

Higher Education in Asia and the Search for a New Modernity: An Introduction

RAJIKA BHANDARI, INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, UNITED STATES

ALESSIA LEFÉBURE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, UNITED STATES

To familiarize oneself with the unfamiliar, to open oneself to the different, one must exercise the courage to leave the familiar and to throw oneself into the unknown.

— JOHN DEWEY, 1933

The unknown makes it necessary to imagine and possible to create the new.

— EDMUND PHELPS, 2014

No region has undergone as profound a transformation as Asia during the past half-century, from the 1970's to the present. The unprecedented economic growth has driven major social and demographic changes and institutional reforms and, in most countries, has brought about greater political stability. The advent of a large middle class, coupled with the openness driven by economic imperatives, has contributed to greater interconnectedness among Asian states and between them and the rest of the world. Higher education was not estranged from these dynamics. On the contrary, at a time

when economic growth seems to be related to knowledge production and advanced skills, Asian governments and citizens expect higher education institutions (HEIs) to create the conditions for the development of their countries and to train the future generation to be innovative and creative and to pursue sustainable growth.

This acknowledgement and clear shift toward prioritizing higher education are not unique to Asia, though the means and pace of reform are. Despite national differences—including varied political and institutional settings, historical legacies, and local constraints—reform of the higher education sector across Asia has been largely state-driven and publicly funded. In other regions, the state gradually withdrew from investments in higher education, which encouraged private investments and market competition.

After several years of sustained high economic growth in several Asian countries, most governments in the region succeeded in driving major reforms of their higher education system. These reforms often took inspiration from overseas, while also addressing local issues. China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, as well as ASEAN members and India have regularly referenced Western models and practices—most often those of the United States, but also Europe.

Asia's presence is growing in the international education landscape. When we look at its rise through the lens of academic mobility, a clear pattern emerges: many of the Asian faculty who return to their country of origin to take leadership positions have studied in the United States and obtained their PhD at a U.S. or European university; many post-secondary students in Asia plan to at some point continue their education overseas, likely in the United States or Australia. The most recent *Open Doors* 2014 statistics once again point to the surge in mobility *out* of Asia and well as *into* Asia. Students from Asia make up 64 percent of the total international student body in the United States, particularly from China, India and South Korea. Asian students are now a strong presence on many U.S. campuses, with faculty and administrators having to rethink their assumptions about the cultural, historical, and academic backgrounds of their student population. Although U.S. students are still relatively less mobile than their peers in the rest of the world, they are drawn to Asia in growing numbers for shorter-term study experiences as well as for full degree study.

Given this overall expansion of international academic mobility, most Asian governments decided to join the competition with the clear ambition to have their higher education system play at the top. Yet, if there is a power shift, it is more about redeployment rather than a rebalance. American and European research-based universities are still influential and highly attractive in Asian emerging countries. What happens in major research-based universities in the “old Western World” still matters and still has an impact on the rest of the world, including on Asia. North American and European universities invest considerable financial resources and energy in trying to establish a presence in Asia by creating branch campuses, platforms of services, local representative offices, strategic alliances, dual degree programs, and large networks.

By attracting a more diversified student body and actively appealing to international audiences, Asian universities are now, like their western counterparts, making commitments to offer portable skills and to train leaders capable of adapting their talents to a variety of institutional and regional settings. In the midst of this profound transformation of their ecosystem, they are progressively moving beyond the narrow confines of academia and becoming central to any political narrative about development and economic growth. Higher education today is one of the most convenient and critical arenas to establish consensual cooperative engagements and partnerships, despite the persistence of divergences and disagreements.

As Asian countries forge ahead to embrace new developments within their systems and beyond, they open the debate about the possibility of reconciliation between the ancient traditions of learning that have existed within the region for centuries and the new emerging models of learning. Among Asian countries are some of the world's oldest and largest universities, such as Nalanda in India, which dates back to the 5th century AD. The period of western colonialism in the 19th and 20th century further complicated or diluted these ancient systems. Today, professional accomplishments of institutions and faculty are based on a system of merit that is largely western-based, with western criteria and metrics that often place non-western systems at a disadvantage, especially those Asian countries where English—the lingua franca of scientific innovation and enterprise—is not one of the dominant languages.

Nonetheless, the heritage of colonialism in the region has not prevented Asian governments and institutions from experimenting with alternate and perhaps more authentic approaches to higher education development. As a consequence, in contemporary Asia today, traditions coexist with new models of higher education either imported directly from the west or shaped after a notion of what it means to be world class. Hence it is possible that we are seeing the emergence of a unique Asian model of higher education that selectively borrows from the west, yet freely draws upon its own solid academic traditions.

Why a Book on Higher Education in Asia?

In this book we attempt to show that the challenge in the 21st century is not about who is going to win the race. There is no race; there is no single superpower when it comes to education. What we see is greater mobility, growing interconnectedness, increased dialogue, and many more bridges rather than barriers. Higher education in Asia is interacting with this dynamic in new and different ways. And this engagement is continuously enhancing all players, leading to new forms of strategic alliances.

To give a complete picture of the developments in this region, this book, in addition to analyzing global trends in higher education, also looks at domestic transformations occurring within systems not engaged with other countries or regions.

Higher education institutions in Asia, like elsewhere, are facing a new kind of competition. Foundations and large non-profit organizations outside academia are often better positioned strategically to achieve civic and political objectives than universities, political parties, and governmental organizations. Questioning whether higher education is the only relevant scale for action could feasibly limit academia's power, as resources are channeled elsewhere.

International rankings, global competition, and marketing constraints also pose new challenges to academia in Asia. These conditions push university leaders to engage in a race to the top, collectively taking on a service-provider role. HEIs are finding that they cannot devote resources to human development projects, such as promoting digital literacy or focusing on climate change imperatives and the development of the civil societies, since these projects would not directly impact their academic ranking and reputation. The story is well known and documented. Higher education increasingly became a global market in the 1990s, allowing more students to select colleges outside their resident countries. Students therefore needed global comparisons and benchmarking. International rankings appeared in the early 2000s and have gained influence and strength since then. HEIs are trying to appeal to a worldwide audience, and historical prestige and reputation is no longer the only indicator of excellence and quality. International rankings have introduced new metrics, such as peer competition, research achievements of the faculty, and quality of services, that give a comparative advantage to new comers and to universities able to invest in brand development. Ranking systems have transformed the research-based university and Ivy League model into the world-class university standard, making it impossible to reach without the underlying business model. U.S. research universities rely financially upon endowments and tuition revenues that are not easily transposable in other parts of the world. Private donors, the tradition of legacy, and student loans are very specific to the U.S. social structure.

By looking at the most recent developments in Asian higher education, the book contributes to a new definition of excellence. While many of our authors, including Kishore Mahbubani and Tan Eng Chye, allude frequently to global rankings as one way to assess the quality and excellence of a country or region's HEIs, others point to the ability of higher education to adequately serve the aspirations of a growing domestic population as a key indicator. In India, limited higher education opportunities push a large number of domestic students overseas. Greater access to higher education is crucial even for other growing Asian economies not primarily focused on improving their global positioning, as they also seek to bolster their domestic sectors and talents, including through articulation of vocational and technical education.

There are many unique challenges that must be addressed, especially given the fact that Asia as a whole is home to a large number of developing countries whose educational needs are distinctly different from those of more developed countries. Countries like India, which otherwise has one of the largest and fastest growing college-aged cohorts in the world, has remained relatively disengaged in international education and the globalization of its higher education sector. A common argument is that this type of engagement makes sense only if it helps address the country's existing domestic education issues, which are primarily those of adequate access and quality. Our book attempts to address the critical question: How do developing Asian countries respond to global changes and the imperative to be outward-facing, while also remaining focused on their very real domestic education challenges?

The book offers a review of both regional trends and local initiatives, converging around the idea that universities should become incubators of talents, capable of developing the best and the brightest in each country and from all over the world. The book features prominent higher education scholars and experts who have been asked to discuss the major evolutions and trends in education and research policies throughout Asia. Through an interdisciplinary and comparative approach, they investigate the origin, design, implementation, and effects of different policy responses to development problems and challenges. By analyzing precise reforms and measures adapted since the 1990s, the authors show how higher education decisions have reflected the national development goals of states and nations. Given the pace and the scale of change, Asian higher education can be regarded as a laboratory for studying and improving our comprehension of a multitude of worldwide evolutions. Indeed, in the past decade, the study of higher education policies has not been limited to education specialists, but has been progressively incorporated into a larger theoretical debate on the analysis of public policies and their instruments.

While Asia has been understood in its broadest geographic sense, including the Far East, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, the book focuses primarily on countries whose higher education systems have either undergone a transformation or are part of the global competition. Nonetheless, our book is not just about the "big players"; it is as much about the smaller, rapidly emerging economies in Asia, including Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand. These countries have experienced strong economic growth in the past decades and have undertaken steps towards an internationalization of their HEIs.

What we intend to convey in the book is that in Asia, as anywhere else in the world, higher education is about raising talents; it is about encouraging the best in students and helping them grow as responsible citizens in this global world. A cross-cultural dialogue and an international dimension are doubtlessly crucial to achieving this objective. Not only are HEIs in Asia upgrading and scaling up, but they are also becoming interlocutors, partners, and peers for universities in other parts of the world. A new relation seems to be about to emerge, offering students in Asia and in other

parts of the world the possibility to move from one system to another, to experience new environments, to push themselves out of their comfort zone, and to embrace the differences and opportunities that this brings.

Despite the rapid growth of higher education in Asia, the issue of quality is paramount. Are the sheer quantity of HEIs and enrollments occurring at the cost of quality? Assuring consistent quality remains a key issue for many Asian countries which otherwise might have large higher education sectors. This quality issue becomes even more important, as many Asian countries are seeing a large growth in the number of private institutions that are not regulated by a government body. Altbach highlights the same situation for India, where despite valiant efforts on the part of the higher education sector and the government to implement reforms, there remains widespread and endemic corruption, and educational quality suffers.

Overview of the Book

The focus of the book reflects our personal and professional experience of the region and of the higher education sector. It draws inspiration from the extensive research on higher education mobility carried out at IIE's Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact, and from our teaching at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and at Teachers College. Our contributors were chosen for their expertise in the topics addressed by their respective chapters. In selecting authors for the book, we included researchers, academics, and practitioners based in Asia as well as those outside Asia so as to fully reflect voices and perspectives *from* the region as well as those *about* the region.

The first part of the book includes four chapters that situate the current Asian higher education landscape within a wider global context by raising critical questions about competitiveness, educational quality, and excellence. In Chapter One, **Kishore Mahbubani** and **Tan Eng Chye** argue with a sense of optimism that Asia is indeed poised to become the next higher education superpower, but that there are challenges that must be overcome. Presenting a different point of view, **Miguel Lim** questions whether Asian higher education is at the level where it can compete with other higher education superpowers and world-class institutions, especially when global university rankings are used as a yardstick. Lim also introduces the idea of world-class institutions and the knowledge economy, a relationship that is developed in greater detail in Chapter Three by **Chaya Jain**, in which she examines in detail the intersections between knowledge economies, higher education sectors, and economic growth in Asian nations. Chapter Four by **Simon Marginson** addresses the systemic and national-level challenges in Asia that continue to impede educational quality and global competitiveness.

Chapters Five and Six address from different angles the internationalization of higher education in Asia. **Futao Huang**'s chapter identifies distinctive characteristics of higher education internationalization in Asia, which has drawn upon internationalization in other countries and yet has evolved with its own, distinctly Asian flavor. This is followed by **Jack Lee**'s chapter on the role of cross-border education—and education hubs in particular—in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, and the motivations, economic benefits, and outcomes of these types of arrangements.

The second portion of the book focuses on how the cross-cutting, region-wide issues raised in the first four chapters are reflected at the local level in four Asian economies: India, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Japan. **Philip Altbach**'s chapter analyzes a few of the current trends within the Indian higher education system and highlights the continuing challenges associated with rapid massification and poor educational quality. Chapter Eight by **Mohd. Ismail Abd Aziz** and **Doria Abdullah** explores the role of Malaysia in the ASEAN regional integration process, while also providing an overview of current developments within the Malaysian higher education sector. This is followed by a chapter on Vietnam, in which **Pham Thi Ly and Martin Hayden** explore the challenges for a country with a rapidly growing economy and higher education system, yet one that is grappling with systemic issues that prevent it from achieving its full potential. In Chapter Ten, **Takao Kamibeppu** traces the evolution of internationalization within Japanese higher education and explores the relevance of European mobility schemes and regional harmonization schemes for Japan and whether such initiatives work in the Japanese context.

The final chapter by **Jouko Sarvi** highlights the potential role for donor agencies such as the Asian Development Bank in addressing some of the current higher education challenges in Asia, and what the future might hold both in terms of a shift in development strategy and in higher education growth within the region.

