American colleges and universities remain a magnet for students and professors around the world. But the higher education marketplace is changing. Some countries are hosting “branch campuses” of Western institutions on their own soil. Others, especially in Saudi Arabia, Korea, and China, are spending billions of dollars to create world-class institutions.

And for-profit companies, based primarily in the United States, are using distance-learning technologies to attract millions of learners in Asia and Latin America who are eager to get relatively inexpensive, career-oriented degrees.

In “The Great Brain Race,” Ben Wildavsky, the former education editor for U.S. News & World Report, provides an informative, early-days assessment of a new phenomenon: “free trade in minds.” Acknowledging missteps and problems, he claims, with a bow to author Thomas Friedman, that an increasingly flat academic world will bring unprecedented economic, social, and political benefits, innovative research, and spread meritocratic values to emerging nations. The United States, which “remains the model every other nation wants to clone,” has nothing to fear from globalization, even if it loses market share, Wildavsky said.

In China, Wildavsky reveals, the number of undergraduate and graduate degrees quadrupled between 1999 and 2005. The government poured billions of dollars into 100 universities but concentrated resources on nine top-tier institutions. In India, where the post-secondary system is mediocre, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently allocated $2.2 billion to build 12 universities and bring 18 existing ones up to speed. And in Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology opened last year with an endowment of $10 billion.

Wildavsky may be right that if the repressive regimes in China and Saudi Arabia eliminate constraints on academic freedom, they will become “heavy hitters in the global academic game.” But even if they do, and India succeeds in building eight really good institutes of technology, the world of higher education won’t be flat. The rich nations will get richer. The “have-nots” — and Africa is conspicuous by its absence in “The Great Brain Race” — will fall even farther behind.

Nor does Wildavsky examine whether globalization has trickled down to large numbers of economically disadvantaged young men and women. And, we can guess, most of the 3 million students who now venture outside their countries pay their own way. Given the economic woes of private and public colleges and universities in Europe and the United States, it’s unlikely that financial aid for international students will increase substantially any time soon.

The academic world, then, isn’t all that flat. Free trade in higher education is far from a reality. And globalization is generating losers as well as winners. Nonetheless, as Wildavsky emphasizes, the shift from a manufacturing to a service to a knowledge economy puts a premium on post-secondary education. And makes it inevitable that nations with money to spend will enter “the great brain race.”

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