

Exploring the Evolving Ecosystem of Higher Education Worldwide

Shahid Hafeez¹
Kayode Abraham Mayah²

¹Chairman,
ASFE Consultants,
Birmingham, UK

²Senior Lecturer and Research Associate,
Anglia Ruskin University London,
Oxford Business College,
United Kingdom

Received: 05/10/2024

Revised: 25/10/2024

Accepted: 31/10/2024

Abstract

The landscape of higher education (HE) has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, shaped by global trends, economic pressures, technological advancements, and shifting societal expectations. This article explores the evolving ecosystem of higher education worldwide, examining the dynamics between public and private institutions, the impact of digital technologies, and the growing demands for innovation, accessibility, and equity in educational offerings. It explores the role of governments, market forces, and institutions in navigating these changes and investigates the implications of these transformations for students, educators, and society at large. Through an in-depth analysis of global trends, the article presents a comprehensive overview of the current state of higher education and identifies emerging challenges and opportunities that are shaping its future.

Keywords: Ecosystem, Higher Education (HE), Private Higher Education, Public Higher Education, Technology, Equity and Access, Lifelong Learning

Introduction

Higher Education (HE) has traditionally been viewed as a critical pillar of societal progress, serving as a vehicle for the development of human capital, the promotion of research, and the cultivation of civic engagement (Ama & Emetarom, 2020, Kayyali, 2024, Nwachukwu et al., 2024, Pee & Vululleh, 2020). However, the global HE ecosystem is increasingly shaped by a complex interplay of various factors, including technological innovation, policy shifts, and socio-economic trends (Aithal et al., 2024). The transition from traditional, primarily Public, Higher Education (PuHE) models to more diverse and market-driven systems reflect broader socio-economic changes that are occurring worldwide (Marginson, 2016). Moreover, the rise of Private Higher Education Institutions (PrHEIs), online learning platforms, and the growing demand for lifelong learning have further complicated the global HE landscape (Altbach, 2018).

This article aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the evolving ecosystem of HE, focusing on key themes such as the structure and role of public and private higher education institutions, the impact of technology on learning, and the increasing demand for education to be more inclusive, accessible, and relevant to the needs of the contemporary workforce. The study highlights the global differences in higher educational systems and governance models, explores the internationalisation and globalisation of HE, and examines the definitions of HE.

Higher Education: Definitions and Evolving Perspectives

HE is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a broad range of organised post-secondary learning opportunities. Scholars and organisations have attempted to define it from various perspectives, reflecting its evolving nature and significance across societies.

Trow (1973) defined higher education as,

“all that organized provision for qualified persons beyond the age of compulsory schooling which is of a standard above that of secondary school” (p. 9).

This definition highlights the organised and structured nature of HE while focusing on its role as a continuation of formal learning beyond the secondary level. Similarly, Clark (1983) emphasised institutional settings, stating that,

“higher education is that stage of learning which occurs after secondary education, and which is normally carried on in universities or colleges” (p. 1).

Clark's perspective underlines the institutional contexts in which HE takes place, particularly universities and colleges. Barnett (2000) refined this view by integrating the outcome of HE, describing it as

“the stage of education beyond secondary education, provided in universities and other institutions and leading to a first degree or equivalent qualification” (p. 3).

This perspective adds a focus on the qualifications and formal credentials associated with higher education. UNESCO (2009) extended these definitions globally, framing higher education as,

"tertiary education, also referred to as third stage, third level, or post-secondary education, [which] is the educational level following the completion of a school providing a secondary education, such as a high school, secondary school, or gymnasium" (p. 17).

UNESCO's definition incorporates global diversity in education systems, making it universally applicable. For, this paper, HE interchangeably referred to as tertiary education, aligns with the framework established by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011. This classification delineates HE into four key levels. **ISCED level 5** represents short-cycle tertiary education, typically vocational or technical, aimed at equipping individuals with specific skills for the workforce or as preparation for further academic studies. **ISCED level 6** corresponds to bachelor's degree or equivalent programs, focusing on foundational knowledge and competencies in a particular discipline. **ISCED level 7** pertains to master's degree or equivalent qualifications, emphasising advanced theoretical and applied learning. Finally, **ISCED level 8** encompasses doctoral or equivalent programmes, characterised by a strong focus on research and original contributions to the body of knowledge (UNESCO, 2012).

Table 01: Higher Education Levels

Levels	Explanations
8	Research focused doctoral studies
7	Master's degree or equivalent qualifications, PGC, PGD, UK 1year Maters, USA 2 years of master's degree
6	Bachelor's degree (3, 4 and 5 years) UK 3 years, USA 4 years, Medical 5 years
5	Short-cycle tertiary education, typically vocational or technical courses
4	Post-secondary non-tertiary education

Source: Author's conceptualisation

It is important to distinguish that **ISCED level 4**, classified as "post-secondary non-tertiary education," falls outside the scope of this study. While ISCED level 4 serves as a transitional phase between secondary and tertiary education, often providing preparatory courses for higher studies, it does not fulfil the criteria to be regarded as higher education (OECD, 2021). By adhering to this framework, the project ensures a clear and internationally consistent understanding of the boundaries and scope of higher education.

The concept of HE is not static; it continuously adapts to changing societal, technological, and economic demands. Several key trends illustrate the dynamic evolution of HE:

Lifelong Learning

The traditional view of HE as a singular phase of academic and personal development occurring predominantly in early adulthood has undergone significant transformation.

This shift reflects broader societal, economic, and technological changes that necessitate continuous learning. As Field (2000) argues, individuals increasingly seek HE opportunities throughout their lives to remain competitive in rapidly evolving job markets and to satisfy personal development goals. This perspective aligns with the concept of lifelong learning, which UNESCO (2015) defines as "*all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competencies, within a personal, civic, social, or employment-related perspective*" (p. 4).

The paradigm of lifelong learning emphasises the importance of accessible, flexible, and diverse educational pathways that cater to learners across different ages and stages of life. This shift is particularly relevant in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), where rapid technological advancements continuously reshape workforce demands (Schwab, 2016). HEIs are now adapting their programmes and delivery methods to support non-traditional learners, such as mature students, working professionals, career changers, and retirees seeking new skills or intellectual enrichment (Boulton & Lucas, 2008).

Furthermore, lifelong learning underscores the importance of creating inclusive educational systems that address diverse learner needs. This includes the proliferation of online and blended learning modalities, modular courses, micro-credentials, and recognition of prior learning (Bates, 2019; OECD, 2021). These innovations offer greater flexibility, allowing individuals to integrate learning with other life commitments, such as work and family responsibilities.

The evolving landscape of HE reflects a shift toward lifelong learning, emphasising the need for HEIs to provide accessible, flexible, and inclusive opportunities for learners throughout their lives. This transformation not only enhances individual employability and personal growth but also contributes to broader societal goals of economic development and social equity.

Online and Blended Learning

Advancements in technology have revolutionised the delivery of HE. Online and blended learning modalities have emerged as transformative approaches, enabling institutions to expand their reach and provide flexible options for students worldwide (Bates, 2019). These modalities also accommodate diverse learning preferences and allow for innovative pedagogical practices, enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of higher education. The transition to online teaching accelerated at an unprecedented pace following the physical closure of educational institutions during the COVID-19 crisis (Qureshi et al., 2020). The global pandemic acted as a catalyst, compelling educators, institutions, and learners to adapt rapidly to digital platforms as a primary mode of instruction (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Khawaja et al., 2023, Pejić et al., 2024). While initially seen as a temporary measure, the widespread adoption of online teaching has since evolved into a significant and enduring trend in education (Qureshi et al., 2024).

Post-pandemic, the use of online and hybrid teaching methods has become increasingly popular, with institutions integrating digital tools and platforms into their standard curricula to enhance accessibility and flexibility (Dhawan, 2020, Khawaja et al., 2022). This shift reflects a broader paradigm change in education, emphasising the benefits of digital

learning, including the ability to reach geographically dispersed learners, personalise educational experiences, and foster lifelong learning (OECD, 2021).

Moreover, the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), virtual learning environments (VLEs), and blended learning models highlights the growing demand for digital literacy and technological competency among both educators and students. These developments underscore the potential of online education to transform traditional learning models, creating opportunities for innovation while addressing challenges such as the digital divide and varying levels of technological infrastructure globally (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

The pandemic-induced shift has thus marked the beginning of a new era in education, where online teaching is no longer a supplementary tool but an integral component of modern pedagogical strategies.

Globalisation and Internationalisation

Globalisation has profoundly influenced higher education, driving internationalisation in multiple dimensions. Knight (2008) notes that HE now involves greater mobility of students and faculty, cross-border institutional collaborations, and the emergence of transnational education providers. This trend has expanded opportunities for knowledge exchange, cultural understanding, and global competence among students and educators.

HE remains a cornerstone of societal and individual development, providing advanced knowledge, skills, and research to address contemporary challenges. As it evolves, HE must balance its traditional roles with emerging trends, including lifelong learning, technological integration, and globalisation. This adaptability ensures its continued relevance in shaping not only the futures of individuals but also the progress of societies.

Equity and Access in Higher Education

A major challenge facing HE globally is ensuring equity and access for all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background. In many countries, the cost of education is a significant barrier to higher education access, particularly for students from low-income families or underrepresented groups (Perkins & Neumayer, 2019). Although many PuHEIs offer low-cost or subsidised tuition, the rising cost of education, coupled with reductions in public funding, has led to greater reliance on private sources of finance, often leaving students with significant debt (Maringe & Sing, 2014).

Efforts to improve access to higher education have led to the creation of scholarship programmes, income-based tuition schemes, and government-backed loan systems. However, these measures often fall short in addressing the structural barriers that prevent marginalized groups from accessing higher education (Giroux, 2014). Moreover, the increasing focus on market-driven education models raises concerns about the commercialization of higher education and the potential marginalization of less profitable fields of study, such as the humanities and social sciences (Giroux, 2014).

Historical Development and Growth of HE

Higher education institutions, as we recognise them today, emerged from a long and complex history, with their roots tracing back to ancient civilizations. While various forms of advanced learning existed in antiquity, the concept of the university as an institution dedicated to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge took shape in medieval Europe.

Table 02: Timeline of Higher Education Institutions

Century	HEIs
11th - 12th	Primarily in Europe (Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Salamanca)
13th - 14th	Expansion across Europe (Padua, Naples, Coimbra, Prague, Heidelberg)
15th - 16th	Reaching new continents (St Andrews, Rostock, Uppsala, Louvain, Santo Domingo)
17th - 18th	Growth in the Americas (Harvard, William & Mary, Yale, University of San Marcos)
19th - 20th	Global expansion and diversification (University of Tokyo, University of Buenos Aires, University of Sydney, Quaid-i-Azam University, Allama Iqbal Open University, numerous universities across Africa and Asia)
21 st century	<p>North America, California State University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Europe, University of Luxembourg, Aalto University Finland, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST, Saudi Arabia), Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou, China), Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISERs, India), Here is a list of notable universities established in the 21st century, categorized by region:</p> <p>North America</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. California State University, Channel Islands (USA) 2. Florida Gulf Coast University (USA) 3. University of California, Merced (USA) <p>South America</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universidad de Investigación de Tecnología Experimental Yachay (Ecuador) 2. Universidad Nacional de Villa María (Argentina) <p>Europe</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University of Luxembourg (Luxembourg) – Established in 2003, it emphasizes multilingualism and international collaboration. 2. Aalto University (Finland) – Founded in 2010 through a merger of three existing institutions, focusing on innovation and technology. 3. Maastricht University Campus Venlo (Netherlands) – Part of Maastricht University, Venlo campus started operations in the 21st century. <p>Asia</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST, Saudi Arabia) – Opened in 2009 with a focus on research and graduate studies. 2. Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou, China) – Launched in 2022 as a new campus of HKUST. 3. Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISERs, India) <p>Africa</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University of Kigali (Rwanda) 2. Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology (E-JUST, Egypt) <p>Australia and Oceania</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Federation University Australia (Australia) 2. Australian Catholic University Campus Developments

Source: Author

Historically, higher education began as a public good, with universities established to serve broader societal needs. Institutions like the University of Bologna (founded in 1088) and the University of Paris (1150), the University of Oxford (1096), the University of Cambridge (1209) were public institutions aimed at advancing scholarly pursuits in theology, philosophy, and law. The Oxford and Cambridge universities quickly gained prominence as centres of learning and scholarship. These early institutions were often founded with royal or ecclesiastical patronage, reflecting their role in training clergy, scholars, and administrators (Rashdall, 1936).

As shown in table 02, many universities established in the 21st century focus on:

- Interdisciplinary studies
- Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)
- International collaboration and innovation

These institutions reflect a global emphasis on addressing contemporary challenges through research, technology, and inclusive education models.

Over time, private higher education emerged, particularly in the United States, with the establishment of institutions such as Harvard University in 1636 and Yale University in 1701. These institutions relied heavily on private endowments and tuition fees to operate (Altbach, 2016).

In the 21st century, PrHE has become one of the fastest-growing sectors worldwide, driven by the increasing demand for higher education and the inability of public systems to accommodate this growth. For instance, in countries like Brazil and India, private institutions now account for most enrollments, as governments have encouraged private sector involvement to meet the demand for tertiary education (Levy, 2017).

Worldwide Growth of Private Higher Education

The argument of unmet demand remains one of the most prominent explanations for the emergence and growth of PrHE. This demand manifests in two primary forms: qualitative, where there is a desire for different or improved higher education experiences, and quantitative, reflecting a need for expanded access to higher education (Geiger, 2019). The quantitative demand explanation is prevalent in global analyses (Kinser, 2010), as well as in regional studies across continents. In Europe, the growth of PrHE has been studied extensively (Levin, 2005, Qureshi, 2020); similarly, in Asia and Africa, PrHE expansion responds to unmet demand for educational opportunities (Levy, 2020; Varghese, 2009).

In Latin America, historical studies have pointed to quantitative demand as a central driver of PrHE growth (Levy, 1986), and individual country case studies reinforce this view, with examples from Australia and Poland highlighting the pressures of unmet demand on higher education systems (Bennett, Nair, & Shah, 2012; Siemienska & Walczak, 2012). The growth of PrHE is not only driven by increasing demand for tertiary education but also by broader socio-economic trends, including liberalisation, privatisation, and marketisation (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). These interconnected phenomena have reshaped the HE landscape globally, creating an environment conducive to the expansion of PrHEIs (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021).

Liberalisation in Higher Education

Liberalisation refers to the relaxation of government controls and regulations over the provision of education, enabling private entities to establish and operate educational institutions. This trend is often associated with broader economic reforms aimed at fostering competition and innovation. As Altbach and Levy (2005) note, liberalisation in the education sector often creates opportunities for private providers to address gaps left by PuHEIs, such as insufficient capacity to meet the rising demand for higher education. This has been particularly significant in emerging economies, where public resources are often constrained, and the private sector has stepped in to fill the void (Tilak, 2008).

Privatisation of Higher Education

Privatisation is characterized by a shift from public to private ownership and control of HEIs. This process is frequently driven by governmental policies aimed at reducing the financial burden of HE on state budgets. According to Varghese (2009), privatisation also involves a diversification of funding sources, such as tuition fees, private investments, and philanthropic contributions, making institutions less dependent on state funding. Privatisation has contributed to the proliferation of PrHEIs that offer specialised programmes aligned with labour market needs, thus catering to the aspirations of students seeking employment-oriented education.

Marketisation in the Sector

Marketisation introduces market-based principles into HE, treating it as a commodity subject to supply and demand dynamics. Institutions, both public and private, are increasingly adopting business-like models to attract students, secure funding, and enhance their global competitiveness (Brown, 2011). In this context, PrHEIs often emerge as key players, offering tailored, flexible, and career-focused programmes to meet student and employer expectations. The marketisation trend has also led to the establishment of branch campuses, online degree programmes, and transnational education collaborations, further driving the growth of private higher education (Knight, 2008).

Implications of Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Marketisation

While these trends have undeniably contributed to the expansion of private higher education, they have also raised concerns about equity, quality, and access. Critics argue that market-driven approaches may prioritise profitability over educational outcomes, potentially exacerbating social inequalities (Ball, 2012). Nevertheless, proponents highlight the sector's capacity to innovate, diversify educational offerings, and expand access to underserved populations.

In nutshell, the growth of private higher education is intricately linked to the processes of liberalization, privatization, and marketization. These factors have collectively transformed the higher education landscape, positioning private institutions as pivotal players in addressing global educational demands while introducing new challenges for policymakers and stakeholders.

Public Higher Education Institutions (PuHEIs)

According to UNESCO (2014), PuHEIs are those "governed and managed by public education authorities, government agencies, or bodies appointed by a public authority." PuHEIs are

predominantly owned and funded by the state, which significantly influences their policy-making and operational frameworks. This often translates to a focus on accessibility and affordability for a broader student population, aligning with national priorities for human capital development.

The governance structure of PuHEIs typically involves substantial oversight from government bodies, ensuring alignment with national education policies and priorities (UNESCO, 2014). This can manifest in the form of regulations, quality assurance mechanisms, and strategic directives from government ministries or agencies.

HE systems in England, Scotland, and Wales are distinguished by intermediary public bodies like the Office for Students (OfS) in England, which mediate between government and providers—a structure uncommon in many OECD countries, where coordination typically occurs through central government departments or, in federal nations like Germany, Canada, and the United States, at the regional level (Atherton et al., 2024).

The table below summarises how higher education systems are co-ordinated in the 38 countries of the OECD.

Table 03: Higher Education Coordination Mechanisms Across OECD Countries

System co-ordinator	Countries	Number
Department/Ministry of Education	Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Slovak Republic, Chile, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Korea, Lithuania, United States	18
Department/Ministry of Higher Education.	Austria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Iceland, Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Colombia, Italy, Spain,	11
Intermediary Body	Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Costa Rica, Israel, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom (England, Wales, and Scotland)	9

Source: Atherton et al., 2024

This table shows how different countries organise the oversight of their higher education systems. It categorizes countries based on the type of body that coordinates their higher education system:

- **Department/Ministry of Education:** In these countries (18 listed), higher education is managed within the same department that oversees the entire education system, from primary school to university. This suggests a more centralized approach where higher education is closely linked to other levels of education.
- **Department/Ministry of Higher Education:** These countries (11 listed) have a separate department specifically focused on higher education. This might indicate a greater emphasis on the distinct needs and priorities of universities and colleges.
- **Intermediary Body:** These countries (9 listed) use an intermediary organization to coordinate higher education. This body acts as a buffer between the government and

institutions, potentially allowing for more autonomy and flexibility. It could be a council, agency, or other type of organization that oversees funding, quality assurance, or strategic planning.

Essentially, this table illustrates the variety of approaches to higher education governance across different countries. Some centralize it within their general education system, others give it a separate focus, and some use an intermediary body to manage the relationship between government and institutions.

Private Higher Education Institutions (PrHEIs)

In contrast to PuHEIs, PrHEIs operate with greater autonomy from the state. They exhibit diverse characteristics:

- **Independent Governance:** PrHEIs are governed by independent boards or governing bodies, with varying degrees of autonomy in decision-making regarding academic programmes, finances, and strategic direction (Neave & Van Vught, 1994).
- **Diverse Funding Models:** PrHEIs rely on a variety of funding sources, including student tuition fees, endowments, philanthropic donations, and research grants (Altbach, 2016). This can influence their priorities, program offerings, and institutional strategies.
- **Market Orientation:** PrHEIs often operate within a competitive market environment, responding to student demand and market trends in their program development and marketing strategies (Brennan & Shah, 2003).
- **Specialised Niches:** PrHEIs may specialise in specific disciplines, cater to niche markets, or offer unique pedagogical approaches to differentiate themselves within the higher education landscape (Geiger, 2004).

The Blurring Boundaries and Emerging Hybrid Models

While the distinction between public and private HEIs provides a useful framework, it is important to recognise that the boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. Many institutions exhibit hybrid characteristics, combining elements of public and private governance and funding models (Teixeira et al., 2017). This can occur through:

- **Increased Private Funding for Public Institutions:** Public universities are increasingly reliant on private funding sources, such as philanthropy and industry partnerships, to supplement declining government support (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).
- **Government Regulation of Private Institutions:** Governments often exert regulatory control over private institutions to ensure quality standards and alignment with national education objectives (Mok, 2010).
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborative ventures between public and private institutions are becoming increasingly common, blurring the traditional divide and creating new models of higher education provision (Shattock, 2012).

Public and private HEIs are often distinguished by key factors such as legal ownership, funding sources, and their broader societal impacts (Buckner, 2017). While both types of institutions aim to provide educational opportunities and contribute to knowledge production, their operational frameworks and priorities differ significantly due to their

underlying ownership structures and financial mechanisms. Levy (2013) offers a nuanced perspective by describing PrHEIs according to national definitions, which vary considerably across different regions. In this context, PrHEIs are typically defined as institutions that do not receive public funding and operate independently, often with a for-profit orientation. Altbach (1999) further emphasises this distinction, arguing that private institutions are self-financing, typically relying on tuition fees, private donations, and other non-governmental revenue streams to sustain their operations.

In contrast, PuHEIs are generally characterized by state ownership and funding, with the government playing a central role in their governance and financial support (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). These institutions are often tasked with providing broader access to education, particularly for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and contribute significantly to national development by aligning their educational missions with governmental policies and social goals (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010). As a result, PuHEIs are typically seen as playing a central role in fostering social mobility, equity, and public good through their educational offerings and research contributions (Goddard & Puukka, 2008).

Although PrHEIs and PuHEIs differ in ownership and funding models, their functional roles in society can be quite similar. Both types of institutions are engaged in the core activities of teaching, learning, and research, with a focus on preparing students for the workforce, advancing knowledge, and contributing to cultural and societal development (Duczmal, 2006). However, their differences in ownership and financial backing shape their priorities and approaches. For example, PrHEIs are more likely to adopt a market-driven approach to education, often designing programs tailored to the needs of the private sector, while PuHEIs tend to have a more public-oriented focus, emphasizing broad access to higher education and the development of knowledge for the collective good (Clark, 2000).

In terms of societal impact, the distinctions between PrHEIs and PuHEIs are also notable. Private institutions, with their greater reliance on private funding, often have more flexibility in responding to market demands, which can result in greater specialisation in fields such as business, technology, and professional studies (Lupton & Glennerster, 2009). On the other hand, PuHEIs, with their government-backed resources, can focus on a wider range of disciplines and have the potential to serve larger, more diverse populations (Huisman et al., 2015). This broad access to education, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, positions PuHEIs as key contributors to the goal of social equity and economic mobility.

The interplay between public and private higher education institutions is also increasingly shaped by the growth of public-private partnerships (PPPs), which are becoming a significant force in the global higher education landscape.

These partnerships allow for the sharing of resources, expertise, and infrastructure between the public and private sectors, facilitating the expansion of educational offerings and enhancing the overall quality of education (Perkins & Neumayer, 2019).

By leveraging the strengths of both sectors, PPPs can help address contemporary challenges in higher education, such as improving access, enhancing educational outcomes, and fostering innovation in teaching and research (Goddard & Puukka, 2008).

The increasing prevalence of PPPs also signals a shift toward more collaborative models of governance in higher education, where public and private institutions work together to address societal challenges, such as skill gaps, unemployment, and regional development (Teixeira, 2022). In this regard, both public and private institutions are seen as complementary rather than competing entities, with each playing a unique role in meeting the evolving demands of the knowledge economy and addressing social needs.

Overall, while the primary distinction between public and private higher education institutions lies in their ownership and funding mechanisms, their operational and societal roles are becoming more interconnected, especially in the context of growing public-private partnerships. This dynamic shift underscores the need for a more holistic understanding of the higher education sector, where both types of institutions contribute to the broader goals of human capital development, societal progress, and economic growth (Marginson, 2007; Clark, 2000). As the global landscape of higher education continues to evolve, the interplay between public and private institutions will likely remain a crucial factor in shaping the future of education and its role in society.

In contrast, PrHEIs are managed by non-governmental entities, including religious organisations, trade unions, or business enterprises, with their governing board members not selected by a public body (UNESCO, 2014). These institutions operate independently of direct government control, allowing greater flexibility in their operational and strategic decisions. PrHEIs are typically characterised by private ownership and funding, often relying on tuition fees, donations, and other private sources of revenue (Buckner, 2017). According to Levy (2012), PrHEIs are defined based on national criteria, and they operate without government grants, assuming full responsibility for their financial sustainability. Altbach (1999) notes that these institutions often operate for profit, prioritising financial viability alongside educational outcomes.

The differentiation between public and private HEIs is not merely a matter of ownership and funding but also extends to their societal roles and impacts. PuHEIs are generally perceived as serving the public good, providing accessible education to a broad demographic and contributing to national development goals. In contrast, PrHEIs, while contributing to education and skill development, may prioritise niche markets or specialised programmes that cater to specific industries or professional fields (Duczmal, 2006). Despite differences in governance and funding, this functional similarity in educational roles highlights the diverse approaches within the HE sector to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021).

Challenges and Future Trends

The expansion of higher education, both public and private, presents several challenges.

In public institutions, issues such as underfunding, overcrowding, and bureaucratic inefficiencies persist, particularly in developing countries.

In private institutions, concerns about quality control, the commercialisation of education, and limited access for disadvantaged groups remain prevalent.

In the future, the distinction between public and private higher education may become increasingly blurred.

Many public universities are seeking alternative revenue streams, such as international student recruitment, partnerships with industry, and offering online programs. Private institutions, meanwhile, are becoming more research-oriented and playing a larger role in national innovation systems (Levy, 2017). The rise of online education, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, has also created new opportunities and challenges for both sectors (Marginson, 2022).

Conclusion

The evolving ecosystem of higher education worldwide is shaped by a range of factors, including the interplay between public and private institutions, technological advancements, globalisation, and the ongoing quest for equity and accessibility. As the demands for higher education continue to grow and evolve, it is essential that institutions, governments, and stakeholders work together to navigate the complexities of the changing landscape. The future of higher education will likely be characterised by greater collaboration, flexibility, and innovation, but these changes must be managed in a way that ensures education remains inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of both individuals and society at large.

One of the most significant features of the modern HE ecosystem is the growing interplay between public and private institutions. PuHEIs, traditionally the main providers of higher education, continue to play a central role in shaping educational policies and priorities. These institutions are typically funded by the government and are subject to public accountability, with a focus on delivering education that is accessible and affordable for all citizens (Teichler, 2015). In contrast, PrHEIs are increasingly prominent, particularly in countries where public funding for education has been reduced or where there is a demand for specialised education in niche fields (Levy, 2017).

The governance structures of public and private institutions often differ substantially, with public institutions generally subject to greater governmental oversight. This governance model is characterised by regulations that ensure that education serves public interests, such as social equity, public accountability, and the alignment of educational outcomes with national economic goals (Brennan & Teichler, 2008). Conversely, PrHEIs have more autonomy in terms of curriculum design, pricing structures, and admission policies, which allows for more flexibility and responsiveness to market demands (Maringe & Sing, 2014). Despite their differences, both public and private institutions face similar challenges related to funding, market competition, and the need to provide high-quality education that meets the expectations of students, employers, and society (Hazelkorn, 2015). Moreover, both types of institutions are increasingly engaging in partnerships, collaborations, and mergers with other academic entities, governments, and industries in order to enhance their global reach, improve educational offerings, and contribute to regional development (Tight, 2022).

Funding Statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

About the Authors

Shahid Hafeez

Chairman, ASFE Consultants UK

Shahid Hafeez is a distinguished figure in the educational consultancy field, serving as the Chairman of ASFE Consultants UK since 2010. With over a decade of dedicated experience, Shahid has been instrumental in shaping the educational trajectories of countless students, providing expert guidance and strategic insights to navigate the complexities of higher education.

Under his leadership, ASFE Consultants UK has emerged as a trusted name in the educational consultancy sector. The firm specialises in offering comprehensive consulting services to students aspiring to pursue higher education domestically and internationally. Shahid's profound understanding of the educational landscape and his commitment to excellence have driven ASFE Consultants to achieve remarkable success and recognition.

Shahid's expertise spans various educational services, including university admissions, career counseling, and academic planning. His personalised approach and unwavering dedication to his clients' success have earned him a stellar reputation among students, parents, and educational institutions alike.

A visionary leader, Shahid continuously strives to innovate and expand the services offered by ASFE Consultants UK, ensuring that students receive the highest quality of support and guidance. His passion for education and relentless pursuit of excellence makes him a respected and influential figure in educational consultancy.

Dr Kayode Abraham Mayah

Senior Lecturer and Research Associate,

BSc (Hons) (Political Science), PGC (International Business), M.A (International Human Resource), MPhil (Management), PhD (Human Resource Management), MCMI, FHEA.

Anglia Ruskin University, London. United Kingdom (Senior Lecturer)
Oxford Business College United Kingdom, (Research Associate)

Kayode Abraham Mayah is a distinguished Senior Business Lecturer with a wealth of academic experience and expertise in business management with a specialism in HR. He has completed PhD in Management specialism in HR. His expertise includes HR, strategic management, organisational behaviour, and leadership dynamics. With a commitment to academic excellence and over a 15 years of teaching experience in HE, he has effectively delivered courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels at reputed universities such as Wales, Coventry, Northampton and Anglia Ruskin. He is a dedicated and accomplished Senior Business Lecturer whose combination of academic expertise, research contributions, and commitment to student success makes him an invaluable member of the academic community.

References

- Aithal, P. S., Prabhu, S., & Aithal, S. (2024). Future of Higher Education through Technology Prediction and Forecasting. *Poornaprajna International Journal of Management, Education, and Social Science (PIJMESS)*, 1(1), 01-50.
- Altbach, P. G. (1999). Private higher education: Themes and variations in comparative perspective. *Prospects*, 29(3), 310-323
- Altbach, P. G. (2016). *Global trends in higher education*. Routledge.
- Altbach, P. G. (2018). *Global perspectives on higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Altbach, P. G., & Levy, D. C. (Eds.). (2005). *Private higher education: A global revolution*. Sense Publishers.
- Ama, J. U., & Emetarom, U. G. (2020). Equipping higher education students with the 21st century skills beyond computer and technological skills for future effective participation in the global economy. *European Journal of Education Studies*.
- Atherton, G., Lewis, J., Bolton, P. (2024) Higher education around the world: Comparing international approaches and performance with the UK. House of Commons Library. Retrieved from: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9840/>
- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global education inc.: New policy networks and the neoliberal imaginary*. Routledge.
- Barnett, R. (2000). *Realizing the university in an age of super complexity*. Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Bates, T. (2019). *Teaching in a digital age: Guidelines for designing teaching and learning*. Tony Bates Associates Ltd.
- Bennett, L., Nair, C. S., & Shah, M. (2012). The emergence of private higher education in Australia: the silent provider. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 2(4), 423-435.
- Boulton, G., & Lucas, C. (2008). What are universities for? *League of European Research Universities*.
- Bozkurt, A., Jung, I., Xiao, J., Vladimirschi, V., Schuwer, R., Egorov, G., Lambert, S. R., Al-Freih, M., Pete, J., Olcott, D., & Rodes, V. (2020). A global outlook to the interruption of education due to COVID-19 pandemic: Navigating in a time of uncertainty and crisis. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 1-126.
- Brennan, J., & Shah, T. (2003). Access to what? Converting education opportunity into employment opportunity.
- Brennan, J., & Teichler, U. (2008). The changing roles of higher education in society. *Higher Education*, 56(3), 329-339.
- Brown, R. (2011). *Higher education and the market*. Routledge.
- Buckner, E. (2017). The worldwide growth of private higher education: Cross-national patterns of higher education institution foundings by sector. *Sociology of Education*, 90(4), 296-314.
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. University of California Press.

- Clark, B. R. (2000). Collegial entrepreneurialism in proactive universities: lessons from Europe. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 32(1), 10-19.
- Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49(1), 522.
- Duczmal, W. (2006). The rise of private higher education in Poland: Policies, markets and strategies.
- Field, J. (2000). *Lifelong learning and the new educational order*. Trentham Books.
- Geiger, R. L. (2004). *Knowledge and money: Research universities and the paradox of the marketplace*. Stanford University Press.
- Geiger, R. L. (2019). *American higher education since World War II: A history*.
- Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism's war on higher education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Goddard, J., & Puukka, J. (2008). The engagement of higher education institutions in regional development: An overview of the opportunities and challenges. *Higher education management and policy*, 20(2), 11-41.
- Hazelkorn, E. (2015). The global competition for talent: Implications for the public and private sectors. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 69(3), 273-292.
- Huisman, J., Lepori, B., Seeber, M., Frølich, N., & Scordato, L. (2015). Measuring institutional diversity across higher education systems. *Research Evaluation*, 24(4), 369-379.
- Kayyali, M. (2024). International Accreditation of HEIs Located in Conflict-Affected Areas: Challenges and Opportunities. *Evaluating Global Accreditation Standards for Higher Education*, 164-185.
- Khawaja, S., Anjos, E., & Qureshi, F. (2023). The Impact of the Pandemic (COVID-19) on Higher Education Students: Challenges, Adaptations, and Future Perspectives. *Creative Education*, 14(11), 2207-2227.
- Khawaja, S., Qureshi, F., Zia, T., & Javed, R. (2022). Online Education And Students' Wellbeing During Covid-19 Pandemic.
- Kinser, K. (2010). A global perspective on for-profit higher education. In *For-Profit Colleges and Universities* (pp. 145-170). Routledge.
- Knight, J. (2008). *Higher education in turmoil: The changing world of internationalization*. Sense Publishers.
- Levin, H. M. (2005). The public-private nexus in higher education. In *Public-private relations in higher education* (pp. 1-22). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Levy, D. (2020). Private higher education. *The international encyclopedia of higher education systems and institutions*, 2305-2313.
- Levy, D. C. (1986). *Higher education and the state in Latin America: Private challenges to public dominance*. University of Chicago Press.
- Levy, D. C. (2013). The decline of private higher education. *Higher Education Policy*, 26, 25-42.
- Levy, D. C. (2017). Private higher education: The state of the debate and the global experience. *Higher Education*, 73(1), 1-20.
- Lupton, R., & Glennerster, H. (2009). Tackling ignorance, promoting social mobility: education policy 1948 and 2008. In *Social Policy Review 21* (pp. 49-66). Policy Press.

- Marginson, S. (2007). The public/private divide in higher education: A global revision. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 307-333.
- Marginson, S. (2016). The worldwide transformation of higher education. *Higher Education*, 72(2), 9-22.
- Marginson, S. (2022). Challenges and possibilities for higher education in India during and beyond the covid-19 pandemic. In *Global higher education during and beyond Covid-19: Perspectives and challenges* (pp. 11-22). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Maringe, F., & Sing, D. (2014). Globalization and higher education in Africa: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 5(1), 23-45.
- Mok, K. H. (2010). When state centralism meets neo-liberalism: Managing university governance change in Singapore and Malaysia. *Higher Education*, 60, 419-440.
- Neave, G., & Van Vught, F. A. (1994). *Government and Higher Education Relationships across Three Continents: The Winds of Change. Issues in Higher Education Series, Volume 2*. Pergamon Press, Elsevier Science Ltd.,
- Nwachukwu, C. O., Diemuodeke, E. O., Briggs, T. A., Ojapah, M. M., Okereke, C., Okedu, K. E., & Kalam, A. (2024). Low/zero carbon technology diffusion and mapping for Nigeria's decarbonization. *International Journal of Sustainable Energy*, 43(1), 2317146.
- OECD. (2021). *Education at a glance 2021: OECD indicators*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- OECD. (2021). *Education at a glance 2021: OECD indicators*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- OECD. (2021). The state of global education: 18 months into the pandemic. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1a23bb23-en>
- OECD. (2021). *The state of higher education: One year into the COVID-19 pandemic*. OECD Publishing.
- Pee, S., & Vululleh, N. (2020). Role of universities in transforming society: Challenges and practices. *International perspectives on policies, practices & pedagogies for promoting social responsibility in higher education*, 67-79.
- Pejić Bach, M., Suša Vugec, D., Khawaja, S., Qureshi, F. H., & Fildor, D. (2024). Systemic View of the Role of Higher Educational Institutions in the Great Reset. *Systems*, 12(9), 323
- Perkins, R., & Neumayer, E. (2019). Private-public partnerships in higher education: A critical review. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 73(1), 88-106.
- Qureshi, F. H. (2020). Exploring International Student Satisfaction in Private Higher Education Institutes in London.
- Qureshi, F. H., & Khawaja, S. (2021). The growth of private higher education: an overview in the context of liberalisation, privatisation and marketisation. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 8(9).
- Qureshi, F., Khawaja, S., & Zia, T. (2020). MATURE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' SATISFACTION WITH ONLINE TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 7(12).
- Qureshi, F., Khawaja, S., Pejić Bach, M., & Meško, M. (2024). Slovenian Higher Education in a Post-Pandemic World: Trends and Transformations. *Systems*, 12(4), 132.

- Rashdall, H. (1936). *The universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*. Oxford University Press.
- Schwab, K. (2016). *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. World Economic Forum.
- Shattock, M. (2012). *Making policy in British higher education 1945-2011*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Siemianska, R., & Walczak, D. (2012). Polish higher education: from state toward market, from elite to mass education. In *As the World Turns: Implications of Global Shifts in Higher Education for Theory, Research and Practice* (Vol. 7, pp. 197-224). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Slaughter, S., & Leslie, L. L. (1997). *Academic capitalism: Politics, policies, and the entrepreneurial university*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Teichler, U. (2015). The changing role of higher education: Internationalization and employability. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5(1), 65-80.
- Teixeira, A. A., & Rocha, M. F. (2010). Cheating by economics and business undergraduate students: an exploratory international assessment. *Higher Education*, 59, 663-701.
- Teixeira, M. G., De Déa Roglio, K., & Marcon, R. (2017). Institutional logics and the decision-making process of adopting corporate governance at a cooperative organization. *Journal of Management & Governance*, 21, 181-209.
- Teixeira, T. R. (2022). Global production networks and the uneven development of regional training systems: Conceptualizing an approach and proposing a research agenda. *Progress in Human Geography*, 46(2), 507-526.
- Tight, M. (2022). Internationalisation of higher education beyond the West: challenges and opportunities—the research evidence. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 27(3-4), 239-259.
- Tilak, J. B. G. (2008). Higher education: A public good or a commodity for trade? *Prospects*, 38(4), 449-466.
- Trow, M. (1973). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education*. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.
- UNESCO (2014). *Higher education in Asia: Expanding Out, Expanding Up*. Retrieved from: <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/public-educational-institution>
- UNESCO. (2009). *Global education digest 2009: Comparing education statistics across the world*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- UNESCO. (2009). *Global education digest 2009: Comparing education statistics across the world*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- UNESCO. (2009). *Investing in cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue*. UNESCO Publishing.
- UNESCO. (2012). *ISCED 2011: International Standard Classification of Education*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- UNESCO. (2012). *ISCED 2011: International Standard Classification of Education*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- UNESCO. (2015). *Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Varghese, N. V. (2009). *Private sector as a partner in higher education development*.
International Institute for Educational Planning, UNESCO.