



# Think global, think local: The changing landscape of higher education and the role of quality assurance in Singapore

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## Abstract

This article examines how the Singaporean state has reformed the higher education sector in order to co-opt different political and economic agendas at both the global and local levels, utilising quality assurance as a regulatory process of control. The core argument is that quality assurance has been used as an instrument to reshape the higher education landscape in Singapore. The article begins with a review of the literature on the role of the Singaporean state in higher education. Next, it reviews how the Global Schoolhouse initiative was developed and implemented and how public and private higher education sectors were audited. The article then analyses the establishment of a new quality assurance mechanism for private higher education in 2009. Finally, the article suggests that this new regulatory regime exemplifies the importance of political factors in the implementation of neoliberal managerialism in higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

Singapore has positioned itself as a Global Schoolhouse since 2002 and thus has launched a series of policies to reform its higher education sector. This Global Schoolhouse initiative is considered as an important strategy of the nation opening up its territory to the presence of foreign higher education providers and consumers and hence corresponding to globalisation. However, there is a growing sentiment among Singaporeans against this “open-door” policy, as local university places are lost to international students. Such a sentiment forces the Singaporean government to make changes in its strategic direction. In this context, the “Singaporeans first” notion emerged and the focus of the Global Schoolhouse policy has shifted from managing global challenges to finding the right balance between global and local agendas (Tan, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

In this context of the global–local dynamics, this article examines how the Singaporean government has reformed higher education in order to co-opt different political and economic agendas at both global and local levels in the last decade. It argues that quality assurance is instrumentally utilised as a way of (re)shaping the landscape of higher education to match Singapore’s continually changing policy agendas. The article consists of four main sections. The

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<sup>1</sup> According to Tan (2011), the President of Singapore, “‘Singaporeans first’ was different from ‘Singaporeans only’. We should not make it too difficult for international talent to come to Singapore. Finding the right balance is not going to be easy but we must try”. “Think global, think local” therefore was used to express the revised mentality of the Singaporean government.

first section provides a literature review on the role of the Singaporean state in higher education, which is adopted as a theoretical basis for this study. The second section turns to review how the Global Schoolhouse initiative emerged as a response to globalisation, with a focus on how quality assurance and managerialism were used to redefine the relationship between the state and public universities in the early 2000s. It also notes that a relatively loose control over private higher education was adopted during this period. The third section examines the establishment of a new quality assurance system for private higher education with the promulgation of the Private Education Act and establishment of the Council for Private Education in 2009. The final section reveals how this new regulatory regime is taken as a response to the local political and social sentiments, thereby illustrating the significance of political factors in the adoption of neoliberal managerialism in higher education.

## 2. The state and higher education in Singapore

The existing literature demonstrates great consistency in the understanding of the state capacity in the process of structuring the higher education landscape in Singapore. For instance, [Gopinathan and Lee \(2011\)](#) point out that the city-state, as a developmental state, adopts a state-led development model, in which the Singaporean government under the leadership of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) plays a significant role in planning and shaping various sectors, including higher education. They consider Singapore as a case of successful state capitalism and of planned rational political economies, in which state intervention is justified as necessary to achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth and to provide a stable socio-political environment (p. 288). On this basis, Gopinathan and Lee argue that a pragmatic perspective on education is adopted in Singapore, from which higher education is instrumentally considered as a tool of economic development (pp. 289–290). This relationship between the state and higher education is reiterated in [Olds's \(2007\)](#) analysis, which reveals the forceful leadership provided by the Singaporean state in order to implement the Global Schoolhouse initiative that is seen as a response to the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis and a way of facilitating transformation towards the knowledge-based economy (pp. 959–960). He uses the term “soft authoritarian” to describe the Singaporean developmental state, which is “guided by an elite bureaucracy, focused on medium- to long-term economic objectives, and frequently prone to eclectic and effective forms of social control in the stated interests of national development” (p. 962).

Given its strong tradition of state-led development, the way that Singapore adopts to implement the neoliberal discourse in its higher education system is different to that used by many countries in the West. According to [Marginson \(2013\)](#), the neoliberal market model is a combination of two institutional practices: one is economic commercialisation, with which financial rationales and business templates can be transplanted into the domains of education; one is the New Public Management, which emphasises the importance of accountability and transparency and the role of bureaucratic control in upholding these notions (p. 354). He notes that although there is a gap between the policy reality (i.e. how far an open, relatively unregulated markets has been achieved in higher education) and the policy rhetoric (i.e. neoliberal concepts), the Westminster countries (i.e. the UK, Australia and New Zealand) are keen or even pressurised to render higher education more market-like through destatisation and therefore are more willing to withdraw government interference (p. 355, see also [Jarvis, 2014b](#)). By contrast, Singapore has never given up its notion of higher education as an economic development tool. Hence, though the university sector has implemented a series of market reforms (e.g. incorporation of public universities), the Singaporean state continues to play a strong role in steering the reform process and ensuring that the plans of individual universities meet the goals of the national policies. As Gopinathan explains:

Singapore's remarkable socio-political development and the changes it seeks to implement in education are illustrative of the wider debates about the power of globalisation and the capacity of states to remain viable and relevant. Singapore's developmental history places it clearly in the category of strong states ([Gopinathan, 2007](#), pp. 68–69).

The interplay between the state coordination and marketisation can be further illustrated by the university funding model. Public universities in Singapore are encouraged to inculcate an entrepreneurial mindset ([Wong, Ho, & Singh, 2007](#); [Xavier & Alsagoff, 2013](#)), while they are funded by the government on a per student basis. The Ministry of Education (MOE) provides an annual recurrent block budget to the universities based on their actual enrolment each year and their respective capitation rates. But, since 2000, the universities have been allowed to retain operating surpluses in order to provide incentives for them to adopt an entrepreneurial model ([UAGFSC, 2005](#)). However, it is intriguing to see that there are conflicts between the capitation grant scheme and market driven development. For

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