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A Public Policy Perspective on the Privatization of HEIs in Taiwan

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Abstract:

After a period of rapid expansion, Taiwan's higher education sector is beginning to contract. The number of universities in Taiwan increased from 50 institutions in 1991 to 147 in 2014, and this expansion of Taiwan's higher education sector has been accomplished primarily through the opening and upgrading of private institutions (Cheng et al., 2012). While the challenges resulting from rapid expansion have been well noted in education literature, the specific content and corresponding implications of the trend of privatization has been underattended. This paper seeks to address this gap by incorporating a public policy perspective on privatization. Thus, this paper first reviews the role of privatization in the expansion of Taiwan's higher education sector. Next, the paper turns to an analysis of the nature of privatization of Taiwan's HEIs through a multi-factor framework which addresses issues such as legal ownership, political authority, funding, and social equality. Finally, this paper turns its attention to (1) the current challenges facing Taiwan's higher education system, which has been described as increasingly stratified and plagued by dual challenges of quality and sustainability, and (2) the future of the system as policymakers attempt to reduce the number of Taiwan's HEIs through mergers and closures.

Key Words: education policy, privatization, social equality

1. Introduction

Following almost two decades of rapid expansion, Taiwan's higher education sector is beginning to contract. From 50 institutions in 1991 the number of universities in Taiwan increased to 147 in 2014; this expansion has been accomplished primarily through the opening and upgrading of private institutions (Cheng, et al., 2012). While the challenges resulting from rapid expansion have been well noted in education literature, the specific content and corresponding implications of the trend of privatization have been underattended by scholars working in the field of public policy. The following analysis addresses this gap by offering a public policy perspective on the privatization of higher education in Taiwan.

The role of privatization in the expansion of Taiwan's higher education sector has been noted in the field of education. The first section of this paper sums up the growth of higher education in Taiwan in terms of both institutions and student enrollment. Next the major concerns surrounding privatization are raised by scholars of education policy are highlighted.

Taking another look at the expansion and privatization of Taiwan's higher education sector, this paper adopts a public policy perspective by employing concepts commonplace in public policy literature including issues of legal ownership, political authority, funding, and social equality. The final section turns its attention to the implications of privatization for both the current challenges facing Taiwan's higher education system, which has been described as increasingly stratified and plagued by dual challenges of quality and sustainability, and the future of the system as policymakers attempt to reduce the number of Taiwan's HEIs through mergers and closures.

2. Expansion Through Privatization

2.1 Growth in the Number of Institutions

Over the last two decades, Taiwan's the number of Taiwan's higher education institutions (HEIs) has increased dramatically. In 1949, only one university and three junior colleges existed in Taiwan; over the past sixty years the number of HEIs has grown to 163, including 147 universities/colleges (Cheng, et al., 2012). Following the revision of the University Act in 1994, rapid growth occurred disproportionately through the establishment and expansion of private institutions (Chou, 2008). The number of private HEIs more than tripled (340% growth) from 22 institutions in 1991 to 97 institutions in 2013 (MOE, 2014b). During the same period, growth in the number of public HEIs was much slower (78% growth) from 28

institutions in 1991 to 50 institutions in 2013 (MOE, 2014b). The ratio of public to private institutions shifted from 1.27:1 (22:28) in 1991 to 1:1.94 (50:97) in 2013 (MOE, 2014b). Presently, nearly two-thirds of Taiwan's HEIs are private institutions. (See Figure 1 Growth in Taiwan's HEIs 1991-2013 below).

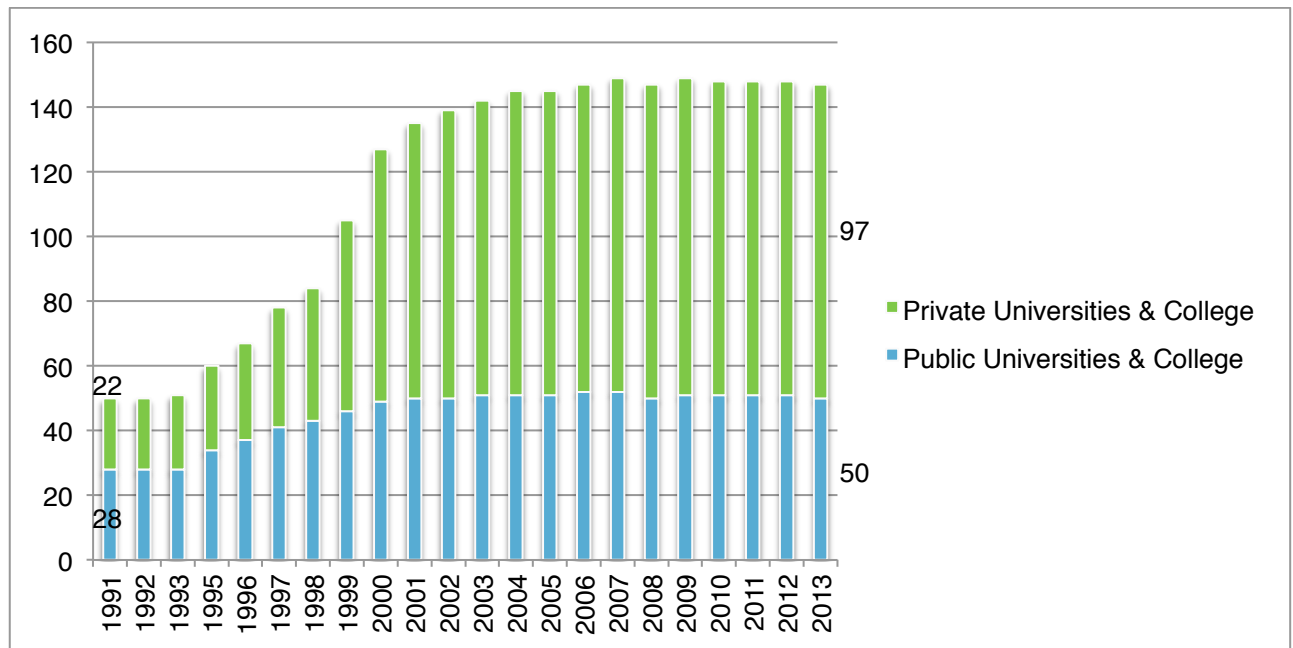


Figure 1 Growth in Taiwan's HEIs 1991-2013

Source: Statistics, MOE, 2014

2.2 Growth in Enrollment

As the number of HEIs has increased, so has the number of students enrolled in colleges and universities. In past three decades, Taiwan's higher education system has transformed from an elite system into a universal system.¹ Enrollment for all levels (undergraduate, masters and doctoral) more than tripled (340% growth) from 280,249 students in 1991 to over 1.2 million in 2013 (MOE, 2014b). In 1987 the net enrolment rate for the university age cohort was 14.82% but by 1995 it had risen to 27.79% (Chiang, 2013). Furthermore, Chou (2014) notes, "today, nearly 70 percent of Taiwan's 18–22 age cohort studies in an HEI," of these, more than 60% are enrolled in private institutions (p. 3). (See Figure 2 Growth in Enrollment in Taiwan's HEIs 1991-2013 next page).

¹ Trow defined elite higher education systems as those that enrolled up to 15% of the corresponding age group, mass systems are those that enrolled between 15 and 40% of the age group, and universal systems are those that enrolled more than 40% (Trow, 2007).

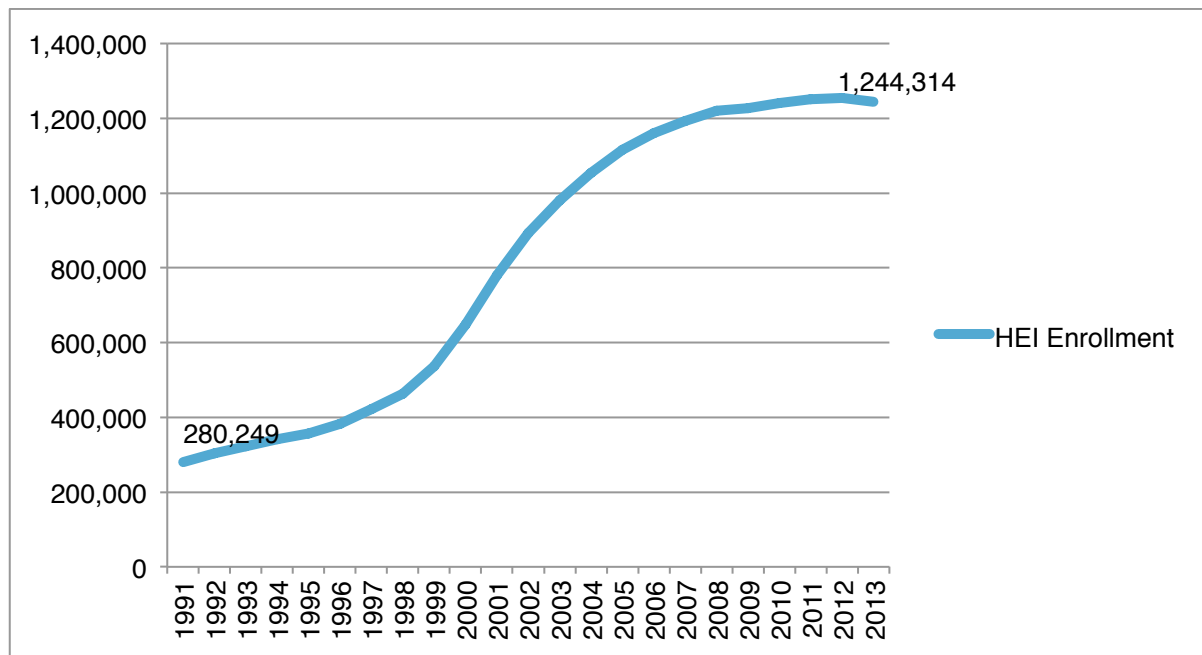


Figure 2 Growth in Enrollment in Taiwan HEIs 1991-2013

Source: Statistics, MOE, 2014

2.3 Consequences of Growth in Education Literature

The rapid expansion and privatization of Taiwan's higher education system has been raised as an area for concern in the field of education policy studies. Issues raised have centered around three main areas: control, quality and sustainability. The deregulation of the higher education system in Taiwan is closely tied to the 1987 revocation of Martial Law and resulting sociopolitical and socioeconomic changes (Law, 1998; Mok, 2002). Before the reforms of the late 1980s and mid-1990s, the Kuomintang (KMT)-controlled Central Government through the MOE "controlled the establishment of institutes and departments, the appointment of university executives and academics, the allocation of finance, the design of university curricula, the adoption of textbooks, and the procedure of student admissions and graduation" (Law, 1998, p. 4). Highlighting the dramatic shift away from centralized control of higher education, Chou notes,

The revision of the University Act in 1994 transformed the traditional centralized system of bureaucratic control of the MOE into a more self-reliant and autonomous environment for HEIs. It also reduced MOE power and responsibility for university academic and administrative operations in presidential appointments, curriculum guidelines, student recruitment, staffing,

and tuition policy, fulfilling the goal of academic freedom of autonomy. (2008, p. 149)

The loosening of centralized control and accompanying rapid expansion of Taiwan's higher education has been heralded for increasing HEIs' academic autonomy and expanding access to higher education for the public; however, despite these important gains, deregulation of Taiwan's HEIs has also been criticized for overall decreases in quality and increasing concerns about sustainability.

The rapid growth in the number of Taiwan's HEIs and the expansion of enrollment has raised concerns for the quality of higher education in Taiwan (Chen et al., 2010). As the number of HEIs increased, the admission rate to universities and colleges also grew dramatically. Traditionally, approximately 30% of students who sat for the national College Entrance Exam were admitted to higher education programs (Chiang, 2013). By 2008, more than 97% of test takers were offered admissions (Chiang, 2013). In fact one report pointed out, the the number of students taking the exam fell short of the number of new admissions offered by universities virtually guaranteeing admissions to test takers (China Post, 2008). Chiang (2013) notes "the minimum university admission grade is 18.47 where the full grade is 500/600 for a total of five/six exam subjects. In other words, those who would like to go to university need only score an average of 3.7/3.1 points in each of the exam subjects" (p. 415). Chiang goes on to point out, "when the major financial resources for operating in private higher education institutions are from students' tuition.... private universities have to admit more students by lowering the admission criteria that serve as the gatekeeper for qualified incoming students and have to lower educational standards in curriculum delivery in order to retain students for more tuition revenue" (p. 415). This seems to be reflected in the results of the Ministry of Education's 2005 national college evaluation which reveal a few high-performing (public) institutions sitting atop an increasingly stratified system (Cheng, et al., 2012).

In addition to concerns about quality, the sustainability of the sheer number of Taiwanese HEIs has increasingly been called into question. Since 1984, Taiwan's fertility rate has fallen below the population replacement rate of 2.1; at 1.1 in 2014 it is one of the lowest in the world (Yearbook, 2014). Due to the shrinking population of students, Taiwan has already seen closures of elementary and secondary schools, and the trend is poised to affect colleges and universities.

3. Higher Education Privatization from a Public Policy Perspective

Although education policy is extensively discussed in the field of education, the education sector has been traditionally underattended in the field of public policy. Raffel (2007) brings attention to the public policy field's lack of attention to education and attributes this lack of attention to the US-centricity of the discipline that is traditionally focused on the federal level and hindered by ideological views about the relationship between education and the state. McLendon (2003) notes, "although an appreciable literature continues to accumulate in description of state governance reform... virtually nothing is known about how or why state governments undertake reforms of their higher education systems" (p. 58). Despite the lack of widespread attention, public policy can offer valuable lens for investigating education policy. In Taiwan, the expansion of higher education has been attributed to both push and pull factors. Following the end of the martial law period, the public enjoyed greater freedoms and expanded democracy. Pushing from below, reform of education became an arena in which the public exercised newfound freedoms and called for greater access to higher education (Chiang, 2013). At the same time, the government recognized the pull of the necessity to train highly educated knowledge workers in order to stay competitive with a modern economy (Marginson et al., 2011). Together this external pull and bottom-up push paved the way for the 1994 reforms and subsequent expansion. The following sections take a second look at the privatization of higher education in Taiwan employing concepts commonplace in public policy literature. Highlighted here are issues of legal ownership, political authority, funding, and social equality.

3.1 Legal Ownership

The most fundamental and simplistic distinction between public and private organizations is the simple question of legal ownership. Bozeman et al. (1994) refer to this as the core approach to studying privatization; one in which scholars merely identify organizations as government-owned vs. privately owned. This distinction, while simplistic, captures the dichotomy between public (國立) and private (私立) HEIs in Taiwan. Many of the present-day private colleges and universities in Taiwan were established by individuals, families or corporations as junior colleges or vocational institutes, following the 1994 educational reforms these institutions were rapidly expanded and upgraded to full-fledged universities (Chou, 2008). These institutions were required to take the form of not-for-profit organizations when established which allowed them to purchase government land at artificially low prices a scheme promoted by the government in order to encourage the expansion of education

(Rickards, 2013). Although the concept of legal ownership allows us to clearly separate Taiwan’s HEIs into two groups: public and private, it does little to describe the nature of the differences between these two types of institutions, or what challenges privatization may present. A more useful, but rather less clear-cut, dimension is that of political authority.

3.2 Political Authority

Moving beyond dichotomous the question of legal ownership, examining the extent to which organizations are affected by external political authority provides a dimensional approach to privatization whereby organizations can be described as “more or less public” (Bozeman, et al., 1994, p. 202). When considering control by external political authority, it is useful to adopt a continuum between high “publicness” and high “privateness” (Johnstone, 2002). (See Table 1 below.)

Table 1 Continuum of Privatization based on Johnstone (2002, p. 488).

	High “publicness”	← Continuum of Privatization →		High “privateness”
Control by government	High state control, as in agency or ministry.	Subject to controls, but less than other state agencies.	High degree of autonomy; control limited to oversight.	Controls limited to those over any other businesses.

On this continuum, Taiwan’s public HEIs certainly fall left-of-center, and closer to the high publicness end than do private HEIs. However, Taiwan’s private HEIs, while enjoying slightly more autonomy than public institutions, certainly fall toward the middle of the spectrum when compared with organizations in other industries. The extent to which the government exerts authority over private HEIs in Taiwan is codified in the Private School Law. The Law includes provisions for the establishment of institutions; the compositions of supervisory boards; the numbers and distribution of students to be enrolled in the colleges, departments, schools, or programs; as well as, the regulations about budgeting and income surplus use (Private School Law, 2014). While gains have been made towards greater autonomy and freedom from government control for both public and private HEIs in Taiwan,

the government still exerts a significant degree of political authority over HEIs; gains in institutions academic autonomy have far outpaced gains in administrative freedoms.

3.3 Funding

The privatization of higher education in Taiwan has had important consequences for the funding of higher education. Before the enactment of education reform, government total expenditures on all levels of education were NT\$60.2 billion in 1980; of this just over 17% (NT\$10.2 billion) was allocated to the 27 existing colleges and universities (MOE, 2014a). By 2013 government total expenditures on all levels of education had climbed to NT\$544.6 billion; the amount allocated to funding universities and colleges increased to 36.1% (NT\$196 billion), which was distributed among 147 colleges and universities (MOE, 2014a). As a percentage of total government expenditures, spending on education at all levels increased from 14.71% in 1980 to 19.59% in 2013. While the total amount of government spending on higher education has increased significantly, it has not kept paced with the growing number of colleges and universities and increased enrollment numbers. In 1980, government funding per university student was NT\$200,000; by 2013 the amount had fallen to NT\$130,000 per student (MOE, 2014a).

Unsurprisingly public institutions' budgets rely more heavily on government funding than do private institutions'. On average 37% of public institutions' funding comes from the government, in comparison, an average of 15.7% of private institutions' funding comes from the government (Rickards, 2013). Private institutions make up for the lack of government support by relying on revenue from student tuition with an average of 54% of private institutions' budgets based on student contributions (MOE, 2014a). In contrast, on average only 18% of public institutions budgets come from tuition revenues (MOE, 2014a). While public institutions boast more prestigious reputations, the government has ensured their tuition rates remain low with students paying on average NT\$30,000 for annual tuition (MOE, 2014a). In contrast, tuition at private institutions is significantly higher with students paying an average yearly tuition of NT\$110,000 (MOE, 2014a). The remainder of institutions' budgets comes from a mix of profit-generating activities and philanthropic donations, although scholars are careful to note that alumni and philanthropic donations are not yet part of Taiwanese society the way they have been in the United States; moreover, public institutions, with their comparatively prestigious reputations, may find it easier to raise funds in this way (Chou, 2014; Rickards, 2013).

3.4 Social Equality

While the increased numbers of HEIs have certainly expanded access to higher education across Taiwanese society, Rickards (2013) notes, “ironically, students from families in higher socio-economic brackets are more likely to get into the academically elite but lower-tuition national universities, while those enrolled in the higher-cost private schools are often less academically inclined and come from working-class backgrounds” (p. 15). Indeed research has shown that Taiwanese students’ family income, parental educational background, and home region influence their chances of entering top-ranked, public institutions (Lo, 2002). Researchers have noted that in Taiwan private institutions have been relied on to expand access to higher education, but public investment has been targeted toward a limited number of elite public universities (Chiang, 2013; Hayhoe et al., 2005). This phenomenon is captured by the effectively maintained inequality theory which stresses that despite expanded access to education the advantaged effects of socioeconomic status remain (Cheng, et al., 2012). Moreover, in recent years university graduates have faced greater challenges in transforming their university degrees into economic opportunities. Overall, the unemployment rate for university graduates’ was 4.8% in 2014; and furthermore, the unemployment rate for university graduates’ has been higher for any other education level, including those without college degrees, since 2011 (Chou, 2014; DGBAS, 2014). Thus, the increasing stratification of the quality of HEIs in Taiwan has far reaching concerns for social mobility.

4. Challenges and Implications

Taiwan’s higher education sector presently faces challenges in two key areas: (1) quality and (2) sustainability. Both of these issues are affected by the expansion of Taiwan’s higher education via privatization that has occurred over the past two decades. Concerns about quality are highlighted in both the extremely low qualifications to enter colleges and universities through the national College Entrance Exams, as well as, the increasing gap between graduates’ education and the demands of Taiwan’s industries for talent (Chou, 2014).

After the first decade of rapid expansion, concerns about the quality of Taiwan’s newly established colleges and universities became apparent and the government began to take steps to address quality in HEIs. One initiative that has received a great deal of fanfare is the Plan to Develop First-class Universities and Top-level Research Centers (renamed in its second phase as the Aim for the Top University Project, referred to as the Top University Plan for

the remainder of this paper). Since 2005, the Taiwanese government has allocated NT\$10 billion to 12 elite universities towards the development of world-class universities and research centers (Song et al., 2007). Of these universities, ten are public and two are private institutions. One of the achievements of the Top University Plan has been the inclusion of National Taiwan University (NTU) in the QS World University Rankings. NTU was ranked in the top 100 institutions for the first time in 2009 and was ranked 76th in 2014 (QS World University Rankings, 2014). Although the Top University Plan has contributed to international recognition and connections for its participating institutions, it was not designed to address concerns about the stratification of quality among Taiwan's HEIs.

In order to ensure basic quality of HEIs, beginning in 2005, the MOE introduced an evaluation and quality assurance scheme of institutions and programs nation-wide to be carried out by the Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TWAEA) and the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT) (Cheng, 2009; Chiang, 2013). To date, HEEACT has carried out two rounds of reviews. HEEACT's reviews have focused on on-going improvement via goal setting and institutional self-evaluation, rather than ensuring institutions meet a fixed standard (Cheng, 2009; A.-c. Hou, 2012). In the first cycle conducted between 2006 and 2011 of all programs and institutions reviewed, 86.11% passed unconditionally, 11.84% were conditionally accredited, and 1.97% were denied; the second cycle (conducted between 2011 and 2013), 98.3% of programs and institutions reviewed passed unconditionally (A. Y.-C. Hou et al., 2014).

In addition to questions of quality, concern about the sustainability of the higher education system is an increasingly pressing issue as the local student population is shrinking due to Taiwan's extremely low birthrate. Despite its urgency, reducing the number of HEIs to a sustainable number seems to be a difficult task for the government. Efforts by the MOE to facilitate the merging of public universities have yielded few results since their beginnings as early as 1996 (Tien, 2008). Responding to concerns about sustainability, in September 2014, Education Minister Wu Se-hwa (吳思華) announced that the number of HEIs in Taiwan should be reduced to 100 while simultaneously enhancing the quality of remaining institutions (Chang, 2014). His remarks have been met with protests from faculty and students, as well as, from politicians elected in areas where effected universities are a significant source of local income (Pretzer-Lin, 2015; Rickards, 2013). Moreover, public policy scholarship suggests that mandating organizational change, especially terminating organizations, is not easily accomplished. While scholars now agree that public sector

organizations are not as immortal as Kaufman (1976) suggested, numerous case studies into transformational change and termination of public sector organizations note that such change may be severely limited and difficult to achieve (Bimber, 1998; Frantz, 2002; Geva-May, 2001; McNulty et al., 2004). These challenges seem to accurately describe the situation in Taiwan. Furthermore, although there are a number of studies on national educational reform, the majority are descriptive studies rather than analyses of the processes and forces driving policy decisions and shaping outcomes (De Boer et al., 2007; McLendon, 2003). Thus, given the intensifying demand for Taiwan's higher education sector to ensure quality and sustainability, there is still much room for public policy scholars to make both practical and scholarly contributions.

5. Conclusion

Over the past two decades Taiwan's higher education sector has expanded rapidly through privatization both in terms of the number of institutions and student enrollments. Education policy scholars have raised concerns about rapid growth through privatization centering around control, quality and sustainability. Adopting a public policy perspective to reexamine the expansion and privatization of Taiwan's higher education sector, this paper notes that while issues of legal ownership seem to divide Taiwan's HEIs into two categories, both public and private institutions remain subject to a substantial degree of government control suggesting even private institutions retain tendency towards "publicness". In terms of funding, both public and private institutions have seen a decrease in government funding per student as well as an increase of reliance on tuition fees. Public institutions, however, receive more funding from the government but are also more strictly regulated in terms of how much they can charge in tuition fees. These differences in funding combine with increasing stratification of quality among Taiwan's HEIs to affect students' social equality and mobility. Finally, privatization of the higher education sector can be linked to concerns about both quality and sustainability. While the government has taken steps to tackle these issues, there is still a need for public policy scholarship to contribute to address these significant challenges.

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