

Introduction to the Section

Daniel C. Levy

A central question raised worldwide by the astonishing growth of private higher education (PHE) is how private is “too private”? The question encompasses both PHE’s enrollment share and PHE’s nature. A key gauge of PHE’s nature is whether PHE is for-profit or nonprofit. Southeast Asia in general, including the Philippines and Vietnam specifically, illustrates some important common, and some intriguing uncommon, responses to the “too private” question.

This section considers who and what determine different responses in different settings. It emphasizes a core tension between abiding normative discomfort with a private presence in higher education and strong social, economic, and political forces that promote PHE, including for-profit PHE. Our subregional overview article draws upon, and contrasts the two ensuing national case studies. In Southeast Asia, the Philippines trails only Indonesia in both total higher education and private enrollments and, like Indonesia, has a private enrollment majority with a substantial for-profit component. Along with Thailand, Vietnam comes next in total enrollment, both with comparatively low private shares—Vietnam being a legacy of Communism’s presumed view that *any* PHE is too much PHE. Yet, stunningly, Vietnam has recently become globally unique for having not only PHE, but for having PHE almost exclusively in for-profit form. ▲

What's Too Private? Values and Realities in Southeast Asia

Daniel C. Levy

In the categorization of the Program for Research on Private Higher Education (PRO-PHE), Southeast Asia is Asia's third largest subregion in total higher education, trailing South Asia and East Asia, while larger than Central/Western Asia. Yet Asia is so easily the world's largest region in total higher education that Southeast Asia's roughly 18 million enrollments (in 2015) exceeds or equals the enrollments of each entire (non-Asian) region, except Europe. In addition, Asia and Southeast Asia's especially large private shares mean that the subregion's PHE (8 million enrollments) is easily larger than any entire (non-Asian) region's, except Latin America. Meanwhile, both the subregion and region fit the new century's global patterns of continued strong private raw enrollment growth, alongside a relative stabilization in private share—the world's private share being at just over 30 percent, Asia's just shy of 40 percent, and Southeast Asia's at roughly 45 percent. Moreover, although there is no international dataset on for-profit PHE, Southeast Asia and Asia are probably the respective subregional and regional leaders. Indonesia and the Philippines lead the subregion in raw for-profit enrollment, while Vietnam leads the world in the for-profit share of PHE. In sum, regarding both PHE in general, and for-profit PHE in particular, Southeast Asia looms very large.

Great Variations across the Subregion

However, great variation exists across Southeast Asia's 10 countries, just as it does across Asia and the world overall. The Philippines joins Cambodia and Indonesia in having a majority of private shares, Malaysia falling just short. These four countries account for the aggregated subregion's permissive answer to the "how much is too much" question, as Indonesia and the Philippines hold well over half of the subregion's total enrollment. Yet the next largest, Vietnam and Thailand, have private shares only modestly above a tenth of the total national enrollment, joined recently by Brunei; Myanmar is one of the world's few countries maintaining that "any PHE is too much PHE." Lao PDR and Singapore lie in between the high and low private-share cases, closer to the global average. Malaysia is the subregion's leading example of private share increase in the new century, while Vietnam exemplifies stable share, and the Philippines private share decline.

Who Decides What Is "Too Much Private"?

Vietnam epitomizes the subregional and global extreme of the state deciding what is too private, at least in the 1954–1989 period, and its answer then was that any PHE was too much PHE. Whereas this was North Vietnam's answer as soon as it achieved independence from France, the answer came to the South when the North vanquished it in 1975 and nationalized all its PHE. We could thus consider the 1975 nationalization, Vietnam's first "U-turn" (to adopt the term from Chau's article below), state-driven. State (or party-state) authority was also preeminent for the second U-turn, granting permission for "nonstate" institutions and creation of a framework for them, restricting the U-turn by not allowing for-profit formation. The state then authorized and set the terms of the incredible U-turn that Chau focuses upon, flipping from legally nonprofit-only-PHE into an astonishing legally for-profit-only-PHE, thus hurtling past all other countries that allow for-profit but alongside nonprofit. State authority will now largely decide whether to turn once again, to allow nonprofits to form alongside the for-profits, perhaps even to allow the country's scattered small religious seeds to bear fruit.

Compared to the subregion's other countries and most of the world, then, the Vietnamese state has been key in deciding how much is too much. It decided first that any PHE was too private, then that for-profit and religious were impermissibly private even

Abstract

A central question raised worldwide by the astonishing growth of private higher education (PHE) is how private is "too private"? The question encompasses both PHE's enrollment share and PHE's nature. A key gauge of PHE's nature is whether PHE is for-profit or nonprofit. Southeast Asia in general, including the Philippines and Vietnam specifically, illustrates some important common, and some intriguing uncommon, responses to the "too private" question.

Besides, many politicians and their families, just as in the Philippines and many other countries, own private institutions or shares in them.

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for a nonpublic sector, and now considers whether, how, and how much private might extend to forms other than secular for-profit—as well as how much autonomy from state control to allow for any PHE.

The Philippine trajectory of “who decides what is too private” has been radically different. The decision has been the outcome of powerful societal forces, with state power varying in weight and in terms of how restrictive or enabling it is for private forces. The Philippine PHE history—being much longer than in Vietnam or most of the subregion and region—is key. Akin to Latin America much more than to the rest of Asia, colonialism dates back to the sixteenth century and was Spanish, thus Catholic. As in Latin America, Church–Crown universities were private–public institutions. In contrast to Latin America, however, Spanish rule ended almost a century later and after the 1898 Spanish–American War, yielding to US rule (all the way to 1946, though as a Commonwealth from 1935) rather than to formal independence.

Both these differences contributed to the Philippine colonial universities becoming mostly private in independence, whereas the Latin American ones became overwhelmingly public. US rule then contributed to the early development of both Protestant and secular PHE, including for-profits. In sum, after extended Spanish rule had brought early PHE and especially Catholic development, US occupation stimulated a more diverse and business-oriented sector, setting a very high bar for what is “too private.” Thus, for-profit and international PHE were within practical bounds. Whereas Vietnamese independence brought PHE’s demise, Philippine independence willingly inherited an extensive and diverse PHE with deep roots in society and with powerful dynamics, difficult for the state to control, even when some in office have wanted to do so.

Yet, however stark the contrast between the Philippines and Vietnam as to how much society and markets vs. the state drive boundary-setting on what is “too private,” the cases fit the common contemporary global reality that some mix of contending forces determines the boundaries. Thus, even in the Philippines, normative and policy worries mean ongoing struggles over present and proposed regulations. The state banned for-profit PHE in 1982, but driving nonstate dynamics brought its legal resurrection in 1994—with additional regulation. More startlingly, even Vietnam had de facto PHE before the state issued the legalizing word, and then already had de facto for-profit PHE when the state eventually figured that it might as well opt for de jure status and tax accordingly. Besides, many politicians and their families, just as in the Philippines and many other countries, own private institutions or shares in them. Self-interest looms large in pertinent policies. For all Vietnam’s prior parallels to China in Communism banning pre-existing PHE and, years later, allowing limited and then more openly private PHE, Vietnam allows much more latitude for markets and society to penetrate the state and align with contending factions within the state (while China has, for example, only dabbled with allowing for-profit experiments).

Southeast Asia will continue to be a major domain for what size and shape PHE can take in Asia and globally. As will occur in both those wider settings, Southeast Asia will continue to give varied answers to the question of what is too private, and to who has how much sway in determining those answers within countries. In general, however—and notwithstanding normative wariness and constraining regulations—economic, social, and political forces have led Southeast Asia to give in actual practice comparatively permissive answers to the question of what is “too private.” ▲