

The Role of Higher Education under the New Geopolitics: The Case of Taiwan

Yi-Hsuan Irene Huang

University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Higher education has been growingly shaped by geopolitical dynamics and global issues, such as the resurgence of populist nationalism and intensified territorial tensions in many regions. In this context, Taiwan has gained the attention of the major media worldwide, given its idiosyncratic geopolitical position. Nevertheless, there have been fewer studies focusing on the opportunities and challenges for Taiwanese higher education institutions (HEIs) under the new geopolitics. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate how the roles of Taiwanese HEIs are shaped by the current policies.

More specifically, empirical data are collected based on policy documents. An approach combining reflexive thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis is adopted for data analysis. The results of the analysis suggest that Taiwan's higher education system has been increasingly shaped as part of the broader political-economic schemes. By using an institutional logics theory, the study explains how HEIs are diversified and provides policy implications.

Full paper

It has been widely argued that the world has entered an era of new geopolitics. In this era, global issues such as the intensified regional tensions over territories, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the climate change agendas have collectively and consistently shaped government policies worldwide (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023). Recently, there have been growing discussions on the role of higher education under the new geopolitics (Marginson, 2024; Tran et al., 2023). Nevertheless, in the current scholarly discussion, Taiwan is an overlooked context even though it has caught considerable attention from global media (e.g., "What's behind China-Taiwan tensions?", 2024). To fill the gap, the current study aims to understand the roles of Taiwan's higher education institutions (HEIs) illustrated by the government under the new geopolitics. More specifically, the current study will answer the following two questions:

1. Based on government policies, what are the opportunities and challenges for Taiwan's higher education under the new geopolitics?
2. How do government policies shape the roles of different HEIs under the new geopolitics?

To answer these questions, empirical data were primarily collected through documentation, which includes transcripts of presidential inaugural speeches, policy papers, and official news releases of the current Taiwanese government led by the Democratic Progress Party (DPP) were collected. In terms of data analysis, the study adopted a qualitative approach combining Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) and Fairclough's (2001) critical discourse analysis (CDA), which enabled the researcher to capture the general patterns of the documents and explain them in-depth. In total, 91 policy documents were included for analysis.

Furthermore, an institutional logics approach by Thornton et al. (2012) was applied as the theoretical framework to interpret the findings. More specifically, institutional logics refer to "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). Based on the relevant literature, the theoretical framework used to explain the rationales and objectives of government policies in this study includes five logics, namely *academic*, *market*, *managerial*, *community*, and *state logics*.

The findings of the current study highlight the increasingly significant roles of higher education in serving the broader economic and political objectives of Taiwan. In other words, universities are depicted by the government as agents in expanding Taiwan's engagement under the new geopolitics. More specifically, according to presidential inaugural speeches, the intensified tensions with mainland China have been a primary consideration that alternates Taiwan's economic focus to other countries, such as Southeast and South Asia. In this context, recruiting and retaining international students from Southeast and South Asia has been prioritised in government policies. Meanwhile, as highlighted in Taiwan's development plans, the government is further developing Taiwan's advantages of semiconductor and hi-tech industries. In this process, the strengthened industrial connections have brought considerable transformations to HEIs, which could challenge the traditional roles of flagship universities.

Furthermore, Taiwan's recent "bilingualisation" initiatives have also been influential in shaping institutional roles. Under the initiatives, selected universities are encouraged to collaborate with universities in Western countries, particularly English-speaking countries. Echoing the relevant studies from a political perspective (Gupta & Lin, 2023; Hsu, 2021), this could be understood as the government's efforts to increase Taiwan's international visibility and establish closer political relationships with democratic alliances. Nevertheless, while the whole-system initiatives have portrayed a considerably positive imaginary of the bilingual future, the current study reveals that the initiatives are primarily driven by *market logic* and problematises them from an egalitarian perspective.

Moreover, based on the policy analysis, the process of HEIs being diversified for the development of Taiwan is made clear. More specifically, while top-ranked public universities are led primarily by *academic* logic in pursuit of international research excellence, private technical universities have been mainly shaped by *market* logic with a particular focus on international student recruitment under the current policies.

In this context, the study concludes that Taiwan's higher education policies have been designed as part of the broader political-economic schemes under the new geopolitics, with a focus on

establishing bilingual partnerships with Western countries, strengthening economic ties with Southeast and South Asian countries, and contributing to technical industries. Based on the findings, the current study proposes implications for government policies and institutional practices. While Taiwan's HEIs have been increasingly diversified under government policies, the study stresses the importance of reviewing the ways of resource distribution and rethinking the visions of university education in Taiwan.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis : A practical guide*. Sage.

Fairclough, N. (2001). Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research. In R. Wodak; & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 121-138).

Gupta, K. C.-L., & Lin, A. M. (2023). English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education in Taiwan: A review and critical reflection on why, how, and for whom. In P. K. Sah; & F. Fang (Eds.), *Policies, Politics, and Ideologies of English-Medium Instruction in Asian Universities* (pp. 63-76).

Hsu, F. (2021). Taiwan's Bilingual Policy: Signaling In/dependence and Settler Coloniality. *American Quarterly*, 73(2), 355-362.

Marginson, S. (2024). The New Geo-politics of Higher Education 2: Between Nationalism and Globalism.

Moscovitz, H., & Sabzalieva, E. (2023). Conceptualising the new geopolitics of higher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 21(2), 149-165.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2166465>

Thornton, P. H., & Ocasio, W. (1999). Institutional logics and the historical contingency of power in organizations: Executive succession in the higher education publishing industry, 1958–1990. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(3), 801-843. <https://doi.org/10.1086/210361>

Thornton, P. H., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2012). *The institutional logics perspective: A new approach to culture, structure, and process*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199601936.001.0001>

Tran, L. T., Zou, T. X., & Ota, H. (2023). *East and Southeast Asian perspectives on the internationalisation of higher education: Policies, practices and prospects*. Taylor & Francis.

What's behind China-Taiwan tensions?. (2024, January 8). BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34729538>