Some are launching fund-raising drives to build new teaching blocks, others are partitioning covered playgrounds into classrooms or converting spare rooms into classrooms. Schools are scrambling to create more space by September to accommodate a sharp swell in the student body for the coming academic year. Older and new academic systems will work side by side.

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Higher education is expanding on a global basis. A big reason for this is the rise of private universities. Worldwide, more than one in three university-level students now studies in a private institution. But what are the implications of this trend? And do public universities now study very different from private ones?

The Hong Kong government wants to create more private universities in addition to the territory’s eight publicly funded institutions. At present, Shue Yan is the only private university along with three other self-funded institutions. This balance reflects the colonial past. In Britain there is also just one private university, the University of Buckingham. By contrast, in the US and Japan there are many more, offering highly-regarded private universities such as MIT, Harvard and Keio. Some private universities are “not-for-profit” and embrace civic or religious missions while others, such as the University of Phoenix, are “for-profit” working on a purely commercial basis. Private universities get a hefty chunk of tuition fees, investments, alumni giving, research grants, consulting and exploiting their intellectual property. Public universities do these things too, but also receive state funding.

Private universities have the chance to do things differently. The University of Buckingham has compressed the three-year undergraduate degree into just two through a four-term teaching year. This means students accumulate less debt and can get onto the job market more quickly. In future, the expansion of private universities might lead to private and public universities competing directly for public funds through a student voucher scheme, such as the one operated in Colorado. But this will inevitably mean public universities getting less of the pie. Public universities are being pushed to become more commercial and business-minded. As a result, many “public” universities are more like private ones in the way they generate income. Hong Kong University gets only about 60 per cent of its income from the government. The other 40 per cent comes from tuition fees, grants and investments. King’s College in London is typical among the elite British public universities in getting less than half its income from the government.

The distinction between public and private is eroding in practice, if not in image. But this blurring means public universities are having an identity crisis. By trying to diversify their income, public universities are caught between being tired to become more commercial and business-minded. As a result, many “public” universities do not have a permanent classroom. And when the student population hits its peak in September, Chan says 31 classes will have to fit into the space.

An Education Bureau spokeswoman says teaching space need not be confined to traditional classrooms. The bureau has already allocated grants to allow secondary schools to carry out renovations to create additional teaching space. “An additional subsidy of not more than HK$300,000 was also provided to schools with genuine needs for alteration works on application,” she says.

Schools should use the available resources flexibly to create more teaching space to support implementation of the senior secondary curriculum. Flexible time-tableing should be adopted to provide students with reasonable choices of subjects and diversified learning experiences.”

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Changes cramp schools’ style

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