Higher Education in Asia: Quality, Excellence and Governance

Alfred M. Wu · John N. Hawkins *Editors*

Massification of Higher Education in Asia

Consequences, Policy Responses and Changing Governance

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ISSN 2365-6352 ISSN 2365-6360 (electronic)
Higher Education in Asia: Quality, Excellence and Governance
ISBN 978-981-13-0246-6 ISBN 978-981-13-0248-0 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0248-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018940413

Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

Preface

Over the past decades, higher education has been responsible for significant changes within all Asian societies. The massification of higher education has as one of its intended effects reshaping the sociopolitical landscapes of Asian societies in fundamental ways. Within this framework, the Asia Pacific Higher Education Research Partnership (APHERP) devoted its 2014 senior seminar to investigating the massification of higher education in the Asian context. The organizers raised two essential hypotheses: Hypothesis 1 assumes that increasing access through massification either actually or eventually increases inequality; Hypothesis 2 presumes that the massification of higher education nevertheless increases equity and equality *in the long run*. All chapters in this book respond to these hypotheses in some way, drawing on individual country experiences and challenges. This collection provides significant coverage of many elements related to massification by examining trends, consequences, policy responses, governance quality, equality, and equity in the Asian higher education sector, which in turn contributes to a larger debate about higher education in the twenty-first century. In addition to tackling common misconceptions, some policy implications have been generated from these studies.

The book will be of great interest to education policy-makers, higher education administrators, and practitioners in the higher education sector worldwide. As the collection tackles different layers of actors associated with the massification of higher education, it will be attractive to students of higher education institutions, higher education governance, the political economy of higher education, and other social dimensions impacted by the dynamics of higher education.

The senior seminar of the APHERP was sponsored by Centre for Greater China Studies and Department of Asian and Policy Studies of The Hong Kong Institute of Education (now The Education University of Hong Kong) and the East-West Center in the USA. Particularly, the editors would like to thank Professor Deane Neubauer for directing the senior seminar, which led to this book.

We also wish to express our gratitude to the reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions and Mr. Lawrence Liu, Ms. Lay Peng Ang of Springer, and Ms. Olga Sazhina of the Education University of Hong Kong for assistance and the significant help they provided over the course of this 3-year book project.

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Contents

1 **The Many Faces of Asia Pacific Higher Education in the Era of Massification** 1
John N. Hawkins, Ka Ho Mok and Deane Neubauer

2 **Massification of Higher Education in China: Problems and Solutions** 9
Ying Gao

3 **Competition for Talent and Unequal Development of Higher Education: Evidence from Chang Jiang Scholars Programme** 21
Jin Jiang

4 **Changes and Challenges in the Rise of Mass Higher Education in Korea** 39
Hyejeong Jo

5 **A Double-Edged Sword—Thoughts on the Massification of Higher Education in India** 57
Miloni Gandhi

6 **The Emerging Face of Higher Education: An Analysis of the Malaysian Context** 79
Mariani Md Nor and Adelina Asmawi

7 **Institutional Differentiation in the Era of Massification: The Case of Malaysia** 87
Chang Da Wan

8 **Challenges of Massification in Higher Education: The Case of Vietnam** 103
Nguyen Thi My Ngoc and John N. Hawkins

9 University Enrolment Expansion and Returns to Higher Education: Evidence from China 113
Lin Ye, Alfred M. Wu and Xinhui Yang

10 Higher Education Governance and Institutional Research: The Emergence of a New Role in the Post-massification Era in Japan 129
Reiko Yamada and Aki Yamada

Chapter 1
The Many Faces of Asia Pacific Higher Education in the Era of Massification

John N. Hawkins, Ka Ho Mok and Deane Neubauer

Higher education throughout much of the world, and certainly across the diverse Asia Pacific region, has been engaged in one or another aspect of the massification phase (Trow 2005) for the past three or four decades. From an outside perspective, it may appear that the general form and dynamics of this massification movement are quite similar, irrespective of local country differences. On closer inspection, however, the process of massification is in fact highly complex and differentiated, taking a variety of shapes and pathways.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify some of these differentiations, and thereby suggest possible paths of inquiry that readers may wish to pursue. In doing so, we will explore a set of apparent contradictions concerning the varying structures and dynamics of massification throughout the region; these contradictions take the form of two basic contending hypotheses arrayed around the common assertion that massification is generally thought of as (1) both a process and a result, that (2) increases access, thereby also increasing the relative extent of equity and equality. Depending on which of these contending hypotheses one chooses to follow, massification also poses unique challenges with respect to issues related to higher education (HE) governance and leadership.

Hypothesis One states a challenge to the underlying assumptions of massification, namely, that increasing access through massification either actually or eventually increases inequality. One implication of this argument, should it be correct, is that it is therefore more honest (and perhaps practical?) to stay within and maintain an elite system of higher education, backed up by appropriate vocational and technical education that is aligned with the (rapidly changing) workplace.

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A. M. Wu and J. N. Hawkins (eds.), *Massification of Higher Education in Asia*,
Higher Education in Asia: Quality, Excellence and Governance,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0248-0_1

What might be the bases for holding this hypothesis to be correct?

To begin, it can be argued that massification produces institutions and students of vastly different qualities; this leads to differences that extend throughout the system, affecting the quality of facilities; the organization, provision, and structures of higher education institutes (HEIs) themselves; student preparedness; and increases in dropout rates. Those holding this view assert that the gulf between HEIs at the "top" and "bottom" extremes of the quality distribution (however that is determined) has widened worldwide, year after year, as massification has progressed.

What might be some of the evidence to support this proposition?

First, it can be observed that enrolment in HE has increased by over 50% in the last decade and in various parts of Asia by a much greater figure (Calderon 2012).

Second, the majority of the enrolment growth in coming years will be in two countries—China and India—both of which have massive populations, and which are each also characterized by significant patterns of income and social inequality. These inequalities affect not only their urban populations, but are particularly acute between urban and rural populations.

Third, it follows that, as the diversity of student populations expands, students may increasingly come from social classes and income levels with little preparation for HE. This raises the propensity for dropping out and/or attending low-quality and sometimes exploitative HEIs that spring up to "serve" these underprepared populations, and whose continued existence is often rationalized by their ability to maintain "head counts" irrespective of educational quality (Bettinger and Long 2009).

Fourth, within "conventional" HEIs, these students are more "expensive" because they require tutoring, counseling, and a variety of social services—more than "elite" students might. As participants within the higher education process, they simply do not have the academic background or ability that those within the historical elite system are presumed to possess. Further, they often suffer when compared with those in HEIs within the current system—HEIs that have come forward with massification, which often continue to be viewed as the "best" HEIs, and which, for a variety of reasons, continue to have access to the best or better students within the overall HEI pool.

Fifth, building up overall systemic capacity is also expensive and time-consuming, thus it is often the case that the expansion of HEIs cannot keep up with demand. Facilities become substandard—often because "money" for them is concentrated on the "front end" for initial construction, with little thought or provision for ongoing maintenance. This, in turn, leads to a situation in which the conditions for studying are inferior—overcrowded, characterized by inadequate libraries, lacking in information and communication technologies, and resulting in a limited range of curricula. In most of these situations, few or no resources are made available for the continued education and training of faculty, which in turn quickly leads to the perpetuation of outdated curricula, and other HEI challenges (Trow 1973; Altbach 2010).

Sixth, the academic professionals needed to staff these expanded facilities tend to be less qualified, lower paid, overworked, burdened with heavy teaching loads that include large classes, and having little time or energy to provide personal attention to students. Indeed, in many contemporary massified higher education systems in the Asia Pacific region, faculty members at "lesser regarded" institutions are often forced to hold positions at multiple universities, a situation that leads to a downward cascade of professional preparation, in terms of both timeliness of knowledge and energy to teach effectively. What results is, in effect, a "beggaring" of this fraction of academic professionals (Chapman 2009).

Seventh, massification often concentrates expansion in the private sector, which can lead to the proliferation of institutions that are underfunded and exploitative, and that tend to function basically as "demand absorbing" institutions, almost irrespective of the quality of the education being produced (Jiang 2011).

Eighth, high non-completion rates tend to grow with massification—especially as it moves toward Trow's final stage of "universalization," in which higher education is deemed necessary for all. Even U.S. data indicate that it takes longer to graduate (on average 6.3 years for a BA), with many students being either unwilling or unable (often for financial reasons) to continue, and simply dropping out. In many countries, the practice is to simply fail large proportions of students, while at the same time bringing in ever more, to meet either income needs or to fulfill government-mandated quotas (Smit 2012).

Ninth, massification in some instances takes place absent an increase in either the quality of the secondary system, or adequate quality regimes, leading to the admission of students unprepared for HE. When massification of higher education takes place in the absence of a corresponding "reform" or "restructuring" of secondary education, the distortions of the latter are telegraphed directly into the former. The result is that many institutions (as suggested above) may end up at the periphery of the newly emergent system, with students fundamentally unprepared to succeed at meeting the demands of higher education. Such institutions, however, are characteristically likely to be evaluated in terms of metrics common to the system as a whole, and thus enormous pressures are generated and transmitted throughout the system to sustain what are deemed to be suitable levels of graduation. These tendencies are underscored and multiplied when the processes of massification are accelerated. The most common indicators of the costs of such dynamics are often evident in professional fields in which graduates are required to take national qualification examinations. In many cases—the Philippines being one example—a significant proportion of graduates, often exceeding 50%, fail national qualification examinations in the fields of their degrees.

One important result of these dynamics is that the combination of factors described above often leads to a situation in which efforts to create, assure, and maintain quality by agencies, either governmental or non-governmental, proves to be an impossible challenge.[1] Determining the quality of new HEIs entering the system is a challenge, but one no less daunting than that which is encountered when seeking to create and

[1] On the quality dilemma amid the massification of higher education, see Hawkins et al. (2018).

implement quality routines that can lead to sensible and verifiable data for such a wide range of institutions. One result is that "quality assurance" exercises are often empty and of dubious value.

Another important result is that elite institutions continue to dominate these differentiated systems—they are characterized by having the highest average socioeconomic status (SES) students, the best faculties, the highest completion rates, and the largest share of the public higher education budget, among other advantages. In contrast, the lower level HEIs attract students who are less competitive in examinations, have lower (or the lowest) scores, have less income, and are generally ill-prepared for a "true" higher education.

Furthermore, the available data are unclear on whether or not a degree from one of the lesser institutions actually increases life opportunities or income, although some U.S. data suggest that overall, a degree from any institution of higher learning does increase lifelong income opportunities (Baum 2014). On the other hand, some Korean and Japanese data show that a degree from a lesser institution does not do so, but instead acts to perpetuate inequalities. Studies by Lee (2014) show that in both Japan and Korea, despite both massification and declining fertility, SES stratification in HE remains persistent over time. The data indicate that in terms of academic preparedness, financial affordability, and investment attractiveness, massification has not ameliorated SES stratification, but rather there has been a low impact on changing SES, with increased financial burdens on low-SES students, and high between-school variance in a vertically stratified HE system.

Another aspect of massification has been the actual scale on which many of these unintended consequences have arisen. In *Higher Education News*, Zha (2011a) has detailed many such consequences as they affect China, noting that while a number of these phenomena have taken place outside China as well, within China they have occurred on a massive scale, complete with numerous protests and other manifestations of disorder, arising in large part from the unexpected and unanticipated high cost of higher education and its surprisingly low returns for students (Facts and Details 2013).

To this must be added, not only for China, but increasingly for much of the developed world (e.g., Spain, France, and Britain), the astonishing increase in the number of unemployed graduates. For Zha (2011a), this phenomenon stands as evidence that, for China at least, its "current social, economic and political structures are not ready to absorb them" (2011, 2). A conclusion increasingly evident to many commentators is that the well-known and remarked-upon "alignment crisis" in higher education, which is typified by the inability of graduates to find employment, is a fundamental structural feature of those economies in which massification is the characteristic form of higher educational pursuit. This is compounded by data that reveal that there are downsides in China for both equity and equality in HE participation, which can in turn affect students' lifetime opportunity potentials. Surveys continue to show that high SES students are favored for access to the best and most selective universities, and they receive more financial aid than lower SES students in lesser institutions, who, despite massification, have fewer lifetime opportunities as a result (Zha 2011b).

Hypothesis Two, which can be seen as a competing or alternative hypothesis, states the view that even conceding all or most of the above problems and issues, a massified system nevertheless increases "long-term" equity and equality. Part of the apparent conflict between the two views can be explained by the reality that it just might take longer to achieve this relative social state than we thought.

This proposition points to the following kinds of evidence that may be adduced from what in most instances must be viewed as emerging or emergent forms of massified higher education.

First, in an argument contrary to that made above, it is held that massification sets a tone for all further education and raises the overall talent pool of emerging countries. In this framing, massification acts as a kind of "demand pull" that transmits signals of quality and aspiration (often drawn from global comparisons) that are held to "chip away" at the parochial and more narrowly conceived educational parameters and standards of nationalist systems prior to the onset of the massification stage (Dill 2007).

Second, this framework holds that eventually it will pay to attend HE and obtain a degree. This assertion accords with recent studies in the United States that find, when surveying all members of the labor force and comparing them with a high school diploma, those with a bachelor's degree earn about 170% more while those with an advanced degree earn about 225% more (Baum 2014). Whether it is the case that this is an economic principle, or rather that the U.S. represents some sort of outlier, remains to be demonstrated. Recent reports from China's newly massified system would suggest that HE recruitment is down in almost every province as parents and students opt out of attending HE, skeptical of the benefits they might accrue (Tremors in China 2014).

Third, it is seemingly an invariable requirement that governments must increase regulation and monitoring of the new, largely private, institutions that contribute to massification, in order to gradually increase their caliber through rigorous Quality Assurance (QA) and accreditation processes (Dill 2007).

Fourth, in order for massification to result in a steady pattern of improved access accompanied by requisite quality, there must be greater transparency. Experience throughout the world continually attests to this central proposition of higher education quality assurance—namely, that whether recognized or not, higher education both nationally and internationally constitutes a form of market in which various forms of symbolic currency are given value and exchanged. Transparency is an essential requirement for the effective exchange of information in such a market, one that allows "consumers" of the higher education "product" (however defined) to make informed decisions. This has become a major task of national quality assurance activities and figures importantly in both the emergent ranking system (as one form of generating such transparency) and nascent efforts to create viable standards for international/global quality comparisons (Marginson and Sawir 2005).

Fifth, for the desired qualitative improvement and overall beneficial aspects of massification to occur, there must be government action to provide for cost-sharing and financial aid, and to help those low-SES students with abilities gain access to the top institutions, thus increasing that pool of talent. Where such action is absent, as

indicated in Hypothesis One above, higher education systems will inevitably operate to both perpetuate existing inequalities and to create new ones. This is a particularly important point around which to gather data and provide context, inasmuch as the "model" pattern of government involvement in higher education is to provide significant support in earlier stages of massification (along with the loosening of government regulation for private institutions), but in later stages, spurred by elements of neoliberalism, to restrict government support. Current concerns in the U.S. focus on how declining support for higher education may reduce middle-class achievement for graduates (Quinterno and Orozco 2012) (thereby providing evidence in support for Hypothesis One), whereas much evidence exists to document how, when government support does exist, it tends to level inequalities (Arrow 1993; Schultz and Theodore 1972). This "role of the state," much maligned in the recent climate of neoliberalism, is now being reinvigorated as a kind of "fourth revolution," with Asia as the model exemplar (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2014).[2]

Sixth, another apparent requirement, when seeking to achieve an outcome of long-term equity and equality, is to construct diversified systems able to provide more stable HE environments as systems become massified. As experience with the California Master Plan indicates, these systems can be constructed such that institutions are provided with funding appropriate to their mission, and are provided access to sufficient numbers of students who have demonstrated competence at the level of engagement designed for given institutions, and where faculties, administration, and regulatory authorities (whomever they are) agree on the mission, capabilities, and limits of each institution within the system. Such explicit and self-conscious ideas of mission, combined with explicit notions of limitation, militate against "mission creep" which is invariably a source of "introduced inequality" and instability where it occurs (Douglass 2000).

Given the foregoing, we can then provide two "contextual" conditions for each of the above hypotheses to be considered within. The first focuses specifically on issues concerning the changing economic structures—locally, nationally, regionally, and globally—and their implications for how, where, and why educational efforts are situated within these changing structures. More simply, given the dynamics of massification, how do nations in particular make assessments, judgments, and efforts to create appropriate higher education capacities within the continually changing parameters of labor markets at all four of the levels specified above? An important entailment of this question is how they do so (or are expected to do so) within a climate and structure of international competition such as that which has been generated by the pervasive focus on international rankings, a phenomenon that often generates stipulations for HEIs irrespective of what some would see as the requirement to produce quality education to meet local needs.

The second contextual condition that may usefully be addressed is this context of existing and future regional cooperation. Within this frame, we would invite inquiry into how universities with higher numbers of students might, could, or would foster

[2]On government policy design associated with higher education governance, see Capano (2017).

more regional cooperation in terms of promoting research, explorations in the range and nature of academic programs, and the various pathways and processes leading toward student mobility. This appears a critical consideration in many instances, since some commentators perceive that collectively we are running short of resources to invest in higher education if we continue to engage in unnecessary competition.

Conclusion

In addressing these two contradictory hypotheses and these two contextual conditions, individual contributors were asked what the implications may be for governance, and the leadership of education officials and HE administrators, as they grapple with the substance of these contradictions. It is clear to us that existing systems of higher education throughout the Asia Pacific region contain elements of both hypotheses, and that for empirically existing systems their "reality" can probably be located on a continuum defined by Hypothesis One at one end and Hypothesis Two at the other.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to invite the further development of these hypotheses while simultaneously adducing for them data relevant to the general discussion of the differences that exist throughout the region in the overall progress of massification. Another lens through which we might simultaneously view this issue is to ask after the overarching costs and benefits to society of massification, and its appropriateness to enduring social structures within the societies in which it is occurring. This in turn may introduce discussion of the degree to which factors external to national systems of education, such as the more distinct macro forces of globalization itself, are creating the effective social and political context within which higher education investment, from both public and private sectors, takes place.

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