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## Global higher education learning outcomes and financial trends: Comparative and innovative approaches

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### ABSTRACT

The cost of higher education continues to escalate at an alarming rate. Public and private funding sources from around the world are increasingly under pressure to reduce allocations toward higher education while at the same time raising outcome expectations. This financial outlook is projected to continue well into the future, and in many instances it is deemed unsustainable in the long run. Within this context, we examine good and best practices of higher education finance models in select international contexts. A primary objective of this paper is to examine exemplary models of learning outcomes and higher education financing models that can reduce or at least help level off this unsustainable trend. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 60 content area experts with in-depth knowledge as administrators of seven case study higher education institutions. We conclude with recommendations to assist policy makers, government planners, and higher education administrators in their attempts to meet the financial challenges of today and in the future.

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### 1. Introduction

In many ways the Education for All conferences held at Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and Dakar, Senegal in 2000, affirm the shifting enrollment patterns toward universal secondary education and eventually the massification of higher education in the 21st century. This shift toward higher education focus comes with many challenges. Perhaps chief among the many international challenges facing higher education in the 21st century is the fiscal shortcomings at the personal, institutional, state/provincial, and national levels. The fickle financial foundation of our contemporary era was highlighted in the lasting impact of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis.

At the beginning of our paper, we examine seven financial trends at the heart of many global higher education shifts. These challenges include enrollment patterns, competition, government funding, public support, curriculum revisions, increased personal and institutional debt, and inequalities among many higher education stakeholder groups. Despite many other issues that could be examined, we consider these financial challenges as among the most important facing higher education administrators

today. We discuss how these seven financial trends emerged and shifted over time.

#### 1.1. Enrollment trends

Enrollment trends continue to shift. A recent study by Strayer (2016) highlights how residents from many locations in the United States are choosing to move out of state and pay higher tuition rates in order to avoid rising tuition costs for in-state students in their home states. Drawing from U.S. Department of Education data, Strayer notes that California, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Texas lead the nation in number of students electing to leave their home state for higher education opportunities in other states. States benefiting the most from these shifts include Alabama, Arizona, Pennsylvania, North Dakota, and Wisconsin. Due largely to growing financial deficits and constraints, public higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States are accepting larger numbers of applicants from overseas and out-of-state locations to the detriment of local residents (Dunn, 2015; Jaquette and Curs, 2015; Saul, 2016).

These enrollment trends underpin many of the inequalities that exist in HEIs, especially at the most elite public universities in many countries (see for instance Declercq and Verboren, 2015; Huang, 2012; Liu and Cheng, 2012; Kosor, 2010; Pigni and Staffolani, 2016; Pope and Tang, 2013). Some countries help offset this trend by establishing laws that limit the amount HEIs can

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charge for tuition. In the UK, for example, tuition is capped at a maximum of £9,000, regardless of whether it is a public or private institution (Sutin and Jacob, 2016, p. 62). German HEIs offer courses tuition free, though the sustainability of this financial model is questioned (Oltermann, 2016). In some countries, governments prevent attempts by HEIs to raise tuition costs, even when administrators justify raising tuition to help cover increasing overhead and operating costs. In Indonesia, for instance, the Supreme Court struck down an attempt by HEIs to raise tuition costs, declaring such moves as unconstitutional and significantly limiting equal access among all citizens, especially the socioeconomically disadvantaged (Jacob et al., 2012). Private HEIs that are able to offer quality higher education options are in many cases able to capitalize on the increasing costs of higher education. Enrollment shifts toward private HEIs will continue well into the foreseeable future (Casillas, 2010).

Students studying in foreign settings have steadily increased. Table 1 shows the enrollment trends of students who have come to the United States from the top 13 sending countries in 2015.

In addition to the United States, many other countries proactively reach out to international students to help bolster revenue and add diversity to their campuses. Australia has long been recognized as a prime international destination country. Foreign enrollments comprised roughly 7.6% of total undergraduate enrollments in the United States, compared to 24.3% in Australia (Australian Education Network, 2016; Institute of International Education, 2015). Several international enrollment trends that are and will continue to be influenced by financial forces, include the development of innovative delivery models, including branch campuses, multi-national/institutional courses and programs, quality distance learning options, dual-degree programs, sandwich programs, and visiting scholar opportunities. With the exception of the Africa region, many foreign students are choosing to return home for employment opportunities rather than choosing to remain in their host country to work (Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011). And while China continues to send out more students abroad each year than any other country, the China Ministry of Education continues to support efforts to further solidify China as a top destination country of choice for foreign students. Sino-African partnerships have increased substantially over the past decade, where Africans are recruited and admitted into many Chinese HEIs (Liu, 2016). Despite all the international enrollment shifts, only approximately 2% of all higher education students are internationally mobile (de Wit et al., 2013).

### 1.2. Competition trends

The massification of higher education has in many ways contributed to the inequalities in graduate employability, social

mobility, and mismatch in labor market needs (Brown et al., 2004; Mok, 2016; Mavromaras et al., 2013). As with other higher education stakeholder groups, students have gradually recognized that their participation in higher education does not necessarily guarantee a full-time job upon graduation. Unemployment remains a significant growing issue, as Clifton (2013) noted that 1.2 billion people worldwide are employed full-time. Yet, he recognized that approximately 1.8 billion additional jobs are needed for those who are currently unemployed or underemployed. Most higher education graduates are far away from meeting market expectations, while the number of graduates have increased dramatically in the last few decades. Levels of unemployment upon graduation are extremely high and are increasingly reported in various higher education systems and labor markets (Abel et al., 2014; Bassey and Atan, 2012; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Li et al., 2014; OECD, 2016).

Increased enrollments have changed the nature of competition among students and graduates. There is also a trend toward increased admissions standards, which often are coupled with increased tuition prices (Davies and Hammack, 2005). The variation in the quality, cost, and prestige of higher education programs has led to growing competition among students, seeking to enter high quality and elite institutions, acquire better and marketable degree qualifications, and secure employability in an increasingly competitive labor market. Furthermore, students also tend to put a significant effort to link their higher education experience with their future participation in the job market. Thus, graduate employability and the transition from higher education to the workforce remains a major issue (Tomlinson, 2012). Ultimately, due to these changing competition trends, people are willing to invest more of their time, resources, and efforts in the promise that employability skills, which are more closely aligned with industry needs, will better enable them to find quality jobs (Brown et al., 2004).

Global competition trends continuously put students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and those from rural and remote regions at a significant disadvantage. Furlong and Cartmel (2005) conclude that limited financial resources and cultural orientations have forced many disadvantaged students to register for fewer courses, enroll in less prestigious programs and institutions, and chose less costly institutions in order to remain close to their families, and avoid the burden of debt. In these scenarios, most disadvantaged students fall further behind in competition when they attend prestigious HEIs and also when entering the labor market.

Competition challenges often lead to markedly higher financial constraints for students expecting a quality and an affordable education, HEIs seeking to reduce costs while retaining an emphasis on quality student learning outcomes, and organizations

**Table 1**  
Enrollment trends of the top countries sending higher education students to the United States, 2005–2015.

Country	1999/2000	2004/2005	2009/2010	2014/2015	Percent change (2000–2015)	% of total intl students in US HEIs (2015)
China	54,466	62,523	127,628	417,881	667.2	42.9
India	42,337	80,466	104,897	132,888	213.9	13.6
South Korea	41,191	53,358	72,153	63,710	54.7	6.5
Saudi Arabia	5,156	3,035	15,810	59,945	1,062.6	6.1
Canada	23,544	28,140	28,145	27,240	15.7	2.8
Brazil	8,860	7,244	8,786	23,675	167.2	2.4
Taiwan	29,234	25,914	26,685	20,993	-28.2	2.2
Japan	46,872	42,215	24,842	19,064	-59.3	2.0
Vietnam	2,266	3,670	13,112	18,722	726.2	1.9
Mexico	10,607	13,063	13,450	17,052	60.8	1.7
Iran	1,885	2,251	4,731	11,338	501.5	1.2
Nigeria	3,602	6,335	6,568	9,494	163.6	1.0
Indonesia	11,300	7,760	6,943	8,188	-27.5	0.8

Sources: Calculations by the authors with data from the Institute of International Education (2010, 2015).

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