# The Widening Space of Postsecondary Education

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**Abstract**
Massification of postsecondary education participation has been predominantly met by expanding higher education institutions. But the risk of over-schooling and the demand for increasingly diversified skills now require postsecondary education systems to expand vocational and subdegree programs. At the same time, bridging the divide between the higher and further education subsectors will lead to a more integrated but diversified postsecondary landscape.

A silent revolution is taking place in the industrialized world, one with huge consequences for the future of our nations and economies. In 2020, the share of 25–34 year-olds with a tertiary qualification in the OECD countries exceeded the tipping point of 50 percent. This means that in high-income countries, over half of the young age cohorts are now holding a qualification from a postsecondary institution. This percentage will continue to grow, although the rate of growth will probably slow down.

**Academic Drift**

This silent revolution is increasingly challenging the architecture of our postsecondary education systems, designed several decades ago in completely different environments. In most countries, research universities have been expected to absorb the ever-rising numbers of students, causing huge challenges with regard to funding, infrastructure, the workload of staff, and teaching and learning practices. Despite those pressures, few research universities openly questioned the idea that postsecondary massification necessarily meant providing a university education to everyone. Putting a question mark behind that idea was perceived to be at odds with equity and fairness.

However, there are pressing signs that high levels of university attainment do not have only positive effects on societies and economies. Graduate underemployment, overqualification, mismatches, and substitution effects are examples of such perverse effects. Substitution of middle-skilled jobs by master level qualifications, even when the task input has not dramatically augmented, contributes to labor market polarization, squeezing out the middle-class and rising levels of social inequality. In several countries, policy makers are starting to question whether we really need an endless increase in university graduates.

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Technological change is pushing skill demand in developed economies beyond the level represented by secondary education qualifications. However, the changing skill demand is not one of "more of the same," but one of increasingly diversified skill sets. Postsecondary education landscapes will need to transform to meet the changing skill demand.

**Different Pathways**

Systems with more institutional diversification, like in the United States, potentially have better cards to address this challenge, but the recent decline in the intake of community colleges suggests that this is not happening automatically. Some countries, like the United Kingdom after 1992, have unified their postsecondary system, but suffer from a generalized academic drift and a lack of perspective for universities that are not at the top of the research hierarchy. Such systems stick to only one archetype of academic success. Other countries, like the Netherlands or Sweden, have resisted unifying their postsecondary landscape and maintained a binary system (see also H.F. de Boer, "From Expansion to Academic Drift and Declining Student Numbers: The Dutch Case," in this issue). Against all criticisms, binary systems seem to hold the advantage in that there is at least a minimal level of diversification in the landscape.

Countries like Germany have followed a different path. The rate of massification of university participation has been much lower in Germany, a European country with still relatively low levels of university attainment. Many see this as a major shortcoming of the German education system. However, the skill demand of its highly developed industrial infrastructure is well served by an excellent vocational training system that expands well into the postsecondary space. The highest vocational qualifications have now received equivalence to academic master degrees. Whereas in many countries professional and

vocational programs and qualifications are still seen as the second-best choice, Germany has successfully achieved filling the reputation gap between academic and vocational postsecondary trajectories. Inspired by the German example, policy makers in many countries now start realizing that the missing link in the postsecondary landscape is a high-quality vocational sector.

**Extending the Qualification Ladder**

After Bologna, the bachelor/master/doctorate ladder became the universal qualification framework for the postsecondary education space. However, this implicitly signified that the entire postsecondary education space was defined by the higher education subsystem. In consequence, a huge gap was created between a secondary education qualification and the nearest postsecondary one, the four- or three-year bachelor degree. All students with postsecondary aspirations were thus forced into bachelor-level degree programs, and too many failed. The higher education system's ambition to impose an academic definition of the postsecondary space involuntarily caused a lot of social hardship.

It is interesting to see developments in many countries toward expanding subbachelor degree, "short-cycle" programs, such as "associate degrees"of typically 120 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credits. The European qualifications framework (EQF) luckily foresaw this development by including an EQF5 level, meant to fill the gap between secondary education qualifications and the bachelor degree. Yet, lack of reputation, reticence among employers, limited institutional offerings, a too strong link to bachelor degree programs, and low student demand still prevent a breakthrough of this segment of the postsecondary space.

More promising seems to be the rapidly expanding interest in short programs and nontraditional certifications such as microcredentials. Subdegree certificates are hardly new to the United States, but technologies such as digital badging and blockchain create opportunities for solving recognition and credibility challenges. In Europe, with the support of the European Commission, microcredentials seem to be a promising new segment of the postsecondary landscape. Many higher education institutions, mostly in the professional education sector, are experimenting with these new certificates.

After a long period during which higher education was mainly interested in expanding the top of the qualification ladder, the PhD degree, more political interest is now going toward extending the lower rungs of the ladder. This coincides with a renewed political interest in more equitable postsecondary participation, in shorter trajectories, in higher success rates, and in meeting the skill demand of occupations just below the high-skilled ones.

**Bridging the Higher and Further Education Divide**

However, as promising as such developments are, a genuine transformation of the postsecondary landscape will not happen unless countries are willing to face the challenge of bridging the divide between higher and further education. The further education sector, serving the post-16 population with mainly vocationally oriented programs, is institutionalized in countries such as Australia (with the Technical and Further Education [TAFE] system), Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Those offerings exist as well in many other countries in less institutionalized forms, under the labels of "continuing education," "adult education," or even "lifelong learning." In colleges, training centers, or through many different kinds of providers, sometimes even outside the education sector, various types of programs are offered to young or older students.

In most countries, further or adult education is traditionally not seen as part of the postsecondary landscape. But this is starting to change. In the United Kingdom, the government has initiated several policies to modernize further education and to bring it closer to the higher education sector. In Ireland, the education minister has recently published a white paper calling for "a unified tertiary system for learning, skills and knowledge" (see Hazelkorn and Boland, "Ireland: Toward a Unified Tertiary Education System," in this issue). And in Australia, strong voices have argued for an integration of the higher and vocational education sectors into one integrated postsecondary education system. Similar developments are taking place in many other countries.

**Prospects**

Landscapes of postsecondary education are changing and that is a positive evolution. The expansion of student demand after finishing school has led to massification of higher education participation. But both the changing skill demand and diverse student needs now ask for a wider and more diverse educational response. The challenge seems to be to strengthen the postsecondary education system that falls outside higher education. ◢

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