

HESB

HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND BEYOND



Riding
the waves
of change

Message from The HEAD Foundation

The HEAD Foundation was heartened by the overwhelmingly positive response to our commemorative 10th issue. This 11th issue of HESB marks a new and exciting chapter for this publication.

Since HESB's inception, Mr Loke Hoe Yeong has successfully helmed the publication as its editor. His leadership and hard work has positioned this humble publication by The HEAD Foundation into a leading authority on higher education trends and developments across Southeast Asia and beyond. As we look to grow the reach, impact, and influence of HESB, The HEAD Foundation is happy to announce a new editorial team. The team will be helmed by the Foundation's, Mr Vignesh Naidu and supported by Prof Lorraine Symaco, Dr Wan Chang Da, Dr Adrian Kuah and our trusty stalwart, Mr Loke Hoe Yeong. The editorial team will continue to seek the advice and guidance of our consultant editors, Prof S. Gopinathan and Prof Philip Altbach.

To mark this new chapter for HESB, this issue takes a broad overview on the future of higher education in Southeast Asia and beyond. We have invited leading thinkers from across the globe to pen their thoughts on the challenges and anticipate what big shifts will occur in higher education.

In the opening article, **Jason Tan** and **Loke Hoe Yeong**, attempt to answer the vexing question — what role universities should and will play in an era of skills-based education? **Geoff Scott** looks at the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on higher education and its necessary shift towards

championing sustainable development. **Rajah Rasiah** examines the impact of foreign student enrolments on Malaysian universities.

Mark Brown discusses the impact of the military coup on higher education reforms in Myanmar a year since the event. Oftentimes the future of higher education is gleaned through conversations with academics and policymakers, but **Dana Abdrasheva**, **Diana Morales** and **Emma Sabzalieva** present the future of higher education through the eyes of today's students.

The next three articles expound on the issues surrounding the role of private enterprise in the provision of higher education in the region. **Maria Alicia Bustos-Orosa** provides an overview of the private higher education space in developing Southeast Asia, while **Nurdiana Gaus** deep dives into the situation in Indonesia with **Quang Chau** doing the same for Vietnam.

Following the relatively recent announcement of the merger of Yale-NUS College with the NUS University Scholar's Programme there has been much debate in Singapore and the region about the value, both perceived and real, of a liberal arts education. **Mary-ElLEN Boyle** discusses this in the concluding article of this issue.

We hope you enjoy this issue and invite you to consider contributing to future issues, and to be part of the conversation on higher education in Southeast Asia and beyond.

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What's the University for? An Age-Old Question in the COVID-19 Age

JASON TAN & LOKE HOE YEONG

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the occasion for us to rethink many of the things we do. Higher education has not escaped unscathed. Does the university, as we know it, still serve a purpose? And if so, whom do they serve?

Already on the eve of the pandemic, the rise of stackable certificates and corporate universities such as the Dyson Institute had seemingly challenged the premise of the university. In the past year, while online classes may have brought semblance of continuity during various lockdowns, students have questioned the rationale of paying astronomical tuition fees (at least in some countries), or for incurring student debt for years to come, for a greatly diminished educational experience.

As university cohort participation rates have reached the massification stage — and as university education is increasingly seen as a universal right rather than as a good that is available only to a select few — what exactly is to be gained at the individual and societal levels by a university education?

Sceptics have reason to believe that the university of today is merely a glorified finishing school,

especially with the plethora of MOOCs and other forms of online learning to be had. Even the kinds of life experiences and skills that universities provide can theoretically be gained through many other avenues.

Universities and the Skills Debate: The Case of Singapore

The university serves many other purposes aside from producing graduates. Research universities have been the embodiment of the global scientific progress.

For the vast majority, however, the university is where one goes to qualify for good jobs. David Goodhart, in his latest book *Head, Hand, Heart*, points out how cognitive ability has become the “gold standard of human esteem” — to the detriment of manual and craft work, as well as work that prioritises caring for others.

In Singapore, the question of the university's purpose has been closely tied to the skills debate. For much of the past decade, the government has been trying to convince Singaporeans that the future economy

“With issues of financial sustainability and graduate joblessness, what it does not answer is whether the evolution of higher education has necessarily produced the best outcomes — either at the individual or societal level.

places greater emphasis on skills rather than paper qualifications, and that graduates should pursue the former. In fact, university education in Singapore has been aligned with labour market needs since independence in the 1960s, in line with the policy priorities of a fledging, post-colonial economy.

Yet, a perennial issue in Singapore's higher education has been the public pressure for a greater cohort participation rate in public autonomous universities. There has been a phenomenal surge in cohort participation rate in these universities, from 5% in the early 1980s to over 40% four decades later. This is surely no mindless paper chase, for students who cannot get a place in these universities are willing to fork out large sums of money to enrol in private universities and overseas branch campuses, or even to pursue a degree outside of Singapore. Pressures in an increasingly competitive global job market, along with the widespread belief in the positive contributions made by university-level qualifications to one's lifetime earnings and social prestige, must surely account for much of this. In addition, a university degree is still a basic prerequisite for entry to certain professions, such as medicine, the law, and accounting.

A History of Universities in Three Waves

The university, at least as conceived in the historic European centres of Bologna, Paris and Oxford, served even smaller, more elite cohorts than today

— probably less than 1%. The university curriculum was largely based on the classics, after which the graduate was to pursue a career through further skills qualifications or apprenticeships. The purpose of the university education was to serve very lofty aims of “broadening the mind”.

The next development in the modern research university came through the Humboldtian, German-American model in the 19th century, when the university became a centre of scientific research.

Only in the next iteration of the university during the era of massification, in light of movements such as decolonisation in the 20th century, did university cohort participation rate grow from under 10% to as much as 80% in countries like South Korea and Taiwan today.

Needless to say, the purpose of the university had fundamentally changed through those three waves. The University of Oxford of the 12th century was obviously an entirely different institution from the Humboldt University of Berlin of the 19th century, which itself was entirely different from the South Korean and Taiwanese universities that sprang up in the 20th century. It was really only in that third wave that the talk of a skills-based university education began.

The implication of this briefest of historical overviews is that over the course of the last millennium, the university as an institution has clearly evolved. Yet,

with issues of financial sustainability and graduate joblessness, what it does not answer is whether the evolution of higher education has necessarily produced the best outcomes — either at the individual or societal level.

The Problems of a Skills-Based University Education

Among institutions of any kind around the world that have survived the longest, universities dominate that list by far. They are often much older than many nation-states. Indeed, universities have been chastised for being slow to change and adapt, but clearly, they have not yet been written into irrelevance.

Students and employers perennially desire that university education revolve more around “real life skills” that prepare them for the job market. The implication is that university education is still “too academic”.

But the problem arises when, in a fast-moving economy in the digital era, such skills quickly become irrelevant. What a first-year university undergraduate learns will likely be irrelevant by the time they graduate three or four years later.

To calls in the Singaporean debate for university education to revolve around more practical skills, the retort from the educationists has been that employers should not shirk their role in preparing and developing employees through on-the-job training, such as through apprenticeships.

Could there be a case for a broad-based undergraduate education that nurtures the mind, rather than one that caters to specific vocational preparation? Much of the interest around liberal arts education in Singapore arose more than a decade ago, because of the interest in such a curriculum in spurring the kind of creativity and innovation among potential hires sought by the tech giants such as Apple and Google. The Yale-NUS College has been able to boast of a stellar graduate job placement record, as well as impressive median starting salaries. If this sort of

education is truly valuable, then why has it been positioned as a choice for the “brightest” students, rather than as a mandatory requirement for all undergraduates?

At the same time, there are those who would argue — as Bryan Caplan has in his book *The Case Against Education* — that the primary function of a university education is not to enhance students’ skills. Rather, it is to signal the desirable qualities of a graduate — intelligence, work ethic and conformity — to prospective employers.

Reforming University Education: The Questions to Ask

David Goodhart argues that thinking of university education as an entry route for young people into the workforce needs to be reconsidered. He favours a more flexible “rotation model” in which work and education are rotated over the course of an individual’s career. What Goodhart argues for solves a number of problems, for instance, that some degrees could be training graduates for jobs that may soon cease to exist.

“To reform university education in any substantial way, such as what Goodhart argues for, would require a considerable rewiring of current attitudes towards various kinds of work.”

The benefits universities have brought to the education of their students, and indeed to society at large, have been eloquently argued for by many. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have only accentuated their arguments.

All this may sound like an unquestioning defence of the university. Universities could certainly do with more multi-disciplinarity in their curricula, and even the addition of “real life skills courses” and “soft skills” as they already do. But to respond on the whim to calls for “real life skills” would be a mistake to those who believe in the power of the university — the power to add that extra component to a student’s personal development and growth that is not available in other educational institutions or through self-study. To reform university education in any substantial way, such as what Goodhart argues for, would require a considerable rewiring of current attitudes towards various kinds of work.

For instance, why is it that university education rests at the pinnacle of every education system around the world? Are the tangible and intangible benefits, in terms of enhanced earnings and social status, important enough reasons to continue the tremendous public and private investment in the pursuit of a degree?

Or is a degree meant to contribute substantially to one’s workplace capabilities? In the case of certain professions, one might argue that this is indeed the case. After all, none of us are likely ready for a situation where doctors have not been adequately prepared and certified for their work. But what about the vast majority of university courses that are not vocationally-oriented? A recently published academic report revealed that Singaporean parents and young adults felt that a university degree in a general discipline was necessary rather than aspirational. Many jobs now required a university degree as the minimum entry-level qualification.

We do not pretend to have all the answers to what societies have to decide as a whole — students and employers alike. But the questions we raise here are what society needs to seriously consider, in order to avoid the pitfalls of mass graduate unemployment, or an inflexible university education that prepares students for jobs of the past. 🏠

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The COVID-19 Aftermath: Sustainable Development and Higher Education in the Age of Uncertainty

GEOFF SCOTT

COVID-19 — A “Wicked Problem”

The COVID-19 pandemic is a good example of a “wicked problem”. Back in 1973, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber defined this as a problem that is ill-defined, unique, has no stopping rule or perfect solution and is nested within a range of other problems in which action relies on judgement. Working out how best to address the pandemic raises a wide range of ethical dilemmas, including how best to balance a focus on lives vs. livelihoods, and maximising vaccination of one’s own population vs. helping others.

Addressing a problem like COVID-19 requires simultaneous attention to a wide range of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These include dealing with the impact of poverty; variations in health and well-being; educational quality; decent work; industry innovation; responsible production; protecting life below water and on land; ensuring peace, justice and strong institutions; and the need to work in partnership to achieve the agreed changes.

Values and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Values are the engine house of change. All technical, social, economic and political decisions are value-laden.

In addressing wicked problems like COVID-19, decisions about which way to proceed require value judgement. There is a profound difference between change (something becoming different) and progress (a value judgement by the individual that this is desirable, worth becoming involved in).

A set of values is embedded in the UN SDGs. They include a commitment to no poverty or hunger; fostering good health; ensuring quality education for all; care for the environment; fostering harmonious living; and collaboration for the common good. These, in turn, have links to the values seen in our studies of successful graduates and leaders. Such values include having compassion; showing kindness to others; being able to work productively with diversity; having humility; being calm under pressure; honest; authentic; non-grasping; willing to persevere under trying conditions; able to listen; share; and to face and learn from errors.

Higher Education, the Age of Uncertainty and the SDGs

Higher education plays a central role in developing the world of tomorrow and in addressing key social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability challenges. It develops a large proportion of the world’s leaders, entrepreneurs and scientists. It creates many of the social, cultural, technical, economic, and environmental solutions that help ensure we have a sustainable future. It helps shape the values of these people and, if well structured, can prepare them to successfully navigate the current age of uncertainty.

To achieve this mission, our higher education institutions need to give more careful focus to developing graduates who are not only work-ready for today (i.e., competent) but are also work-ready *plus* and capable of successfully negotiating this uncertain tomorrow and the wicked sustainability problems that characterise it.

As John Stephenson noted almost a quarter of a century ago when he was Director of the Royal Academy of Arts Higher Education for Capability Project:

Capability is not just about skills and knowledge. Taking effective and appropriate action within unfamiliar and changing circumstances involves judgments, values, the self-confidence to take risks and a commitment to learn from the experience.

– John Stephenson, “Capability and Quality in Higher Education”

Work-Ready *Plus* Graduates

Capable, work-ready *plus* graduates are sustainability literate (i.e., socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally); change implementation savvy (i.e., able to productively engage a wide variety of people with necessary change and help them deliver it); and inventive (i.e., socially, not just commercially). In addition, they are clear on where they stand on the tacit assumptions driving the 21st century agenda — assumptions like growth is equally good for everyone; consumption is happiness; ICT is always the answer; and global uniformity is great. They have the distinctive set of personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities outlined earlier.

There is increasing interest around the world in developing the key capabilities of work-ready *plus* graduates through the use of capstones focused on the key dilemmas of early career professional practice, and social enterprise capstones focused on the SDGs. The Enactus and Blue Economy projects¹ provide a wide variety of case studies on how capstones focused on the SDGs can be successfully enacted.

1. See Blue Economy at: <http://www.moss.org.au/100-innovations>; see Enactus 2030 at: <https://enactus.org/globalgoals>

“ Our higher education institutions need to give more careful focus to developing graduates who are not only work-ready for today (i.e., competent) but are also work-ready *plus*.

Effective Change Leadership in the Age of Uncertainty

Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas and change doesn't just happen but must be led, and deftly.

– Michael Fullan and Geoff Scott,
Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education (2009)

What is significant is that the key capabilities of successful early career graduates align with the key capabilities identified in our studies of successful change leaders in higher education. The combined findings are summarised below.

Successful change leaders listen, link, leverage then lead, in that order. To engage staff with change, leaders undertake a stocktake of what is already underway in their institution and acknowledge this. They focus on a small number of priorities for action and seek to learn by doing — by trialling potentially relevant solutions under controlled conditions to identify what works best before moving to scale-up. They are true to their own values, “practice what they preach” and are transparent and honest in dealings with others. They know their strengths and limitations; are organised; are willing to face and learn from errors; and they can think creatively and laterally. These leaders develop a “why don't we”, not a “why don't you” culture, and focus on using the moral purpose of the institution as a key motivator. They recognise that change is a complex learning and unlearning process for all concerned, in which staff will be constantly assessing if engagement with the change is relevant, desirable and, most importantly, feasible. Finally, effective change leaders are particularly deft at networked learning.

In combination, this profile provides an operational definition of how to enact SDG 17 (i.e., partnerships to achieve the other 16 goals).

The New University

To act on the above findings it can be argued that the new university needs to focus on:

- seeking to develop work-ready *plus* graduates;
- giving specific transdisciplinary attention to the 17 SDGs in its teaching, research, engagement projects, and operations;
- paying equal attention to equipping graduates for social and commercial entrepreneurship;
- helping graduates come to a personal understanding on where they stand on the tacit assumptions driving the 21st century agenda;
- developing a shared moral purpose;
- giving emphasis to Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths (STEAM, not STEM); and
- operating as a “living laboratory” on how to manage change effectively and address the SDGs

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for institutes of higher education to consider what their key purpose should be over the coming years — in an era when more “wicked problems” will challenge the world, and where leaders at every level must be equipped to tackle them. This is when we must effectively address the interlaced challenges of social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.

The SDGs provide a set of values and focus areas for action. By embedding them in the teaching, research, engagement programmes, and operations of our colleges and universities, we make sure that we develop ethically robust graduates and future leaders who are not only work-ready for today but who are also equipped to successfully negotiate the uncertain tomorrow we all face — by being work-ready *plus*. 🌊

This article is based on a keynote speech given at the Global Higher Education Forum (GHEF) 2021.

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Disruptive and Unprecedented Times: The Future of Foreign Students Enrolment in Higher Education in Malaysia

RAJAH RASIAH

Higher education was already plagued by both increasing international competition, as well as delivery modes driven by technical change. On the one hand, there has been emergence and expansion of foreign students since the 1990s at universities located in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that now compete for students with the established universities of the developed countries, such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Japan, and the countries of continental Europe. On the other hand, the advent of digitisation and digitalisation since 2012 has raised the potential for students to enrol in academic programmes from distant sites. Xenophobic reactions to migrants in general, and foreign students in particular have only been accentuated further with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020.

It has to be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has derailed development across the world, and in the process, is wreaking havoc in both developed and underdeveloped countries. In fact, a number of developed countries (e.g., United States) have faced far more catastrophic collapse than developing

countries (e.g., Vietnam). Consequently, this essay examines the light that will not only sustain foreign students' interest on higher education in Malaysia, but also focuses on what the emphasis should be. The rest of the exercise addresses foreign student enrolment trends, the shift towards digital platforms, technological responses to cyber platforms, and the future of foreign students' enrolment for higher education on Malaysia's platforms.

COVID-19 and Impact on Infections and Deaths

Unlike predictable developmental outcomes, the COVID-19 pandemic, which remains an elusive virus that continues to mutate with hugely uncertain outcomes, threatens to undermine the agglomeration of foreign students at particular established universities as well as new proximate universities at home countries. Indeed, there is no statistical correlation between developmental status (e.g., GDP per capita) and the COVID-19 cases and deaths (see Figures 1 and 2). The explanatory power of both relationships is close to zero.

FIGURE 1
COVID-19 Cases Per Million Population, 2020

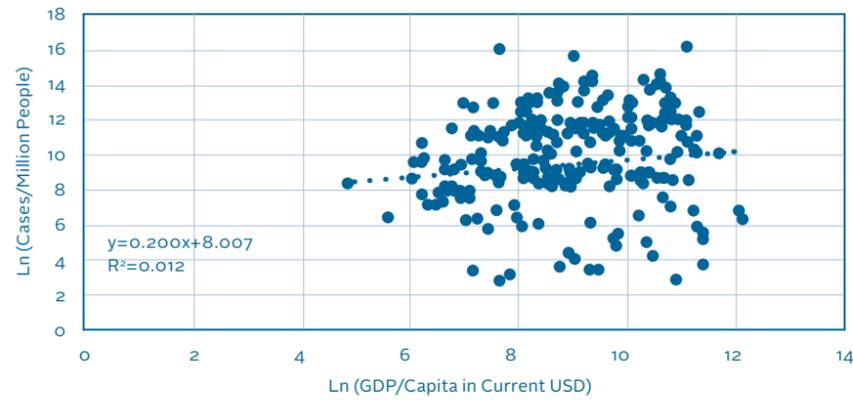
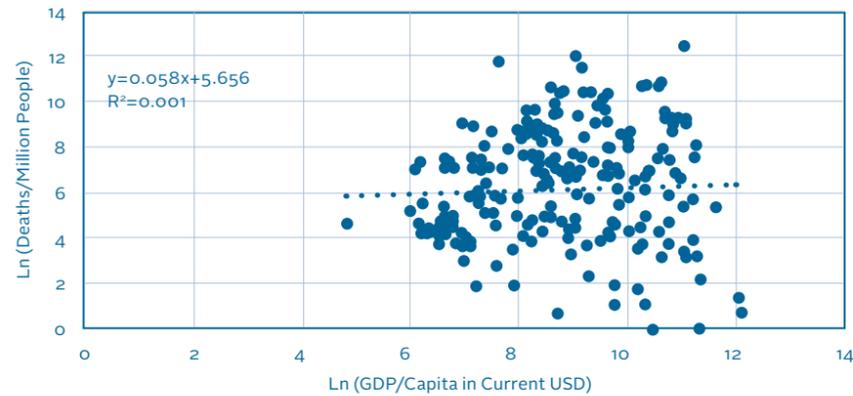


FIGURE 2
COVID-19 Deaths Per Million Population, 2020

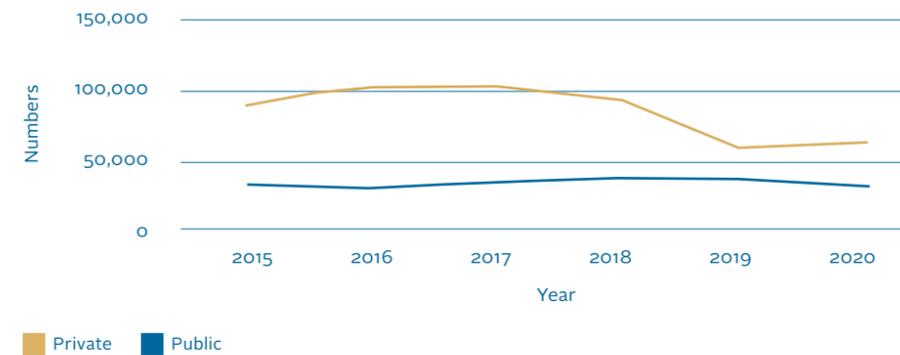


Source: Plotted from data gathered from Worldometers (2020), <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

Foreign Student Enrolment Trends

The immediate response to the lockdowns and introduction of standard operating procedures (SOPs), including social distancing and suspension of travels, has been a trend fall in foreign student enrolment especially in the developed countries. However, such a fall has not been obvious in some countries, such as Malaysia. As Figure 3 shows, while foreign student enrolment among public universities stayed steady, the share among private universities picked up slightly from 2019 to 2020. This trend in Malaysia is obvious with students from China and the Middle East taking advantage of the generous opportunity for studying through online lectures.

FIGURE 3
Foreign Students in Tertiary Education, Malaysia, 2015-2020



Source: Plotted from data supplied by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia

While the Higher Education Ministry as well as universities in Malaysia have taken steps to prevent a contraction in foreign student enrolment in 2020 and possibly in 2021, the transition from a pandemic to an endemic should see a resurgence of demand for universities abroad that may intensify the competition for foreign students. This potential trend is very likely despite concerns over the emergence of the Omicron variant and the surge again in cases in Europe. Nevertheless, restrictions on the inflow of foreign students to United States and Europe — which started as a response to increased terrorism and trade friction with countries such as members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and China — have now expanded to other countries quickening the proliferation of digitalisation and IR4.0 technologies in higher education, which we turn to in the next section.

Shift Towards Digital Platforms

Some countries are ahead in the time schedule in the promotion of digitalisation and IR4.0¹ technologies. Taiwan’s firms for instance have reshored significant

sections of agriculture and manufacturing when President Trump triggered rising tariffs and other forms of restrictions on imports landing in the United States from 2017. Whereas robots and drones dominate intensive agriculture, robotisation has attracted back from China significant volume of manufacturing, especially after the government launched a programme and two incentive schemes targeting local firms under a broad “Invest in Taiwan” that attracted collectively NT\$1.19 trillion in investment from 826 companies, according to data compiled by the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA).

Malaysia launched IR4.0 masterplan in 2018 and its digitalisation blueprint in 2020 to quicken the proliferation of IR4.0 technologies in the whole economy, with higher education included.

While it may be too soon to review the progress of these two blueprints, it is pertinent for the government to focus on an appraisal mechanism that addresses target-setting, selection, monitoring, and ex-post assessment to recalibrate strategies if necessary so as to ensure that the government’s

1. IR4.0 refers to the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

desired outcomes are met. A case in point is to avert the disastrous approaches taken to develop science and technology parks in the country.

Both public and private universities embarked on establishing digital channels to deliver education, especially for students from abroad beginning in 2019, which was hastened by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 as lockdowns and calls for stringent social-distancing policing sharply reduced international travels. Public universities were also required by the Higher Education Ministry to keep out students, especially when the Movement Control Order (MCO) came into place in both 2020 and 2021. The government subsequently raised the budget for the installation of digital platforms in its 2021 and 2022 budgets. A number of tertiary students in Malaysia were still following classes through Zoom sessions as of January 1, 2022. That includes classes on the doctoral advanced methodology course from the Asia-Europe Institute and Masters courses at the Faculty of Business and Economics at Universiti of Malaya.

Impact of Cyber Platforms

While digitisation and digitalisation holds much promise for the transformation of higher education in Malaysia, three major problems risk sub-optimal outcomes. The first is the inherent challenges of digital platforms, whether through the use of professional educators or humanoid robots. The social elements that are critical in teaching, reflecting, and learning are constrained using digital platforms as human interactions that deal with student specificities are difficult to adapt using digital technology, especially when the student numbers are large. Learning had already lost significant social elements when disciplines were born out of philosophy with some completely detached from that mother discipline. For example, economics as a discipline has sought scientific precision by focusing on statistical models that are run using assumptions that largely do not hold in reality, as described by Amartya Sen in his 1983 book, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement*

and Deprivation. Indeed, journals are increasingly publishing articles that tell their own stories rather than first establishing the rationale for the new story — by either identifying gaps in past studies or establishing the rationale for the creation of new knowledge paths.

The second problem relates to the capacity of universities to absorb, adapt, and invent better ways to appropriate teaching and learning synergies from digital platforms and robots. Education ministries across the world have indeed included digitalisation and IR4.0 instruments in their promotional kits and expenditure budgets, but have yet to induce enough change to suggest that its potential is being realised. Such a development is the case even though proximate teaching and supervision are still critical during the transitional phase to address disciplinary specificity. For example, in surgical instruction, while robots are increasingly engaged in diagnoses through the use of big data, Internet of Things, and cloud computing, its transition is still far from the possible frontier that such technologies promise in hospitals.

“**Education ministries across the world have indeed included digitalisation and IR4.0 instruments in their promotional kits and expenditure budgets, but have yet to induce enough change to suggest that its potential is being realised.**”

“**The eventual trend fall in physical classrooms and university space, and the savings from renewal and downsizing of maintenance, could equalise the new costs expected from the construction of digital platforms and IR4.0 instruments.**”

The third problem deals with the role of higher education as a driver of development in individual countries. While developed countries — with the United Kingdom and the United States being the major early starters — use higher education as a platform for both revenue extraction and to shape the foreign policies of home countries, the key universities in these countries are still earmarked to develop the workforce and to support home countries’ innovations. In fact, these Western economies have also planned to offer such students’ visas and eventually citizenships if the candidates’ roles are considered beneficial to the countries. In Malaysia the focus on generating revenue looks obvious but the utilisation of students, especially graduate students to support the country’s national innovation system, looks unclear. Interviews show a lack of coordination between those offering private university licenses and the immigration department, which have also caused serious disjunctures. That said, writers like V. Selvaratnam have noted that several private universities that emerged following the Private Universities Bill in 1996, are now on the brink of liquidation as the Higher Education Ministry starts to introduce quality standards for the approval of programmes and admission of students.

Nevertheless, writers like Michael Best, author of *The New Competitive Advantage: The Renewal of American Industry*, have noted that the United

States has benefitted enormously from training foreign students, offering green cards to the bright ones among them to support its national innovation system. Such a practice has now been emulated by several other countries, including Australia, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and France. While it is critical that priority should be given to national students in specialisations that are critical for the country, the shortfalls in some critical technical disciplines in Malaysia can benefit from such policies. Particularly in industries classified by the government as strategic, the government should consider offering permanent residence, and eventually citizenships to quality foreign students in strategically needed industries. This is part of the reason why Singapore has managed to attract quality scientists from abroad to renew their labour force to sustain rapid economic growth, which I have noted in my chapter in the 2020 *Oxford Handbook of Industrial Policy*.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely drained resources from all economies across the world — slowing down efforts to heighten innovation and adapt to the digital revolution and IR4.0 smoothly. Such a change has also not benefitted from possible cooperation among countries to address the problem. Countries are still competing individually to shield their economies from surges in COVID-19 infections and deaths, and further economic contraction.

Future of Foreign Higher Education Students

The twin forces of digitalisation-driven IR4.0 technologies, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has left all facets of life at a conundrum. On the one hand, the proliferation of digitisation and digitalisation has offered opportunities for breaking out from a dependence on low-skilled foreign labour, to deploying robots and drones. On the other hand, Malaysia has yet to translate the two related blueprints to action since their respective launches in 2018 and 2020. It is over this time that the COVID-19 pandemic struck to delay the execution of these plans.

While the government should resume emphasis on higher education but with increased focus on meeting the needs of the country, there is also a need to offer scholarships selectively to attract talent from abroad. Indeed, such scholarships have been widely offered by the net human capital recipient countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, France, Canada, and Singapore.

In doing so, the government should invoke the critical elements of economics to focus on the public goods properties involved in promoting higher education and related training. The critical technological and knowledge focus should be on latest strategic and complimentary industries that focus on the new frontier of technologies, such as digitalisation and IR4.0 technologies, biotechnology in intensive farming, open systems approach to education, and finally targeting higher education to meet societal needs, including achieving carbon-neutral status and energy efficiency, raising healthcare quality, and reducing socioeconomic inequality.

The initial costs may be high, especially given the disruptions necessitated by COVID-19. However, the eventual trend fall in physical classrooms and university space, and the savings from renewal and downsizing of maintenance, could equalise

the new costs expected from the construction of digital platforms and IR4.0 instruments. Given the properties of education as a public good, the fees should also be assessed to be socially acceptable, especially when Malaysia is positioning itself internationally as a middle power to fight for the interests of small- and middle-income states.

The concept of education should change to be in sync with developments in some continental European economies, such as Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, and Sweden — so that the emphasis will be on promoting society relevant knowledge. With the proliferation of digitalisation and IR4.0 technologies, universities can also reduce support staff to provide savings on overheads. Higher education should focus on knowledge acquisition — both adaptation and creation of new stocks, and its effective delivery through critical discourse. Malaysian higher education universities should move away from the commodification of knowledge to its promotion as critical know-how for constant re-innovation for application. Universities should also increasingly be directed to become entrepreneurial in the mould of what Schumpeter had referred to in his seminal works, *The Theory of Economic Development and Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, as the essence of entrepreneurs, which is being able to innovate. University managements should be encouraged to spearhead teaching, learning and supervision that requires academic personnel to create and apply knowledge that are useful for society. While entrepreneurial universities can easily finance their activities — provided they are organised to value producer-user relations through endowments, commercialisation, and start ups — disciplines that lack the ability to attract entrepreneurs but remain essential to synergise the entrepreneurial courses will need funding. However, the funding of these disciplines, such as philosophy, history, political science, sociology, and anthropology can be kept to a sufficient extent to fertilise the entrepreneurial disciplines.

Conclusions

Digitisation and digitalisation have inevitably triggered the potential for disruptions and discontinuities in production and delivery of goods and services across economies, including in higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to those disruptions with lockdowns and social distancing. While the world as a whole, including Malaysia, has been slow in transforming the embedding environment to embrace these developments, it is important to note that education in general, and higher education specifically should not be subjected to a mechanistic transformation that will eliminate its social and non-metaphysical attributes. Hence, this essay has offered the arguments on why and how Malaysia should transition to a digitalised world that is more resilient to epidemics, yet does not compromise the philosophical fundamentals and public goods properties of education.

For a number of reasons, it is right for higher education policy to promote access to foreign students in Malaysia. While it is important to ensure that foreign students will at least be able to support the costs associated with the provision of higher education to them, the government should also target foreign students for the potential they can bring in productively shaping the country's development. The latter has been a major policy focus, albeit often implicitly, of successful countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Singapore.

The evidence amassed shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has offered no country any real advantage in the pursuit of attracting foreign students; but given the critical importance of social distancing and the restrictions imposed on travels, the mode of delivery has increasingly shifted to distant teaching, learning, and supervision. With the special significance of contact-based learning and research, a number of faculties are still in a transitional phase with no clear direction. While the revenue generation objective has been conspicuous in Malaysia's pursuit of foreign students in higher education — in addition to the need to refocus it with greater emphasis on the nation's development, as it carries tremendous public goods characteristics — it will be good to take a leaf out of the country's foreign policy to play a hybrid middle power role by making higher education a platform for the promotion of sustainable development. In doing so, the government should call for the inclusion of complementary disciplines that emphasise the philosophical attributes of holism, realisation of creative self, integrity in the distribution and allocation of resources, cultural interdependence, and entrepreneurship focused on innovations. 

This article is based on a keynote speech given at the Global Higher Education Forum (GHEF) 2021.

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Myanmar's Higher Education System: Reforms Deformed by COVID-Coup Conundrum

MARK BROWN

2021 was a difficult year for higher education in Myanmar. COVID-19 and the military coup compounded to effectively halt any and all progress. The task of this article is to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Myanmar. This is achieved by first sketching the state of higher education by the time COVID-19 arrived, followed by a review of the Ministry of Education's response to the pandemic. The current operational status of the higher education sector is then briefly identified, from which lessons can be learned for Myanmar's higher education sector regarding pandemic shocks. This is done while keeping in mind that the true impact of COVID-19 and the ability of Myanmar's higher education administration to apply lessons learned are both made difficult due to the military's dissolution of the country's civilian government for the foreseeable future.

Higher Education at the End of the NESP

The past 10 years has seen a number of significant developments in Myanmar's higher education sector, due in large part to the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). Although the NESP has run the course of its five-year timeline (2016-2021), the second instalment was expected to be released circa 2021 to ensure a smooth transition from 2022 onwards. However, due to the double dilemma of COVID-19 and the military coup that have crippled the country in 2021, the second iteration of the NESP is unlikely to be immediately forthcoming either in documentation or implementation.

In the context of higher education, the NESP (2016-2021) had three strategic objectives: (1) to strengthen higher education governance and management capacities; (2) to improve the quality and relevance of higher education in Myanmar; and (3) to expand access to equitable higher education. In view of these objectives, a number of successes and challenges can be identified.

Successes include, for example, establishing the decentralising National Education Policy Commission (NEPC), which served as a point of coordination between the Ministry of Education (MOE) and higher education institutes (HEIs). Additionally, regarding funding, an increased percentage of the national budget was allocated to the education sector. According to the World Bank, in 2011 education received 3.9% of the budget (US\$230M), and in 2019 received 8.4% (US\$1.5B), of which 17% was assigned to the Department of Higher Education. In terms of GDP, this translated into an increase from 0.79% in 2011 to 1.93% in 2019 — still well below the global average of 4.5% of GDP (in 2017) and still the lowest performer in Southeast Asia, but nevertheless an upward trend. A further success is that, according to the Statistical Yearbook released by Myanmar's Ministry of Planning and Finance, between the 2010–11 and 2017–18 academic periods student enrolments increased by 55.9%, the number of teaching and research staff increased by 40.5%, and education college enrolments in the same period went up by an astronomical 800+%. It is also worth noting increased multilateral support in terms of digital infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development. These initiatives tended to focus on urban HEIs in lower-Myanmar, though not exclusively.

Challenges for the NESP's strategic objectives in higher education include, for example, the 2021 military coup. The impact of the coup on Myanmar's education sector as a whole, including higher education, has been systematic, deep, and will likely be long-lasting. With domestic stability not yet a reality, it is unclear how long it will take the education system to recover. Another challenge is the fact that traditional, rote-focused teaching methods that prioritise obedience rather than participation remain the standard pedagogy. And, of course, a third challenge is the impact of COVID-19 at the tail-end of the NESP's project cycle.

“The impact of the coup on Myanmar's education sector as a whole, including higher education, has been systematic, deep, and will likely be long-lasting.”

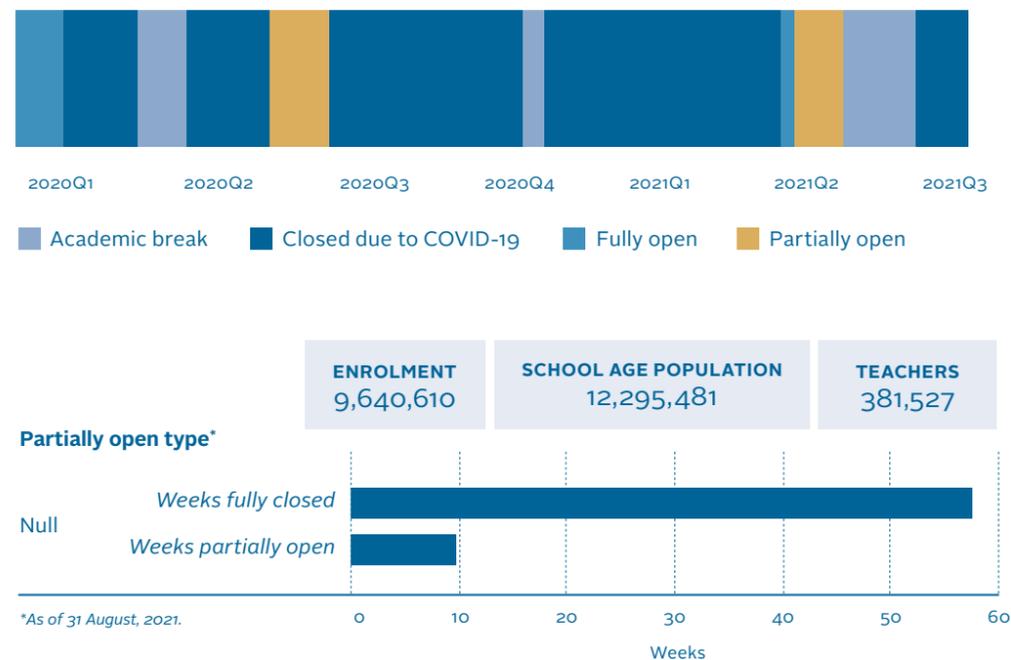
MOE's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan

When COVID-19 reached pandemic status, Myanmar's MOE was quick to respond with health and safety measures for all public schools. These measures were swiftly followed by nationwide school closures from primary through to tertiary levels. These closures remained in place for the majority of 2020 and 2021, punctuated with brief opening periods, and HEIs apparently having access to remote learning. However, those opening periods proved brief due to an increase in COVID-19 cases in 2020 and national civil disobedience in the face of military violence in 2021. Additionally, while remote learning is identified as an option for HEIs in Myanmar, the reality is that in the current military climate internet access and power supplies are unreliable, and HEI educators are unlikely to have the pedagogical training and skills to facilitate online learning for the estimated 932,000 HEI students (per the World Bank's 2018 estimate). These factors, combined with the fact that Myanmar has comparatively fewer resources at its disposal, translate into a very low vaccination rate, so that a coordinated and safe reopening of schools and HEIs is unlikely.

FIGURE 1

School Closures in Myanmar

Closures applying to all public schools from primary to tertiary. Numbers indicative of primary and secondary only.

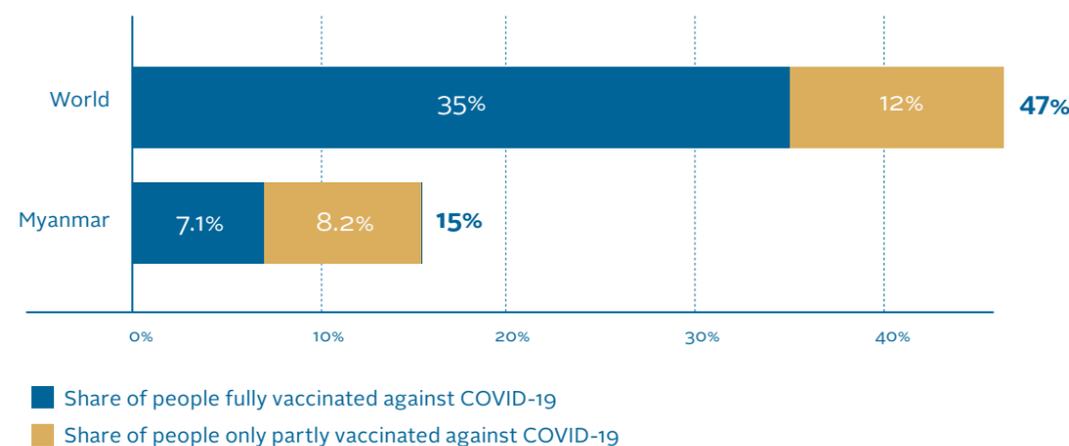


Source: <https://covid19.uis.unesco.org/global-monitoring-school-closures-covid19/country-dashboard>

FIGURE 2

Share of People Vaccinated Against COVID-19

[as of 8 Oct 2021]



Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>

In May 2020, the civilian government formulated a COVID-19 Response and Recovery (R&R) plan. The goal was to ensure quality, equitable education in the short, medium, and long-term during COVID-19. The provisional timeline spanned from May 2020 to October 2021, though this was open to the changing dynamics of the pandemic. Pandemic-related risks to education identified in the plan include: reduced government spending due to the associated economic slowdown; closure of TVET schools and HEIs for approximately 1.5 million students; increased student dropouts as a result of limited experience with distance learning; increasing educational inequalities due to rural-urban and socio-economic divides; increased child labour as a result of those divides; and a negative impact on student mental health and well-being.

Specifically regarding higher education, and in-line with the NESP, the R&R plan expected an impact in the areas of access, quality, equity, and management. Access concerns focused on fair and transparent admissions, departmental challenges for distance learning, online access, and data affordability challenges for students. Regarding quality, concerns focused on a lack of professorial capacity for distance learning, learning materials not being suitable for distance education, students often being limited to mobile phones for online interaction, and onerous online training requirements for teacher educators at education colleges. Equity issues revolve around vulnerable demographics, such as persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and women. Management issues point to challenges in data collection, effective communication channels, remuneration, and private sector relations.

The R&R plan was based on two key assumptions. The first assumption considered the time-sensitive nature of responses to, and recovery from, the impact of COVID-19. The second assumption was that international assistance and funding would be available for the R&R plan to be implemented. Both assumptions are reasonable, yet the second assumption may now prove problematic. With the second assumption comes a deeper assumption of

political stability, a stability that has been destroyed by the 2021 coup, which puts international assistance and funding at risk because bilateral and multilateral support has wavered in response to the coup, including international sanctions directed at senior military members and a redirection of funds by selected donor agencies can be expected. In addition to an economic slowdown, spending on education may be further hampered by limited access to international assistance and funding. It is worth recalling that in 2019 the Department of Higher Education received 17% of the national budget for education, while in the R&R plan higher education was allocated 12.1% of the budget, a proportional decrease of 28.8%.

A monitoring and evaluation framework was prepared to track the success of the R&R plan. Key indicators for the response phase include the continuity of education during school closures, training and support for educators, and student health and well-being. Key indicators for the recovery phase include the return to safe learning environments for all stakeholders, a transition back to face-to-face teaching and learning, continued training and support for educators, and civic engagement and communications. At the time of writing (October 2021), a monitoring and evaluation report based on the targets stipulated in the R&R plan has not been released. At this stage of COVID-19, with schools still closed and a military junta in control, it is reasonable to conclude that these proposed targets will not be achieved anytime soon. Information regarding plans for higher education to resume amidst COVID or post-pandemic is not forthcoming from the junta, and when such information does become available there is sufficient cause to question its validity.

Current Status

When COVID-19 arrived the capacity of Myanmar's education sector was much stronger than it was 10 years prior. Currently, HEIs remain closed in Myanmar ostensibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Reuters reported via the Myanmar

“ In the context of COVID-19 and looking to the future, deeper and more exhaustive capacity building and infrastructure investment is required to ensure that the higher education sector is more resilient to pandemic shocks should they occur in the future.

Teacher's Federation that in late May 2021, 19,500 university staff had been suspended by the military due to staff involvement in the nationwide civil disobedience movement. Such COVID closures and military suspensions can only be debilitating to the public higher education sector and the more than 930,000 students it serves. A key learning point from the R&R plan is the need for an emergency preparedness strategy to be included in the NESP II, should it materialise. In the context of COVID-19 and looking to the future, deeper and more exhaustive capacity building and infrastructure investment is required to ensure that the higher education sector is more resilient to pandemic shocks should they occur in the future.

Reforms After COVID-Coup

By October 2021, the World Health Organization reported 475,885 cases of COVID-19 in Myanmar, with 18,068 COVID-related deaths. With a fragile healthcare system and weak public administration,

these numbers likely underreport the true medical impact of COVID. Bolstering this claim is that, subsequent to its coup, the military was widely believed to be inactive to the point of using the surge in COVID cases during the third quarter of 2021 as a strategy to dampen civic dissent against coup. The result of COVID-19 and the coup combined is that the NEPC was suspended in May 2021, an 18% economic downturn is predicted for Myanmar's 2021 financial year, therefore a decrease in higher education funding can be expected, from which student enrolments and teacher engagement in public higher education can also be expected to drop, and international partners are wavering. Successes achieved by the ambitious NESP were certainly challenged by COVID-19, with setbacks expected, but a way through the pandemic was envisioned with the civilian government's R&R plan. The military regime makes no mention of the R&R plan, from which we can infer that it has been abandoned, and with it the prospect of a return to safe learning environments for education stakeholders.

Currently, what we might minimally hope for and what is realistic appear as two divergent questions. We might hope for a cessation of hostilities, meaningful dialogue between competing military-political interests, a return to diverse investments in education, and Phase 2 of the NESP being taken up in earnest by a civilian government. The reality is that reports indicate continued protests amidst widespread street-level violence, arbitrary arrests, shootings, and bombings. Concerns over COVID have largely been overshadowed by the coup. For higher education, the way forward is unclear. The dilemma facing higher education today — to acquiesce for peace or to resist for justice — is a dilemma to which there is no attractive solution yet. 🏛️

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The Future University in the Eyes of Today's Students

DANA ABDRASHEVA, DIANA MORALES & EMMA SABZALIEVA

What do today's students think about the university of the future? What are their hopes and fears, when thinking ahead to possible scenarios for higher education in 2050? This article presents the voices of some of the 741 respondents from around the world, who participated in one of 55 focus group consultations conducted in 2020-2021 as part of UNESCO's priority to examine the futures of education.¹

In connection with this global initiative, higher education is brought into focus through the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022 as well as by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), through a large-scale project on the plural futures of higher education.² This project has included a global consultation with higher education experts, published as *Thinking Higher and Beyond: Perspectives of the Futures of Higher Education to 2050*, and a public consultation that engaged over 1,200 people in 100 countries in 2021.³

1. See "The Futures of Education," UNESCO, <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/>.
2. See "Futures of Higher Education," UNESCO IESALC, <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/futures-of-higher-education/>.

Focus Group Participants

Focus groups participants — 502 of whom were students and 239 active in fields related to higher education (e.g., government, NGOs, academia) — recognised the adverse effects of the pandemic as well as opportunities created by it on the processes of higher education. Some of the main topics that emerged from the focus groups are discussed below.

The Campus Experience Will Be Transformed

The campus, currently the hub of most students' higher education experiences, will be complemented — but not replaced — by integrating technology into teaching and learning. As one focus group participant noted, "an equilibrium must be reached where students are also able to learn by real experiences, human interaction and physical expression, without relying heavily, or borderline exclusively, on digital tools."

3. See publication here, <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/futures-of-higher-education/thinking-higher-and-beyond-perspectives-on-the-futures-of-higher-education-to-2050/>; and public consultation details here: <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/futures-of-higher-education/public-consultation/>.

“Although students were optimistic about the role of technology in opening up higher education, they also felt that the future might hold more “market characteristics”.

While fears of a global digital divide abound, focus group participants felt that technology could have a positive impact on inclusion and accessibility.⁴ For example, one participant said that “digitising classrooms will allow access to top education institutes for people who were geographically or otherwise left out previously. A student in rural California will be able to take classes online through top schools in San Francisco or Los Angeles. Any student around the world no matter [their] location will be able to access higher education.”

Although students were optimistic about the role of technology in opening up higher education, they also felt that the future might hold more “market characteristics”. It was felt that this competition would ultimately drive up quality in universities and colleges, but at the same time lead to greater stratification throughout society in terms of education.

A Paradigm Shift from Academic Mobility to Engagement

Participants recognised that “mobility will turn into connectivity” and that traveling to other countries would not always be necessary in the future, because students will learn how to stay engaged with the global community in different ways. Students saw their future university attending to local needs by tackling all kinds of inequalities, while remaining responsive to international collaborations.

Participants believed that technology would act as an equaliser between countries in the future, and that “mobility opportunities should reach other countries and be more international.” Students and educators talked about restructured university degrees that would consequently lead to changes in curriculum content as well as forms of academic mobility.⁵ Students trusted that virtual forms of mobility would be equally beneficial for intercultural exchange and understanding.

Co-Creation of Learning Environments

Participants foresaw “new forms of knowledge construction, based on cooperative and collaborative relationships between teachers-students and students-students. For this, it is essential to reconfigure the role of the teacher who, in addition to preserving his/ her role as a specialist, must assume more [of the] role of tutor, mediator, facilitator, and motivator.” In this future, students would be more active about what they want and need, according to their contexts and realities. They would be co-creators in their own higher education, which includes having the ability to shape their learning pathways.

4. For UNESCO IESALC’s report on digital divide and its impact on student mobility, see <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2021/05/10/the-impact-of-the-digital-divide-on-student-mobility-university-world-news/>.

5. See examples here: <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/vsm/>.

Climate Change, A Ubiquitous Concern

Among all participants, climate change is a major issue — particularly its lack of coverage in today’s higher education curricula. Focus group participants articulated the need for more interdisciplinary and accessible teaching and learning. This should incorporate climate change: “Topics such as sustainability and guidelines focused on social causes, will be more discussed and included.”

Another participant noted that “[c]limate change has effects on various diseases, but there are few specific links made during our education. We need to connect the dots and incorporate the impact of climate change.”

Links Between Higher Education and the Labour Market

Looking ahead, the links between higher education and the labour market are also important concerns for students. While job markets will vary, students remained practical in their perception that a university degree serves to elevate their economic and social status. Unemployment is seen as a big threat in the future, and the university’s role in teaching students to be “market-ready” will continue to be significant.

However, participants also looked beyond the financial benefits of employment, into fulfilment and reward from their chosen area of work. As one participant noted, the “fluid options of lifelong learning” present many opportunities for continuous growth and development beyond the “four walls of the classroom”. Students are aware of the need to reskill and upskill to maintain stable employment.

Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Employment

Automation and robotisation will further affect human interactions and will specifically appear in the service field when “cars ... drive themselves, shopping will move away from brick and mortar

and lead to more convenient lifestyles.” However, participants also expressed their concerns about the social effects of such change and predict various upheavals and social disorders.

Connectivity

If the findings from these very varied focus group consultations had to be summarised in one word, it would be connectivity. Participants no longer see higher education as created only by institutions, but connected to students in the co-creation of their learning pathways. Further, global processes should be connected with local communities.

Students want to become better communicators and collaborators to thrive in a technologically interlinked world where learning runs throughout their entire lives. Individuals will continually upgrade their skills to stay relevant and connected in fluid labour markets. Participants acknowledged their role within the structures of higher education because they want to become better learners and serve global and local communities to the best of their capacity.

These focus groups have revealed students’ hopes and concerns, as they think ahead to 2050. The next big question is: Are universities ready to attend to students’ visions of the futures of higher education? 📖

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Private Higher Education in Developing Economies in Southeast Asia: Challenges to and Prospects for its Sustainability in a Post-Pandemic World

MARIA ALICIA BUSTOS-OROSA

The COVID-19 pandemic has created massive economic disruptions and challenges to private higher education institutions (HEIs) across Southeast Asia. Before the pandemic, private universities shared an extensive reach in college enrolment and was a growing sector. In contrast, private universities are now confronted with significant enrolment declines and higher dropout rates due to prolonged erratic school closures, economic losses, financial uncertainties, and disruptions on traditional modes of teaching.

University World News reported in April that almost half of private universities in Indonesia saw at least a 50% decline in new students coupled with significant dropout rates. In another report, the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities (PACU) revealed that almost half of the private universities suffered an enrolment decline of 10 to over 50% in the 2020–2021 academic year. These losses were piled on top of long-term deficits from the K-12 transition. In Malaysia, a report with the foreboding title “The Collapse of Malaysian Private Universities” described a pending collapse as 44% of private universities were technically financially insolvent, and around 55% were operating on trading

losses. Travel restrictions for foreign students had also hampered foreign admission in private universities. In the same report, according to the Malaysian Association of Private Across Colleges and Universities (MAPCU), foreign students deferred admission which translated into a 44% revenue drop, particularly among foreign-affiliated universities. In Vietnam, in a 2021 paper published by Dr Que Dang Nguyen, Vice President of the Vietnam National Academy of Public Administration, the private sector needed to narrow down their scale or face closures.

The narratives of Southeast Asian private universities amid the COVID-19 pandemic paint shared accounts of change and challenge for most. The pandemic certainly exacerbated their already precarious financial standing. The accelerated, albeit drastic, shift to emergency remote teaching and learning, has also weighed heavily on their financial viability and operational capacity.

The pandemic raises these questions: Has the pandemic altered prospects for private education in Southeast Asia? What opportunities does the post-pandemic context offer private universities in the region?

“ During the pandemic, private HEIs resorted to cost-cutting measures that involved laying off untenured employees or to draw reserves. These measures, however, are not sustainable for the long term.

Private Education: Context and Challenges

Private universities were grappling even before the pandemic with economic and political externalities that threaten their survival. In its golden era, private education was founded as a viable and even preferred alternative to public higher education. In 2018, Philip Altbach and Liz Reisberg — founding director and research fellow at Boston College Center for International Higher Education, respectively — alluded to the market-driven trend in privatisation as the “massification” of higher education. However, a challenge to privatisation is the shifting political focus and bias towards free, public higher education in Southeast Asia. The Philippines is a prime example. As a palliative, the government extended access to private universities through student loan schemes and tertiary education voucher subsidies (called UniFAST) for students who opt to enrol in private universities. Despite this initiative, financial support for low-income students is still mostly sourced from university funds or private donors and endowments.

Before the pandemic, problems relating to quality, retention, high costs, access and equity had long hounded private universities. The market forces that drive private universities hinder research productivity as universities focus on programme offerings that are labour market-driven and can yield immediate results (i.e., employability). Arresting student attrition and retention of highly qualified faculty are recurrent problems. Unfair competitive practices and tuition price wars among neighbouring private HEIs are also evident.

Tuition and fees vary widely across the different types of private universities with the more elite, exclusive universities charging higher rates versus mass market and non-selective private universities. As the pandemic has highlighted, poorly funded private universities are at the highest risk as they depend on tuition revenues. The lack of

resources, in the absence of government subsidies, adversely leads to the dearth of investments in infrastructure, research and faculty development. During the pandemic, private HEIs resorted to cost-cutting measures that involved laying off untenured employees or to draw reserves. These measures, however, are not sustainable for the long term.

Government regulations and unfavourable policies hinder institutional autonomy for new offerings and flexibilities in fees. Legislated tax incentives for private universities are also subject to political changes. The recent Philippine experience presents an interesting case. Its Corporate Recovery and Tax Incentives for Enterprises (CREATE) Act — which temporarily reduced the tax rate to 1% for three years — was meant as a relief for private universities during the pandemic. However, private universities opposed its interpretation by the tax authority. It has been reported that, if enforced, CREATE would instead increase the sector's tax rate to 25%.

Private Universities and Their Responses to the Pandemic

Across Southeast Asia, private universities responded to school closures and made large-scale transitions towards online or remote learning to ensure learning continuity. Some HEIs opted for massive open online courses (MOOCs) while others introduced new models for instructional delivery, including setting up learning management systems (LMS) and video-conferencing facilities. While digital education is the path ahead, such transition demands substantial costs and investments.

Private universities struggle to remain resilient and viable in the face of competition from public HEIs and the economic fallout from the pandemic. Online learning has highlighted inequities in access to technology, limitations in internet connectivity, and the lack of gadgets for many students. Across Southeast Asia, private universities introduced direct stop-gap measures for their students — such as extended payment terms, gadget provisions, lower internet fees, and tuition and miscellaneous

fee waivers. Direct financial assistance through loans, subsidies and scholarships to qualified students has been initiated. In the Philippines, private universities offered student loans backed by startup private equity firms, such as Bukas.ph and InvestEd. Further south, *The Jakarta Post* reported the Indonesian government's allocation of Rp1 trillion (US\$70.6 million) to help 410,000 students mostly in private universities to pay their tuition fees. However, such concessions are still deemed inadequate. In Vietnam, big internet providers pledged free data charges for the education sector.

As early as 2012, the Asian Development Bank has recommended critical indirect actions to ensure the future of private universities. These indirect, political and economic mechanisms include tax incentives, minimal regulations on profits and returns, and funding for research and other grants. After all, the outlook for private universities is contingent on the political and economic incentives for all private enterprises in a post-pandemic context.

“ **A rationalised higher education development plan can better delineate the parameters of complementarity between public versus private universities and avert needless competition between them.** ”

Private Universities at a Crossroads

Across Southeast Asia, a post-pandemic context presents an uncertain and undefined future for private universities. Steady market expansion, population growth and a rising middle class may assure the future of private universities. Private universities need to re-imagine education as flexible learning to ensure learning continuity and sustainability. It might be possible that as prolonged school closures persist, students will prefer private universities that prove their distinct capacity to deliver innovation. Private universities will need to invest in digital infrastructure, leading to long-term returns and targeted increases in student enrolment. However, for cash-strapped private universities in developing economies, investments in digital technologies may not be feasible to begin with. Indirect government incentives must then allow for recovery and generation of capital for technology investments and re-tooling faculty for innovative and responsive pedagogies.

Private universities must be agile and imaginative to trends in the job market and instructional delivery. ASEAN private universities can form partnerships through distance, transnational education. Online faculty exchanges and regional research collaborations open growth prospects for private universities; through these partnerships, private universities might gain long-term leverage.

A rationalised higher education development plan can better delineate the parameters of complementarity between public versus private universities and avert needless competition between them. Policies must enable autonomy in fees and curricular options, but restrict opening new or substandard HEIs from offering oversubscribed programmes. Quality standards even for hybrid learning must be laid down, and HEIs that prove their worth can then be awarded incentives.

In developing economies, public HEIs at best should focus on priority programme gaps that are: critical to national sustainable development goals, capital-intensive, and high-risk that substantial government funding can sustain. In the Philippines, public HEIs can focus on relevant and critical degree programmes such as: agri-fisheries to ensure food security; scientific research; disaster risk reduction; community development; and social work.

Across Southeast Asia, a policy environment beneficial for private universities must be in place, particularly in developing economies. Legal barriers must be revisited to allow private universities to receive direct and equitable government subsidies similar to public HEIs. Government student subsidies for low-income families that prefer to attend private universities must be expanded.

The volatile and uncertain pandemic renders a bleak outlook, as many private universities remain vulnerable to the economic downturn in a post-pandemic context. Private universities are now at a crossroad and where the road turns remains to be seen. 📖

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Private Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia: Tackling the Issues and Envisaging Post-COVID-19 Strategic Actions

NURDIANA GAUS

From Indonesia's Directorate General of Higher Education 2020 report, private higher education institutions in Indonesia are home to 4,374,994 students, making them major higher learning institutions. Their primary source of revenue is from students' fees, which may lead to insolvency as a result of the decreased rate of new students' enrolment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under such challenging conditions, these institutions have had to formulate strategic actions. While all private HEIs are impacted, they have varying degrees of capacity in terms of economies, infrastructures, human resources, and technologies — that may affect the extent to which they can take and implement strategic actions to reconcile with the impact of the pandemic. According to the directorate, smaller private HEIs are the most affected institutions.

Strategic Actions Taken by Private Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen technological disruptions, causing all intellectual activities on campus to be moved to online systems. Raihan, Rector of the Jakarta Islamic University (UID) and Budi Djatmiko, the Head of the Association of Indonesian Private Universities (APTISI), said private HEIs should ideally include an internal learning management system — supporting equipment such as servers for online learning, and software that allows lecturers to supply teaching material. APTISI has similarly recommended that larger private HEIs with adequate infrastructure, human resources and financial resources could afford to provide these services. However, for smaller private HEIs with limited human resources, technology and financial resources, this would be extremely difficult. According to the association, only 30% of private HEIs (numbering 3,044 in 2020) could afford online learning — and most of them are the larger ones.

“While many smaller private HEIs have encountered difficulty in running online learning, some have used their capacity to map whatever available options and ways to ensure learning in their institutions goes on.

Nevertheless, while many smaller private HEIs have encountered difficulty in running online learning, some have used their capacity to map whatever available options and ways to ensure learning in their institutions goes on. It was revealed that a private university¹ in Bengkulu (a province in Sumatra) had adopted and contextualised what is known as “revolutionise education”, where it used an e-learning portal coupled with Zoom and Google Meets to conduct online learning and teaching. Given that there were many students living in other areas with good internet connectivity, the lecturers were encouraged to communicate with students via Whatsapp and Telegram. Use of YouTube to post videos of learning content was also promoted.

Next, the case of a smaller private university in Makassar tells a different story. This university has very limited capacity to provide online learning. It employs a hybrid approach to learning that combines offline and online learning — with the latter focusing on the use of free online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meets in limited 40-minute sessions. In this case, learning that are entirely reliant on lecturers cannot be provided comprehensively, resulting in students' lack of knowledge and mastery of such

topics. In such circumstances, students are at a disadvantage. To address some of these concerns, the government has given free data packages of 50 GB for students and lecturers from September to December 2020, and of 15 GB for the same period in 2021 to facilitate the operation of online learning.

Also reported by APTISI, during the pandemic, the incomes of private HEIs have been affected due to the declining enrolment of new students (by roughly 30% to 50%) and an increase in the dropout rate of enrolled students. In coming to term with this condition, private HEIs with adequate support resources may have more discretion in planning strategic initiatives to keep current students from dropping out. For example, a university in Semarang, Central Java, used its capacity to take strategic actions and solutions. They identified students who were entitled to financial aid, and also determined which students' parents or families have been significantly impacted by COVID-19 (forcing them to lose their jobs or income). These were then prioritised for assistance. In the assistance, the university made available a wide range of aid, from tuition price reductions to tuition fee waivers. This, however, is not the case for smaller private HEIs, whose financial resources are limited. Such institutions have no other option but to rely on the government for financial aid for their students. In 2021, the government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, provided financial aid totalling IDR 1 trillion — to assist 410,000 students at private and public HEIs in their tuition fees. Yet, not all students were eligible for this aid; only those who were studying in particular semesters (semesters 3, 5, and 7) could access the aid. With this amount limit and the restricted eligibility, the likelihood of students dropping out is likely to increase.

1. The names of the private universities are kept anonymous at the request of the author.

Larger private HEIs have also been able to practise their strategic actions and find solution to increase new student enrolment. The same university in Semarang, armed with resources in marketing, information technology, and finance, has been able promote and market its courses. A wide range of offline promotion programmes has also been conducted in the form of education fairs and outreach to senior high schools. Online promotions take the form of using social media advertisements. Smaller private HEIs like the university in Makassar, confined by their limitations in all aspects, cannot do the same things. They can only promote their institutions through simple pamphlets, word-of-mouth, and some school outreach. (Given the limited access to internet in some parts of Indonesia, institutions have to organise direct outreach to facilitate registration and payments; this remains a barrier for some potential students.)

“ There should be a programme to aid enrolled students who have missed a significant amount of learning as a result of limited online studying time.

What Are Some Post-COVID Actions?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the ways scholarly activities and practice are conducted at private HEIs, forcing them to adapt and use their ability and skills to construct strategic actions and find solutions to ensure their institutions remain viable. However, all these actions have been primarily focused on the tackling on-going issues and challenges, neglecting post-COVID-19 strategic actions for recovering the impacted activities and regaining financial viability.

It is important for policymakers and education institutions to examine the post-COVID-19 options for recovery — especially for those who have been badly impacted. First, there should be a programme to aid enrolled students who have missed a significant amount of learning as a result of limited online studying time. These institutions need to devise strategic techniques in keeping students up to date on teaching materials in order to improve their mastery of the courses. Second is a programme to bring students who have dropped out, back to university to restart their studies. Third, a programme relating to recovering the trust of potential new students to enrol in their institutions in order to restore financial viability. And last but not least, a programme to diversify the sources of income in addition to students' fees.

So far, Nadiem Makarim, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has raised the idea of permanently using online learning modes as a form of distance-learning post-pandemic in Indonesia's higher education. There has been no news of recovery steps from the government to assist private HEIs in resuming normal operations. 

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Vietnam: Public-Private Higher Education Debates in a Communist State

QUANG CHAU

Private higher education (PHE) in Vietnam emerged from the state's political and economic reform called *Đổi Mới*, which was initiated in 1986. The adaptation of the market economy gradually penetrated into higher education and indirectly helped PHE to emerge. Initially, the state's regulations for PHE were highly interventionist, but generally spontaneous — largely due to the state's inexperience with the sector. Since the mid-2000s, these regulations have been continuously consolidated and institutionalised, and PHE (currently counting 65 universities and over 260,000 students) is an integral part of the national higher education system. Yet, private universities continue to claim that they are treated unfavourably compared to their public counterparts.

Public-Private Sectors: Complement or Competition?

In general, discrepancies between the public and private sectors (intersectoral distinctiveness) are key to understanding debates about Vietnam's PHE. During the early years of PHE, intersectoral distinctiveness was remarkable: Private universities were generally considered *the* avenue for less academically competent students. To enter private universities, students only needed to get the baseline score in the nationally administered entrance exam. That score was set by the Ministry of Education & Training (MOET) for quality assurance purposes. In contrast, public universities were highly selective: The acceptance ratio was extremely low, and the admission score was generally far above the baseline. Furthermore, most faculty members at private universities were adjunct, while faculty at public universities held tenured positions. In sum, while most supporting arguments for PHE cantered on access, the sector was simultaneously vulnerable to quality criticism.

Since the mid-2000s, when intersectoral distinctiveness started to decline, competition between the two sectors has increased. Public universities were established in many provinces, including economically peripheral ones, usually from upgrading existing colleges that delivered short-cycle tertiary education programmes. These universities focused largely on offering low-investment programmes and enrolled students who were academically less competent than those at traditional public institutions. This expansion policy raised numerous debates. Faced with direct competition from new public universities, private university administrators argued that the state should concentrate their investment on improving the quality of “key” programmes benefiting the larger population, such as medical education, engineering, biological technology — while leaving other programmes to private universities. This argument was, however, thwarted by provincial governments claiming that new public universities would contribute enormously to the provincial economy. Eventually, as public universities were established one after another in many provinces, they attracted students who would otherwise migrate to major cities and enrol in private universities. As a result, enrolment dropped at many private universities, which faced serious financial crises.

“ In general, PHE is believed to have indirectly forced the public sector to innovate and operate more effectively.

The recent involvement of private corporations in PHE has, however, significantly revived the sector. Several private universities are now owned by multi-sector corporations, and from acquiring many private universities, education conglomerates have also evolved. Some corporation-affiliated universities have opened capital-intensive programmes, attracting high-performing students, and have therefore become a counterbalance to major public universities. In general, PHE is believed to have indirectly forced the public sector to innovate and operate more effectively. There is now a flow of senior faculty members and staff leaving public universities to work at private universities, because the latter not only pay higher salaries, but also allow more space for experiments, innovations, and entrepreneurial spirit.

Equity and Inclusion: An Attack on the Public Sector

Unlike in many other countries, questions of equity and inclusion have not yet played out significantly in Vietnam’s PHE. There is general support for meritocracy in the Vietnamese tradition: It is considered fair that less competent students, regardless of social background, study at lower-tier universities, which are often private and charge high tuition. However, public universities have recently become subject to equity and inclusion criticism. As a part of the public administration reform

initiated in the mid-2010s, major public universities have been encouraged to become financially autonomous from state funding, in exchange for greater decision-making authority in select aspects. Consequently, tuition fees at these universities have rapidly increased and are now affordable mostly to affluent students.

Private Higher Education and Political Correctness

Since private education was originally considered antithetical to the Communist ideology, policies regulating non-state actors’ involvement in education development have evolved through tremendous ambiguities and sharp discontinuities (see also my article “Vietnam, the Unique Case for For-Profit Monopoly”¹). The socialisation (*xã hội hóa*) policy first announced in the late 1990s sought both to encourage the participation of private actors in funding and governing public education institutions, and to promote the PHE sector. However, this soon turned out to be largely a cost-sharing policy: Private actors, especially parents, were called in only to help share the state’s financial burden — while governance decisions remained in the state’s hands. Regarding PHE, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) on one hand legalised the sector, but on the other hand refused to recognise higher education as a market, and explicitly opposed the commercialisation of higher education. However, after Vietnam’s accession to the World Trade Organization (in 2006), which coincided with a top leadership reshuffle of the CPV, policy orientations on PHE tended to reverse. All private universities were mandated to convert to for-profit corporate status and run entirely as businesses. In parallel, the government also proposed (but this was later rejected by top CPV leaders) that public universities be equitised and run as joint-stock enterprises. One reason for these policy proposals was that some senior policymakers

“ Whether a truly non-profit sector will eventually emerge remains an open question.

seemed to misunderstand “corporatisation” — then a buzzword among higher education communities in East and Southeast Asia, which essentially called for greater institutional autonomy — as “to be run as a business corporation.” Furthermore, since most policymakers were previously trained in the Soviet Union, where the non-profit sector was practically non-existent, they tended to have only a partial perception of the private sector. For them, “private” meant for-profit businesses. Consequently, the profit-making nature of most Vietnamese private universities is considered legitimate, and does not receive extensive criticism.

Currently, with non-profit PHE recently legalised, one could expect intersectoral distinctiveness to decline further, and public-private debates to de-escalate. However, whether a truly non-profit sector will eventually emerge remains an open question. After all, higher education is not shielded from the country’s political economy, and Vietnam’s political economy contains so many unknowns. 📖

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1. Quang Chau, “Vietnam, the Unique Case for For-Profit Monopoly,” *International Higher Education*, Summer Issue No. 103 (2020), <https://www.internationalhighereducation.net/en/handbuch/gliederung/?articleID=2981#/Beitragsdetailansicht/815/2981/Vietnam%253A-The-Unique-Case-of-For-Profit-Monopoly>.

Global Liberal Education: Contradictory Trends and Heightened Controversy

MARY-ELLEN BOYLE

Liberal education (also known as liberal arts, and liberal arts and sciences) expanded globally during the first two decades of this century, with dynamism continuing today. Schools and programmes are opening and closing; professional networks are starting and disbanding; and scholarly books and conferences are offering critical analyses as well as pragmatic assistance. The dynamism is characterised by differentiation and politicisation: Schools are distinguishing themselves from each other and distancing themselves from US models, as Western values are being challenged and indigenous approaches created.

What is Liberal Education, and Where is it Offered?

Liberal education is easiest to define by what it is not: It offers an alternative to specialist and professional education at the post-secondary level. Sometimes mistakenly equated with general education, its core characteristics include comprehensive multidisciplinary knowledge, along with fostering intellectual qualities such as critical thinking, communication, creativity, learning to learn, problem solving, and social responsibility. Pedagogies are interactive and student-centred. These characteristics prevail across the cultures, nations, and regions that adopt the philosophy, suggesting universal agreement about core practices. These characteristics are not inherently politicised, but the term “liberal” has connotations of freedom and choice, values that are not embraced worldwide. Hence the controversy.

Based on the above definition, over 200 schools and programmes have been identified outside the United States, up from about 100 at the turn of the century. The increase can be attributed to the overall expansion and continued differentiation in the tertiary sector, with growth primarily, but not entirely, in Asia — with China in the lead. Efforts have also

“ Even with the sharp spike in programmes of late, liberal education will not surpass specialised tertiary education any time soon.

begun in places as diverse as Argentina, Germany, Ghana, and the UAE, with schools or programmes now found in approximately 60 countries. Much of this growth has been explicitly US influenced, while other efforts reference European, Muslim, or Confucian traditions — or claim to be modern innovations. At the same time, a handful of schools have closed or discontinued their liberal education foci, typically because of leadership, politics, and/or finances.

This dynamism and growth in the sector have generated a burst of scholarly literature. Emerging research is addressing thorny questions about purpose and politics, since liberal education is found even in illiberal regimes. Comparative case studies show the nature of differentiation across and within nations, and studies of classroom activity address how to nurture the qualities of mind associated with liberal education. Access and affordability remain key research and policymaking topics.

Contradictory Trends: Convergence and Differentiation

Even with the sharp spike in programmes of late, liberal education will not surpass specialised tertiary education any time soon. Yet the numbers and visibility are such that impact can be analysed. By adding liberal education to their arrays of post-secondary offerings, national systems are becoming more like each other, i.e., converging. The numerous case studies published reveal that this is not liberal

education in name only — practitioners describe genuine efforts to teach differently, to gain from the experiences of educators elsewhere, and to position their students for success, defined broadly. At the worldwide level, convergence has also been intensified by efforts to create global alliances or international networks of liberal arts schools. However, these global alignments are increasingly being replaced by regional convergences and differentiation.

Scholars and practitioners use geopolitical terminology to distinguish the interpretations of liberal education found around the globe. Three regions, defined broadly, dominate the discourse: Europe, Asia, and the United States. These geopolitical descriptors are found in book titles and articles, as well as in regionally named professional associations, networks, and blogs. Regional convergences can be described as follows:

- The European “resurgence” serves elites, with goals of excellence and tradition. A research orientation and multiple languages are typical. The Erasmus programme has published a guide.
- The Asian approach is utilitarian and international, serving economies in need of entrepreneurial thinking, creativity, and global adaptability. Research on these innovations is flourishing.
- The American interpretation is democratic and inclusive, with contestation, embeddedness, and diversity as constituent elements. Claims of decline are debated widely.

Notably, the European and Asian interpretations occur *within* the bounds of their geographic regions. In contrast, explicitly “American-style” liberal education exists outside as well as within the United States. These American-style schools outside of the United States are straightforward exports — attempts to replicate US liberal education, buttressed by US structures (in terms of accreditation, cooperation agreements, funding), and designed to advance US ideals. Such schools are in several categories: self-named “American” universities and colleges, found in 50 countries; those that have accreditation from US agencies; and branch campuses or high-profile partnerships. Several of these American outposts have become political flashpoints, as described below.

With or without American influence, and notwithstanding the geographic region, liberal education across the globe has been growing increasingly differentiated at the level of the individual school/programme. Variety is seemingly limitless, and may reflect national priorities, the founders’ passions, or prior experiences of the faculty, staff, and/or families. As further illustration of variability, liberal education was integrated into comprehensive research universities (e.g., Hong Kong, the Netherlands), emerged as a pilot project within existing state structures (e.g., Argentina, China), grew out of religious traditions (e.g., Indonesia, Israel), or began independently (e.g., Ghana, Italy). Curricular foci, too, are numerous — for example, from great books to climate change research, global languages and cultures to ethical leadership, and more. This diversity illustrates the malleability of liberal education in practice, given a shared set of core characteristics.

“ **This development suggests that the sector overall is resilient: It can adapt creatively and relatively quickly.** ”

Heightened Controversy and Politicisation

More a philosophy than a prescriptive model, the ideals of liberal education have long been associated with the West, particularly the beliefs about academic freedom and democratic participation that are prevalent in the United States. Yet, as liberal education proliferates and global balances of power shift, these Western values are being challenged. Several recent high-profile changes have brought global attention to the sector: the surprising dissolution of the Yale-NUS partnership,¹ the Russian expulsion of a Bard College (US) programme, the relocation of Central European University from Hungary to Berlin, and the abrupt closure of the American University of Afghanistan. The narrowing of the Chinese space with respect to Fulbright exchanges and Confucius Institutes has also generated concern and controversy, not limited to liberal education. As authoritarian political regimes gain sway, liberal education is buffeted.

Yet, while these retreats from US collaboration are notable, they are by no means universal. NYU Abu Dhabi is enthusiastically celebrating its 10th anniversary, the Duke Kunshan partnership in China remains strong, and the Harvard-supported Fulbright University in Vietnam appears vital. Start-ups continue, notably in Nepal and Sicily,

advised by experts from American universities and veterans of other global efforts. With US influence waning, it is increasingly common to acknowledge the intent to adapt American-style liberal education to local circumstances. Some global advocates would like to create new terminology (eschewing “liberal”) because of both its political connotations and lack of clarity. Philanthropist George Soros is taking an analogous approach, funding an Open Society University Network with Bard and its international liberal education partners, with the explicit goal to “counteract polarisation by promoting global collaboration in research and education to examine issues from different perspectives.”

Such evolution in interpretations and nomenclature is anticipated in theories of educational transfer asserting that ideas and practices that come from elsewhere are eventually claimed (and indigenised) by the borrowing culture. Moreover, this development suggests that the sector overall is resilient: It can adapt creatively and relatively quickly. At the same time, the political backlash was perhaps inevitable, given rising authoritarianism around the world and waning US power.

The increase in controversy and politicisation is not the only challenge facing the global liberal education sector. Full assessment must take the COVID-19 pandemic into account: With student mobility severely limited, the programmes that depended upon international students, particularly study abroad, have lost revenues and must retrench. Travel restrictions have stimulated interest in local options, resulting in unanticipated enrolment growths in certain settings. Pandemic adaptations also spurred appreciation of online and hybrid learning, thereby testing the schools and programmes designed around the residential college experience.

In conclusion, liberal education is firmly established as a global phenomenon with ongoing investment, scholarly interest, and innovation. Several high-profile closures will not be enough to disrupt the entire sector, since global schools and programmes are dispersed, variable, and interconnected. Resistance to change is inevitable — and informative, keeping us all aware of neo-nationalist dangers and China’s long shadow. 🏡

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