

Book Review: Higher Education in Southeast Asia: Blurring Borders, Changing Balance

By Anthony R. Welch.

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Higher Education in Southeast Asia: Blurring Borders, Changing Balance addresses the challenge facing five countries of Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam) of increasing access to higher education. Although this is a common goal shared by these countries, “none are in the position to provide public higher education to all who aspire to it. Hence, private higher education is growing swiftly, sharpening problems in governance within a sector that is, in several cases already stretched to capacity” (p. 1). Welch introduces his book by describing the seemingly contradictory roles and functions of universities using Manuel Castells’ well known taxonomy. These functions and roles are translated into four broad goals listed on page 2 and which are: “train skilled labor as demanded by societies, cultivate elites, generate and transmit ideology and create and apply new knowledge.” A measure of success of developing countries is how well they manage these contradictory functions in order to achieve “growth,” “reform,” “equity,” and “social integration.” Although Castells does not “distinguish” between private and public institutions, the emergence of private institutions as well as its regulation complicates this endeavor. It is well-known that it is expensive to provide higher education because of the enormous amount of resources needed especially in the areas of science, technology and engineering. Developing countries often do not have these needed resources as developed nations do.

In his introduction, Anthony R. Welch provides some statistical data on the five countries ranging from their GDP to number of patents granted. He also offers other characteristics common to the five countries such as the demographic pressure exerted in higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as the rise of private higher education. He points out that with the increase in HEIs there have been some challenges and problems such as the governance in higher education. The rise of HEIs has neither created growth in regulation nor transparency. In addition, the impact of limited resources has put pressure on governments in providing quality control over an ever growing number of

institutions with no additional staff. This problem has been aggravated by the location of new institutions which are sometimes in scattered areas. Moreover, the transnational and cross border programs and institutions has put more pressure to regulatory agencies. Last, the impact of corruption has been felt in the higher education sector, ranging from people receiving bribes, enrolling unqualified students to “bogus” universities who have left hundreds of students “stranded” having lost their investment in higher education. In his introduction Welch concludes that,

there are two senses in which borders are also blurring. On one hand, the greater pressure on public sector HEIs to increase their income and diversify sources of funding means they are acting more like private providers. . . . On the other hand, national borders are also blurring as trans-national delivery of higher education, both actual and virtual, increases in scope and scale. (p. 18)

With the explosion of private institutions comes the need to address the impact of these in issues of equality.

The book is divided into five major chapters covering the five Southeast Asian countries. Each chapter provides a historical background of higher education in each respective country, highlighting some important issues in each of them. In Chapter 1 the author explores the directions in public and private higher education in Indonesia where there is an alarming increase of private higher education which has aggravated the issues of governance, quality, equity and state regulatory capacity. Added to these, are the problems of privatization of public higher education and transnational higher education. The crisis that Indonesia faces has to do not only with governance, but also with the diversity of its population and the economic crisis of the 1990s which contributed to their current debt. Not only income disparities persist in the country, but also education has been “distributed unevenly” in the different regions and in terms of gender. The author describes the historical development of higher



education with a special emphasis on Islamic higher education and the growth of the private sector.

The situation in Indonesia is very intricate as there are many ministries responsible for overseeing higher education institutions. Even though the higher education system is large, there is little commitment to research and teaching which has affected its quality. Faculty is not well paid in the public sector and when economic times are difficult they look for part time jobs in private universities. In the private sector, quality has also been affected by the lack of investment and the spending rates per student. There is also the issue with transparency. For example, there have been some instances in which private HEIs have provided fake data in their annual report. Indonesia's higher education system also faces other problems such as the regulation of non-accredited institutions, number of students per faculty, and staff qualifications. Another pressing issue is the funding of both private and public HEIs, compounded by the cuts in higher education by the government. The increase of HEIs in Indonesia is seen as part of the influence of economic structural adjustment in which the role of the state has diminished which in turn has had an effect on equity.

In Chapter 2—"Malaysia: A Quest for the Best?"—is comprised of a national case study devoted to an overview of Malaysia's higher education subsector. Welch provides a historical context of the development of higher education that includes the influence of Islamic higher learning and the British. One of the current issues and problems that Malaysia faces deals with the legacy of a policy that tried to undue ethnic discrimination creating instead a polarized society in which public universities enroll mainly ethnic Malays (*Bumiputra*) and private HEIs enroll mostly *non Bumiputra*. Unlike the other case studies included in this book, the Malaysia government did not undertake "significant" spending cuts in public higher education. However, the system was unable to provide education since the demand was too high. This together with the implementation of the ethnic quota on minorities helped the "rise" of privatization. Malaysia did not have private universities prior to 1995. But several pieces of legislation changed that, which led to the explosion of private HEIs. Brain drain is still a problem in Malaysia despite efforts to reverse that trend. Changes in immigration policy in other countries, which are attracting highly skilled workers, have aggravated this problem.

Malaysia's efforts to become an Eduhub have been so far more successful than other countries in the region. There has been an increase of international student enrollment in Malaysian HEIs which has attracted a good percentage of students from international locations and especially from Islamic countries. However, the quality of the faculty in both public and private

HEIs remains an issue as well as the lack of a research culture. It is also argued that the use of Bahasa Melayu as the language of instruction in public HEIs at the undergraduate level has decreased the proficiency of English and increased unemployment among Malays. Even though there are differences between private and public HEIs, the borders between both are becoming blurred. The increase of subsidiaries of public HEIs has created a market of questionable private HEIs and regulation of the booming private sector has become a problem that has affected the overall quality of education. Malaysia has ambitious goals for its higher education system, but according to Welch in order to achieve them it is necessary to abolish the ethnic quotas imposed in public HEIs.

Chapter 3 describes the higher education system in Thailand: "Privatizing Higher Education in Thailand?" which unlike the other four countries in the region, was never colonized by Europeans. Thailand is a very diverse country (ethnic and linguistically), however, Theravada Buddhism, Thai royalty, and Thai language have been and remain the basis of its education institutions. But just like the other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand also faces the problem of brain drain although there is a program to reverse that trend. Thailand also faces problems of quality control as the demand for higher education has increased and the budgets decreased. There is lack of institutional experience in conducting self assessments of their programs. Moreover, large amounts of resources are needed to conduct such assessments. Another problem facing its higher education system is that of quality of staff which is measured by the percentage of faculty who hold doctorate degrees and the ratio of faculty to students.

However, the overall problem facing Thailand is not so much the shift to private institutions per say, but the autonomy of public HEIs which are acting like private enterprises relying on student fees to run their institutions. According to Welch, "the most striking example of blurring borders" is the privatization of public HEIs who are being pushed to establish fee-paying programs to generate income. The dramatic rise of these programs which charge exorbitant fees to their students has played undue burden to faculty who must engage in working longer hours and therefore, leaving almost no time to engage in research. Some of these programs are also being staffed with under qualified staff which leads to granting degrees of questionable quality.

Overall the mass expansion of higher education has not translated into better quality. While there has been an increase in enrollment in both private and public institutions, the number of faculty has decreased and in some cases full-time faculty has been replaced with part-timers who are most cost effective to institutions.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the case study of the Philippines and it is titled “Quantity over Quality? Public and Private Higher Education in the Philippines.” In this country 90 percent of HEIs are private and its quality is acknowledged as being poor. The Philippines is a country of rich diversity and great income disparities. The rampant corruption at the governmental level contributed to the debt problem. Not only is the public debt high, but the collection of revenue has been declining. Corruption has also permeated the higher education system in which “cronyism” and “nepotism” are common. Its high birth rate has aggravated the economic problems as well. Under these circumstances it was inevitable the rapid growth of private education. The budget for state universities fell and there was an increase in their fees to keep them afloat. The implementation of student loans and pre need plans to afford higher education have failed.

Another problem facing the Philippines is that of brain drain. This is more pronounced in the Philippines as brain drain is also a “current government strategy” as the remittances sent by those living abroad accounts for a high percentage of their GDP and has kept the economy afloat. The third problem faced by the Philippines deals with that of quality. Its system is characterized by graduating a large number of students, but of poor quality. There is also a strong correlation between the quality of the institution and social class. Middle and wealthy students attend good HEIs while poor students attend “poor” HEIs. It is then argued that “academic selectivity” is in fact “social selectivity” (p. 121). Students from upper social classes are more prepared to pass higher education entrance examinations because they attend better high schools and can afford outside preparation to pass the examinations. On the other hand, the poor do not have extra help and generally do not attend the top high schools. Therefore, a high number of poor students attend private HEIs where they have to pay very high fees. Another aspect that affects quality is the lack of qualifications of higher education institutional faculty members; less than 10 percent of their teaching staff hold doctorate degrees. It is important to observe that corruption and cronyism affect the quality of education as well as credentialism. The Philippines experiences a high degree of unemployment among college graduates (about one third of them are unemployed). This speaks volumes to the quality of their education.

Chapter 5 illustrates Vietnam’s unique case as it grapples with maintaining “socialist goals in a society moving towards the market” (p. 137). Vietnam, unlike the other countries in the region, has a relatively small percentage of private HEIs but they have been growing and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Privatization is present in Vietnam however the local terminology used is more commonly referred to as

“socialization.” The term “private universities” is avoided in most local contexts and the term “people’s universities” is preferred by the government instead. These private universities get their funds through fees and donations. Even though there is a strong growth in public universities, private universities are in relative terms outpacing public universities.

Two of the main issues facing Vietnam have to do with the access to higher education and quality. Public universities cannot accommodate all qualified applicants and therefore, private universities will be in demand. The economic reality of the country, which remains very poor, has affected the capacity of the state to provide public education. Furthermore, the quality of education is affected by the teaching and learning methods in which the student is a passive recipient of knowledge; there is an emphasis of teaching by reading. It is also affected by the low compensation received by faculty in public universities; holding a second job is not uncommon. Moreover, some faculty graduated decades ago in Eastern Europe and only a small percentage hold doctoral degrees. In the private sector, two serious problems have emerged: over enrollments and bribery accepted by university officials to secure admission to the university. There have also been problems with corruption and bogus universities that have awarded “worthless” degrees. The implementation of fees in some HEIs in rural areas has also affected the poor.

One of the major strengths of this book lies in the relevance of the issues the author addressed in this book, such as governance, equity, access and quality of HEIs in the era of globalization and the liberalization of the economies of developing economies. Even though each case study discussed here has similar problems, some of these are aggravated by the unique socioeconomic, political and cultural situations of each individual country. Undoubtedly the role of higher education has changed in this new world order. Education has become another commodity in which students are treated as consumers and not as learners. It is up to each county to come up with new ideas and solutions to minimize the problems associated with internationalization of education.

Although the scope of the book is not to provide solutions, but rather to identify and describe in detail the problems and current state of the education system of these selected Southeastern Asian countries, it would be interesting to learn in the future what realistic solutions these countries have found to address the issues raised by the author of this book. Another major strength is the amount of research conducted by the author to back his claims. His familiarity with the topics and the countries at hand provides a much needed authority in the subject. Moreover, the organization of the book is other strength. He uses similar subheadings for each individual country, but highlights the unique problems that each specific country is facing. This book surely

will become a must read for any policy maker, faculty or graduate student interested in comparative higher education in general and in Southeast Higher education in particular.

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