

# Book Review

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Hamish Coates, Zheping Xie and Wen Wen (2021). *Global University President Leadership: Insights on higher education futures*. London: Routledge

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The books “Global University President Leadership: Insights on higher education futures” (Coates et al., 2021a; Coates et al., 2021b) published in English by Routledge and separately in Chinese by People’s Press as “Global University Presidents: Tsinghua interviews,” stem from a Tsinghua University research project launched in 2019. Each year, visiting university leaders with the titles like “president,” “rector,” “vice chancellor,” or “principal” are invited to take part in a semi-structured interview (Liu et al., 2020). These books uncover insights from interviews with 19 such presidents, serving a wide range of readers interested in higher education.

The books focus on renowned universities which are playing a distinctively global and often flagship role. The authors fill a gap regarding research on university presidents by contributing insights on presidents’ perspectives, their careers and work, and their views on higher education in China and beyond. They show how studying university presidents via interviews goes well beyond studying websites, public commentary, or other third-party information. The books are accessible and do not assume any previous knowledge or expertise on the reader’s part, making it relevant to a range of people.

A review of the interviews reveals consensus among the interviewed presidents about the importance of communication, the irrelevance of academic discipline to leadership, and the value of global collaboration.

The presidents emphasized the importance of maximizing and leveraging relationships to achieve organizational, team, and individual goals. The presidents related being involved in many forms of lobbying and brokering with a wide range of stakeholders, affirming the importance of dealing with myriad uncertain externalities. They affirmed the vitality of communication for coordinating external circumstances, engaging in the strategic design of their university, building plans, and engaging and communicating with large numbers of staff and stakeholders.



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Interdisciplinary is another widely discussed topic. The presidents saw it as important to cross disciplinary viewpoints and enable students to gain a true understanding of world's complexities. They aspired to create interdisciplinary knowledge which generated impact for society and built platforms that were interdisciplinary in nature.

As their own institutional roles convey, the presidents attached great importance to global cooperation. They believed that collaboration with top institutions across the globe would progress knowledge leadership for a better world. They outlined more opportunities to use collaboration to advance innovation.

The books include case studies from Asia, Europe, Oceania, North America, and Africa. These reveal significant differences in mission and positioning between universities from developed and developing countries. When presidents from developed countries talked about the mission and vision of their universities, they emphasized the importance of the university as an independent and free academic community and an important part of society. For instance, the President of Waterloo University in Canada conveyed that the university should progress as a part of society as a whole and stand alone as a unique institution. Similarly, the President of the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom related that his university was open to people regardless of socioeconomic circumstances and active as a global community. The President of Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, by contrast, related that what he and his colleagues cared most about was to prevent corruption or other scandals. The President of the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka told interviewers that most of the scholars at this institution had obtained doctoral degrees from universities in developed countries. They would send some young colleagues abroad for post-graduate research to forge connections. The President of Stellenbosch University in South Africa conveyed that they sought to be "locally relevant, regionally impactful, and globally competitive."

As a comprehensive university famous for science and technology, Tsinghua University maintains collaborations with many full-spectrum and technology-based universities. The presidents of these two kinds of universities exhibited noticeable differences in the interviews. Presidents from comprehensive universities tended to focus more on internal affairs or relationships with government and the community, while presidents from science and engineering universities focused on industry and business relations. The President of Politecnico di Torino in Italy, for instance, reported that their university was at a critical moment and needed to change teaching methods, to do more applied research and interdisciplinary research, and to achieve technological transformation by promoting the integration of universities and various industries. The President of the RWTH Aachen University of Technology in Germany also discussed relations with business and industry.

The presidents who were interviewed have various relationships with Tsinghua University and China. As senior international visitors and observers, they have generally witnessed the rapid development of Chinese higher education and the challenges facing Chinese higher education.

The presidents interviewed were impressed by the widescale and rapid development of Chinese higher education. Recalling his first impression of China in 2006, for instance, the President of the University of Queensland in Australia mentioned that "At that time, it was clear that things were happening in China with respect to its strength in academic research and university capacity building." The President of Rice University shared similar views: "We're a little bit jealous of the amount of money that the government is putting into universities in China. I think it's a smart decision. It's a competitive decision. The US should be worried about that, which is not to say there's anything wrong with it. It's a great thing that China's putting money into higher education and research."

Other university presidents reported getting to know China's higher education system by reaching out to Chinese students on their campus. The President of Waseda University in Japan calculated that they received around 4700 Chinese students among the 8000 international students

every year: “I received several Chinese students in my graduate program. They are not from Tsinghua. They are not from Fudan, but they are very bright. Not the very top schools, probably second-tier universities in China, but those students whom I taught at that graduate-level were very bright. Chinese university official system is, I think, very good. Good quality. Provides good education.”

The interviewed presidents were invited to observe challenges facing Chinese higher education. Some remarked on the critical thinking and questioning perspectives of Chinese college students. One remarked: “From the Chinese students who come to us, we used to have difficulty in getting them to understand the concept that being at university is about challenging accepted dogma. Chinese students didn’t like to accept that. They are changing very much in that they’re becoming much more accepting that because it’s in a textbook, it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s right, and that there isn’t an answer to everything: you come from school, and you’re told that’s the answer. Actually, then you go on to university and say, well, we don’t always know what the answer is. That’s up to you to tell us what you think the answer is. I think that’s developed a great deal.” Some presidents questioned the publication policies. China’s world-class university movement has prompted China’s research universities to actively benchmark top international universities and continue to increase joint research in collaboration with internationally renowned universities, laboratories, and professors. The President of Rice University mentioned: “For a while, the way China was incentivizing was just to encourage publication, right? Whatever outlet, whatever quality, just publish, publish, publish. That’s actually not the way, ultimately, to raise a university’s performance.” The President of Singapore Management University talked about the employment situation of Chinese college students, especially those from disadvantaged groups.

Overall, readers from a wide range of backgrounds can gain valuable insight from reading “Global University President Leadership.” These books unlock mysteries surrounding university presidents, shed light on their views of higher education, contribute insights that help understand their peers and their work, and furnish foundations for future research. The books extract key points in each chapter, allowing the reader to get vital information rather than to read it from cover to cover. We hope that the books will give food for thought to professionals and scholars who are interested in education, universities, public policy, science and humanities, and global affairs.

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