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Who Benefits from the Massification of Taiwan’s Higher Education?

Guest Editor’s Introduction

In Taiwan, higher education was closely linked to economic development and was subject to government control before the 1980s. The government implemented rather strict control measures over both public and private institutions in terms of establishing schools; determining their size; appointing presidents, admissions, curriculum; and expanding in particular higher education institutes (HEIs). The addition of new universities was extremely limited. In 1984 when the per capita income was only US\$4,000, Taiwan had 173,000 university students, only about 0.9 percent of the total population of 19 million. Higher education remained a means to cultivate elites using a rigorous college entrance exam system to select talent.

It was not until the lifting of martial law in 1987 and onward that the number of HEIs began to rise to meet the demands from globalization and domestic social and economic changes in Taiwan. Since the early 1990s, there was an unprecedented expansion in both in the number of HEIs and in the number of students. Consequently, the government’s public spending on higher education

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became relatively constrained. In order to alleviate the financial burden of the higher education expansion, the government adopted neoliberal principles and market mechanisms by granting HEIs greater freedom and rights in university governance and operational budgeting.

During the 1990s Taiwan, like many countries whose government underwent organizational reforms and changes in education, also amended its Universities Law and set up the Executive Yuan Education Reform Commission (1994–96) to launch a reform blueprint enabling universities to move down the road toward deregulation, decentralization, democracy, and internationalization. For example, the Universities Law as amended in 1994 transformed universities from being under the traditional centralized control of the Ministry of Education into more autonomous campus environments, reducing academic and administrative intervention in universities and moving toward more autonomy in terms of admissions, staffing, and tuition policies.

Meanwhile, as Taiwan's government responded to public demands for more high schools and universities and for alleviation of the pressure for advancement, along with a demand to establish universities in local elections, by 2008 (with per capita income of U.S.\$17,000 at the time), the number of university students had increased to 1.12 million, a 6.5-fold jump since 1984. The number of universities had increased to 148 (51 public and 97 private); adding in 15 vocational/technical colleges, the total was 163. By 2009, the total number of college and university students had reached nearly 1.34 million (including undergraduates, vocational/technical students, and graduate students), or 5.8 percent of Taiwan's entire population of 23 million people.

The rapid expansion of the higher education system also had some side effects, including an overly rapid upgrade of some vocational/technical colleges into universities, causing a decline in the quality of education. Although the government relaxed its controls over universities, it introduced market competition mechanisms that resulted in the uneven distribution of resources among public and private institutions, causing aftereffects such as increased social stratification.

With these facts in mind, this issue of *Chinese Education and Society* explores the topic of who has benefited from the expansion of higher education in Taiwan. First, Chou Chuing Prudence and Wang Li-Tien address the question “Who Benefits from the Massification of Higher Education in Taiwan?” This topic includes an exploration of the allocation of resources in terms of ethnicity as well as class reproduction. Their research indicates that although Taiwan’s university enrollment rate is said to be one of the highest in Asia, the distribution of resources is increasingly concentrated on elite ethnic groups in a few public universities. These elites come mostly from families with high socioeconomic status, so that class reproduction in universities is becoming increasingly apparent. In addition, Lin Ching-Yuan analyzes the impact of high university tuitions on disadvantaged students in Taiwan. While everyone can attend university since expansion, the gap between public and private school tuition is too high (two to three times), and most of the students attending private universities come from economically vulnerable families. The result is that many private school students must rely on student loans or part-time jobs to complete their education, which indicates enormous social inequity. We can see that since the massification of higher education, the gap in the distribution of resources appears to be increasingly large.

The original intention of massification was for the whole society to be able to access higher education, increasing the quality of the citizenry. Many have questioned, however, whether the quality of higher education has fallen due to the massive expansion of universities and students. This subject often gives rise to discussions about the student point of view regarding teaching quality. Chang Dian-Fu and Chao-Chi Yeh’s article addresses teaching quality after the massification of higher education in Taiwan from student perspectives. In 2005 Taiwan implemented the Teaching Excellence Program, aimed at balancing the quality of higher education. Chang and Yeh investigated whether teaching quality improved at universities receiving program grants and found that many still failed to meet the expectations of students in terms of teaching quality. With regard to student performance and learning experience, Chuang Ching-Pao and Hu J.H. Joanne compared the employment perfor-

mance of college and university graduates after the massification of higher education and found that students' education was not always used in the job market, that students in medicine and health and industrial arts outperformed students from other disciplines in terms of employment, and that the employment performance of graduates from public universities was superior to that of students from private universities and vocational/technical colleges. In addition, along with the expansion of higher education, admission procedures to Taiwan's universities underwent major changes; the previous one-time unified entrance exam system was changed to multiple-channel entrance, which includes recommendation and selection, application for admission, and designated testing. After being admitted through different entrance channels, students may have different learning experiences. Lin Hsiao-Fang examined the impact of Taiwan's multiple-channel university entrance policy on the learning outcomes of third-year students and found that students, whether from public or private schools, who had applied for admission generally had better learning experiences.

Wang Ru-Jer also points out that after the expansion of higher education, access to education is still being questioned. The gap between public and private tuition has resulted in a situation in which class reproduction remains widespread. In addition, Wang Hsiou-Huai, as well as Liu Chin-Shan and Cheng Hui-Juan, respectively explore issues remaining after the massification of higher education in Taiwan from the viewpoints of equity and excellence, including imbalances in quality, the dilution of funding, and the misuse of evaluation indicators. After clarifying the significance of equity and excellence, Wang recommends that equity issues should be included as one of the top priorities in policy making. Liu and Cheng suggest specific measures from the start, during the process, and in the outcome of the higher education massification process. Cheng Sheng Yao (Kent) and W. James Jacob's and Chen Dorothy I-ru's studies both indicate that the expansion of higher education does not necessarily parallel equal access to higher education. Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender have generally decreased for higher education students attending the less selective

vocational track but increased for those attending the more selective general track.

After the expansion of higher education in Taiwan, groups originally belonging to elites continue to enjoy rich resources. While members of the general public do enjoy access to higher education, the teaching quality and the learning environment they have still cannot compare to those of elite groups. In other words, although the rapid expansion of the number of universities has brought the advantages of increased educational opportunities for the middle and lower classes, the expansion of access to higher education has also raised doubts about a decrease in quality. It is worthwhile to see how Taiwan will respond to the problem of maintaining higher education quality as well as equity in the era of massification, coupled with its imminent birth decline challenge.