Introduction to Part III: Access, Equity, Capacity, and Quality in the Overall Context of the Massification of Asia Higher Education

As indicated in the general introduction to this *Handbook* the four elements focused on in this section tend to occur as a "related bundle" of attributes in all higher education systems that are given to expansion. This is *not* to argue that such elements were absent from higher education systems during their smaller, more constrained elite stage, but it *is* to argue that once a higher education system seeks to expand, or begins to expand, that these elements occur within the various and complex "logics" of how higher education is pursued.

Preeminently, the desire and/or need to provide access are at the core of rationales for expanding such systems, which in turn links them to issues of capacity. The issue is always capacity for what? For initial exposure to higher education for an additional segment of the population? And if so how much? And for how many new participants? Is it to create new graduate institutions, or those of technology, or those that can compete for global rankings? Or those that exist in the electronic form of massive open online courses and other alternatives. Or all four? The complex and varied answers to such questions bring forth with them a host of related implications, involving cost, location, recruitment and training of personnel, administrative procedures and on—across the entire range of higher education experience. Thus, the entailment of increased access is always a related set of policy issues implicating capacity. These in turn, whether intended or not, involve issues of equity because higher education has historically been a valued and measured resource in society, which in the overwhelming number of cases has contributed a social benefit to those who have be able to pursue and consume it. By its nature, the higher education process creates a set of outcomes that *evoke* questions of equity. It follows that within the whole of the discourse on higher education, any effort involving significant expansion, which is precisely what the process of massification does involve, creates distinctions that impinge on equity. Some in society will have the benefit and some will not

and this leads inevitably to what becomes the *prior* question: who *should* have access and under what conditions with what resources made available? While it is clear that questions of equity within a society are intimately related to the history and structures of each society, it has become equally clear that the dynamics of globalization and the many consequences that they entail, not the least of which are the creation and expansion of the knowledge society, increasingly influence how questions of equity are framed and pursued.

Such processes touch on issues of quality at almost every level, if only for the basic but compelling reason that if a *system* of higher education (public or private, or more importantly public *and* private) is developed in which significant differences in quality exist, that fact—in and of itself—constitutes a situation of manifest inequity. In fact, even though such terms rarely appear in the literature on higher education quality assurance, which seeks to develop standards of approval and aspiration for quality, a failure to reach that standard can be viewed as a manifest demonstration of *inequality*.

As the chapters in this section fully demonstrate, the effort to satisfactorily define quality within higher education contexts and to employ it with disciplined and useful consequences embraces all of higher education. While all countries in the region engage in some defined and purposeful quality measurement activity, widespread agreement on the definitions to employ, the standards to impose, the measures to be taken, and the implications and value to be given to them remain elusive. One aspect of this enterprise can be viewed as operational and managerial, namely developing a set of values and procedures within a national higher education setting and placing them within an effective administrative structure. This much is do-able, if difficult, and we know this because some nations have in fact created workable and reliable systems of quality assurance that garner sufficient support within the relevant policy systems to be sustainable. However, it has proved far more difficult to do so across the conceptual, value, and administrative differences and complexities of cross-national comparison. It is in this context that the current importance and significance of international rankings have emerged, because insufficient and unsatisfactory though they may be in practice, they have created a form of comparative international "currency" by which the achieved "status" of a higher education institution can be known and engaged within the levels of global exchange (of students, faculty, degrees, research output, etc.) that have become such a part of contemporary globalization.

The chapters in this section seek to take one or more portion of this complex fabric of access, equity, capacity, and quality and elucidate it within a particular and delineated context, usually that of a given national system of higher education. We also stepped out of the Asia-specific framework in this instance to add a chapter on quality assurance in the USA, expressed primarily as higher education accreditation, in recognition that much of what has become quality assurance in Asia over the past few decades reflects in many respects that

experience. As editors, our hope for the reader's experience in this regard is that the complex inter-relationship between these fundamental concepts of quality can be clarified and lead us collectively forward toward more focused conceptual clarity and empirically based research in this critical area of comparative higher education research.