Higher education in the Asia Pacific: A human right?

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The concept of human rights has a lengthy and theoretically diverse history as both a philosophy and a corresponding system of laws and protections. Fundamental and collective values are translated into a set of laws to protect individuals in a way that will benefit society. Societal philosophies have ranged from broad and equal protections to unequal protections justified as good for broader society. In relation to education, the 17th century philosopher and theologian Comenius is credited with focusing on education as a universal right without respect to class, sex, race, or any other category.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is an important historical and guiding document for human rights. It was drafted by diverse constituents around the globe and was made official by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris in 1948. It is the most fundamental and comprehensive claim to human rights that should be universally protected. Article 26 of the Declaration outlines education as a human right:

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

At the core of the declaration is primary school as fundamental, compulsory, and free. Higher Education, however, is noted as accessible as related to merit—both of which are highly contentious terms. Although higher education has been globally massified, claims to accessibility are seen in relationship to cost, which is another component of higher education that is rapidly growing, or to some other social value.
Throughout the Asia Pacific region, higher education has grown rapidly in a variety of ways. Price, accessibility, mobility, government funding and the quality of education available are all key areas of interest, and are all issues that likely shape the degree to which higher education may be viewed as a human right. This emerging scholars seminar is seeking a variety of empirical, evaluative, and philosophical perspectives on the question of higher education as a human right. How do societal values, conditions of availability and quality, and the presence or absence of public funding shape beliefs about the function of higher education in society? How does higher education compare to other human rights, and is there a ranking of importance when it comes to rights? Although enrollments continue to grow in many higher education systems, protests related to fees and other equity issues continue to grow as well. Furthermore, the global enrollment rate is still only 26 percent of the college going population. What are the legal and moral implications around the discussion of higher education as a right or a privilege? Whatever these are, do they or should they extent to issues of the relative value of a higher education degree within society subsequent to graduation?

Fundamental to understanding entitlements to learning facilities is the role of public investment and cultural values. Of particular interest for this seminar will be cultural analyses from regions, nation-states, and economies that sort out the degree to which the hypotheses outlined by Neubauer, Shin, and Hawkins (2013) play a role in the conceptualization of higher education as a human right. (See attachment.) The driving forces behind the hypotheses include Western dominance, economic development, globalization, and Asian cultural heritage. Higher education as a human right must be understood through the lens of Asian cultural heritages and philosophy and in a hybrid lens given the Western architecture of contemporary universities. The majority of discussions and publications about rights include a Western style philosophical, legal, and logic approach (c.f. McCowan 2013).

Proposed papers may begin with a particular unit of analysis on the topic ranging from a specific country/economy, region, philosophy, political perspective, legal analysis, or moral argument. The details that should be considered in any chapter are the nuances between rights and privileges and the increasing role of de facto rights where political economies are pursuing mass higher education to universal levels. Papers may also include discussions of notions of merit, qualifications, and quality. Papers can be propositions, analyses, evaluative, empirical, or intellectual exercises that make a contribution to understanding how higher education may be conceptualized in terms of human rights in the Asia pacific.
**References**

