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From Where I Sit - Recommended Reading

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I was asked last week to suggest a "higher education book" that the prime minister of a Central Asian nation could read on his vacation. He wanted something that would deepen his understanding of universities, how they work and what they contribute to the nation or the region. Preferably in English and not too academic. And, of course, the book was required "now". And as his aide said, "How hard can this be? You read all the time."

It didn’t seem like a difficult task until I began. It needed to be something fresh. The prime minister had read all the usual stuff, such as Jamil Salmi’s monograph on The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities, and knows the human capital argument better than Tom Friedman.

My first thought was to go back in time. How about Henry Rosovsky's The University: An Owner’s Manual? It is readable, occasionally funny and gives an insight into the complexities of managing an institution with diffused authority and competing incentives. But published in 1991 and based on the author’s term as dean of arts and sciences at Harvard throughout the 1980s, it seemed a little dated. The prime minister could get the same messages from C.P. Snow’s The Masters, which would also remind him that the academic community is very small and its politics very personal. But then he runs a Cabinet that reminds him of that almost daily.

Thinking of Snow and his Strangers and Brothers series, I wondered about slipping The New Men into the pile. This might be a good way of reminding the prime minister of the tensions between the creators of new knowledge and those who seek to apply it for good, for power and for economic growth. This would be timely because debates about the commercialisation of research and the level of state investment in science are looming.

Digging more deeply into the fiction pile, I discarded the student-life novels, such as I Am Charlotte Simmons, and the faculty novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge. James Hynes' The Lecturer's Tale and Publish and Perish had too much artifice and surrealism for a mind attuned to public policy, while Porterhouse Blue by Tom Sharpe was too farcical. Alaa Al-Aswany’s novel Chicago, about Egyptian students studying abroad and the relationship between them and the sponsoring state, was a possibility but could have ended up reducing the state scholarship budget of this particular nation.

Biography looked more promising. Lord Butler's The Art of the Possible has been required reading on the history and politics of education for years and is less dated than Rosovsky’s book. But I recalled another prime minister dismissing it as the doodling of a "line minister who never made it". Abandoning political writing, I thought of John Sperling’s Rebel with a Cause, an account of the creation of the University of Phoenix that covers online education, for-profit higher education and Phoenix’s roots in increasing access to education for lower-income groups. It also covers the problems of accreditation of new modes of delivery and the vagaries of the market for higher education. But this left the public sector institutions - attended by most students - on the side.

It was turning out to be a not-so-easy ask. So what would you choose for your PM or chancellor or chair of the board of trustees? I ended up going for Don Peurach’s Seeing Complexity in Public Education, which traces how effective practice in one school was scaled up to more than 1,600 US schools. This seemed worthy of the prime minister’s attention as he struggles to lift the quality of higher education across the nation.