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Access through Private Higher Education:
Global Patterns and Indian Illustrations

By
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**PROGRAM FOR RESEARCH ON
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By

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ABSTRACT

One of the salient concerns in contemporary higher education internationally is access, which is rapidly expanding. Another salient trend is the rapid expansion of private higher education. These two salient tendencies have not been treated in scholarship as heavily intertwined. Much of the reason is that many people associate “private” with “elite,” in part because of the U.S. reality of leading private universities clearly associated with elite functioning. In much of the rest of the world, suspicion of privates runs deep and there is little disposition to couple the negative connotations of private with the positive connotations of access.

Yet as enrolment has been rising rapidly and keeps increasing, there are strong limitations on what can be accommodated through public higher education. Practically, either access is spurned, widely considered politically, socially, and even economically untenable or there must be explosive growth of private higher education. This is largely a matter of demand for higher education greatly outdistancing at least the public supply of higher education. Thus, much of the link between access and private higher education concerns “demand-absorbing” institutions, which is not to overlook more specialized avenues of access to other types of private institutions. At any rate private higher education has grown powerfully in recent decades and seems destined to grow further. India is a marked case of still very low cohort enrolment in higher education but with great demand and rapid private growth.

BACKGROUND

Access is a major issue in higher education the world over.¹ Meanwhile, private higher education is growing dramatically, affecting degrees and patterns of access. This working paper is an analytical overview of how private higher education institutions provide increased access, in different ways, through different forms.

Remarkably, private higher education accounts now for roughly a third of global enrollments, and a higher share in Asia. It is untenable to think about expanding higher education access without considering the role of the private sector.

Policies on access are at the center of higher education concerns in country after country. Yet in few countries is the access issue more vital and dramatic than it is in India.² In a comparison of giant neighbors, India sorely lags behind China. The two countries were close not long ago, but with its fantastic dynamism (Levy 2002). China has soared ahead. Although India also grows significantly, as it too enjoys an economic boom and the middle class multiplies, it still stands out for its strikingly low cohort enrolment. Seven percent contrasts with both moderately and massively greater enrolment in not only the developed world but also in most of Asia and Latin America.³ Paradoxically, then, India is simultaneously a world leader in absolute enrolments and a laggard in proportional enrolment of the cohort group. The Indian government has looked to move from 7 to 10 percent of the main age cohort enrolled by today's date. Achievement of that goal would yet leave India far behind. Even 10 percent may appear a modest goal, leaving India behind China and many other developing countries. Indeed, the classic figure employed by Martin Trow some three decades ago, and cited frequently since, labels "mass higher education" as 15 percent enrolment (Trow 1974). Arguably, that figure is outdated (too low), yet India nevertheless stands far short. Moreover, as the Indian age cohort expands, and government tries to trim expenditures, 10 percent is no easy feat. Moreover, some leading Indian analysts call for 20-25 percent in the near future. Access is thus one of the intriguing aspects of an Indian higher education system in transition. It is intertwined with political, economic, demographic, social, and international dimensions.

Clear to most governments and many scholars worldwide is that booming growth cannot often be accommodated by public sectors alone. This separates the modern era from much of the last century as more developed regions and then some less developed regions moved toward mass higher education. Back then the movement was exclusively or overwhelmingly

through public institutions, both growth in existing institutions and creation of new institutions. Even many developing countries increased their cohort enrolment rate from a few percent to ten, twenty, and or even thirty percent. Though long seen, misleadingly, as a private bastion, the United States would be roughly 80 percent public at the point where more than half of secondary school leavers came to enter higher education. Europe remained almost fully public, as did Africa and some other parts of the developing world. Latin America saw important private initiatives sporadically over decades and then more resolutely starting mid-century, often based around religious or socioeconomic elite efforts, then overtaken by access to “demand-absorbing” institutions—but enrolment in “Spanish America” (without Brazil) was still nearly four-fifths public as late as 1980.⁴

Asia provided the major exceptions to the public access rule. Several countries expanded mostly through the private sector (e.g., Japan, Korea, and the Philippines). Still, more Asian countries, like India, offered access mostly on the public side.

Access through public institutions remains common, of course, but has run into serious problems. Near consensus remains that higher education overall should and will keep enlarging; this view may be especially potent in “lagging” countries. Demand will continue to expand due to belief in favorable individual returns and social mobility, needs of the new knowledge society, lifelong education, demographics, political pressures, mimicking of industrialized countries, and so forth (World Bank 2002; Task Force on Higher Education and Society 2000). On the other hand, traditional public supply is often poorly configured to meet the growing demand. As in India, this supply has been basically publicly funded, though the growth in the system now comes in its bulk on the private side. Globally, the dominant political-economic reality or at least the perception in ruling circles is that the state must trim its costs and insist that beneficiaries assume more of the financial burden. This leaves a huge problem for countries like India where conviction remains widespread that education is a “public good” and should be “free.” One way to square access with limited public funds is partial privatization of public institutions, as the percentage of costs covered by the state shrinks and “private” management increases. This too is both an Indian and an international phenomenon. The other way to square access with limited public spending, the way that is the subject of this paper, is the growth of private institutions (with mostly or fully private funds).

Fewer and fewer countries disallow private higher education, whereas many did several decades back. Furthermore, while private growth has often exploded unexpectedly and on the fringes of legislation, it has also emerged

where laws have been liberalized. India's Chhattisgarh state is a recent example (Neelakantan 2004), but Karnataka and Maharashtra have been among the Indian leaders looking to provide access through private institutions. Similarly, China has allowed considerable leeway for provinces to set variable policies, more liberal or less, regarding private institutional creation to promote access.

Leaving aside the Indian private colleges affiliated to public universities, colleges that became basically public (certainly in finance) after Independence or were created after Independence, India had a first wave of private growth between 1958 and 1968 but then added just three private institutions in the 1970s. Greater institutional expansion began in the 1980s and then exploded forth in several states. This includes "deemed universities" (many private, many public) providing access in particular specialized fields (Powar 2004). Privatization is a major trend in Indian higher education and that includes growth of private institutions. Policy depends very much on configurations of India's decentralized governance, varying not only by state but upon controversial court decisions and different views by different official agencies and authorities (Gupta 2004). In any event, higher education access is a crucial issue for India and private higher education is crucial to overall higher education access in the country.

We consider two principal international issues regarding access through the private sector:

1. *how* private higher education increases access;
2. *types* of private expansion.

Obviously, this paper can only sketch key trends and illustrate from countries how they may be understood. Our focus is on countries that are developing or transitional (away from statist economies); India obviously fits especially the developing country category. More and more of these countries face a present and future of increased private proportional loads in providing higher education access.

PART 1: HOW PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INCREASES ACCESS

Finance

Financial dynamics of private institutions enhance access in two basic ways. The first is mostly straightforward, by providing private income for private institutions, thus bringing added revenue into the higher education system

overall. The second is more complex and uncertain, concerning impact on public institutions.

Most private institutions get virtually no public funds or few funds (Levy 1992; Salerno 2004). Exceptions include the United States, with sector-blind federal research funds and with student aid, and some emulation of such funding in other countries (e.g., student aid in Kenya) as well as isolated special funds or even subsidies. India could be a major exception to the lack of public funds tendency only if one defines private higher education very loosely regarding colleges affiliated with universities.

Most private higher education institutions, in India, other developing countries, and even developed countries, depend on tuition and fees.⁵ This is particularly true of the least prestigious institutions, which are the majority. Yet tuition is generally higher in more prestigious institutions (than in public institutions), where it may be mixed with other private funds. Access expands as clients pay for it.

Other sources of private income are more sporadic but nonetheless important and have potential to increase, especially where significant tuition increases are not feasible. Where and when business thrives, corporations or groups of financiers or industrialists have launched efforts to provide for major and well-endowed private universities. Turkey's Bilkent University is a major example as is the Aga Khan University in Pakistan, now over twenty years old, is a large and much-cited example. Success in such endeavors may stimulate alumni and other philanthropic contributions. Charitable foundations have not thus far been a prominent option. Contributions from churches have been common for "their own" institutions. Fast-growing financial sources include contracts and entrepreneurial units that generate funds through consultancies and services. Any of these funding sources can increase higher education's ability to offer access.

To the extent private institutions spend efficiently, capacity increases even more than income. The World Bank and others typically criticize developing countries' public universities as highly inefficient. There is ongoing debate on the extent to which private institutions achieve efficiency or merely operate with low quality. Yet clearly private higher education operates with much lower costs per student. For example, there are fewer staff, and the teaching staff is overwhelmingly part time. Students move through more quickly, including through more flexible provision of courses and tighter institutional controls. Costly fields of study and other undertakings, such as conventional academic research, are usually bypassed. Commercially oriented private institutions, whether formally for-profit or not, epitomize

these tendencies. So private higher education garners and spends revenues in ways that enhance access to higher education, but that hardly guarantees access to all forms of higher education.

Private income generation and efficiency sometimes contributes, through example or competition, to public reform in finance and management. A dramatic illustration in many countries is the admission into public institutions of tuition-paying students, alongside subsidized students. Tradition, political conviction, and self-interest continue to favor a basic policy of free or low tuition charges—but revenue is generated by imposing charges on students admitted beyond the basic, subsidized, quota. At Australian universities, full-fee paying students may constitute up to 25 percent of total enrolment per program. This phenomenon is also prominent in Central and Eastern Europe. It is powerful in some African countries, including Kenya (Otieno and Levy 2007). A different reform within public institutions that also can be associated in part with private example and competition is movement into fields of study pioneered in private institutions. These are often commercial fields with high demand. Obviously, there is a correlation between offering fields in demand and expanding access.

Still, the net impact on public entities is difficult to gauge and depends greatly on what change we postulate for these entities were there no private competition. How stagnant would they be versus how much would they be trying to generate more capacity through private revenues and efficiency? If the latter, then arguably they are hampered in those respects by the private ‘skimming off’ of lucrative fields, donors, and so forth.

Alongside private-hue reform, however, is major public resistance to such reform as either not needed or even bad. As in India, so in Latin America and elsewhere, the left mostly holds that the state should expand public provision, with public money. With a combination of conviction and self-interest, many in and around public universities resist most forms of privatization.

How and how much private institutional growth has affected access to public institutions is therefore unclear. One possibility is that pulling some students into the privately funded private sector allows public institutions to open additional spaces for other students. But probably the clearest and most potent point about access and privately funded private institutions is that they enrol students who would not otherwise be in higher education and would not be covered through public funds.

Access through Institutional Differentiation

Private sectors hold a significant share of enrolment and especially of new enrolment in many countries. Whereas Japan is the only developed country with a majority of higher education enrolment in the private sector, this is the situation in many developing countries in Asia and Latin America. Moreover, many others countries have moved from small private sectors to sectors with anywhere from 10-40 percent of enrolments; European post-communist countries have moved up usually from zero toward as high as 30 percent (Slantcheva and Levy 2007); post-communist Kazakhstan has a much higher percentage private (Zhakupova 2008) And whatever the enrolment percentage, the percentage of institutions is generally higher. For Eastern and Central Europe this holds for twelve of the thirteen countries for which UNESCO reports data on both enrolment and institutions, and the institutional ratio is often twice or more the enrolment ratio.⁶ In other words, the private sector facilitates access to higher education through institutional proliferation and small institutions. The point applies to United States for-profit higher education with one mammoth exception, the University of Phoenix. Commonly there are many small private institutions, sometimes alongside a few medium or large ones.

Private growth is often about creating institutions not meant to be much different from public ones with the exception of operating on private money. These institutions thus offer access through more of the same. But private growth is also often about creating institutions quite different from public ones—access largely through differentiation. This differentiation often means the kind of institutions that are less costly to operate, even apart from considerations of efficiency. Often crucial to access is the high proportion of private “colleges” or other “non-universities.” This is common in South Asia, including India and Pakistan. Indeed, ambiguity often surrounds the question of which private providers are truly part of “higher education.” So, private proliferation contributes to access by relying upon institutional forms with high ratios of enrolment to cost.

Private institutions tend to be much narrower than public ones in what they do. This is a reflection of smaller size and a different and more restrictive number of activities. The concentration is greatest in what students demand. Again much of this is traditional demand in excess of public supply, while much is demand for something different. That something different is usually job-related, through fields and processes that can move the student quickly toward employment.⁷ This is part of the recent private access story in India. Striking also is job-oriented access by institutions that lack official recognition for degrees; Greece and Malaysia are examples. Barriers to state

employment may not deter students looking toward private or international employment. Whether through such intriguing forms or through degree-granting nonprofit institutions, when private institutions build novel areas or otherwise attract students who would not attend higher education, they serve access.

The “new people” private higher education helps accommodate are varied. Probably the most common are those academically unable to gain admission to the limited public sector. Asian examples include Japan, Korea, and, far behind but increasingly, China. Thus we behold access through a kind of private “demand-absorption.” It involves many students from socioeconomic backgrounds lower than that in public institutions, notwithstanding tuition charges. After all, the main obstacle to access for those from poor backgrounds is not higher education tuition but rather factors that limit their chances to perform well through schooling and thus to be qualified for selective public higher education. Accommodating delivery modes, including class times, help working and other non-traditional students to enrol. In South Africa, the percentage of black students in private institutions is estimated to match that in the public sector (Subotzky 2002). Often the private sector (including a religious or other socially conservative subsector) is especially attractive for women, avoiding the social permissiveness and political protests, strikes, and other turmoil more common in public institutions. In Kenya, where women do significantly worse on scientific entry exams and thus in those cases cannot gain access to public universities, private universities play a crucial role. Other clientele, whether socio-economically more modest or not, may include working adults, a higher education population that should increase as lifelong education gains currency. We should also note that private institutions often provide access for those who can win places at middle or lower rung public institutions even while they cannot gain access to the leading public universities. Thus, private higher education often provides access as a “second choice” phenomenon. India fits here too.

Of course, how private higher education increases access depends crucially on real actors. These are often directly self-interested actors, principally students as well as private institutional leaders and backers. There are also important promoters from ‘outside’ the higher education system, including international businesses and the World Bank. The Bank's spin-off, EdInvest, <http://www.ifc.org/edinvest/index.htm>, at the International Finance Corporation, has a pointed and active mission to promote access through various forms of higher education privatization, including the creation and growth of private institutions. Regarding government, there is great variation. Private growth often arises quite outside government planning,

even catching government and others by surprise (Levy 2006). Yet, compared to Latin America a generation and more ago where private provision grew up outside state directive, it appears increasingly common for governments today in Asia, Eastern Europe, and now even Africa and the Middle East to articulate a rationale for private access.⁸

PART 2: TYPES OF PRIVATE INSTITUTIONAL EXPANSION

Demand-Absorbers and Related Blends

Up until the 1970s or 1980s, the main institutional forms of private higher education could be described as religious or other cultural, elite, and demand-absorbing (Levy 1986; Geiger 1986). Since that time, it is the third category that has exhibited most significant growth. And it is obviously the crucial category when the concern is aggregate extent of access.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the public higher education sector of developing countries and even of Europe could be considered rather elite. As demand grew and was accommodated the sector became less elite or a private sector emerged to handle the newcomers; usually it was a combination but with great variation as to whether public or private managed the bulk. In recent years, the private share of such enrolment has clearly grown, whether private institutions become the 'mass' (majority) sector or not.

Where religious private higher education has recently expanded it may be more closely aligned with demand-absorbers, compared to a past where it often was closer to elite private institutions. This is the case when Catholic universities proliferate in Latin America, where the oldest Catholic universities remain among the most selective institutions. In the United States, the younger Catholic colleges, created in the middle of the twentieth century, are becoming more like private secular colleges scampering to maintain or build their market share in an increasingly competitive setting. Worldwide, existing Catholic colleges and universities struggle to maintain some religious essence. This is not to say these institutions are simply about access rather than religion but it is a mix.

Meanwhile, there is proliferation of other religious institutions, including Moslem and Protestant of various denominations, largely Pentecostal. Kenya has both as well as Catholic private higher education and, though some of the institutions are for the fairly well to do, the main selective institutions are still the top public universities, and so the religious institutions play a major role in private access. Also on a cultural front, whether religious or not, many

institutions grow to provide comfortable places for a cultural minority, as for Russians in Ukraine. This reminds us that the term “access” has different shades of meaning; some types of private higher education offer an access that attracts students including some who could have had public access.

Usually “access” is thought of in terms of expanding numbers for the system overall. But, clearly, there is also specialized access. The different religious and cultural groups can fit this well, particularly where entry to mainstream public institutions is not comfortable. One can also point to access through non-traditional modes, including distance education, even where students *could* enter traditional institutions.⁹

More research is needed to map the proliferating private institutions that are neither elite nor the opposite. As in the United States and now many developing countries, some provide places for well-off youth who cannot get into selective institutions and are disinclined to mix into unselective public ones. Common too are institutions that approach neither the academic top nor bottom, as noted above for India and other countries. Instead, they may perform very well in a chosen specialty, reflecting the point about narrow private institutions. The specializations typically relate to commercial fields of study, such as business administration, tourism, information technology, or English. Sometimes racing into such fields ahead of public institutions, the private sector offers access through institutional proliferation. But there is also evidence of subsequent institutional broadening. As in China, many narrow institutions pursue aspirations to grow, often using revenues generated from their lead commercial fields to finance the opening of new fields or new campuses. They would then provide different kinds of access, though often alongside rather than in place of their access offerings to date.

Many tendencies thus far identified crystallize in a growing for-profit sector. Until recently, access had little to do with this sector. Private growth was basically nonprofit. Many countries that have permitted private higher education have prohibited for-profits. Most of Central and Eastern Europe still follows that course, and the generalization holds most of Latin America and certainly Africa. In other cases, there is merely an assumption against for-profits, without specific legal proscription. But more and more countries now allow formal for-profit sectors and some even encourage it (Kinser and Levy 2006). And probably access is the main rationale for this public policy. Still more common, however, are for-profits legally cloaked as nonprofits. India quite fits here and many citizens routinely refer to private institutions as for-profit.

Many of the access arguments for the private over the public sector sharpen when it comes to for-profits, whether legal ones or functional ones. The main positive argument is that access increases without drawing on public money.¹⁰ A key distinction is that, unlike nonprofits, for-profits do not get public tax breaks.

Related to the economically oriented claims of for-profits are socioeconomic claims about *who* gains access. The examples cited above about novel delivery modes and about black enrolment in South Africa come largely from the for-profit sector. Again, extensive evidence is available only for the United States, where it shows socioeconomic background for students at for-profits to be more like that of public community colleges than of either public or nonprofit four-year institutions (Kelly 2001; Kinser 2008). Such reality should undermine stereotypes about private higher education as necessarily elitist and unfriendly to access. For-profits and their formally nonprofit commercial brethren open places for groups that have difficulty making it into selective public or nonprofit higher education. The greater flexibility for simultaneous study and work is particularly attractive for both youth and older adults who do not see full-time study as a viable economic choice.

Inter-Institutional Linkages

For-profits (and nonprofits) still arise and grow mostly as freestanding institutions, sometimes novel, sometimes not, but both also sometimes provide access through various inter-institutional linkages. We identify a few forms briefly and then concentrate on one, partnership between private and public higher education institutions.

Formal linkages between businesses and higher education fit our list of expanding access options. Perhaps the clearest access role involves offering higher education to employees who otherwise would not receive it. As in South Africa and the United States, business may run their own corporate universities, or they may work out agreements to pay for the students' education in exchange for work commitments.

Another type of linkage involves the institutions tied together in a chain, with common for-profit ownership. The University of Phoenix is the leading example in the United States—and one of a number now operating internationally, whether through buying existing institutions or creating new ones. In one country or across countries, operations are put under one brand name. This is not just a marketing ploy. It is also a strategy that declares their product is working and now can be offered, through institutional cloning, to populations that cannot reach the initial places. Though the multiple sites

may have some autonomy, but only some, as the core idea is a rather standard package for curriculum, pedagogy, hiring, and admissions. The potential exists for huge access with profits.

Meanwhile, our major example of linkages involves formal partnerships between private and public higher education institutions. These are expanding rapidly. In some longstanding cases, as in several South Asian cases, private colleges—major access providers—are “affiliated” to public universities, which grant degrees and supervise. But many of the new private-public partnerships involve truly private colleges, some for-profit, others nonprofit. The private colleges are often tied to public universities, though sometimes to private universities. They often hook-up voluntarily but in other countries the affiliation is legally mandated. India has had its own type of private college-public university arrangements for years. Prominent examples of private-public partnerships include China, Malaysia, Russia, and South Africa. There is a great need for research about these partnerships as to both their theory and their practice.

Again much of the rationale lies in access. Still relatively exclusive public universities open some access to their facilities and certainly curriculum and perhaps evaluation. Private colleges accommodate demand while not terribly watering down academic standards and status at the universities. Of course, the linkages are about money as well as access, since the private college students are mostly fee-paying. There may be a progressive side to this access, reaching more students than otherwise, sometimes ones in more remote geographic areas but usually at least students of more modest background than at the university. On the other hand, where the private students pay while the public university ones do not, there is an apparent inequity.

Compared to other modes of increasing access, partnership brings the private and public together. It prioritizes cooperation over competition but does so in ways that tend to make mutual use of private-public distinctiveness rather than to minimize it.

Overlapping dynamics appear internationally. Of course, foreign providers may simply offer their product inside another country; where the providers are private, this represents additional private access. But more and more public universities also function abroad like private entities. Best fitting our discussion here, however, is where foreign universities join up with local private providers. The mutual attractions between foreign university and local college may be much like that of the domestic partners just discussed. The foreign institution expands its reach geographically and often socio-

economically, and garners tuition. The local private college gains a legitimizing link, curriculum, and the ability to offer a diploma or degree that may lack state recognition but can have job-market or international value. Malaysia has been a leading example of a country where the government has actively encouraged such arrangements (Lee 2002). Not surprisingly, charges of imperialism greet some such attempts. Nor do the attempts escape the common charges made even when the private-public partnership is strictly local: pursuit of profit, deception, low quality—and offering access at a markedly lower level, often to less privileged students, than what university access had traditionally been understood to be.

CONCLUSION

As in India, so also globally, higher education continues to grow and a rising share of that growth is private. Private higher education provides stark solutions to the dilemma of how to keep expanding access while not expanding public budgets. This has much to do with private payments, low-cost, and market-oriented endeavors, concentrated in an array of proliferating institutions distinct from traditional public universities.

Showing how and through what institutional forms private higher education provides access can leave a very positive impression. Yet the access is quite debatable as to its impact on equity and quality. Sometimes, the concerns include access via fraud, as in alleged preferences for Indians who make special payments to gain a space at private medical schools. Thus, regulation becomes a central policy issue for the private higher education's access role. Even if the general disposition is that "more is better," it does not follow that more is always better, depending on one's views on how and where the extra access is provided.

One can care deeply about access with or without caring about the mix of private or public provision. But it is impossible to understand contemporary expansion, including its size and contours and policy dimensions, without knowledge about both sectors. It is also important to analyze dynamics between the sectors. What effect does a kind of access through one sector have on the other sector? For example, the private sector may bolster system capacity where it ultimately spurs diversifying and expanding public sector provision. Private sectors will likely continue to provide access in ways importantly different from how public higher education provides access. Some of the modes will show continuity with present forms and, likely, others will be less predictable.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For example, the 2007 annual meeting of the American Council on Education is entitled The Access Imperative. News, public policy debate, and funding for research all appear to put access at the forefront in higher education. Though these statements are made about the U.S., they echo in much of the world.

² See Pawan Agarwal (2007) for a good analysis of Indian private higher education.

³ See <http://www.albany.edu/dept/eaps/prophe/data/international.html>.

⁴ For Latin American for historical data and other references in this paper, see Levy (1986), indicating a regional average moving toward 35 or 40% around 1980 and after. For more recent data see García Guadilla (1996: 40).

⁵ Three recent examples are shown in papers at the 52nd Comparative and International Education Society Annual Conference (Kinser 2008; Praphamontripong 2008; Silas Casillas 2008).

⁶ See http://www.cepes.ro/information_services/statistics.htm

⁷ See Cao (2007)'s dissertation on Chinese private colleges and the labor market. Juan Carlos Silas (2008)'s CIES paper, has undertaken the first in-depth, empirically informed dissection of the demand-absorbing sector into its more dubious and more legitimate parts.

⁸ Where to place India on this spectrum is not clear but certainly India policy is less centrally and forcefully directed than is the case in a number of other Asian countries.

⁹ Praphamontripong (2008)'s CIES paper makes a good case about specialized access via "semi-elite" institutions.

¹⁰ There is a huge qualification to this in the United States. The national government distributes massive funds to students as "vouchers" that they can use at any accredited institution. Many of the for-profit institution boast this accreditation (Kinser 2005) and so their revenues are largely public revenues.