Higher Education in East Asia: Challenges for the Present and the Future

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Abstract

The expansion of higher education systems in East Asia is largely coming to an end, and postmass education is becoming a reality. This transition involves a set of challenges that will require education policies, universities, and other relevant agents to adapt to new circumstances in an environment shaped by demographic and techno-economic shifts. Research will also need to become more collaborative, international, and multidisciplinary to meet the complex and uncertain challenges of the twenty-first century.

Like most developed countries, higher education systems in East Asia are becoming postmassified. This new stage implies new challenges, transformations, and adaptation to a new reality that policymakers and universities must be ready to tackle. In this context, East Asia faces three main challenges.

Before delving into these three challenges, it is important to point out that, like in other regions of the world, the challenges associated with massification, such as those related to equity and access, assessment, and quality of education, remain mostly unresolved in East Asia.

Consolidate Higher Education Systems Owing to Demographic Shifts

The period of expansion of the higher education sector in East Asia is coming to an end. Universities in the region may seek to mitigate declining domestic student enrollment by attracting international students. However, the attractiveness of other destinations, the cost of living in the region, and tuition fees may make it difficult for East Asian universities to attract many international students. This challenge is not only linked to East Asian universities but also to a change in the paradigm of welcoming students who would eventually enter the workforce in host countries. The current "assimilationist" perspective may need to change to an open perspective that would allow host countries to take advantage of the new ideas and creative potential of these skilled migrants. East Asian universities may also seek to create programs for nontraditional students that meet the demand for lifelong learning. This strategy, however, is likely to have a relatively small effect for several reasons. First, the duration of courses for nontraditional students and

their salary level tend to be lower than those of traditional students. Second, in aging societies, people are likely to be concerned about saving money to secure their retirement; therefore, they are more likely to allocate their savings to pensions than to education. Third, household debt in East Asian countries is high, and economic conditions are unfavorable (possible financial or economic crises on the horizon). Thus, nontraditional students are unlikely to use their disposable income or wealth to invest in education.

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Most students in East Asian countries are enrolled in private universities, which face the highest risk of closure. Private universities rely heavily on tuition fees for their financial viability. They are also overwhelmingly teaching-oriented and less reputable than public universities. Private universities are likely to be closed or merged in the face of declining enrollment to make them financially sustainable. Public universities should be safer because they are funded by governments and have mandates that make them economically and socially strategic, even if they are not necessarily financially viable. Nevertheless, this is unlikely to prevent some of them from merging, as government debt in the region is also high, and public budgets will require tighter control over spending. This means both private and public universities will face job cuts, leading to expected unemployment of academics, with some of them having few job opportunities in the sector (age constraints), while new PhDs will face difficulties in finding a job in academia.

Prepare Higher Education Systems for Techno-economic Shifts

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, artificial intelligence, and associated mass automation will necessitate a reexamination of existing educational offerings. No one knows the outcomes of these technological shifts and advancements, but future workers are expected to work multiple jobs over their lifetime. Studying engineering to become an engineer is a thing of the past because after studying engineering, a student may become a manager, a teacher, or hold a position unrelated to engineering. Students will need adaptable skill sets that must cross disciplinary boundaries. As a result, the focus of learning should be on learning to learn, unlearn and relearn. Students should be able to adapt to new challenges rather than focus too much on learning specialized technical knowledge (which may quickly become obsolete). Universities should consider teaching their students transversal technical knowledge and the ability to adapt to multifaceted work demands and diverse challenges. Increased use of multidisciplinary project-based learning and experiential learning is essential. Therefore, courses may also need to be run by more than one school or department. This change must be promoted and implemented throughout the education system. Yet, universities should be the first to prepare for these changes, as should accreditation and evaluation agencies, because technological uncertainties demand constant rethinking and flexibility, not only from academics but from all stakeholders. This will require a broad effort, which can only be achieved by promoting the need for greater institutional and programmatic diversity, as well as autonomy between and within universities.

To ensure that universities can adapt to technological shifts, they also need to engage in more reforms. Universities should promote and invest in their strengths, rather than disperse their limited resources trying to do everything and risk ultimately failing to achieve meaningful outcomes. This would involve easing the constant tensions between research, teaching, and service, and would mean changing the incentives and career progression schemes currently followed by academics. The career of research-oriented academics initially recruited for their research potential/profile should be assessed against activities associated with research quality and postgraduate training. Teaching-oriented academics recruited for their pedagogical and teaching abilities/potential should first be assessed on the basis of the innovative curricula they develop, close monitoring of student learning, and research on teaching and pedagogy. All academics should be able to progress from assistant professor to professor, but may be assessed differently based on their core strengths and work related to the role for which they are hired.

Internationalize Intensively and Sustainably

The number of international publications authored by scholars affiliated with East Asian universities has increased, but their visibility and impact are limited. This warrants continued investment in scientific and academic research. Public investment in academic research in the region is still low compared with other advanced economies and needs to be at least sustained. This also justifies the need for greater internationalization of academic staff in the region (not only by promoting international mobility but also by attracting more international academics, postdoctoral researchers, and doctoral students to East Asian universities). It is also necessary to consider a shift from quantity to quality in the production of research output. The focus on production is primarily the result of incentives that emphasize publication quantity rather than quality, which needs to change. Conducting research to meet quotas for global university rankings should be replaced by a focus on meaningful research for the betterment of society. Such a shift toward quality may imply the need for more balanced investments in fields other than STEM, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, which are at the heart of innovation efforts and breakthroughs in the twenty-first century. ◢

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