New Perspectives on Global Higher Education Challenges

At a conference on international higher education held in Washington, D.C. on December 3 and 4, 1998, there was general agreement on the similarity in the central issues facing higher education around the world. Organized by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the Council on International Exchange of Scholars (CIES)-the Fulbright Program, the meeting brought together nine key experts from around the world to discuss current and future trends in higher education. The group responded to a theme paper prepared by Philip Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, and Todd Davis, research director at the IIE. The paper can be found in this issue of *IHE*. The conference featured one day of discussions of major trends and developments with a larger group of Washington-area policymakers and international education experts. Among the groups represented were the Inter-American Development Bank, the U.S. Department of Education, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Organization of American States, the U.S. Information Agency, and others. A second day of discussions with the core group of experts was held to discuss future directions for international higher education cooperation.

Among the experts attending the conference were Peter Darvas, formerly director of the Higher Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute in Budapest, Hungary and now a senior staff member at the World Bank; Nasima Badsha, deputy director general of the higher education division in the Ministry of Education, South Africa; Suma Chitnis, director of the Tata Endowment and former vice chancellor of SNDT University in Bombay, India; Simon Schwartzman of the Center for Social Research on Sustainable Development in Brazil; Min Weifang, executive vice president of Peking University, China; Akimasa Mitsuta, professor at Obirin University in Japan and formerly a senior official in the Japanese Ministry of Education; Barbara Sporn of the Department of Informatics at the Economics University of Vienna, Austria; and George Eshiwani, vice chancellor of Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya.

The insights of these experts will soon be published in a book cosponsored by the Institute of International Education and CIHE. Copies of *Toward a Global Understanding of Higher Education* will be available from CIHE and IIE in spring 1999. ■

Global Challenge and National Response: Notes for an International Dialogue on Higher Education

Philip G. Altbach and Todd M. Davis

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Higher education has profoundly changed in the past two decades, and those involved in the academic enterprise have yet to grapple with the implications of these changes. Academic institutions and systems have faced pressures of increasing numbers of students and demographic changes, demands for accountability, reconsideration of the social and economic role of higher education, implications of the end of the Cold War, and the impact of new technologies, among others. While academic systems function in a national environment, the challenges play themselves out on a global scale. We can learn much from both national experiences and international trends. Ideas and solutions from one country or region may be relevant in another.

Since academic institutions worldwide stem from common historical roots and face common contemporary challenges, it is especially appropriate that international dialogue take place. A comparative and global approach to thinking about higher education benefits everyone—the experience of one country may not be directly relevant to another, but issues and solutions touch many nations. This essay has several key aims:

- to highlight issues in higher education that face many countries and about which an international discussion can contribute insights;
- to contribute to the internationalization of higher education through discussion of international initiatives and linking of people and institutions committed to a global perspective and expanded international programs;
- to create a network of colleagues and centers working in the field of higher education worldwide in order to foster ongoing dialogue, communication, and possible collaborative research; and
- to link policymakers, key administrators, and the higher education research community in a creative dialogue on the central issues facing contemporary higher education.

We see this essay, and the discussions that we hope it

will stimulate, as a first step in an ongoing discussion. We are especially concerned to link "north" and "south" in a discussion that has been for so long dominated by the industrialized countries. We are convinced that there is much that can be learned by considering the experiences of countries and systems worldwide.

Background and Global Perspective

While it may not yet be possible to think of higher education as a global system, there is considerable convergence among the world's universities and higher education systems. The medieval European historical origin of most of the world's universities provides a common antecedent. The basic institutional model and structure of studies are similar worldwide. Academic institutions have frequently been international in orientation—with common curricular elements and, in the medieval period, a common language of instruction—Latin. At the end of the 20th century, English has assumed a role as the primary international language of science and scholarship, including the Internet. Now, with more than one million students studying outside their borders, with countless scholars working internationally, and with new technologies such as the Internet fostering instantaneous communications, the international roots and the contemporary realities of the university are central.

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Higher education systems have also been moving from elite to mass to universal access, as Martin Trow pointed out in the 1960s. In North America, much of Europe, and a number of East Asian countries, academic systems approach universal access, with close to half the relevant age group attending some kind of postsecondary institution and with access increasingly available for nontraditional (mainly older) students. In some countries, however, access remains limited. In China and India, for example, despite dramatic expansion, under 5 percent of the age group attends postsecondary institutions. In some countries with relatively low per capita income, such as the Philippines, access is high, while in some wealthier nations, it remains a key point of challenge. Throughout Africa, access is limited to a tiny sector of the population. Access is an increasingly important issue everywhere, as populations demand it and as developing economies require skilled personnel.

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Demands for access come into conflict with another of the flashpoints of controversy of the present era—funding. Higher education is an expensive undertaking, and there is much debate concerning how to fund expanding academic systems. Current approaches to higher education funding emphasize the need for "users" to pay for the cost of instruction, as policymakers increasingly view higher education as something that benefits the individual, rather than as a "public good" where the benefits accrue to society. This new thinking, combined with constrictions on public expenditures in many countries, have meant severe financial problems for academe. These difficulties come at a time when higher education systems are trying to provide expanded access. Higher education's problems have been exacerbated in many of the poorer parts of the world by the idea, popular in the past several decades and stressed by the World Bank and other agencies, that basic education was most cost-effective—as a result, higher education was ignored by major lending and donor agencies. Now, higher education is back on the agenda of governments and multilateral agencies just as academe faces some of its most serious challenges.

Academic systems and institutions have tried to deal with these financial constraints in several ways. Loan programs, the privatization of some public institutions, and higher tuition are among the alternatives to direct government expenditure. In many parts of the world, including most of the major industrialized nations, conditions of study have deteriorated in response to financial constraints. Enrollments have risen, but resources, including faculty, have not kept up with needs. Academic infrastructures, including libraries and laboratories, have been starved of funds. Less is spent on basic research. Conditions of study have deteriorated in many of the world's best-developed academic systems, including Germany and France. Students have taken to the streets in large numbers to protest declining budgets and poor conditions for the first time since the 1960s. There has also been a dramatic decline in academic conditions in sub-Saharan Africa and in some other developing areas.

While these trends, and the circumstances discussed below, vary to some extent from country to country, there is considerable convergence. Academic leaders worldwide worry about the same set of topics. Specific conditions vary from one country to another, and there are certainly major differences between the Netherlands and Mali. Yet, solutions from one country may be relevant, at least in terms of suggesting alternatives, elsewhere. For example, there is much interest in Australian ideas concerning "graduate tax"—repayment schemes based on postgraduate income. The United States, as the world's largest and in many respects leading academic system, experienced the challenges of universal access first, and American patterns of academic organization are of considerable interest elsewhere.

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We live in a period of rapid change in higher education, a period when we can learn much from the experience of others. In short, higher education has gone global but with a variety of accents. These global concerns or issues are actually not discrete topic areas. They are better understood as issue clusters. Each of the following are actually related concerns that are increasingly difficult to isolate and manage in a reductionist manner. A discussion of the short list of issue clusters follows.

The Issue Clusters

We identify several themes that seem to us to be central to current developments in higher education worldwide. These themes deserve elaboration and analysis. They affect countries and regions differently, although we believe that all are relevant internationally, and that a discussion of implications can lead to understanding that will useful for both comparative and national analysis.

- Education and work are activities that should feed one another. The links and transition points from initial education to the work force are weakly articulated. This is true in the developed world as well as in the developing world. Educators and business leaders rarely discuss, let alone agree upon, a set of skills and orientations that are prerequisites for successful employment. The formal structures by which education systems prepare students for tomorrow are similarly weakly developed. Models developed in Germany, through the linking of postsecondary education and apprenticeship arrangements, or the community college system in the United States are currently being explored in several areas. Professional education often links well to employment in many countries, but education in the arts and sciences is less well articulated. It is not clear how close the articulation can be, but the issues are worthy of further consideration.
- While the initial transition from school to work may be poorly articulated, the demand for education throughout the life cycle is becoming apparent. Fed by rapid changes in technology and the creation of employment categories that did not exist 10 years ago, workers and employers must continually attend to the educational dimension. As the nature of work has evolved, so have the needs of those in the workforce to continually upgrade their capacities. This has led to the development of a variety of educational forms beyond the bachelor's degree. In Germany, recent changes in the degree structure have led to the modularization of graduate degrees. In the United States, certificate programs and short-term courses of study are being rapidly developed. By one recent estimate corporations in the United States alone will spend $15 billion over current expenditures by 2005 just to maintain current employee training levels. Others estimate that world wide expenditures on training amount to many billions of dollars annually to ensure that their work force has the skills necessary to compete in an ever competitive and high-velocity business environment. In many countries, especially in the developing world, graduate education is coming into its own as the need for advanced skills and for continuing education becomes increasingly clear.
- It has become a point of banality to remark on the changes that technological developments have wrought. Indeed, many of the dislocations in school-to-work transition and the press for lifelong education are partially the result of these developments. More directly, however, technology has made possible a revolution in distance education that has important implications for the accreditation of educational institutions and assurance of quality in such circumstances. Technology is also beginning to have an impact on teaching and learning in traditional universities. It is also a truism that this technology is expensive, subject to rapid obsolescence, and requires high initial investment simply to get into the game. For many developing countries, cost is at present prohibitive, and it is precisely these areas where technology can provide the greatest short-term improvement. Technology is also central to the communication, storage, and retrieval of knowledge. The traditional library is being revolutionized by web-based information systems, as are the management systems of many universities. Technology is the least understood of the issue clusters discussed here, and perhaps the one with the greatest potential for transforming higher education.

• We have noted in passing the increase in the number of internationally mobile students. While this is an exciting and important trend, it is not without some important consequences. As the market for individuals with transnational competencies have grown, so have opportunities for individuals with marketable skills in other countries. Currently the transfer of talent has been from developing countries such as India and China to the developed world. In the United States, the stay rates for advanced students in the engineering disciplines and the sciences can be higher than 75 percent for students from particular countries. From the perspective of national education authorities, these students may represent a considerable hemorrhaging of talent that has been developed by the students' countries of origin. If nations are to develop, a means must be found by which talent can flourish in the soils that originally nurtured it. Related issues of internationalizing the curriculum and providing a global consciousness to students, including instruction in foreign language, and ensuring that the academic profession is linked internationally are central to any discussion of the internationalization of higher education.

• Although seldom discussed, one of the areas of greatest expansion worldwide has been graduate education—the post baccalaureate training for the professions as well as for science, technology, and teaching. Graduate education offers great opportunities for international links and cooperation. Countries can take advantage of graduate training capacities elsewhere, and the new technologies can provide key links. Highly specialized and advanced-level teaching and research deserves careful analysis.

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• The privatization of higher education is a worldwide phenomenon of considerable importance. In Latin America and some parts of Asia the fastest-growing parts of the academic system are private institutions. In Central and Eastern Europe, private initiative is also of considerable importance. Public universities are in some places being "privatized" in the sense that they are increasingly responsible for raising their own funds. They are asked to relate more directly to society. Students are increasingly seen as "customers." The expansion of the private sector brings up issues of quality control and accreditation since in many parts of the world there are few controls as yet on private-sector expansion. Access is also a central issue. As some developing areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa, will soon be experiencing the growth of private institutions, understanding in a comparative context the problems and possibilities of private higher education is an urgent need.

• The academic profession is in crisis almost everywhere. There is a rapid growth of part-time faculty members in many countries, and traditional tenure systems are under attack. The professoriate is being asked to do more with less, and student-teacher ratios, academic salaries, and morale have all deteriorated. The professoriate is being asked to adjust to new circumstances but is given few resources to assist in the transition. Without a committed academic profession, the university cannot be an effective institution.

The academic profession is in crisis almost everywhere.

• Access and equity remain central factors, but in the current policy context are sometimes ignored. While academic systems worldwide have expanded dramatically, there are problems of access and equity in many parts of the world. Gender, ethnicity, and social class remain serious issues. In many developing countries, higher education remains mainly an urban phenomenon, and one that is reserved largely for wealthier segments of society. Although women have made significant advances, access for women remains a serious problem in many parts of the world.

• Accountability is a contemporary watchword in higher education. Demands by funding sources, mainly government, to measure academic productivity, control funding allocations, etc. is increasingly a central part of the debate on higher education. Governance systems are being strained, sometimes to the breaking point. To meet the demands for accountability, universities are becoming "managerialized," with professional administrators gaining increasing control. The traditional power of the professoriate is being weakened.

• Expansion brings with it increased differentiation and the emergence of academic systems. New kinds of academic institutions emerge, and existing universities serve larger and more diverse groups. In order to make sense of this differentiation, academic systems are organized to provide coordination and the appropriate management of resources.

These are some of the key topics that affect contemporary postsecondary education worldwide. While this is by no means a complete list, it provides the basis for discussion and cooperation. International and comparative analysis can help to yield insights on how to deal with these topics in individual countries. ■