

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of World Poverty

## Education, Private and Public

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of World Poverty  
Chapter Title: "Education, Private and Public"  
Pub. Date: 2015  
Access Date: November 23, 2015  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc  
City: Thousand Oaks  
Print ISBN: 9781483345703  
Online ISBN: 9781483345727  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483345727.n224>  
Print pages: 437-439

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483345727.n224>

## Education, Private and Public

The public-private education dynamic has been the subject of discourse and review in most education agendas. This is largely because of the emerging debates about which type of education assures people of strategic social mobility and productivity in both their professional and personal lives. In order to determine the distinction that exists between private and public education, it is critical to understand the context of what these forms of education do and how they operate as institutions.

### Distinction Between Public and Private Education

The distinction between public and private education is conceptually messy. Most education monitoring offices and agencies categorize schools and universities based on their source of financing, their stakeholders, and their advocacy and mission. In some countries, the difference is derived from statistical data such as enrollment, participation, and types of courses. Daniel Levy in 1979 categorized universities using two alternative approaches. He used the “bottom-up approach” in looking at what public and private universities actually do, and he gauged the “privateness and publicness” of universities based on the practices and constructs or attributions of their actions.

In general, across regions and countries, when the overall function of an institution is run and controlled by a government, it is safe to categorize it as a public school and students receive public education; however, when private entities and stakeholders have the mandate to decide on an institution’s direction, it is considered a private education system. This basic demarcation, however, is not conclusive, as most private schools in some countries are still regulated by the national government. It is worth examining which of the two systems promotes more opportunities, or as some people suitably describe it, which option is the ticket to success.

The first aspect that is gauged is education's accessibility to the public. Almost all countries in the world offer public education in elementary and secondary units. This is the government's primary responsibility to its citizens, and [p. 437 ↓ ] it is reinforced and assessed by most international and bilateral organizations with globally binding agreements such as the Education for All (EFA) and United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) directives, in which countries that are signatories commit their governments to actualize education as a right and not as a privilege.

In higher education, Levy cites Europe as the region with the strongest presence of the public education system. For example, a majority of the universities in the United Kingdom (UK) are public; however, all people who intend to study at a university in the UK, including its citizens and residents, must pay a standardized amount unless one holds a scholarship or a bursary. Similarly, in the United States, students have to pay tuition and miscellaneous fees if they do not have a student loan, scholarship, or remission privileges. Everywhere, it is self-evident that the public sector is sufficient to cater to the demand of the public for education. Where, then, does private education come in?

## Private Education in Developing Countries

In most developing countries, the burgeoning population growth and demand for quality provide impetus for private schools and universities to flourish. From preschools to elementary and secondary schools, one can find a private school in almost every town or city. The presence of private schools in most developing countries serves two purposes. First, these schools share in the government's responsibility to shoulder the burden of providing education to its citizenry; however, this type of service comes with a price that is highly relative on factors such as infrastructure, human capital, source of funding, and even tradition.

Second, private schools provide access to students who cannot enter public schools and universities that have competitive requirements and standards. In China, according to Ka Ho Mok, the emergence of "minban" or private higher-education institutions and overseas universities is the country's response to globalization and the

challenges of the knowledge-based economy. Just [p. 438 ↓ ] like any other sector, the education sector is not shielded from marketization, privatization, and decentralization. Similarly in Chile, a study by O. Espinoza and L. Gonzales revealed that the country's postsecondary education system is increasingly privatized as evident in its enrollment, with two-thirds of the students in higher education studying in private institutions.

*In general, across most regions and countries, when the overall function of an institution is run and controlled by a government, it is safe to categorize it as a public school and its students receive public education. Pictured, a second grade student at Greenwood Elementary School in Des Moines, Iowa. (Flickr/Phil Roeder)*



Is the private education system a strategic development strategy that directs countries to a high level of progress? Although most governments advocate public-private collaboration in most of their development plans, the reality on the ground does not always manifest this envisioned partnership. Due to the differing sources of funding, structure, and end goals of public and private education systems, three factors influence students' outcomes.

The first factor is the measure of efficiency that can be gauged through examination of students' mobility, both their transition from primary to university level and their life chances after university or postgraduate education. The second factor is quality, which can be assessed through students' performance in both curricular and extracurricular activities and placements of students from higher-education institutions. The third factor is regulation. Public schools are not spared from regulatory mechanisms, but private schools, at times, are excluded from routine checks. This is relative among countries. The tricky aspect, though, is to what extent should private schools be allowed to operate and how should they be evaluated if quality assurance is to be maintained.

# Accountability

In some cases there is tension between public and private education. This tension stems from the issue of accountability. Which system is more accountable to students and to the state? Most countries have external accrediting institutions that regularly check the performance of institutions, like the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) in the United Kingdom. In higher education, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) is composed of more than 200 organizations whose major function is the area of quality assurance.

In today's globalizing market, the education sector is not shielded from its overt influence. From primary to secondary schools up to the university level, a comparative lens is always used to gauge the student's social mobility and performance in both private and public institutions. In universities, there is always a demand to get a share of market income in order to increase student population and operation income. In some cases, the marketization of education influences the quality of education that institutions intend to offer to the public. Thus, it is of interest to policy makers to probe and determine the extent of efficiency and purpose of both public and private institutions.

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**See Also:** Education; Education, Secondary; Education, Tertiary; Education and Opportunity; Education and Sustainable Development; Education Premium; Privatization.

## Further Readings

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483345727.n224>