

# INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

NUMBER 125 • WINTER 2025



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Diversity, Equity,  
and Inclusion

AI, Work Futures, and  
Opportunity

Global Talent Flows

Ethics, Corruption,  
and Authority

Internationalization in a  
Multipolar World

Disruption, Decline, and  
Adaptation



**BOSTON COLLEGE**

Lynch School of Education and Human Development

CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

# INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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## EDITORIAL

# While Terminologies on Diversity and Fairness Evolve, Universities Should Maintain Long-Held Commitments

*Gerardo L. Blanco*

Views about identity are subject to change, and so is the language utilized to explain experiences related to difference and exclusion within universities. Issue [104](#) of *International Higher Education* included a special section addressing anti-Black racism, as experienced by international students and as a pervasive experience in study abroad practices, along with the perils of university presidents making public pronouncements on social issues. Over the five years since its publication, things have changed dramatically and, as Jamil Salmi has [noted](#), the backlash against equity policies in higher education is evident and constitutes a global phenomenon. Certain terms have become flashpoints in increasingly polarized societies, but it is important to recognize the impossibility of studying higher education from a comparative perspective without understanding the basic characteristics of the student body or the academic staff. In other words, it is impossible to ignore diversity in higher education.

As governments around the world have fixated on making their institutions competitive in the global arena, existing hierarchies among institutions have been accentuated. This has put a critical spotlight on selective admissions, even though a very small proportion of institutions are selective. Such an emphasis reveals a tacit agreement that admission to higher education should be fair. Whether fairness should be determined on the basis of academic performance alone, or whether hardships or personal characteristics, including race, should be considered, must be debated and remain debatable within universities. In other words, equity cannot be extricated from the study of higher education either.

## The Dangers of Anticipatory Compliance

Despite the clear importance of these topics for both our scholarly and professional field, they are not being defended, at least in public. Instead, self-censorship and anticipatory compliance appear to be taking hold. Academics are retreating from activities that are central to their professional roles, such as making remarks that can be perceived as critical of their government or offering commentary to the press. There are multiple and significant exceptions, but a chilly climate is evident.

What is more concerning yet is that teaching is also showing signs of self-censorship. While violations of academic freedom are documented and very concerning, they are also extremely rare in most contexts. It is increasingly common to hear “we can’t say that” or “we can’t use that word” on campus; sometimes this is said ironically, sometimes the tone is unclear. Fear of recording devices in class is a cyclical phenomenon, reappearing every so often. While recording bans are futile, they continue to be implemented by worried professors.

The targets of thought and speech police are sometimes conservative and sometimes liberal. Although many of the most recent attacks against academic freedom have been conservative in nature, the evolution of language around diversity has itself been used at times as an instrument of exclusion, often along generational lines. Mixing up equity and equality, misunderstanding intersectionality, or even not understanding the latest practices related to capitalization could result in cancellation. In the spirit of fairness, it must be said that some gratuitous expressions of woke values by academics and administrators in past years did not reflect deep commitments but rather the same spirit of anticipatory compliance, this time fearing not government policies but student judgment. As Carel Stolker has clearly [illustrated](#), woke dogmatism has also had negative consequences. Surely it is time to abandon all efforts to police speech, whether conservative or liberal in nature, as, in all cases, the effects are detrimental for the main function of the university, which is promoting intellectual engagement, not mutual suspicion.

## Striving for Meaning Through Translation

Practitioners and scholars of international higher education are gifted in the art of translation. We translate complex research findings into actionable recommendations for institutional administrators and policymakers. We often translate from one language to another, recognizing that a literal translation is not always the most accurate approach. Translation is particularly common in the Global South, where our colleagues have for decades found ways to focus on their local concerns and priorities through research while complying with the mandates of funders from Europe or the United States. Accordingly, it might be time to engage in a different kind of translation, i.e., by

adapting and embracing new terms to explain fair access, difference, and belonging in higher education. As we look for new terms, the field should not repeat past errors of dogmatism.

Diversity and fairness are central to the work of universities. Other ideals universities should remain committed to might include intellectual humility (an awareness that we could be wrong and of the limits of our own knowledge), curiosity and discovery (as opposed to dogmatism), and a plurality or

multiplicity of perspectives. Cosmopolitanism might be a good candidate for the list too, along with hospitality, as internationalization plays a central role in the mission of universities. In this issue, we have covered diversity, equity, and inclusion topics because they are central to both the study of our field and the current attacks on higher education, and also because we have much to learn from other national contexts. That is our commitment, even when the names to give these phenomena are subject to change.

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

# Widening Participation and Accountability in UK Higher Education

*Emma Smith and Georgiana Mihut*

Widening participation remains a key bipartisan aim for higher education policy and practice in the United Kingdom. Universities are held accountable for their widening participation outcomes. Despite these policies, higher education inequalities persist.

Whether or not you went to university used to depend on having the good fortune of being born to a certain favored social group. This started to change in the later half of the twentieth century when a combination of demographic, political, and ideological pressures shifted the discourse around access to university from one of privilege to one that embraced equal rights and expected higher education (HE) to be accessible to students regardless of social origin.

### A Tale of Bi-Partisan Political Support and Persisting Inequalities

Although the university sector expanded rapidly in the post-war period in order to accommodate the growing population, it wasn't until the 1990s that universities became incentivized to increase participation from the most "disadvantaged" sections of the community. This shift is largely attributable to a seminal report, authored by Lord Dearing, which recognized that opportunity was unevenly distributed among the population and placed an expectation on universities to widen their social nets. The Dearing Report kickstarted an era of "widening participation"—an equivalent umbrella term to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the United States and elsewhere. Groups who had routinely been excluded from HE—i.e., those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or from neighborhoods where few went to university, those with disabilities, those who were older, as well as those who came from certain ethnic minority groups—would be encouraged to participate. It reflected the political sentiment of the time with the then Prime Minister Tony Blair pledging to "care about educating the many" and setting a target for 50 percent of young adults to have a university education. The focus of the United Kingdom's widening participation policies is therefore broader than DEI policies in the United States, given the strong focus on addressing a range of socioeconomic and geographic disparities.

Almost three decades have passed since the publication of the Dearing Report, and twice as many students now enter university as they did at the end of the 1990s. Policies to widen

access continue to receive widespread bipartisan political support. For example, an important policy paper on HE published by the then Conservative government in 2016 paid close attention to issues of widening access. Of particular focus were two targets for widening participation: a doubling of the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university by 2020, and an increase in the number of Black and minority ethnic students by 20 percent in the same period. These targets, along with a requirement for universities to publish data on the social backgrounds of students, were indicative of the political will to ensure that the university system should act as an "engine of social mobility." More recently, other higher education policies, such as the United Kingdom's Turing Scheme for student mobility, prioritize opportunities for students who meet the criteria of a widening participation group.

These initiatives—at institution and government levels—have sought to break cycles of inequality and ensure that access to higher education is attainable and equitable for all. All told, this emphasis on widening access to university for these underrepresented groups has been very successful—a "social mobility success story"—as students from underrepresented backgrounds are now more likely to go to university than ever before. However, inequalities in access persist and participation in HE continues to be differentiated by socioeconomic status, as well as by other "pre-adult" social, geographic, and historical factors. Students from underrepresented backgrounds also remain less likely to study high status subjects at the most academically selective institutions.

### From Free Higher Education to Substantial Student Debt

Along with the expansion in student numbers, and a proliferation of courses, degree providers, and opportunities for further study, has come the inevitable question of who will shoulder the cost of higher education. Indeed, to understand the politics of widening access and inclusion over the last three decades, particularly in England, it is important to talk about

fees. Until the early 1990s, university in the United Kingdom was largely free of charge, with means-tested grants to cover housing and living costs for those from lower income backgrounds, and no tuition fees for anyone. The gradual introduction of student loans to cover living costs coincided with the growth of the sector during the 1990s, and the decade ended with the Labour government following another of Dearing's recommendations and introducing tuition fees. Initially intended as a contribution toward the cost of tuition, fees were first set at £1,000 but rose rapidly as the burden of payment shifted from the taxpayer to the individual. By 2017, English undergraduate students were paying among the highest fees for public university education in the world, fees which in 2025 are set at £9,535 per year. Students are not required to pay tuition fees in advance but can apply for a loan that they are expected to start paying back once their income reaches a threshold of £25,000.

In less than one generation, therefore, university has gone from being largely free of charge to a situation in which the average English student graduates with £53,000 of debt that, according to government estimates, only just over 50 percent will ever pay back in full. As British universities—even the most elite—lack the philanthropic and institutional aid systems of their American counterparts, students without recourse to family funds can expect to incur considerable debt in pursuit of a higher education.

## Leveraging Fees and Accountability to Widen Participation

Understanding tuition fees is directly relevant to understanding the bipartisan push for inclusion and diversity in the United Kingdom, as, in order to charge such high fees, universities are

required by law to diversify their student intake. Each year, universities are expected to report to the higher education regulator a series of plans that set out the steps they will take to “improve equality of opportunity to ensure that disadvantaged groups can access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.” These [Access and Participation Plans](#) are completed annually and set out, in detail, the outreach programs, research, evidence, and intervention strategies that the university will put in place to demonstrate that they are meeting their obligations to widen access. Universities are held accountable to the regulator in such a way that, if they wish to charge elevated fees, they are obliged to diversify their intake.

## Marketization as the Grounds for HE Attacks

Over the last thirty years or so, the United Kingdom has gradually been moving toward a system of universal higher education. As university intakes have increased and diversified, the burden of payment has shifted from the taxpayer to the individual. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the UK university sector is now under a great deal of scrutiny from interested stakeholders: from politicians who want the sector to be more competitive, flexible, and accountable; from the students themselves who seek value for money and reassurance that their degree is “worth something”; and, more broadly, from those who see higher education as a conduit for social mobility. What is striking is that it is the marketization feature of higher education in the United Kingdom that has made it vulnerable to attacks, not its widening participation aims. Arguably the broad remit of the widening participation agenda has helped to protect it from the kind of backlash currently affecting DEI policies in the United States. and elsewhere.

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## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

# DEI in Japanese Higher Education: Visible Progress, but a Long Journey Ahead

*Lilan Chen and Lizhou Wang*

This study examines Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) implementation in Japanese higher education. An analysis of governmental policies, initiatives, university DEI declarations, and DEI center operations shows that, while DEI is promoted in response to demographic shifts, globalization, and the social inclusion agenda, implementation relies heavily on project-based funding, numerical targets, and symbolic structures. This article outlines both the progress that has been achieved and the need for expanded diversity dimensions to address structural inequities.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has emerged as a defining theme in higher education worldwide, often positioned simultaneously as a moral imperative and a strategic tool for institutional excellence. However, DEI research and practices now face unprecedented challenges, exemplified by recent anti-DEI legislation in the United States that has affected university policies and practices. More critically, significant gaps remain in understanding how DEI concepts, predominantly developed within Western contexts, are interpreted and applied across diverse national settings. Such disparity is especially pronounced in East Asian societies, where cultural values, demographic compositions, and institutional structures create different DEI contexts. Japan thus represents a compelling case for examining how DEI is translated from global discourse into the national and institutional context, and to what extent it addresses structural inequities. By critically analyzing governmental policies, government-led initiatives, university DEI declarations and statements, and the operational practices of DEI centers, this study highlights both the progress made and the limitations that persist in embedding DEI into the cultural and structural fabric of Japanese universities.

### The Japanese Context

The emergence of DEI policies in Japanese higher education is rooted in both global and domestic contexts. At the global level, increasing internationalization of science and higher education has pressured Japan to strengthen its competitiveness by fostering diverse talent, enhancing research capacity, and aligning with global discourses on inclusivity and social sustainability. Simultaneously, the national agenda has been shaped by urgent demographic and socioeconomic challenges, including rapid population decline, labor shortages, and the declining vitality of regional communities.

These conditions have positioned universities as key sites for cultivating diverse human capital, revitalizing local society, and

improving gender equality in research and academic leadership. Policy initiatives such as the Top Global University Initiative, the Basic Plan for Gender Equality, and the Fourth Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education collectively reflect these imperatives, framing DEI as both an instrument of global competitiveness and a foundation for building a more inclusive and cohesive society.

### Implementation: Visible Progress, But Not Mainstream

The implementation of DEI in Japanese higher education has largely been driven by top-down policy initiatives, reflecting the strong role of governmental bodies in steering institutional priorities. Government agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology, the Japan Science & Technology Agency, and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, not only allocate project-based funding aimed at encouraging DEI but also frame DEI as an instrument for enhancing research excellence, innovation, and international competitiveness. This has led to a proliferation of competitive, time-limited projects that encourage universities to demonstrate progress through measurable outputs, such as the number of women hired in academic posts, the recruitment of international faculty, or the proportion of students participating in global mobility programs. While these indicators offer a sense of progress, they often risk reducing DEI to a numerical exercise, sidelining deeper questions of structural and cultural reform.

At the institutional level, universities have responded by establishing organizational structures—most notably DEI centers—that are tasked with promoting inclusion across campus. These centers typically coordinate awareness-raising campaigns, training programs, and workshops, often in collaboration with other faculties or external partners. For instance, Tohoku University's Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion provides structured information on DEI-related

classes and training opportunities, while Hiroshima University's Institute for Diversity and Inclusion actively collaborates with other universities to organize research meetings on *Tabunka kyosei* (multicultural coexistence). Nevertheless, these efforts are often fragmented, lacking systematic integration into core university governance and policy-making structures. Many DEI centers remain small in scale, staffed with a limited number of full-time members, and hold only advisory rather than executive authority within university hierarchies.

Beyond campus boundaries, some institutions have pursued partnerships with local communities, municipalities, and even overseas universities to frame DEI as a socially impactful agenda. For example, initiatives such as the Multicultural Campus Project Toward Social Impact highlight the potential of universities to foster broader multicultural coexistence through curriculum development and community engagement. Yet, these collaborations often mirror the same project-based and symbolic tendencies that characterize national initiatives. Their sustainability is contingent on external funding and leadership enthusiasm rather than long-term institutional commitment.

### **Current Issues: Single Focus and Under-Resourced**

Despite visible progress in recent years, many issues remain in the promotion of DEI within Japanese higher education. Firstly, some universities have articulated the concepts and definitions of various underrepresented groups only in theory. For example, the University of Osaka has defined the groups of SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer). However, practical diversity initiatives in Japanese higher education remain predominantly focused on increasing female representation, while other dimensions of gender diversity are largely overlooked. This might correspond to the fact that, in Japan, the share of females entering STEM fields is the smallest among OECD and partner countries. The pattern, therefore, may reflect important diversity priorities while simultaneously limiting broader intersectional approaches to inclusion. Other factors, such as economic background, regional origin, and disability status, which also present significant barriers to educational access, are likewise largely overlooked.

Another key problem lies in the overreliance on project-based funding schemes and short-term initiatives, which often generate temporary visibility without embedding sustainable structural change. The emphasis on quantifiable indicators, including the number of women researchers hired, international students enrolled, or faculty completing DEI training, reinforces a tendency to equate progress with numerical outputs, while questions of cultural transformation and institutional reform remain insufficiently addressed. DEI centers, though symbolically important, are typically under-resourced and hold limited decision-making authority, leaving them constrained to activities such as awareness-raising, seminars, and workshops that may not significantly reshape the organizational culture.

Universities thus remain caught between the dual imperatives of responding to governmental expectations and addressing the lived realities of underrepresented groups (e.g., female students and faculty, next generation students [*Jisedai Ikusei*], and LGBTQ communities), with the former typically taking precedence. This imbalance highlights the need for a more sustained, systemic integration of DEI principles into the governance, curricula, and everyday practices of universities, beyond symbolic gestures or compliance with state-driven key performance indicators.

### **Future DEI Directions for Japan**

This analysis demonstrates that Japanese higher education is developing pragmatic DEI approaches that reflect the country's unique demographic needs and global positioning. Universities have established DEI infrastructure, including centers, training programs, and measurement frameworks, that represent progress in institutionalizing diversity commitments. Yet these structures remain largely symbolic, under-resourced, and tied to short-term, project-based funding that prioritizes numerical targets over cultural transformation. The current focus on gender equity reflects urgent national priorities, but also reveals a need to expand diversity dimensions to include socioeconomic, regional, and accessibility considerations. Significant potential exists for addressing broader structural inequities through continued investment in comprehensive governance structures, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and sustained institutional commitment to transformative change.

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## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

# Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Chilean Higher Education

*Julio Labraña and Paulina Latorre*

In Chile, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become central to higher education reform in a system long shaped by inequality and market competition. Student movements in 2006, 2011, and 2018 reframed DEI as a condition of institutional legitimacy. Yet regulatory frameworks have often translated DEI into managerial compliance rather than structural change, revealing both the gains and limits of institutionalizing equity.

In Chile, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become central to higher education reform. The incorporation of DEI into higher education law, accreditation standards, and institutional strategies has given these agendas unprecedented visibility and normative weight. Yet the very instruments that have enabled this institutionalization—legal mandates, strategic planning frameworks, and quality assurance systems—are embedded in managerial rationalities that prioritize auditability, standardization, and reputational risk management. This creates a structural tension: while inclusion is publicly affirmed as a fundamental value, it is frequently enacted as a technical checklist item, evaluated through metrics and controlled by bureaucratic procedures.

### Regional Inequalities: From Equity Policies to Structural Limits

The social and territorial context of Chile is fundamental to understanding why DEI has become a policy priority. Regional inequalities have historically structured the university system, concentrating resources, prestige, and influence in Santiago, while regional universities continue to operate under conditions of structural disadvantage. Students from outside the capital—many of them graduates of under-resourced schools—face compounded barriers to both access and success. Universities are therefore compelled to address these inequities, but often in ways that remain reactive rather than transformative.

Programs such as the *Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo (PACE)*, in place for over a decade across different regions, exemplify this tension. While PACE and other mechanisms targeting students with caregiving responsibilities have created alternative pathways to university, their reach is modest, and their impact uneven. These initiatives mitigate visible barriers to entry but do little to dismantle the structural hierarchies that reproduce inequality between Santiago and the regions, or between elite and peripheral institutions. Consequently, although they are celebrated as equity measures,

their long-term effectiveness in redressing systemic disparities remains highly contested.

### Student Movements and the Limits of Reform

The trajectory of student movements has been central in pressing for reforms in Chilean higher education, but their achievements reveal both advances and constraints. The mobilizations of 2006 and 2011, led by secondary school and university students, exposed the inequities of Chile's voucher-based education system and demanded equitable access and higher quality. While these protests helped lay the groundwork for a subsequent gratuity scheme that expanded participation, the reform largely addressed affordability rather than the deeper structural inequalities embedded in the system.

A decade later, the feminist mobilizations of 2018 transformed campuses into arenas of protest against harassment and patriarchal structures. Although initially sparked by cases of abuse, these mobilizations evolved into a national reckoning with gender inequality. In response, the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities advanced gender mainstreaming through its Commission on Gender Equality, promoting preventive protocols, communication campaigns, and recognition of gender identity. Yet, much of this institutional response has been procedural, often limited to compliance-oriented measures rather than a transformation of entrenched academic cultures.

Together, these movements illustrate how bottom-up activism has reframed DEI as a matter of institutional legitimacy. At the same time, they highlight the limits of reform in a system where structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and metropolitan hierarchies continue to constrain more transformative change.

## New Regulations and Implementation Mechanisms

The regulatory turn of 2018 was decisive in placing DEI on the higher education agenda, but it has also revealed the tension between formal mandates and substantive change. Law 21.091 on Higher Education requires universities to promote interculturality, adopt reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, and prevent arbitrary discrimination. While these obligations are embedded in institutional governance, their implementation has often been procedural, emphasizing compliance rather than transformation. Similarly, Law 21.369, enacted in 2021, mandated binding protocols, gender units, and preventive measures against gender-based violence. Yet, in many cases, these mechanisms have been reduced to bureaucratic requirements with limited capacity to alter entrenched institutional cultures.

The National Quality Assurance System, through the National Accreditation Commission, reinforced this compliance-based logic by embedding DEI into accreditation criteria. Universities must now demonstrate measurable progress in promoting inclusion, quality of life, and coexistence to maintain legitimacy. Although this has pressured institutions to adopt formal DEI frameworks, it has also risked turning diversity and equity into checklists, privileging documentation over genuine cultural transformation.

Institutional practices reflect this ambivalence. While gender equity and access policies have advanced more decisively—supported by dedicated units and initiatives such as *InES Género (Innovación en Educación Superior Género)*—other areas such as interculturality and disability inclusion remain weakly institutionalized. In these domains, efforts often stop at minimum compliance, revealing the limits of a regulatory model that secures visibility for DEI but struggles to confront the structural inequalities and cultural hierarchies embedded in Chilean higher education.

### Interculturality on Hold

By contrast, interculturality has been more difficult to institutionalize. While universities in northern and southern Chile have created centers dedicated to Indigenous languages and cultural practices, and while interculturality is now a recurring theme in institutional documents, much of its implementation remains declarative. The absence of a national definition has allowed wide variation in how universities interpret the concept, from Indigenous recognition in frontier regions to broader pluralism in central universities.

Legal mandates have increased visibility, but initiatives have largely targeted students, with limited focus on faculty and

administrators. Moreover, managerial logics that prioritize efficiency, profitability, and competitiveness often clash with intercultural commitments, sidelining initiatives that do not produce immediate measurable returns aligned to external quality assurance.

### Pressing Challenges

Moving forward, the challenge is to shift DEI from compliance-oriented frameworks to transformative practices. This requires the creation of robust evaluation mechanisms that extend beyond accreditation checklists. For interculturality, essential steps include curricular integration, systematic faculty training, sustained partnerships with Indigenous and migrant communities that strengthen outreach, the provision of multilingual services, and the recognition of non-hegemonic knowledge systems. For gender equity, the agenda must expand beyond harassment prevention toward structural changes in academic careers, including promotion systems, caregiving policies, and pay equity. Regional inequalities require special attention, as metropolitan universities tend to advance faster in DEI implementation than their counterparts in peripheral regions, reinforcing the very disparities DEI policies seek to reduce.

Looking ahead, the future of DEI in Chilean higher education will depend on how political valuation and organizational adaptation interact in the coming years. Three scenarios can be envisaged. The first is a regressive scenario, in which political support for DEI weakens, leading to the erosion of regulatory mandates, budgetary cuts, and the retraction of institutional commitments. In this context, DEI would risk becoming a marginal or optional concern, maintained only where internal actors preserve momentum. The second is a regulatory expansion scenario, where political commitment remains stable or even increases, resulting in more detailed accreditation requirements, legal obligations, and performance indicators. However, in the absence of internal institutional change, DEI would remain largely procedural, producing formal compliance without substantial transformation. The third is a transformative consolidation scenario, in which continued political and regulatory support is accompanied by deep organizational shifts. In this case, Chilean universities meet external requirements but also reconfigure internal cultures, structures, and epistemic practices. DEI becomes embedded across teaching, research, and governance as a generative principle, rather than a peripheral obligation. All in all, the path Chilean higher education takes will depend not only on state policies or managerial tools, but on whether institutions are willing to confront and redress the historical inequalities that continue to shape their reproduction.

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## AI, WORK FUTURES, & OPPORTUNITY

# This Time is Different? Higher Education and AI's Impact on the Labor Market

*Pedro N. Teixeira*

The last two centuries' historical experience has shown that technology has consistently replaced human labor in specific tasks without leading to widespread job loss, reinforcing instead the labor market advantages of higher education. Despite that optimism, growing concerns have permeated policy views about digitalization and its impacts on the labor market. This text examines briefly those concerns and some potential implications for higher education, with a particular emphasis on the role of educational mission, pedagogical and curricular innovation, and the institutional conditions favorable to face those challenges.

The last two centuries' historical experience has shown that technology has consistently replaced human labor in specific tasks [without leading to widespread job loss](#). Moreover, the experience of the last half century indicates that technological progress has reinforced the [labor market advantages of higher education](#). Despite that optimism, growing concerns have permeated policy views about digitalization and its impacts on the labor market. This text examines briefly those concerns and some potential implications for higher education.

### Rising Concerns About the Effects of Recent Technological Changes

In recent years, there has been growing pressure to assess the potential impact of AI on employment for different profiles of workers. [Recent analyses](#) have pointed out that generative AI technologies, which can produce novel content (e.g., text, images, and code), have the potential to affect a broader range of industries and employments than previous waves of automation, and that jobs that rely heavily on human interaction, complex judgment, or non-repetitive creative tasks tend to be less exposed to the effects of generative AI. These analyses show that a sizeable number of jobs currently filled with workers with higher levels of education and specialized skills, earning higher median salaries, may be more exposed to advanced generative AI technologies than they were to previous technological advancement.

This view that AI and machine learning may have an impact slightly different than previous waves of technological change is corroborated by [several analyses](#). Whereas previous waves of automation had a significant impact on workers with low or intermediate levels of qualifications, age, and wages, the potential impact of AI could affect many workers characterized by higher wages, higher levels of educational attainment, and

many years of experience—a group once insulated from the effects of automation.

The evidence suggests that AI's impact on job content is not uniform and [varies significantly across occupations](#). What is particularly relevant is that reskilling and upskilling may become relevant for workers who, until recently, were regarded as insulated from technological changes due to their high levels of educational attainment and lengthier labor market experience. This profile is [very different from those targeted by previous policies aiming at workers affected by automation](#).

Furthermore, [the impact may also differ across countries](#). High-income countries seem likely to face bigger challenges, as their employment structure presents greater exposure to AI and has a higher percentage of qualified workers who may face reskilling needs. On the other hand, their structure of employment also presents greater complementarities with AI, thus protecting those workers for whom AI is expected to boost their productivity. Although [low- and middle-income countries seem to be less exposed to the impacts of AI](#), they also face the complex challenge of having to deal with persistent pressures to expand access to higher education, enhanced by higher wage premia for college-educated workers, at the same time that they must rethink the skills profiles of higher educated workers.

To make the matter even more complex, several authors consider that the impact of AI and machine learning on employment is nuanced and predominantly [occurs at the task level rather than the job level](#). While most jobs include tasks amenable to machine learning, only a small proportion of jobs are fully susceptible to automation through machine learning, meaning that automation through machine learning is likely to complement human workers in many occupations, rather than entirely displacing them. Hence, adapting education and training systems may often not imply a macro-change of the

existing curricula, but a focused review of the knowledge transferred and the skills developed in higher education.

## Some Major Implications for Higher Education

The accumulating evidence about the impacts of rapid technological advancements in the labor market has relevant implications for higher education. One of the main challenges is to rethink the educational portfolio and the balance between degrees and other forms of learning, notably through the increasing importance of lifelong learning. In a rapidly changing world, the emphasis on one-time degree attainment must be balanced with a more flexible and continuous approach to education.

Another significant challenge arising from this shift is the growing mismatch between the skills graduates acquire during their education and those employers require. Consequently, there is a growing need to reconsider the content and structure of educational curricula to ensure that they align with the evolving demands of a digitalized and automated economy. Although many higher education institutions (HEIs) monitor the employability of their graduates, this tends to be focused on the initial stages of the transition to the labor market, with most institutions losing track of older cohorts of graduates where AI impacts may be more significant.

This renewed attention to education and training as a core mission of universities implies rethinking academic reward systems. If universities are seriously committed to fostering innovation and quality in teaching, learning, and assessment, they need to find ways to assess and reward the time, ingenuity,

and effort placed into pursuing these objectives by academic staff. These aspects are significantly at odds with an entrenched institutional and professional culture that has tended to reward achievements in research over those of education and training.

In order to be successful in this transformation, institutions need to support their academic staff. As the demands of the higher education sector change, so must the skills and knowledge of those who teach, requiring academics to effectively integrate new technologies, teaching methods, and subject matter into their practices. Continuous professional development is essential to keep pace with advancements in their respective fields of expertise and also in adopting teaching strategies that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

## Final Remarks

The recent dynamics of the labor market seem to affect far more highly educated and experienced workers than previous waves of technological progress. Although the jury is still out, the preliminary accumulating evidence indicates that this time may be different, and that the impact of new technologies will negatively affect the position of many experienced college graduates. This reality requires higher education to fundamentally rethink the profile of educational portfolios and reassess the competencies, skills, and literacies developed during initial education and lifelong training. This will also require HEIs to attentively monitor the employability of not only recent cohorts but older ones, too, in order to better respond to rapidly emerging needs. Failing to do so may exacerbate existing challenges and render higher education less relevant to the demands of an AI-driven labor market.

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## AI, WORK FUTURES, & OPPORTUNITY

# Corporatization and Mission in Higher Education

*Morten Hansen*

Corporatization in higher education is often equated with institutional mission drift. To complicate this perspective, this paper claims that importing private-sector practices can bolster institutional mission rather than only undermine it. Drawing on recent [research](#) on international foundation programs, this claim is tested through three scenarios.

Participation in higher education has more than [doubled](#) during the last two decades. As governments struggle to finance massified higher education systems, universities are increasingly tasked with finding new sources of income and enhancing operational efficiencies. Universities have often achieved this by engaging in intense processes of “corporatization,” an organizational process that changes institutional cultures, practices, expectations, and rationales so that they come to mimic that of the private for-profit firm. For example, a university might shift its employment practices from mostly tenured positions to mostly precarious adjunct roles. This can create new problems: for example, knowing they can be fired at short notice, the lack of job security may reduce the ability and willingness of teaching staff to champion students’ rights. Despite this, colleges rely on precarious contracts, because the effective salaries tend to be lower than those of tenured faculty, and non-tenured staff are easier to let go if future teaching demand decreases.

At an institutional level, corporatization can result in [mission drift](#), with universities pursuing the goals of for-profit firms (such as increasing profits) rather than their core missions (e.g., the provision of excellent teaching). Mission drift is the primary reason why corporatization is often seen as antithetical to higher education as a common good. Indeed, given the tendency to conflate the two, one would be forgiven for thinking that more corporatization always leads to more mission drift.

This article’s claim is that new ways of organizing higher education through a corporate form might equally bolster institutional mission and sector-wide collaboration. What matters is context and implementation. This is especially true when considering the on-the-ground realities of higher education institutions competing with private providers. In such cases, avoiding corporatization for its own sake may lead to inaction, which can mean ceding ground to private for-profit firms.

## A Practical Example

This claim is explored through three scenarios concerning university preparatory programs for international students, which have been offered by English speaking universities [since the 1980s](#) in order to bolster both educational access and university finances.

Imagine a university in the UK seeking to increase its intake of international students by establishing an international foundation program. The program’s purpose is to enroll and train international students who lack the prerequisites for direct entry to a UK university program. Students would begin their degree upon successfully completing the foundation course, aligning with the university’s mission of inclusion through educational access. The university also hopes that the program will establish a new revenue stream through additional tuition fees. The program would be very profitable for the university if it grows large, but the university would lose money if it does not admit enough students. The vice chancellor is unsure about how to proceed, and she faces time pressure to act because a neighboring university and a for-profit private provider are also considering similar programs. If the university proceeds, is this corporatization, and is the profit motive inevitably prioritized over inclusion, or could this new initiative bolster its mission? These questions do not have straightforward answers; specific organizational structure matters.

In this example, the university would likely first consider launching the program in-house, a model similar to those run by [King’s College London](#) and the [University of St Andrews](#). There are benefits to this model, but one can imagine that the university’s governance body might reject it, fearing insufficient enrollment to break even and potential harm to the university’s financial sustainability. The institution would then be left with three scenarios.

In Scenario 1, the university does nothing. Eventually, a private for-profit provider opens a pathway college nearby. The

provider has a checkered reputation, and the rumor is that it treats its staff and students poorly. However, without a not-for-profit alternative, this provider is likely to dominate the market for years.

In Scenario 2, the university partners with a reputable private provider. In this model, the provider builds a school on campus, and the university legally commits to buying back the building over decades. Though the building bears the university's logo, the private provider is directly involved in the day-to-day running of the school, teaching, and recruitment. The university receives a share of the school's revenue, but remains dependent on this revenue (and the success of the provider) to meet its building payments.

In Scenario 3, the university partners with a neighboring university that also wanted to enter the foundation market. The company they create is a limited liability partnership and shields both universities from worst-case financial risk. This collaboration allows for the sharing of the costs of facilities, recruitment, and teaching. Staff teaching in the new entity work more hours, earn lower salaries, and have less job protection than traditional university staff. Students gain full access to both universities' libraries, student societies, and lectures from visiting scholars. The private provider with the poor reputation abandons its plan to open a school, as it does not believe it can compete with this university-led alternative.

## Rethinking the Relationship Between Corporatization and Mission

These scenarios appear to represent a continuous spectrum from low to high levels of corporatization. But, once the traditional in-house option is off the table, which scenarios represent the most and least intensive forms of corporatization? And how does corporatization correlate with institutional mission?

Scenario 1 involves no organizational change, meaning no corporatization at the university level (the least corporate option). At the sector level, however, it represents the most intense corporatization because these students are now fully taught by a private for-profit entity, one which is likely to put their financial mission above their "customers" and employees.

Scenario 2 features limited internal corporatization because the private provider de facto runs the school. However, it uses debt to trap the university in the partnership, diluting the university's brand through allowance of a private operator to teach and recruit on its behalf.

Scenario 3 represents the most intensive corporatization: two universities form a new private entity that allows them to hire more precarious, lower-paid staff. At the sector level, however, the problematic private competitor is blocked from penetrating the market. The universities also retain control over teaching, admissions, and student access to campus resources. This model of corporatization also transforms the universities' competitive relationship into a cooperative one.

This simulation helps us see that corporatization looks markedly different when viewed at the institutional or sector level. It also highlights the fact that it is a normative endeavor to determine when corporatization bolsters institutional mission and when it undermines it. Making such determinations is the messy work of university leadership. Leaders can do this work most effectively if they understand that they do not just serve their institution, but also the wider sector in which they are embedded, which includes the educational markets that they shape through their (in)action and the relevant national priorities advanced by the government. In countries like the UK, US, and Australia, where governments have long urged universities to act more like private firms, this means thinking creatively about how distinct organizational forms can impact a university's mission.

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## GLOBAL TALENT FLOWS

# America's Brain Drain: International Scientists and the Shifting Global Landscape

*Sonali Majumdar*

Despite their central role in US research and innovation, international doctoral students now face significant instability, as restrictive immigration policies, declining research funding, and an unwelcoming climate push international scientists to seek careers abroad. Competing nations are seizing the moment through targeted recruitment of scientific talent and funding incentives. Without reform, the United States risks ceding its long-held edge in science and technology to global competitors.

The United States has long led the world in training and employing global scientific talent—a cornerstone of its research leadership. That dominance is now under threat. An antiquated immigration system, declining federal investments in science, and a growing climate of hostility toward immigrants are pushing international STEM PhDs trained in US universities to pursue careers abroad. At the same time, global demand for STEM expertise is rising, and competing nations are investing heavily to attract high-skilled scientists. If not addressed, the erosion of US talent advantage could undermine the country's scientific and technological leadership.

### The Scale of International Talent in US Science

International scientists are a key demographic in US research. Temporary visa-holders make up a significant share of the graduate student and postdoctoral population. According to the 2023 NSF Survey of Graduate Students and Postdoctorates in Science and Engineering, the international graduate student population (master degrees and PhDs) has grown sixfold over the past forty years, from 13.7 percent (50,302) in 1980 to 39.4 percent (322,287) in 2023. Among STEM PhD students specifically, 40.7 percent (125,030) were on temporary visas in 2023. Postdoctoral appointments are even more dependent on international talent: 57.9 percent (38,149) were international in 2023, compared with 35.4 percent (6,506) in 1980.

This pipeline feeds directly into the scientific workforce. Data from the 2023 NSF Survey of Earned Doctorates show that international STEM PhD graduates of US universities grew 2.5 times over the past half century, from 14.7 percent (2,656) in 1978 to 36.8 percent (16,768) in 2023. Most international graduates want to remain in the United States, at least in the short term. In 2023, for example, 76.2 percent (19,393) indicated intent to stay. STEM PhDs are also more likely than PhDs in the humanities and social sciences to remain in the United States:

only 15.2 percent of STEM PhDs, compared with 30 percent in non-STEM fields, reported career plans abroad in 2023.

These figures underscore the fact that international scientists have long been crucial to US research productivity and innovation. However, that foundation is now becoming unstable.

### Barriers to Retention: Immigration and Climate

Despite their centrality, international scientists face steep barriers to building stable careers in the United States. The immigration system is restrictive, slow-moving, and poorly aligned with the realities of scientific training and careers. For many, particularly from India and China, country-based caps on green cards can mean decades-long waits for permanent residency. These backlogs blunt career agency, delay entrepreneurial ambitions, and deter risk-taking.

The 2023 NSF SED data reveal early warning signs. Among Chinese-born PhDs, intent to stay in the United States dropped from 81 percent in 2016 to 77.5 percent in 2023, reflecting both immigration frustrations and China's growing career opportunities, fueled by increased R&D investments. Anti-Asian sentiment and safety concerns have further weakened the appeal of staying. By contrast, 89 percent of Indian-born PhDs expressed interest in remaining in the United States despite the long waitlists—likely due to fewer scientific career opportunities in India.

Policy changes are compounding these pressures. The second Trump administration has enacted sweeping restrictions in 2025: [revoking visas](#), [pausing visa appointments \(disrupting fall enrollments\)](#), and signaling a desire to reduce international student numbers. New proposals would impose [fixed durations of stay](#) for graduate and postdoctoral training, eliminate

[Optional Practical Training \(OPT\)](#)—a vital bridge to employment—and [alter H-1B visa criteria to favor high salaries](#) that disadvantage early-career scientists. These measures not only destabilize lives but actively drive talent away.

Immigration policy is not the only driver of international scientists' career decisions. The broader research climate in the United States is deteriorating. The second Trump administration has cut scientific funding, leading to layoffs, hiring freezes, and growing precarity for early-career researchers. In a [2025 Nature poll](#) of 1,600 scientists, 75 percent said they were considering leaving the United States, with Europe and Canada as top destinations.

Patterns of scientific mobility suggest that these intentions could translate into actual migration. [A study](#) tracking 3.5 million scientists over six decades found that relocations across long distances are most common early in a career, tapering off with professional age. In other words, instability in the early career stage has an outsized impact on long-term mobility. Further, international scientists are more comfortable with global mobility due to prior experience.

## Incentives Abroad: The Global Race for STEM Talent

The United States is competing with other countries that are investing strategically to recruit disillusioned scientists, particularly those trained in American universities. Global demand for STEM expertise is accelerating, with R&D intensity—R&D spending as a share of GDP—serving as a key indicator. The [2023 AAAS Report](#) shows China, Korea, Taiwan, and Israel with the steepest growth in R&D intensity over the past twenty years. While the United States leads in absolute R&D spending, Korea, Taiwan, and Israel surpass it, relative to GDP. China, aiming for 3 percent of GDP in R&D, already produces the most scientific publications and employs the largest scientific workforce.

Governments are pairing these investments with targeted recruitment. The European Union launched its “Choose Europe for Science” initiative, backed by €500 million (2025–27),

offering grants, mobility fellowships, and relocation support, visible through the Euraxess portal. China continues to expand global talent programs, such as the High-End Foreign Expert Recruitment Program and the Excellent Young Scientists Fund, alongside its new K visas. Other countries are also leveraging immigration as a recruitment tool: Australia's Global Talent Visa, the United Kingdom's High Potential Individual and Global Talent visas, Germany's GAIN network, and South Korea's “Brain Return 500.”

A 2023 [Nature global survey](#) of 2,300 scientists highlighted the incentives most likely to drive mobility: research funding, quality of life, and higher salaries. Barriers included authoritarian politics, limited freedoms, and visa difficulties—factors that increasingly describe the US environment.

## What Is at Stake

The implications extend beyond graduate programs or postdoctoral positions. International scientists fill critical gaps in the US workforce and drive innovation in emerging technologies central to economic competitiveness and national security. Restrictive policies, unwelcoming climates, and funding volatility threaten to erode this foundation, leaving the United States vulnerable as other nations capitalize on the opportunity. The question is not whether international scientists will thrive; it is where. Scientists are drawn to ecosystems with strong R&D investment, dynamic career pathways, and supportive immigration policies. Increasingly, those ecosystems are outside the United States.

## Fork in the Road

International scientists trained in the United States are assets. They expand the nation's capacity for discovery, innovation, and problem-solving. Yet the current trajectory risks accelerating brain drain just as global competition for talent intensifies.

The United States faces a choice: reform its immigration system to reflect the realities of scientific careers, restore stability to federal research funding, and rebuild an environment that welcomes global talent—or concede its leadership in science and technology to nations ready to seize the moment.

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## GLOBAL TALENT FLOWS

# From Quantity to Quality: China's International Student Strategy

*Ming Li and Yukiko Ishikura*

China's international student strategy is shifting from enrollment-driven goals to a more diversified, quality-oriented model. Once focused on attracting degree students, recent efforts emphasize short-term international exchanges, and Chinese universities' overseas programs and campuses. Challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and domestic criticism have spurred this reorientation. Despite policy ambiguity, emerging initiatives suggest a more flexible, outcome-driven approach aimed at strengthening global engagement and ensuring the long-term sustainability of international education in China.

In recent decades, China's international student policy has undergone a profound transformation, reflecting the country's evolving role in global affairs. From the 1950s to the 1980s, international education served primarily as a diplomatic and cultural instrument. Entering the 21st century, especially after joining the World Trade Organization, China began to reposition international education as a tool for strengthening global educational influence and advancing its market economy.

In 2010, the government launched the Study in China Plan, setting a target of enrolling 500,000 international students by 2020. The plan reflected a strategic ambition to position China as the leading destination for international students in Asia. It also sought to enhance the quality and accessibility of student support services, build world-class educational capacity, and cultivate globally competent graduates with a deep understanding of and affinity for China. Launched alongside other major national strategies, including the Double First-Class Initiative (a program to develop world-class universities and academic disciplines in China) and the Belt and Road Initiative (China's global infrastructure and economic cooperation strategy), it formed part of a broader effort to improve the overall quality of higher education, strengthen research capacity, and accelerate the integration of China's education system into the global academic community.

To support these ambitions, authorities introduced wide-ranging measures such as increasing scholarships, streamlining visa procedures, and building institutional partnerships around the world. These efforts yielded results. The number of international students rose from 52,150 in 2000 to 492,185 in 2018, nearly reaching the 2020 goal ahead of schedule.

## The Impact of the Pandemic and Geopolitical Tensions

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trajectory. Since 2019, no new official data on international student enrollment have been published, and no formal post-pandemic national strategy has been introduced. The absence of updated figures has made it difficult to assess the current state of international education in China. Meanwhile, peer countries such as Japan and South Korea have already outlined clear recovery goals: Japan aims to enroll 400,000 international students by 2033, and South Korea targets 300,000 by 2027.

In this uncertain environment, the authors conducted interviews with university-based practitioners, policymakers, and scholars involved in international student affairs. Their insights reveal a sharp decline in international student numbers and a slow pace of recovery. One leading Double First-Class university administrator reported that its international student population had dropped from 3,500–4,000 before the pandemic to around 1,500 in 2023, with degree-seeking students showing the weakest rebound.

Geopolitical tensions, particularly between China and the United States, have further constrained mobility. According to the Christian Science Monitor, the number of American students in China declined from about 20,000 in 2018 to just 700 in 2023. One scholar remarked that student mobility often mirrors diplomatic relations, noting that the recent reduction in exchange reflects a combination of strained political ties, diminished trade and academic cooperation, and travel warnings issued by the US government.

## Rising Domestic Criticism and Institutional Strain

Beyond external conditions, internal challenges are also dampening China's attractiveness as a study destination. Interviewees pointed to rising public skepticism toward international students, driven by concerns over preferential treatment and the allocation of educational resources. A 2021 report by Phoenix News noted that online media and public debate have increasingly questioned the special privileges given to international students, such as generous scholarships, better housing, and priority access to resources. These concerns, fueled by rising nationalist sentiment and calls for fairness, have pressured Chinese universities to be more cautious in recruitment and funding policies.

Universities also face persistent issues in international student services: language barriers, limited cross-cultural support, and institutional fragmentation have made it difficult to provide consistent and high-quality experiences. Financial constraints are compounding these challenges. Amid economic headwinds, both national and local governments have tightened education budgets, leading to reductions or eliminations of scholarship programs and weakening universities' ability to offer competitive financial packages. The impact of these changes falls disproportionately on less prestigious institutions.

## Signals of Change: Toward a More Flexible and Outward-Looking Model

In January 2025, the Master Plan on Building China into a Leading Country in Education (2024–2035) was released. While broad in scope, the strategy offers only general guidance regarding international education. It proposes strengthening the “Study in China” brand, improving admissions and evaluation systems, expanding youth exchange initiatives, and promoting global Chinese language education. However, it does not specify enrollment goals or provide detailed implementation mechanisms.

Despite this ambiguity, recent initiatives aligned with the plan suggest that China is beginning to reposition its international education strategy. For instance, the government is actively advancing the Five-Year, Fifty-Thousand initiative, which aims to bring 50,000 American youth to China between 2024 and 2029. Concurrently, China is expanding its educational presence abroad. As of 2024, 22 Chinese universities had established 27 overseas campuses or joint institutions. More than 200 vocational colleges across 27 provinces had launched over 400 international collaborations in 70 countries.

These developments indicate a gradual shift in China's international student policy from a primary focus on increasing higher education enrollment toward a more diversified model. This evolving approach includes outreach to younger student groups, short-term programs such as international summer schools, and the overseas expansion of Chinese universities through joint programs and branch campuses. In contrast to the elite-oriented frameworks common in Western systems, China's efforts emphasize vocational training and engagement with countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, the Luban Workshop, designed to cultivate skilled professionals in collaboration with local institutions, saw its first overseas establishment in 2016 with the Thailand Luban Workshop, jointly launched by Tianjin Bohai Vocational Technical College and Rajamangala University of Technology. China is increasingly delivering education abroad, aiming to complement inbound mobility with the broader international presence of its educational resources.

Reflecting a broader shift in institutional priorities, a more quality-oriented and outcome-driven approach to international student recruitment is gradually emerging within Chinese higher education. This evolving model emphasizes the reassessment of program offerings, more targeted geographic outreach, and the use of performance indicators—such as graduate outcomes and educational return on investment—to evaluate enrollment effectiveness. In parallel, universities are developing specialized programs that align academic strengths with industry needs, aiming to attract self-funded international students and foster a more financially sustainable model of international education that reduces reliance on government subsidies. Furthermore, institutions are increasingly partnering with Chinese enterprises operating overseas to provide international students with internship opportunities and career pathways, thereby enhancing the practical value and employment relevance of their educational offerings.

Taken together, these policy signals and institutional innovations suggest that China's international education strategy is entering a period of strategic realignment. Although the absence of updated data and comprehensive policy guidance continues to create uncertainty, universities are actively experimenting with new models. The emerging approach places greater emphasis on educational quality, combines inbound and outbound engagement, and prioritizes vocational and regional partnerships. While still in formation, this model reflects a gradual move toward a more flexible, resilient, and globally embedded phase in China's international education engagement. If sustained, this transition could enhance China's soft power by positioning its universities as more credible partners in shaping the future of global education.

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## ETHICS, CORRUPTION, & AUTHORITY

# Contemporary Higher Education: An Environment Ripe for Corruption

*Elena Denisova-Schmidt, Hans de Wit and Philip G. Altbach*

The global competition for rankings and the current geopolitical challenges are just two of the issues fueling corruption in higher education in various forms, including data manipulation, biased recruitment, unethical authorship, and other problems eroding integrity and transparency. Since cultural norms and other systemic pressures can blur ethical boundaries, it is crucial to explore the causes, cultural dimensions, and reforms needed to restore accountability and ethical governance.

Corruption in higher education is widely condemned as a threat to academic integrity, institutional credibility, and societal trust. Yet, as the current state of higher education and the landscape of global competition for prestige and rankings intensifies, the boundaries between strategic governance and corruption become increasingly blurred. While corruption is inherently harmful, undermining meritocracy, distorting data, and enabling unethical behavior, its manifestations are often complex, shaped by incentives, pressures, and systemic loopholes. This ambivalence calls not only for condemnation but also for deeper structural reforms and thoughtful remedies.

The phenomenon is not new but has increased substantively due to the pressures of massification, the importance of the knowledge economy, related competition, and internationalization. Current geopolitical tensions and national security concerns will add new dimensions to higher education. With the immense expansion of higher education worldwide and its increasing diversification and complexity, the opportunities for corruption, over-commercialization, and other practices have expanded. Contemporary higher education—with its internationalization, new technologies, distance education and joint degrees, knowledge distribution systems, high-stakes admissions and related testing industry, academic promotion structures, and other conditions—is perhaps uniquely primed for a variety of corrupt practices, despite being a system that generally adheres to respect for academic values and ethics.

### Crossing Ethical Lines

The pursuit of improved global rankings has led universities and governments to implement strategic actions intended to boost visibility and performance. Measures such as merging institutions, recruiting international students and faculty, professionalizing marketing, and rewarding high-impact research are certainly legitimate. However, in practice, academic

research and media reports reveal that these practices often cross ethical lines, leading to what is known as Goodhart's law: "As soon as an indicator becomes a target, gaming ensues, which forecloses its ability to function as a good indicator." Institutions can (and sometimes do) inflate internationalization metrics through practices such as optimizing faculty-student ratios by deliberately omitting adjunct faculty or postgraduate students in their official data or recruiting international scholars without disclosing their first affiliations. While these actions may superficially enhance institutional rankings, they ultimately misrepresent institutional capacity and compromise transparency.

In the realm of research, corruption takes more insidious forms. Pre-determined peer-review processes, sophisticated forms of plagiarism, and pressure to falsify data or self-cite are increasingly being reported. These practices not only distort the scientific record but also reinforce a toxic culture of hyper-competition. One of the most troubling trends is the elimination of faculty members with lower publication counts, regardless of their teaching quality or service contributions. This creates an environment where quantity trumps quality and ethical considerations are sidelined.

Corruption in faculty recruitment and student admissions further illustrate the complexity of the problem. Nepotism, fake credentials, and side-door or back-door admissions through donations or non-transparent scholarships, as illustrated perfectly in the US Varsity Blues scandal (2019), reflect both institutional desperation and inequality in access. In some cases, the line between incentive and manipulation is crossed when legacy-based or donor-favored admissions circumvent merit-based criteria.

### Cultural Challenges

Culture is an additional challenge in dealing with corruption. In some academic systems, the application of rules and laws can be

uneven, with individuals treated differently based on their social status, affiliations, or political agenda. In contexts where corruption is widespread, unethical practices may be overlooked, especially when more pressing issues dominate institutional priorities. This creates a paradox where individuals publicly condemn corruption yet justify their own participation in it, adhering to conflicting moral codes. A striking example is the practice of unethical authorship, where individuals are listed as authors despite making minimal or no contributions to the work. This may occur in various ways: supervisors may be credited as a gesture of gratitude by doctoral students, senior researchers might coerce junior colleagues into including their names, or peers may request authorship as a favor—sometimes even negotiating it as a transactional exchange. While some view such practices as voluntary acts of goodwill, others face implicit pressure to comply, revealing the complex and often ambiguous nature of academic integrity in these environments. This duality underscores how deeply embedded, and culturally contingent, unethical behaviors can be, challenging efforts to enforce universal standards of accountability. Addressing such issues requires not only clear policies but also a critical examination of the systemic incentives and power dynamics that perpetuate them.

## Structural Reforms Needed

Despite these challenges, there are examples of institutions and systems implementing successful anti-corruption measures. Transparency in reporting data to ranking bodies, audits of faculty credentials, and independent peer-review mechanisms are among the best practices adopted to restore integrity. Establishing clear guidelines around faculty hiring, ensuring open access to admissions criteria, and fostering whistleblower protections are also essential remedies.

Moreover, structural reforms at the national or international level can help align incentives with integrity. For example, some countries have established independent quality assurance bodies that decouple performance metrics from funding decisions. Others have prioritized qualitative assessments of research and teaching over purely quantitative rankings, reducing the pressure to game metrics. It should be noted, however, that, like optimizing rankings, transparency and reporting can also be optimized, creating a situation that could be likened to “asking the fox to audit the henhouse”—an important thought that should be kept in mind.

It is crucial to take a global perspective on the complex issue of academic corruption. This includes bringing together scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines, countries, and career stages to voice their wide range of views, experiences, and concerns while exploring practical remedies and policy measures to promote integrity and accountability.

Academic values—such as academic freedom, autonomy and social responsibility for higher education on the one hand, and academic integrity and responsibility of higher education to society on the other hand—are under increasing pressure everywhere. Attacks on academic values go hand in hand with unethical behavior, corruption, and fraud in authoritarian as well as more democratic systems in both the Global South and Global North. The respect for academic freedom and autonomy, as well as the support by society for higher education, can only hold if those within higher education recognize and take action against corruption and other unethical manifestations in the sector.

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## ETHICS, CORRUPTION, & AUTHORITY

# Owning Intellectual Leadership: Facing Down Academia's Intellectual Neglect

*Richard Watermeyer and Mary P. Sheridan*

Geopolitical convulsions have exposed the scale of atrophy and impotency of academia's intellectual contribution. While a contraction of intellectual leadership has been instinctively and perhaps idly blamed on higher education's neoliberalization, academics' apology neglects to address how their intellectual languor may also be operationalized into and obscured by a carousel of practices that academics have normalized, but should challenge.

Much has been documented of how universities' embrace of neoliberal logic has for some forty years eroded the intellectual contributions of universities around the world. Less addressed, for obvious reasons, are the more recent implications of populist politics which have engendered social distrust in established institutions like universities. Arguing that these institutions only benefit the social elite (and indeed degrade those outside of their orbit), populist movements claim that university 'leadership' today is non-representative, non-elected, divorced from and dismissive of common concerns. This shift in the public imagination has led to a radical reconsideration of academia's contribution and fueled public distrust and even anger at academics. Although these events have been much discussed, what is rarely covered is how higher education's own structures and practices have contributed to this atrophy of intellectual leadership. Although there are, of course, legitimate grievances about external threats, academia requires leadership that can robustly engage with these external forces. Both institutional leaders and individual academics, therefore, owe themselves a closer inspection of their own culpability in the erosion of higher education's intellectual authority and capacity for intellectual leadership.

This contribution draws on ongoing empirical work, as well as the authors' Anglo-American perspectives, to challenge three professionalized practices which are core corrosives to academics' intellectual leadership: productive individualism, internal censoring, and endemic conservatism.

### Productive Individualism

One academic practice that erodes intellectual leadership is the egocentric manipulation of academic labor, linked to the wider societal gravitation that Richard Sennett some forty years ago described as "chronic individualism." This individualism appears in university rewards systems that do not credit academics' servant leadership—i.e., intellectual contributions for a common good—with the same weight that they count the solo

scholar's grant income, numbers of research publications, or evidence of impact. In today's hyper-metricized higher education context, leadership concentrates only on the fast flow of productive output. Disincentivized to spend time pursuing intellectual leadership, many academics have resigned themselves to a widget-like role within understandings of universities as apoliticized engines of productive output devoted to the delivery of economic ends.

The problem is that, without radical change to insular reward structures, academics themselves become as myopic in vision as the system they decry. While some attempts have been made by funders to facilitate this change—the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF) provides an example of a widened understanding of what "counts" by introducing social impact as a measure of research assessment—opportunistic academics and their institutions have often been the ones to resist the change. Instead, academics need to challenge structures that justify a singular fixation on the definition of scholarship or else they resign a key leadership role in society.

### Internal Censoring

A second set of practices eroding intellectual leadership relates to internal censoring. Critics of higher education point to an endemic of illiberal liberalism on university campuses, of groupthink and the morphing of universities into what Matt Goodwin (in *Bad Education*) calls "monocultures" (i.e., "institutions where only a single set of ideas, beliefs, assumptions and priorities are allowed to flourish"). A conformity to a single way of thinking, or a fear of speaking out, has, it is alleged, become ingrained in an intentionally de-intellectualized culture that limits opportunities for engaging with controversial topics. This culture of conformity causes academics to "play it safe," lest they expose themselves to the potential of recrimination or even "cancellation," of being derided by their peers, hounded by their students, or penalized by academic managers. Polling from a [recent survey](#) undertaken on behalf of the UK higher education

regulator, the Office for Students, finds that 28 percent of academic respondents believe their university has become less tolerant to a range of viewpoints, while one fifth do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in their teaching; a figure that rises to almost a third for academics from ethnic minority backgrounds.

In a climate where surveillance is normalized, internal censoring means that academic dissent is increasingly rare—and the blame for this cannot be laid entirely on institutional managers. Reputational management has become as important to individual academics as it is to the institutions they work for. This dynamic is particularly obvious in the realm of social media, where academics actively court followers through excessive agreeability and praise of even the most mundane of achievements. Identity management now trumps engagement in intellectual debate, and so intellectual leadership is reduced to an approval ratings race. When accruing citations, “likes,” and other forms of soft endorsement, academics are not leading but rather diverting attention away from the potential ambiguity of their contributions and the growing impotency of their scholarly and public impact. Reclaiming academic leadership requires generative criticality, something currently suffocated just as much by the pressure to remain “likable” as it is by institutional managerialism. Rather than compulsively posting images of themselves and their every whereabouts as testament to their illustriousness, academics would have better outcomes for society if they spent their time engaged in less heroic and self-congratulatory forms of leadership.

## An Endemic of Conservatism

A third academic practice that erodes intellectual leadership is an endemic of conservatism, particularly among officially

designated institutional leaders. Cowed by the barrage of criticism that emanates both from within and outside their institutions, their ability to provide dynamic leadership seems to have evaporated, as is evident in the case of many high-profile sackings and increasingly attenuated tenures across the Anglosphere (e.g., in the United States at institutions such as Harvard University, Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, and most recently Northwestern University; and, in the United Kingdom, [across multiple institutions](#)).

Institutional leaders too often function within narrow time frames to implement predetermined instructions or otherwise “window dress” in order to preserve their legacies. Like so many in the academic rank and file, structurally appointed leaders who adopt this conservatism are reduced to a function that is representative not of leadership but complicity.

## Reanimating Intellectual Leadership

A reversal of these processes will not be easy. Universities face strong headwinds that will only further constrain the disruptive potential of their faculty. And yet, unless academics start to resist these pressures, they will irrevocably lose their capacity for productive change. Instead, academics must heed the clarion call to reclaim factors within their control so that they can lead in such moments of turmoil. To do so, they must move past legitimate grievances, acknowledge the impotence of victimization narratives, and rediscover their role in crafting new paths to intellectual leadership.

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## ETHICS, CORRUPTION, & AUTHORITY

# Misconduct Among Postgraduate Students in African Universities

*Harris Andoh*

Since the early 2000s, African universities have expanded postgraduate education as part of their mission to drive knowledge production, human capital, and national development. Growth through part-time, weekend, and MBA programs has widened access but also fostered widespread misconduct. Plagiarism, contract cheating, falsified research, and collusion are increasingly reported, often in the context of weak supervision and lax enforcement. Drawing on evidence from Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Zambia, and Nigeria, this article shows how misconduct erodes graduate quality and the credibility of African degrees. It calls for ethical reforms, stronger accountability, and robust quality assurance to safeguard the integrity of postgraduate education.

Recent findings across Africa show a concerning rise in unethical behavior among postgraduate students, particularly in weekend, part-time, and MBA programs. These questionable practices include plagiarism, ghostwriting (a form of contract cheating, in which teaching assistants do students' assignments), research fabrication (including the practice of individuals and companies writing theses and dissertations for a fee), examination fraud, and sex-for-grades scandals.

### The Landscape of Professional Misconduct

These practices directly contradict the core purposes of postgraduate education: original research, advanced and continuous learning, and professional preparation. Plagiarism, for example, undermines intellectual honesty by passing off others' work as one's own, while contract cheating erodes the educational value of assessment. When a student purchases a dissertation or thesis, they are not only violating academic standards but also falsely signaling expertise and competence to future employers and academic institutions.

And yet these practices appear to be rampant. For example, in Kenya, the Commission for University Education revealed that, in 2023, nearly 35 percent of submitted postgraduate theses contained unoriginal or improperly cited material, with some cases showing up to 60 percent plagiarism detected via Turnitin reports. In 2022, the University of Ghana sanctioned over 100 students for various forms of academic misconduct, with 20 cases involving graduate students engaged in recycling past theses without attribution. At the University of South Africa, over 1,400 disciplinary cases were investigated in a single year (2023), with postgraduate students accounting for more than half of these cases. South Africa's Council on Higher Education

has also noted a pattern of increased plagiarism and research manipulation in coursework-based master degree programs. MBA programs, often marketed as fast-tracked, career-enhancing qualifications, appear to be particularly susceptible. In Nigeria, the National Universities Commission closed 58 illegal postgraduate and MBA centers in 2022, citing widespread forgery, poor supervision, and the use of unqualified staff.

### Institutional Gaps

Although most African universities have formal academic integrity policies in place, their implementation is inconsistent. The problem, therefore, lies less in the absence of rules and more in a lack of enforcement and awareness.

For example, while institutions like the University of Ghana and Makerere University have detailed anti-plagiarism guidelines and access to tools like Turnitin, a 2021 survey among postgraduate students revealed that only 41 percent had received formal training on citation ethics. Supervisors are often overstretched, handling upward of 20 to 30 theses at a time, reducing their capacity to detect or prevent misconduct.

Moreover, many part-time and weekend programs are managed as semi-autonomous entities within universities, where oversight is looser and quality control mechanisms are weak. In Zambia, a 2022 audit by the Higher Education Authority found that 28 percent of MBA and part-time programs in public universities lacked active supervisory committees or internal review boards. In Kenya, internal governance mechanisms such as university councils, disciplinary committees, and audit offices exist, yet are often under-resourced. Furthermore, cultural factors discourage whistleblowing. A 2020 study found that 72 percent of students who had witnessed misconduct did not

report it, citing fear of retaliation or lack of faith in institutional follow-through.

On the other hand, several structural and contextual factors contribute to the likelihood of misconduct, including time constraints (many part-time students are working professionals with limited time for genuine academic engagement), credentialism (the rise of degree inflation means that a master degree is increasingly seen as a basic requirement rather than a mark of expertise), commercialization (universities, seeking revenue, have expanded postgraduate offerings rapidly without proportional investment in quality assurance), and social pressures (postgraduate degrees confer social capital, which fuels demand, regardless of merit). This environment makes misconduct not just an individual choice but a systemic risk, with institutions sometimes turning a blind eye to ensure enrollment numbers and financial targets are met.

## Consequences and Implications

Unchecked academic misconduct has far-reaching consequences. First, it produces graduates who lack essential competencies. Employers report growing skepticism about the quality of African postgraduate degree holders. In a 2023 pan-African survey by the Association of African Universities, 46 percent of employers said they had to retrain recent master degree graduates in basic research or communication skills.

Second, the credibility of African universities on the global stage is at risk. As more institutions seek international partnerships, questionable degrees can lead to rejection of credentials, loss of exchange opportunities, and diminished competitiveness in global academic rankings.

Third, the erosion of trust damages public confidence in higher education. When students see peers rewarded despite cheating, it undermines morale and promotes a culture of cynicism.

## Conclusion

It is clear that universities have noticed these issues, but are restricted in their ability to act, given the dual pressures to meet national massification agendas and simultaneously create revenue to meet their financial obligations.

However, these issues cannot go unaddressed. The proliferation of misconduct among postgraduate students in Africa, particularly in part-time, weekend, and MBA programs, poses a fundamental threat to the quality, credibility, and future relevance of higher education qualifications on the continent. While policies exist, their inconsistent application and the structural incentives of expansion over quality have created a breeding ground for unethical practices.

To restore confidence in African postgraduate education, institutions must go beyond punitive measures. This includes investing in supervisor training, embedding ethics in curricula, developing centralized thesis databases, and improving student orientation regarding academic integrity. National accreditation bodies should also increase monitoring and make audit findings public.

The future of African higher education depends not only on increasing access but also on ensuring that its degrees remain meaningful. Without bold action, the very mission of postgraduate education—to develop knowledge leaders and critical thinkers—will be undermined by short-term gains and long-term reputational damage.

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## INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

# A New Paradigm for Higher Education Internationalization in Brazil?

*Fernanda Leal and Mário César Barreto Moraes*

This article discusses the new Brazilian government strategy aimed at the internationalization of higher education—the program Networks for Institutional Internationalization (CAPES-Global.Edu)—launched in July 2025. The objective is to analyze the directions of the internationalization of Brazilian higher education over the past 10 years, with some initial reflections on the characteristics of the new initiative and, specifically, its prospects for marking a new paradigm of internationalization for Brazil.

The internationalization of Brazilian higher education over the past 10 years suggests a shift in understanding of this process from being synonymous with international mobility, directly focused on individuals, to representing a broader phenomenon that affects the *raison d'être* and values of universities. National strategies, such as the Science without Borders program (SwB) and the Institutional Internationalization Program (CAPES-PrInt), have reflected the significant influence of the Brazilian government in the direction of internationalization, and the former CAPES-PrInt program has confirmed a historical pattern in which higher education is conceived as an instrument for achieving broader developmental goals.

This article presents and discusses the Brazilian government's new internationalization strategy, the program Networks for Institutional Internationalization (CAPES-Global.Edu), which launched in July 2025 and is scheduled to run from 2026 to 2031. It also offers some initial reflections on the characteristics of the program, specifically its prospects for establishing a new internationalization paradigm for Brazil.

### Internationalization Through Networking: CAPES-Global.Edu

CAPES-Global.Edu is managed by CAPES, the Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education, an agency affiliated with the Brazilian Ministry of Education. The program was conceived after several months of preparatory meetings and discussions, with high expectations from the Brazilian academic community. Its target audience is Brazilian higher education and research institutions (both public and private non-profit) that offer graduate programs.

The general objective of CAPES-Global.Edu is to contribute to Brazil's international projection and consolidation as a strategic partner in global initiatives, promoting mutual cooperation,

intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development. More specifically, its objectives involve: a) encouraging the creation of partnerships between institutions from different regions of Brazil and with different levels of internationalization; b) consolidating strategic internationalization plans; c) encouraging collaboration with civil society institutions; d) promoting opportunities for international experience in Brazil and abroad; e) fostering a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming culture of internationalization; and f) improving institutional governance of internationalization. The program aims to achieve these goals through the creation of networks that will enable institutions to join forces around strategic research themes.

### A Network Approach

This program marks the first time that a Brazilian government program focused on internationalization has been explicitly structured around the creation of networks of national institutions. The purpose is to reduce inequalities in the levels of internationalization between institutions in the five geographic regions of the country.

Networks within the program must follow one of the following formats: be composed of a coordinating and three associated institutions, ensuring the presence of institutions from at least three regions of the country; or be composed of a coordinating and four or five associated institutions, ensuring the presence of institutions from at least four regions of the country. In both cases, institutions from the North, Northeast, and Central-West regions—the first two representing the highest poverty rates in Brazil—must participate.

Coordinating institutions must meet a series of requirements, such as having at least one graduate program with the highest CAPES evaluation scores and including graduate programs with lower evaluation scores in their proposals. They must also

demonstrate expertise in the defined strategic research themes, with international partnerships being prospected or underway; have an office or individual within their structure responsible for managing internationalization; and offer language training initiatives.

## International Partners

Unlike CAPES-PrInt, CAPES-Global.Edu does not specify preferred regions or institutions for collaboration beyond national borders; it merely mentions the purpose of promoting international cooperation with “institutions from the Global North and South.” Thus, as long as the required format is respected, each network will be responsible for defining its national and international partners, considering their adherence to the strategic research themes.

## Financial and Budgetary Resources

The program will receive a total investment of up to R\$1,400,000,000.00 (one billion four hundred million reais), with an estimated annual investment of up to R\$350,000,000.00 (three hundred and fifty million reais), to be distributed among the approved networks over the first four years. State Research Support Foundations may also participate by providing funding directly to institutions in their states.

The funding may be used to support international work missions to facilitate agreements and execute projects; participation in conferences; and scholarships that can be used both within and outside the country. Scholarships used abroad can cover “sandwich doctorates” (i.e., doctoral programs in which a student carries out part of his research at an institution abroad), senior and junior visiting professor programs, and short-term training. In Brazil, the scholarships aim to attract researchers from other countries.

## Reflections on Advances in the Concept of Internationalization

CAPES emphasizes that CAPES-Global.Edu represents a paradigm shift in the internationalization of Brazilian science, having been built “from the ground up” through dialogue with institutions, with the aim of subverting inequalities. At least in its design, a paradigm shift can be identified, as the program seeks to include members of the university community who have been marginalized from the internationalization process, such as the technical staff. The brief mention of outreach, an important university function that is often neglected in

internationalization initiatives, also signals an important departure from past norms.

However, the internationalization objectives pursued by CAPES-Global.Edu do not differ significantly from those defined by its predecessor program, CAPES-PrInt, as that initiative also sought to consolidate strategic internationalization plans at the institutional level, create international research networks, support the internationalization of graduate programs, and promote an international environment in participating institutions. CAPES-Global.Edu also focuses on the idea of institutional transformation, although it now recognizes the importance of partnerships between Brazilian institutions with different levels of internationalization as the path toward that goal. In this sense, the greatest difference between these two strategies appears to lie in the means by which the objectives are achieved, rather than the objectives themselves.

Overall, CAPES-Global.Edu appears to be structured on a less competitive basis than the previous initiative. However, the primary focus remains on research, which means it is likely that the university functions of teaching and, especially, outreach will remain overshadowed within internationalization efforts.

## Reflections on the Inclusion of the Global South

In contrast to CAPES-PrInt, CAPES-Global.Edu explicitly emphasizes the importance of cooperation with the Global South. CAPES statements about the new program recognize internationalization as a means to subvert inequalities and achieve broader social justice goals, with [Heleta and Chasi's](#) positioned definition of internationalization being frequently highlighted as an inspiration for the program. It is unclear, however, how the operationalization of relations between Brazil and other institutions in the Global South will occur. The following questions deserve attention and could serve as a useful guide to the organization of networks involved in the program: Despite CAPES' good intentions, will participating Brazilian institutions choose institutional partners from the Global South, given their historical preference for the Global North? If so, will this be sufficient to ensure reciprocal relationships and promote a different perspective on internationalization? At the national level, how will relationships between coordinating and partner institutions within each network work, given their inequalities? Without sufficient attention to such questions, it remains unclear if the program will actually represent a paradigm change in the internationalization of Brazilian higher education.

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## INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

# Navigating Challenges of Italy's Transnational Education Landscape

*Elisa Sguaitamatti*

This article explores Italy's transnational education perspective and current state of play by analyzing its complex landscape both as a TNE importer (branch campuses, filiations, off-shore campuses, and multinational corporate universities) and TNE exporter (branch campuses and virtual universities). Furthermore, it focuses more closely on the Italian approach in addressing emerging challenges in quality assurance and recognition of such TNE qualifications.

**T**ransnational education (TNE)—a structure that enables students to pursue foreign degrees while remaining in their home country—has become a key pillar of global higher education. Defined as cross-border mobility of academic programs and education providers, TNE fosters an intercultural network where students, staff, and institutions often navigate uncharted waters of differing norms, expectations, and practices between sending and host countries. This interplay of global and local dynamics highlights the need for consistent frames of reference to address issues and promote sustainable partnerships. For instance, the Mediterranean Automatic Recognition Network (MAREN) project, led by the Italian Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence, shed light on the complications related to the automatic recognition of qualifications within TNE.

Each country involved in TNE approaches these challenges differently. In the case of Italy, its evolution as both a TNE importer and exporter has allowed a plethora of institutions to flourish.

### Italy as TNE Importer

The following types of TNE operate in Italy within a multilayered environment: branch campuses, filiations, off-shore institutions, multinational corporate universities, and virtual universities.

Branch campuses allow foreign institutions to offer study programs and award degrees recognized in Italy. Some examples are Johns Hopkins University - School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, St. John's University in Rome, and the French ESCP Business School in Turin.

A peculiarity of Italy is the filiation, which enables foreign providers to decentralize part of their academic offer for study-abroad purposes, mostly attracting foreign students wishing to deepen their knowledge in Italian culture, art, and design. Such

programs generally grant credits to be transferred to the respective home institutions but do not award diplomas or degrees. There are currently over 130 "study abroad centers" in Italy, all operated by American universities, regulated by Law No. 4 of 14 January 1999 and authorized by the Ministry for University and Research, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Three varieties of filiations can be identified. A first category comprises institutions open to students enrolled at any foreign university (some examples are Fairfield University, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, Florida State University in Florence, and Saint Mary's College in Rome). A second category are institutions open exclusively to students enrolled at the home universities (e.g., the University of Washington Rome Center and the University of Arkansas in Rome; Stanford University and New York University in Florence; and Monash University in Prato). Lastly, a third type encompasses institutes established as a result of multilateral agreements, such as the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Florence and the Duke University Center in Rome. Some of these latter filiation models are highly complex entities. For example, the Duke University Center, often referred to as "The Centro," is a stand-alone institution, which was established in 1965 by representatives of 10 American colleges and universities and currently counts over 100 member institutions. Under a long-term agreement with the consortium members, Duke University administers its "Duke in Rome" program, which focuses on the study of classical antiquity.

Off-shore institutions represent another common model of TNE. These are autonomous entities, entirely managed by the sending country in organization, structure, and quality assurance. Some examples in Italy include the American University of Rome and John Cabot University in Rome.

Finally, multinational corporate universities are part of the current Italian panorama. These institutions have been launched by big transnational corporations interested in organizing their own education offer, and award labor-market-targeted qualifications that do not belong to any national education system. As the focus is on direct transfer to the labor market, accreditation is not prioritized by these institutions. Some current examples based in Italy are the French-Italian corporation STMicroelectronics in Catania and Eni Corporate University in San Donato Milanese.

## Italy as TNE Exporter

In addition to the extensive landscape of TNE within Italy, Italy is also a significant TNE exporter. The first Italian export venture was the establishment of a University of Bologna branch campus in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Virtual universities are another model of successful TNE exporting for Italy. These institutions are located in Italy, but their programs are specifically tailored for learners outside Italy. Università Telematica Guglielmo Marconi, Consorzio Nettuno, and Consorzio Icon are leading this sector.

Italy also hosts a number of renowned institutes offering programs/qualifications that do not belong to any specific education system. These are the result of agreements between Italy and international organizations or intergovernmental agreements between Italy and other countries. The most famous of these are the European University Institute in Florence, Venice International University in Venice, and the European University Centre for Cultural Heritage in Ravello.

## Challenges in Quality Assurance and Recognition

Overall, the Italian approach aims at moving beyond compliance toward meaningful intercultural engagement and partnership resilience. However, tackling both quality assurance and recognition in TNE has turned out to be challenging.

While the extensive Italian TNE panorama shows networks of growth and opportunity, effective quality assurance presents remarkable challenges for both host and sending countries. Instances of poor quality provision and the existence of rogue providers pose considerable risks for both students in the host country and for the reputation of the sending country's higher education system.

Furthermore, independent and collaborative forms of TNE provision may call into question the reliability of quality assurance. In the former (e.g., branch campuses), the sending institution takes full control over academic provision and governance, and local partners have limited action in quality assurance and curriculum design. In contrast, collaborative models involve shared development and co-governance (quality assurance, joint curriculum design, cross-cultural staffing). TNE initiatives in Italy have often shown particularly blurred boundaries. Such fluidity highlights the need for a flexible, nuanced framework for analyzing TNE arrangements. Partnerships evolve over time in response to shifting strategic priorities or external pressures.

Regional and international agencies also play a crucial role in sharing best practice guidelines, research, and data, which helps to ensure the development of quality assurance procedures. Italy abides by the ENIC-NARIC guidelines for transnational providers: accreditation in the country where the institution overseeing academic studies and awarding qualifications is located, license to operate in the host country (by home and host authorities), and adherence to the principles outlined in the Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education and in the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education.

In order to address challenges to ensure the recognition of qualifications awarded by TNE institutions, Italy adopted the Ministerial Decree No. 214 of 26 April 2004, thereby adhering to article VI.5 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention by setting regulations and procedures for the establishment of foreign higher education institutions within the Italian territory. According to the Decree, any TNE institution and its programs must fulfill specific requirements and comply with strict quality and equivalence criteria, including institutional recognition in the home country, scientific relevance, adequate facilities, and faculty qualifications verified by Italian institutions.

As countries grapple with the complexities of a wide range of TNE models, most notably branch campuses, franchising, validation, joint/dual degrees, and online learning, Italy has developed its own landscape, comprising both exporting and importing activities. Its experiences can serve as a useful model for other countries interested in expanding their TNE offerings.

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## INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

# Critical Challenges to Albanian Higher Education and Its Internationalization

*Elton Skendaj and Hans de Wit*

This article describes and analyzes the development and internationalization of higher education in Albania since 1991, when a 45-year long dictatorial period ended. It considers the major developments and challenges in the context of Albania's efforts toward European integration and internationalization.

Little has been written about the state of higher education in Albania, its role in the country's economic, social, and political development, or its efforts to achieve European and international integration. From 1946 to 1991, Albania was ruled by an extreme, ruthless, and isolated communist dictatorship. When the regime ended in 1991, what followed was an unstable period of six years of political tensions, instability and corruption. This period was one of the toughest in the country's history, including the failure of several financial pyramid schemes, which triggered a massive rebellion bringing the state institutions to collapse. Only in 1998 did the country see the return of some stability and the prospect of economic recovery.

### Historical Context

During the dictatorship, higher education was public and state-controlled. The University of Tirana, founded in 1957, acted as the lead institution, with several other higher education institutions serving specific needs of the communist government. Once the regime fell, the country immediately entered a period of massification. As, during the communist period, only the children of the elite—i.e., of loyal communist party members—were allowed to attend university, the end of the regime marked a new era of opportunity for all Albanians. In response to this increased demand, after 1991, more public universities were opened by the elected socialist government, in particular outside of the capital, albeit with very limited funding, human resources, and academic capacities.

When the conservative Democratic Party took over in 2005, the government allowed the creation of private universities in order to provide more supply. Over 50 private universities were established in the post-2005 period. In 2014, the country had the highest number of higher education institutions per inhabitant in Europe, with a population of just around 3 million. However, the quality of both public and private universities was very poor due to underfunding, lack of qualified teachers, and high numbers of students. Corruption and fraud were common, with

private universities practically selling their degrees, including to foreigners.

In 2015, under the new government of the Socialist Party of Albania, a new law on higher education and scientific research entered into force, establishing a higher education system that consisted of public and not-for-profit private institutions. Seventeen private and eight public universities were closed, and a review by the British Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education helped the Albanian Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education develop standards for quality assurance and accreditation. Currently, there are between 30 and 40 universities in the country, 13 of them public and the rest private ones; 33 of these are accredited.

In itself, this reform was a good step forward. However, a number of major challenges remain that prevent Albania from upgrading its higher education system to match European and international standards. The challenges include a continuous lack of funding, corruption, a rigid bureaucratic system left over from the communist era, brain drain, and lack of adequate quality assurance mechanisms. Brain drain, in particular, is a major concern. Efforts to stimulate the return of skilled members of the diaspora are challenged by bureaucratic procedures, as recognition of foreign diplomas takes up to two years, even for PhD degrees from top universities. The autonomy of Albania's higher education institutions also exists primarily on paper, as governance is highly centralized and subject to detailed regulation and funding by the ministry of education and other government agencies.

### Internationalization Efforts

As mentioned in the preceding section, brain drain is quite high, with neighboring Italy, in particular, attracting a large number of Albanian students. Incoming students and staff numbers, meanwhile, are almost insignificant. Existing dual-degree programs between Albanian and foreign universities are in reality one-way outgoing programs and only add to the brain

drain. Students that come to study in the country are mostly Albanian speakers from neighboring Kosovo and North Macedonia. Recently, there have been recruitment efforts targeting potential students from Asia and the Middle East, through a recruitment agency based in Dubai. Some students from Italy have also started coming to Albania to study medical sciences through a private Catholic university in Tirana. However, language remains a huge barrier, and, while teaching in English is offered by some private universities, its quality is often questionable. Recently, public universities have started launching English-language programs, but their success remains to be seen.

Academic services and the quality of teaching are other obstacles in recruiting international students. It is difficult to find information on university websites, especially for international students, about enrollment procedures and admission requirements, available programs, teaching staff, academic services, tuition fees, and other aspects of campus life.

## Europeanization Efforts

Albania is aspiring to become a member of the European Union. In 2003, it joined the Bologna Process and also became an associate member of the Horizon Europe research and innovation program. It additionally has access to some elements of the Erasmus+ program and is aiming for full membership at a later stage. However, there are major challenges with the implementation of these plans. Even though Albanian universities mention long lists of partnerships with foreign—mostly European—universities on their websites and are active in Erasmus+ and involved in dual-degree programs with primarily European universities, the reality is less positive. Other countries in the Western Balkan region that share some common legacies from the past, such as North Macedonia and Serbia, have already become program countries in the Erasmus+, while Albania remains just a partner country.

There is slightly more foreign presence in the private higher education sector. In 2023, the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium, opened the first international branch campus in

Tirana, sponsored by the European Commission. Epitech Balkans is part of the French IONIS group, and there is also Turkish influence in private universities such as the University of New York Tirana, which is managed by the Turkish state-run Maarif Foundation. There are also other higher education institutions with international-sounding names, such as the Canadian Institute of Technology or the European University of Tirana. However, these names seem to be given purely for marketing reasons, as there is no clear indication of involvement from Canada or Europe in their accreditation or management.

## Major Challenges

The rigidity of the system, underfunding, lack of professional development, and brain drain are the main problems obstructing Albanian higher education's path toward European integration and internationalization. While universities boast a large number of bilateral agreements, they fail to show any analytical data on the results of such agreements. Even more concerning, although the government imposes fines or even up to two years imprisonment for plagiarism, in the last five years there have been [reports of senior public officials and university leaders guilty of plagiarism](#).

## Urgent Needs

What the country needs urgently is further training for university administrators and academics on understanding and implementing internationalization, including internationalization of the curriculum at home. Albania also needs a national strategy on internationalization and more attention paid to accreditation and quality assurance processes. It is important to address the main obstacles and weaknesses impeding internationalization, in particular issues around recognition of foreign degrees and transfer of credits. Finally, accumulating more reliable data is essential.

For Albanian higher education to become seriously integrated in the European Higher Education Area and to internationalize, there is still a long way to go.

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## INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

# The Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education

*Miguel Antonio Lim, Soubin Sisavath and Mark Andrew Elepaño*

This article examines the promise and challenges of the Common Higher Education Space in Southeast Asia following the 2024 Joint Declaration signed by ASEAN and SEAMEO. While the declaration marks a key milestone in regional cooperation, persistent disparities in resources, readiness, and regulatory alignment reveal a collective action problem. The article argues that sustained political will, coordinated implementation, and inclusive engagement are essential for turning regional ambition into meaningful, long-term impact.

The Joint Declaration on the Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education, adopted in August 2024, marked a historic step in regional cooperation. Two regional organizations—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a political and economic bloc of ten member states aimed at promoting regional stability and integration, and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), a long-standing intergovernmental body dedicated to regional collaboration in education, science, and culture—jointly signed the declaration. Their joint endorsement is significant not only because of their respective influence in policymaking and capacity building, but also because it symbolizes a long-awaited convergence of political will and educational vision.

The declaration marks a commitment to support regional quality and mobility efforts in order to achieve a vision of “an inclusive space of collective intelligence in Higher Education for sustainable learning and living in Southeast Asia.” While the declaration signals a strong regional commitment, it is important to note that it is not a legally binding instrument similar to the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention, which set formal standards for the mutual recognition of qualifications in Europe. Instead, the Joint Declaration operates as a soft agreement, reflecting consensus and shared aspiration, but relying on voluntary alignment for implementation due to varied levels of educational development. Nevertheless, the declaration marks a shift from the long-envisioned idea of a shared higher education space to a tangible regional framework. It underscores the strategic importance of pooling collective expertise, cultivating essential skills for sustainable futures, and deepening people-to-people linkages.

The declaration represents a major milestone but also exposes significant challenges. The vision of a truly harmonized regional space continues to face substantial obstacles. Differences in national education systems, uneven quality assurance, resource

disparities, and fragmented recognition frameworks persist. Aligning regional aspirations with domestic priorities demands sustained political will and institutional capacity, both of which vary widely. This article explores these implementation challenges, arguing that, while the declaration is symbolically powerful, its impact will depend on how Southeast Asian governments, institutions, and stakeholders translate shared goals into coordinated and sustained action.

### Southeast Asia’s Pursuit of Higher Education Harmonization

The signing of the Joint Declaration was the culmination of nearly two decades of incremental progress in regional higher education cooperation. With the inclusion of Timor-Leste at the ASEAN Summit in October 2025, the region now covers over 670 million people across 11 countries. Despite its diversity, ASEAN and SEAMEO have steadily fostered collaboration to enhance connectivity, economic integration, and shared development goals. Higher education has been recognized as a key enabler of these aspirations since at least the 2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Higher Education, which underscored its role in building the ASEAN Community.

Momentum began to build in the early 2000s, with initiatives led by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED) exploring the idea of a common higher education space. The 2007 ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint laid further groundwork, highlighting the need for skilled labor mobility and regional harmonization in education. Subsequent ASEAN Work Plans on Education introduced mechanisms for aligning credit transfer systems, quality assurance frameworks, and mobility schemes. These efforts, while often compared to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), have unfolded through ASEAN’s distinct mode of consensus-building, known as the “ASEAN Way.”

Recent developments also reflect growing institutional readiness in some member states. For example, in 2024, Lao PDR issued formal guidelines for credit transfer and expanded English-medium instruction to promote mobility. Such national-level reforms, supported by regional coordination, illustrate how policy aspirations are beginning to translate into institutional change. The Joint Declaration thus builds on a foundation of sustained, though uneven, collaboration. While symbolizing a shared commitment to harmonization, it also signals the beginning of a more complex phase, turning regional ambition into coherent, inclusive, and implementable practice.

## A “Collective Action Problem” in Southeast Asia’s Regional Higher Education Harmonization

Despite strong rhetorical support for the Common Higher Education Space and flagship initiatives such as the ASEAN Global Exchange for Mobility and Scholarship (ASEAN GEMS), persistent disparities in national capacity, institutional readiness, and stakeholder priorities reveal an underlying collective action problem. Stakeholders, though supportive, struggle to coordinate or contribute effectively due to misaligned interests, perceived inequities, or insufficient incentives. This manifests in inconsistent regulatory frameworks, unequal participation, and uneven distribution of benefits, all of which hinder progress toward regional integration.

A key barrier is the reluctance of some Member States to undertake structural reforms, such as aligning academic calendars or harmonizing credit systems, when these pose domestic political or administrative costs. For countries with limited visibility, capacity, or outbound mobility, the perceived benefits may be too low to justify sustained engagement. This risks a “free rider” dynamic, where some actors disengage or contribute less, diluting effectiveness and legitimacy.

Compounding the problem is a lack of shared clarity on the Common Space and its programs’ overarching purpose. While some stakeholders frame it as a tool for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through strategic, state-led mobility, others view it as a platform for building mutual understanding and regional identity via grassroots, student-driven exchanges. These competing visions—top-down versus bottom-up—result in diverging expectations about program design, scholarship allocation, and metrics for success. Without

convergence around a common theory of change, ASEAN’s efforts to build a cohesive regional higher education space may continue to fall short of their transformative potential.

## Realizing the Common Space: What Will It Take?

Collective action problems have direct implications for the successful implementation of the Joint Declaration on the Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education. Although the declaration articulates a bold and shared vision, persistent disparities in capacity, policy alignment, and institutional readiness threaten to fragment the region’s path forward. Core goals such as enhancing academic mobility, upholding quality provision, and promoting shared regional development agendas remain difficult to achieve without more coordinated and equitable participation.

Given that the Declaration relies on voluntary alignment, policymakers must move from rhetorical support to sustained resource commitment and enforceable coordination. This is difficult under ASEAN’s principle of “non-interference.” Strengthening the governance role of SEAMEO RIHED and the ASEAN Secretariat could drive momentum, including creating regional incentives to offset domestic political and administrative costs.

Effective governance also requires strategic leadership and stakeholder buy-in. This involves active engagement from member states, particularly when they hold time-bound leadership roles such as the rotating ASEAN Chair. With stronger coordination and leadership, it becomes possible to develop a coherent, shared theory of change, helping to address the current lack of clarity around the Common Space’s purpose and its flagship initiatives.

Institutional leaders, supported by national reforms, must engage in deeper, sustained dialogue with faculty, employers, and civil society to establish clear, unified metrics for success and guarantee universal upholding of quality provision. Ultimately, the Common Space’s potential rests on the collective ability of governments, institutions, and stakeholders on the ground to translate the shared vision into coordinated and sustained action. Without this commitment, efforts to promote collective regional intelligence and increased global visibility risk being limited in their long-term impact and confined to grand visions but toothless implementation.

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## DISRUPTION, DECLINE, & ADAPTATION

# Signals of Distress: A Global Wave of University and College Closures

*Eldho Matheos and Philip G. Altbach*

The complex and difficult issue of university and college closures has received little attention but is of great importance, as many institutions do fail and close. The reasons are many, including demographic declines, leadership or governance failure, financial crisis, and others. Most vulnerable are private institutions, with warning signs including declining admissions, program cuts, and various governance issues. This crisis demands attention from academic communities and regulators to ensure institutional sustainability and quality.

**G**lobal higher education is undergoing a paradoxical shift. On one hand, student enrollment is booming, with over 254 million students currently enrolled in higher education institutions. On the other hand, despite this growing demand, university closures and mergers loom large in many countries. Much more attention needs to be focused on these failures, which affect students, staff, and society.

There are many reasons for this unhappy situation: population declines in some countries, a growing skepticism about the return on investment for a university degree, populist opposition to science and higher education, shifts in government funding away from higher education institutions, predatory private providers, technological disruption and the rise of online learning, among others.

The consequences are already visible: a wave of campus closures and mergers that are reshaping the higher education map in many countries. In many cases, closures and mergers represent desperate responses to institutional distress. While exact figures are difficult to determine, it is estimated that hundreds of universities and colleges worldwide have shut down or merged in recent years.

### A Global Phenomenon

Universities and colleges in many countries are struggling to stay viable amid shifting demographics, rising operational costs, and evolving societal perceptions of higher education's value. Countries facing significant demographic declines, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, face especially serious problems—and in these countries the large majority of students are in private universities. In all three countries, the government has considerable power over private institutions. In Japan, 33 universities have closed in the past few years and another 29 have merged with other institutions—and these numbers will continue to grow. A similar number have closed in South Korea,

while others, called “zombie” universities, are kept alive through government funding. In both South Korea and Japan, most failed institutions are in provincial areas where population decline is especially evident.

Many predatory for-profit private universities, especially in the United States, have closed or been purchased by other universities in recent years. These institutions lured unsuspecting students with unrealistic expectations and access to loans, only to collapse when government regulators clamped down. For example, the University of Phoenix, once the largest university in the United States with 470,000 students, is now down to 80,000 and trying to sell itself to other institutions. Ashford University and Kaplan University suffered similar fates.

In the United States, approximately 79 universities have closed in the past five years and at least another 80 are in imminent danger. Most of these schools are private and in rural areas with declining populations, so enrollments have declined precipitously. Mergers are also increasingly common, although accurate statistics are unavailable. These take place when an institution is not viable on its own. A few are public: for example, in the state of Pennsylvania, which has a large number of small public colleges, the state government is merging these institutions to reduce costs.

In the United Kingdom, a majority of the nonelite universities have fiscal deficits and have been firing large numbers of academic and other staff. A decline in overseas student enrollments, stimulated by more restrictive government policies, will exacerbate financial problems, although it is unlikely that any institutions will fail. Similar challenges are evident in Canada and, to a lesser extent, in Australia. In the Canadian case, many vocationally-oriented colleges, some of which have engaged in shady academic policies, have deep financial problems: it is estimated that more than 80 public or

nonprofit colleges have already closed, although no universities are threatened.

Globally, closures and mergers do not affect research-intensive universities but rather institutions at the lower end of the academic hierarchy. Top institutions, such as those in the United Kingdom and those targeted in the United States under the Trump administration, may face crises, but not existential threats.

## The Indian Case

India is not immune to these trends. At the same time, it is an unusual case since its population continues to grow and the number of young people seeking postsecondary education is expanding as well, with plans to raise the gross enrollment ratio to 50 percent by 2035. While the number of universities and colleges in India continues to expand, smaller institutions, especially private engineering and management colleges, are facing closure.

In 2020, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) imposed a two-year moratorium on the establishment of new engineering colleges in traditional areas of engineering, lifted only in 2023. In the current academic year, the AICTE approved the closure of 27 private colleges nationally. These institutions have stopped accepting new students. Furthermore, many affiliated colleges under the supervision of state universities are quietly being phased out. For example, in 2024 alone, 14 colleges affiliated with Mahatma Gandhi University in the state of Kerala shut down due to declining enrollment and financial difficulties. The Karnataka state government is currently reviewing the continuation of nine newly established public universities. Unfortunately, neither national agencies, such as the University Grants Commission, nor state governments provide an accurate picture of college closures nationally. Only the AICTE provides detailed data on closures. Competition and institutional closures are natural in any sector, including higher education. However,

ignoring warning signs makes the situation worse. India currently benefits from a large youth population, but changing birth rates will lead to a demographic decline in the future, similar to the East Asian and North American experience. This potential shift emphasizes the need for sustainable strategies to ensure the stability and quality of higher education institutions.

A college or university in crisis typically shows many early warning signs. In India, common indicators include a consistent drop in student admissions over time, which affects both public and private institutions. Overreliance on tuition fees can also be considered a sign of crisis. Academically, signs of trouble include the reduction or closure of programs, nonrenewal of faculty contracts, and the resignation of prominent faculty members without proper replacements. Governance issues, such as frequent leadership changes, and reputational challenges like poor campus infrastructure, unpaid electricity bills, and inadequate student support services further signal decline.

## Recognizing Failure

There are many reasons for failure, and some of them may be existential and lead to institutional collapse. Some of these factors, such as demographic decline, are obvious and can sometimes be ameliorated by mergers, innovative programs, or other means. Institutional failure can also be caused by poor leadership or management, inadequate governance, or other internal factors. In some ways, these challenges are exceptionally difficult to correct. The current higher education environment globally is especially challenging—including not only the attacks by populist governments, but also issues raised by artificial intelligence, changing labor markets, and many others. All of this requires careful attention not only by the academic community but also by quality assurance agencies, government regulators, and others. Of course, students and families, too, must be aware of the challenges that academic institutions are facing.

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## DISRUPTION, DECLINE, & ADAPTATION

# Demographic Decline in the Global South: Risks and Opportunities for Reform

*Jonathan Mills Williams*

Many jurisdictions in the so-called “Global South” have declining youth populations. This poses important risks for their higher education systems, including threatening academic integrity and institutional viability, especially in systems with many small institutions, as is the case in the four states of South India (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu). In such circumstances, policymakers should focus on system improvement and engaging in a deliberate process of strategic consolidation, rather than trying to keep small institutions open.

For several decades, declining youth numbers have concerned higher education policymakers in OECD and former Eastern Bloc countries. Although not often discussed, similar trends are now affecting much of the so-called Global South. China is the most prominent example: its population aged 20–24 has been falling precipitously since 2010 and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Yet, other major jurisdictions like Brazil, Colombia, Iran, and Thailand are also experiencing significant declines. Demographics vary greatly within countries too, such that some regions face serious challenges even as national youth populations continue to grow. One key example is South India (defined here as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu), where the population aged 20–24 is projected to contract by 18 percent between 2011 and 2036. This is comparable to what Japan and Germany will experience in the same period, and more significant than projected in Italy and Spain.

Globally, the political economy of higher education tends to assume enrollment growth. Universities are rarely profit-optimizing. Instead, they seek to maximize their educational, research, and service activities. Enrollment growth aligns with this vision and typically brings more government funding and student fees. It is also arguably the primary vehicle for increasing productivity in higher education by enabling economies of scale. Without growth, systems face “cost disease,” caused by rising staff compensation. This requires governments, students, and students’ families to pay more in order to maintain services already in place, or requires institutions to make cuts. To avert this problem, most high participation higher education systems have pursued enrollment growth even as youth populations have fallen.

For higher education systems still undergoing massification, the risks (and opportunities) of demographic decline are understudied but increasingly urgent. South India provides a window into the phenomenon.

## Mitigating Demographic Decline

The most obvious way for higher education systems to mitigate declining youth demographics is to increase the share of the population enrolled. In systems where demand exceeds capacity, shrinking cohorts may reduce exclusion both in absolute and relative terms.

Crucially, however, the primary determinant of a system’s enrollment should not be aggregate youth numbers, but the number of young people exiting upper-secondary education with sufficient academic preparation. In many low- and middle-income countries, there is a large disconnect between enrollment in basic and upper-secondary education and actual student learning. This disconnect can extend into higher education, in some cases fostering widespread placebo higher education, i.e., students obtaining higher education credentials without corresponding higher education level competencies. This problem is particularly pronounced in systems with weak quality assurance and limited support for underprepared students. Demographic decline may compound pressure on institutions to compromise academic standards at admission.

A further complication is the expected cost curve of higher education. Conceptually, per-student costs follow a U-shape. Costs should decline when moving from elite into massified higher education due to economies of scale and diversifying higher education provision (e.g., less research-intensive institutions or programs). Costs should rise again at some point, however, as expansion will progressively engage students facing more significant barriers to learning, requiring more investment to educate them successfully. Where South Indian states are located on the U-curve is difficult to judge, but with gross enrollment rates of between 36 percent and 47 percent, we may assume that they are on the right half. Holding all other factors constant, demographic decline squeezes the U-curve, reducing the potential cohort of students who can be educated most

affordably. This increases the average cost per student of decent quality higher education level instruction.

The second avenue for mitigating demographic decline is to recruit more international or other non-local students. High participation systems in higher income countries have often pursued this strategy, including Canadian provinces, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom. Often this is further incentivized by high differential fees. For low- and middle-income countries, this strategy is likely less available, given weaker competitiveness for students as well as adverse political pressures when local participation rates remain modest. Still, Southern Indian institutions might seize upon the region's national reputation for education quality and health and safety, as well as weakening competition from traditional destinations, such as Canada and the United Kingdom. Competing for non-local students may also help foster a virtuous cycle of quality improvement. Malaysia may offer important lessons on how to implement such a strategy successfully in a middle-income context.

## Adapting to Demographic Decline

The alternative to mitigation is adaptation, which may be market- or policy-driven.

Market-driven adaptation entails institutions competing for the smaller pool of potential students. It also involves unsuccessful and unviable private institutions closing. Poland, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States all experienced significant enrollment declines beginning between 2008 and 2013. By 2022, the number of private higher education institutions in these countries had fallen by 25 percent. Yet, private enrollment shares remained stable or even rose in all but Taiwan, meaning greater attrition of institutions than of students. Recently, private enrollment shares have also risen in countries like Germany despite adverse demographics. Evidently, privates can outcompete publics under pressure.

Smaller institutions are much more susceptible to close. Demographic decline not only reduces aggregate local enrollment growth but makes it more volatile. While non-local enrollment can offset local losses, it also tends towards more volatility. Larger institutions are better able to weather these challenges by diversifying their programs and other activities and investing in marketing and other strategic measures.

By contrast, consolidation of public higher education institutions is inherently policy-driven. Governments rarely permit outright closures; instead, they allow or encourage mergers and absorptions. Even so, any form of consolidation—of public or private institutions—tends to be politically sensitive.

International experience shows a higher tendency to consolidate non-university higher education institutions than universities. For instance, three of the four countries discussed above reduced their complements of public non-universities by about 12 percent by 2022, while still increasing the number of public universities (Taiwan excepted). In Poland and South Korea, average university size fell sharply as a consequence, especially outside major cities. Non-universities are more likely to close because of their lower status and weaker elite connections, but also because their smaller size exposes them to the pressures described earlier.

These patterns suggest that demographic decline will be more disruptive for higher education systems with many small non-universities. South India's 11,004 colleges enrolled just 569 students each on average in 2021–2022. Attempting to keep thousands of increasingly unviable institutions afloat risks distracting enormously from the fundamental need to strengthen system quality and relevance. If consolidation is inevitable, the real task is to use it to build stronger, more resilient institutions that better serve their students and communities.

## Demography as Destiny Only in Part

Demographic decline heightens risks for higher education, even in systems where participation remains moderate. Fragmented systems with fragile governance and limited competitiveness are especially vulnerable. Yet, because demography is predictable, it also presents unique opportunities for proactive action, especially for the most vulnerable systems.

Over the next decade, South Indian policymakers have the imperative and the opportunity to transform the higher education system. If they succeed, they may chart a path for all of India and reshape global higher education for years to come.

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## DISRUPTION, DECLINE, & ADAPTATION

# The Collapse of Higher Education in Wartime Sudan

*Rania M.H. Baleela and Husam Eldin E. Abugabr Elhag*

The ongoing war in Sudan since April 15, 2023, has resulted in the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, one characterized by famine, insecurity, genocide, and displacement. In addition to the obvious contemporary toll on the country, this war has overshadowed future generations by severely damaging the physical infrastructure of higher education, jeopardizing long-term prospects for peace, development, and intellectual sovereignty even in the post-war era.

On April 15, 2023, military clashes broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan. Initially, the Sudanese people thought that the fighting would last a few days, or at most, a few weeks. However, the escalating conflict has now resulted in two years of destruction of infrastructure and a significant death toll due to hunger, disease, bombings, and field executions.

In addition to the obvious contemporary toll on the country, the war has overshadowed future generations by severely damaging the physical infrastructure of higher education, jeopardizing long-term prospects for peace, development, and intellectual sovereignty even in the post-war era.

### Over-Centralization

One of the main factors contributing to the rapid decline of the Sudanese higher education sector is the over-centralization of the Sudanese university system. Sudanese universities have historically played a vital role in shaping the intellectual philosophy and civic literacy that contributed to the concepts of Sudanese national unity, development, and social mobility. Over the years, Sudan's 62 public and private universities have provided education to over 600,000 students across various fields, supported by more than 20,000 academics. However, the over-centralization of universities and other higher education institutions in the central states, and particularly in the capital Khartoum, has led to catastrophic devastation of the sector, given the concentration of major university functions in areas most affected by the war.

### Destruction of Infrastructure

Numerous institutions, including the University of Khartoum, Sudan University of Science and Technology in Khartoum, and the University of Gezira in Gezira State, have been occupied as strategic locations by military factions and suffered extensive

damage due to shelling and looting. As a result, the libraries, laboratories, and lecture halls have been ravaged and left derelict. Some of the most profound examples include the destruction of the Natural History Museum and its thousands of preserved specimens collected since the nineteenth century, the burning of the Toxic Organisms Research Centre building at the University of Khartoum, and the looting of the Plant Seed Bank in Wad Madani.

### Displacement of Academic Communities

Like all of the victims of the war, thousands of students, academics and other university staff have been forced to flee their homes, causing a near complete shutdown of the education system. As the war has escalated over time, many academics have sought asylum abroad, resulting in a significant loss of human capital, leading to dire brain drain. Many have sought refuge in neighboring countries or in safer regions of Sudan, often without the means to continue their academic pursuits. Academics have been forced to pursue alternative jobs with low incomes or part-time work to support their families, while more than half of students, whose families have experienced a 40% decrease in monthly salaries, have had to take on employment as war-related inflation continues to raise the cost of living.

Several universities initially adopted online teaching to continue the academic year. However, students still face interrupted studies, uncertainty about qualifications, and limited access to online alternatives due to poor internet infrastructure. Universities in safe zones established education hubs to host the affected educational institutions, but these have mostly adopted hybrid strategies of combined face-to-face and online teaching, which have only been marginally successful at retaining students.

Furthermore, although the Ministry of Higher Education and many universities relocated their operations to the current capital of Port Sudan, where they have been better protected, a

decision was made to return universities to their original locations, requiring the mandatory return of faculty members and students, despite ongoing military attacks. This is a dangerous strategy, given the vulnerability of universities to violations, artillery shelling, or drone strikes.

## Psychosocial and Economic Impacts

Beyond the physical and logistical disruptions, war has exacted a heavy psychological toll on students and educators. Trauma, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness have contributed to declining academic motivation and performance. Furthermore, families struggling with displacement and job loss are often unable to afford tuition or educational materials, further marginalizing access to higher education.

## Implications for National Development

The collapse of higher education and research institutions poses a grave threat to Sudan's long-term development. Universities are not merely centers of learning but incubators for innovation, governance, and civil society. Dismantling these institutions, alongside museums and seed banks, undermines efforts to

rebuild the country and risks entrenching cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. Without a robust educational and research sector, Sudan will struggle to cultivate the leadership and expertise necessary for post-war reconstruction.

The destruction of higher education and research institutions in Sudan is both a symptom and a driving force of the national crisis. Immediate international support is necessary to mitigate the damage and lay the groundwork for future recovery. Although the Sudanese National Academy of Sciences has issued appeals to the global scientific community for assistance, these calls have largely gone unanswered, leaving Sudanese academics feeling isolated and abandoned. This lack of engagement has exacerbated their vulnerability and deepened the sense of neglect.

Humanitarian aid frameworks operating in Sudan must include educational support. Efforts should also be made to preserve academic networks, support displaced scholars, and invest in rebuilding institutions once stability returns. Protecting education in times of war is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for peace and sustainable development.

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## DISRUPTION, DECLINE, & ADAPTATION

# Public Policy and Market Mediation in Indian Higher Education

*N V Varghese*

A new education policy reflects India's efforts to reposition the sector within a changing context and its aspiration to develop the country as a global higher education hub. The policy proposals for the universalization and internationalization of higher education, and for the restructuring of curriculum, reinforce these perspectives. Although the institutional framework for policy implementation is not yet fully in place, a shift in orientation toward centralization, market mediation, and a reduced reliance on public institutions seems core to the reforms.

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), launched after 34 years of anticipation, aimed to reposition the sector within the evolving economic and social context of development. Unlike previous policies, the 2020 policy was framed against the context of the sector attaining maturity and massification and placing increased reliance on market forces to shape the direction of change. For the past five years, all discussions about reform in the sector have centered around the policy, but slow progress in implementation has kept the policy proposals largely untested.

### Progress Toward Implementation

Promises made in the policy include the universalization of higher education, institutional consolidation, transition to a multidisciplinary orientation, opening of the sector to foreign providers, strengthening research, and transformation through new arrangements to ensure light but tight regulations.

Differing from earlier policies, the NEP 2020 encourages expansion of the higher education sector through its focus on universalization. As the country remains at the early stages of massification, there is immense scope for enrolling more youth to universalize the sector. The policy recognizes the need for skills-based education that will allow the country to take advantage of its youth bulge. However, there are challenges in practice. The think tank NITI Ayog projects that universalization of the sector, which implies almost doubling the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), will require an additional intake of nearly 50 million students to increase the total student enrollment to 90 million by 2035. The introduction of four-year undergraduate programs, which extend the duration of undergraduate studies by an additional year, may help to achieve the universalization target.

The policy expects that, by 2040, higher education institutions (HEIs) will become multidisciplinary with multiple entry and

exit options into and out of four-year undergraduate programs. Reviews show that most institutions have introduced four-year undergraduate programs (FYUP) but have done so without adequate curriculum reorganization and teacher preparations. In the absence of planning, there is substantial confusion and uncertainty around what to do with the additional year, especially regarding the required fourth-year research component.

The proposal for institutional consolidation envisages a minimum enrollment of 3,000 students per higher education institution. This proposal looks unrealistic because not more than 5 percent of Indian institutions enroll 3,000+ students. A majority of institutions enroll less than 1,000 students. Further, a consolidation of institutions is difficult because they operate under varying ownership and management. Many institutions remain small in size because they were established in the less developed and rural areas in order to promote equity. Closing down or relocating them will adversely affect equity efforts.

The policies related to the internationalization of higher education envisage that India will emerge as a global higher education hub. While joint degrees, dual degrees, and twinning programs have always been allowed, foreign universities and their branch campuses were not permitted prior to the NEP. Since its implementation, two foreign universities have established branch campuses in India, and many more are in process.

Challenges related to curriculum, the level of fees, and repatriation of a surplus of branch campuses are beyond the purview of national regulatory authorities and nationalistic considerations. Equity and inclusion may become a casualty when market-friendly foreign campuses and elite institutions—levying high fees, relying on selective admissions, and following English medium instructions—become the norm for quality higher education.

The policy also emphasizes the promotion of research, although no more than 10 percent of Indian institutions are actively engaged in research and publications. For example, state universities account for more than 80 percent of enrollment but produce only 14.7 percent of research publications. In contrast, although elite institutions account for less than 10 percent of enrollment, they produce more than 50 percent of research publications. The policy envisages establishing a National Research Foundation (ANRF) to promote and fund research. Developing the mechanisms for channeling these research resources toward a more equitable research ecosystem is a challenging task, given the poor research base of institutions currently.

The NEP 2020 recommends a new structure for reorganizing governance and management of higher education. At present the sector is regulated by more than fifteen bodies. The structure—the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)—is expected to bring all regulatory authorities under one umbrella. It will have four independent verticals, one each for regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standard setting. This body is yet to take a final shape.

### **What Constrains Policy Implementation?**

Implementation of the NEP suffers from an inability to create effective institutional arrangements and capacity. Public funding support is also not forthcoming, with budgetary allocations to education not encouraging in the initial years following policy formulation.

The Ministry of Education generally follows a committee approach and relies on existing institutions for policy

implementation. Several committees have, therefore, been constituted, and several institutions have been identified, very often without any provision for additional resources, which has crippled policy implementation processes.

The creation of FYUP has also increased the workload of teachers, challenged the infrastructure capacity of institutions, and increased the cost for students with doubtful gains in the quality of skill acquisition and learning. Surveys among teachers and students indicate a fear of FYUP diluting core disciplinary competencies. There is an urgent need for introducing system-wide capacity development programs to support teachers to restructure curricula, integrate technology in teaching-learning processes, adopt new pedagogical practices, and strengthen research orientation among students.

### **Conclusion**

The aspirations reflected in the NEP 2020 policy seem to be misaligned with the implementation strategies. New regulatory structures are yet to emerge and over-reliance on existing institutions seems to be constraining policy implementation. Absence of enhanced budgetary support also severely constrains new initiatives. How far markets can be relied upon to implement public policy in education is debatable. The available trends indicate that policy implementation promotes an unstated silent restructuring process for centralizing control, weakening the role of public institutions and privileging elite private and foreign institutions in higher education policy and planning. These trends tend to erode the policy promise of equitable and inclusive quality higher education in the country.

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