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Higher Education in Southeast Asia: Development and Prospects
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It is just about ten years since the publication in full of the joint UNESCO-IAU Report on higher education and development in Southeast Asia. In that report, certain important conclusions with respect to both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of higher education were drawn. These need to be discussed in relation to the events which have actually occurred with the lapse of time.

Quantitatively speaking, the study highlighted a general imbalance between manpower needs and the output of institutions of higher learning in the region as a whole. This was the case both with regard to level and type of manpower skills required. Proportions between levels were unsatisfactory. For example, there was a tendency to over-provision at the managerial/professional level as compared with that at the vocational/entrepreneurial/para-professional level. In terms of types of skills, oversupply was experienced in such sectors as the arts and social sciences and a noticeable shortage in the areas of the natural sciences and technical education. Vocational education at post-secondary level was yet to be properly expanded. Among the professional schools at universities, law faculties seemed over-developed almost everywhere.

¹ Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development (Singapore)

² Higher Education Development Project of the International Council

Qualitatively speaking, there were heavy wastages arising from large enrolments being attended by low output. Among the contributory factors to this situation was the liberal policy applied to admissions at higher institutions – a policy determined more by basic qualifications rather than by a strict selection of pre-requisites. There was, too, the inadequate preparation of secondary school students for higher education due to a disproportionate concentration on a university preparatory curriculum to the exclusion of considerations which might be linked to more diversified vocational expectations. At the same time, production at the level of tertiary institutions needed a firm base for the maintenance of high quality. This, the rapid expansion at primary and secondary levels of education, during a period of popular demand for education, could hardly ensure. Lack of counselling for secondary students regarding vocational opportunities and lack of adequate planning further compounded the problem. Finally, an in-adequate supply of quality teachers left its poor-quality stamp on the products at all levels. This necessitated the offer of remedial courses in some universities, a measure which diverted scant resources, both human and material, from more important concerns.

Throughout the Report, a strong note was struck, not so much for the further expansion of higher education as for a re-planning of its role, its purpose and content to bring about a development which bears a closer relevance to the purposes for which education is provided in the first instance – a development which cannot be divorced from the objectives of development in other sectors of the national effort.

A system of higher education anywhere is the major investment and its development cannot be left either to wanton preference or a blind faith in traditional practice. What has happened since the publication of the Report? Has the scene changed? Have there been developments along the lines of some of the recommendations at least? These questions are even more important since the intervention of the oil crisis.

Table 1 provides the average annual growth rates of enrolment in higher education. Comparing the rates in the first half of the decade of the Sixties (covered by the Report) with those in the second half (a post-report period), it may be seen that growth rates did indeed fall in six of the countries in the region with a consequent drop for the whole region from an overall average growth rate of 12.4 per cent in 1960-1965 to 10 per cent in 1965-1970.

Table 1

Average annual growth rates⁽¹⁾ of enrolment in higher education in the Southeast Asia Region (as a %)

Country	1960-65	1965-70
Burma	7.0	15.2
Indonesia	19.5	11.1
Khmer Republic	31.0	9.3
Laos	7.3	21.4
Malaysia	9.5	5.9
Philippines	11.9	4.7
Singapore	11.7	-0.1
Thailand	-4.4	8.7
Former Rep. of Vietnam	18.0	14.1
Average growth rate for the region	12.4	10.0

If we omit the three countries of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam where events, since the cessation of war, are bound to have introduced significant variations in the pattern of change, we find that of the remaining six countries, one (Singapore) had a negative growth rate and three countries (Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines) registered an average drop in growth rate of 6.4 per cent. Only two countries, Burma and Thailand, showed an increase in growth rate, and this, at more than twice that in the previous half decade.

(1) Extracted from Table 1 on page 64 of Higher Education: International trends, 1960-1970, Statistical Reports and Studies Series, UNESCO, 1975.

From the evidence, therefore, it may be suggested that enrolments at tertiary level have begun to be made subject to more selective control and that firm decisions may have been reached already about optimum limits beyond which enrolment figures would not be permitted to grow. In the case of Burma more recent statistics suggest that the university student population, which increased markedly from 20,555 in 1964-65 to 52,809 in 1971-72, is getting stabilised. The Burmese Government has declared its intention to limit the annual fresh intake into universities to 10,000.

In the Thai case, a strong social demand for higher education, despite the rapid growth in the number of universities and the increase in areas of study, forced on the Parliament a decision to create, in 1971 an open university. In that year, the enrolment at the Open University alone equalled the combined total of enrolments at the eleven other universities. Also, the Private College Act of 1969 allowed for the establishment of privately-owned colleges, although the establishment of these were to be strictly regulated through a control which was to be jointly exercised by the Ministry of Education and the National Education Council. Thus the Thai enrolment figures show a 13.1 per cent increase.

The latter half of the decade saw also a decided effort made towards better planning in and for higher education. In Burma, a co-ordinating committee for higher education was instituted by the Office of the Prime Minister. Universities and higher institutions of education in Singapore and Malaysia which are almost totally subsidised by their respective governments have long been subject to a coordinated control. Where Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines are concerned, the presence of a strong private enterprise in tertiary education makes it difficult to exercise control and bring about coordination to the same extent as in the other three countries.

Nevertheless, manpower planning units have been set up in all countries and indications are that shifts in higher education are being made to meet the demands arising from areas of shortage. From statistics in Table 2 it may be inferred that such shifts have been quite significant in countries like Singapore and Malaysia where coordination is easier to plan.

Table 2

Distribution⁽²⁾ of Students by Field of Study (as a %)

Country	Year	Humanities	Edn	Fine Arts	Law	Social Sc.	Nat'l Sc.	Engg.	Med'l Sc.	Agri-Cult.
Burma	1965	40	4	-	1	10	22	9	12	2
Indonesia	1959	5	28	-	19	17	1	4	14	4
	1971	6	22	1	9	28	2	16	9	5
Malaysia	1960	4	85	-	-	-	1	8	-	1
	1966	12	70	-	-	1	5	7	2	3
	1970	25	20	1	-	16	15	11	4	7
Philippines	1960	13*	18	1	4	39	...*	9	13	1
	1965	16*	38	1	2	25	...*	11	5	1
	1969	19*	26	1	3	34	...*	10	4	1
Singapore	1966	11	37	5	2	12	13	12	8	-
	1971	9	10	7	3	17	10	37	6	-
Thailand	1959	2	6	2	26	46	5	4	6	3
	1965	4	15	2	24	31	4	5	10	5
	1967	6	16	2	8	33	4	6	13	7
	1970	6	25	2	7	27	5	8	11	7

Note *The figures for Natural Sciences are included in those for the humanities.

It should be noted that the element of personal choice of subjects is still open to students, despite the control exercised over admissions. The social sciences may be considered a generally popular field of study. Figures for education courses tend to fluctuate depending on the needs of the moment. Such may be caused through rapid expansion in the system or through a rapid turnover of trained staff in the education service due to the attraction of the inducements which the private sector vies with the public sector to offer.

(2) Ibid, Op.cit. pp 72, 73.

There are other reasons too for sudden shortages of teachers. In Singapore, for example, a shortage of English medium teachers has been created because of a strong shift in parental choice of medium of instruction for the children, a shift of choice from a language which is more akin to the home language to one which is perceived as the language of economic success and mobility in a technological society. Thus, though a period of stability in teacher supply was expected in 1970, the problem of shortage appeared at the turn of the present decade to be as formidable as ever. Despite careful manpower planning, redundancy accompanied the shortage.

Measures, which have been taken to meet qualitative considerations besides those of selective admission and more specific manpower planning, have been in the areas of diversification of curricula and the promotion of a better relationship between secondary and higher education. With respect to the diversification objective, more non-university type institutions have been set up, noticeably in Burma, Malaysia and Singapore. Secondary education in its turn has received a hard look and more pronounced attempts have been made to define and distinguish the curriculum meant for those students for whom secondary education is terminal from that for students with potential for university-type education.

Remedial courses, nevertheless, continue to be offered at university level. These are necessary mainly because of the introduction of a new medium of instruction or because of existing medium of instruction is not familiar enough to those who receive it. The latitude left to personal choice in the pursuit of higher education brings also its embarrassments. It was seen in Table 2 that the social sciences have remained a popular area of choice and, in some countries, it seems to attract growing numbers of students. In circumstances of rapid industrialisation, the graduates who turn to school teaching tend to be mainly those who have pursued the humanities or social science subjects. This has meant an oversupply of such teachers to schools. The consequent need arises of attempting to make "bricks with straw". At the Institute of Education in Singapore, remedial courses offered to graduates comprise the following:

- 1 Applied Mathematics and Statistics, for would-be teachers of mathematics who have pursued only pure mathematics;
- 2 Physics of Chemistry, to would-be teachers of Physical Science with only university training in one subject or the other, but not in both;
- 3 The fine arts (music or art) and physical education, for graduates in the social sciences who have read subjects which are non-school subjects.

Such courses place a heavy strain on staff. But the problem is difficult to solve in as much as the university's service functions cover a much wider sector than teacher training.

Future prospects

I hesitate at this point to attempt to consider anything in the way of a prediction. The futurologist to-day occupies an uncomfortable position. The trends and indicators on which he relies for his predictions are not as easily discernible as in times less subject than ours to the vagaries of chance and change. It would be safer not to peer too far into the future, except to ascertain from time to time that the objectives associated with the provision of higher education were still acceptable even as the measures taken to implement them continue to be costly. It would also be more pertinent to consider what should not be set against the future than to hypothesise about what might be.

First, our respective countries, as may be discerned from the foregoing brief discussion of developments, are more and more concerned with the creation of a well-equipped intelligentsia, able to contribute to sound nation-building, able to match, with the specific skills, which they have acquired at institutions of higher learning, the needs of development within a technological society. In the case of Burma, for example, it was specifically stated, as an aim among others prescribed by law, that courses of instruction and training would be devised, in which foremost priority would be given to technology and science, so as to lead to effective vocational and professional pursuits⁽³⁾. Towards the same end, the Malaysian Government established the Universities of Science and Agriculture, upgraded the Technical College to university status, and

(3) Burmese Education Law, 1964.

developed more particularly the postgraduate courses in the fields of science, medicine and technology at the University of Malaya in order to effect a shift from an overemphasis on the humanities and the social sciences to science and technology. Similar shifts have taken place in Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

Society is expressly willing, therefore, to support a costly technically-oriented enterprise and the State, in most cases, underwrites the expenses. The emphasis is on the importance of acquiring utilitarian knowledge, a process very much related to training, may grow to the eventual exclusion of research, which embodies purely individual subjective experience. From time to time, there are signs of a growing impatience with pure research. Even the subjective experience has to be tied in to a utilitarian motive.

While it is clear that research that is too esoteric in nature can hardly be a priority in any country with immense problems of development, the lines are not clear as to what may be termed acceptable research. For much of what is applied come through the unhurried addenda to basic research, accrued over years of patient observation and experimentation, without obvious connections with the world of action. Unfortunately, research to-day, like everything else, has been technologised. It is often associated with the research "plant", which can be very expensive when set against the returns. It may be necessary for universities to consider how to adapt to limited means, without having to forgo the right to the best individual insights which are still the sine qua non of true progress. The fact is that, even in the advanced countries, there is a growing tendency to regard the polytechnics as places for action and universities as places for withdrawal from action. In Britain, for example, there seems to be a move towards a polarisation of institutions with the CATS (Colleges of Advanced Technology) extending their embrace to more and more types of professional training, the latest being teacher training, while the universities continue to enjoy the luxury of research. For the short term, this may seem ideal, but it may not be far-fetched to expect that, when the national purse becomes too slender to support all institutions on an equal basis, action-oriented institutions may claim much, if not all, of what remains in the purse. It may be important, therefore, that the pattern of specialisation discernible in the establishment of special universities in the region should not result in the attrition of institutions which may seem less profit-worthy in the utilitarian sense. This, however, should not be taken to mean that, where a proliferation of higher institutions of learning has taken place without

clear purpose and where their establishment has been based on nothing more than popular demand, a proper evaluation of priorities should not be carried out and drastic reduction enforced.

Another problem which needs to be attended to has to do with the products of higher institutions of learning. There is increasing complaint that institutions of higher learning are large, impersonal and bureaucratic. The impersonality of life at tertiary level is quite obvious. I have been interviewing university graduates seeking admission to teacher training for the past few days, at thirty persons a day. But for a mere few, the majority confessed to not having participated in any extra-curricular activities during their undergraduate years. They had a lot of learning to do, so they claimed. From the experience of the staff of my Institute, university graduates on the course are found to be much more disoriented than non-graduates about values in life which have to do with community and civic-mindedness. The evidence here is that schools do foster through their classroom groups a sense of togetherness, whereas the universities have not. If nation-building presumes that our products should have the right attitudes for the purpose, then it should be our responsibility to examine how we can inculcate values in an age of facts. Otherwise, the great effort put into the provision of higher education may produce less than the desired returns. What are the alternatives to the tutorial system which may be beyond the means of universities carrying populations of more than five thousand? Or should there be more of less? Smaller institutions?

A third aspect, associated with the development of higher education, which needs clear examination for better results in the future, is that of manpower for tertiary-level institutions. Too frequently this is an afterthought to the provision of tertiary level education. The buildings are planned on the drawing boards, but the manpower is left to time and circumstance. In the volume, *growth of Southeast Asian Universities*⁽⁴⁾, the Indonesian account has this to say,

“To meet the need of teaching staff, new staff members were recruited without any selection or a well-defined personnel development. The teaching staff composition in the academic field often does not meet the real need of the field concerned, which should be the case in a well-arranged academic situation. Some fields are overstaffed while others have a minimal number of staff.”

(4) Amnuay Tapingkae (ed), RIHED publication, 1974.

Such a problem would be most common where institutions of higher learning are still in the process of being established or have been established in too rapid a succession. But, there is another angle to this problem which is not often taken up – that of the ability of the staff to teach. If the emphasis, as it is to-day, is on training in order to equip persons for specific roles in society, then a premium should be set on the ability to train. Teachers at tertiary level institutions have been exempted from undergoing pedagogical training by virtue of the argument that their superior attainments have already established their worthiness for their job. While this might be true in the days when university dons were filled with matter, facile with ideas, deeply interested in research and students were few enough in number for a “deep calling to deep” type of communication to occur frequently between the tutor and the taught, the situation to-day is vastly different. Students who are at the various institutions mainly for training are no longer homogeneously interested in ideas. They want the lines of instruction to fall clearly into place. Also, with the development of educational technology, other methods than the lecture could be used to enrich classroom teaching, particularly where the lecture notes are full of secondhand material culled from common texts and contain nothing that is original or peculiarly the lecturer’s own. The contact time, too, between lecturer and individual student has become almost negligible. The ways and means of countering this ever-present threat of student anonymity should be explored.

The universities and other institutions in the region remain highly-examination conscious. The niceties of separating sheep from goats are carefully observed, though there is enough evidence in the research literature on educational measurement to cast a doubt over the reliability of the various evaluation procedures followed at institutions of higher learning. Do we allow a mark, sometimes a mere point, to distinguish the outstanding from the good, and so on, down the line, or has there been some thought addressed to the desirability of defining what outstanding achievement might be in terms of certain discernible characteristics. Perhaps it may be feasible at this juncture of development to consider the role of criterion-referenced assessment, in place of the usual norm-referenced assessment, in determining who should pass or fail, or who should be considered outstanding or average. In the world of work, what is important is the ability of the individual to respond to a situation requiring his specific skills, rather than the particular mark or degree which he has acquired.

Finally, because we are Asians, we find it difficult to accept technological values in their entirety. We would like to repeat that man shall not live by bread alone. Is there a place for some form of study at tertiary institutions which should be made compulsory for all students – a study which will provide meaning to the action, a study which brings together philosophical as well as practical considerations, which is not just a study of the history of ideas, or the philosophy of ideas, but welds scientific inquiry to humanistic values?

In discussing the various problems above, I have assumed that the next decade will be one largely of consolidation rather than expansion. The continuing oil crisis will not make it easy for state governments to entertain grand ideas about status and prestige. Tertiary institutions will be viewed as having essentially a plebeian role. They will be required to get closer to the community and society in which they exist. It is with this in mind that I have discussed those issues which I feel will have a bearing on future prospects.