Entries into higher education are continuing to soar globally, fuelled by the economic rise of India and China. Professor Philip Altbach explains to Robert Jeffery what this means for quality, diversity – and IB World Schools.

Campus life during Professor Philip Altbach’s time as an undergraduate would surely have been almost unrecognizable to the student of today. A native of Chicago, USA, Altbach was initiated into the world of higher education at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s, when student unrest was breaking out over the Vietnam War, racial equality and social issues.

Today, as Monan University Professor of Educational Leadership and Higher Education at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, Altbach is less likely to encounter sit-ins – or see students importing peace symbols from across the Atlantic, as he once did. Instead, the student of today could have been educated anywhere in the world – and could rub shoulders with the brightest minds from China, India and beyond.

It is these trends Altbach must make sense of, as one of the world’s most respected scholars of higher education. His four-decade-long academic career has taken in Harvard University, Stanford University and spells teaching in India, Singapore and Malaysia. In 2009, he was asked to explore the direction of higher education in a widely read report commissioned by UNESCO.

As IB World explores recognition, we ask Prof Altbach about globalization, markets – and if campus activists might make a return.

What are the prevailing characteristics and trends of higher education globally?

If you had to generalize, there are three or four and they all emanate from one word: massification. Higher education in many countries has gone from being the preserve of the elite to a mass phenomenon. Even in the past 20 years, enrollments have grown from 100 million to 150 million worldwide, and that growth is continuing. Most people estimate that in the next 20 years, at least half the numerical growth of higher education will take place in India and China. India today only enrols about 13 per cent of its young people, and China 22 per cent.
The sociologist Martin Trow observed in the 1960s that higher education was moving from an elite (about four per cent of the age group) to mass (about 40 per cent) to universal. But we’ve learned over the years that the universal that seemed to top out at about 70-80 per cent — some young people just don’t go.

What are the main impacts of this “massification”?

One is that higher education has become unequal. Most countries now have an elite sector in a mass market, whether by design or practice. The elite sector has become better and more internationalized, while student mobility has increased across all sectors. But massification has generally lowered the standards of higher education, which is logical when you think about it. The professorate has also deteriorated in quality.

What percentage of students ought to be going on to higher education?

There’s no way of controlling that. No country, no matter how repressive or undemocratic, can limit the trend to mass higher education. The more people who graduate from secondary school, the more who want to go on to post-secondary education, the more the labour market demands post-secondary qualifications. The global knowledge economy also demands the skills that are provided by higher education. What percentage of students benefit from higher education?

The global knowledge economy also requires a broader set of skills, particularly the ability to reason, think independently and problem-solve: all things many universities never did well. They did fine at meshing students with specific jobs — you can point to the old Soviet system as the prime example of that, where if someone studied power station engineering that’s all they were fit to do. That doesn’t work any more, if it ever worked at all.

How well do you think the IB Diploma Programme prepares students for higher education?

My general impression is that it does a really good job in providing a broad and important understanding of the major fields of the sciences, social sciences and humanities. A student who goes through the Diploma Programme is guaranteed to have a broad background formed by some of the deepest and well-articulated curriculums. And IB students do very well at university.

Many people in higher education are opposed to private providers. But what’s wrong with a healthy competition?

The fast-growth part of higher education globally is private education. It’s very difficult for the state to fund these huge numbers of students, so others have moved in. That’s not the case in Western Europe, but it is in almost all of the developing world and Latin America. Although 80 per cent of enrolments in the USA are in the public sector, and the non-profit sector is steady, the for-profit private sector is expanding rapidly. It is working very hard to become deeply problematic in my opinion.

There is a state that has a high priority for higher education, but the problem is to convince societies to invest appropriately in it. What we can do is to increase its contribution rather than expanding it. Part of it is down to the global economic crisis but it’s bigger than that — it’s still the general view that higher education is a private good and should be paid for by the student or their family, rather than a public good.

I’m not opposed to some elements of competition in the system, but I believe deeply that higher education is a public good and society has a responsibility to it. Those who have come out of higher education contribute to their societies — they are better consumers, they vote more, they live longer, they spend less on medical care.

How would you involve private companies in higher education?

Everybody says they have a role, and I would have to agree. But they have to be better managed and monitored because we have so much evidence from around the world that the big for-profits manipulate the system so they get the greatest possible number of kids through the door without caring whether they are qualified. In the United States, for example, a Congressional investigation found that some for-profits just admitted students to obtain their tuition dollars, ultimately paid through student loans. They get them in, spit them out and the kids end up owing money. The key is to create a system where private higher education works for the public good.

Neither of those countries’ universities are prominent in rankings of higher education institutions. Why is that?

Rankings measure a university’s research productivity. That’s all you can measure – there are no ways of measuring teaching, although it’s being worked on, and no way of ranking universities cross-nationally in terms of their teaching excellence.

China has invested a lot in its universities, particularly what it calls the China Ivy League of research-intensive universities. The facilities are world-class in many of them, but the challenge is to build a world-class academic culture and have some of their best scholars and scientists come back from Oxford and other places. Some other countries, like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, are also doing well, and we will see the top tier of institutions change.

What role does the school you go to play in the university you get into?

In much of the world (the elite sector of the US being an exception), the main determinant of entry into higher education is your score on a national or institutional exam or a high school leaving exam. The higher your score, the more chance you have to get into an elite university. The Chinese have this down to a fine science, with the gaokao [national entrance exam], which millions of students sit on the same day each year.

Haven’t we seen more student activism, when global protest has been so prominent recently?

Many people have scratched their heads about this. Why hasn’t there been more reaction on campuses in the US, for example, against the war in Iraq, which many Americans thought was a bad idea to start with? A lot of it is related to the job market in industrialized countries: student activism has traditionally taken place when the economy is pretty good, because students don’t worry so much about jobs when they leave.

The last couple of years has put a damper on this, especially in the US, where the quiescence on campus, particularly over Occupy Wall Street, which seems an extremely simple set of complaints about society.

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Wider view: Philip Altbach thinks education is getting better

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