

RELEVANCE IS THE KEY

The report repeatedly supports shoring up the quality and relevance of higher education, noting that quality education is more closely associated with economic growth. Record rates of enrollment increase over the past decade have driven down expenditure per student and placed quality at risk. Labor market surveys document employer dissatisfaction with graduate competence, and show high levels of graduate unemployment in a number of countries. Thus, the World Bank cautions that “Though social and political demands press for expansion of public tertiary enrollments, these must be balanced against the need to increase the relevance of education and research, and to encourage the production of the technical skills and applied research capabilities that will promote competitive industries” (p. xxii).

In conclusion, the report posits that tertiary institutions in Africa will need to transform themselves into a different type of educational enterprise: networked, differentiated, and responsive institutions focused on the production of strategically needed human skills and applied problem-solving research. To this end, governments will need to fashion national human resource development strategies that choose and strategically fund a limited number of disciplinary and research areas that directly support national economic goals. Africa's mounting crisis in academic staffing—caused by retirements, brain drain, major diseases and weak recruitment

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incentives—will have to be addressed through an aggressive expansion of national and regional postgraduate programs. Research must be resuscitated through funding incentives and partnerships with the productive sector that lay the groundwork for an eventual national innovation system. Increased autonomy is necessary to enable institutions to innovate and differentiate, while system-oversight bodies hold institutions accountable for their performance in the use of public funds, in part through quality assurance mechanisms. Pedagogical reform may be the most difficult, yet most significant, of the changes foreseen as necessary: interdisciplinary rather than disciplinary perspectives; flexibility in learning; group work instead of lectures; problem solving rather than memorization of facts; practical learning as a complement to theory; learning assessment through project work that demonstrates competence, instead of multiple choice examinations; communication skills; and computer literacy. In the medium term, alternative lower-cost educational delivery models must be devised if access is to increase. These may take the form of lifelong learn-

ing, information and communications technology applications to education, online distance education, open-source courses, self-paced learning, and educational gameware. Success in these undertakings would constitute the 21st-century version of the African “development university.” ■

The World Bank's Perspective on African Higher Education

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Accelerating Catch-up, a 2008 third major installment by the World Bank on higher education in Africa, further liberates the continent from the yokes of the imposed, and most importantly, its own flawed intellectual discourse that gripped the system for a long time.

The report is indeed a welcome boost to several other voices that have always recognized the critical role of higher education on development but is a far cry from the World Bank's position in the past. It now declares “neglecting tertiary education could seriously jeopardize SSA's [sub-Saharan Africa's] longer-term growth prospects, and slow progress toward MDGs, [Millennium Development Goals] many of which require tertiary-level training to implement.” This is indeed a major turnaround from the time when higher education was declared a luxury the continent could ill-afford.

The report stresses that each country should map its own course, using its own national development strategy, and drawing lessons of good practice from other countries. It recognizes that the countries in Africa have achieved sufficient diversity in their higher education systems and advises that the World Bank's own analyses and recommendations should be linked to country-specific realities.

COUNTERING HOMOGENEITY: RESTRAINING EGALITARIANISM

In the last 15 years, unprecedented growth among private providers, new and upgraded public institutions, and unconventional forms of delivery have expanded the system in Africa considerably. However, with about a 5 percent enrollment rate, higher education on the continent remains elitist.

Differentiation and diversification have not kept pace with dramatic expansion of the system. Most of the for-profit private institutions have focused on limited market-oriented programs, creating homogeneity. Meanwhile, the “flagship” uni-

versities are competing for resources with the newly established and elevated public universities, as egalitarianism has become a benchmark for disbursing resources.

As access is expanding and new institutions are opening, the need to establish some hierarchy in the sector has become more imperative—allowing the building of strong research institutions to enhance socioeconomic development. Research is an expensive undertaking; thus, the economic state of African countries dictates that institutions cannot and should not be nurtured equally. Egalitarianism in establishing national knowledge systems and research is out of place. A nation must identify its “mother” institution(s) that could effectively leverage other national academic, economic, and social institutions. The report rightly underscores that public expenditure for higher education has reached a threshold at which there is a need to replace homogeneity with heterogeneity and egalitarianism with “favoritism.”

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PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

Private providers—both for-profit and nonprofit—are expanding higher education access on the continent. In many countries they have eased pressure on public institutions and governments, created financial opportunity for the academic community, and developed dynamic and diversified programs. The report's recommendation that these providers receive loans and grants is thus an important intervention.

Yet, expansion did not come without a price. A large proportion of faculty at private institutions are part time, while maintaining full-time positions at public universities. This has created divided loyalty, attention, and commitment, leaving little room for research. In an already financially constrained environment, whatever research interest existed has been overtaken by the drive to generate more income externally. While the expansion of private providers is to be welcomed, it has unintended consequences on the knowledge-generating capacity of nations, which the report barely mentions.

GENERATING RESOURCES

In the last several years, resource generating efforts have increased as part of the many strategic planning initiatives executed in several institutions. The report singles out the impact of these activities in raising income for institutions and improving living and working conditions for the university community, particularly academia.

Among the institutional efforts, the most common approach allows for fee-paying and non-fee-paying students at

the same public institutions. In some cases the fee-paying students already outnumber the non-fee-paying by a substantial margin.

In a few countries, the faculty have become more engaged and focused on the fee-paying students, as faculty compensation depends on the number of these students. Despite the positive changes these resources have brought about, they have also pushed the academic community away from research, as intensive teaching consumes faculty time.

ENSURING QUALITY

Concurrent with mobilizing nonpublic resources and opening up the market to internal and external private higher education providers, a growing number of dubious institutions and fraudulent schemes have emerged. These pursuits pose a serious threat to the quality of higher education and the development of strong knowledge systems as a whole. The World Bank's ongoing efforts and its recommendation to strengthen regulatory mechanisms are laudable. However, the absence of analysis of the World Trade Organization's effects on higher education is a visible gap.

NEGLECTED HISTORY

The report states that “higher education has always been part of its [the World Bank's] agenda.” However, such a claim clearly contradicts the World Bank's long-standing, albeit recently shifted, position that hampered higher education development on the continent. In fact, the World Bank has recognized its own oversight. Numerous institutions and individuals have

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been at the forefront of confronting the flawed policy since its inception. The report actually contradicts itself by stating that “many of the earlier reservations to the Bank's engagement with tertiary education in Africa faded from prominence because of achievement and change, even as compelling new justifications for tertiary education development pushed to the fore.” Other development partners are charged for following its lead—unfairly spreading the blame.

Steven Sakar, the BBC Hardtalk host, on October 22, 2008—in his opening remark on the growing financial crisis as he hosted Professor Mark Gertler, one of the leading US economists—asked whether “economists who brought us the current economic crisis can be trusted in rebuilding [the economy].” Is it unfair or irrelevant to pose the same question to the World Bank, which has a similar history?

CONCLUSION

The list of resources in the report is exhaustive, and the composition of the external advisory panel is also diverse. Yet, some

of the data in the report are out of date. For instance, the document reports 12 private colleges in Ethiopia, while that figure has grown by more than fivefold, to over 60, in recent years. If anything, this situation reflects a lack of a systematic, sustained, and visible source of information and research on higher education in the region.

The absence of major research institutions in Africa is further exhibited by the production of such major reports by an external institution such as the World Bank. With the expansion, differentiation, and complexity of higher education systems on the continent, strengthening research capacity to study the sector is paramount. It is thus urgent that institutions that promote alternatives to the World Bank's undisputed dominance in African higher education discourse be strongly nurtured. ■

India's Effort to Join 21st-Century Higher Education

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India's central government will create 12 new central universities, adding to the 18 that currently exist. This is a mammoth undertaking—Rs. 3,280 crores (about \$73 million) has been allocated from the central government budget to it. Earlier in the year India announced it will create 30 “world-class” universities, 8 new Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and 7 Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) in the coming five years. On the recommendation of the National Knowledge Commission, the central government is planning massive investment to upgrade and expand higher education. Other plans include enhancing the salaries of college and university academics—boosting salaries by as much as 70 percent.

This prospect represents welcome news since India currently lacks world-class universities according to the international rankings, and Indian academics, when compared internationally, are rather poorly paid. Students also suffer an immense shortage of places in India's top academic institutions and throughout the higher education system. India today educates only half as many young people from the university age group as China and ranks well behind most Latin American and other middle-income countries.

India exhibits a special problem at the top of its higher education hierarchy. With the notable exceptions of the IITs and IIMs, and a small number of outstanding nonuniversity research and training institutions—such as the All India Institute of Medical Sciences—top-notch schools are rare. Indeed, none of India's 348 universities is ranked in the top 100 in the world. Generally, when India has wanted to innovate in the higher education sector, it has sidestepped the universities and has started entirely new institutions such as the IITs.

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However, if India invests large amounts of money and human capital into academic improvement and expansion without undertaking strategies to ensure that the investment will yield results, resources will be wasted and failure will be assured. Despite a discussion of organizing some of the new university based on the American model, so far neither the ideas nor the funding seems adequate. Yet, a newspaper reported that one official said: “The view was that there should be no hierarchy or disparity in standards amongst universities, and the reforms and changes suggested for world-class universities should be applied to all universities.” This attitude shows a complete misunderstanding that the American system institutes significant hierarchy among the public universities.

Just pumping money and resources into a fundamentally broken university system is a mistake. Establishing new universities, especially those intended to be innovative, requires careful planning and an understanding of the weaknesses of the current system. Let us outline some of the problems that need fixing before resources are given.

BUREAUCRACY WITHOUT ACCOUNTABILITY

India is world famous for sclerotic bureaucracy, and higher education fits into that mold. Few decisions can be made without taking permission from an authority above, and the wheels of decision making grind slowly. Fear of corruption or of a loss of control entrenches bureaucracy. Teachers and academic leaders at colleges and universities have little incentive to innovate higher education—indeed quite the opposite. It is completely impossible to build world-class universities in this bureaucratic context. If the new institutions must tolerate responsibilities to both the central government and the states in which they are located, the bureaucratic burden will be completely overwhelming.