

Classifying University and College Closures from Around the World

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University and college closures have become an increasingly prevalent issue across the world. Yet much of the understanding on this topic has often been siloed into domestic studies rather than taking on global considerations. This article offers a categorization of institutional closures across the world using four typologies: system contraction, mergers, political pressures, and conflict and war. These classifications provide a globally unified lens on this growing trend in higher education retrenchment.

In a recent issue of *International Higher Education*, [Mathews and Altbach](#) challenged the field to take university closures seriously. Despite being a global trend, research remains siloed in domestic studies, and a unified global typology is lacking. This article furthers the call to attention by offering a classification of institutional closures that can be identified across the world: system contraction, mergers, political pressures, and conflict and war. These distinctions can offer a unified understanding and a springboard for stakeholders grappling with this growing trend.

System Contraction

Much of the college closure discourse centers on higher education contraction. This signifies a new global trend in the sector, punctuating the post-war-era massification of higher education. During this previous era, systems around the world expanded access, institutions, programs, and resources to colleges and universities. Questions have long lingered about credentialism and overeducated populations, yet the sector continued to grow across the world. Now, those trends are finally coming to an end in many contexts.

Countries have already been grappling with the demographic cliff through birthrate slowdowns. Birthrates in the East Asian region (Japan, South Korea, and China) have gained the most attention for their detrimental effects on rapidly aging populations. The impact on higher education has also been significant. Taiwan has seen 15 institutions closed recently; Japan expects over 250 private universities to close in the coming years; and Korea is looking to shutter over 80 so-called “zombie universities,” which have too few students. But issues extend beyond East Asia, as birthrates are slowing globally. Our World in Data shows this trend extends even to developing nations, while the OECD has also reported a slowdown in tertiary education growth globally since COVID-19. International recruitment cannot fully bridge the gap caused by declining birthrates, leading to inevitable sector-wide closures.

The US has seen the most system-contraction closures, with roughly one institution shuttered per week, especially in economically stagnant regions and exacerbated by COVID-19. Overexpansion, online education, and for-profit actors have played roles in the sector’s contraction. The appetite for public investment in higher education has weakened in recent decades, meaning that even state schools have had to fight over student pools. These conditions have led to a wide range of closures.

Mergers

Mergers (i.e., two or more universities, colleges, or departments becoming one institution) have been discussed extensively in higher education research. Although the merging of institutions does not always result in closing a college, mergers can result in the closing of a campus/location. Further, even if a specific location remains open, the mission, focus, and culture are all immensely altered through mergers. Under such conditions, the more dominant partners are more likely to retain their ethos while the weaker lose. These lopsided power dynamics can make mergers more of an acquisition rather than a marriage. Brazil’s private higher education sector has been especially aggressive toward these types of mergers, with hundreds of such acquisitions in recent years.

Mergers have also become a tactic that countries around the world have used to bolster prestige and world-class status, known as diversification or conglomerate mergers. Strong national institutions or departments are merged into one larger university. The 1990s in China were called the Merger Wave, with hundreds of institutions merging, including Zhejiang University, which became a top institution globally. Likewise, in Denmark, 25 institutions were turned into just eight in 2027, while South Africa saw 36 post-apartheid institutions reorganized into 23. Another version is called integration or horizontal mergers. This version sees weaker institutions joining forces—sometimes related to geographic proximity or missions, such as two Catholic institutions—to create a stronger singular university.

Political Pressures

Political pressures that result in closing a higher education institution sit on a broad spectrum. A common variant of political pressure comes from international branch campuses. Western discontent with international branch campuses often stems from misaligned values between democracies and authoritarian hosts regarding academic freedom and free speech. These pressures have led to closures, such as Yale–NUS College in Singapore, University of Michigan–Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Texas A&M University at Qatar. The Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) estimates a roughly 15 percent failure rate for branch campuses.

Political pressures can also emanate from domestic politics in broader society, leading to closures of educational institutions. These pressures are characterized by authoritarian governments or leaders cracking down on perceived dissent from educators, intellectuals, and students. A high-profile example comes from Hungary, where Viktor Orbán pressured Central European University into closing its campus, forcing it to move to Austria. Similarly, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan shuttered 15 private institutions in Türkiye, Daniel Ortega did the same to 37 in Nicaragua, and the Taliban disbanded all women’s institutions or programs in Afghanistan. More benign domestic pressures, such as “town versus gown” tensions or environmental litigation, can also force relocations. Collectively, these political pressures range from local disputes to state-sanctioned shutdowns.

Conflict and War

During times of conflict or crisis, higher education institutions must grapple with chaos, destruction, and sometimes death around and within their communities. Depending on the length and intensity of the conflicts, campuses may shutter, and operations may be moved to a safer area or to an entirely new country. UNESCO reported that conflicts (such as those in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Ukraine) have led to hundreds of thousands of students fleeing their home countries, with some institutions choosing to continue from abroad as universities in exile. Three presidents of Palestinian universities released a

statement declaring that their missions will continue, even if the old campuses lay in rubble. Most, if not all, of the universities in the country have lost much of their campus infrastructure.

China’s history is emblematic; during the Japanese occupation and subsequent Communist takeover, hundreds of institutions moved or closed permanently. Some moved their namesake to Taiwan (such as National *Tsing Hua* University), while others merged into Mainland state institutions (such as *Tsinghua* University). Both versions of *Tsinghua* claim the early history before the split.

Campuses that close due to conflict may eventually reopen in different forms. Long after a conflict ends or comes to a resolution, sectors may attempt to reclaim the lost institution in some way. For instance, the former site of Fu Ren University, which was a prince’s palace before it became a Catholic university, became a branch of Beijing Normal University in 1952. This type of reuse after conflict does not mean that the severed history, ethos, or other institutional characteristics will carry over. Each conflict and recovery is highly contextualized.

Further Understanding of Global Classifications

The phenomenon of closing colleges and universities will only become more prevalent in the coming years. The field of international education must remain invested in the topic through scholarship that is not merely focused on domestic contexts but rather continues exploring the issue through a global lens.

College closures due to system contraction, mergers, political pressures, and conflict and war can be identified around the world. Stakeholders can therefore look at the global landscape of closures to understand likely dynamics and consider best practices. While political pressures and conflict might be more unpredictable, leaders in higher education sectors around the world do not simply have to wait for demographic changes. Understanding the diverse varieties of college closures in existence can help sectors grapple with institutional closures more humanely.

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