

segregation of the sexes and woman's traditional role as wife and mother. It was further indicated that external study, or *intisab*, a method that enables women to pursue higher education without attending lectures, has not successfully met the increasing demand for higher education opportunities. Recent reports announced the imminent opening of QOU branches in the United Arab Emirates, which would offer courses "to those who work or have family commitments" by providing higher education to students "where they reside."

Women across the Arab states are the largest group directly affected by the dissemination of distance education opportunities

The open university has become a viable opportunity for Palestinians, too. QOU has enabled several thousand Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (and, to a lesser extent, within Israel), who do not otherwise have access to higher education, to undertake higher education studies and thus qualify for a wider spectrum of occupational opportunities. Moreover, some Palestinian and Arab security prisoners held in Israeli prisons, especially those sentenced for longer periods of confinement, see open university studies as a viable opportunity. Attempts by QOU to introduce its curricula to this group have reportedly met

with difficulties. Some inmates have consequently enrolled in the Israeli Open University, where studies and materials are in Hebrew.

Increasingly, open university programs from outside the Arab states are also directing themselves toward other locally marginalized groups. For instance, in 1997, India's Indira Gandhi National Open University began offering courses abroad for the first time—in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE—in response to the growing demand for higher education opportunities, particularly among Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf states.

Crossing the Distance

Efforts to extend alternative higher education opportunities to marginalized groups and isolated communities in the Arab states remain quite modest. The dual approach to distance education, whereby a university offers outreach courses in addition to its regular curriculum, has yet to be instituted.

Some have argued that for open university programs of study to succeed, as legitimate venues of mobility they should be launched through regionalized schemes, rather than through a centralized (pan-Arab) institution. Nevertheless, expanding open university programs would most probably speed up the process of knowledge commodification, which is already under way as part of the privatization of higher education in several Arab states (e.g., through the opening of foreign-university affiliates). As knowledge becomes increasingly transferable across distances, its commodification for marketization purposes will be affected by competition. ■

Key Public Policy Issues in the United States

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Since 1994, the Association of Governing Boards, an American organization representing boards of trustees of colleges and universities, has published a series of volumes that identify the leading public policy issues affecting higher education in the United States. The 1999–2000 edition in this series was recently published and, as the following list indicates, the top 10 issues in the current biennium have much relevance to trends and conditions in international higher education.

1. Teacher Preparation

Teacher supply and quality issues are at the top of the education agenda in the United States as in many other coun-

tries. In the United States, the issue of teacher supply is linked to the daunting demographics as growing numbers of children outstrip the ability of local school districts to educate them. The teacher shortage is exacerbated by doubts about the ability of higher education institutions to produce qualified teachers. One expression of these concerns is recent federal legislation requiring universities to publish the pass rates on state teacher competency tests for their recent graduates.

2. Affordability vs. Access

Although the United States continues to have the highest participation rates in higher education in the world, the gap between rates for rich and poor students has not narrowed over time. Amid rising concerns about whether the most economically disadvantaged students will be able to afford postsecondary education, many states and the fed-

eral government are redirecting funds up the income scale by awarding aid on the basis of merit rather than need, creating prepaid tuition and savings plans rather than providing need-based student aid, and creating tuition tax credits to address middle-class fears about college unaffordability.

3. Cost and Price of Higher Education

For the past two decades, student charges in the United States have been increasing at more than twice the rate of inflation at both public and private institutions. This trend has made college costs a highly visible public policy issue as legislators at both the federal and state levels have reflected constituent worries about the future affordability of higher education. Indeed, Congress has created a national commission to investigate the increase in college costs and prices. The commission's 1998 final report argued that it was important for the public and policymakers to understand the difference between college costs and prices. However, the report also warned that the failure of institutions to become more transparent in their accounting might result in federal cost controls.

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4. Implementation of Federal Legislation

Higher education became a focus of attention in recent congressional sessions as major legislation was enacted, including creation of tuition tax credits and renewal of the Higher Education Act authorizing federal student aid programs as well as categorical (targeted) funding programs. Emphasis will now shift to implementing this legislation: including establishing procedures for students and their families to claim tax credits for their education expenses and revising federal student aid programs. In addition, the legislation contained several important new initiatives for early intervention, distance education, and teacher training for which rules and regulations must be issued.

5. Federal Support for University Research

The federal government is a major funder of basic and applied research conducted on campuses in the United States. Annual federal spending on campus-based research exceeds what the federal government spends on student aid and categorical higher education programs. While there re-

mains strong bipartisan support for funding university-based research, a number of issues remain—including a slowing in the rate of growth in federal research funding; a new law requiring all data produced with federal funds to be subject to the Freedom of Information Act; and continuing instances of political intrusion into the tradition of peer-reviewed, merit-based research funding approaches.

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6. Diversity in Admissions

Affirmative action has been the most prominent public policy for promoting greater ethnic and racial diversity in American higher education as well as in employment, housing, and other policy areas. But as a result of a series of court decisions and state referenda, public and private institutions face serious challenges in using race or ethnicity as factors in the process for selecting students and hiring staff. Defenders of affirmative action are assembling evidence and developing alternative approaches to preserve their ability to use race and ethnicity in admissions, aid, hiring, and promotion decisions.

7. Information Technology and New Competition

As is true around the world, information technology and distance learning in the United States would make possible expanding access without the expense of constructing facilities. But the potential is far from being fulfilled in the United States and elsewhere as a number of obstacles remain. In the United States, recent federal legislation provides seed money for distance learning partnerships and allows demonstration projects to address whether and how distance learners should be eligible for the student aid. In the states, distance learning is where the tension between nonprofit and for-profit higher education is most intense, although for-profit providers remain less prominent in the United States than in many other countries.

8. Economic and Financial Trends

Many countries have struggled economically in recent years, but for most of the 1990s the robust U.S. economy has produced prosperity for many of America's colleges and universities. Public and private institutions alike have seen their revenues from federal and state governments grow, and a booming stock market has inflated the value of their endowments. Few states or institutions, however, seem pre-

pared or positioned for the next recession and its consequences, with the inevitable cutbacks in staff and budgets and the rapid increases in tuition fees at public institutions that typically occur during recessions as states reduce on their funding of institutions.

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9. *Creating a Sustainable Society and Future*

Interest in creating more sustainable communities has grown in the United States just as it has in many countries. It seems likely that American higher education institutions will be asked to provide greater leadership in quality-of-

life, natural resource, and environmental issues through the research that is conducted on campus and in the way that institutions operate. A difficult problem remains the disposal of hazardous materials, which has been a bone of contention on many campuses. A number of institutions are seeking to address these and other difficult environmental issues through the formation of consortia.

10. *Rethinking Public Higher Education Systems*

Large systems of public higher education are the most typical higher education governance structure in most countries. While they represent a smaller share of all enrollments in the United States, large public systems face obvious challenges as institutional officials and public policymakers wrangle over how to encourage efficiency, productivity, and accountability while keeping costs reasonable. At the City University of New York, the third-largest system in the United States, for example, these challenges have resulted in a major debate over admissions standards and the role of remediation. ■

Economic Crisis and Privatization in Thai Universities

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During the economic crisis of the past two years, privatization has become a major concern for Thailand's public universities. Under the new education reform law and the provisions of a \$1 billion loan for social restructuring from the Asian Development Bank, the Thai government wants all 23 state universities to break away from bureaucratic control by the year 2002. At latest report, 7 state-run universities have become independent entities, mostly within the last year. The rest are at various stages in working on their own draft bills for autonomy.

Controversy at Chulalongkorn

In late September, Thienchai Keeranant, an early proponent of the movement and rector of prestigious Chulalongkorn University, threatened to withdraw the draft autonomy bill already presented to the government. He cited as the reason faculty fears over future government support once the university was no longer a part of the state bureaucracy. The rector of Kasetsart University, Theera Sutabutra, spoke in the same vein—announcing his institution's readiness to leave the state bureaucratic system as soon as government assurances for future benefits and subsidies were in place.

Reasons cited for this erosion of trust were unclear signals from the Ministry of University Affairs, staff shortages created by restrictive government policies, and a renegeing on help promised in the past year. Calling for concrete government measures, a group of Chulalongkorn lecturers in economics and political science argued that pushing state universities out of the bureaucracy would have adverse effects on the country's human resources development. The small, new universities in the provinces with limited ability to earn income from assets, research work, and public donations would be the most vulnerable. Quality lecturers would move to private universities that offered higher salaries. Without a larger government fund for education loans to ease the burden of higher tuition fees, tertiary education would inevitably become unavailable to needy students.

University autonomy remains a controversial issue.

In response to all the criticism, Abhisit Vejjajiva, a minister in the prime minister's office, pointed to the government's burden in providing free education for all students in the first 12 years of basic education by the year 2002. Only after this project was fully implemented could