

largely people from the business world with aggressive marketing experiences. Vice presidents may change three or four times during an academic year. Lower-level managers also frequently undergo shifts of positions or are transferred to different departments.

Party representatives are given executive vice president positions, with other executive management positions being filled by employing relatives. These executives, with minimal or non-existent educational experience, view these universities as highly profitable businesses. For example, at a relatively renowned private college in Southern China, a former party secretary was hired as the executive vice president; and brothers, sisters, children, and cousins were given highly responsible jobs.

*The instructors at private universities mainly constitute younger faculty members with bachelor's degrees and limited teaching experience.*

#### LIVING AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

Facilities provided for these students, who pay around 12,000 RMB (around US\$1,750) for the year, are similar to the facilities at public universities. Students are offered mediocre living quarters in a six-student dormitory room, which includes no furniture other than a desk and stool for each student, two hours of hot water a day, no TV, and very slow (given a trend all around China) and time-limited Internet access. Student cafeterias, grocery stores, and bottled water services are usually owned and run by owners of the universities, leaving students with no other options regarding what they should eat and how much they should pay. Students may not be allowed to use cash on campus and forced instead to use school-issued debit cards, onto which they must first place a minimum of 50 RMB at a time. This initiative is of course a matter of convenience and security, among other benefits; but the lack of a refund policy for the money unspent is a rather aggressive business strategy. Moreover, students are charged extra for Internet access, hot water usage, and electricity—occasionally three or four times more than what the Electricity Bureau charges the school—even before they use it and, again, without a refund policy. Most of these universities are located outside city centers; and with little public transportation available, students are left with no choice but to stay on campus.

Humble and desperate Chinese students, socially outcast by lower examination scores, are still willing to pay top dollar for living in mediocre quarters and being taught in classrooms without climate control (brutally hot during the summer and freezing cold during the winter) by unmotivated and inexperienced young faculty members. It should be noted that the students at these private universities receive the same living conditions offered at a public university, which charges students

less than half as much as private institutions. Paying a higher tuition fee should certainly ensure better living and learning facilities, in addition to providing a global and competitive education.

#### CONCLUSION

The relatively low ranking of private colleges and the thus rather negative public perception of the graduates of such schools cause students to be treated as helpless customers with nowhere else to go. Recruiters make promises during recruitment fairs, focusing entirely on parental satisfaction but ignoring the needs of these students. Students go unheard, unable to complain due to the cultural barriers of losing face and disappointing their parents and relatives. Local chat rooms, while providing a platform to voice their opinions, are not significant tools to promote change in China's private universities.

These students are paying high prices and deserve better education and treatment. Instead of using the desperation of these students, China's private universities need to open their eyes to the reality of aggressive competition, from foreign joint-venture universities or other private universities. The examples in this article are based on my teaching experience at four different private colleges and universities in China, each of them with an average student population of 20,000. One of these institutions has recently been designated by the Beijing government as among "China's Top Ten Privately Managed Educational Institutions." These institutions should start offering more services with better training to make their students more marketable in the real world.

Again, if any education is better than no education, even these problematic private universities provide useful service to China. However, with the need for more colleges and universities in China, the low-end private universities should start focusing on giving quality education and good living conditions to students who are paying high tuition fees. ■

## Taking a Closer Look at the OECD Tertiary Statistics

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The statistics that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development regularly reports on tertiary education in its annual *Education at a Glance* publication are increasingly used to compare the performance of OECD coun-

tries. However, the many problems with how some of the key indicators are calculated and reported can limit their utility in producing international comparisons. Much of the data is either incorrect or misleading.

As a result, a number of the key data elements regularly collected and reported upon by OECD require a serious reconsideration, including: enrollment ratios; persistence rates; the lack of connection between enrollments and attainment rates; spending per student figures; and financial commitment—the share of GDP devoted to tertiary education.

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#### ENROLLMENT RATIOS

Participation rates traditionally constitute how tertiary education systems are compared internationally. Martin Trow used them more than three decades ago to develop his typology of higher education systems as elite, mass, and universal. The OECD calculates enrollment ratios—its version of participation rates—by dividing all students enrolled by the population of traditional college age in a given year. Several problems with this approach do limit its utility as a measure of participation.

One problem is that the OECD enrollment ratios include older students and overseas students in the numerator but not in the denominator; this tends to overstate participation in countries with large numbers of these kinds of students. In that way, the OECD enrollment ratios for some countries can occasionally equal or even exceed 100 percent.

In addition, the number of students reported to OECD as enrolled often does not cover all students actually in tertiary programs because of data collection limits. For example, most trade school students enrolled in the United States are not in the OECD tertiary enrollment figures. Similarly, in Canada many community college students are not listed in the OECD figures because federal data collectors for various reasons do not report all enrollments in provincially run community colleges. In some OECD countries, some or all further-education students are not counted as tertiary.

Perhaps most important, counting currently enrolled students fails to reflect those individuals who have already completed their tertiary studies. For example, 23-year-olds who complete their undergraduate degree at age 22 are not included in statistics on currently enrolled students aged 18–24. Yet clearly these students should be included in any reasonable measure of participation.

#### PERSISTENCE RATES

OECD reports two types of persistence rates—completion

rates and graduation rates. Completion rates compare the number of degrees awarded in one year with the number of students who begin a program at a typical amount of time beforehand. The other OECD-reported measure of persistence—graduation rates—divides graduates in one year by the population at the typical age of graduation.

Like enrollment ratios, both these persistence rates are proxies because most OECD countries do not track how many students in a cohort complete their program of study (although OECD admirably is trying to collect cohort rates from a number of member countries). Also as in the case of participation, the proxy nature of the OECD-reported persistence rates often means that they do not measure what they purport to measure. It also can send confusing signals about where countries rank. Take New Zealand—on completion rates, it ranks near the bottom of all OECD countries, just ahead of Hungary, the United States, and Italy and just behind Mexico. But when graduation rates are calculated, New Zealand is one of the leaders, ranking third among OECD countries.

#### ENROLLMENT AND ATTAINMENT STATISTICS

The growing reliance on using attainment rates as reported by OECD to compare countries is a very positive development as these statistics tend to be collected consistently across countries through labor force surveys and reflect measures of both access and success. However, an examination of the OECD

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enrollment and attainment data reveals a large disconnect between the two measures. Although Canada has the highest attainment rate for subbachelor's degrees, the number of students reported as enrolled in those programs simply could not generate the attainment rates that OECD reports. A major cause of this disconnect is that OECD enrollment figures are generated from reports by institutions, whereas the attainment data come from surveys of workers who are asked about the highest degree they have attained.

#### COSTS PER STUDENT

Despite efforts to weed out noneducational costs, the educational-cost figures reported by OECD often include spending outside the educational process. For example, OECD reports that the United States had educational costs of \$18,000 per student in 2005 but several recent US reports peg educational costs per student in the United States closer to \$14,000, including both public and private institutions. The OECD data also may ignore cultural differences. For example, in some OECD countries such as Spain and Portugal many enrolled

students do not regularly attend class. This may be a boon for university finances but not for quality education.

Research is the other major component of OECD-reported spending per student. Here the measurement issue is that presenting research spending on a per student basis, as the OECD does, makes little sense. An elite system would show a higher level of research spending per student, while in a mass system research spending per student would be lower. But this does not accurately reflect a country's commitment to research. It would be much more sensible to consider research spending as a share of GDP, as various publications (and the OECD) do for the broader category of research and development.

#### FINANCIAL COMMITMENT

In addition to measuring costs per student, OECD also reports financial resources spent on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP. As discussed above in the context of research spending, measuring a country's financial commitment by what it spends as a percentage of GDP can be preferable to looking at per student spending figures. But as is the case in educational spending, the OECD-reported commitment figures may include spending items for some countries that are not included in the figures submitted by others. Again, to use the United States as an example, it has the highest commitment of all OECD countries by a wide margin; but its leadership comes

*Like enrollment ratios, both these persistence rates are proxies because most OECD countries do not track how many students in a cohort complete their program of study*

from its very high level of private resources, which include university hospitals as well as endowments that are not shown or do not exist in data for many other OECD countries. The public commitment in the United States is actually quite modest; it ranks 15th among OECD countries in public resources devoted to tertiary education.

This review of some key OECD statistics for tertiary education suggests that they should be used with great care in comparing the effort and the accomplishments of various countries. It also suggests that in a number of instances we should be trying to develop better measures to compare OECD countries on these and other key variables. ■

## International Comparisons: What Your Fourth-Grade Math Can Reveal

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It's not that the latest rhetorical trope in the bad news presentation of US higher education is to say—wherever improvements are acknowledged—“Wait a minute! But other countries are doing better!” and rush out a rash of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) population ratios that show the United States has “fallen” from 2nd to 9th or 3rd to 15th place in whatever indicator of access, participation, and attainment is at issue.

The trope is not new in any country. Want to wake up your local or national policymakers? Tell them someone is down, and that someone is us. For some odd reason, educators everywhere, in countries large and small, love self-flagellation. In the metrics of international economic comparisons, we treat trade balances, GDP, and currency exchange rates the same way.

Except in matters of higher education, the metrics are false, and our use of them both misguided and unproductive. For postindustrial nations, the most visible reports on higher education lead off with OECD population ratios drawn from its annual *Education at a Glance*, assuming they were passed down from Mt. Sinai as the tablets by which we should be judged. The population ratios, particularly those concerning higher education participation and attainment for the 25–34 age cohort, will serve the preferred tendency of education leaders and policymakers to engage in a national destructive orgy that purposefully neglects some very basic and obvious facts. I urge colleagues from countries outside the OECD not to fall into this trap.

You do not need more than fourth-grade math to see the problems with population ratios, whether you are a large ship or small skiff in the human harbor. None of the reports using OECD data bothers to recognize the relative size of the US ship or the relative diversity of races, ethnicities, nativities, religions, and native languages that characterize our 310 million residents. They would blithely compare our educational landscape with that of Denmark, for example, a country of 5.4 million, where 91 percent of the inhabitants are of Danish descent and 82 percent belong to the same church. They would exalt Finland in higher education matters, another racially and lin-