

## Revitalizing Insights in Taiwan's Higher Education: Perspectives from Educational Sociology

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**Abstract:** Taiwan's higher education is characterized by tradition, innovation, and persistent pursuit of academic excellence. However, similar to its global counterparts, many challenges are prevalent in Taiwan's educational sector that impede its progress and effectiveness. These challenges encompass demographic shifts, financial constraints, quality assurance, internationalization efforts, and technology integration. This article aims to revitalize insights for the development of higher education in Taiwan from some perspectives of educational sociology, and to overcome these challenges. The insights are as follows: (1) higher education must be examined from diverse perspectives, and (2) higher educational institutions must be proactive and dynamic in implementing Taiwan's educational ideals.

**Keywords:** educational sociology, higher education, sustainable development

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### 1. Introduction

The United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Framework for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) 2030 emphasizes that education should promote the physical, social, and emotional well-being of future generations. It outlines the essential cognitive, social, and emotional skills necessary for this goal, including: (1) critical, analytical, and reflective thinking: encouraging learners to think deeply about problems and reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions; (2) collaborative learning: promoting teamwork and cooperation among students to solve problems collectively; (3) problem-solving: equipping students with the ability to identify problems, develop solutions, and implement them effectively; (4) decision-making in the face of uncertainty: preparing learners to make informed decisions even when outcomes are not certain; (5) planning: teaching students to plan effectively for the future, considering both short-term and long-term impacts; (6) self-efficacy: building confidence in students' abilities to achieve their goals and make a difference. These competencies are vital for transforming learners into conscientious global citizens capable of solving complex problems. Through higher education, students can acquire these competencies, which are crucial for: (1) assessing the effects of environmental crises on human well-being: understanding the impact of environmental issues on health and society; (2) promoting sustainability and health: advocating for practices and policies that enhance sustainability and well-being; (3) empowering social change: equipping students with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to become agents of social change. By fostering these competencies in students, higher education institutions (HEIs) can contribute significantly to creating a more sustainable and equitable world. Therefore, we can understand the importance of higher education for a country's development, and HEIs can support the achievement of the UNESCO sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially SDG4 quality education (Biancardi et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2017, 2023; Shih, 2024a; Wang & Shih, 2022, 2023; Zion & Adler, 2024).

Taiwan's higher education is characterized by tradition, innovation, and persistent pursuit of academic excellence. However, similar to its global counterparts, many challenges are prevalent in Taiwan's educational sector that impede its progress and effectiveness. These challenges encompass demographic shifts, financial constraints, quality assurance, internationalization efforts, and technology integration. This article aims to revitalize insights for the development of higher education in Taiwan from some perspectives of educational sociology, and overcome these challenges and promote the quality of higher education in Taiwan.

### 2. The Current Experience of University Students in Taiwan

University education provides defining life experiences that promote personal development and prepares students for fulfilling careers. Excelling in university requires more than intellect; learners must work diligently, manage their time effectively, and cultivate strong study skills (Gardam, 2023), and these habits will serve them long after graduation.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal routines of Taiwanese university students. Taiwanese university students were required to engage in online education and learning activities (Lin, 2021). Students in Taiwan incurred losses in university learning occasioned by the pandemic. Additionally, several scholars have

observed an association between learning environments, access to resources, and academic performance in Taiwanese universities during the pandemic (Hu, 2022; Meng & Hu, 2023).

Higher education quality after the pandemic has been extensively studied. Studies have often emphasized student learning outcomes as indicators of higher education quality. For example, the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes initiative of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development involves the examination of the academic achievements of senior college students for evaluating the quality of undergraduate education. Although improving learning outcomes is vital for enhancing education, the optimal method of assessing such outcomes remains controversial. Curriculum planners in higher education often point to international mobility programmes as a means of promoting the idea of global awareness and cultural competences. It may well be the case that students learn to be more open-minded, tolerant and respectful of differences (Robertson, 2021; Tian, Lu, & Li, 2022).

The past decade has seen the gradual internationalization of Taiwan's higher education system, though international enrollment at Taiwan's colleges and universities has fallen steeply over the past three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the threat of COVID recedes and international exchanges begin to recover, the Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education in Taiwan (FICHET) continues its biennial survey of overseas students in Taiwan to better understand their motives for coming to Taiwan, their general conditions during their stay, and their intention of staying on after graduation (Department of International and Cross-strait Education at Ministry of Education, 2024).

The prevailing understanding of internationalization is superficial; universities are frequently believed to be "internationalized" if they offer courses taught in English and recruit international students. However, few English-language or international courses meet the abilities and needs of domestic students or are conducted in such a manner as to expand the horizons of domestic students. In curriculum internationalization, integrating cross-cultural elements and global perspectives is vital. Recently, EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) has sparked a wave in higher education in Taiwan. The promotion and discussion of EMI stem from the "2030 Bilingual Nation Policy," which aims to gradually increase the use of English in teaching from primary education to higher education in Taiwan. The policy hopes to establish English as the mainstream teaching language in the future, in order to attract foreign professionals to Taiwan, and expand to the international stage, and enhance global competitiveness (Tao, 2024; Wang, 2019).

### **3. Reflections on the Development of Higher Education in Taiwan: Perspectives from Educational Sociology**

#### **3.1 Thomas Popkewitz's Diverse Perspectives: Examine Higher Education from Diverse Perspectives**

Grounding his work in educational sociology, the American education scholar Thomas Popkewitz expressed the hope that people will examine problems affecting education from diverse perspectives in his 1998 book, *Struggling for the Soul: The Politics of Schooling and the Construction of Teachers* (Popkewitz, 1998). The authors of the present article shares Popkewitz's hope and suggests that higher education in Taiwan must be viewed from diverse perspectives if it is to adapt and thrive. Promoting higher education in Taiwan from diverse perspectives in numerous ways:

##### **3.1.1 Global Competitiveness**

Focusing universities's sustainability and competitiveness are important issues. Emphasizing internationalization, such as encouraging student and faculty exchanges, and can promote the competitiveness of Taiwan's higher education institutions on a global world (Kuo, 2016).

##### **3.1.2 Cultural Sensitivity**

Integrating diverse cultural perspectives can foster a more inclusive environment that respects and values different backgrounds, promoting social harmony and reducing cultural biases.

##### **3.1.3 Interdisciplinary Approaches**

Encouraging interdisciplinary studies can lead to more comprehensive and innovative solutions to complex problems by drawing on a wide range of academic fields.

##### **3.1.4 Technological Integration**

Adapting to technological advancements and integrating them into the curriculum can better prepare students for the rapidly changing job market.

### **3.1.5 Sustainability**

Emphasizing sustainability in higher education can instill a sense of environmental responsibility in students, which is crucial for addressing global environmental challenges.

### **3.1.6 Student-Centered Learning**

Diverse teaching methods can cater to different learning styles, and which can enhance students' engagement and improve educational outcomes.

Incorporating these diverse perspectives can create a dynamic and resilient higher education system in Taiwan, and can meet the challenges of the 21st century.

## **3.2 Karl Mannheim's Concept of "utopias": Higher Educational Institutions Must Be Proactive and Dynamic in Implementing the Educational Ideals of Taiwan**

In his 1991 book, *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim argues that "utopias" transcend social situations, and that they are not ideological insofar as they are transformed by contrary actions. In Mannheim's utopian worldview, historical conditions are constantly reevaluated regarding whether they accord with present conceptions. Every historical event is based on an endless quest for "utopias" to develop new insights that transform the existing social order. However, only by establishing "utopias" and "revolutions" can these insights ignite radiant life. Institutional order is always the "evil remnant" left behind when utopia and revolution are destroyed as history ceaselessly moves from one utopia to another. Mannheim's concept of utopia refers to a shared social ideal with a revolutionary function that dismantles or changes existing social orders. Ideas require action: Social ideals without a revolutionary function are not utopias (Mannheim, 1991).

Applying Mannheim's concept of utopia to Taiwan's higher education system, Taiwanese HEIs must proactively and dynamically implement Taiwan's educational ideals, gradually ameliorate the shortcomings of higher education, and engage Taiwan's citizenry in transformative changes to improve the quality of education university students receive. Applying Karl Mannheim's concept of utopia to Taiwan's higher education system involves envisioning an ideal educational landscape and actively working towards that vision while addressing existing shortcomings. Here's how Taiwanese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can implement this approach:

### **3.2.1 Envisioning Educational Ideals**

#### **3.2.1.1 Equity and Access**

Educational inequity is a significant social issue characterized by the unequal distribution of educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes among students. To strive for a system where all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have equal access to high-quality education (Alam, & Mohanty, 2023).

#### **3.2.1.2 Innovative Pedagogy**

In an age of innovation and digitalisation, critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills have become the most valued skills in the labour market. To embrace innovative teaching methods that foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills for students (Vincent-Lancrin, 2024).

#### **3.2.1.3 Lifelong Learning**

Promote a culture of continuous learning and professional development beyond formal education.

#### **3.2.1.4 Proactive and Dynamic Implementation**

Regularly update curricula to reflect the latest developments in various fields, ensuring relevance and applicability. Invest in ongoing professional development for faculty to keep them abreast of new teaching methodologies and research advancements. Leverage technology to enhance students' learning experiences, such as through online courses, virtual labs, and interactive learning platforms.

### **3.2.2 Engaging the Citizenry in Transformative Change**

#### **3.2.2.1 Public Participation**

Involve students, parents, educators, and community members in the decision-making processes related to educational policies and reforms.

#### **3.2.2.2 Community Outreach**

Foster partnerships between HEIs and local communities to address societal challenges and contribute to regional development.

### 3.2.2.3 Civic Education

Incorporate civic education into the curriculum to prepare students to be active, informed, and responsible citizens.

### 3.2.3 Enhancing Education Quality

#### 3.2.3.1 Research and Innovation

Encourage the related researches that address societal challenges and fosters innovation, contributing to national and global progress.

#### 3.2.3.2 Global Perspective

Internationalization is a significant area of research and practice in higher education. To promote internationalization through exchanges of students and faculties, collaborations with foreign institutions, and exposure to global issues (Mittelmeier, Lomer, Al-Furqani, & Huang, 2024).

By proactively pursuing these educational ideals and engaging all stakeholders in the process, Taiwanese HEIs can create a transformative and utopian vision for higher education, leading to a system that not only meets current needs but also anticipates and adapts to future challenges.

## 4. Reflections and Conclusions

### 4.1 Reflections

Education is humanistic because it involves the growth and development of human beings. Therefore, on December 2, 1996, Taiwan's General Consultation Report on Education Reform stated the following in the section Guaranteeing the Right to Learning: "The starting point of education must be confidence in human nature and the belief that people have the ability to do good. This is also the basis for humanistic education. Therefore, the driving force of education must return to the subject of education, that is, the individual in self-improvement and self-realization" (Executive Yuan Education Reform Review Committee, 1996; Li, 2004; Shih, 2019, 2024b).

Education is closely linked to political, economic, gender issues and cultural activities. Higher education plays a crucial role in effecting social change. Higher education reforms in Taiwan must focus on the growth and development of students, cultivating humanity, preparing students for careers, and encouraging students to contribute what they have learned to the development of society. Social change rarely occurs in the absence of robust higher education systems. Taiwan has excellent global competitiveness in spite of limited land and natural resources. The key reason is its quality human resources and higher education (Gowen, 1997; Ministry of Education, 2023; Shih & Wang, 2022).

### 4.2 Conclusions

This article also reflects on higher education in Taiwan from the perspective of educational sociology, suggesting that (1) higher education must be examined from a diversity of perspectives, and (2) higher educational institutions must be proactive and dynamic in implementing the ideals of Taiwan. Finally, the serious social, economic, and environmental problems facing humanity require inspiring and proactive leaders. Achieving UNESCO's SDGs by 2030 requires leaders who can transform and empower their communities. In this transformation, educational leaders play a critical role, as education is vital to guaranteeing the well-being and prosperity of a community. Stakeholders in higher education must have a shared commitment to sustainability, and curricular practices and institutional approaches should be aligned with the principles of education for sustainable development (Urrea-Solano, Cebrián, Molina, & Hernández-Amorós, 2024). The challenges in higher education in Taiwan are complex and multifaceted, requiring concerted efforts from government, institutions, and the broader educational community. Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for reform and innovation. Policymakers are tasked with navigating these challenges, balancing tradition and innovation, and ensuring that the higher education system can adapt to a changing demographic, economic, and technological landscape. Although implementing reforms is complex, with strategic planning and collaborative efforts, the higher education sector in Taiwan can continue to thrive and contribute to Taiwan's development and global presence.

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