

The Past and Future of Asian Universities: 21st Century Challenges

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It is impossible to generalize about Asia's vast and diverse universities in countries stretching from the shores of the Mediterranean to Japan. Further, Asia contains some of the world's wealthiest nations, along with some of the poorest. We are concerned here with understanding the challenges that face Asian universities in the 21st century, as institutions that are necessarily part of an international knowledge system and that also play a central role educating a nation. Universities are part of this global system of science and scholarship and are at the same time rooted in their own societies—they serve multiple roles.

Asia, in common with the rest of the world, has universities modeled in the Western pattern. All universities, without any exceptions, are patterned on the universities that emerged in Europe in the medieval period and as a result reflect western organization and curriculum. This is even true in countries that have a rich indigenous intellectual and higher education tradition.

In order to understand contemporary reality, a historical perspective is needed. Asia's academic development has been varied and it has been shaped by history. A few Asian countries, notably China, Japan, and Thailand, were never colonized although they chose Western academic models in the 19th century when their modern academic systems were created. Much of the rest of Asia was under colonial rule, mainly from Europe, when universities were established. For example, the British shaped higher education development in south and much of southeast Asia, the French in Vietnam and Cambodia, the Dutch in Indonesia, and the Spanish in the Philippines. Toward the end of the colonial era, the United States (in the Philippines) and Japan (in Korea and Taiwan) also influenced higher education.

Nowhere in Asia has economic development been dependent on higher education. Even in those countries that have achieved impressive rates of growth and have joined the ranks of the industrialized world—Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and to some extent Thailand and Malaysia—development has not been based on the knowledge industries nor on higher education. The

underpinnings of economic growth are varied. The typical pattern was industrialization based on an inexpensive labor force with a basic education and literacy skills, and a reliance on exporting relatively unsophisticated manufactured goods or the products of heavy industry. In some cases, raw materials (such as oil and rubber in Malaysia) or agricultural products were added.

Significant investment in education did play a role, but it was in primary and to some extent secondary education to equip the workforce for the emerging industries with the appropriate literacy and related skills. Higher education was not valued, and academic systems remained in almost all cases small, enrolling just a few percent of the age cohort. The universities largely served the elites.

In the contemporary period, Asian higher education systems have developed impressively. Indeed, taken as a whole Asian countries have experienced some of the fastest growth rates in the world. Despite the quantitative growth, Asia has been slow to build world-class universities in terms of research and general academic quality. A small number of universities in Japan have achieved this status. There have also been impressive developments in China, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan.

The 21st century brings some significant challenges to Asian higher education. These challenges are similar to those faced by universities in other parts of the world, of course, but are especially important in the Asian context because of the aspirations of many Asian countries for both qualitative and quantitative growth. Among these are:

- The continuing challenge of massification
- Access.
- The Private Sector in Asian Higher Education
- Differentiation and systems
- Accreditation and quality control
- Research and the development of research infrastructures
- The academic profession
- Globalization and internationalization and how Asia will relate to the rest of the world

These and other challenges will be at the heart of the Asian higher education debate in the coming period.