

Special Issue

Remaking Higher Education for the Post-COVID-19 Era:

*Critical Reflections on Marketization, Internationalization and
Graduate Employment*

Edited by

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Introduction

Remaking Higher Education for the Post-COVID-19 Era: Critical Reflections on Marketization, Internationalization and Graduate Employment (*Ka Ho Mok & Catherine Montgomery*)

Selected Articles

The development of higher education in Japan and the United Kingdom: The impact of neoliberalism (*Mark Brazzill*)

Education Market with the Chinese Characteristics: The Rise of Minban and Transnational Higher Education in China (*Ka Ho Mok*)

China's Move to Mass Higher Education in Recent Two Decades: An Analysis of Higher Education Expansion Policies (*Jin Jiang and Guo Guo Ke*)

Challenges to the Asian academic profession: Major findings from the international surveys (*Futao Huang*)

Are Malaysian TVET Graduates ready for the Future? (*Husaina Kenayathulla*)

Time will tell: Revisiting the impact of college expansion on income and occupational prestige mobility of young adults in Taiwan (*Ping Ying Kuan and Ssu-Chan Peng*)

Reconceptualising 'internationalisation' in higher education: The case of Hong Kong (*Suyan Pan*)

Internationalisation and the ASEM Education Process: The Malaysian higher education experience (*Munusami and Hashim*)

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Abstract

This Special Issue was conceived and developed following a series of international conferences held in Asia, with a particular focus on critically reflecting upon higher education development in the region from broader social and political economy perspectives. Some of the papers in this Special Issue were selected from presentations in the East Asia Social Policy Research Network (EASP) Conference successfully held in Taiwan in 2018, while others were chosen from international events held at Lingnan University in Hong Kong presenting critical reviews and reflections on internationalization, marketization, and graduate employment of higher education in Asia. This introductory article puts the discussions of the selected papers in this issue in context, with critical reflections on the key issues being examined in these papers. The Special Issue is published when the world is still confronting the unprecedented global health crisis resulted from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article discusses the higher education development trends in Asia through the massification, diversification and internationalisation processes in transforming the higher education system and examines how these development trends are affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis and Impact on Higher Education Development

The outbreak of COVID-19 came so suddenly that higher education systems across different parts of the globe were unable to make financial, physical or even psychological preparations. The emergence of online teaching and learning has rushed faculty and students into adapting to unprecedented virtual learning patterns. International student mobility has been halted with major national borders closed. Internationalization of higher education has been seriously adversely affected with global universities not only being disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of student learning and internationalization, but major university systems in the West have also been significantly affected by the global health crisis with the drastic drop in international students (Altbach and de Wits, 2020; Mok, Xiong, Ke and Cheung, 2021). University finances have been significantly challenged by this decreasing number of international students. For those higher education systems heavily reliant on international students as one of the major funding sources, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected both their finances and university governance.

The pandemic has also come at a time of fragile global relations. Taking Australia as an example, the recent diplomatic relations between China and Australia have compounded the impact of the pandemic. Australian universities have long been reliant on international students as one of the major sources for incomes; more than half of the student population comes from overseas with Chinese and Indian students constituting a relatively high proportion (Welch, 2020; Marginson, 2020). The sudden drop of international students because of the border control has affected the finances and governance of the Australian universities (Mok, 2021) and this in turn will have an impact on the longer-term development of higher education in the region. Similar development trends are unfolding in the UK and other jurisdictions in Europe. According to Simon Marginson when commenting on how COVID-19 has affected universities in the UK, he stated that:

“In response, universities in the UK decided to continue offering face-to-face classes in 2020-21 academic year, and enrolment numbers have, indeed, stayed up, at least for now.... the big worry was what might happen to revenue, to the bottom line, in what is a market-based system where institutions survive partly on international student fees. UCL – the country’s third-largest research university – gets £300 million, or 20.2% of its income from non-EU student fees.” (Marginson, 2020, p.1).

It is clear that higher education development in Asia has not only been affected by the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the changing geo-political environment in the region driven by the rivalry between major world powers like China and the US. This has also significantly influenced student mobility, research collaboration and academic diplomacy across major higher education systems. The worsening relations between China and Australia, the tension between China and the US extending from trade war to technology and innovation fights, and the ideological conflicts between China and the major world powers in the West are shaping higher education development (Marginson, 2020; Mok, 2021). The anti-Chinese sentiments and anti-China politics which were already happening before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis have begun to interrupt normal student mobility and research collaboration between China and the US. This has also extended to other liberal economies guarding against China in its rise in Science and advances in innovation and technology (Wong and Barnes, 2020; Xu, Sun and Cao, 2021).

Recent research (Fry et al 2020) shows that the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the geographic loci of coronavirus research, as well as the structure of scientific teams, narrowing

team membership and favouring elite structures. This was also to the exclusion of the participation of Global South and is a sign of the accentuation of privilege in research collaboration in a time of crisis. Changing patterns in the nature of international science collaboration during Covid-19 (or in another crisis) could also be an outcome of the global pandemic. The analysis carried out by Fry et al. (2020) shows that scientific research teams became smaller and less international during the pandemic (in Covid research only) as a result of needing to act fast and not being able to travel (also cost issues were a problem). The big players were still dominant (China, the United States and the UK) but the patterns and directions of networks changed and fewer partners from the Global South were involved. Research teams relied on existing relationships because it was not possible to build new ones (due to limitations of time and immobility). Fry et al.'s research shows that (2020) a catastrophic and urgent event, such as the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, could accelerate or reverse trends in international collaboration, especially in and between China and the United States.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has also further provoked the anxiety of Chinese and Asian students who have encountered “stigmatization” and “discrimination” because of diverse perceptions and health preventive measures taken during the global health crisis. This clearly reflects cultural differences and practices when Asian and non-Asian countries manage public hygiene after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Feng, 2020; Qi, Wang and Dai, 2020; Mok, Xiong, Ke and Cheung, 2021). This Special Issue is set against this unique and unprecedented political and economic context and here we reflect upon marketization, internationalization, graduate employment and academic profession issues presented by the selected articles.

The Impact of Neoliberalism on Higher Education Development

A few selected articles in this issue critically review how higher education development not only in Asia but also in the UK has been influenced by the ideas and practices of neoliberalism. Central to neoliberalism is the introduction of market principles and practices to manage higher education. With the declining role of the state in financing higher education, the massive growth of higher education institutions not only in Asia but also across other parts of the globe has heavily relied on the non-state sector. The adoption of market ideas and use of market forces to develop higher education has become a global trend, with more private higher education institutions being established to cater for the pressing higher education needs when

most governments cannot afford to be the primary funder of higher learning (Maringe, and Foskett, 2010).

Mark Brazzill critically reviews the development of higher education in Japan and the United Kingdom, highlighting how these two systems have been affected by neoliberalism. Higher education financing and governance has been significantly affected by the introduction of reforms and policy change driven by the ideas and practices of neoliberalism. Common to the two systems is the introduction of competition among all universities in Japan and the UK, driving for performance. With reductions in state funding, the universities in these two countries must search for non-state sources of funding to sustain their future development. Typically, universities in the UK are run like businesses and a corporate governance model is being adopted to make university more efficient and effective in management (Hartman, 2017). The adoption of neoliberalism in higher education management has led to criticisms from academics for undermining academic freedom, and this is commonly heard not only from the two case studies but also from other international discourse when reflecting upon how market forces shape university governance (Hartman and Jean-Christophe, 2012).

Ka Ho Mok critically reviews how higher education in China has been transformed in the last two decades especially when the country has made serious attempts to expand higher education by allowing non-state actors to run higher education. Mok critically examines different strategies adopted by the Chinese government to increase higher education to meet the pressing learning needs of its citizens through marketization and diversification of higher education. In addition, Mok also discusses how the higher education system in China has undergone internationalization and transnationalization; all the transformations taking place in the country are closely related to the introduction of market forces with strong state steering. Without being fundamentally oriented toward neoliberalism, the Chinese government tactically makes use of some practices in line with neoliberalism to drive towards higher education transformations in the country. After examining how China's higher education is being transformed through this unique form of marketization, Mok argues in this issue that the emerging education market in China should not be understood as a free marketplace, like its counterparts in the Western societies, because the Chinese government has never committed to the free education market philosophy. More specifically, Mok believes the rise of the education market through the involvement of more non-state actors (including both local and overseas players) in offering learning opportunities for Chinese citizens should be interpreted as a policy tool. Such measures are carefully and tactically employed by the government to increase HE

enrolment, diversify learning experiences and meet the changing needs of the market rather than representing the government's commitment to opening the education sector freely to the market (Jiang and Mok, 2019).

Reviewing the massification of higher education in China, Jiang and Ke adopt a critical policy analysis showing how China has proactively responded to the challenges resulting from the strong urges to transform the economic structure of the country from the manufactured-oriented production to cater for the new development needs driven by the knowledge-based and creativity-oriented economies. Realizing its disadvantages being a latecomer in the expansion of higher education, Jiang and Ke reveal how the Chinese government has driven higher education massification through adopting marketization and decentralization strategies to increase learning opportunities first, then followed by concentrating funding to a selected number of universities to groom them to become globally competitive when responding to the quest for the world-class university status. Much previous research has already analyzed the higher education transformations through the adoption of marketization, diversification and decentralization processes (see for example, Mok and Marginson, 2021; Mok, 2000, 2002), the contribution of Jiang and Ke to this issue is a critical review of major higher education policies since 1998 to highlight how the move to mass higher education was achieved through marketization and decentralization with the strong steer of the central government. Jiang and Ke's analysis further supports Mok's critical reflections of China's unique approach to educational market formation. Putting these two articles into perspective, we can appreciate China's higher education expansion exhibits the characteristics of the East Asia model, which is shaped by the strong nation-state structure with pragmatic instrumentalism. Following the principle of "pragmatic instrumentalism", the private sector could provide development opportunities for education programmes as depending on government funded public schools alone will constrain education provision in terms of both capacity and diversity (Mok, Chan & Wen, 2020).

Analysing the impact of neoliberalism on higher education development is to examine how performance assessment and university governance in Asia is affected by such ideas and practices. Based upon major findings from international surveys regarding the academic profession in Asia, Futao Huang offers an interesting analysis of how academics in Asian universities assessed their profession before the COVID-19 crisis. The findings clearly show that Asian academics have been under intensified pressures for performance as university funding has increasingly been influenced by neoliberalism. The introduction and adoption of

market principles and practices to manage higher education institutions are increasing in Asia, and such practices have affected academics in Asia. Through the analysis of surveys examining how academics evaluate the impact of recent university governance changes and how this has affected the academic professional, Huang highlights the major challenges faced by academics in Asia, particularly when they are under tremendous pressures to do more with less resources. The analysis presented by Huang captures well the academic profession before the COVID-19 crisis, and we may anticipate the working environments of Asian academics may become much more challenging after the outbreak of the present global health crisis. Recent research has clearly shown intensified work pressures of the emergence of online learning forced by the sudden spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cham, 2020). When receiving diverse but contradictory student comments around online learning, it is not difficult to imagine the pressures generated for academics to strike for quality learning and teaching, and at the same time (Korkmaz and Toraman, 2020), they are also called on to produce even higher quality publications meeting world-leading standards for facilitating their institutions to perform well in various global university leagues (Mok and Kang, 2021). When all these pressures are put together, we can easily imagine how academics in Asian universities are reimagining their academic profession.

Internationalization of Higher Education: Challenges and Futures

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began spreading widely across the globe, internationalization of higher education had become a growing trend in Asia. Being a leading region across the world for sending out students to different regions for studying, universities in the Asia and Pacific region have also attracted students from other parts of the world for academic exchange or different forms of learning programmes. Recent research regarding student mobility among ASEAN countries, together with the strengthened links with the Big Three in East Asia, namely China, Japan and South Korea, shows that more frequent student mobility is reported well before the COVID-era and more intra-regional learning is also expected in in the Post-COVID-19 era (Mok, 2021). Setting out the context of deepening cooperation among the Asian states, Munusami and Hashim analyze how the ASEM education process has enriched student learning experience with particular focus on the Malaysian higher education experience. Reflecting upon how internationalization of higher education is promoting more regional cooperation and academic exchange within the Asian region rather than going to the traditional study destinations normally based in the liberal economies in the West, Munusami and Hashim offer highly relevant and useful insights for further deepening

regional cooperation, particularly with the recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China, together with Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. More research should be conducted to critically explore whether the formation of the RCEP will lead to a paradigm shift of Asian students choosing overseas studies within the Asian region rather than going to traditional Western countries for international learning (Yeong, 2020).

Suyan Pan critically examines internationalization of higher education in Hong Kong, especially when the city-state positions itself as the international city of Asia. The call for internationalization of higher education has become one of the key performance indicators when assessing public universities in Hong Kong, Pan attempts to reconceptualize internationalization of higher education of this international city in Asia. The above reflections of the major arguments of these few articles related to internationalization of higher education lead us to ask which directions internationalization of higher education will head for in the COVID-19 crisis context (Xu, Sun and Cao, 2021).

At the time when this Issue is published, our world is confronting the major challenges of global health problems, with most national borders closed and international travels being disrupted, and major universities are still using virtual learning as the primary mode of teaching and learning. Encountering such unprecedented global health conditions, what could be the future of international higher education? Does international higher education still matter? Will students from Asia prefer studying within the region rather than going to major campuses in the West? How will students assess the stigmatization and cultural shocks that some of them have experienced during the crisis? How will universities manage the changes and significant transformations generated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Massifying Higher Education and Graduate Employment in the Post-COVID-Era

To prepare citizens to face the highly competitive global market environment, many higher education systems in Asia have engaged in massification and privatization of higher education. Malaysia is not an outlier as the country has also experienced the massification of higher education with a significant increase of private higher education while the public universities remain in the “minority”. Within a massified higher education system, Husaina Kenayathulla conducts research asking the question “Are Malaysian TVET graduates ready for the future?”. This article not only throws light on reflecting the role of TVET in Malaysia, but the same question has also been raised and discussed internationally when many higher

education systems across the region have massively expanded higher education, particularly general academic degrees offered by universities. The rapid expansion of higher education in Asia without a careful matching with the changing socio-economic and labour markets need has inevitably led to a skill mismatch, resulting in graduate underemployment and unemployment well before the crisis of COVID-19 pandemic. Hugh Lauder and his team have critically revisited the arguments of Human Capital Theory presenting a beautiful promise that the investments in higher education would lead to enhanced graduate employment, together with upward mobility and advanced career development (Lauder, Brown and Cheung, 2018). However, this beautiful promise is broken with the globalization of economy when talented graduates are entering “wars of talents” and “wars of positions” not only in the domestic labour markets but extending to the global marketplace (Brown, Lauder and Cheung, 2020). High-skilled labour and well-educated university graduates are now facing “The Global Auction”, when the global competitions for jobs and career developments are becoming increasingly competitive (Brown and Lauder, 2011).

Ping Ying Kuan and Ssu-Chan Peng’s critical review of the impact of college expansion on income and occupational prestige mobility of young adults in Taiwan fundamentally challenges Human Capital Theory as young adults in Taiwan have been facing the challenges of downward social mobility as university education has failed to prepare them to be competitive enough for the global marketplace. Unemployment and underemployment, stagnation in graduate premium, and over-supply of university places in comparison to what high school graduates need, has indeed provoked antagonism between the government and the young adults. The unsatisfying youth transition from education to work partially contributed to the outbreak of the Sunflower Movement in the island state (Hou, Chiang and Chan 2020). The case studies presented by Kuan and Peng offer not only a sociological analysis of the massification of higher education and the resultant graduate employment of Taiwan but also contributes to the global discourse of youth transition crisis, revealing deep-down social and political-economy issues intensifying inter-generational conflicts on education, housing, social security, and mobility (Green and Henseke, 2020; Mok and Zhu, 2021; Mok, Xiong and Ye, 2021).

Conclusion

The Editors of this Special Issue would like to thank all authors who have contributed to this Issue by analyzing key development issues facing the higher education systems in Asia.

The challenges that Asian universities have confronted / will be facing are not unique experiences. Drawing comparative and international perspectives, we can easily find similar debates and analysis of higher education development issues in other jurisdictions across the globe. The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis has clearly revealed how vulnerable academics in general and higher education institutions could be when managing global health problems. Hence, collaboration is desperately needed for co-developing better learning and research opportunities for students and academics across nations and cultures. We hope this Issue could offer useful insights for government officials, academic leaders, and other stakeholders to develop policies appropriate for managing the global health crisis with effective and productive measures to managing higher education development in the post-COVID era. Remaking higher education for a better world should be the core business after experiencing the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. We must devise measures supporting student learning and enhancing research cooperation for co-production of a better world in the future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated in this study.

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