

## Essay

# Higher Education in Post-Neoliberal Times: Building Human Capabilities in the Emergent Period of Uncertainty

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that the neoliberal consensus about education finance has broken down due to growing economic inequality. First, I use a comparative historical analysis of political alliances to examine patterns of world trade and nations' policies for economic and educational development since World War II. The United States emphasized STEM-collegiate preparation for all students, while most countries continued the dual emphasis on technical-tertiary and higher education. Educational policy in the US and Pacific region also shifted towards a reliance on markets and student loans resulting in worsening economic inequality in access. Nations with dual technical and academic pathways in secondary and postsecondary education systems expand college enrollment rates more rapidly than the US. They also experience class conflict between the working-middle class and the new technological elite. Next, I examine how education policy shifted from national planning aligned with public funding to market-based incentives for institutional development, further exposing gaps in opportunity within nations. Finally, recognizing the variations in systemic causes of inequality, I argue that governments, education agencies, and civic activists can best promote equity by organizing to address barriers to opportunity for groups left behind in the wake of withering neoliberal education policy.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism; education development; trade alliances; economic development; human capital; cultural capital; social capital; human capabilities; social action



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## 1. Introduction

Massification of higher education was integral to economic development before economic globalization surged in the 1980s [1]. Neoliberal education finance policies accelerated economic and social inequalities as economic globalization progressed. The new conflict between social democratic systems and nationalistic totalitarianism illustrates a breakdown in the withering neoliberal consensus that emerged in the 1980s. Community-based initiatives that build students' capabilities and families are increasingly necessary to address rising inequalities.

This paper examines the new uncertainties created by the withering consensus about education finance. First, I review historical transitions in alliances among nations to distinguish the regional contexts for future education policy development. Next, I examine government policies promoting education development across global regions, focusing on the US, Europe, and Asia. I conclude with a framework for building capabilities to address attainment gaps accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Global Transitions Affecting Education Development

The breakdown of the quasi-consensus on economic and educational development was the driving force in neoliberal globalization, but now adds to the international chaos. The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a slowdown in international academic exchange and exposed weaknesses in the global supply chain between the US, European Union (EU), and China. The Russian invasion of Ukraine also adds to the emerging international

tensions but is not the cause of global uncertainty. I briefly review historical transitions in international alliances (Table 1) before discussing forces influencing education development and social stratification.

**Table 1.** Global transitions: shifting political ideologies, international alliances, educational development strategies, and social capital formation for cross-generation uplift.

Transitions	Political Ideologies	International Alliances	Education Development	Social Capital Formation
<i>Colonial: Pre-World War II</i> (European nations and Turkey build wealth through colonial empires)	Colonies aligned with colonizing nation; the US in the Americas; Western influences in China	International corporations within empires; trade across empires benefits colonizing nations; China open to trade	Education institutions forms adapted by colonies; humanities emphasis; China open to Western missionaries	Social elite with cross-generation college degrees; economic elite from colonies educated in the colonizing nations
<i>Cold War: 1945–1980</i> (Soviet–Western competition on education, science, and trade)	Capitalist democratic vs. communist systems; space race influenced defense and education	Western capitalism v. state-owned enterprises; international corporations constrained in Soviet nations	Advanced nations with universal K-12 and mass college; developing countries lack K-12 for all	Family cross-generation uplift in the Western and Eastern Europe; poverty in developing nations
<i>Global: 1980–2015</i> (Neoliberal “Washington Consensus” frames economic and education development)	Autocracies followed post-Soviet Eastern European democratization; Chinese economic reform	Global trade and corporations; EU, China and US major forces in trade; US exports working class; global supply chain develops	Expanding education through global marketization; technology competition and cooperation; student mobility	Vocational and academic secondary and collegiate pathways in EU and China; US collegiate prep for all students
<i>Post-Neoliberal Transition: 2015–present</i> (Authoritarianism v. democracy)	Brexit, Trump and COVID-19; Russia-Ukraine War; Chinese rises in Asia	New trade wars and reemergence of nationalism undermine neoliberalism	Uncertainty about future w/ COVID-19 pandemic; more distance learning	Reconstruction of the middle class; technical vs. academic paths uncertain

Education systems developed within international alliances during the imperial period. Education institutions in most developing nations adapted models from colonizing countries, a systemic difference too frequently overlooked in a rush to globalize universities [2]. Both global rankings for universities and national histories influence how countries engage in education exchange and create opportunities for their citizens [3].

### 2.1. International Alliances Influencing Education Development

The legacies of the nineteenth-century empires continue to influence economic and social development across the globe. The democratic revolutions in the US and France did not substantially change the overarching narrative of economic development portrayed by Adam Smith [4]. However, the Russian revolution during World War I brought the political dialectic into international politics. The British Empire transitioned to the industrial age faster than the global Spanish and Ottoman empires. Serious problems within the Ottoman economy influenced their engagement in WWI [5,6]. WWI brought British hegemony into dominance in the Middle East.

#### 2.1.1. Transformations Influencing Economic and Education Development

Transformations in prevailing political ideologies, political alliances, and nations’ strategies for education development influenced social capital development in countries. These legacies of past global periods affect contemporary social stratification and the prospects for reducing opportunity gaps accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The multinational return of authoritarianism is symptomatic of profound social and cultural tensions [7]. In some Latin American countries, the rise of autocratic leftist politicians has been characterized as a “post-neoliberal” ideology [8]. Distinguishing the forces at work in economic and educational development during the current period starts with examining historical transitions. These periods stand out as distinctive as concerns economic development, trade across nations, and educational development within them:

- *The Empires.* European wars were waged over colonies, trade, and religion. South Asian nations adopted educational forms from their respective colonial power. For example, the British education and trade models dominated India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Pakistan, etc. China’s trade and education were open to Western nations and missionaries, including the development of educational institutions. Japan evolved aspirations to build an empire, expanding into Korea and China before WWII.

- *The Cold War.* The centuries of empires came to an end after World War II, as global conflicts emerged from conflicting ideologies. Nationalized economies in Soviet nations competed and conflicted with capitalist expansion in the West. Western democracies and Eastern European countries in the Soviet sphere expanded K-12 and higher education, moving toward mass access in the US and Europe, with enrollment tracked by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). China developed policies of centralized education and economic planning consonant with those of the Soviet model. The US trade agreements and tax policies favored global corporations and ignited the nascent global supply chain, with American goods supplying the rebuilding of European nations after WWII.
- *Neoliberal Globalization.* The first wave resulted in the democratization of post-Soviet Eastern Europe, but was resisted by China [9]. China embraced the second wave, emphasizing global production, trade, and international corporations. The European Union (EU) emerged, facilitating intra-European trade, travel, educational exchange, and EU engagement in world trade. The internationalization of higher education increased student and career mobility as economic globalization accelerated. China globalized its universities, started joint campuses with Western universities, and saw many students studying abroad.
- *The New Uncertainty.* As the neoliberal global consensus withered, a new set of circumstances emerged by 2015, when the Republican US Senate did not consider Obama's Supreme Court nomination and the United Kingdom (UK) voted for Brexit. The West had lost an early information war aimed at increasing divisions within Western democracies [10]. The breakdown of democratic institutions in the US accelerated during Trump's presidency, as the US Cold Civil War emerged and the US broke trade agreements [11]. As the COVID-19 pandemic wanes, democratic and authoritarian ideologies within and across nations seem locked in conflict about education and trade. The new "hot war" in Eastern Europe raises the fear that a world war is possible.

Understanding the possible meanings of the current global transition for social change requires careful thought about conflicting political ideologies, shifting international alliances, educational development within and across nations, and patterns of social capital formation. The global supply chain created by neoliberal economics reversed the flow of goods in the US from outgoing to incoming.

#### 2.1.2. Breakdown of "Washington Consensus" on Education Development

An international aid strategy emphasizing capitalism in aid to developing nations was the alternative to communism advocated as a global strategy by Harvard social scientists, e.g., [12], and gained momentum during the 1960s under the Presidential administrations of Kennedy and Johnson. At the end of the Cold War, some economists argued that capitalism, rather than democratic institutions, had caused the demise of the Soviet Union, e.g., [13].

The "Washington Consensus" was a strategy for international development created by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the late 1980s [14,15]. It is perhaps most easily understood as a tacit agreement among neoliberal economists about the role of international capitalism in developing South American, Asian Pacific, and African nations [13,14]. The ideas persisted through most of the neoliberal period of globalization.

While the IMF is mainly concerned with lending and the repayment of loans for development, the restructuring of world trade is the haunting legacy inhibiting cross-generation uplift, at least for the US [16]. The export of US jobs was only part of the problem. The debt accrued by developing nations ensured a legacy of poverty in many countries, especially in Latin America, where debt-to-tax ratios were excessive [17].

The Cold War's communist-capitalist dialectic disguised the deeper social conflict between racism within nations as empires crumbled. Racism morphed across global transitions into the contemporary conflict between authoritarian rule and democratic institutions. Democratic institutions are more likely to embrace and facilitate diversity within countries,

while autocratic leaders appeal to powerful economic elites and populists [18]. These forces have resurfaced in Trumpism in the US, Brexit in the UK, and Russian claims of Nazism in Ukraine before the invasion. Conflicts between racist nationalism and internationalism linger within nations across the globe.

## 2.2. Transforming Patterns of Education Development

The American colonies appealed to English philanthropists for college funding, usually claiming they would educate native people, but expanding the opportunities available for colonists was an underlying aim [19]. The University of London first offered distance degrees for children across the British Empire in 1858 ([https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Distance\\_education](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Distance_education) accessed on 2 February 2023). As schools and universities expanded globally, colonizing nations disseminated national models and languages [20]. These early arrangements set in motion the diaspora of institutional forms within empires, easing the international exchange of students within these networks.

German universities were the first to establish doctoral education on a large scale, as Germany became the center of scientific discovery in the nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German universities enjoyed extensive graduate enrollment, as universities in the US and other nations developed graduate programs organized at first by Germany's Ph.D. graduates. International study proceeded within and across alliances through World War II and the Cold War. American universities enjoyed the most extensive international enrollment, in part because the Carnegie credit hours made credit transfer easier than was possible in most other nations. There has always been international study, however. After high school, students might choose to attend college in another country.

Germany was the center of scientific discourse in physics before WWII, but the migration of top Jewish physicists due to Nazi oppression began before the war [21]. This drain of physicists influenced the competition to build an atomic bomb during the war. The migration of German physicists to Russia and the West influenced the competition to produce bigger and better bombs throughout the Cold War. It also influenced the space race. Responding to this sinister form of international competition, Western democracies and Russia expanded funding for science during the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War accelerated cooperation in science, further breaking down East–West barriers to academic exchange. International collaboration in science accelerated throughout the global period. For example, the International Space Station, a joint venture involving the United States, Russia, Canada, Japan, and countries in the European Space Agency, illustrated cooperation in space [22]. However, the rekindled Cold War now emerging in this new period of uncertainty has dampened academic exchange, even as international corporations function as mechanisms for technology transfer through the still-evolving supply chain and organizational partnerships between the US and China [23].

### 2.2.1. Social Sciences in the Cold War and Beyond

The migration of German social scientists added divisiveness and fragmented international exchange during and after WWII. During the Cold War, in 1963, mainstream US social scientists conferred to frame a middle course between the far right and the socialist frame marginalized by McCarthyism [24]. The next year, Marcuse [25] severely criticized this approach. A Jewish scholar who had been part of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse became one of the few left-leaning US social scientists during the Cold War. On the other extreme, Leo Strauss, a noted German philosopher, became the thought leader of the new conservative right [26]. Strauss criticized liberal democracy because the German democratic system made it possible for Hitler to seize power, giving rise to the Nazi regime [27].

Almost as echoes of this anti-democratic social thinking, right-leaning scholars advocated for a return to Western civilizations as foundations for collegiate undergraduate education in the US, e.g., [28,29]. They advocated restructuring the high school curriculum to emphasize a college preparatory curriculum for all students [30]. The political left in the

US also promoted this strategy for preparing all students with advanced courses in math and science previously necessary for entry to collegiate Engineering programs. Liberal scholars advocated for preparing all students for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields because of the history of tracking minorities into vocational education into vocational high school programs [31–33]. Rather than updating and modernizing vocational education, the path chosen by the EU, the US marginalized technical for working class families.

These contrasting arguments in academic discourse come into question as nationalism reemerges as a fragmenting force. For example, Brexit ushered in a reconstruction of trade agreements in the EU. European nations have benefited from trade and economic exchange within the EU—the flow of labor and products—but the UK’s financial future is now uncertain [34]. Given China’s ascent in world trade and strong relationships with the EU, Trump’s agenda on global and Pacific trade agreements has left the US more isolated in international trade, at least before Biden’s election. Biden’s alliance-building with Europe during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may reshape these trade alliances, depending on China’s support for Russia. Claims thrown back and forth about Nazi nationalism underlie this contemporary rhetorical battle, further accelerated by the Ukraine war.

The global appeal of the US university model further complicates the post-neoliberal political shifts [35]. Trump’s criticisms of China created reluctance among Chinese students to study in the US even before COVID-19 [36]. Israeli universities have benefited from the shift in students’ interests [37], illustrating that international economic and political alliances impact educational exchange.

### 2.2.2. Expanding College Opportunities

Most developed nations have moved towards universal preparation for tertiary education with collegiate and technical pathways [38]. The US STEM strategy constrained the opportunities available for high school students, emphasizing the STEM pipeline to jobs for the high-tech economy [39]. In contrast, most European nations maintained technical pathways and strengthened vocational and technical options at tertiary institutions, promoting working-class employment and high-tech opportunities [39–41]. In contrast, many less-developed countries, including China, have sought to move to mass higher education, yet many still do not provide K-12 for all students.

The Bologna agreement and process started a new wave of international exchange in education by moving toward common credit mechanisms and opportunities to enroll in institutions across Europe. This process increased the appeal of EU universities to Chinese students as well. The high cost of American higher education has become a barrier for some international students. Ireland and most other Western European countries have maintained college affordability [42–44]. Declining college affordability is an additional factor in the US regression in access ranking compared to other OECD nations [45]. The narrowing of the high school curriculum to marginalize technical preparation has also influenced the reduction in the US in the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college.

Ensuring socioeconomic and racial diversity in elite universities is a critical issue related to economic competitiveness and social mobility in the EU and the US. These aims influenced the exchange of Chinese college students to prepare coming generations of for engagement in a global economy [46]. Economic inequality within nations has been a motivating factor for reshaping university outreach to low-income students in developed countries throughout the global period [47,48]. Educational inequality between the northern and southern hemispheres continues to be challenging, especially for underdeveloped African countries [49].

### 2.3. Educational Policy, Social Stratification, and Educational Uplift

Nations’ policies on education and economic development routinely make assumptions about social structure and the capacity of families to acquire cultural capital for college.



In Europe, higher education offers postsecondary pathways for the working class that are no longer evident in the US. These divergent policy pathways may rest on different assumptions about social class as nations progress from empires to the breakdown of the neoliberal consensus. The shift to using debt as the low-cost mechanism for expanding access raises issues about cultural and social class differences across nations.

### 2.3.1. Social Class and Capital Formation across Generations

During the Cold War, the movement toward mass higher education in Western democracies was informed by a social theory of class structures. Talcott Parsons's [50] theory on social forces in economic development evolved into a social system theory [51] that was foundational to the logics underlying America's move to mass higher education [1]. Class structure was more rigid in Western Europe than in the US, where sociologists focused on social mobilities within nations [52] as a cross-generational issue of uplift and social class transitions [53]. Europe retained dual technical and academic pathways, an approach that reinforced class inequalities. In contrast, the US narrowed the K-12 curriculum, marginalizing the nation's working class, who were once vital in supplying the European rebuilding process. The social research informing policy development also differed in the US and Western Europe.

Structural social theories of uplift had informed US policy. James Coleman [54] was the first researchers to study white flight from cities to suburbs after the court-mandated desegregation of urban school systems, leaving many inner-city schools predominantly Black. Later, he theorized that social capital in families was central to building social capital for cross-generation uplift. Later, he argued that moving to locales with stronger social cohesion was the primary mechanism for uplift [55]. US education policy began to focus on the improvement of urban schools, but the new policies were largely ineffectual because of the increasing concentration of poverty [56,57]. Neoliberals argued that the marketization of urban schools would improve quality and reduce inequality [58–60]. Instead, these mechanisms accelerated gentrification in some urban neighborhoods and reproduced poverty in others [61,62].

Critical social theories focusing on class reproduction had more influence on post-secondary policy in Western Europe than in the US. Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory [63–65] focused on education knowledge transmitted in families as a force in class reproduction. He argued that cultural transmission was more potent than educational content as an underlying force in inequality. These arguments informed activist research on student outreach in US high schools [66–68]. Adapted in Ireland, this community-based approach has had documented success across international contexts [44,69].

### 2.3.2. Emerging Inequalities in the Post-Neoliberal Period

Arguments about the role of social capital in educational uplift can provide insight into neoliberalism's impact on economic wellbeing across generations. Breen and Müller [70] found that Americans and Europeans born before 1950 had upward economic mobility, while those born afterward experienced downward economic mobility across generations. Specifically, the education gains across Western democracies did not improve the financial wellbeing of families, a reality facing most people in the workforce in these nations.

Amartya Sen [71] proposed a theory of human capabilities as educational and cultural support for wellbeing as an alternative to the human capital theory that has driven nations' economic and education planning since the Cold War. He based this idea on a comparison of states in India, where some regions were more resilient than others, a probable artifact of education [72]. Capabilities development was a guiding theory for Irish successes in low-income schools [48]. The capabilities approach merits consideration as governments and communities organize to overcome education gaps left in the aftermath of COVID-19.

### 3. Education Policies in Globalizing Nations

Expanding college opportunities beyond mass higher education poses new challenges for developing countries, especially given the growing inequalities within and across nations. The uncertainty recently infused into international trade and education alliances complicates but does not substantially alter available choices of financing strategies. Instead, awareness of shifting cultures within nations, their social structures, and their investments in K-12 and higher education affect the capacity to expand and equalize opportunities.

Historical and current practices of education finance across nations suggest four logical frames—socially progressive, strategic investment, privatized markets, and human capabilities (Table 2). National economic and education development policies usually demonstrate one or more of these frames in uniquely crafted national frameworks.

**Table 2.** Frames guiding in policy on economic and education development: social progress, strategic efficiency, privatized markets, and human capabilities.

Frames/Policy Aims	Economic Development	Education Development
<i>Social Progressive</i>	Educated public drives economic development; progressive taxes for social and economic development	Public systems expand opportunity; focus on cross-generation uplift
<i>Strategic Investment</i>	Public investments to address inequalities and promote nations' economic development agendas	Need- or merit-based programs support national aims; national K-12 and higher education policies
<i>Privatized Markets</i>	It relies on corporations, corporatization of the public sector, and reduced taxes for the elite class	Shifts costs of education from taxpayers to students and families; student loans and reduced need-based aid
<i>Human Capabilities</i>	Focusing on building human capabilities is more productive than treating people as "capital."	Using social networks with both public and private investment to address inequalities

A comparison of OECD nations reveals that Canada and Mexico had not followed the US model toward privatization of higher education by the early 2000s, but many other Pacific region nations had chosen this path [73]. Before examining other regions, I review the historical transition in the federated US system and explain how marketization occurred.

While the globalization of universities uses indicators for comparing universities, the transitions in international alliances have illuminated the challenges facing institutions in the post-neoliberal transition. I use these frames to examine policy transitions that have affected economic and educational systems in nations engaged in the global economy: the US, the EU, South Asia, and post-Soviet countries, explicitly considering China within Central Asia.

#### 3.1. Transitions in the US Decentralized Market System

The US is a federation of 50 state public education systems with independent colleges and proprietary postsecondary institutions. The colonies developed education as faith-based before federal involvement began with land grant colleges during the Civil War. By the 1870s, all states had "free schools" using the cross-sectorial Protestant model, an approach resisted by Catholics [74]. Thus, when states began funding public schools in the late nineteenth century, Catholic schools remained "private" without public funding.

From the late seventeenth through the early twentieth century in the US, public colleges evolved as mostly independent campuses that lobbied state governments for funding. States developed higher education systems in the late 20th century, exemplified by California's master plan in 1960 [75]. Most states used *social progressive* educational and economic development concepts when developing their state systems from the 1950s through the 1970s [76].

The federal government began funding public education systems by making *strategic investments*, with the GI Bill supporting college education for returning veterans after WWII. In response to challenges facing the nation and states after desegregation of schools

began, federal initiatives intended to promote equity through supplemental programs for low-income children in K-12 schools and need-based aid for low-income college students were developed. During the height of this strategy in the 1970s, states peaked in race equity in college enrollment and high school graduation rates [39]. The neoliberal shift in federal policy in the 1980s eventually transformed states' regulation of K-12 education and their financing of public higher education, moving many states toward *privatized markets*.

First, the federal government shifted federal K-12 policy from emphasizing supplemental education for high-need students to mandating STEM pre-collegiate programs for all students, based on *A Nation At Risk*. The STEM agenda emphasized raising math and science requirements for all high school students, using tests to track school performance, and markets to promote excellence through school-wide programs and charters. High school graduation rates dropped in most states for a few years after math requirements were raised [38].

Second, the Reagan administration shifted the emphasis from need-based grants to loans. The decline in federal grants corresponded with rising tuition as students amassed excessive debt. Many states responded to cuts in federal need-based aid by letting institutions raise student aid so that they could replace those students lost when the federal government cut need-based grants. These practices could not offset high student debt [38,77].

There is substantial variability in the extent to which states maintained progressive social finance policies for education. In the 1980s, Minnesota adopted a progressive strategic model to emphasize higher tuition and higher need-based grants, optimizing Pell revenue and ensuring more equity in college access [78,79]. Indiana balanced public finance strategies to improve college enrollment in the 1990s, as did North Carolina in the early 2000s [80]. The episodic nature of state financing is an artifact of shifts in the policy in state legislatures and alliances between policymakers and engaged scholars.

A *human capabilities* frame emerged as a response to inequalities created by rising college costs and the decline in federal grants. The State of Indiana combined social support and grant aid in the Twenty-First Century Scholars (TFCS) program, as did the Gates Foundation's scholarships for low-income minorities and funding for school reforms student grants in Washington. The social support provided by these programs positively influenced the formation of social and cultural capital, empowering students to make choices in their interests instead of responding to social or family expectations [38]. TFCS was the model for GEAR UP, a federal program providing social support for students in low-income schools. There were also numerous community-based nonprofit programs providing student support. Targeted programs provided advantages, compared to those communities and schools that did not have them. In the same period, states' education requirements and college finance strategies constrained high school graduation and college enrollment rates.

### 3.2. From the Marshal Plan to European Community

A comparison of OECD nations on enrollment percent in higher education and the extent of public student subsidies showed that, by 2005, most European nations resisted privatization [73]. The progressive social frameworks adopted after WWII had maintained most EU countries' commitment to low tuition through funding institutions and providing subsidies to students based on financial need. Resistance to privatization was rooted in strategies set in motion by the process of rebuilding through the Marshall Plan and political values within nations [81]. The Marshall Plan brought the ideals of Roosevelt's New Deal to Europe as the core of the rebuilding strategy after the war.

Scandinavian nations have maintained progressive education finance and social policies—investing in education and social programs with progressive taxation—better than nations in any other subregion globally [41,42]. In the early 2000s, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, and Belgium were nations with high collegiate access and high support for postsecondary institutions and students [73]. They are part of the EU, but Sweden and Finland are only now seriously considering joining NATO because of the Ukraine War [82].



Greece was among the nations with the highest in college access and highest subsidies for postsecondary students in the 2000s [73], but is facing new challenges. The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan influenced reforms in Greece after WWII [83]. However, after financial restructuring to pay off debts, Greek higher education has confronted neoliberal laws and “free-market tricks” [84] (p. 277). These shifts came at a time when Greece had more college demand from Syrian immigrants than other European nations [85].

Not all European nations adhered to progressive social ideals, however. France, Germany, and the UK were nations with lower-than-average access [73]. France faced cultural conflicts with immigrants. Germany underwent a merger of the eastern and western parts after the wall fell. The UK has been a leader in neoliberal globalization, symbolized by Brexit and the withdrawal from the EU. These cases illustrate that national identities, cultures, and educational histories play a substantial role in shaping competitiveness in college access.

Among nations internationally, Ireland stands out as a nation that has used the *human capabilities* approach to expand access, rising to the top of the OECD by 2019 [45,62]. Building on the successful outreach to low-income-serving schools by Trinity College Dublin, e.g., [48], Ireland funded outreach to and social support of students in low-income schools through university partnerships across the nation. Ireland maintained college affordability for low-income students, creating financial access for prepared low-income students. Most EU nations used a combination of grants and low college costs to reinforce a social structure that included academic pathways into the elite class and technical pathways strengthening and sustaining the working middle class.

### 3.3. South Asia and the Pacific Region

The public finance strategies used in the developed countries in the Pacific region are part of the context for developing privatized financing strategies, shifting the cost of higher education from taxpayers to students. Other nations in the region have moved cautiously toward loans. They use research to inform strategic plans and government investment to develop new institutions and programs. A new wave of cross-national studies reveals cultural adaptations and social resistance to the market model in regional countries engaged in the global economy as newly industrialized nations.

#### 3.3.1. Higher Education Finance in the Pacific Region

More than in other global regions, OECD nations on the Pacific Rim had emphasized loans to help lower low-income college students’ net costs, a strategy advocated in the Washington Consensus. Korea, Japan, Australia, and the US were the most privatized nations in the Pacific [73]. Like the US example, Korea, Australia, and Japan were in the top half for access. In contrast, Japan joined Mexico and Portugal as highly privatized OECD nations with lower-than-average college continuation rates. The Australian model of income-contingent repayment is an option being considered by some Asian countries as they review hardships caused by conventional loans.

The efficacy of loans has also become a topic of inquiry in the region. In Japan, traditional time-bound repayment has caused hardships for graduates, and the nation is considering shifting to income-contingent repayment as a national strategy [86]. A South Korean study found that borrowers concerned about their ability to repay had less social wellbeing, including feelings of despair [87]. The shift to loans over socially progressive forms of finance differentiates the Pacific economies from Europe. Students from lower- and middle-income families are more likely to depend on loans than wealthy families. Thus, nations shifting to privatization use debt to substitute for tax revenue and place the burden on students concerned about their ability to repay. Cross-generation decline—a pattern evident in the US and Europe [52]—is a possibility in many nations engaged in the global economy.

### 3.3.2. Overeducation in India

India had been the pride of British colonialism. Mohandas Gandhi organized early protests for independence, exhibited patience and support for the Empire during WWII, and became a spiritual leader in the struggle for independence after the war. His writings on nonviolence [88] inspired the Civil Rights movement in the US. After his undergraduate education in India, he obtained a law degree in England and went to South Africa, where he started organizing Indians using nonviolence. His educational journey from India to England was not uncommon for upper-caste students in India in the late nineteenth century. Colleges and universities continued developing in India in the early 20th century. By 1980, India had an over-educated population for the nation's employment capacity, especially before economic globalization [89].

The financing of education in India has continued with the traditional model, and India exported educated professionals through the late 20th century. Financial aid also ensures access, especially for students of the untouchable caste [90]. With its surplus of educated citizens, India was well-positioned for the early global economic boom. The process of decentralizing production took advantage of low-cost labor. The English-speaking education tradition aided the decentralization of the service industry. As industrialization continued in Asia, India's economy fell behind China [91].

The transition from a British colonial economic system to a market-based economy and the education system of the neoliberal period has created growing problems for higher education in India. Students coming from rural areas and attending lower-quality institutions are not repaying loans, sometimes willfully [92]. The expansion of higher education has been chaotic and unplanned, adding to the complexities of the market. India has public, public-aided private, and private colleges. India is also a federation of states with different educational and economic policies. College costs are a factor in college choice for high-merit students, but middle- or low-achieving students can end up in high-cost colleges with high loan burdens [92,93]. Thus, students' social contexts have become an increasingly important issue in the market system of higher education, adding substance to arguments that the system needs reform.

### 3.3.3. Alternative Narratives about Globalization Strategies in Southeast Asia

The "Washington Consensus" advocated student loans to expand higher education. There are two narratives among South Asian nations, one that embraced the Washington Consensus, and the other resisted adherence to this neoliberal vision.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 to promote technical education and economic development in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan. Known as "ASEAN Tigers," they engaged in the first period of global industrialization (starting about 1980), creating alliances with international corporations to manufacture products for export in the early supply chain. Thailand embraced student loans to provide access for high-poverty students, but there is now a concern about the needs of groups marginalized by the policy [94]. Medical educators in Singapore have concerns about the limitations of career choices for graduating doctors [95]. Scholars in Malaysia have begun to explore why low-income students form the intent to default on loans, a growing problem in the nation [96]. Like the developed nations in the Pacific region, ASEAN nations have discovered new challenges after following the Washington Consensus on higher education development.

Other nations have been slower to embrace loans; their national strategies seem linked to national cultures. In a country caught in a swirl at the edge of Islamic fundamentalism and Middle Eastern wars, Pakistani policymakers questioned the viability of using student loans to expand college access [97]. With forethought, one recent Pakistani study examined how personalities (e.g., extroversion) related to students' financial planning [98], an issue related to the eventual implementation of loans. Following the lead of Thailand and Korea, the Philippines developed a financial assistance strategy in 2016 to provide adequate funding expansion. Evaluators hope to monitor implementation to ensure "justice" prevails

in the transition from free colleges in the Philippines [99]. The research on loans in South Asian nations reveals cautionary inquiry into the strengths and limits of loans.

### 3.4. Post-Soviet Transitions in Postsecondary Education

With the breakdown of the USSR, the Soviet system ended in Eastern Europe. The Soviet model centralized planning and control. This approach to institutional development did not emphasize markets and students' freedom to choose institutions. Marketization using loans to expand access was not a preferred method of finance.

The Soviet central control approach during the Cold War allowed for coordinated expansion in "factory-like" institutions. The Soviet model also created research institutions separate from universities, inhibiting the development of globally competitive research capabilities in post-Soviet universities during globalization [100]. The transformation from central control to market systems was not easy. There was no "Marshall Plan" for building institutions during the Cold War or after the transition to democratic forms of governance, complicating the transition to the post-Soviet era in higher education systems competing in economic and educational spheres with Western Europe and the US [99].

The OECD data reveals variabilities in programs through the early transition period, and scholarly research reveals some of the challenges facing post-Soviet nations. Like the Western European nations noted above, post-Soviet countries were low on the privatization scale in the mid 2000s [73]. However, they were also lower in enrollment rates, indicating they were slower to adapt to the push toward universal access in the early globalization period.

One of the problems has been corruption in the administration of institutions, with wealthy families buying access [101,102]. A mixed-methods study of 14 Ukrainian universities before the current war illuminates the risks facing post-Soviet nations:

*Local reform efforts are viewed as being anchored in the outdated 'factory-model' of higher education and generate more losses than gains in regional and global competitions. The discussion focuses on the argument that a failing higher education system is likely to lead to a failed state. One of the contributors to this failure is the lack of a globally conditioned set of indicators, independent of local politics. The world-class university model could become a major reform driver, but it could also be thwarted by a legacy of entitlements, corruption, and poor performance. [102] (p. 249)*

Chankseliani argues that post-Soviet universities face a "double disadvantage" caused by "Russian imperialism and Western academic colonialism" [103] (p. 265). These insights touch the core issue. In contrast, the US' higher education system has weathered tuition and admissions scandals in the past decade [104,105] because of the US' independent court system. The weaknesses of democratic institutions slowed the transition in Eastern European universities, but other factors contributed to the challenges they faced.

US standards became the basis of the global ranking of universities. At the same time, most high-ranking global universities have local (state or community) links and support. The 'bean counting' in academic indicators—publishing in highly ranked journals, for example—was never the core value of Soviet academic life. The older Soviet factory model produced graduates but did not generate knowledge to support local democratic institutions, a core value in the American universities. If a factory-like emphasis on producing journal articles prevails over reason, the global system of democratized institutions is at further risk. The journal rankings often marginalize critical thinking when these bean-counting norms are dominant in US universities.

### 3.5. Economic and Educational Transitions in China and Central Asia

Urbanization, strategic positioning, trade, and competition between Russia and China have influenced development in Central Asia since WWII, with a shift in the balance of power toward China in trade and economic growth since the breakdown of the Soviet Union [106,107]. China's ascent in world trade in Central Asia was part of its emergence as a dominant global economic power.

While Eastern European nations embraced democratic ideals after the breakup of the Soviet Union, China pioneered a different course. As China's boundaries in Central Asia expanded, it promoted opportunities for immigrant Han populations over indigenous residents in the regions it governs. This practice has been especially problematic and visible internationally in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Inequality in college access for Uyghur students has become a vital issue of increasing concern in the international discourse on education equality [108,109].

China departed from the path taken by post-Soviet nations in higher education finance and institutional governance. China followed the Soviet approach with dual academic and technical secondary and postsecondary education and has retained dual collegiate pathways [110]. China has loan programs, has studied the repayment burdens [15], and is currently considering the Australian approach to debt repayment [16]. After the USSR broke up, China did not convert to democratic government and did not engage in globalization until the second wave emphasized international corporatization rather than political institutions [9]. China balanced the features of public and private higher education systems as it expanded rapidly this century [110]. Even when compared to other rapidly growing higher education in other East Asian nations, China made a remarkable and rapid transition, expanding educational opportunities and access as it developed new forms of decentralization and innovation [111].

The Chinese Communist Party has evolved a dual system of governance, with a parallel Party hierarchy and governing structures within universities, private corporations, and other entities. The hybrid form of academic administration in China is unique. It has allowed universities to respond to local and global developments, undertake new educational and research initiatives, and build international academic partnerships. Yet, the Communist Party has made demands on academic research in many fields, including social scientists engaged in studies of education reforms. National plans, along with Communist Party priorities, can constrain content and interpretations as part of internal reviews of academic papers in social sciences, sometimes increasing uncertainty in external reviews by international journals.

### 3.6. Education Development Strategies and Issues

This review illustrates that strategies for educational development vary substantially across regions and nations. The tension between traditional and market-based public finance strategies for expanding access was a source of conflict during the neoliberal transition. As we enter the post-neoliberal period, comparisons of contexts take on a renewed importance, especially concerning the rights of people in this new period. In addition to comparing the expansion of progressive education using free college, we have several examples of loan adoption at the national level, the approach recommended as part of the Washington Consensus. Since nations widely adopted student loans in the Pacific region, evidence about social issues emerged after countries adopted this policy. This review reveals:

- The movement toward education marketization, especially using loans for access in the Pacific region, raised social issues and inequalities, which have been examined by social scientists across these nations.
- Maintaining both academic and technical options at the secondary and postsecondary levels has facilitated a greater expansion of education than the American model, which emphasizes collegiate academic preparation and reduces tech prep.
- However, maintaining dual academic and technical pathways reinforced social class stratification in Western Europe, a form of social inequality.
- The history of central control in Eastern European post-Soviet countries complicated transitions to democratic education markets.
- Urbanization in China marginalized educational opportunities for the children of urban immigrants and created barriers to access for some social groups. New policies providing universal access to K-8 schools in China break down some barriers.

Addressing social issues emerging from neoliberal policies should be foundational in social research during this new period. Research on diverse groups within a nation can inform the development and change of education policy in countries, provinces, and states. Social research can also inform social initiatives that empower people to overcome barriers and expand and equalize chances for education success and economic wellbeing. A human-capabilities approach to social and policy research can inform interventions seeking to promote opportunities within the constraints of educational systems in rapidly changing times.

#### 4. Building Human Capabilities

Research on capabilities can inform public policy. This special issue of *Education Science* focuses on research that informs social action to build human capabilities for people left behind in their local context and promotes learning across contexts.

Human capabilities emerged from comparisons of states in India and women's opportunities in Islamic countries [112–114]. Nussbaum argued that women had a right to education to a level needed to support a family, a threshold of wellbeing not met in countries that denied education to women. Nussbaum [112,113] focuses on health, education, faith, and other freedoms and responsibilities. Building on her ideas, the capabilities noted in Table 3 relate to education and career pathways, along with localized social support for actualizing them. Local schools and community organizations are at the center of this approach. Their capacity to organize interventions is enhanced by investment from the government, businesses, and foundations, including university–school partnerships that provide information and local groups providing mentoring and social support (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Human-capabilities framework for addressing educational inequalities: assessing gaps and opportunities for social support and networking.

Capability/Strategy	Assess Capabilities Gaps	Build Support Networks
Financial Wellbeing	Minimum basic income for subsistence for individuals and families	Local agencies, businesses, schools, health care, and social services provide safety nets
College Preparation	Local educational opportunities through K-12 schools, including localized preparation for college and work opportunities	Community engagement in schools, providing supplemental support for engaged learning, social services, and networking
College Opportunity	Access to college, either academic or career education; guaranteed financial aid covering tuition when families cannot afford college costs	Social networks provide local and regional support; college networks linked to communities; technology access for distance learning
Career Pathways	Access to local, regional, and global collegiate career pathways; appropriate employment opportunities	Partnerships among schools, colleges, governmental agencies, and businesses supporting local economic and social development
Realistic Information about Opportunities	Realistic information about education, health, and career; support for realistic self-assessment	Local, regional, national, and global networks provide access to information on pathways
Social Support Networks	Opportunities to support peers and rising generations through mentoring and social support	Churches, schools, community centers, and businesses provide mentors for social support

Comparing strategies used to support marginalized students and communities in Ireland and the US [61] reveals no simple solutions to K-12 preparation and access inequality. Of course, the US is much larger but about half of the states have more population than Ireland. A comparison of US states also shows that states that coordinated student aid funding with rising costs and provided social support saw more substantial gains in college enrollment rates than comparable states [43,114].

The human-capabilities approach provides workable means for research informing policy and practice. Studies informing policymakers in Ireland, England, and the US confirm the workability of this approach in raising capabilities (preparation, access, and college success) for groups that would likely otherwise be left behind [9,69,115]. Students' engagement in encouragement and support services improves the odds of college enrollment [47]. Research informs practitioners about what does not work as intended, why this is the case, and alternative policies and practices. However, substantial changes will likely be needed to transport innovations across contexts, even when successful interventions occur.



In addition, and perhaps more importantly, action studies informing social support projects help expand and refine services and the quality of information and mentoring they provide. The global experience of the move to marketization through student loans in higher education raises differing social issues across nations. Consider the example of possible social interventions that would minimize the negative consequences of growing student debt, a problem of emerging importance across countries in the Pacific region. The economic wellbeing of students who graduate with debt, as measured by their ability to support their families, is a primary indicator in the human-capabilities framework (Table 3). Since local and national economies vary substantially, the local remedies to this challenge must differ to fit policy circumstances and cultures.

## 5. Moving Forward

Knowledge of local contexts is vital to designing successful interventions that build human capabilities for marginalized groups in their locales. Both qualitative and quantitative studies can inform local and government action. Compared to Western nations, there is only modest prior research on capabilities development among Chinese school-age and college-age youth students. Studying social class and education uplift may become a priority for Chinese education scholars and social scientists. For example, in a large-scale qualitative study of Chinese undergraduates, Ciupak [44] documented differences in college preparation and pathways for students from peasant backgrounds, working-class families, and resources with the resources for studying abroad. She also encouraged systematically studying these issues as China expands educational opportunities [116].

Building an international community of scholars who share interests and research that supports and informs human-capabilities development is crucial. This approach provides a means of engaging scholars in educational improvement in China [117], as it has in the US and Ireland. Beijing Normal University's Center for Education Development and Social Justice aims to promote a new generation of research. This volume starts a concerted effort to promote this theme. In the concluding chapter, the editors use the three frameworks—global transition, policy frames, and human capabilities—to review these articles and to illustrate an integrative approach to policy studies.

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