Chapter 2

Higher Education Transformation: Some Trends in California and Asia

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Introduction

The social transformations rippling throughout education systems worldwide impact both basic and higher education. In general, higher education is being asked to provide graduates with skills and abilities commensurate with the workforce demands of rapidly changing economies. Frequently articulated critiques of higher education argue that its institutions have been elitist, dominated by faculties resistant to change, lacking in social relevance, and—as institutions—absorbing an increasing (and perhaps unwarranted) amount of societal resources. Where higher education has largely been a state function, conservative bureaucracies are viewed as impediments to necessary development and change. Virtually everywhere, voices are raised to demand necessary reforms yet, in spite of these apparently common challenges, it remains true that policy-related education issues are framed by and “spoken through” the particularities of distinct cultures and histories. For those of us seeking to understand and document appeals for higher education reform, the task is always to appreciate the distinctiveness of local/national articulations of these issues while also recognizing the structural commonalities that link global higher education issues. As one of my colleagues recently stated, “[A]ll globalization is local.”

In many cases, issues of higher education reform appear in the context of aligning limited capacity with expanding social needs, while creating or retaining quality. In developing countries, capacity issues reflect the struggle to create and sustain a set of higher education institutions (HEIs) suitable to meeting the needs of rapid population growth, the demands of increased global interdependence, and the realities
of emerging knowledge societies. In India, China, and Indonesia, to take but three examples, institutions of considerable age and distinction are being challenged to meet these internal demands while demonstrating their “competitiveness” by exhibiting “world class” attributes—a not very disguised code for developing competitive international research capacities and attracting the best students. Behind this “first tier,” institutions of lesser status are expanding rapidly and new institutions including community colleges, technical institutions, and providers of on-line education are coming into existence. In any organization, rapid expansion of capacity begets dual quality concerns: “raising” the quality of older, traditional institutions to make them more globally competitive, and developing new institutions within acceptable quality guidelines.

An additional complicating factor is the shifting target posed by “quality” as its meanings and practical implications shift in response to changing social and economic situations. In Japan and Korea, to take two other examples, creating effective higher education institutional responses to rapidly changing social and economic conditions is viewed as a particular challenge, given the very strong developmental role government has played in creating the “modern university.” The capacity/quality nexus in those societies with large numbers of university graduates condenses around providing enforceable norms of retraining for existing graduates and refocusing “output” for the university system as a whole. Japan, in particular, has a distinguished history of first-rate HEIs, which nevertheless, today are being challenged to dramatically change in light of twenty-first century imperatives.

Underlying this capacity/quality/reform tableau is the thorny issue of equity. Rapid, increased global interdependence has resulted in corresponding accelerations of economic and social inequality, massive population migrations (especially from rural areas to burgeoning cities), major changes in social and economic status, and pressures on prevailing cultural norms. Governments, particularly, are concerned with issues of growing inequality and the social, political, and (perhaps) economic instabilities to which it is conducive. Increasingly both governments and intergovernmental organizations are looking to education as an answer to these iconic effects of global integration.

Higher education is often seen as the capstone solution: an institutional response that will produce alignment among a complex set of social goals, from the creation of new intellectual capital, to the production of effective workforces, to the diffusion of effective “ways of being” in this world of escalating change. Higher education “reform” is shaped, of course, by the distinctive cultures and styles of national policy processes: policy may be policy, but how societies go about it can be radically different.

Almost every country in the Asia-Pacific Region, including the United States, struggling to overcome these challenges to higher education is faced with redefinitions of “public and private higher education sectors.” The meanings and values imputed to “public and private” have changed significantly over the past century; these terms have acquired new meanings and currency as notions of market competitiveness (“liberalization”) have penetrated these societies, be they historically capitalist, socialist, developing, or developed states.