GOSPEL FROM THE WORLD BANK

HIGHER EDUCATION: THE LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE
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Why does this publication matter? The World Bank is one of the most important sources of funding of education projects in developing countries. Since 1980, the World Bank has produced a number of policy papers on education. A paper on education policy published in 1980 was followed by papers on primary, technical, and vocational education and by this paper in higher education. Currently, the Bank is working on another education policy paper, which will be released in 1995. Policy papers, unlike other research and analytic work, are reviewed by the executive directors of the Bank, they are expected to shape operations by influencing dialogue within the Bank and between Bank staff and borrower countries.

Countering this view on the influence that policy papers exert in what the World Bank does is one that argues that research, policy, and actual lending are only loosely connected, and that staff in operations largely ignore what researchers and analysts write and recommend (R. Ayres, Bunking *on the Poor* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 19841).

This paper is important both for what it says about higher education policy and for what it signals regarding internal Bank struggles on the links between technical knowledge and proposals for policy reform. In contrast to prior education policy papers in the World Bank, this document emphasizes the need to design policy frameworks that are country-specific and that rely on processes of consultation and dialogue with the principal stakeholders for reform in the sector:

> The policy framework for higher education needs to be linked to specific national conditions. . . . Recent experience shows that successful reform depends on decision makers building consensus among the various constituents of the higher education subsector (p. 58).

This theme, reiterated in several parts of the paper, contrasts with prior Bank papers that promoted "magic bullets" and standard recipes to improve education. Furthermore, this theme is also in sharp contrast to the draft version of the upcoming education policy paper, which relaunches the search for magic bullets, drawing overly authoritative conclusions from a limited number of cases and studies reviewed, neglecting much of the knowledge generated in education research, and relying primarily on knowledge based in economics and economics of education.

All this is to show that the battle to influence policy papers is alive and well at the Bank, a sign that some people at least think they matter.

This document on higher education does an outstanding job documenting the crisis of higher education in developing countries and in proposing a comprehensive agenda for systemic reform, including institutional differentiation, providing incentives for public institutions to diversify funding sources, redefining the role of government in higher education, and introducing policies aimed at improving quality and equity. The proposed role for government represents another departure from previous World Bank literature, which had greater faith in the role of the private sector to maximize societal efficiency. This paper proposes a role for the central state in carrying out strategic planning within the higher education sector, evaluating risks and constraints, and safeguarding the long-term viability and quality of the system. This theme of a new role for the central state and of the necessary greater autonomy of institutions is another valuable contribution of the paper. It is an implicit recognition that reforms cannot be forced on universities and a distancing from the old messages that reduced the role of the state to imposing tuition fees on universities.

An area insufficiently developed in the paper is that of the internal governance of institutions. While decentralization of key management functions to institutions themselves is proposed as central to reform (p. 64), less is said on the options for internal university administration. While autonomous institutions have advantages over those where the minister of education or president of the country has control over the use of resources, university autonomy combined with high *internal* centralization can also create a political space controlled by an elite with little accountability to the large majority of students, faculty, or to the country—as the experience of several autonomous universities in Latin America demonstrates. Also, the same disincentives to introduce more relevant curricula, establish new links between universities and the world outside them that are mentioned for nonautonomous universities also exist for universities in which departments lack the autonomy to control their resources. The highly centralized internal administration of many autonomous universities is a significant obstacle to improving efficiency and equity—a topic on which the paper is relatively silent.

While it argues that successful implementation of university reform will require the participation of key stakeholders, the paper does not deal with the implications for World Bank operations. The paper states as its objective informing the discussions on higher education within the Bank and among borrowers. However, supporting systemic policy reform, as the paper proposes, also means support-

ing national policy dialogue and participation. If this paper had succeeded in addressing **this** theme and making concrete proposals, it could have represented a true paradigmatic shift from prior policy papers.

A serious shortcoming of the paper concerns the knowledge base chosen from which lessons of experience are drawn. Of the 152 bibliographic references only 32 (21 percent) are not World Bank publications or publications of Bank staff. In part this gives due credit to the wealth of knowledge on the subject generated internally—including papers commissioned by the Bank on this subject from outside consultants—but it also leads one to question whose experience is meant by the subtitle "The lessons of experience." Given the many positive aspects of this paper it is unfortunate that the authors did not include the significant contributions to the topic that have been made outside the Bank—to name a few of the oversights: Philip Altbach's long line of research on universities and overseas training, Maureen Woodhall's recent excellent series of publications on student loans in developing countries for the International Institute for Educational Planning, and UNESCO's 1993 policy paper, "Strategies for Change and Development in Higher Education."

In sum, this policy paper is an important contribution to the debate on higher education reform and on education policy reform in general. It departs from prior policy work of the World Bank in a number of important respects, and that gives it the potential of generating controversy and hopefully of supporting a critical examination of past practices in the field.

Few recent World Bank publications have generated *so* much internal controversy as this policy paper on higher education. To some, the paper does not offer "leadership," and fails to provide sufficient guidance for the Bank to suggest policy reforms to borrowing countries. Other aspects of this controversy focus on the contents of the paper, concerning the role of the state vis à vis the role of the private sector, the kinds of reforms envisioned, and the methods proposed for achieving higher education reform.

At the heart of the debate are two different epistemologies, one that argues that reform can be based on "universal" findings and influenced by pressure from international organizations, another that contends that technical knowledge alone is not sufficient to inform the direction of educational change. The latter position is consistent with what Jiirgen Habermas has called a pragmatic model of the impact of scientific knowledge in policy, in opposition to a decisionistic model—which assumes science is value-neutral—and a technocratic model—which assumes scientific knowledge has intrinsic normative authority (J. Habermas, *Toward a* **Rational** *Society* [London: Heineman, 1971]). The pragmatic model suggests interactions of reciprocal influence between politicians and researchers in a democratic society.

The merits of this paper, beyond its excellent analysis of the problems of higher education, lies in the value it places on democratic processes in negotiating policy and on the more humble, albeit important, role it assigns in that process to research-based knowledge, and consequently to international organizations that draw some of their power from access to that knowledge. The debate over the lack of "leadership" provided by the paper suggests that not all are comfortable with this new, more humble role that supports democratic processes of policy negotiation.

This paper matters because it has stimulated discussion on the sources of educational reform. It concerns the role of values in contextualizing findings of research and lessons drawn from experience, and the process that should be followed in designing reform. It is, finally, a debate about national ownership of the process and content of educational change. The debate continues beyond this paper and is perhaps the central source of tension between departments that engage in producing policy papers and operations departments, between the World Bank and governments of borrowing countries, between governments and other stakeholders in each society.

DIMENSIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

ACADEMIC FREEDOM *IN* AFRICA
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In the last few years, African countries have been rocked by struggles for democracy, whose scope and intensity suggest a fundamental rupturing of the postcolonial order and a profound yearning for a new socioeconomic and political dispensation. Intimately engaged in these broad struggles for the "second independence," African intellectuals have also been waging battles for their own academic freedom, against the social forces and actors that control and constrain the academic research environment and the production of critical ideas—namely, the state, civil society, the institutions dominated by the intellectuals themselves, and foreign donors and Eurocentric academic cultures. This hook, a product of the conference sponsored by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) on academic freedom, held in Kampala in 1990, addresses these issues with urgency, passion, and intelligence, and offers us a rare glimpse into