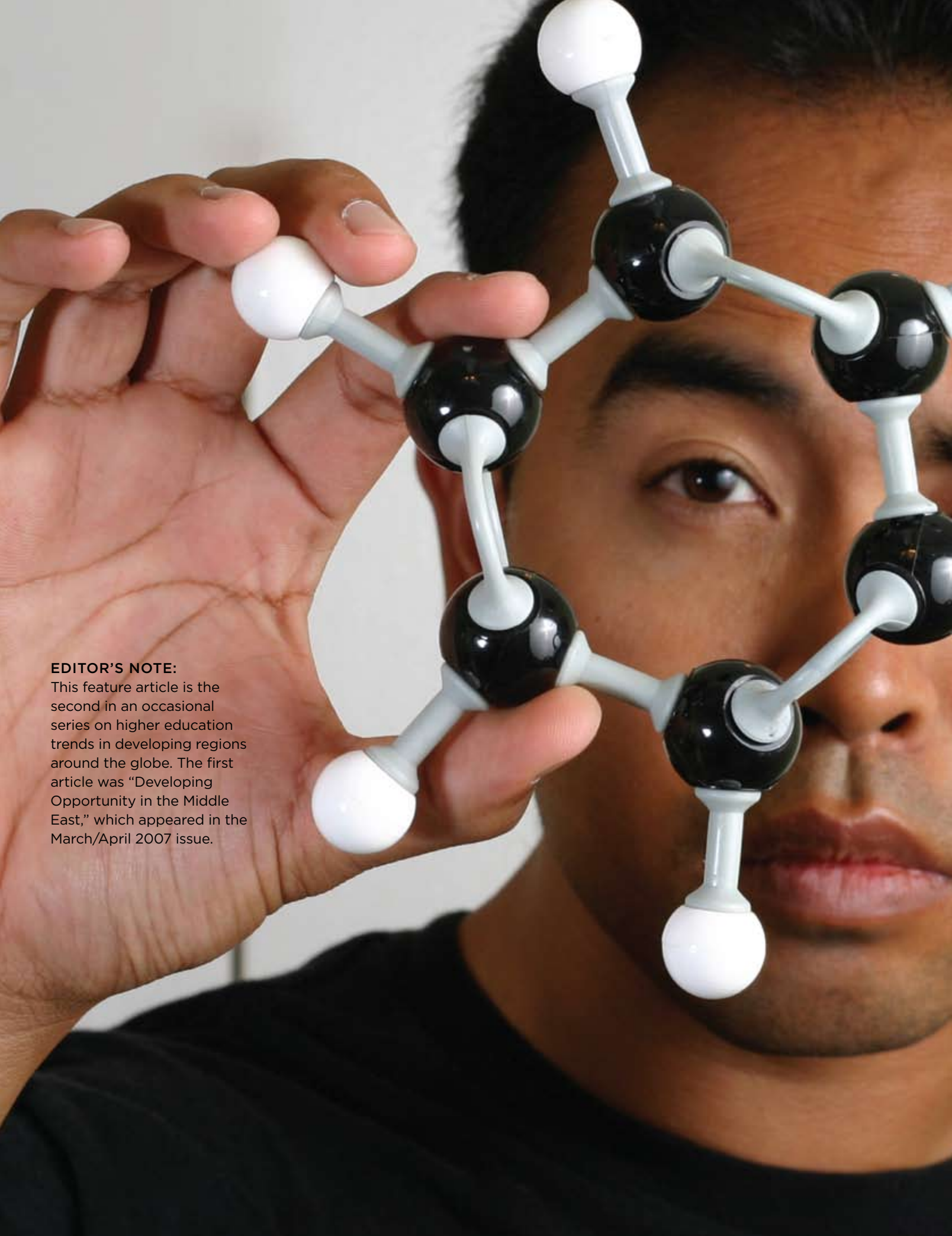

EDITOR'S NOTE:
This feature article is the second in an occasional series on higher education trends in developing regions around the globe. The first article was "Developing Opportunity in the Middle East," which appeared in the March/April 2007 issue.

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Kanji Symbol for Foreign Exchange

Where the Students Are in East Asia

BY KYNA RUBIN

With changing demographics and in many countries, booming economies, Asian students have greater mobility in where to study while universities are increasing recruiting—today these forces are changing the landscape of higher education in East Asia.

AS ANYONE WHO READS A NEWSPAPER, goes to the movies, or talks to U.S. college students knows, Asia is hot. Asian students continue to fan their way across U.S. campuses while American students are taking on Asian languages—demand for Chinese instruction is astronomical—and flying eastward as never before. In 2005–2006, East Asian nations and India (which, with 76,500 students in this country, remains the top sender) together made up almost half of the 565,000 foreign students in the United States. Outward bound, nearly 35 percent more U.S. students headed for China and 11 percent more for Japan in 2004–2005 than did so the previous year. In absolute numbers, almost as many of them went to China as to Germany, reflecting young people's burgeoning interest in Asia's powerhouse. U.S. students studying Chinese has skyrocketed: according to the Asia Society, between 1998 and 2002 the number of college students studying Chinese rose 20 percent and increasingly, high schools across the nation are offering Chinese language courses. The East's growing global importance has pushed study of it well within the U.S. academic mainstream, not a place it occupied a generation ago.

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Inside Asia

While U.S. universities look forward to a return to increases in PRC (People's Republic of China) students (a resurgence in Japanese students seems unlikely in the near future), the main game for China, numbers-wise, is within East Asia, where links between Chinese higher education institutions and their counterparts in East and Southeast Asia abound. On campuses in China, Japan, and South Korea between half to three-quarters of foreign students come from the other two neighboring countries. China is especially assertive about playing a larger role in international education. Between 2004 and 2005, its foreign student population surged by 21 percent to 141,000 (the goal is 300,000 by 2020). An example of regional marketing practices: As early as 2003, seventeen Chinese universities in Jiangsu Province banded together to travel to Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia to forge student exchanges. Hong Kong, attempting to attract brainpower from all over China in the way that Shanghai has been doing for decades, has set aside 10 percent of university slots—and scholarships funded in part by local business tycoons—for mainland students. The former British colony, part of China since 1997, is often viewed by PRC parents as a transitional destination for their children who, once there, sometimes transfer to a U.S. university.

All of these student flow trends occur within the context of individual domestic developments in East Asian nations. However, questions about whether rigid national college entrance exams and pedagogical practices, hallmarks of traditional Asian education, can produce creative twenty-first century thinkers continue to permeate debate about higher education across East Asia. Those concerns form the backdrop for two key challenges facing Asia's universities: maintaining or enhancing education quality, and making universities more accountable to a public increasingly paying out of pocket for college.

China's Explosive Expansion

In 2005 China's universities enrolled almost five times the number of new students they had in 1998, bringing the total roll count to 23 million. The rapid broadening of educational opportunities reflects China's focus on higher education as a priority in national development. The expansion, initiated by the government in 1999, has been a godsend for growing numbers of well-off Chinese parents desperate for their children to secure a college education in a country where demand has long outpaced supply and a rigorous national entrance exam has excluded many youth from college. China's college-enrollment rate is now at a very respectable 20 percent; the goal is to reach 50 percent (per Japan and Korea) by 2050. While recently providing mass education, since the late 1990s the government has also heavily invested in upgrading to international standards a select subset of its best universities. Taken together these changes are helping to keep more of the country's students at home. Spiffy lab facilities and the presence of greater numbers of Western-trained Ph.D. faculty members (lured back with higher salaries that permit a comfortable lifestyle) are among the upgrades. So, too, is the proliferation of joint Chinese-foreign university programs—167 such programs existed in 2004—where PRC students can earn a foreign degree while remaining in China most of the time. These offer a practical way for students to internationalize without spending a fortune to study abroad. Such programs also expose participating Chinese faculty to foreign program content without leaving home.

The foreign-educated academics returning to teach in China fit into larger university personnel reforms. These reforms began four or five years ago, according to Kathryn Mohrman, the Washington, D.C.-based executive director of the Hopkins Nanjing Center, when universities started to change policies to attract new blood. Since 1949, universities had largely drawn from their own graduates to fill faculty slots, creating ingrown institutional cultures exacerbated by a workforce immobilized by a rigid government job-assignment system. That system is now largely dismantled. Over the last several years, Peking University had pursued hiring reforms with such fervor, says Mohrman—firing faculty, making them re-compete for their positions based on merit rather than seniority, hiring newly returned Ph.D.s from abroad, instituting tenure—that a negative response forced university leaders to scale back some of the new policies. Putting such changes into place represents an enormous shift in values and is a huge administrative challenge, she notes. Many of China's better universities are quietly making similar changes.

The dramatic swell in college students invariably has also brought challenges related to education quality. Even top-tier schools that have been favored by special funding attention from the state have not been immune to the pressures of such a high-speed expansion. "I don't think that money can necessarily assure absolute quality and that there aren't problems" even at the elite, well-provided-for institutions, says Ruth Hayhoe of the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The government and universities are doing a lot of serious work to create mechanisms to assess quality and upgrade curricula, but "there's been a lot of controversy over whether they expanded too quickly." Hayhoe, who consulted for the World Bank in China in the 1990s, says that the bank had pressured China to expand higher education for years. The government finally took the plunge in 1999 due to social demand and to stimulate economic consumption and construction in the higher education sphere. Universities, now responsible for their own budgets, have on the whole been enthusiastic about the expansion and have taken out big loans for that purpose. The result, she says, has yielded impressive new buildings, whole new campuses in city outskirts, often with a lot of money from local business and a lot of risk-taking by university leaders. It's all happening so fast, adds Hayhoe, that it's difficult to make a substantial assessment about institutional quality across the

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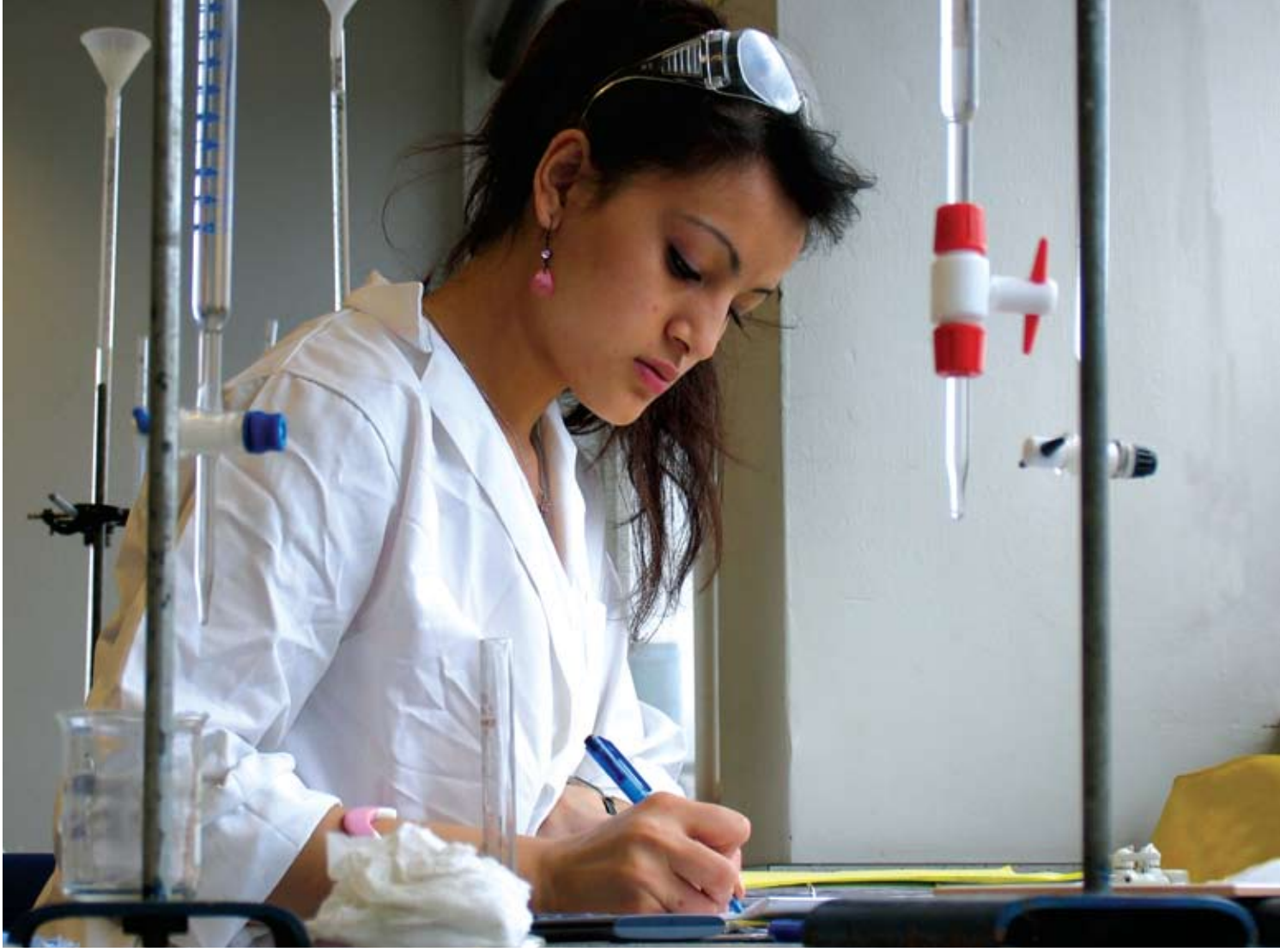
country. A survey that she and a University of Toronto team will conduct will canvas students in 12 universities (nine public and three private) on their views about teaching quality and other shifts during China's move to mass higher education.

Private Sector Stepping Up to the Plate

One byproduct of the move to mass higher education has been the creation of so-called "second-tier colleges" alongside the growth of private universities, which have been around for about 15 years but have proliferated since 1999. The two types of institutions compete for students who don't pass the rigorous national university entrance exam or score too low on it to enter the top public institutions. Second-tier colleges have been set up under the aegis of some prestigious universities to generate income by capitalizing on parents' craze for brand-name universities. The way it works is that universities have a fixed quota of students they accept through the examination process. Through second-tier colleges, universities enroll a large number of extra students who enter with lower exam marks but who are willing to pay higher tuition fees for the university's name on their diploma. These documents may say Huazhong University of Science and Technology on them, but "second-tier college" appears as well, making it clear to potential employers that such graduates paid rather than tested their way into the school. In the context of a tight job market for college graduates, this situation has made students question the worth of these diplomas.

Competing with the quasi-public-but-in-fact-private second-tier colleges for the "mass" students are an estimated 1,200 private universities that charge similarly high fees but lack the same name recognition of longstanding public universities. With some exceptions, many of the private universities have a reputation for poor quality and weak job placement for graduates compared with the public universities. They accept almost all paying applicants, who enter these schools at the bottom quartile of students sitting for the entrance exam. Typical course offerings focus on trade, computer science, accounting, and foreign languages. Only about 15 to 20 private universities have received government approval to offer degrees, according to Hayhoe. "The government wants the private universities to play the role of lower level technical training and certificates," she says, preparing people for the local market without necessarily becoming full-fledged degree-granting institutions. She believes that government strictness about recognizing private schools is warranted, as the private for-profit higher education world is not very well regulated, resulting in a certain degree of profiteering, exploitation, and questionable quality. On the other hand, some highly reputable private universities have existed for several years now.



LAURENCE GOUGH/ SHUTTERSTOCK

According to Hayhoe, about 10 percent of China's students attend private universities and another 10 percent or so attend second-tier colleges, while the rest fall within the full public system quotas. China has a long tradition of excellent private education, she says. She predicts that the private university sector could be "quite promising" if the government were to give it a fair chance by creating for it a proper regulatory and legal framework.

It is noteworthy that in spring 2006 China's State Council put an official end to the higher education expansion it set into motion seven years earlier. The government's eleventh five-year plan (2006–2010) for education lists "improving teaching quality" as a goal. According to China's *Xinhuanet*, though the expansion has allowed for more college entrants, universities still engage in outdated teaching methods, receive insufficient state funding, and produce a surplus number of graduates "scrambling for jobs." In January 2007 Deputy Minister of Education Yuan Guiren announced that the nation's 5 percent jump in 2007 university enrollment quotas will mostly go to China's underdeveloped western regions.

This is good news as another education problem is diminished equity of opportunity. University tuition hikes fueled by sparse state subsidies and the need to generate revenue for recent expansions have put college out of range for poor and rural youth. Suicides among peasants ashamed they cannot afford to send their children to college surge in July after college entrance exam scores are released, according to one report. The Ministry of Education has a loan program through China's banks to help such families, and some universities offer their own scholarships for small numbers of promising young people. But the loan system is inadequate and, in reality, few economically disadvantaged students have access to college. Also, according to Hayhoe, China's entrance exam is geographically unfair. Test takers from certain cities and areas can enter universities with lower scores than can their counterparts from other parts of the country. Critics within the educational community also complain that the exam produces bookworms rather than creative thinkers. How China responds to unequal access to education as well as to a "rising accountability mentality" among students and parents concerned about the quality of education they are paying for are two of China's biggest challenges, says Hayhoe.

While wrestling with high-speed higher education growth, China is also rising fast as a study destination. Japan and South Korea lament the large imbalance between the droves of students flowing outward to study abroad and the relative trickle of Western students heading for Japanese and Korean campuses. In contrast, China's inward-outward flows are in closer balance, driven by the increase in international students going to China in the last decade. Between 1978 and 2005, 933,000 Chinese citizens studied abroad

ALINTA T. GIUCA/ SHUTTERSTOCK

and 871,000 foreign students studied in China. In 2005 China's 141,000 international students made it the sixth most attractive study destination after the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia. Most of these students are self-sponsored and from Asia. Interestingly, foreign students are increasingly going for long-term study. Almost a third are studying for degrees, and though three-quarters enroll in Chinese language and culture programs, a significant number are starting to enroll in other fields such as economics and engineering. International students don't yet go to China to learn cutting-edge science, but that could change in the future as Chinese universities and scientists become world-class.

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Japan's Diminished Demographic Demand

As in China, demographics and economics have driven changes in Japan's higher education scene, but in Japan demand for college is dwindling rather than swelling. The declining pool of 18-year-olds, a still recovering economy (from the 1990 bubble burst), and university reforms over the last few years have forced many universities, private institutions in particular, to rethink their selection criteria and course offerings to attract a shrinking market.

Almost 80 percent of Japan's 755 universities are private. Private institutions have traditionally been more innovative than the public schools, observes David Satterwhite, executive director of the Fulbright Commission in Japan. The best public and private schools, which include some of Japan's national universities, remain competitive for admissions, he notes. Public institutions are "a little more relaxed about the phenomenon of changing demographics" than are private schools. The less known and less prestigious of those are reacting with a greater sense of urgency to the drop in demand for their services.

Many of those institutions "are just trying to keep their heads above water," observes June Gordon, associate professor of education at the University of California–Santa Cruz.

Because of changing market conditions, "students who would not have gotten into university before because of their low scores or lack of performance" might now be considered for admission, she says. It's still too early to tell if the lowering of admissions standards by some Japanese universities will negatively affect higher education quality, says Satterwhite. He adds, however, that "academic quality has been on the decline in Japan for a number of years." In fact, according to Gordon, who is writing a book on education among Japan's immigrant and minority populations, some private universities are starting to alter, some say dilute, their curriculum by, for instance, requiring students to learn fewer *kanji* (the Chinese characters that are used together with Japanese syllabaries). Private schools are also reacting by creating new majors such as one in media studies that includes "career communications, environment, and human relations," an attempt on the part of one university to cover with one stroke all the arenas that Japanese young people are being told they need to understand to be employable, says Gordon. To reach out to new markets, some entrepreneurial university programs are beginning to target life-long learners, "a virtually untapped market," says Satterwhite, to make up for the shortfall in 18-year-olds. This generates revenue for universities like Sophia University, and gives baby boomers a chance to study what really interests them, say, history, rather than what the corporations that typically hired them thirty years ago trained them to do (e.g., engineering). It is likely that the less entrepreneurial institutions will not be around in five years, says Satterwhite, due to an inevitable "winnowing out" of less well-placed, less well-managed colleges and universities.

The private sector's response to a shifting market is occurring at the same time that Japan's higher education system is undergoing government-initiated reforms begun more recently than China's, in 2004. The reforms granted independent corporation status to the country's 87 national universities, leaving them in the public sector but permitting them to set their own tuition fees (within government limits). This move was motivated in part, says Satterwhite, by former Prince Minister Koizumi's desire to make government smaller by shifting university personnel off the public employee roster. The reforms also include hiring outside business-type administrators to manage the schools, and forcing consolidations

University of Beijing Campus Entrance

between some national universities and nearby (sometimes less prestigious) schools. The mergers are aimed at increasing efficiency and accountability on the part of universities, which have operated opaquely for years. The national universities as a whole, says Satterwhite, not only those undergoing mergers, are having to create and justify their own budgets and are accountable back to the Ministry of Education "in a way the pre-incorporatization system did not require."

Japan's wider educational reforms include more international educational opportunities to capture the interest of a diminished college-age pool of students. According to Satterwhite, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University offers courses entirely in English that bring in foreign students to interact with local students; Akita International University and Waseda University both have all-English programs for Japanese students that require a study abroad year. In 2005 the government began to recognize foreign university branch campuses in Japan. Two American schools—Temple University Japan and Lakeland College Japan—enjoy such status, permitting Japanese students to transfer credits from those schools to Japanese universities. A Chinese university is negotiating to open a branch in Osaka, but overall numbers of foreign branches remain low.

Shandong University, Jinan, China

LUISA FERNANDA GONZALEZ/ SHUTTERSTOCK

June Gordon perceives a questioning within Japanese society about the utility of a university education at a time when going to college does not guarantee a job as it once did. Few young graduates are finding full-time, well-paying positions with benefits. They are competing for jobs, she says, with a growing pool of 25- to 35-year-old women (separated, divorced, or unmarried) and unemployed middle-aged men who lost their jobs during Japan's downturn. Satterwhite's view of college graduates' job prospects is more sanguine. Since the "lost decade" of the 1990s, when most of Japan's top corporations ended the traditional practice of life-long employment, young people, he says, have learned to redefine their definition of a "successful career" by considering other kinds of work including jobs at non-big-name companies.

Confusion among parents about how to educate their children for jobs in today's world, starting with what kind of elementary school to send them to, is a byproduct of Japan's economic and social changes, says Gordon. "Parents want to be in sync with the international mantra but they're not quite sure what that means in the context of Japanese society." Unsure of the benefits of K–12 educational reforms aimed at making the domestic curriculum more creative and "international," parents with means are putting their kids in private schools where traditional curricula remain, she says. Both private-public and urban-rural divides have contributed over the last 10 years to a society of what Japanese are now calling "winners and losers" in terms of education and economic opportunity.

South Korea's Privatized System

More than 50 percent of Korea's youth are enrolled in colleges and universities, an impressive figure on par with that in Japan and more than double China's 20 percent. But the higher education system faces three serious challenges, according to Sunwoong Kim of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. First is low overall investments in the sector. Korea spends only $6,000 per student per year, low relative to Japan's investment of $12,000 or the U.S.'s $20,000. Politically, it is difficult for universities to raise tuition, and increased government spending to levels that would satisfy everyone does not appear forthcoming, according to Kim.

Paralleling that low investment is the Korean public's concern with quality in both public and private universities. Korea's higher education system is the most privatized in the world, says Kim. Some 3/4 of students enrolled in four-year universities attend private institutions. But quality at many of these universities (the well-established, well-endowed institutions are the exceptions) is considered low, tuition rates high, and transparency in governance scarce because of laws that allow the families that founded these institutions dominant control over finances and personnel. Some of the problem is traced to 1995, when higher education reforms cut down on government regulation and new private institutions proliferated. "Korean parents perceive that the educational system in Korea is failing," observes a Fulbright Commission staff member in Seoul. Families spend enormous amounts of money supplementing their children's education through private "out of school" institutes that provide tutoring in regular school subjects as well as classes in foreign languages, arts, music, and sports.

The second challenge on Kim's list relates to demographics. He predicts that some universities, especially the privates and the lower

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ranking privates that are heavily tuition-dependent, will be forced to close or merge with others as supply outstrips demand for higher education. Korea's college-bound age cohort began shrinking about three or four years ago, he says, and will continue to do so for some time, putting universities in a somewhat similar bind as those in Japan, where fertility rates have been falling for some two decades. Like their counterparts in Japan, Korea's highest-ranking institutions won't be affected, says Kim, and in general the public institutions—with their lower tuition rates—will likely attract more students than the privates will. He also notes that Korea's problem attracting students to universities will be more serious than Japan's because Korea has smaller room to increase its college participation rate. The third challenge, in his view, is universities' governance. In Korea's bid to make its tertiary institutions more globally competitive, legislators have proposed granting public universities more independence by having them create individual boards of trustees. This notion faces stiff resistance among faculty and administrators who want to protect their job security, says Kim. Attempts to make private university governance more transparent have been going on for years.

As a result of a lack of confidence in domestic higher education, Koreans have long been sending their children to study abroad. The U.S. remains the most popular destination (China is second), though universities in Britain, Australia, Canada, China, Ireland, and Germany also successfully market their services in South Korea. Over the last 10 years Korean families have been putting their children on planes to study abroad at younger and younger ages. It is not unusual to find unaccompanied clusters of Korean high school students either boarding at private U.S. institutions or living with relatives.

Korean students constituted more than 10 percent of international students in the United States in 2005–2006, making South Korea the third leading place of origin for foreign students after India (13.5 percent) and China (11 percent). That same year saw a 10.3 percent rise in Korean students studying in the United States. The surge is due to several factors, according to Fulbright Commission staff in Seoul—Koreans' dissatisfaction with the quality of domestic higher education, their longstanding positive bias toward a U.S education, a large Korean-American population (many with U.S. degrees) who exert a powerful influence over where family

members attend school, and the spillover from Korean graduates of U.S. secondary schools who have been staying on to attend college.

According to James F. Larson, deputy director of the Fulbright Commission in Korea, the imbalance between numbers of Korean students studying abroad and Western students in Korea is one of Korea's greatest education challenges. Most of Korea's 22,600 foreign students as of 2006 came from China and Japan. Only 5 percent came from the U.S. (in 2004).

Focusing on a more ready market, in March 2007 Korea's Ministry of Education announced plans to make it easier for students in the Philippines, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and some regions of China to attend Korean universities by recognizing those nations' secondary school curricula. This move is part of efforts to internationalize Korea's education system, as is government's encouraging students to study abroad by abolishing regulations that had hindered overseas credit transfers to home institutions.

Vietnam's Ambitious Agenda

Vietnam is struggling to forge its own identity after years of foreign rule (China, France, Japan) and influence (the Peoples Republic of China, the former Soviet Union, the United States). The country presents a contradiction and is a moving target as it undergoes dramatic change. Its economy is booming due to market economic reforms begun in the mid-1980s, but its higher education system lags behind the times. For the two decades (1954–1975) that the nation was divided into North and South, two separate higher education systems reflected distinct influences—the Soviet Union in the north, and earlier French colonial rule (followed by U.S. influence) in the south. The nation's 90 percent literacy rate reflects the Confucian value it places on education and its nearly universal primary education. But its universities face challenges similar to those plaguing institutions in China, its larger Communist neighbor to the north, two to three decades ago. Higher education supply is woefully inadequate. Only 10 to 20 percent of Vietnamese youth attend university. Those who do so encounter outdated curricula and mindsets, few textbooks, Spartan facilities, aging professor-level instructors (80 percent are older than 60), and outmoded teaching methods that an American Fulbrighter teaching in Vietnam in 2006 describes as "lecture-memorize-test." Nine out of 10 professors do not use the Internet. Teaching quality even on Vietnam's better campuses is generally low, research is slight, and graduates are not equipped with the skills and knowledge that employers seek.

Finding a way to incrementally raise faculty and staff salaries to attract and retain quality teachers is one of Vietnam's supreme challenges and urgent priorities, says Mark Ashwill, director of IIE-Vietnam. Teachers are forced to moonlight, which often erodes their teaching. Meager academic salaries deter foreign-trained students from returning home to help upgrade Vietnam's universities. Low pay also creates internal brain drain, whereby U.S.-educated Vietnamese who do come back to teach move to the private or NGO sectors to get a better return on their study abroad investment. Underemployment of returnees can also alienate overseas-trained talent. Ashwill points to the case of a Vietnamese student with an economics master's degree from the United States who returned to his university teaching post only to be asked to teach English. Despite this problem, Vietnam's burgeoning economy, and its recent accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), make Vietnam a "land of opportunity" for qualified young people, says Ashwill. The country's projected growth makes it likely that foreign-trained students who remain abroad eventually will find more incentives to return, as have many of China's students.

To overhaul its university system, in 2005 the Vietnamese government set higher education reform plans that some observers say are overambitious. The aim, through a whopping 32 objectives that are not prioritized but are expected to be met by 2020, is to expand the system by three or four times its current size and to make it better managed, more equitable, more financially self-sufficient, and more in line with international standards. Vietnam's new Minister of Education and Training, Nguyen Thien Nhan, a 1993 Fulbrighter at the University of Oregon, is a man of great vision and energy, says Ashwill. But, says Ashwill, "it is much easier to reform an economy, which Vietnam has done with stunning success, than it is to reform an educational system." Lining up the necessary political, economic, and academic support for these education changes is a daunting challenge for a ministry not easily open to new ways. As of March 2007 the government had still not come up with concrete reform projects. According to Lam Quang Thiep, professor emeritus of Vietnam National University, the question of expansion really hinges on this: Can added institutions be of decent quality without the presence of common standards and in light of low teacher caliber and outdated management practices that "cannot be changed very fast?"

Included in the reform plan is the goal to expand private higher education institution enrollment. Higher education experts such as Pham Thi Ly, director of the Center for International Education, Culture Exchange, and Research at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy, argue that government needs to exercise quality assurance controls over the private university sector. Vietnamese students who crave a college education but score too low on the national college entrance exam to be admitted to solid public institutions can easily fall prey to for-profit universities that make a buck by

providing low-value degrees, she observes. Mark Ashwill agrees that developing mechanisms for quality control is essential, especially in the context of the growing participation in Vietnam's marketplace on the part of foreign education providers that is bound to occur with Vietnam's WTO membership.

In light of the country's inadequate university offerings, education abroad remains the route of choice for children of well-off Vietnamese families, most of whom reside in the South near Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). A bustling economy fueled in part by lucrative real estate investments and a sizzling stock market (that city's index rose 144 percent in 2006) have translated into more investment in overseas study, says Ashwill. Easier-to-obtain U.S. visas and assistance from U.S. relatives have contributed to the growth in Vietnamese students studying in America. For the offspring of families unable to pay for an overseas-based diploma but able to afford more than a domestic university, in-country degree programs like that offered by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology at its two Vietnamese campuses and by the University of Hawaii at Vietnam National University (granting a Vietnamese Executive M.B.A.) are viable alternatives. **IE**

KYNA RUBIN is a longtime contributor to *IE*. Her latest article was "Crossing the Green Line" in the March/April 2006 issue.

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