This chapter explores the relationship of private higher education to several of the main topics highlighted in this Handbook, including access, graduate education, research and scholarship, the academic profession, and globalization. Obviously, variations by region, country, and type of private higher education can be only sporadically sketched in such a brief essay. Thus, this chapter will at best provide an introductory sense of how generalizations about higher education fit—or need to be adapted—when it comes to higher education’s private sector. Particular attention is given to tendencies of higher education change, outlining whether the private sector adapts to that change or even leads it in certain crucial respects. Overall, due to its large and increasing share of total enrollments, the private sector must be reckoned with in any work attempting to deal with higher education overall. (For further general sources on private higher education, see http://www.albany.edu/~proph, including its background paper and Levy (2002), and see Altbach (1999), Levy (1992), and the extensive bibliography: Maldonado, Cao, Altbach, Levy, and Zhu (2004)).

History

Higher education boasts a history of many hundreds of years, and for most of the nation-state era it has been mostly public. Of course, the nature of public higher education has changed over time, and the modern period has involved great differentiation of public forms. In fact, it is a mistake to assume that public higher education is old while private higher education is new. A reasonable distinction between private and public is mostly a product of the last two centuries, particularly related to a separation of church and state. Prior to that, institutions were often more “pre” private or public or were “fused” private-public entities. Only when a sense of publicness versus private nature sharpened did one form or the other clearly emerge. Outside the U.S. that form was usually public. Where types of private higher education existed alongside the public dominant forms, they were usually peripheral to higher education or at least to higher education’s academic core. Seminaries are the major example. Over time, a variety of
borderline higher education entities would emerge on the private side, such as Africa’s correspondence schools or institutional forms previously considered to be “below” higher education.

For the most part, the creation of private universities did not occur until after the creation of public universities or the evolution of private-public fused institutions into public ones. The quintessential and common case is the emergence of religious private universities after religion was largely pushed out of the traditional institutions. Whereas some countries then prescribed that all higher education must be secular, other countries allowed religious higher education outside the publicly owned and financed public sector.

Latin America was the main private pioneering region outside the U.S. (Levy, 1986). Some Asian countries also pioneered, but other Asian countries did not start private sectors until the 1980s or later. With rare prior examples, the main growth of Latin American Catholic universities began in the 1930s and then picked up steam into the 1960s. Indeed, religious organizations often form a kind of first wave for a non-profit sector. They have a rationale, a following that provides “demand,” and an infrastructure and actors that offer the “supply” of funds and personnel. Though less markedly than in Latin America, there is a religious first wave sense in the creation of an African private sector—mostly a product of the last decade—in addition to other regions. Moreover, a major difference between the contemporary period and historical reality lies in the plurality of religious forms whereas (outside the U.S.) the predominant private form had been Catholic. However, private sectors or institutions sometimes emerge with a cultural rationale that is not primarily religious. Language and ethnicity are examples, as seen in recent decades in Africa and in Eastern and Central Europe.

But the bulk of private higher education growth during the private boom of recent decades has been in secular institutions that absorb the demand that the public sector could not or would not accommodate. Most private institutions are or claim to be commercially-oriented, preparing graduates for the job market. Neither prior nor contemporary history has brought many non-U.S. examples of academically prestigious secular private higher education. Most of the prominent cases were traditionally Catholic universities or institutions drawing students from especially privileged backgrounds. Today, an increasing number of private institutions strive for good if not top academic standing, particularly in certain niche fields of study.

Access and Massification

Clearly, the private sector has been a major part of one of the most salient of higher education realities in recent times: expansion. Most expansion has been and continues to be on the public side. This has meant growth in pre-existing or classical universities but it has also meant growth through new or less prestigious public institutions. The roots of growth are much noted in the higher education literature: population growth, large increases in secondary school numbers, economic growth, and social mobility or a clamoring for it. Access has been a much declared and also real policy, to one extent or another, in most systems. Many systems have moved into the conventionally designated realm of “mass” higher education by enrolling at least 15% of the age cohort.