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Changing Concerns of Higher Education:

Examining The World Bank's Papers on Higher Education Since 1994

By Amy Ewen

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Antonio Varas 91. of. 209. Providencia. Santiago de Chile.
E-mail: contacto@ocides.org
Website: http://www.ocides.org

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The Changing Concerns of Higher Education.
Examining The World Bank's Papers on Higher Education Since 1994

The World Bank has been active in supporting higher education since 1963. In 1992, they began an internal review of Bank higher education projects from the previous 30 years (New Challenges, 2004). Perhaps it was this review that led to the Bank's first publication specifically addressing higher education two years later: "Higher Education: Lessons of Experience", (hereafter referred to as "*Lessons*"). The executive summary of this publication states from the start that higher education is in a state of crisis. The reasons are primarily financial, and as a sort of trickle-down effect, the financial issues lead to several other concerns. "In an era of widespread fiscal constraints, industrial as well as developing countries are grappling with the challenge of preserving or improving the quality of higher education as budgets are compressed" (Lessons, p. 2). The executive summary goes on to discuss the particular challenges facing the developing world as a result of this crisis, outlining the circumstances under which these lessons were learned.

Since *Lessons* was published in 1994, the Bank has published four major policy papers on higher education. In 1998 the Bank published Higher Education Relevance in the 21st Century, (hereafter referred to as "*Higher Education Relevance*"), by Michael Gibbons. In 2000 the Bank published a paper in partnership with UNESCO entitled "Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise", (hereafter referred to as "*Peril and Promise*").

In 2002, the Bank published "Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education", (hereafter referred to as "*New Challenges*"), which also reflects upon the Bank's history of support, calling it "piecemeal" (p. 100) and again noting the narrow focus. Projects undertaken throughout the 1970's and 1980's tended to work primarily with top government officials, and relied only on a sound and intelligent proposal for reform (New Challenges, 2004). This approach occasionally resulted in isolated successes, but without a comprehensive plan for follow up, these "well-equipped academic oases" (p. 100) could not be maintained. There was often no follow up plan for sustained institution building. It was soon realized that a system-wide approach would render more consistent and entrenched accomplishments (New Challenges, 2004).

Finally, in 2009 the Bank published "The Challenge of Establishing World Class Universities", (hereafter referred to as "*Establishing World Class Universities*") by Jamil Salmi. The Bank has published several other smaller papers addressing specific aspects of higher education which serve to supplement the major policy papers. While each of the major papers has a specific focus, there are a few themes that are echoed in several papers. However, The World Bank could not remain a relevant actor in the higher education arena if their studies and recommendation did not change and evolve to fit the times. This article will examine the themes that emerge in the Bank's publications.

Consistent and Evolving Themes

The problems of access and equity are often considered jointly in World Bank publications, and the implication is that one directly affects the other. In order to address the problem of inequality in higher education, it may be beneficial to view it as a two-step process. Improving access will bring more applicants to the higher education system, and improving equity will bring a larger number and greater diversity of enrollees in the system. There are dozens of potential solutions to eliminating the inequality in a particular system, but deciding upon the most constructive strategy must come from understanding the nature of the problem. Still, in several Bank publications a few overarching solutions are identified that can help to increase access in equity in all cases.

First, the Bank advocates a focus on access to financial support for disadvantaged students. Students from wealthier families simply have more resources at their disposal, giving them an advantage when pursuing higher education (Peril and Promise, 2000). These patterns can be particularly degenerative in countries where there are high numbers of high quality private secondary schools. Students who are able to attend these schools are usually from families with higher income and often better prepared for public university entrance exams (New Challenges, 2004). This leads to the second recommendation that the Bank makes: improved primary and secondary education for all classes, genders and groups.

Often, when a student from a disadvantaged minority is facing admission to a university, the system has already failed them. It's a harsh reality that many of these interventions "come too late to assist the cast majority of disadvantaged students, who have already suffered institutionalized discrimination in access to primary and secondary education" (New Challenges, p. 58). Therefore, the Bank argues that improvements at the lower levels of education will improve student's chances when pursuing higher education.

The last general solution that the Bank mentions is adapting admissions criteria and imposing admissions quotas. (Lessons, 1994) "Admissions quotas" eventually evolved into the practice of affirmative action, which is discussed at length in *New Challenges*. The authors define affirmative action as "preferential treatment of minorities and disadvantaged groups" (p. 57). To be clear, while this practice is mentioned in more than one Bank publication, the Bank doesn't fully advocate the use of affirmative action. The authors of *Lessons* concede that this is often the most direct way to increase representation of minorities in higher education, but cautions that it is "fraught with difficulties" (p. 78). While it is important to ensure that admissions processes are fair and just, the integrity of the university cannot be compromised. "Merit criteria cannot be relaxed. Awarding degrees or certificates to people who do not deserve them cannot be in the public interest" (Peril and Promise, p. 41). This leads to the issue of quality.

"Today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth- or poverty- of nations depends on the quality of higher education." This quote from Malcolm Gillis, President of Rice University, is prominently displayed atop the first page of the introduction of *Peril and Promise* (2000). Gillis expresses the weight of this issue so succinctly, and the Bank publications underscore the importance of higher education quality in the developing world.

The authors of *Lessons* state from the start that higher education is in a "state of crisis" (p. 1), and go on to discuss the effect that expansion has had on higher education systems. The crisis is "most acute" (p. 2) in the developing world, as higher education is the fastest growing segment of education, but responses to the growth have resulted in "fiscally unsustainable enrollments growth and a sharp decline in quality" (Lessons, p. 2).

The issue of expansion is also addressed in *Peril and Promise*. As systems grow and enrollment rates continue to increase, the existing resources are stretched thin. It's a daunting task for universities and higher education systems to respond to the new phenomena, while maintaining quality (Peril and Promise, 2000).

New Challenges also addresses the issue of quality: "Many universities operate with overcrowded and deteriorating physical facilities, limited and obsolete library resources, insufficient equipment and instructional materials, outdated curricula, unqualified teaching staff, poorly prepared secondary students, and an absence of academic rigor and systematic evaluation of performance" (New Challenges, p. 58). This last point is of particular note, as regulation and accreditation have emerged as central aspects of quality control and assurance. The procedure of establishing external bodies to review and ensure quality is advocated repeatedly by the World Bank, and happily, most transition and developing countries have supported this practice fully.

Furthermore, the Bank has continually stressed that a successful higher education system needs government involvement. However, the World Bank has also been consistent in their support of institutional autonomy.

In 1994, the World Bank stated that "greater institutional autonomy is the key to the successful reform of public higher education, especially reform aimed at more efficient use of resources" (Lessons, p. 63). Later, the Bank established a direct correlation between a lack of autonomy and an institution's ability to stay relevant. When there is too much pressure for a national system to expand, more resources are put towards expansion and personnel costs, and less is earmarked for research. Without the ability to conduct research, universities can no longer serve as relevant reference points for the rest of the knowledge society (Peril and Promise, 2000).

When universities are heavily dependent on government funds, often the result is a line-item budget that reflects the needs of the state, rather than the institution. This can have a stifling effect on research when there are funds allotted for it. When the state is providing the funding for research, the topics and issues are frequently defined by the state (New Challenges, 2002). Research institutions are left with the uncomfortable choice of rejecting state funding, or giving up their autonomy to do research that the state sees as relevant. The Bank recognizes and maintains that "autonomy remains largely an empty concept as long as institutions are dependent on a single government funding source" (Lessons, p. 64).

New Challenges presents institutional autonomy as an essential part of a successful transformation of public systems. "Autonomous institutions are more responsive to incentives for quality improvement, resource diversification, and efficient use of available resources. Tertiary education institutions must be in a position to exercise meaningful control over the principal factors affecting the quality and costs of their own programs" (p. 89). It is important for institutions to have the ability to make swift changes in response to changing needs and circumstances. The ability to make decisions and react quickly to one's own unique circumstances will make an institution a stronger and more relevant part of the whole system.

The issue of relevance is a newer theme in World Bank publications, and is a key issue along with those discussed above. However, relevance has not simply been added to this list, but has in effect become a key element of quality. Eventually, "'relevance' in general will be translated into a nest of performance objectives relation to teaching quality and research performance, among others" (Gibbons, p. 2). In reading the Bank's recent publications on higher education, it becomes clear that relevance has quickly become an essential issue in higher education reform. In fact, *New Challenges*has a full section devoted to the matter of quality and relevance. Conversely, *Lessons* has just one short paragraph mentioning relevance, and only in the context of ensuring "that institutions' enrollment patterns and curricula reflect local skill requirements" (p. 74). International relevance is not mentioned at all.

Another new issue addressed by the World Bank is that of "brain drain". A major obstacle in curbing the harmful effects of brain drain is that it is a global issue, and not one that can be dealt with by one national government or administration. It is this aspect of the problem that puts the World Bank and other global organizations in a unique and influential position. The goal is not to hinder movement and internationalization, but to foster it in a mutually beneficial way. In other words, it's alright to have skilled people headed out of a country for schooling and employment, as long as there are a comparable number of skilled people coming in as well.

The Bank has set out a few recommendations for dealing with "brain drain" that serve to improve the situation in developing countries. Joint degrees, scholarships, increased funding for up to date equipment, allocation of funds for travel to supplement knowledge, and specializations in a particular field are among the suggestions that are offered (New Challenges, 2002). *Peril and Promise* does not offer specific strategies for combating "brain drain", but rather outlines what the conditions should be to attract gifted individuals to a nation. "The retention of top-level talent in developing countries requires improved governance in higher education institutions, greater intellectual opportunities, higher professional salaries, and better working conditions" (p. 73).

Conclusions

The Bank has acknowledged their mixed record of success in higher education investment. As a result, with the publication of *Lessons* in 1994, the World Bank sought to make their investment in higher education more equitable and cost-effective, and "to support countries' efforts to adopt policy reforms that will allow the subsector to operate more efficiently and at lower public cost" (Lessons, p. 13). Eight years later, the authors of *New Challenges* echoed this concern that the Bank had not been entirely successful in their response to the needs of higher education. However, this time the criticism was that the Bank's lending had not "matched the growing importance of tertiary education for economic and social development" (p. 2).

Once again we see that the changing global environment has steered the role of primary players. In 1994 the concluded goal was to assist higher education systems in using their existing funds to operate more efficiently, and in 2002 the presented goal was to engage the international community in a dialogue about investment in higher education. The Bank can act as a "bridge-builder" (New Challenges, p. 107), and bring together stake-holders from across the education sectors. It is no longer enough to work only with government officials. The reform of higher education affects every level and sub-section of the system, and representatives are needed from each level to make any change possible and productive (New Challenges, 2002).

It is also clear that basic education and higher education are no longer mutually exclusive. The quality of higher education directly affects the quality of primary and secondary education through training of teachers and administrators, and the quality of secondary school graduates has a direct influence on the quality of the higher institutions (New Challenges). In the earlier years of World Bank involvement, higher education was a relatively low priority in many developing nations, pushed to the side in favor of investment in basic education. The idea was perpetuated that investment in higher education yielded far lower returns than investments in primary and secondary education. The result of this misleading, but generally accepted idea is that higher education systems in developing countries were under a tremendous strain (Peril and Promise). Currently, the link between higher education and basic education is recognized and a key component of education investment. *New Challenges* goes so far as to say "it is doubtful that any developing country could make significant progress toward achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for education—universal enrollment in primary education and elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education—without a strong tertiary education system" (p. 79).

The World Bank has been a consistent actor in the field of international education, and while there have been varying degrees of success over the course of their involvement, the Bank has learned from experience, and shared those lessons. After studying the Bank's major publications over the past 15 years, it seems that there is a commitment to self-evaluation and a willingness to adapt as needed. The World Bank will be involved in the development and support of higher education in developing and developed countries for a long time to come, and with every project and investment, there will be lessons to learn and knowledge to share.

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