

## International Private Higher Education Conference Held at Boston College

On May 28 and 29, academic leaders, researchers, and policymakers from five continents discussed the key issues facing private higher education worldwide. The social responsibilities of the private sector in higher education for societal improvement and service were discussed, as well as more traditional topics such as accreditation, quality control, the financing of private higher education, and others. The significant diversity of the private sector in higher education was illustrated in reports from such diverse countries as Mexico, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Hungary. Realities differ, but problems are quite similar.

Daniel Levy, a noted researcher on private higher education, focused on what he termed isomorphism—the tendency of private universities to look similar in response to pressures toward uniformity. Other participants emphasized the variations among countries and even within systems. The funding of private higher education, and the difficulties of operating institutions based on student tuition in a competitive marketplace were emphasized. The link between funding, quality, and access was seen as one of the more perplexing issues fac-

ing private higher education. Issues of quality and accreditation were, not surprisingly, considered, and reports concerning accrediting arrangements in various parts of Latin America were discussed. Most of the participants agreed that the private sector is absorbing much of the growth in rapidly expanding academic systems throughout the world.

A special focus was on Latin America because of the explosive growth of private institutions there, and about half of the invited participants came from this region. The invitational conference was funded by the Ford Foundation. Boston College, as a private university in the Jesuit tradition that maintains links with other universities worldwide, was an appropriate place for the meeting, which was organized by the Center for International Higher Education. A book will be published containing the papers commissioned for the conference. Participants included university presidents and rectors, staff members from the Inter American Development Bank, and researchers on private higher education. The group was united in its concern for understanding, and improving, private higher education worldwide.

## Public Policy and Private Higher Education

### Daniel C. Levy

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Public policy questions in higher education worldwide are increasingly viewed and answered in terms of private-public dimensions. Often these dimensions are chiefly intrasectoral, as when private finance is added to the income mix for public higher education. But the dimensions are often intersectoral, and the startling growth of private higher education, in much of Asia and Latin America and now in parts of Central or Eastern Europe and Africa as well, has raised the salience of public policy choices for private higher education. This salience is seen in the deliberations of many governments, growing interest in the press and the general public, and increasing analysis and projects by international powerhouses such as the World Bank. Professional academic interest also grows. This was clear at Boston College's international conference on private higher education in May 1998. Whether the panel topic immediately in question was accreditation, quality, social respon-

sibility, or of course public policy itself, discussions would turn largely to the challenge of what should be done. It is worthwhile to reflect on what participants portrayed as appropriate public policy for private higher education.

Consensus or at least near consensus emerged on some matters at the conference. All participants believe that public policy should treat private higher education *well*. This statement is unremarkable in some ways, but not in all ways. In countries like the United States, private higher education has a long history and ample legitimacy. However, elsewhere private higher education is usually decidedly unpopular with part of the population, or part of the private higher education sector is suspect in the eyes of others. Thus, detractors often want public policy to treat private higher education harshly; the extreme is found in calls to abolish the sector, though such calls are less common than prior calls to prevent its establishment. In any event, the view that public policy for private higher education should be basically negative was not represented at this conference.

Beyond *well* comes the idea that private higher education should be treated *better*, if possible enlightened by the scholarship and deliberations that characterize such conferences. What is noteworthy here is that so little defense is made of the status quo in public policy. This may reflect a dubious tendency to judge realities against ideals as opposed to against realistic alternatives, and to figure out the best prospective policy, well implemented, rather than to

acknowledge that policy reforms and outcomes rarely match expectations. The clamor for better public policy may also reflect a dubious tendency to underplay how “policy” emerges outside of visible, nationally proclaimed government policy (or in deliberate or unplanned combination with it). Whether or not the call for public policy improvement is exaggerated, however, it is widespread and loud.

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But that appears to be it: consensus does not get beyond the idea of treating private higher education well and better. As long as discussion remains on a very general or vague level the consensus might seem ample. The same holds where some policies are proposed in terms of their rationales and then, separately, other policies are proposed in terms of their rationales. In such cases the tone may appear consensual but the implicit differences should be made explicit and should be engaged, for there is no escaping them in practical policy. For example, an apparent consensus for equitable treatment dissolves when we note that some would operationalize equity as equal treatment of private and public sectors while others advocate quite different treatment according to the different characteristics of the sectors.

Even if we limit ourselves to supporters of private higher education, the fact is that they want different things from it. Even when they want mostly the same things, their priorities differ: what some actor desperately seeks another regards as a luxury. Even if we had full knowledge of which public policy would yield what results, we would advocate different public policies according to our goals and priorities from private higher education. And the conference participants’ list (which is hardly exhaustive) of what private higher should provide is ample—and substantially contradictory. For the broader society private higher education should: fulfill public missions and progressive social missions; save primary and secondary education; promote sustainable development; fight poverty; serve the job market; and build civil society, pluralism, and democracy as it reduces the authoritarianism of central states. For higher education itself it should: enhance academic quality, or maintain it while expanding access and holding public costs in check; innovate; serve as models for public higher education reform; and promote a choice and competition that in turn links back to higher quality.

It is possible to identify at least the following significant general approaches to public policy for private higher education, and of course specific policies would be much more diverse: ample vs. limited, increased vs. decreased (or stable), similar vs. different as compared to policies for the public sector, hostile vs. sympathetic. For brief illustrative purpose, however, we may sketch a contrast of why some advocate public policy that is largely similar to public policy for the public sector (a similarity that usually means ample or increased policy directed at the private sector), whereas others advocate public policy that is largely different (a difference that usually means limited or decreased public policy directed at the public sector).

Reasons for advocacy of public policies for the private sector similar to those for the public sector include:

1. To expand supply without basically changing the product offered by public higher education.
2. To treat similarly what is essentially similar. This holds where private sectors are largely “isomorphic” to public sectors; that is, they have been or have become similar to them. Like it or not, many private institutions do not have distinctive missions and often seek neither autonomy nor responsibility but just “go with the flow.”
3. To make the private sector more similar to the public sector because both *should* do essentially the same thing. All education is basically a public good and all higher education must fulfill a common social mission; that the finance and ownership is distinct is rather incidental.
4. Related to #3, there is private-public distinctiveness, but it rests too much on undesirable private pursuits or performance. Examples include low quality, for-profit or other market excesses, and fragmentation that undermines social unity.
5. Alternatively, diversity can be achieved through other institutional divisions, such as “technical institute” or “college” vs. “university”; in turn, private should be treated mostly like public within each category.
6. Paradoxically, whereas #1–5 are linked to limited private-public differentiation, increased public policy that treats the sectors equally is also—increasingly—advocated in order to promote a robust and distinctive private sector. The idea is to “level the playing field,” as seen in proposals to implement national accreditation systems, narrow the “tuition gap,” have government provide or insure ample and accurate information for consumers, provide vouchers for students, or allow privates to compete for research and other special funds even where they cannot receive regular annual subsidies for basic operational expenses. All these measures are alternatives to the idea of promoting a market by leaving the state on the side.

Reasons that advocacy of public policies for the private sector are different from those for the public sector

include:

1. Principal beneficiaries are the students (“users”) who therefore should be the ones who choose rather than being saddled with one mode.
2. Whatever their weaknesses, private institutions can struggle, innovate, and improve if not peremptorily forced to follow a common policy line.
3. Even internally the private sector is too diverse to be the appropriate object of a one-size-fits-all public policy. Subsectors geared to absorb demand, provide distinct religious or other values, or attain elite academic quality do not respond well to the same rules and incentives.
4. The private sector can be a model for public reform (in management, finance, academic pursuits, etc.) only if it is left free to do things differently from what rules and modes for the public sector allow.
5. Mainly, however, the private sector must be free from public policy that shapes the public sector so that the private sector can itself be distinctive. The distinctiveness can be based variously on cultural values, academic innovation, delivery systems, autonomy from central authority, or anything that some legitimate actors want—regardless of whether the distinctiveness in question is frowned upon by government or a public majority.

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Other points could be added to either list. Counterarguments could be given to each point, and then there would be rebuttals to those counterarguments. And the contrast of public policy preferences lies not just between the two lists, or among further lists that could be developed, but also among items within each list since prescriptions usually vary (including on the blend of similarity and difference) depending on the chief rationale pursued.

Clearly, there is no one “right” or easy answer to the question of what should be public policy for private higher education. That hardly makes private higher education unique for public policy fields. And no one right answer hardly means no good answers, or a hopeless morass. There are many options, depending on our values, what we do and do not want from private higher education, and what we learn from ongoing scholarly and policy analysis about the consequences of different public policies. —

## The Anatomy of Private Higher Education

**Philip G. Altbach**

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The worldwide patterns of private higher education tell us much about the growth and development of this increasingly important branch of postsecondary education. Private higher education, in many countries, will be the growth area for the first part of the 21st century. Private universities are expanding at a more rapid rate than public institutions, and they are serving ever larger segments of the population. In such countries as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, private universities educate the large majority of those going on to postsecondary education—80 percent overall. In Latin America, the private sector is growing quickly in many countries—more than half the enrollments in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia are in private universities. If the nonuniversity postsecondary institutions are also included, the proportions increase and other countries can be added. In 1997, half of the total postsecondary enrollments in Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela were in private institutions. Private universities and other postsecondary institutions are developing rapidly in Central and Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union, with growth at all levels of the academic system. This expansion is in general unplanned and unregulated.

The private sector in higher education is diverse. Some of the world’s best universities are private. In Latin America, many of the most prestigious universities are private, and many of these are affiliated with the Catholic church. In Asia, prestigious private universities such as Yonsei in Korea, Waseda in Japan, and De La Salle and the Ateneo de Manila in the Philippines have long stood alongside well-regarded public universities. Although 80 percent of American students study in public universities and colleges, many of the most prestigious universities are private—such institutions as Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Chicago, and others. These universities are stable and firmly entrenched at the top of the academic hierarchy. In general, they have more in common with other top universities in the public sector than with lower-prestige institutions in the private sector.

At the other end of the spectrum, private institutions increasingly dominate the bottom of the system—those “demand-absorbing” schools that offer postsecondary degrees of questionable quality and uncertain usefulness in the marketplace. In Latin America,