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## *A Bridge Too Far? Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*

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There are two broad philosophies within higher education. The first consists of those who are keen to point out the continuing lineage that exists between the medieval university and the present incarnation. The university thus becomes a place of tradition and stability within a world characterised by flux. The core foci of teaching, research and the importance of the community provide an image repertoire that has changed but little for 500 hundred years. Analysis of the higher education sector is, for those predisposed to this reading, a process of identification with these common threads and ensuring the preservation of this legacy. By implication, this reading of the university is elitist and the experience it offers open only to ‘the brightest and the best’.

The second reading is dismissive of this traditionalism and argues that the university as we know it is in ruins at worst (Readings 1996) and almost unrecognisable at best. In this understanding, it is possible to critique and deconstruct the pillars upon which the traditional conception of the university is built. The rapid progress of information and communication technology (ICT) and the attendant changes that have been incurred; the rise of private and corporate tertiary institutions and the resultant competition, globalisation and massification; the impact of HIV and AIDS, especially on developing countries—all these changes (and many more) mean that teachers, researchers, policy analysts and higher education leadership are in the process of fundamentally re-conceptualising what it is that they do and how they will have to do it in future. And as much as those holding the former perspective look on with dread at the perceived desecration of a cherished ideal, the latter, post-modernist perspective is characterised by a sense of immense potential offered by

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this brave new world of tertiary education. It also follows that, while the traditionalists pride themselves on a belief in the university as physically and symbolically remote from market forces, the latter group see the university as one component in a much larger machine called the national (and transnational) economy. In this conceptualisation, higher education is connected to improvements in labour, patents and spin-off companies, to R&D, gender equality, primary and secondary schooling and international competitiveness.

*Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education* derives from a macro-economic approach to tertiary education and falls firmly into the second grouping. In fact, the main author, Jamil Salmi, is an education economist by training; and as a result, the substantive issues are couched in distinctly economic terms with little concession to the 'soft' higher education terms of debate. Furthermore, the report's cover details percentages, pie charts, graphics of economic growth and information and communication technology. Nowhere is there any visual indication that the terms of reference are based on tertiary education. Community outreach, the university as an ethical force in society, academic freedom and the formation of a critical citizenry are not the terms of Salmi's argument.

That said, what is of particular importance in the report, is the unflinching way that higher education is placed as a crucial driver of social development. As Mamphela Ramphele puts it in the Foreword:

Tertiary education, through its role in empowering domestic constituencies, building institutions, and nurturing favourable regulatory frameworks and governance structures is vital to a country's efforts to increase social capital and to promote social cohesion which is proving to be an important determinant of economic growth and development (*Constructing Knowledge Societies* 2002:x).

While academics are convinced of the central role that higher education plays in the construction of society, its importance is very rarely phrased as emphatically or quite in these terms. This has not always been the case with World Bank initiatives. It is a position, however, that has been increasingly articulated since *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience* (World Bank 1994) and *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (World Bank 2000). The change in focus from financing primary and secondary education (Egroun-Polak 2003:2) to concentrating on higher education can be attributed, in part, to the growing pressure of globalising imperatives and ICT growth. It is not good enough to assume that building capacity at these lower education levels will automatically produce a robust tertiary system that is

able and equipped to respond to these new challenges. Primary and secondary interventions within the context of developing societies also means that these countries are perpetually damned to playing catch-up with the likes of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.

The World Bank focus on tertiary education must also be understood in terms that go beyond a descriptor of universities and vocational institutions. The World Bank purposefully, and I believe correctly, extends 'tertiary' to include corporate, open, franchise and virtual universities and colleges, research laboratories and centres of excellence. What this means is that the university is removed from its lofty pedestal as the primary producer of knowledge and becomes simply one among many producers in a crowded and competitive marketplace. It also removes this education band from the education sector and places it firmly within the socio-economic realm of the knowledge economy.

There is a further argument that *Constructing Knowledge Societies* uses in order to further its support of tertiary education. It holds that a primary function of higher education is 'building capacity for managing and improving the basic and secondary education system, including capacity for training and re-training teachers and principals' ( p. xxix). The assumption here is that higher education matters because it is the site where teachers and principals are created in the first place. This assumption displays a logic that has advantages and disadvantages.

The obvious advantage is that the report encourages an integrated and holistic view of higher education. This macro view, which is constantly enforced throughout the text, allows for a valuable re-valuation of higher education as an essentially connected service. Present thinking on higher education policy, governance and institutional autonomy is, all too often, mired in an introspective discourse. Perhaps, in part, this is a heritage of an ivory tower traditionalism that still tends to see itself as an independent sector at a remove from the functioning of larger society. The impact of the report speaks of a cascading or trickle-down model of higher education where all points of entry and exit are causally connected to other parts. Thus, the act of becoming a teacher is automatically understood in relation to ensuring a stable primary and secondary schooling system.

The disadvantage of this kind of argument is that it fails to interrogate its premise. It assumes that higher education will automatically produce those teachers and principals. On the contrary, in South Africa, for example, the teaching community has been badly affected by HIV/AIDS (Badcock-Walters et al. 2003; Bennell et al. 2002; Kelly 2000) and the teaching profession is no

longer seen as prestigious or well paid (as it formerly has been), with the consequence that teacher numbers are declining.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for this focus on tertiary education is the link that the report establishes between higher education and the creation and dissemination of knowledge within economies that are based on the production of knowledge. The higher education institution is thus a knowledge factory in an environment where 'economic growth is as much a process of knowledge accumulation as of capital accumulation' (p. 8). Given that knowledge is what higher education produces (Tilak 2003), the report seeks to integrate the purpose of higher education with the larger goals of a neo-liberal economy. The role of the World Bank is to identify blockages to the flow of knowledge and to intervene at those points in order to create an unimpeded economic productivity. With this as its theme, the report argues that: (a) knowledge 'advancement and application' (p. 6) is central to economic and social progress; (b) tertiary education is the custodian and producer of knowledge and can build the necessary capacity for growth; (c) 'developing and transitional countries are at risk of being further marginalised in a highly competitive world economy' (p. 6) because they are not capable of maximising knowledge in line with these demands, and (d) the state needs to create the necessary conditions for tertiary education to respond in innovative ways to the demands of a global economy.

These issues give structure to the report. Thus *Constructing Knowledge Societies* opens with a comprehensive picture of the global environment, the growing role of knowledge, the transformations of information and communication technology and the mobility of human resources within a global setting as well as covering social issues like the spread of democracy, the impact of corruption and violence and the estimated impact of HIV/AIDS (especially) on developing countries. What is clear from this survey is that the global environment is changing fast and that real urgency is required if developing and transitional countries are to have any hope of surviving within the twenty-first century.

This change is reflected in the transforming face of tertiary education. Chapter 2 explains these global changes in terms of the reactions of tertiary education to meet them. The most obvious implication to prospering within a knowledge economy is that the acquiring and utilising of knowledge is not a once off process, or what Patrinos (2002) calls 'terminal education'. What is required is for more knowledge to be circulated within society and for longer periods of time. In this light, chapter 2 raises the importance of lifelong learning, especially with regard to the possibility that in scientific disciplines 'elements of factual knowledge taught in the first year of study may become obsolete

before graduation' (p. 29). The diverse responses to this proposition are interesting; on one hand, it has meant that in Finland there are more adults involved in continuing tertiary education than traditional young students and, on the other, that new kinds of tertiary institutions have arisen to meet these changing needs. Virtual, franchise and corporate universities are all meeting urgent but different needs and are changing, in the process, traditional teaching methods and modes of delivery.

These accelerated solutions to tertiary education challenges are drastically slowed down as they meet the difficulties of the developing context. Chapter 3 is perhaps one of the most revealing insofar as it offers a plethora of country and culture-specific problems. While many of the difficulties—lack of access to higher education, insufficient and inefficient state funding of the sector, high drop-out rates, gender inequality and HIV/AIDS—are common to many developing nations, the added difficulties of India's caste system, the radical re-design of the educational sector through mergers in Hungary and South Africa and issues like cheating and corruption in China, Nigeria and Kenya add increased stress to an already fragile sector. South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, repeatedly talks about the 'two economies' in one country. 'One is advanced and skilled, becoming more globally competitive. The second is mainly informal, marginalised and unskilled' (Presidency 2003:11). If this is all too often a scenario repeated in developing countries, it does depict an economic divide that is exacerbated by an international digital divide, with the effect that countries may find it impossible to contribute to a knowledge society when they are twice removed—economically and digitally—from its potential. In this dilemma lies one of the main ambiguities of the text. The infectious zeal generated by the potential of knowledge societies can all too easily meet with a deafening incomprehension on the part of those developing countries who simply do not have the ability to implement the basic ICT infrastructures upon which a knowledge society depends.

The text attempts to address this issue at a macro level by suggesting that the state needs to be open to the benefits of a strong tertiary system (p. 77) because of the benefits it brings to the state in the form of a larger tax base, greater consumption by graduates, reduced dependence on government for medical and social welfare services and a more cohesive society. In other words, the argument works on the principle that it is a self-evident benefit for a state to support and fund the tertiary sector because it will produce a strong democratic, neo-liberal nation guided by market forces. The difficulty here is that linear logic is often undermined by regional and cultural differences. It is not self-evident in many developing countries that the ideal of a homogenised consuming graduate is a particularly good idea, especially when national

political objectives are so varied. As the ongoing debate on General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) shows, there is little accord among academics or governments as to whether, in the first place, higher education is a service at all and, in the second, whether free trade actually benefits the country that opens up its borders to competition.

My point here is not an old-fashioned carping about the evils of global capitalism but rather an underscoring of the very different ways that developing and transitional countries *respond to* global conditions. The principles of the free market which dictate the World Bank's interventions often suffer a slippage in implementation because of diverse state and higher education goals within the country concerned. Although *Constructing Knowledge Societies* briefly acknowledges this situation (p. 117), the issue deserves more detailed analysis.

The concluding chapter and the detailed appendices also reveal something else worth noting. While detailing the necessary aspects that need to exist in order for World Bank initiatives to succeed and the kinds of programmes already in place, it becomes evident that the authors are also attempting to articulate a new purpose for the bank:

The World Bank is uniquely positioned to work with its partners in the international community—international organisations, bilateral donors, and foundations—to help facilitate or create a discussion platform and promote an enabling framework for the global public goods that are crucial for the future of tertiary education in the developing world (p. 122).

Statements like these (even given the advertorial tone) suggest that an openness to debate about the World Bank's mission and the method of its achievements perhaps even points to a greater collaborative flexibility in future initiatives. This is a good sign. Another good sign is that *Constructing Knowledge Societies* is not a complete text. If its assumptions about knowledge and the capacity of countries to bridge the digital divide are sometimes naïve, it has no pretensions about being comprehensive or emphatic. In fact Appendix G contains a fascinating list of World Bank initiatives which, it openly admits, are both successes and failures. In addition, the text has not simply become a reference source for libraries; but ever since its release in 2002, it has been taken on a 'road show' by Jamil Salmi and the rest of the contributors in order to market it and to debate its substance (Saint, personal communication, March 2004).

Perhaps the enduring strength of *Constructing Knowledge Societies* is that it allows for brainstorming around the text. Even initiatives that have failed provide provocative lessons, albeit negatively. Ideas like non-profit private institutions, India's tax concessions for any corporate donation to tertiary institutions, free first-year education (recouped at a later stage), the development of management information systems at national and institutional levels and the World Bank's systemwide approach that links sectors as well as levels within a country—these ideas (among many others) open up a vista of potential where the renovation of society is always possible.

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