

## Knowledge Is Not a Product to be Bought or Sold: A South African Perspective

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There can be little argument that knowledge is the wellspring of economic and social development. It is thus imperative for a country like South Africa that its higher education institutions become innovative, high-quality powerhouses of knowledge production and dissemination. To succeed in this endeavor, the reform agenda has to take full cognizance of the need for efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness. However, it is possible and indeed necessary to do so without sacrificing social accountability and without subservience to the “market.” A tall order, some might say in light of increasing pressure to commercialize or commodify education.

In a country like South Africa, and especially at this important point in its history, the transformation of higher education has to be seen in the context of the broader reconstruction and development of the country. In particular, it has to respond to the dual challenges of equity and development—that is, to overcome the fragmentation and inequality of the past and to meet current and future development challenges, especially in the context of an increasingly globalizing environment.

An important element of our agenda in higher education is to focus on quality. Only through due attention to quality, including the building of inclusive institutional cultures, can there be meaningful access to higher education especially for those who were denied opportunities in the past. Only through combining access, quality, and success will the system be able to erode the domination of high-level occupations and knowledge production by privileged social groups. Quality improvement must, of course, include attention to the curriculum and to teaching and learning support.

Clearly, no education system exists in isolation. However, an appropriate balance should be struck between global, local, or regional imperatives. In particular, the engagement of South Africa’s higher education system with the global order has to be guided by national objectives. To ignore this is to run the risk of further entrenching the unequal power relations between the developed and developing worlds. This can be illustrated by reference to the proliferation of foreign higher education institutions establishing operational bases in South Africa—either independently or in some cases in partnership with local public and private institutions.

Prior to the promulgation of the 1997 Higher Education Act, there was a policy vacuum with respect to the regulation of private higher education, both local and foreign. This gap was exploited by overseas institutions, especially from countries threatened by declining student numbers and revenue, that set up shop in South Africa. Regrettably, many of these institutions appear to be driven by concerns largely unrelated to human resources development priorities or equity imperatives that are driving change in South Africa.

Fortunately, through the implementation of our policy and legal frameworks, South Africa has been able to ensure the planned development of the private sector in ways that do not threaten the sustainability and integrity of the higher education system as a whole. This is not an attempt to exclude foreign institutions but rather to ensure that those who operate in South Africa do so with due regard to our policy goals and priorities and in ways that meet our national transformation agenda and quality assurance requirements.

We have not allowed increased trade in education to undermine our national efforts to transform higher education and, in particular, to strengthen the public sector so that it can effectively participate in an increasingly globalizing environment. We cannot also countenance the excessive marketization and commodification of higher education, which among other factors can lead to the unfortunate homogenization of academic approaches and to the undermining of institutional cultures and academic values.

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In large measure, this experience has shaped South Africa’s unfolding response to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)—an accord of the World Trade Organization covering international trade in services that came into force in January 1995. The very designation of education as a service is a fundamental problem if one accepts that education is not a commodity to be bought and sold. As trade and industry minister Alec Erwin has so eloquently stated, “Knowledge is not a commodity and can never be one. Knowledge is the distillation of human endeavor and it is the most profound collective good that there is.” Erwin goes on to argue that the more knowledge is turned

into a commodity and privatized “the more it will either corrode the collective knowledge base or itself corrode as it distances itself from that collective wellspring.”

Education is not merely a value-free instrument for the transfer of skills across national and regional boundaries, as some might like us to believe. On the contrary, education must embrace the intellectual, cultural, political, and social development of individuals, institutions, and nations. This “public good” agenda should not be held hostage to the vagaries of the market.

International “trade” in education services, particularly at the higher education level, has grown significantly in the past period, with increasing numbers of students studying outside their home countries, increased international marketing of academic programs, and the establishment of overseas “branch campuses,” etc.

It should come as no surprise that the movement of students and staff is mainly from South to North, while export of educational services in the form, among others, of educational information, provision, and facilities (e.g., branch campuses) is in the reverse direction.

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We believe that the internationalization of higher education is better addressed using conventions and agreements outside of a trade policy regime. We will continue to lobby key bodies such as UNESCO to champion this approach. We will also continue to build and strengthen our bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

I hope that the effects of trade liberalization on efforts to internationalize higher education can be minimized. However, of some concern is whether already limited financial resources might increasingly be used for trade-driven activities rather than those that emphasize intellectual and social gains. I am convinced that a fundamental rethinking of the inclusion of education in GATS is needed. We must avoid, at all cost, an approach to GATS that puts our education in peril. Only time will tell whether it is indeed possible to engage with GATS in ways that hold promise for our own agendas and needs.

This is an edited version of a speech presented at a conference on higher education in Bergen, Norway. ■

## New Rationales Driving Internationalization

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Given the changes and challenges facing the international dimension of higher education in a more globalized world, the importance of having clearly articulated rationales for internationalization cannot be overstated. Rationales are reflected in the objectives, policies, and programs that are developed and eventually implemented. Rationales dictate the kind of benefits or expected outcomes one would expect from internationalization efforts. Without a clear set of rationales, the process of internationalization is often an ad hoc and fragmented reaction to the overwhelming number of new international opportunities available. The last decade has seen some important and discernible shifts in the rationales driving internationalization.

#### *National Level Rationales*

Traditionally, the rationales driving internationalization have been divided into four groups: social/cultural, political, academic, and economic. These generic categories remain a useful way to analyze rationales. However, there are new and emerging rationales that cannot be neatly placed in one of these four groups.

*Human Resources Development.* The knowledge economy, demographic shifts, mobility of the labor force, and increased trade in services are factors driving nations to place more importance on developing and recruiting human capital or brain power through international education initiatives. There are signs of heightened pressure and interest to recruit the brightest students and scholars from other countries to increase scientific, technological, and economic competitiveness.

*Strategic Alliances.* The international mobility of students and academics as well as collaborative research and education initiatives are being seen as productive ways to develop closer geopolitical ties and economic relationships. There has been a definite shift from alliances for cultural purposes to those based on economic interests.

*Commercial Trade.* In the last decade, more emphasis has been placed on economic and income-generating