

Private Higher Education Globally: A Distant Second Place?

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Notwithstanding the spectacular global rise of private higher education (PHE) in the last half century, the public sector clearly remains the first sector in higher education. The public sector usually is first chronologically, often long the only sector; PHE just a recent reality. Public higher education remains easily the larger sector globally; it is significantly larger in most geographical regions, smaller in possibly none. Moreover, in almost all countries, the public sector remains stronger in most matters, both within and beyond academia. The public sector generally has the leading institutions, faculty, first-degree and graduate students, and research. It has the greater political power, impactful economic presence, and social extension.

But how distant is second place? In this article, we consider where PHE is exceptionally first, PHE's frequent ascension from limited to ample second-place size, and common ways in which PHE shares part of first place.

Abstract

Although remaining a decided second to the public sector globally and in most countries, private higher education has been rapidly expanding and now holds a third of the world's enrollment—and continues to grow and diversify. It has achieved significance in a variety of qualitative respects and even leadership or coleadership in some. The private sector is a prominent second sector.

Rare PHE Primacy: Where and How

Private is the larger sector in several countries, including large ones. Japan and South Korea are the only two developed countries, but private is also the larger sector in Brazil, Chile, India (with by far the world's largest private enrollment), Indonesia, Peru, and the Philippines, joined by many smaller examples (e.g., Burundi, Cambodia, El Salvador, Lebanon, Uganda, and the UAE).

An exception of a completely different nature is private supremacy in quality, not quantity. This exception characterizes only the United States, but that is the world's preeminent system. Especially at the system's pinnacle, private *on average* looms above public regarding quality, selectivity, and status of research, faculty, and students. Probably the only other country where private roughly matches public at the pinnacle is South Korea.

From Limited to Large Second-Place in Size

As late as 1980, PHE was a distant second sector outside the Americas in both size and most other respects, with few exceptions outside Asia. Indeed, many countries still lacked a second sector, PHE being often banned, simply absent, or only marginal. Communism's demise brought an historic PHE breakthrough in Europe and Central Asia, while in China and Vietnam, Communism's market transformation paved the way for PHE. Elsewhere, private emergence resulted from various individual national mixes of academic, social, economic, and political conditions, as well as emulation and permission for the entry of international providers. Most of Africa established PHE only in the 1990s or after, most of the Arab region in the 2000s. More often, PHE's surge globally came mostly through rapid, diversifying growth within preexisting private sectors.

By 2000, PHE had 28 percent of global enrollment and by 2010, 33 percent. Much more impressive—given that the public sector has grown as never before—has been absolute private growth, more than doubling from some 27 million to 57 million during 2000–2010, and undoubtedly more than 75 million by 2019. In Latin America, PHE may no longer be second in size (49 percent, 2010), while its hefty second place in Asia (42 percent) is clearly a mammoth presence in what is easily the largest higher education region. Even elsewhere—the US private sector at just under 30 percent and other regions with lower private shares—each region has seen large absolute private growth in the new century, all but the United States seeing growth in private share. No region any longer has more than an isolated few countries without PHE. The private sector remains distinctly second in size but is nearly ubiquitous and globally formidable.

Mostly Second, but Partly Tied for First Place in Performance

It is no longer rare for the public sector's general leadership, both in the higher education system overall and at its academic pinnacle, to be flanked by prestigious private institutions and even leadership or coleadership in notable endeavors. "Semi-elite" private institutions, now prominent in many countries and present in many others, not only lead most public counterparts, but often establish primacy in certain practical fields, such as business administration, management, economics, or computer studies, sometimes in teaching, though rarely in research. Not infrequently, venerable or entrepreneurial religious universities are close cousins of the semi-elite secular universities.

PHE also increasingly achieves a kind of primacy further away from the academic pinnacle, including through international or domestic for-profit chains and conglomerates. Often with a lower socioeconomic clientele than their semi-elite counterparts, "product-oriented" private institutions peg themselves to the job market. Accordingly, they forge work-study, employment, and applied analysis partnerships with businesses, providing counseling to students and to institutional managers alike.

A different kind of niche primacy appears when institutions serve particular social groups, or we might say individuals who seek meaningful association with their social group. By far the most common type of "identity" institution, both historically and today, is religious. Women's and ethnically oriented institutions, however, also are first choices for some. Though gender, ethnic, and religious institutions can be public, private primacy is clear for gender and especially for religious institutions.

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Into the Future

As usual, the best prediction is both iffy and based on recent trends. Accordingly, we expect PHE to remain the second sector globally, but a significant second, with some quantitative or even qualitative country exceptions and more common mixing of public primacy with private eminence and even leadership in certain important pursuits. Perhaps the safest prediction is that many of the global developments highlighted in this *IHE* anniversary issue will influence the shape of PHE's second-sector status. In turn, this second sector of higher education will influence those global developments. ▲

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