The boom in undergraduate study

Over the past decade, the number of people entering higher education has soared. Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of adults worldwide who have received tertiary education rose from 19 per cent to 29 per cent, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, and all estimates suggest that this growth will continue, albeit at a slower pace.

In the book *Making a Difference: Australian International Education* (2012), contributor and higher education consultant Bob Goddard estimates that the number of students around the globe enrolled in higher education will reach 262 million by 2025, up from 178 million in 2010.

The source of that growth will change the dynamics of global higher education. According to Philip Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College in the US, just two countries will be responsible for much of the increase in numbers: China and India. In both countries, the population exceeds 1 billion, while enrolment levels in 2010 were only 26 per cent in the former and 18 per cent in the latter, according to Unesco. “In India and China, the target is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average rate – around 30 per cent or so,” Altbach explains. However, applying his own “law of expansion”, Altbach predicts that, except in a few small, wealthy countries, any expansion in a country’s higher education system will result in a lower quality of education and of graduates. This is because growth in enrolment means that students of a wider range of ability are being taught; it can also lead to a scarcity of highly qualified staff while government funding is likely to become stretched.

Another implication of mass participation is increasing inequality within higher education systems, he adds. As the system grows, “the Chinese are rethinking expansion as they’re beginning to have more unemployment of university graduates,” he says – “it’s very hard to turn off the tap”.

Sub-Saharan Africa, where the average enrolment level is about 6 per cent, will also contribute to the increase, says John Fielden, director of the higher education consultancy firm CHEMS Consulting and a former consultant for the World Bank. And other parts of the developing world may witness dramatic rises. “In Sri Lanka alone, you could see a five-times increase if the state sector could get its act together,” he predicts. “I have no doubt that the bulk of the developing world wants to move up to gross enrolment of 20 to 25 per cent.”

According to the OECD, the higher education boom is driven by efforts to cultivate knowledge economies in developing and emerging countries. And, according to the OECD’s *Education at a Glance* 2012 report, demand for a university education is likely to hold strong, having already withstood the global economic crisis.

However, according to international education consultant Bob Goddard, the number of university graduates, “it’s very hard to turn off the tap”.

The growth of private provision

One area is expanding more rapidly than any other to meet the growing appetite for higher education: private provision.

Over the past 20 years, provision across most of Latin America has flipped from being predominantly public to mostly private, says Altbach. This phenomenon is now being repeated in other parts of the world, particularly in Asia. Experts on international higher education agree that private education will inevitably