



Original Article

Master's Education in Massified, Internationalized, and Marketized East Asian Higher Education Systems

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This special issue aims to address the topics on expanding master's education and its current challenges in East Asia, focusing on China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The special issue describes the historical backgrounds and key characteristics of master's education and identifies new demands for master's education in terms of employability and labour market outcomes. By doing so, it addresses major issues of current master's education in selected East Asian higher education systems. Each article contains original research, based on historical and empirical approaches, that deepens our understanding of master's education and reveals different contextual challenges in higher education, such as massification, internationalization, and marketization.

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Introduction

Master's education has experienced unprecedented global expansion and diversification since the 1990s, which raises the question of why this demand for master's programmes has risen so dramatically. The first reason is related to the massification of higher education and its relationship with the labour market. In many advanced economies, holding a bachelor's degree has become widespread, and many university graduates seek further academic credentials (Baker, 2011; Bills, 2003; Collins, 1979). The overall expansion of higher education has also created more openings for faculty positions and doctoral education, which also increases the demand for master's degrees as prerequisites for doctoral programmes (Conrad *et al.*, 1993).

This explanation touches on how internationalization of higher education accelerates the inflow and outflow of master's students, because master's education generally takes a shorter period of study than other levels of higher education, and many students choose to go overseas to begin their postgraduate education before



entering a doctoral programme or professional world of works (Glazer-Raymo, 2005; Morgan, 2014). Indeed, many countries aggressively promote their master's programmes to recruit more international students.

Additionally, master's education is the most privatized and marketized sector in higher education, as many universities have recently begun to offer a wide range of self-financed programmes (Knight, 1997; Jung and Lee, 2019). Master's programmes have become a major source of income for many universities and can play an important role in their reputations. Even for higher education systems with a strong public sector presence, master's programmes are mostly self-funded, unlike bachelor's or doctorate programmes. Government regulation is also less strict in at the master's level in terms of admissions criteria, graduation recruitment, and quality assurance procedures. In many cases, these matters are determined by university institutions or departments.

These changes are actively taking place in East Asian higher education systems. Higher education in that region has made noticeable progress in the last three decades, particularly in advanced economies like China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Access in principle to higher education reached the universal stage in the late 1990s, and many university graduates pursue further academic credentials, such as master's degrees, to have better opportunities in the highly competitive labour market. These higher education systems have also strategically recruited international students from one another and Southeast Asian countries to enhance their international competitiveness, though the internationalization strategies differ by country. For example, higher education in Hong Kong has traditionally been one of the most international systems in East Asia, with a high proportion of international academics and heavy use of English as the medium of instruction. Other countries like Japan and China have strong government policy support in the form of scholarships to recruit international students. Privatization manifests itself differently in these systems as well. Countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have a higher ratio of private sector involvement in higher education systems, while the systems in Hong Kong mostly rely on the public sector but use a marketized approach for certain programmes, including master's education.

Therefore, this special issue aims to address the topics on expanding master's education and its current challenges in East Asia, focusing on China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Although the massification of higher education at the undergraduate and advancement of doctoral education in many Asian countries has been discussed over the past two to three decades, the expansion of master's education has rarely been examined. It is not easy to obtain precise figures on programmes and students in master's programmes since they vary across countries and institutions. Considering the scale of the rapid expansion of master's education in Asian countries, it is worth addressing the historical development of master's

education in East Asian higher education systems and its contribution to their current higher education and policy challenges.

The objectives of this special issue are as follows:

- To describe the historical backgrounds and key characteristics of master's education in selected East Asian higher education systems;
- To identify recent student profiles in master's education and students' new demands for master's education in terms of employability and labour market outcomes;
- To address the major issues of current master's education, including admission access, and internationalization;
- To examine the responses of master's education to the marketized higher education environment.

Contributions to the Special Issue

The articles in this special issue refer to case studies of five East Asian higher education systems. Each article contains original research, based on historical and empirical approaches, that deepens our understanding of master's education and reveals different contextual challenges in higher education, such as massification, internationalization, and marketization.

Discussing Taiwan, Jason Cheng–Cheng Yang and Sheng-Ju Chan use the term 'credential game' to describe the expansion of master's education since the 1990s. Their study focuses on how the expansion of master's education has impacted Taiwan's labour market and employment opportunities. Longitudinal data shows that pursuing a master's degree was an inevitable social response by youth to maintain their market value in a labour market impacted by massified higher education, although any trend towards degree inflation is not yet obvious apparent. The authors share their concerns about the rapid expansion of master's degrees in terms of the educational quality of master's programmes and the limited access of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The Korean case also starts with growing master's degree enrolment in a massified higher education context. Soo Jeung Lee, Seungjung Kim, and Jisun Jung raise the question of whether obtaining a master's degree actually brings better labour market outcomes such as higher wages or job satisfaction. Based on panel data analysis, the authors' striking finding is that a master's degree is not positively associated with higher income; indeed, it is negatively associated with wage levels in some academic fields. However, master's degrees are associated with higher job satisfaction in some sectors. The authors interpreted these results in light of the economic and social contexts of higher education and the labour market for



graduates in Korea, such as separation of professional master's degree programmes from academic and research oriented-programmes and the recruitment processes of major companies. They emphasize that the master's degree and its value should be further discussed in terms of national qualification frameworks, curricula, employability, and institutional support for career development, with due consideration for differences between disciplines.

Although the expansion of master's degree enrolment is a common phenomenon in most East Asian higher education systems, there are gender parity issues with regard to accessibility. In particular, gender disparity at the master's level is still a serious issue in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Jiale Yang and Wenqin Shen focus on the gender matching effects in master's education in Chinese STEM fields by using data from a nationwide survey. Their empirical analysis found that female respondents participate in fewer research projects and are less likely to pursue a doctorate after graduation, even if there are no significant gender differences in academic publications. The authors interpret these results in terms of the socialization of STEM graduate students in the context of a Confucian culture and make policy suggestions to recruit and retain more female faculty members in STEM fields.

Master's education in Japan is discussed in the context of internationalization. Using a comparative view of elite universities and less selective institutions, Sae Shimauchi and Yangson Kim explore how master's education in Japan has been affected by several internationalization policies. Their findings show that most universities have successfully recruited more international students since government policy began encouraging that approach. However, responses to internationalization policies and changes in the external environment were found to vary by institutional reputation, resources, and needs. The authors emphasize that targeted policies rather than broad generic initiatives aimed at promoting the internationalization of master's education in Japan are needed.

Master's education in Hong Kong is described in the context of an internationalized and marketized higher education system. Jisun Jung demonstrates how master's programmes have diversified in terms of degree type and learning aim and discusses the strategies used to promote master's programmes in Hong Kong. Using a case study approach, the study found that institutions have strategically marketized their master's programmes to attract more non-local and part-time students and launched many types of spinoff programmes using terms like 'major', 'strand', 'specialism', and 'stream'. Surprisingly, however, the learning aims and the programme focuses employed to achieve these aims were found to be fairly standard across degree types.

Concluding Remarks

This special issue includes five higher education systems in East Asia that have made significant improvements in quantity and quality of higher education over the last three to four decades. They are China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. They imported modern higher education system from the West in initial stage of development; however, they became popular destinations for study and research among many international students and academics in recent years. In this development process, the postgraduate system had a key role in each system improving their training systems of highly skilled people and conducting advanced researches. These selected systems have common challenges for postgraduate education, but having different historical backgrounds and governance structure in their development strategies.

Considering the different histories of postgraduate education, higher education policies and structures of master's education, this special issue utilizes the comparative examination of the expansion of master's education in terms of policy strategies in selected higher education systems. This comparative study identifies the contribution of master's education in their own higher education systems in terms of labour market, academic enterprise, and knowledge system in macro-level. It also identifies students' profile changes, their new demands and expectations for the programmes and institutions on the meso-level.

Policy-wise, the special issue will exert long-term effects at the public policy and institutional management. At the public policy level, it will have implications for the internationalization and privatization of higher education. Although the number of international students in master's degree has been increasing in selected higher education systems, they have several challenges to accommodate international students in short period of master's programmes. In addition, self-financed postgraduate programmes constitute the fastest-growing market in higher education, which has led to concerns over quality and cost. At the institutional level, the project findings will inform institutional strategies for recruiting master's students and contribute to the establishment of programme missions, advising and mentoring strategies, and the redesign of curricular offerings.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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