

## Changing landscapes of Asian higher education

### *Preface*

Before the mid-1990s, Asian higher education tended to be small-sized, teaching-intensive, domestic-focused, and elite-oriented. The existence of such an education system, though highly regarded within the country, is not so extensively related to the broader society with respect to student participation and talent cultivation, knowledge production, industrial development, and national identity. We have seen a dramatic improvement in higher education systems in this region, not only in East Asia but also in Southeast Asia (Chan, 2016). Diverse indicators have been confirmed this achievement such as increasing participation rates, mounting investment in research and development, growing numbers of inbound international students, and rising placement in major world university rankings. This special issue aims to decipher these changing landscapes within Asian higher education. Our contributors target relatively different issues such as university participation, nation building, science policy discourse, internationalization, and doctoral education. They analyzed various countries as case studies for in-depth understanding including Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, China, and Korea. This combination provides a balanced perspective on the latest developments of Asian higher education.

## Universal access to higher education

One of the major distinguishing forces in Asian higher education developments is the massified or even universalized access to higher education. A few societies and countries have continued to expand their tertiary system in accommodating more secondary leavers for higher degrees. Several countries such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan even admitted more than 50 percent of the same age cohort. Other developing countries including Malaysia, Thailand, and China also exceeded 30 percent in their admissions rate (Shin and Teichler, 2014). Such developments have been intertwined with two basic factors: governmental-driven expansion and personal demands for obtaining a higher degree. Social transformation and economic upgrading to a more service-oriented and creative industrial structure has motivated Asian governments employing higher education as a focal conduit to inspire such dramatic alternation. Human capital theory is a commonly used rationale to justify why Asian governments have been keen to pursue further expansion of higher education. Providing a more diverse, qualified, and cutting-edge workforce has been a critical factor in boosting industrial, technological, and economic growth. Under such mega social transformation logic, universalized higher education systems tend to be easily providing a sound and comprehensive basis for such social engineering. According to the governments of the involved countries, achieving wider participation is closely linked to the success of national projects or restructuring efforts regarding the current social, economic, and even political order. Indeed, it plays a fundamental role in national transformation.

In light of these findings, it is clear that participation in higher education is significant at the societal or national level. However, receiving higher education could have a different effect on individuals or families under such a universalized movement. Some studies have indicated that study within Asian higher education is not an undertaking without cost (Johnstone and Marcucci, 2010). Disadvantaged or low social-economic groups of students tend to attend less prestigious or even private institutions. Expanding higher education provides a new channel for them to join this “splendid education feast.” However, they have to share rising costs due to the increasing tuition fees, prolonged engagement with the labor market, and unstable



employment prospects (including low initial salary) etc. Dr Hugo Horta timely pointed out that “survivalism” is the new guiding theory to explain why individuals still enroll in higher education, simply because they would face less professional options without a degree in universalized higher education societies such as East Asia. His new findings offer further explanation regarding why expansion continues and how national projects might move in the opposite direction at the cost of personal burden.

### **National building and nationalism**

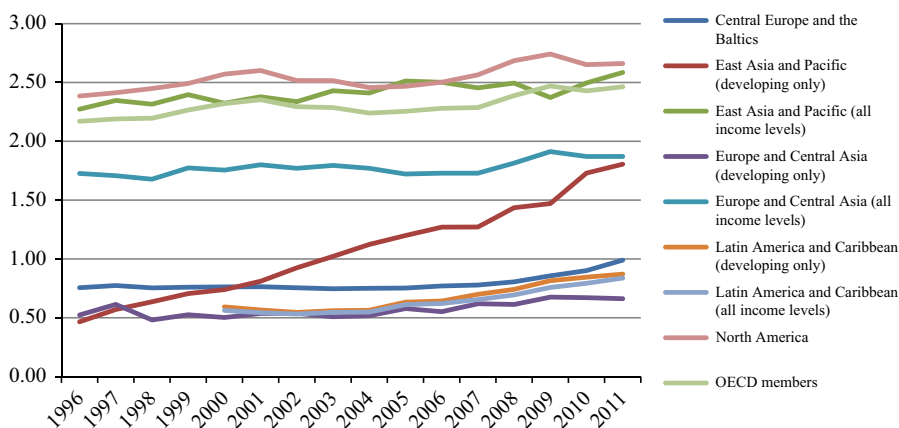
National building, or even nationalism, has always been a strong motivating force and justification for driving governments to steer higher education systems directly or indirectly. The process of “nation formation” or the construction of national identity tends to be regarded as a form of national building (James, 2006). A wide variety of factors might trigger such development. For example, with greater global competition and international linkage, greater competitiveness can be a driver for national pride and a policy tool for nation building. In this special issue, Wen wen’s paper that addressed international students pointed out the Confucius Institute as a cultural approach serving the purpose of strengthening nationalism in this internationalized context. Through promoting Chinese cultures, languages, and traditions, the Confucius Institute solidifies the identity of national spirit domestically as well as spreads its influences upon other societies and countries internationally. This is because nationalism emphasizes a “strong identification of a group of individuals with a political entity defined as nation” (Anderson, 1991). A similar move has been undertaken by the Malaysia government during the past decades as Dr Chang Da Wan and Moshidi Sirat argued. The different traits exhibited in Malaysia demonstrate stronger ethnic-based nationalism, coupled with religious involvement. Carefully examining the Malaysian higher education development, Dr Wan and Sirat found that the Malay language was purposely re-introduced as the official medium of instruction in the university context. This symbolizes the priority of the Malay and was used to consolidate the national identity. In line with the spirit of Vision 2020, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi introduced the concept of Islam *Hadhari* (i.e. Civilizational Islam), emphasizing the ten guiding principles, prescribed in the *Qur’an*, for the Malaysian Government. Such a tendency coincides with a movement to establish a homeland for an ethnic group, providing a stronger identification of nationalism. Higher education in Malaysia, therefore, is deemed as an effective vehicle to achieve deeper nation building. As a matter of fact, if we look more closely at nation building or nationalism, greater internationalization seems to provide extra stimulus as the growth soil of this notion. Along with the immersion in the international order and values, individual countries simultaneously need to highlight their domestic characteristics so as to unite the internal identity nationally. We will discuss this obvious paradox later.

### **Science, research and innovation**

Another major aspect of the changing landscape of Asian higher education is the interconnected importance of science, research, and innovation. As Figure 1 shows, the expenditure of research and development as percent of GDP in East Asia and the Pacific (developing countries only, indicated by the brown line) has been on a continuous rise from 1996 to 2011. Even considering the entire East Asian region as a whole, the investment level has been higher than that of the OECD members after 2002 (except 2009), thus suggesting that Asian countries wish to intensify their output of knowledge production and technology innovation.

Using Taiwan as an example to illustrate these dynamics, Sheng-Ju Chan’s paper focused on the discourses and research funding of science policy in contemporary society. In line with the shifting rationale, greater emphases are inclined to fit in the societal, economic, and

**Figure 1.**  
Research and  
development  
expenditure (percent  
of GDP)



Source: World Bank (2015)

even industrial demand. Greater accountability toward economic values or market price is highly valued beyond basic or curiosity-oriented research. Such a connection is drawn from the new notion of “creative economy” (Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2015). If the science community performs research in an innovative or creative manner, extra value can be attached to the experimental product. Therefore, collaboration between higher education and industrial sectors is particularly stressed in the form of research, development, and innovation (European Commission, 2016). As a matter of fact, Thailand’s Government is keen to transform the whole country into a creative society, entitled “Thailand 4.0.” In acknowledging the difficulties and challenges of successful transformation, Prompilai Buasuwan performed a comprehensive investigation to examine the extent to which Thailand’s higher education has been supportive in fostering creativity and innovation. Her research confirms that an innovative society should be sufficiently underpinned by robust universities in science policy and better application of research to the broader society.

### Talent cultivation

In further echoing an innovative, creative, and integrated society, Asian higher education has been enthusiastic in nurturing, attracting, and retaining talent so as to sustain this new scenario. When defining the nature of talent, we tend to establish a broad scope by referring to a person with a degree (or higher) or professional qualification, regardless of domestic or international origin. However, in matching with the needs of creative society, talent tends to be equipped with special skills, competence, or event attitudes. In her article, Prompilai Buasuwan asserted that cultural reform is needed as Thailand needs future manpower or workforce with new mindsets, skill sets, technology, and learning networks. As far as the research and innovation are concerned, the current practices in Thailand universities to promote a creative society were found to be average. Thailand’s example illustrates that talent should have innovative or flexible capability in creating new ideas and products.

Another dimension by which to understand talent cultivation in Asian higher education is through doctoral education. In this special issue, Jisun Jung carefully examined the training, demand, and supply of doctorates in the academic workforce in relation to entry-level jobs and employment status in Korea. She found that major Korean universities preferred overseas-trained doctorates to domestic ones, indicating that international mobility still plays a critical role in talent training. Moreover, she even

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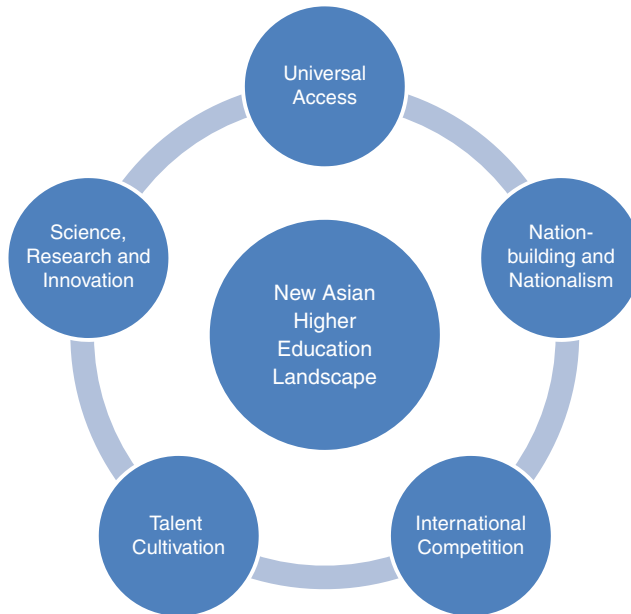
suggested that “doctoral education must adopt a new approach [...] it must consider the role of research in social development, industry, and economic capacity building based on a public policy framework.” This statement is clearly associated with the conception that doctorate’s cultivation has to include the requirements of industrial innovation and research application. It is meaningful to know that both countries’ experiences with talent cultivation are linked to cater to the needs of the industry for knowledge and creative economy (Kehm, 2007). However, it is worthwhile to note that such a tendency to stress the value of industrial application and performative economy could be problematic to the nurturing of a well-rounded personality or humanistic character.

### **International and global competition**

The final elements currently driving the changes of Asian higher education are internationalization and global competition. If one country or society seeks to enhance its national competitiveness, greater international presence or immersion is a critical factor. This explains why many Asian governments encourage higher education institutions to recruit foreign faculty/students, collaborate with prestigious universities, produce international publications, and even encourage cross-border mobility (Mok and Yu, 2015). These strategies aim to achieve greater international linkage and even better international ranking in major league tables. Asian countries, therefore, steer internationalization into the future with hope of better national positioning in this globalized world. An obvious example is found in Wen Wen’s article in this special issue analyzing the historical development of inbound students into China. She found that the Chinese Government tactically uses a cultural approach (including the Confucius Institute) to deploy their soft power. Positioning itself as a new international destination in a global student market, China has been actively providing favorable conditions to attract overseas diaspora and foreign faculty and students. The main purpose for training foreign talent in China since the 1950s has been to help others “know China” (知華), ‘be friendly toward China (友華), and love China (愛華). This unique political mission in attracting inbound students highlights the emerging issue of nationalism. It confirms that greater global competition might adopt the internationalization of higher education as an effective means to realize national project or pride. International education, therefore, seems to be intertwined with the nation building and nationalism in this region.

### **A new social contract for Asian society**

Review of the latest developments and empirical evidence presented in these six articles reveals several fundamental forces/phenomena guiding and shaping the future scenarios of Asian higher education. This is due to the fact that the higher education system acts as the “focal site of societal transformation.” These various issues are closely connected and intertwined as Figure 2 has implied. Looking into the future, Asian higher education systems will continue to play a leading role in restructuring the social, economic, cultural, and even political order for their own societies. This brief editorial also concludes that the occurrence of these phenomena signifies a new social contract with Asian society along with the reforms of higher education systems. In this new agreement with wider stakeholders, higher education promises greater participation, guarantees a stronger national identity, moves toward a better accountable research agenda for innovative economy, deepens the nurturing of various talents, and finally aims for greater internationalization. They are not harmonious, coherent, and consistent without internal conflicts. These are not purely aligned with each other. However, they are the major drivers in addressing the “new contract” for the future Asian society, regardless of whether all countries like it or not.



**Figure 2.**  
Intertwined dynamics  
of Asian higher  
education

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