

The Asian Higher Education Century?

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The Asian Higher Education Century? Philip G. Altbach Philip G. Altbach is Monan University Professor and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. The 2009 world university rankings showed a modest increase in the number of universities in Asia that have entered the top 100—in the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities from 5 to 6, and in the Times Higher Education/QS rankings from 14 to 16. Commentators immediately referred to the academic rise of Asia and a concomitant decline of the West. Fundamentally, however, academic excellence, research productivity, and reputation, which are mainly what the rankings capture, are not a zero-sum game. The improvement of universities in one part of the world does not mean that institutions elsewhere necessarily decline. Further, the shift to Asia is by no means dramatic. It is in fact a good thing that universities outside the traditional powerhouses of North America and western Europe are improving and gaining increased recognition for their work. Nonetheless, it is useful to examine Asia's academic growth if only because the region houses the most rapidly expanding economies in the world, and a number of Asian countries have placed great emphasis on both expansion and improvement in higher education. While it is almost impossible to generalize about so vast and varied a region, nonetheless some realities are relevant for significant parts of the region. Asia is home to a majority of the world's private higher education institutions, and the private sector continues to expand in the region. With a few exceptions, the private sector stands at the bottom of the prestige hierarchy. As the economists put it, the private academic institutions are "demand absorbing" and provide access but generally not high quality. The private sector does not contribute much to the improvement of the quality of Asian higher education. Asia has a significant high-quality sector. Many Japanese universities are highly ranked. Singapore and Hong Kong have excellent academic systems. Outstanding universities exist in South Korea and Taiwan. China's top dozen or so universities are approaching "world class." The Indian Institutes of Technology, although not universities in the traditional sense, are also top institutions. But overall, Asia's universities do not compare favorably with those in North America, western Europe, or Australia. A number of structural, academic, and cultural factors may inhibit even some of the best Asian universities from rising to the pinnacles of academic quality in the near future and are likely to some extent inhibit the improvement of Asia's universities in general. Asian strategies for academic improvement differ. Singapore and Hong Kong have accomplished considerable success simply by building Western universities in Asia by hiring large numbers of nonlocal academic staff, using English, and copying Western norms of academic organization and management. South Korea has sponsored several national campaigns for academic upgrading such as the Brain Korea project. Taiwan has relied in part on convincing Western-educated Taiwanese to return home to improve key universities that have been given extra support. Singapore has strategically invited several foreign universities to open branches and has given them significant financial incentives to do so—although several have failed. China's efforts have been the most impressive: a combination of significant infusions of funds to universities identified as top performers, mergers to create institutions with both high quality and economy of scale, and efforts to create an academic environment that rewards productivity. It is possible, however, that in China and elsewhere in Asia a kind of "glass ceiling" will soon be reached. Financial and other resources combined with some innovative strategies can make progress only so far. Cultural, academic, and historical challenges persist and may well slow the upgrade of Asian universities. The rise of Asian higher education is by no means inevitable, at least in the near future.

Major Impediments An academic culture that is based on meritocratic values, free inquiry, and competition—combined with elements of collaboration and at least some mobility—is central to a world-class university. There is some recognition of the importance of these elements in much of Asia and of the difficulties of implementation and impediments based on historical tradition and other forces. Relationships are, of course, essential everywhere and in all institutions and societies. But in Asia, personal connections and networks—the Chinese call it *guanxi*—are still influencing many aspects of academic life, from the admission of students to the promotion of professors and the allocation of research funds. One implication is widespread inbreeding of faculty. Those trained at a university are hired by that institution and typically spend their careers there. This may hinder new thinking and innovation because of common perspectives and an undue respect for academic hierarchy. It may also often be difficult to encourage innovation in this environment. The ties between a former student and his or her mentor might shape departmental or institutional politics and inhibit change or foster factionalism. Many Asian universities have a combination of affinity-based promotion policies for academic staff while simultaneously lacking a formal "tenure" system. As a result, many persons appointed to an academic position are in due course promoted without much careful evaluation. Furthermore, many systems in this part of the world do not provide formal protection of academic freedom or a promotion policy that rewards productivity and encourages long-term performance. Teaching and, to some extent, research often follow quite traditional methods and emphasize lectures with little interaction between students and professors. Professors often simply repeat their lectures and leave little if any time for questions or discussion. Much criticism has been produced concerning traditional teaching in recent years, with a recognition that it does not contribute to either long-term learning or independent thinking. These methods extend to graduate education, as well, where formality is often the rule, and independent "hands on" work is still not the popular norm. Hierarchy is very much at the center of academic ties of all kinds. This often means that students are inhibited from the kinds of informal interaction with their teachers as enjoyed by counterparts at Western universities. Junior staff are subject to the methodological and topical constraints of senior professors. Key academic decisions are often in the hands of more experienced professors and are related to the Asian respect for age and to the nature of many Asian societies,

although some top universities have rapidly promoted younger professors and have hired a large number of foreign-trained staff. Academic corruption exists, at least to a limited extent, everywhere, but the problem seems to be endemic in some Asian countries. Reports concerning favoritism in admissions to plagiarism in publication, and falsifying research findings can be found regularly in many Asian newspapers. A study by China's Wuhan University estimated that \$100 million is spent annually for ghostwritten academic papers by academics and students. One of the world's top medical journals, Britain's Lancet, warned that China will not become a research superpower by 2020 as promised by President Hu Jintao, unless academic fraud is more tightly controlled. Few statistics are available, but anecdotal evidence indicates the problem is fairly widespread, even in some top Asian universities. In most Asian countries, graduate education is at a relatively early stage—in need both of expansion and of shaping effective programs to provide a research base for Asian universities and the ability to educate the next generation of professors and researchers. Typically, professors who focus their work on postbaccalaureate education tend to be the most research active. Their academic responsibilities emphasize research and the training of small numbers of graduate students. Even many of Asia's best universities provide more emphasis on undergraduate programs—thus making the emergence of research universities more difficult, although some top institutions, for example in China, have dramatically expanded graduate programs. Internationalization is widely recognized as a necessary part of any top university. Many of Asia's universities have stressed it, but the adversities are significant. What should represent the balance between the local language and English, as the main language of scientific communication? In some universities, professors are encouraged to publish in major international journals—not an easy task in the highly competitive arena of science and scholarship. Some classes are taught in English, but at times with mixed results. The complex issues relating to branch campuses, franchised degree programs, and involvement with foreign universities are multifaceted and not always beneficial for the Asian institutions. Most of the world's internationally mobile students come from Asia, and many do not return home following their overseas study—although this trend is slowly changing. The final impediment is the academic profession—at the heart of any university but especially important for a top “world-class” university. For many Asian countries, the professoriate is inadequately paid in comparison to local salaries and woefully remunerated by international standards. Teaching loads are often too high to permit much research to be performed. In many countries, academics are promoted because of longevity rather than for merit. Another challenge is the lack of a tenure system that provides firm guarantees of academic freedom. Professors need both better job protection and more money and at the same time a competitive environment to ensure high productivity.

The Future of Asian Universities While it is very difficult to generalize about Asian countries, some generalizations are possible. Most countries in Asia—with some notable exceptions in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore—are still rapidly expanding enrollments. Thus, competition for public funds for rapidly expanding systems is intense. Top-tier universities often lose out in the struggle for resources. The growing private sector institutions have no interest in research and will not produce prestigious universities. Several Asian countries have undertaken ambitious plans for improving higher education, and some are making impressive progress. China, South Korea, Singapore, and several others have invested heavily in higher education, with the top universities improving significantly. Other countries—notably India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and most of the poorer Asian countries—have a very long way to go.

While there has been impressive progress in some Asian countries and in some sectors of academe, many obstacles remain to achieve world-class status. The struggle is a long one and will require not only resources but also changing deeply entrenched academic practices. But building world-class universities is necessary for Asia to continue its impressive economic progress. Sophisticated research capacity and highly skilled people are needed for Asia's future. Translated into Vietnamese by Pham Thi Ly Source: INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION No. 59 (Spring, 2010).