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### Letter from the Special Issue Co-Editors

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## Letter from the Special Issue Co-Editors

New empirical results show the importance of both minimal and high-level skills, the complementarity of skills and the quality of economic institutions, and the robustness of the relationship between skills and growth. International comparisons incorporating expanded data on cognitive skills reveal much larger skill deficits in developing countries than generally derived from just school enrolment and attainment. The magnitude of change needed makes it clear that closing the economic gap with industrial countries will require major structural changes in schooling institutions. (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007, p. 1)

During the past decade Southeast Asian universities have made concerted efforts to step up onto the next rung of the global ladder in developing their capacities in teaching and research. While in the past most Southeast Asian nations focused primarily on expanding access to higher education, the past 15 years have witnessed a clear shift towards concerns for international conceptions of ‘quality’ and adoption of a more global perspective on academic management. As suggested in the quotation from Hanushek and Woessmann (2007), this change in focus has been linked quite explicitly to societal and governmental concerns for sustained and sustainable economic growth (Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004; University Grants Committee, 1999, 2010). Moreover, the importance of this issue for the region, and indeed for the rest of the world, was noted by Cheng (2010):

In the coming two decades, the Asia-Pacific Region will continue to be the fastest growing area in the world, driving economic development globally and in particular producing the largest number of tertiary graduates and related human capital for the emerging knowledge-based economy. Clearly, there is an urgent need for capable leadership that can transform the education systems with aims to support the enhancement of human capital and the fast development in the region. (p. 2)

In the context of this rapid growth, the region’s systems of tertiary education are undergoing transformation in response to both local and global pressures. Local pressures include the entry of large numbers of previously unserved segments of students into tertiary education, economy-related demands for workers with new skills sets to support sustainable development, and the socialisation of knowledgeable citizens capable of participating in political systems that are placing increasing emphasis on democratic participation. Globally-induced pressures for change include competition for international ranking (see in this issue: Gopinathan & Lee; Mok & Cheung; Tjeldvoll) adoption of global standards of practice (see in this issue: Bajunid; Hallinger & Lu; Kennedy), and systemic integration into international systems of quality assessment and accreditation (see in this issue: Bajunid; Kennedy; Mok & Cheung). These are all driving Southeast Asian universities to rethink mission, core values, organisational structures, and working processes in order to increase quality and competitiveness beyond traditionally accepted

'local' foci and standards. As suggested above by Cheng (2010), these trends are yielding new and often unanticipated challenges for the region's university leaders.

This theme issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* examines leadership and change in higher education in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup> with a focus on five national contexts: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. These nations were selected for examination because we suggest that their universities have made demonstrable advances in terms of achieving international standards in academic practice. Thus, they clearly illustrate the tensions and challenges of change as their leaders seek to manage the shift from a focus on quantity to quality and enable higher degrees of international competitiveness in tertiary education. In a sense, they offer locally relevant examples of both struggle and success for other universities in developing nations and regions.

While this theme volume of the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* focuses on 'university leadership and change in Southeast Asia' we suggest that the topic is anything but 'academic'. Indeed, the issues addressed in these papers hold practical importance for leaders throughout higher education in the Asia Pacific region. This is reflected in the worldviews of the authors who both comprise a diverse set of nationalities (i.e., American, Norwegian, Chinese, Malaysian, Singaporean) and either hold or have held the full range of university leadership positions including Dean (Gopinathan, Kennedy, Mok), Chief Academic Officer (Hallinger), Vice Chancellor (Bajunid), and President (Cheung). Thus, while the papers address high ground issues such as quality, systems change, and global competitiveness, the authors focus on the practical exigencies of implementation in the context of Southeast Asian culture, local politics, and organisational management.

Of course, we recognise that universities throughout the world, not only the Asia Pacific, are coping with massive changes emanating from a global environment. Thus, many of the strategic issues and management contingencies explored in these papers will be both familiar and relevant to university leaders in other regions of the world. Nonetheless, we suggest that the combination of social culture, rapid pace of change, and stage in the development of university capacity combine to make the Southeast Asian case especially interesting and timely. Indeed, as indicated in several of the papers in this issue (Gopinathan & Lee; Kennedy; Mok & Cheung) a number of the region's elite universities have demonstrated strategic success at 'jumping the curve' (Imparato & Harari, 1996) and achieving global competitiveness based on external measures of teaching quality, research productivity, and international impact. At the same time, however, the vast majority of universities continue to struggle to manage changes that largely originate outside the local context and often conflict with traditional norms, structures and process (see in this issue: Bajunid; Hallinger & Lu; Kennedy; Tjeldvoll). Both sets of stories are instructive in terms of developing a more informed and strategic approach to leading change in the region's universities.

This special issue grew out of an academic meeting held in Hong Kong, the *Asia Leadership Roundtable 2010*. This meeting, sponsored by the Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, brought together 50 regional and global scholars to explore emerging challenges facing educational leaders at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in the Asia Pacific region. Several of the papers included in this volume were prepared for the section of the *Asia Leadership Roundtable 2010* that focused on leadership and change in higher education.

The articles bridge theory and practice by offering insights into national policy contexts as well as implementation strategies employed by university leaders in the region. While the papers focus centrally on issues of leading change aimed at quality improvement in Southeast Asian universities, the analyses are informed by discussions of how the cultural

context shapes the implementation strategies and results. The specific objectives for this theme issue of the Journal include the following:

- to examine the policy context that is framing change in higher education in the Southeast Asia region,
- to explore conceptions of quality in higher education that are gaining currency in the region,
- to describe how university leaders are implementing institutional change in the region,
- to analyse how the cultural context of Southeast Asia is impacting efforts of universities to implement change.

The first paper by Professor Kerry Kennedy of the Hong Kong Institute of Education examines the evolution of conceptions of quality education as embodied in the policies and practices of Hong Kong's universities. Hong Kong represents a particularly interesting case because of its strong international reputation in higher education. Indeed, the consistently high performance of several of its universities and component faculties in international higher education rankings has earned Hong Kong a strong reputation for higher education quality and system management.

Kennedy focuses on 'policy borrowing', an endemic feature of higher education change in the Asia Pacific region. 'Policy borrowing' refers to the practice whereby many post-colonial societies have continued to 'look to the West for models that will assist them to reengineer their universities in the quest for creating world class institutions' (this issue, p. 205). Kennedy's paper offers an in-depth examination of how policy borrowing has unfolded in the context of implementing outcomes based learning in the Hong Kong tertiary system. Hong Kong, with a well-resourced higher education sector, represents in many respects a 'best case scenario' for quality-oriented policy implementation. Thus, his analysis of Hong Kong's efforts made towards quality improvement in teaching and learning offer useful insights with respect to cultural, institutional and educational challenges.

Professor Arild Tjeldvoll focuses on the role of university leaders in managing change in higher education in Southeast Asia. Tjeldvoll argues that both the perspectives and strategies of university leaders in Southeast Asia are normatively shaped by the values and traditions of the 'Confucian culture' in which many systems operate. Using a comparative approach, he first compares the historical development of universities in the West (e.g., Europe and North America) and the East (i.e., Southeast Asia). Then he links the challenges and strategies of universities employed by the region's university leaders to underlying cultural norms. While the development of Taiwan's universities represents the focal case for discussion, the analysis sets the stage for subsequent papers in the issue that describe specific efforts to bring about change in universities in other nations in the region.

Professors Joshua Mok and Anthony Cheung, of the Hong Kong Institute of Education, focus their quality lens on the paradigm shift embodied in regional efforts to achieve the status of 'world-class universities'. The paper elaborates on the challenges identified in the Tjeldvoll paper but in a different institutional context. The authors review major policies introduced and strategies employed by the government and higher education institutions of Hong Kong in the quest for world-class status. More specifically, the paper critically examines the 'politics of competition' among institutions for both state and non-state resources, in recruiting and retaining global talents and in internationalising their curricula in order to

achieve their global aspirations. Given the world class reputation of several of Hong Kong's leading universities, the paper offers useful insight into the political processes involved in raising the quality of education across a higher education system.

Professor Dato Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid of the INTI-UC Laureate International Universities provides a detailed historical view of Malaysia's effort to develop a sustainable system-wide effort at quality improvement in higher education. The paper examines the adoption, generation, and institutionalisation of global quality standards in Malaysia's system of higher education. Contending ideas, rationales, and models of universities and the contributions this makes to capacity development in higher education are examined. The analyses are informed by the development of reforms in other sectors of government and society within the integrated framework of the nation's strategic vision of development – *Vision 2020*. Bajunid's analysis offers a useful complement to quality-related discussions contained in the papers describing higher education in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand by elaborating on how the Malaysian context has shaped its own approach to quality improvement and systemic change.

Professor Philip Hallinger and Jiafang Lu of the Hong Kong Institute of Education examine the challenge of quality improvement, but from the perspective of a single college, rather than a university or tertiary system. Hallinger and Lu present a longitudinal case study of change at a graduate business school in Thailand. The paper documents the process and outcomes of attempts to implement innovations in teaching and learning in a social and organisational culture whose norms ran counter to the student-directed tenets of the new learning methods.

This paper reprises many points raised in the Kennedy paper, but within a different cultural and institutional context and in the light of empirical data on change in teaching and learning over time. Like Hong Kong, the effort at quality improvement reported in this paper is instructive in the sense that it also represents a 'best case scenario' for change within its own social-organisational context. That is, the business school described in this paper was well-resourced and relatively free from many of the typical constraints on innovation that describe higher education in Thailand. Thus, the paper offers insights into what is possible to achieve in terms of improvement in teaching and learning when 'all stars are in alignment'.

The final paper in the issue is authored by Professor S. Gopinathan of the National Institute of Education in Singapore and Professor Michael Lee of Chinese University of Hong Kong. Like Hong Kong, the 'Singapore case' lends an alternative perspective from a system of higher education that has, by external measures, succeeded in achieving international standards in the provision of higher education quality. This paper discusses the evolution of Singapore's quality journey as it moved from increasing access, to improving quality, and most recently to becoming an exporter of educational services. The paper elaborates on the strategy and rationale for the choices made, as well as the challenges that remain in fulfilling its evolving vision. Thus, we suggest that Gopinathan and Lee's strategic insights will be of interest to university leaders in developing (and developed) nations throughout the world.

In each of the reports, we note the presence of tensions that have emerged from the process of policy borrowing (e.g. Kennedy, this issue). The authors offer numerous illustrations of the challenges of implementing 'global standards and practices' in an area of the world that starts off with fewer resources in a globally competitive game. Examples abound in these articles with respect to change in approaches to teaching and learning, interpretation of 'quality' processes, as well as methods of coping with global and local competition.

Together these papers offer a rich picture of the diverse responses of higher education systems and institutions in Southeast Asia to the pressures and opportunities that have emerged from the globalisation of higher education. We note again that the nations included in this issue were not selected to be 'representative' of the Asia Pacific region as a whole. A more comprehensive examination of the region's systems of higher education would evidence greater diversity and perhaps include more instances of challenges related to expanding access. Rather our selection of papers was designed to offer insights from regional societies in which earlier access to economic advantages has enabled higher levels of funding and more time for the development of higher education systems. Thus, we hope that the papers that comprise this theme issue will provide useful perspectives on the challenges of leading change in universities located at different stages in the journey of change and quality improvement.

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#### Note

1. We note that Hong Kong and Taiwan are more frequently grouped under the rubric 'East Asian' but for the purposes of this theme issue, we have included them with their ASEAN counterparts. We suggest that with respect to higher education development, they actually share as much or more in common with these Southeast Asian nations as with China, Japan, and Korea.

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