

Higher Education Across Asia: An Overview of Issues and Strategies (Higher Education in Dynamic Asia Series) by Asian Development Bank, Mandaluyong City [Philippines]: Author, 2011. viii-55 pp. ISBN 978-92-9092-512-5.

Book review by Constantin Oprean
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All too often over the past decade of the Bologna Process reforms, we higher educational leaders in an expanded Europe have been too focused on the reform difficulties in our own sphere, and may thus overlook the insights we could gain from looking at the experiences of higher education challenges and reform efforts in other parts of the world. Given the international orientation of our own university (the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu), and especially our close cooperation with the People's Republic of China Confucius Center, this reviewer will now seek to remedy this oversight by reviewing *Higher Education Across Asia: An Overview of Issues and Strategies* authored by experts at the Asian Development Bank. They claim on their website¹ that "it provides an overview on how governments, together with HE [Higher Education] institutions and stakeholders, can improve HE through adequate policies and regulations, and how they can position their economies for further development."

As the authors state their purpose in extenso:

This publication provides an overview of issues of higher education development in developing Asia. Part 1 summarizes the case for government and external support of higher education. Part 2 provides an overview of the factors that have shaped the current situation of higher education and explores options available to governments and higher education systems seeking to strengthen those systems. Part 3 offers recommendations for how development partners such as ADB, a multilateral regional development bank, might best support the continued development of higher education. The recommendations focus on strategic and operational priorities, particularly for strengthening internal and external efficiency, improving cost efficiency and sustainable financing, improving administration and governance, promoting greater access and equity, strengthening private higher education, and promoting regional cooperation and cross-border collaboration in higher education. (viii)

Their pre-emptive standpoint is that "higher education across much of Asia is a remarkable success story" in spite of the many challenges the sector faces in the rapidly developing region. The authors claim that this "success story" is due to a number of interlocking factors, including strong government support of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), in that leaders in the region are united in their view that it "is an important ingredient in the economic and social development of their countries," particularly so given the growing "globalization of markets, the interdependency of international financial systems, the expanded role of technology, and high-speed communications," which has created an "enormous need for highly skilled technical, professional, and managerial leaders" (p. 1). Therefore, higher education enrolments and resource allocation have grown across the region, yet (as is usual) in most cases, the resources allocated have not kept pace with the instructional, service and research needs.

¹ the publication is available for download from there as well: <http://www.adb.org/publications/higher-education-across-asia-overview-issues-and-strategies> - accessed 2 October, 2012

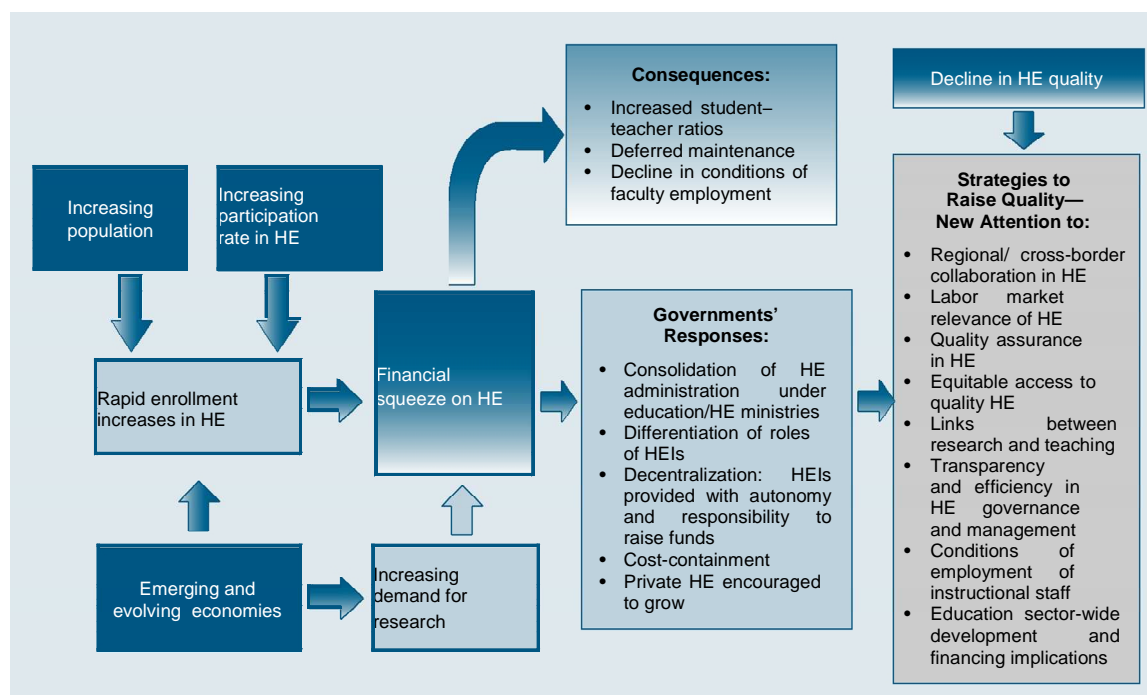
Thus, universities across the region (Southeast Asia, also some specific reference countries in East Asia)² face a number of “interwoven challenges”, including:

1. Explosive enrolment growth;
2. Shortages of qualified instructional staff;
3. Widespread concern over instructional quality; and, in many cases,
4. Severe financial constraints. (p. 1)

The report first answers the question of “why invest in higher education?” in the affirmative (following the lead of the World Bank, which had changed its earlier view that investment in higher education was not as remunerative in developing countries as investment in primary and (limited) secondary education would be. This answer is based on three reasons: 1. “Higher education institutions prepare the primary and secondary teachers, who shape the dimensions and quality of the overall education system of country”; 2. “HEIs train the high-level technical and administrative personnel needed in government, business, and industry” and, 3. “HEIs operate as incubators of the innovation and creative thinking needed for an economically competitive society” (p. 4). This reviewer agrees with all of these assessments, in that Romania’s prior history in developing its higher education system as shown all of these factors to be relevant and timely.

Part two of the report (“Higher Education Across Asia: Issues and Strategies”) opens with this explanatory diagram showing the “flow of pressures on higher education in Asia” (which the reviewer would say applies in Romania as well):

Flow of Pressures on Higher Education Across Asia



HE = higher education, HEI = higher education institution. (Figure 1, p. 5)

A key problem that hinders an adequate managing of these input and process pressures is “low internal efficiency” of most Southeastern Asian HEIs. The authors thus state:

² Focus countries are grouped thusly: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Viet Nam (defined as “lower and low-middle income countries in which the higher education systems are focused primarily on system expansion, increasing enrollments, and infrastructure development”); Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand (defined as “middle-income countries with well-established and growing higher education systems; now increasingly focused on quality improvement”); India, People’s Republic of China (defined as the “largest higher education systems in the world and fastest growing system in East Asia; higher education policies and practices are closely watched and influential across other higher education systems in the region”). These focus countries situations are then compared to two “control groups” of aspirational “reference economies,” the first being Hong Kong, China, Singapore (defined as “small, high-income economies with mature, highly respected higher education systems characterized by slow or stagnant growth”) and then Japan, and the Republic of Korea (defined as “mature higher education systems of respected quality but now facing declining student enrollments”) (p.2)

A central recommendation of this regional study is that, as countries move forward, improving instructional quality should be given the highest priority. Strategies for instruction improvement may differ by country context, but the priority is cross-cutting. Implementation of this recommendation may require painful choices among competing goals. Among other things, governments and higher education systems need to better balance the expansion of access with attention to quality improvement. This may involve reducing the rates of system expansion for a period of time in order to ensure that educational quality catches up with wider opportunity. (p.7)

They bluntly argue, “without those actions, the larger investment in higher education will be wasted.” Then, the authors outline six strategies that they say are “essential to raising quality:

- Differentiating institutional missions within coordinated systems of higher education, and balancing resource allocations to support those goals;
- Improving the recruitment of instructional staff;
- Improving the capacity, motivation, and performance of instructional staff;
- Improving faculty incentive and evaluation systems;
- Creating a more positive institutional culture; and
- Strengthening university-based research efforts consistent with institutional missions. (p. 7)

The balance (and bulk) of the report (pages 36-50) is in part three (“How to Support the Continuing Development of Higher Education in Asia”), which provides a long “laundry list” of policy recommendations under seven main headings: “Strengthening Internal Efficiency,” “Strengthening External Efficiency of Higher Education,” “Improving Cost Efficiency and Sustainable Financing of Higher Education,” “Improving Administration and Governance in Higher Education,” “Promoting Greater Access and Equity in Higher Education,” “Strengthening Private Higher Education,” “Promoting Regional Cooperation and Cross-Border Collaboration in Higher Education.” The strength of this concise policy report is the breath and depth of its sound recommendations, that, while focused upon HEIs in developing Southeastern nations is also well applicable to HEIs worldwide.

This highly recommended report closes with a complete reference list of four and a half pages.

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