

though they may entail difficulties in identifying the appropriate individuals to subsidize. Whether general subsidies produce a net social benefit therefore depends on the following factors: the net social gain from education in general, the relative size of the population for whom subsidies are decisive and those for whom subsidies are not, and lastly, the difficulties of targeting subsidies.

How does a General Subsidy Compare with Alternative Policies?

Even if, after considering the factors just cited, we conclude that a general subsidy is likely to produce a net social gain, we still do not have a sufficient argument for it. In a world of great social need and finite resources, many policies are likely to produce net social gains, and a general subsidy becomes a good idea if the gains produced compare favorably with those of alternative policies. This is a stringent requirement, and one we are not sure it can hurdle. Specifically, most governments will correctly see that investing in primary and secondary school education, primary health care, and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment—to give only a few prominent examples—will give a much better return on public funds than will subsidizing higher education.

In the rare case of a public treasury having sufficient funds to engage in all attractive investments, it should do so. But normally, prioritizing will be necessary. It is not enough to say that a higher education subsidy would benefit the public. When other investments that would shore up the station in life of the ill-educated and the sick would be *more* useful, governments should not choose to subsidize higher education.

Should the State Promote Higher Education at All?

One might erroneously conclude, from what we have said, that we don't think the state should be supporting higher education at all. To be clear: we do think there is a public interest in higher education, above and beyond the benefits received by individual students. This public interest derives not only from the overall rise in the standard of living that increased educational levels bring to those who partake of such education, but from society-wide effects along the lines listed earlier: increased local capacity to create and absorb technology; a greater portion of the population attuned to the workings and advantages of democracy; improved health resulting from greater understanding of nutrition, disease, medicine and public health practices; an enhanced capacity to engage in international negotiations of all types; and strengthened links with other countries.

Indeed, these public benefits of higher education are key reasons why governments should take an active role in strengthening colleges and universities, encouraging changes in their governance structures, ensuring high-quality programs of study, offering guidance regarding the value of including a liberal education perspective within a more-focused set of studies, and promoting the study of science and technology. These benefits are discussed at greater length in *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, the product of an international task force convened by the World Bank and UNESCO.

The task at hand is daunting: resources are scarce and the need is great. But helping the well-off obtain higher education when many of them already manage to do so without government help does not make sense economically. And when governments are swamped with more pressing demands (which is virtually always the case), a general subsidy for higher education is not a good course of action.

A longer version of this article is available: "Should There Be a General Subsidy for Higher Education in Developing Countries?" by D. Bloom and J. Sevilla, in the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, forthcoming at the end of 2003. ■

African Universities, International Donors, and the Public Good

Kenneth Prewitt

Kenneth Prewitt is Carnegie Professor of Public Affairs at Columbia University. Address: School of International Affairs, IAB 1315, Columbia University, NY, NY 10027. E-mail: kp2058@columbia.edu.

For African universities, more than is the case elsewhere, depend for their survival on the scope and focus of external support. Current documents on university reform, and there are many, inevitably urge greater support from international donors. The heavy reliance on donor funds has been true since independence. As donors shifted from one model of university support to another, universities adapted accordingly. In the immediate postindependence period, the high-prestige national elite university was the accepted model. The university was to do nation-building by looking and feeling like the universities of the colonial powers. This period was followed by the development university phase with its emphasis on economic growth. When dis-

illusionment with that model set in, it gave way to what can best be described as damage control, especially as rate-of-return considerations dislodged the university from its privileged place in donor priorities.

In nations facing too many demands with too few resources, where the public sector is weak and market mechanisms are immature, international donors have sought to save higher education by working to correct its internal inefficiencies, immunize against brain drain, compensate for the research weaknesses by creating research networks, help institutions catch up with the technological revolution, and shield teaching and research from the excesses of political interference. At present most of these efforts fall under the broad perspective that African universities needed reforming.

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But reform to what end? In pursuit of what purpose? According to what model of university education? International conferences, task force reports, and white papers have struggled to describe the role of the African university, asking how much commercialization is tolerable, where globalization is taking us, if the brick university will be replaced by the click university, and on and on.

There is, or should be, one constant in this search for a mission. Universities—though not tertiary education more generally—will continue to anchor the public good historically represented in and through advanced education. Many pressures, familiar to readers, have thinned out this public-good responsibility in Africa. A major contributor is the expansion of tertiary institutions constructed as sites for personal advancement and private benefit. While not new and not unwelcome, to present private reward as the primary purpose of postsecondary education leads to the neglect of a very long tradition of public support because universities advance the public good.

Some of the new arguments about the role of universities might, however, provide the opportunity to strengthen public-good rationales. Successfully competing in the international global economy is replacing older “nation-building” tasks as the criteria against which the contribution of the university is

measured. We are familiar with the indicators: market-sensitive curricular reform, rewards to entrepreneurialship, fee-based financing, subcontracting educational services to the private sector, management of universities according to standards of the private sector, blurring the boundaries between the university and the for-profit sector through new partnerships, etc.

The notion that universities should position the national economy in a globally competitive marketplace offers an interesting but truncated view of the public good. It is not happenstance that documents about university reform now frequently include the public goods traditionally associated with universities, a sign that these purposes are, in fact, no longer taken for granted but need to be reasserted. But the traditional rationale will need to be updated as universities reposition themselves to advance international economic competitiveness. For the foreseeable future, the only way in which Africa can participate in the international knowledge revolution will be by protecting the public-good dimension of knowledge production.

There is a worldwide system of basic knowledge production, widely published in both print and electronic media. This follows from the simple fact that the results of publicly funded basic research cannot be held for the benefit only of the nation that has invested in it. Science does not work that way—and efforts to limit the science to its sponsoring nation inevitably weaken the science and harm the nation, as the closed economies discovered.

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Given internationally available knowledge, it greatly benefits each individual nation to create knowledge links to other countries of the world. These links help a country to guard against isolationism and parochialism; they also open the society to broader economic, intellectual, technical, and social possibilities. A strong public case can be made for reducing any import or export constraints on the flow of new knowledge. Research universities are a country’s best-equipped institutions to facilitate this flow. They generate, import, and disseminate nonproprietary knowledge, making it available to all the institutions of society—government, commerce, media, military, and civil society organizations.

The international intellectual commons based on nonproprietary and nonexclusive research allows the world to address a number of widely recognized challenges—such as, emergent diseases, invasive species, and climate fluctuations. It is not in the interest of any single nation to invest heavily in research that could address these problems, because then the other nations of the world would have a free ride. Knowledge about these global challenges is, then, an international public good. It is in the public interest of every nation that this knowledge be created; but it will not be created in the absence of a public investment. International networks of research universities and institutes are a mechanism to advance the required research agenda.

For a number of reasons, then, it is in the interest of each nation to enhance those features of its universities that are able to participate in globally significant research and development and international expert systems focused on global challenges. This works to the benefit of African universities in an environment in which they reposition themselves to advance national competitiveness in the international knowledge economy. Only by continuing to assert and reflect a public good responsibility can they function as a link between their national economies and nonproprietary knowledge.

Current pressures, however, are pulling African universities toward market-derived definitions of higher education and away from public-good definitions. Obviously, universities offer a mixture of private and public benefits. It is a misuse of public funds to pay for those elements that offer private benefits, because prospective beneficiaries will pay on their own. But the same logic underscores that it is a serious mistake to presume that private investment will secure the public benefits of universities. Such a presumption defies economic theory. Public returns depend on public investment. In the rush to adopt funding strategies that shift the cost burden from the public sector to the individual beneficiary, the ancient justification of advanced learning as a public obligation recedes from view.

The international donor community provides a corrective. Its funds are in the spirit of public support for public goods. In particular, these funds can support Africa's connection to the global economy by helping African universities to assert a new, internationally defined role constructed around the values of nonproprietary research, support for the most talented irrespective of ability to pay, free movement of intellectuals, and related features that anchor universities in a long and honored public-good tradition. ■

Academic Colonialism in Action: American Accreditation of Foreign Universities

Philip G. Altbach

Philip G. Altbach is Monan professor of higher education and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.

American accreditors are beginning to evaluate academic programs and institutions in other countries and giving them accreditation in the United States. American higher education is the world's gold standard, and thus there is interest in understanding the U.S. accrediting system and the beginnings of a demand to have American accreditation. The imprimatur of U.S. accreditors is perceived to give a significant advantage to foreign institutions. In principle, however, it is a bad idea for Americans to be certifying academic institutions and programs in other countries. Just as the world's military superpower needs to be careful about its overseas interventions, America as an academic superpower has a duty not to abuse its academic muscle around the world, even if this particular U.S. "academic invasion" is welcomed abroad and even invited by others. Foreign accreditation is an act of intellectual hubris with implications that go far beyond traditional institutional evaluation.

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Without pushing the Iraq analogy too far, does American higher education want to station semi-permanent accrediting troops in foreign countries? Do we want to take responsibility for shaping academic policy in U.S.-accredited universities in countries whose intellectual traditions and higher education context differ substantially? Do we really want to take responsibility for ensuring that academic and institutional standards in other countries match those in the United States? Do we believe that U.S. academic practices are appropriate for other countries?

Of course, no one is forcing foreign academic institutions to be accredited by Americans. Indeed, the opposite is the case. A number of foreign institutions are seeking to be accredited by Americans, and U.S. accreditors have been reluctant to get involved overseas.