

Higher Education in the Asia-Pacific: Rise of the Confucian Model*

Simon Marginson

Professor
Centre for the Study of Higher Education
University of Melbourne

Abstract

The paper reviews higher education and university-based research in the Asia-Pacific, focusing principally on the “Confucian” systems of Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong China, Taiwan and Singapore. These systems exhibit or have exhibited a special developmental dynamism -- one still playing out in all systems except Japan -- and created a distinctive model of higher education provision. The Confucian Model is rapidly pluralizing global power in higher education because in some respects it works more effectively than system designs in North America, the English-speaking world and Europe. The model rests on (1) a tendency to universal participation in tertiary education partly financed by high and growing levels of household funding of tuition, sustained by the private duty to invest in education in the context of social competition mediated by examinations; (2) accelerated public investment in research and “world-class” universities, and (3) strong nation-state shaping of priorities and behaviours. The Model has downsides, e.g., in relation to social equity in participation, and the tendency to top-down governmental interference in university autonomy and

*The first version of this article was a keynote address to the international conference of the Higher Education Evaluation and Assessment Council of Taiwan, Taipei, 4 June 2010.
Manuscript received: 2010.8.4; Revised: 2010.11.11; Accepted: 2010.12.13
email: s.marginson@unimelb.edu.au

academic creativity. But together with economic growth in the context of low tax regimes, the Confucian Model enables these systems to move forward -- rapidly and simultaneously -- in relation to each and all the goals of mass tertiary participation, university quality, and both the quantity and quality and science-based research in higher education.

Keyword: Higher Education Systems; Asia-Pacific; Confucian Culture; Role of Government; Student Participation; Research