Massification, Globalisation and the Global Knowledge Economy:

Policy challenges and opportunities for universities in Southeast Asia

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GLOBALISATION, IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION, IS:

"...the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology, the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions."

\- PHILIP ALTBACH -
Global Perspectives on Higher Education (2016)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More and more people are enrolled in higher education, in Southeast Asia and most parts of the world, than ever before. Mainland China alone produces 7.65 million graduates a year. At the same time, higher education has become more internationalised, as a response to the global knowledge economy.

The trends towards massification and internationalisation produce contradictions and dilemmas, which policymakers and higher education institutions must address. Policymakers and university leaders should be aware of potential pitfalls and missteps, when responding to these trends. Two crucial recommendations stand out:

1. The differentiation of functions between higher education institutions (i.e. between teaching and research universities) should be maintained within national systems. The failure to do so would have hugely disruptive effects on the quality and relevance of national higher education systems. Only the state has the authority to do so, and it should not withdraw from playing this role.

2. Universities should not attempt to train people for specific jobs ("employability"). Nobody can accurately predict the types of jobs that will emerge in the future. Rather, universities should focus on instilling a flexibility of thinking among students, to prepare for an unpredictable labour market.

Higher Education Developments in Southeast Asia: The Dilemma

Two contradictory phenomena in higher education in Southeast Asia, and in much of the world, are emerging at the same time:

- Higher education has been massified across much of Southeast Asia, moving from an elite phase to a phase of almost universal access in a number of countries.

- The global knowledge economy has emerged, requiring research and innovation, and the internationalisation of universities.

Gross Enrolment Ratio in Tertiary Education in ASEAN, 2013-14

Country	Gross Enrolment Ratio (%)
Brunei	32
Cambodia	16 (2011 figure)
Indonesia	31
Laos	17
Malaysia	39
Myanmar	14 (2012 figure)
The Philippines	36
Singapore	87
Thailand	51
Vietnam	30

(Sources: UNESCO Institute for Statistics; Ministry of Education, Singapore)

How should Southeast Asian higher education institutions respond to this two-fold phenomenon?

This policy brief focuses on the role of universities, within the post-secondary education systems of countries. It is in universities that these contradictions are played out most starkly.

One practical example of the dilemma faced by higher education institutions is in one aspect of internationalisation – **university rankings** – which has driven governments to create so-called "world class universities". These rankings draw largely upon an institution's ability to do research – a task that many Southeast Asia universities were not founded to do. Many of them were founded to focus on teaching and learning, and rightly so. The rankings phenomenon has spawned a convergence of different models of universities around the world, which may not always address local needs and issues.

Another challenging aspect of internationalisation is the **use of English** – to attract foreign faculty and students, to enable universities to access global research and to discuss research with their peers around the world. When there are attempts to replace the national language with English as the main medium of instruction in universities, a nationalistic backlash may result. However, the failure to do so would only isolate the universities in question from the global knowledge economy.

A. The Massification of Higher Education

1. **The massification of higher education in Southeast Asia is already a reality**. The enrolment rates in post-secondary education in most middle-income countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam lie in the 20-50% range, while the rate for Singapore is almost 90%. While the enrolment rate is still low in Myanmar (10%), it is likely to grow rapidly with the opening up of Myanmar's economy.

2. **However, massification also has the potential to disrupt the socio-economic systems of countries**. While an increasing number of students are getting higher education degrees, there is a skills mismatch, with employers complaining about not being able to find skilled workers. Some degrees are also viewed as less valuable than others in the job market, because of the reputation of the institution or the "excess" number of graduates in those fields.

3. Another major concern of massification is the **increased pressure on universities to constantly find new sources for revenue**, to meet expansion needs. This presents a dilemma for states – **states want to retreat from too high a financial commitment to public universities, and yet are unwilling to relinquish control over universities and higher education institutions, for reasons of national interest**. These contradictory roles and interests are often enmeshed in one blueprint document, often at the expense of coherence.

4. **More universities in Southeast Asia have been granted autonomous status**, obliging them to find their own revenue. Some universities have been corporatised, introducing governance practices from the private sector. Most have resorted to cost-sharing measures, where students now pay higher tuition fees. There is also a complex relationship between **autonomy and academic freedom**. Policymakers and university administrators must think deeply about the issue.

5. Therefore, although massification does give more students a chance to access higher education institutes, **the increased fees that students must pay keep certain segments of the population away from accessing higher education as well**. This raises troubling issues for equity – what role, if any, does the state have in ensuring greater access?

6. **The private sector is playing a growing role in higher education, in Southeast Asia. In general, it plays a "demand-absorbing" role**, taking in students who are not able to make it into the public universities. There are prevalent concerns over quality in private higher education institutions, such as over the quality of the delivery of classroom instruction. Another major concern relates to completion rates – around the world, private institutions are known for poorer completion rates among their students. Government regulation must be stepped up, to ensure quality control.

7. **In particular, governments need to think carefully about the role of foreign universities in their respective countries**. It should be recognised that foreign universities operating out of their home countries are essentially profit-driven ventures, rather than the private-not-for-profit universities that many world renowned institutions are known to be. One way to keep such institutions from being excessively driven by profits is to bring them into the country through a partnership with a local university/institution. That would also be a good way to ensure that the foreign

universities remain responsive to local needs and conditions.

8. **Institutional diversification** in the higher education landscapes of each national system is key to ensuring that massification does not cause disruptions to society and the economy. For instance, polytechnics should not always aspire to be converted into universities, much as the social and political pressures call for that. Good polytechnics are better for a national higher education system than second-rate universities. Policy must be directed towards creating different pathways for students aspiring towards higher education.

Technology: the Phenomenon of MOOCs

1. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) appear to be revolutionising higher education for the masses, bringing its costs down, and hence increasing access to higher education.

2. However, **the problem with MOOCs is that it is often used by people who have already obtained a degree**. Degree holders tend to be more equipped with the academic interest and the technical know-how to utilise MOOCs. Therefore, rather than improving mass access to higher education, MOOCs may in fact lead to the widening of the socio-economic inequalities between degree- and non-degree holders.

3. **MOOCs are being used to play a supplementary and a reinforcing role, in learning**. MOOCs have not developed in such a way as to supplant the traditional "brick-and-mortar universities". It would be disastrous if governments were to invest in MOOCs and technology at the expense of the more traditional forms of the learning and academic environment at universities.

4. Two aspects in this regard should warrant greater attention and implementation – the use of **blended learning**, which is the mixed use of technology/MOOCs and the traditional classroom interaction, and the notion of the **flipped classroom**, where instructional content is delivered online prior to a class, and class time is devoted to exercises, projects and discussion. Policymakers and university leaders have not thought enough about the **changing nature of pedagogy required for university students today**. This applies not only to young people, but also to mature, adult learners, such as those take evening courses.

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B. Globalisation and the Global Knowledge Economy

1. **Globalisation has influenced higher education in significant ways**. It has direct implications for universities, in research in science and technology, as well as the question of the fundamental purpose of universities.

2. Nobody can accurately predict the types of jobs that will emerge in the future. **As such, universities are not the right place to train people for specific jobs**, which may be rapidly obsolete in a fast-changing world economy. Rather than to train them for specific vocations, **universities should focus on instilling a flexibility of thinking among students**, such as in critical thinking and communication skills.

3. We urge that a distinction be maintained between the university and non-university (e.g. professional training) sectors. The university curriculum should not be over-vocationalised.

Research in Universities

4. **Universities are indeed the best places for research and innovation to take place**. It is where researchers can interact with bright young minds, in a conducive environment of intellectual curiosity.

5. **There are growing expectations and pressures from governments to create so-called "world-class universities"** that must, by definition, be highly capable in research. This is because of the criteria and metrics used by the main university ranking tables.

6. **However, many universities in the region were not founded to be research-intensive universities. Neither should all universities within a country aspire to be research universities**. To cite the United States example (though not necessarily as a prescription for all countries around the

world), there are around 4,700 degree-granting universities and colleges, while only 222 (or less than 15% of them) are research universities.[1]

7. **Applied research versus basic research**[2]: the challenge for universities is this – how do they support basic research in an increasingly expensive environment, where political leaders (who are responsible for funding public universities) want quick, tangible results, as that delivered by applied research? The preference for applied research is understandable, given that research in public universities is funded by the taxpayer, and there is therefore an expectation the research produced should be relevant to a country's socio-economic context, and the needs of its industries. Yet it is basic research that wins Nobel Prizes – the ultimate measure of academic and scientific achievements. Success in basic research can never be guaranteed, thus compounding its exorbitant costs. Governments have to recognise the trade-off in this regard.

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[1] By one reckoning, "research universities" are those categorised by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as "Doctoral Universities - Highest Research Activity" and "Doctoral Universities - Higher Research Activity". The number of degree-granting universities and colleges in the US is taken from the National Center for Education Statistics: http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84

[2] In the scientific lexicon, basic research refers to theoretical research, while applied research refers to research geared towards developing technologies.

C. Policy Recommendations

Some may question the wisdom of making policy recommendations for a diverse range of countries, as is the case in Southeast Asia. However, insofar as all countries aspire towards development and want to participate ever more intensively in the global economy, and thereby in the preparation for it, there are clear lessons that all governments can consider:

1. **The differentiation of functions between higher education institutions within national systems should be maintained**. Institutions should also keep to their missions over time, and avoid "mission creep." For instance, polytechnics should not always aspire to be converted into universities, much as the social and political pressures call for that. This does not constitute a hierarchy of institutions (viz. polytechnics are less prestigious than universities), but really a differentiation of the offerings of these institutions towards creating different pathways for higher education.

2. **Only the state has the authority to maintain this differentiation of functions of higher education institutions, and it should play this role**.

3. At the same time, there should be a **"ladder and bridges" system between polytechnics and universities**, which will go a long way in promoting social mobility. Examples include the Singapore and California Masterplan systems.

4. **Governments must factor in the future phenomenon of declining populations, as their societies mature and develop, and as enrolments in higher education continue to grow**. It is politically easier to set up universities than to close them down, as the cases of South Korea and Taiwan indicate.

5. To achieve effective results in learning outcomes in universities, **the philosophy of education, and not merely educational technology, should be emphasised**. The "Chief Learning Officer" in higher education institutions – a role that is proliferating around the world – should ideally not merely be a technologist by profession, but someone with experience in the policy and philosophy of education.

As massification intensifies, the differentiation of functions between higher education institutions should be maintained. This will ensure the creation of different pathways for higher education. The state can play an important role in ensuring that this happens.

An initial draft of this policy brief formed the basis of a policy forum, jointly organised by Institut Penyelidikan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara (IPPTN, or the National Higher Education Research Institute) and The HEAD Foundation, which was held in Penang on 5 August 2016 under Chatham House rules. Input from the policy forum participants have subsequently been integrated into this policy brief. The positions taken in this policy brief are not to be taken as representative of the views of the policy forum participants, but as a fair summary of the discussions at the policy forum, as captured by the rapporteurs and editors.

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