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## Financing trends in Southeast Asia and Oceania: Meeting the demands of regional higher education growth

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### ABSTRACT

The cost of higher education continues to escalate at an alarming and unsustainable rate. Public and private funding sources around the world are increasingly under pressure to reduce allocations for higher education while at the same time raising outcome expectations. Within this context, we examine good and best practices of higher education finance models in Oceania and Southeast Asia that reduce or at least help level off this unsustainable trend. We conclude with recommendations to assist policymakers, 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 to challenges of funding higher education in Southeast Asia and Oceania

The cost of higher education continues to escalate at an alarming rate. Public and private funding sources around the world are increasingly under pressure to reduce allocations for 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 (Sutin and Jacob, 2016). Within the context framed by this dilemma, we examine a range of higher education systems and structures in Oceania and Southeast Asia that are addressed to at least one specific aspect of this funding crisis and as such may serve as useful guideways for others facing similar situations. A primary objective of this paper is to identify various exemplary models of outcomes that interface with corresponding outcome “structures” that have proved particularly appropriate for the situations in which they occur and for the circumstances that they address. In our conclusions we provide a range of recommendations to assist policymakers, government planners, and higher education administrators frame their own situations within the context of these fruitful and suggestive examples.

It is widely acknowledged that many of the higher education ratings and rankings focus on inputs, activities, and research outputs, but rarely integrate, or more likely neglect information on the broader issue of outcomes. The notion of *learning outcomes* has gained increased importance over the past two decades as part of various accountability endeavors not the least of which has been associated with the development of accreditation in the U.S. and of various related but differing quality assurance regimes throughout the world (Ewell, 2008; APQN, 2010). Its origins in outcomes-based education, a model of educational structuring that involves the clear and explicit identification, statement, and assessment of student learning (Spady, 1988; Allan, 1996; Andrich, 2002; Adam, 2006) has continued to develop such that currently the statement and measurement of higher education learning outcomes are broad and complex and may be defined from multiple perspectives. The range of indicators that can be and have been utilized to signify higher education outcomes is large indeed. Much of what is meant to be signified by an “outcome” is determined in part by the level of generality intended. At the institutional level, outcomes focus on behaviors and measures associated with the institution itself (e.g., grades, course completion, degree completion, dropout rates, etc.). And over the past two decades, as neo-liberal ideology has been an increasingly more prevalent focus of higher education in various environments, explicit metrics have been developed within a variety of national settings (for example Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia) that have come to serve as determinative “output” measures of systemic performance, often associated with

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rates of return on funding from national sources and/or quality regimes (see for example, Borlan et al., 2000; Ghaffar and Abrizah, 2017). In what follows we shall examine some of these, along with rankings to suggest how such approximations of “outcomes” both serve institutions in some regards, and impede them in others. Further, we shall seek to outline an approach for evaluating the relative effectiveness of higher education institutions (HEIs) as reflected in the creation and use of such measures. It is here that, interestingly, they “speak” to important aspects of both the policy process as those overseeing public higher education spending seek to gain a sense of the “worth” of such systems—indicated in many instances by the kinds of employment opportunities that emerge from different institutions, or in the case of private institutions, provide a form of metric for the presumptive value of the degree.

Globally higher education finance displays some unique regional characteristics. Southeast Asia and Oceania in particular represent a variety of emerging markets for higher education, given their regional trends toward economic integration, growing enrollment, and high student mobility and job seeking (Jacob, 2012). On the other hand, what prevents local decision-makers from fully exploiting these trends includes some daunting challenges, such as patterns of low affordability, a prominent diversity of higher education governance structures, differing finance models, and student demographics and often poor higher education quality. Geographic factors also play a key role in determining higher education finance strategies, with Southeast Asia being a compact region that is sufficiently compact that countries can exchange higher education content and students, whereas those within Oceania are more scattered and disproportionate in size, population, and various other dimensions. With these in scope, this article aims at discovering promising higher education finance approaches that may contribute to the sustainable growth and exchange of higher education within these two regions. Focus will be placed upon the ten ASEAN member states as well as 14 Oceanian countries.

### 1.1. Higher education enrollment trends in Southeast Asia

Since 1996, enrollment growth of tertiary education demonstrates both similarities and discrepancies across the ten ASEAN countries. Fig. 1 shows that all ASEAN countries have experienced steady growth over the past 20 years, with Indonesia and Brunei

Darussalam having by far the largest and smallest student populations respectively.

Fig. 2 indicates that all of the ASEAN countries have achieved positive growth through major periods from 1997 to 2014. However, Cambodia, Lao, and Vietnam have experienced steeper growth and decline periods than other ASEAN countries. In particular, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam have achieved 66.71%, 40.47%, and 70.96% annual growth respectively in 1997, 2005, and 2006, while Indonesia, with the largest student population of the ten ASEAN countries, has never surpassed 17.46% in this period. Lao and Vietnam have also recorded the region’s largest two annual declines in 1998 and 2000 respectively. Both figures (−19.16% and −9.61%) pale in comparison with the growth trends in the two countries as well as the whole region (Fig. 3).

Enrollment in secondary education during this period is uneven, showing both growth and decline across countries. While Lao has experienced consistent growth, with a maximum annual growth of 14.14% in 1999, Singapore and Vietnam have experienced consistent decline for 7 and 9 years respectively from 2008 to 2014 and 2005–2013 (see Table 1). In contrast, both countries have achieved consistent growth in tertiary education enrollment during these two time periods. In the countries where tertiary education enrollment has experienced steep annual growth (e.g., Lao), the pattern is not mirrored in the growth of secondary education enrollment which, in the case of Lao, turns out to be much milder (Table 2).

These fluctuations and discrepancies in growth patterns are suggestive that complex socioeconomic and policy factors are at play in determining accessibility and affordability of higher education in this geographical region. It is highly possible that innovative finance models at regional, national, and international levels are being adopted, which accounts for the consistent growth as well as some of the declining periods (due in part to the lack of success of some models) of enrollment in this region.

### 1.2. Higher education enrollment trends in Oceania

Tertiary education in the countries of this region is vastly asymmetrical. Australia and New Zealand have both experienced steady enrollment growth in tertiary education through 1996–2013, where both countries over time have achieved 38.70% and 58.06% growth respectively. This trend is mirrored in enrollment of

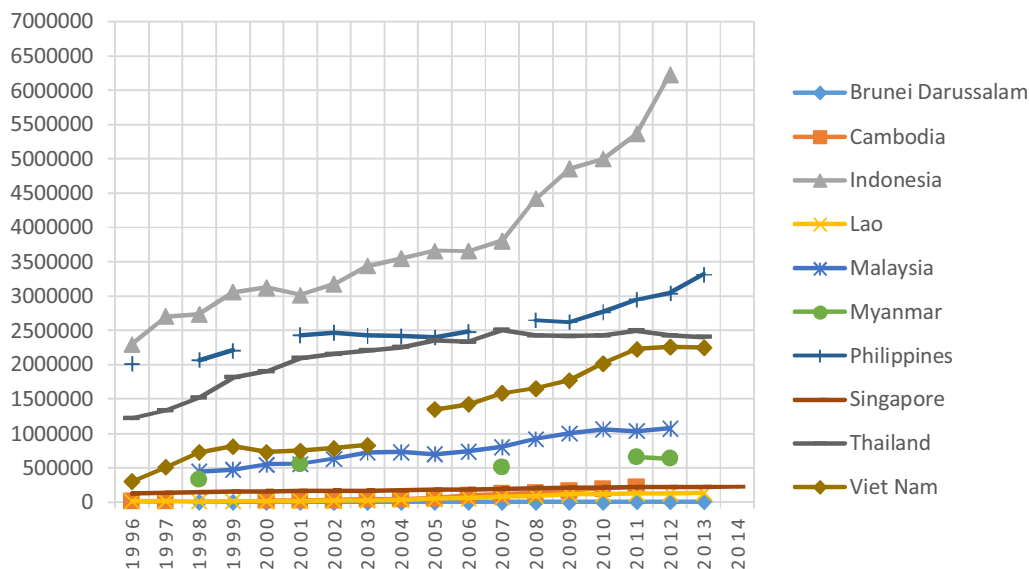


Fig. 1. Enrollment of tertiary education in ASEAN countries, 1996–2014.

Source: Created by the authors with data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2016a).

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