

Southeast Asia Higher Education Changes and Emerging Futures

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Abstract

This paper unpacks recent developments and future directions in Southeast Asian higher education. It takes stock of higher education systems in three selected countries, Australia, Indonesia and Singapore. It sketches these systems, distils several changes around 2024, and discusses emerging directions for education, research and universities. The paper concludes by looking at what is required to catalyse transformations likely to impel future progress.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Higher Education, University Reform, Policy Futures.

Introduction

This paper unpacks recent developments and future directions of one of the largest and fastest growing higher education regions of the world. In even less than the span of one career, Southeast Asia (SEA) has built one of the world's largest higher education ecosystems. The rapid and sustained evolution of higher education in SEA has transformed the academic landscape in ways that make it difficult to predict the future roles of doctoral graduates. Profound imagination and foresight will be needed to curate future steps, as will basic information about what is going on. Taking stock of changes in 2024 furnishes an interested angle on understanding what the future may bring.

Herein lies a problem, for far too little is known about higher education in SEA, particularly compared with other parts of the world. Regional efforts have focused on building and expanding university systems. Less emphasis has been placed on monitoring, evaluation, and scholarly research about higher education itself. Apart from national statistics, 'global' university rankings, and commercial data on potential tuition flows, most public data has been collated by agencies based in Europe and North America. Collaboration among countries and universities is patchy, precarious, and political. In many respects, Asia has hitherto played a subordinate or 'back-office' role, sending people for research and education to other parts of the world.

Among the panoply of possible futures, however, it is hard to imagine SEA being the silent premise in global higher education for too many more decades or even years to come. While it differs in interesting respects, as touched on in this paper, higher education in SEA has grown to compare in meaningful ways to higher education in other major world regions in terms of universities, faculty, students and research endeavours (Zhong & Coates, 2020). There is a need to understand and create possible futures.

With such background in hand, this paper takes stock of higher education systems in selected countries in SEA, all of which are at varying stages of maturity. After offering a sketch of sample higher education systems in the next section, the paper distils several 2024 changes. The penultimate section looks at emerging directions, and the paper concludes by looking at what is required to catalyse transformations.

In reading this paper it is important to keep in mind that ‘Southeast Asia’ is far from a settled concept, location or region (Miler & Johnson, 1997). Asking students in a class to draw ‘Asia’ let alone the sub-region produces an array of fantastic and bewildering configurations. Professorial minds overlay theories, directions, powers, projections and caveats. Businesspeople see endless wealth arising from having 60 per cent of the world’s people within a few hours flight of Singapore. Including Australia in this nomenclature is highly controversial, though the country belongs to the ASEAN Plus Six and East Asia Summit (EAS) groups. Defining Asia depends as much on impression as it does on information or expertise.

Southeast Asia Higher Education

This paper focuses on higher education in three countries around SEA. SEA is a large, thriving and diverse part of the world. Overall, there are around a dozen countries with 700 million people in this part of the world, with a combined GDP around US\$5 trillion, over 7,000 higher education institutions, and upwards of 12 million students (Lim, et al., 2022). While SEA is itself an evolving and debated concept, in this analysis we embrace the broad region between Myanmar to the north and west and Australia to the south and east. In particular, we sample three countries with large and thriving higher education systems: Australia, Indonesia, and Singapore (Figure 1). These countries offer different

cultural, historical, institutional and educational perspectives on higher education and research.

Figure 1: World map and sampled Southeast Asia higher education systems



Australia has built a globally renowned higher education system over the last three decades, shifting from a system with antipodean foundations designed to cultivate a national professional class to a sector that contributes significantly to the nation's economy (Universities Australia, 2024). In 2024, Australia had 44 universities, eight university colleges, and 158 institutes of higher education. In 2023 there were 1,076,027 Australians studying at university and around 400,000 foreign national students (DoE, 2024). Australian universities have grown large due to fixed-price tuition for domestic students and international demand, with 16 universities each having over 40,000 students. Institutions are legally separate to government, though government exercises significant control through funding, regulation, accountability and broader controls. Regulation and funding have nationalised and developed as the system has grown, with concentration over the last decade on academic and corporate processes rather than institution and student inputs. Australian higher education institutions have become massive players in the global industry of fee-paying higher education students, with revenue from such sources contributing substantially to university research and development. In 2024 Australia's universities contributed over AU\$40B to the national economy and employed over 250,000 staff. Australia's universities produce significant research, leveraging government, research council and international collaborations. Around five universities

have been consistently listed at the top world ranks.

Indonesian higher education is growing rapidly as the nation's economy matures, and has yet to reach its full potential. There are more than 4,000 institutions of higher education in a complex and fragmented sector. National reforms in the early 2000s sought to develop institutional autonomy, yet the system remains centralised and controlled by the public sector (Rosser, 2016; Aprimadya, 2023). The intersecting authorities of multiple ministries and state agencies affects the sector's agility. Most higher education institutions are privately owned, small, and varying in quality. Meanwhile, most public institutions are treated as a working unit of the Ministry of Higher Education and less than 25 public institutions are autonomous (Pannen et al., 2019; Irianto, 2023). However, as the Higher Education Law provides the Ministry of Higher Education with authority on various governance aspects, including planning and implementation, practitioners and scholars have questioned the merits of institutional transformation. Most students study at one of the 206 public institutions. Education and social science programs remain the favoured programs despite decades of advocacy toward STEM. International student mobility is very limited except to selected institutions and programs, such as medicine. Most lecturers are master's graduates with large teaching and administrative responsibilities (Pratama, 2020). These staffing characteristics coupled with a lack of infrastructure and research funding have impacted the country's research performance.

Singapore's higher education system is dominated by its six autonomous universities and five polytechnics. While there are other institutions, including international ones that have established in Singapore (such as the French business schools INSEAD and ESSEC, and Australian universities such as James Cook and Murdoch), the autonomous universities and polytechnics deliver most of the higher education and research in the country. By all international standards, this is a small coterie of institutions, but by international standards they punch above their weight. In highly referenced (but also significantly debated) rankings, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technology University (NTU) have featured among the world's top universities. In lesser known (but also less criticised) rankings, the Singapore Management University (SMU) has featured impressively. The polytechnics are well known for the quality of their education and the preparedness of their graduates for the workforce. Overall, compared to many other

countries where graduate unemployment is an issue, graduate employment rates are very healthy. With respect to the university sector, the Singapore Government adopted a framework of 'autonomy' first with SMU early in its inception (in 2000). Subsequently, in the mid-2000s, the incumbent universities (NUS and NTU) were granted autonomy, and the newer universities followed suit at their inception. This means that there is a policy and performance agreement between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and each university. Annually, there is a Performance Review Forum where MOE meets up with each university to discuss performance towards agreed goals. The Singaporean Government retains control over the universities through policy setting and appointing members to trustee boards.

Major Changes Around 2024

Introduction

The year 2024 provides an excellent period to sample changes taking place in these three countries. The Covid19 pandemic ravaged these societies between 2000 and 2022, taking its toll on travel and economics, and as a result teaching, international students and research. In many respects, 2023 was seen as a rebuilding year, with many countries and universities setting foundations for future practice and settling into what was often foreshadowed as a 'new normal'. Notwithstanding national and international developments, a sample of which are explored below, 2024 may be seen in many respects as the first year post-2019 which is relatively stable, at least from an analytical perspective.

Australia: 2024 Changes and Challenges

At the start of 2024 Australia's Minister for Education released the 'Universities Accord' which sought to "devise recommendations and performance targets to improve the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of higher education, in order to achieve long term security and prosperity for the sector and the nation" (DoE 2024). Enthusiasm around the Australian Universities Accord waned rapidly due to several government policy controversies which impacted the ability of universities to undertake their core mission.

One example was the proposed ‘international student cap’. Echoing interventions in other countries, this proposed ‘international cap’ sought to limit the number of foreign national students an institution might enrol. The espoused reason was the impact such students had on domestic demand for housing. This intervention was considered highly controversial given the reliance of institutions on foreign tuition, with estimates that in the first year alone the measure would cost universities between \$650 million to \$750 million in foregone tuition fees (Calderon, 2024). This, in turn, would mean the loss of thousands of jobs, erosion of universities’ research endeavours, less student support, and delay to building maintenance and infrastructure. The proposed policy was litigated throughout 2024 in public, in the media, by politicians, and in the Australian Parliament. Ultimately, the proposed legislation was defeated in the Australian Parliament. An election loomed at the time, and administrative immigration measures were implemented as an interim political response.

University budget challenges reared as important public issues in 2024, not least due to their size, their precarity, and their consequence. Before the pandemic only a few universities reported net operating deficits. In 2022 and 2023 annual reports, 27 of 41 selected universities reported a deficit (Calderon, 2024). It can be argued that universities pursue strategic ‘deficits by design’ to sustain subsidies, staffing and operations. Even though universities bet on a resumption of international student revenue flows and greater post-pandemic government support, strong headwinds curtailed such optimism and a multi-decade stretch of economic growth. Many universities seem likely to report deficits for years to come, which will impact staffing, research and the quality of education.

In 2024 a significant amount of sector energy was invested in matters relating to leadership, governance and work. A few specific changes stand out. Broader industrial relations changes have limited the capacity of universities to rely on casual academic staff which are abundant. Concern grew among politicians, unions and staff over the salary packages of university presidents, which regularly exceed AU\$1M. Australia’s workforce regulator found that many universities had underpaid casual academic staff by tens of millions of dollars. The inability of the Minister of Education to regulate international student flows revealed limits of government power. Combined, these changes gave

momentum to broader developments around the need to reform university governance and leadership. An Australian Senate review of university governance was established.

Australia has a highly exposed university system which is being buffeted by global forces. Australia has developed major education and research partnerships with China, which have been tested in recent years due to broader international developments and conditions. A pivot to India has been actioned to counter-balance overdependence on China, requiring the formation of new skills, infrastructure, and partnerships. This is a long-term solution, however, because it takes years to forge new markets, because countries which were previously importers of educational services are now exporters, and because national governments are shifting away from globalization and embracing more nativist or regional approaches. More recently, the global engagement of the United States, Australia's foremost security partner over the last 80 years, is being shaken. The United States' strategic realignment will reshape the collaborative nature of science globally for decades.

Australian higher education is facing troubles which flow from rapid growth, broader visibility to society, and a more prominent role in volatile international affairs. These changes, like others, point towards Australian universities facing uncertainty over the next few years. Without smart institution and academic reforms, the financial recovery for universities may be years away. Australian universities' governance frameworks were constructed under the period of sustained economic stability. Policymakers, regulators and university leaders will be tested through this period of uncertainty..

Indonesia Higher Education Changes

Indonesia's higher education underwent much change in 2024. Certain changes stand out among others as playing an important role in the contemporary and future dynamics of this large and developing higher education system.

The year 2024 saw ongoing change in the national regulation of higher education. Following his inauguration in October 2024, President Prabowo Subianto mandated the formation of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology (MoHEST). This governance change received mixed responses. On the one hand, keeping higher

education, science, and technology together is seen as a logical and appropriate move to cultivate a better research culture in Indonesia, which remains argued by some as uninspiring (Rosser 2023, Aprimadya, 2024a). A similar decision, through the establishment of the short-lived Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education (MoRTHE) in 2014-2019, has proven effective in pushing the nation's research performance (Aprimadya, 2024b). Hence, the decision gives a glimpse of hope for an enhanced research environment after five years of semi-neglect of higher education and research. On the other hand, splitting apart one 'super' Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (MoECRT) into three entities is not an easy task as some disruptions to ongoing programs and policies were observed (see Zein, 2025). Nonetheless, as President Prabowo has argued, this decision, which is part of the cabinet enlargement, is necessary to deal with Indonesia's complex socio-political challenges, including in higher education.

The support and remuneration of academics were prominent issues in 2024, revealing strains associated with a growing and diversifying system. A Ministerial Decree on performance incentives for lecturers was another highlight in 2024. Many lecturers in Indonesia hold public servant status, even given reforms in the early 2000s. In general, there are two main salary components for Indonesia's public servants, namely basic salary and performance incentives (Zein, 2025). However, lecturers with public servant status have not received any performance incentive payments since the policy came into effect in 2014-2015. The argument was that lecturers receive another type of 'special' incentive, being a professional incentive (Zein, 2025). Hence, they are not entitled to the performance incentive. As a result, lecturers' take-home pay is often significantly lower than that of staff, as the latter receive performance incentives. Following a series of protests and parliamentary hearings, recent developments suggest that the government will begin disbursing performance incentives for lecturers in July 2025 (Madjid 2025). This move is expected to improve the precarious working conditions faced by many Indonesia's lecturers.

The year of 2024 also marked a significant step in Indonesia's openness to global higher education. Following the establishment post-graduate schools of Monash University on the outskirts of Jakarta in 2022, more foreign universities have followed suit. Western

Sydney University, Deakin University and the United Kingdom's Lancaster University are among the newcomers now offering degrees in their respective satellite campuses in Indonesia. This changing landscape is a welcomed development to foster the global outlook and competitiveness of Indonesia's human capital. The presence of global institutions spurs more intense collaboration between domestic and international scholars, ultimately improving the quality of the local academics and enabling greater knowledge circulation (Indrawati & Kuncoro 2021).

In line with previously discussed developments, the Indonesian government's commitment to financing higher education can be observed through various existing policies. First, the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) scholarship has significantly expanded since its inception in 2013, offering a range of opportunities tailored to diverse socio-demographic groups. Up to 2019, there is 24,000 individuals participated in the program (Rachman, 2022). Second, since 2020, LPDP has also been entrusted with managing a dedicated endowment fund for research. This fund is accessible to Indonesian academics and researchers to finance their projects through a competitive selection process, including joint-funding schemes such as the collaboration between MoHEST and Australia's KONEKSI. Furthermore, the government continues to support students from underprivileged families to attend universities through Kartu Indonesia Pintar Kuliah (KIP-K) program. In 2025, the government has allocated funding to support one million beneficiaries, which is double the number supported in 2020 (Indonesia.go.id, 2025).

Research reforms were another important change in Indonesia's higher education landscape. The political and regulatory climate presented a challenge despite the anticipation of an improved research culture under the new Ministry and continuous government commitments. Scholars and practitioners have noted that the main reason for Indonesia's prolonged underwhelming research performance could be attributed to the politicisation and bureaucratisation of the sector. During the New Order era, for instance, research was carried out largely to justify government programs. Academic work was not able to challenge government, even if the work was intellectually proven or accepted (Mahfud, 1997). Ariel Heryanto (2005) discussed how the state only accepted the legitimacy of science (and knowledge), which was easily managed by the regime. Similar

conditions may re-emerge. Indonesia's higher education and knowledge landscape has been continuously shaped by a preference for commercially oriented research projects (Sunendar & Andriany 2023) often at the expense of qualitative and social research (see Rakhmani and Sakhiyya 2024, Rakhmani 2019). As such, social and critical research has increasingly sought refuge in digital and alternative spaces (Rakhmani and Sakhiyya 2024). In addition, the ongoing national budget constraints have continued to exert pressure on research funding (Tempo, 2025). These challenges must be addressed to ensure that Indonesian academics can pursue research that both contribute to both national economy and broader knowledge production.

Changes in Singapore in 2024

As Singapore continues to face the challenges of a rapidly changing world, of shifting geopolitics, climate change, demographic shifts, structural economic changes, and more, the demands on its higher education system are not insignificant. But the challenges have been anticipated, and the directions for higher education have been set for a few years. Selected 2024 changes therefore reflect consolidation of existing directions rather than significant re-orientation.

Singapore has grown into one of the world's wealthiest countries in the last few decades, fuelled by an excellent education system which is partly constituted by a restless quest for growth. At the start of 2024 Singapore's Education Minister, Chan Chun Sing shared his view that Singapore had to avoid complacency and to redefine success in education, referring to the need to see education as not about grades, culminating in a degree, but to extend to cover broader endeavours across a lifetime, including lifelong learning.

This continues a movement started at least a dozen years ago, when Singapore increased its investment in lifelong learning, notably via the flagship SkillsFuture initiative. SkillsFuture aims to enable individuals to chart ongoing own career and lifelong learning pathways. This includes financial credits for adults to use towards continuing education and skills training. The Singapore Government has also set goals to increase work/study and job placements for mid-career workers. Mid-career transition programs to help workers upskill were announced. Prime Minister Lawrence Wong also announced

additional budget measures to provide funding support for employers to accelerate job-redesign activities.

As part of recognising the dynamic region in which Singapore is located, higher education institutions have sought to strengthen and consolidate its linkages with regional universities, and to position itself as a regional and global academic hub. While intra-regional mobility has always been present, particularly with students from China, India and ASEAN seeking opportunities in Singapore, universities and polytechnics in Singapore have also increasingly sought to establish offices and partnerships in the region. Polytechnics and universities have therefore stepped up on their physical presence in Asia. Notably, in 2024, SMU and the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) established their overseas offices and partnerships in various cities in the region, including China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. 2024 marked an especially active period in the regional outreach efforts of Singaporean universities.

Even while Singapore universities have long sought and delivered academically rigorous and internationally competitive research, in recent years, there is growing discourse around how research impacts business, government and society. Translational research in medicine is well-acknowledged, but the overall pursuit of rankings has privileged academic metrics of success. Looking elsewhere at the shifts in the UK especially through its Research Excellence Framework and impact case studies, as well as Hong Kong's adoption of UK practices through its Research Assessment Exercise, and Australia's Engagement and Impact Assessment, Singapore institutions are stirring in this regard, with SMU's "integrative impact framework" valorising both academic and societal impact. Culture shifts will take time to take root.

Taking Stock

Combined, this analysis reveals different but of course also related changes and trends shaping higher education in the three sampled countries and across all world regions. Table 1 summarises these changes. Neither the countries nor the changes are sampled in any scientific way, yet they do reveal patterns. Australia experienced volatile adjustments to external international and political circumstances. Changes in Indonesia related more

to national policy reforms and workforce developments. Singapore showed more evolutionary development resulting from further consolidation of existing arrangements.

Table 1: Major 2024 changes shaping selected Southeast Asian higher education

Australia	Indonesia	Singapore
International student regulation	Ministry changes	Sustaining success
University financial challenges	Academic remuneration	Lifelong skill emphasis
University governance	Political leadership	Greater regionalisation
Challenging geopolitics	Advancing research	Societal impact

Distinguishing University Futures

Looking Ahead

With the above settings and background in mind, where does higher education in this region appear to be heading? As universities grow to play larger roles in society there is clearly value in charting possible futures in terms of social rather than sectoral frames. Universities not only can do this, many in society would expect them to take the lead (Coates, 2017, 2020).

To this end, the 100-year-life offers higher education a stimulating narrative which is obviously far more inspiring than extrapolating contemporary flux or further detailed analysis of bibliometric ranks. Advances in nutrition, hygiene, and medicine will continue to extend lifespans and alter the structure and scope of modern lives. The possibility of living a hundred years is shaping up into a distinct reality which opens all kinds of prospects for higher education.

As articulated by Kong (2024), finding a foothold in the 100-year-life offers fertile grounds for the setting universities on the next stage of their growth. This is timely, for the ‘global game’ of recent decades is spurring distortions, yielding diminishing returns, and hindering engagement with the purposeful social agenda universities have always

evolved to serve. Universities need to open their doors and experiences to support relearning, reskilling, and more socially purposeful research.

Making Education Authentic

The idea of a 100-year-life evokes a new relationship between universities and people. It is obvious, but far from institutionalized, that three-to-six years of tertiary education in the early twenties will hardly sustain the next 50-70 years of work. There is value for most in a foundation credential which socializes people into adulthood, ferments professional personae, and blends critical knowledge and skills into a highly plastic brain. But learning fades, even with regular refreshing, and across a 50-year career people may want to pivot, augment or start fresh. The three-stage life model of 'education, employment then retirement' endures, but it is being stretched thin and challenged by individual and social change. Education, like employment, needs to be spread across a lifespan.

As Singapore shows, engaging with universities must be a journey that extends throughout people's lives, responding to the changing needs of individuals and society. Universities have almost everything they need to curate the next era of education contribution. A suite of simple adjustments and catalysts would help them make the leap.

Universities need to go beyond the cognitive. Traditionally, universities sought to educate the whole person with all kinds of moral, attitudinal, social and professional formation. Elite programs still do, often distinguishing themselves in this way. In the process of scaling to offer mass-market degrees, many have stepped around any attempt at 'cultivation' and shrunk to servicing the development of knowledge and necessary skills. This has led to concerns about 'social license' in the Australian context. Reinvigorating social and personal dimensions of university education would help universities get back in touch with people, and the extent to which universities do so will surely firm-up as a competitive frontier.

Stimulating independence, exploration and experimentation helps individuals challenge their values, reflect on their identities, and develop a stronger sense of self. This has been an area in which Australia has excelled, Singapore is consolidating, and Indonesia is

venturing. Universities can progress this through self-reflexivity which turns activity into learning, then into valuable experiences. They can provide opportunities for independent production which encourage taking risks, prototyping new ideas, and pursuing self-driven projects. They can provide structure for self-direction, and help when students seek to change courses of study. Through such prototyping, students can chart pathways, design their lives, and create new states of awareness and identity.

Accentuating the humanities will help universities cultivate human qualities. The humanities have suffered several declines in recent decades, precipitated by investments in science and technologies, contested claims for social relevance, and fundamental shakiness fuelled by post-structural cosmopolitanism (Madsjerg, 2017). Funding and programs have been withdrawn in Australia, whereas initial investments in Singapore and Asia have been more slanted towards the sciences. Yet the recent rise of contemporary artificial intelligence reveals that a human-centered education offers essential skills that machines cannot replicate. To serve future needs, universities in this region must offer courses that give insights into the human condition through the arts, humanities, and social sciences. In studying the humanities, we learn about humanity, or what it means to be human. The jobs that will withstand the fourth industrial revolution are those that require an understanding of human nature and a reliance on human empathy.

One way of making universities more relevant is to orient them towards external needs rather than internal legacy structures. ‘Interdisciplinary depth’ is an important quality to foster as universities look to enable learning across a lifetime and frame success as human development rather than the count of credentials. ‘Interdisciplinary depth’ works beyond all sorts of protective walls built around disciplines, and adds substance. Rather than skirt across diverse fields to round out core functional learning, learners should be encouraged to make deep and dynamic interconnections. This obviously requires changes to curriculum architectures, perhaps even to liberal arts. New teaching skills are needed, and the reification of new fields.

In all sampled countries, a national mindset change is needed to switch universities into lifelong enablers. Governments will need to innovate education strategies which currently make it hard for universities to take the leap. In many countries, funding, qualification

and regulatory structures are set for the three-stage life model and need reform. For their part, universities can pivot to multi-stage learning through professional and continuing education programs, modular courses, certifications, and development programs, and leveraging AI and data analytics to personalize tailored learning experiences. Forging age-integrative strategies, integrating leisure and learning, and embracing work-integrated learning offer near-term opportunities for integration. Singapore has made policy headway in this area, in Australia practice and policy are ad hoc, and Indonesia is occupied in building the rudiments of national systems.

Research With Purpose

Academic research, as well, needs to move into a more socially relevant situation. Research has been servant of university globalization. But it has been stretched too much, and as inquiring fingertips have reached beyond global clouds, researchers' feet have lifted from local ground. A raft of dysfunction has emerged, which must be addressed to carve a flourishing path ahead (see Hazelkorn, 2018; Lynch, 2014; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

For centuries university research has swayed between conducting research as an intellectual exercise and to solve societal challenges. Recent decades have positioned research as an instrument for winning reputational competitions (Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021). This focus on short-term reputation has underpinned a longer-term crisis of direction, requiring re-engagement with society to overcome. Affirming the purpose of research beyond short-term performance metrics is needed urgently to fuel engagement and contribution.

As the main funders of academic research, governments and industry need to spark broader national dialogue about the purpose of research. Such dialogue should question how public investment can spur research which goes well beyond serving academic agendas to address societal challenges, explain something to a community that has remained misunderstood or unexplained, or contribute to a different perspective, or be part of a solutioning.

Academic researchers are competitive by nature, and setting broader goals will encourage larger contributions. Universities should grow to think of research impact in academic and societal terms. Partly, this means countering the ‘metricisation’ of research performance, which is only two decades old. Partly, this means finding ways to show that universities are delivering benefits to society, contributing to address the sustainable development agenda. This involves identifying stakeholders and understanding their needs, working with civil society, market forces and the state to frame the research from the start, and engaging stakeholders in translating research findings into actionable outcomes. Assessing impact beyond academic metrics would do much to enhance consequential research.

Becoming anxiously and even existentially fixated on certain forms of academic publication has widened the chasm between universities and the public. Researchers write for researchers, even when the public is the paid-up end recipient. Many publications wallow behind commercial paywalls, even when the public has funded its production. Clearly, alternative channels make research more accessible and actionable. This means going beyond traditional academic formats to reach different audiences, using podcasts, videos, exhibitions, films, popular books, publications targeted at professional bodies, trade associations and communities of practice, and parliamentary reports, policy papers, consultancy reports, pedagogical guides and toolkits. Such publication is itself easy, yet needs codification in reformed research evaluation systems.

Clearly, imbuing university research with greater purpose needs to reify space which keeps universities as the brains trusts of society. Freedom and autonomy are essential for groundbreaking inquiry, as is public accountability. Rather than add ‘engagement’ as an additional administrative burden, dysfunctional measures can be retired. This happens, often without fanfare. Until recently, universities promoted the count of books in their libraries as a show of research muscle, then libraries became learning commons, books and publications transformed, and sustainability encouraged interest in sharing.

Venturing Forth

Cutting Loose Distractions

Universities need to cut loose from troubles to flourish and carve out purposeful education and research, futures. In Australia and Singapore, universities which have grown quickly into ‘world class era’ institutions since the late 1990s have carved out enviable reputations and growth but also a cluster of academic and institutional problems and pains. Without careful strategic consideration, Indonesia may well follow the same course.

The quest for status has spurred diminishing returns. Logically, not every university can be the best in the world, yet the quest for world-class brilliance has led most to invest in trying. Striving for a world-class reputation made sense for a few decades, but the quest to sparkle gets exhausting after a few decades, reverts to management optimization, and hollows-out alternative futures which could be made.

Over-amping research metrics has sparked a symphony of unethical shortcuts in research performance and overtly bad behaviour. Researchers, journals, and whole fields have been infected by problems like data fabrication, data dredging, coercive citation and citation cartels, magniloquence, mistreatment and misalignment. Platforms, corporations, metrics and funding arrangements have propagated misalignment and divergence not only between excellent and integrity, but also between universities and society.

Education innovation and quality has stagnated in many advanced economies, with so much zeal attached to research. University enrolment is low, uneven and declining. As 2024 developments in Australia foreshadow, curricula have become brittle, especially from being coded into online platforms, leading to the teaching of dated skills. In a quest for market differentiation programs have veered towards hyper-specialization. Teaching remains unaccredited practice, rather than an professionalized and structured. Much assessment of learning outcomes has hardly changed in decades and is being exploited by commercial cheaters. Graduate outcomes are misaligned, leading to unemployment, underemployment, ‘lying flat’ (typically referring to the rejection of social pressure and desire to avoid competition and overwork), and quiet quitting. Progress is evidently

feasible, as institutions and other education sectors have shown, and progress must be made to embrace emerging opportunities.

Cultivating Sectoral Innovation

A key learning from trends seen in recent years is that rather than issue credentials then send graduates on their way, universities need to furnish enabling experiences and knowledge contributions which help people and communities grow. Universities as brain trusts have always served as experts. They also need to grow as ‘enablers in chief’ and ‘researchers for impact’. While institutions, especially the research intensive and resource rich ones, are almost lethargic by nature, to embrace this global agenda universities need to build new purpose and mission and cut loose from evidently unproductive distractions.

These frontier innovations for higher education are not complex, but they are ambitious. Most thinking professionals leading and working in and around universities are mindful of these challenges and opportunities. Imagination is never in short supply in higher education. Yet very few education systems or institutions have the foresight and power to advance such ideas to fruition.

As they grow to the rhythms of 100-year-lives, societies are unlikely to wait for universities to reform. Universities need to organize for impact. This would not be their first time. The sector is littered with a history of pivoting between the fluctuating and competing interests of church, state, professions, and science. Creating cultivated gentlemen, training clergy or government officials, and servicing economic growth are no longer all or only the primary reason to be. Neither, soon, may be striving to clamber up corporatized bibliometric lists. Now it is time for universities once again to step outside the looking glass, and chart new purposeful and thriving futures.

Communicating effectively with external stakeholders is critical for ensuring that university contributions are visible and understood by all relevant parties. Universities realize their public value by navigating between ‘corporate’ approaches of strategy, alignment and targeted investment, and the more independent, laissez faire style that characterizes academia. As people’s lifespans lengthen, will universities themselves

endure and remain relevant for the next 100 years? Surely, yes, by taking bold and transformative steps, and embracing the emerging milieu.

Arguably, the fear of change is likely to play a huge role in stymying exactly the progress which universities need to make. This fear of change typically manifests institutionally as 'risk mitigation'. It is given life by regulatory settings and institutional anxieties, sustained by audit finance committees, and executed by senior leaders. Excessive focus on risk mitigation and regulatory compliance has often impeded innovation in Anglo-European higher education. Given the cultural differences and youthful nature of Southeast Asian higher education it will be interesting to see how they play out in this region.

Undoubtedly, this analysis of changes and developments in Southeast Asian higher education has revealed not only enormous growth and development but also offer opportunities to strengthen capacity building in educational research as well as institutional and planning. Research on higher education in Asia remains in its infancy despite the scale and significance of the sector. There is a need for more information on all facets such as policy and strategy, institutional planning an effectiveness, leadership, education, engagement, and of course research. Funding and publication outlets are needed for this research. An important consideration will be the extent that existing Anglo-European perspectives, capabilities and methods will suffice, and the need for region-specific arrangements to take shape.

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