

get is to hire new staff on contract terms. Thus, the security that used to be associated with academic work is gradually eroding. It appears that the issues facing Hong Kong higher education are part of a broader worldwide transformation of higher education, despite local and cultural variations.

The content of internationalism has also changed since the 1980s. Before, internationalism meant a heavy Western orientation, especially toward the major English-speaking countries. The boom in the economy in the 1980s and a collective awareness of an Asian identity fostered regional cooperation. Exchanges among Asian countries have flourished over the years. Common intellectual roots in graduate studies in the West provided an impetus for such exchanges, which have extended to academics who are

wholly trained in indigenous institutions. Hong Kong academics' knowledge of English has facilitated such exchanges. Exchanges with the Chinese mainland are also thriving. At any one time there are dozens of visiting academics from mainland institutions in each institution in Hong Kong. Many Hong Kong academics conduct research related to China. The mainland has a solid tradition in science and technology and in some areas of the humanities. In comparison, the mainland is relatively unfamiliar with Western social science. Western-educated Hong Kong academics have a significant role to play in this phase of knowledge exchange between the two places. Linking the mainland and the outside world, a bridging role Hong Kong has tried to fulfill since its early colonial days, is an ongoing mission in the new era. ■

Access to Higher Education in Bangladesh: The Case of Dhaka University

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In 1997, Bangladesh had a per capita GNP of \$270 (ranked 116th in the world by the World Bank). With a life expectancy of 58 years, 81 percent of the population living in the countryside, and 42.7 percent living below the poverty line, this nation of 124 million people faces many challenges in the coming century.

The policy implications of equity in higher education—defined as equality of access—are much debated today. Should the state increase spending on public universities? Should the government allow more private universities? Should there be taxpayer support for private universities? In Bangladesh, a popular view held by some academics and politicians is that the constitution requires the state to ensure equality of access at all levels of education. This group desires removal of all barriers to education. There is some concern that access to higher education has become less equitable in recent years. Figures from the country's fifth Five-Year-Plan underscore some of the inequities in higher education. For example, the gender ratio is 69:31 in favor of males. The geographic concentration index for higher education in urban areas is 0.97, compared to 0.57 for secondary education, and 0.31 for primary education. An increasingly larger segment of the student population in the best public universities is coming from a small group of urban preparatory schools to which only the richer families can afford to send their children.¹

The debate over access to higher education has sharp-

ened since 1993, when for the first time private universities were allowed to operate in Bangladesh. Many critics believe that private universities are elitist and expensive, making them inappropriate in a poor society. According to this view, the existence of private universities will exacerbate the problem of inequitable access to higher education. On the other side of the debate, supporters of the private universities argue that in the long run private universities will improve access for economically disadvantaged students. They point out that the 1992 Private University Act requires that at least 5 percent of the student body receive full tuition waivers, which are intended to help poor students take advantage of these institutions. Additionally, the choice of a private university by students from rich families may possibly create vacancies in the public universities for poor students. Therefore, proponents reason, an expansion of private universities would improve access to tertiary education for *all* students. Critics disagree with these arguments, pointing out that the policies of private universities are not closely monitored by an outside independent body. Although private universities have increased diversity and choice for many students, their impact on access and equity is less clear.

Dhaka University

A random survey of 56 students at Dhaka University (DU) that I conducted in April 1999 highlighted certain issues concerning access to a public university education. Most of the 56 students state that they come from urban families. In fact, more than half gave permanent addresses in Dhaka, the capital city where the university is located. These findings would seem to support the claim that students from rural households (81 percent of the population) face difficulties in gaining access to the best public higher education institutions. Admission to DU, widely regarded as the country's premier university, has become increasingly difficult. In 1995, only 3,730 out of 63,313 applicants to DU

were reported to have been admitted.² Numerous newspaper reports suggest that political parties and their student factions have attempted to exploit this intense competition by influencing the admission process in favor of students sympathetic to their cause. A system based on graft is likely to work against students without political connections. Interestingly, most of our respondents report that their fathers' formal education exceeded high school level, which would seem to reflect the small representation of first-generation college students at DU.

Without substantial financial assistance, low-income students simply cannot afford quality private higher education in Bangladesh.

Less than one in five respondents state that they receive some form of financial aid from DU. In the absence of a public system of student loans in Bangladesh, poor students would have little alternative but to seek out such kinds of financing from universities. Traditionally, bright students from low-income families depend on scholarships to attain a public university education. Almost half our sample of students state that they supplement their incomes by working part time. The students report an annual private cost (tuition and fees) incurred during university studies of from \$265 to as high as \$828. In a nation where 60 percent of the households live in poverty, public higher education, even when tuition-free, can nevertheless be very expensive. However, these high private costs pale in comparison to the cost of education at a good private university. At North South University, the most popular (but not the most expensive) private university, the annual cost per

student exceeds \$3,500. Without substantial financial assistance, low-income students simply cannot afford quality private higher education in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

An important selling point for supporting public universities in a developing society is that higher education can be a powerful instrument for building a more equitable society. By providing equal access for good students from the lower social and economic backgrounds, the public university can become a great social and economic equalizer in society. The information obtained from our sample at DU seems to suggest that a majority of students in public universities in Bangladesh come from the relatively affluent section of the urban population. This leads to the disturbing conclusion that the significant public subsidies received by these institutions, far from removing the existing inequities in the society, may be reinforcing these inequities. If these findings are supported by additional empirical evidence, there would indeed be a sound rationale for higher education reform in Bangladesh. Such reform would likely need to include the establishment of a realistic fee structure at public universities, the development of student loans to assist the poor in gaining access to higher education, the creation of special admissions programs for underprivileged youth, and a healthy partnership between public and private universities. ■

Notes

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1. Muzaffer Ahmad, "Education and Governance in Bangladesh," in *Crises in Governance: A Review of Bangladesh's Development, 1997* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Centre for Policy Dialogue, 1998), 317–32.
2. Zillur Rahman Siddique, *Visions and Revisions: Higher Education in Bangladesh, 1947–1992* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: University Press, 1997).

Challenges for Catholic Higher Education in Japan

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Catholic universities in Japan, together with all institutions of higher learning in this country (especially the private ones), are facing a difficult year. First, the economic recession continues, which makes it difficult for families to afford tuition for private schooling. Second, the 18-year-old population is shrinking rapidly. Up until now, univer-

sity entrance exams have been a highly competitive affair, and still are to a certain extent, but 10 years from now there will be one university seat available for every eligible 18-year-old in the country. Even now, many universities are falling short of their quotas for the entering freshman class.

On top of these problems is a more fundamental one: the whole notion of what a university is supposed to be and do has come up for serious rethinking. A blue-ribbon commission on university reform shook up the educational establishment last year by issuing a call for radical changes in the way universities operate. Since then endless debates have been going on within and without academia, as people seek new directions for university education.

In this last respect, Catholic universities at least have