
Raising Too Many Expectations? Comments on the World Bank Report *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*

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The new report by the World Bank on tertiary education is both timely and highly necessary. It is timely because, over the last ten years, we have seen a reassessment of the role of education with regard to poverty reduction and development. In this discussion, the role of tertiary education is too often forgotten or only juxtaposed, in a rather negative way, against primary education. An example of this is Kevin Watkins's *The Oxfam Education Report* (2000) which, although it is a very thorough report on the world's education, is rather negative on tertiary education with regard to equity issues and is further negative because it eats too much of national and donors' budgets.

The World Bank's new report is also necessary since it may help to put tertiary education on the agenda of those donor agencies that have tended to overlook it as an important matter requiring attention. The report may place the role and functions of tertiary education in a new light, showing its strategic place in national educational building. This new perspective is particularly important because any analysis of the functioning of our societies and economies

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on the brink of this twenty-first century teaches us that what we do and how we do things is increasingly knowledge based. Tertiary education, if it is functioning well, should be *the* institution for creating and expanding a local and global knowledge base and for transferring and communicating knowledge to society. There are some signs that the value of tertiary education is increasingly appreciated, not only by donors such as the bank, but more importantly, in the developing world itself. Unfortunately, tertiary education in most developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is still in deep crisis.

Expectations

In the present day, when it seems that education is more and more globalized, it is necessary to shed increased light on the global and national side of knowledge creation and expansion. A reassessment of tertiary education systems and institutions, as presented in the report, may be expected to present a strategy to give them a place in the years to come. It should also provide guidelines for donors who support institution building in tertiary education and expanding the research base in both developing countries and in transition countries. A World Bank report should therefore analyse tertiary education as it stands today and, at the same time, share experiences and give new ideas to tertiary education stakeholders in developing countries, to donor agencies and to implementers of projects and higher education sector plans.

The question is: does the World Bank report *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education* provide us with: (a) an analysis of the place of tertiary education in today's societies, (b) an explanation of the relation between the different sectors within education and the role and function of tertiary education in relation to these other sub-sectors, (c) an assessment of the role of tertiary education with regard to knowledge creation, which is the role of research in tertiary education, (d) instruments with which to assess the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of tertiary education systems and individual institutions, and (e) an expectation of the role and functions of the different actors in this field in the future. Does the report fulfil these expectations?

We have to say: only in part. The report is certainly strong in sketching the contribution of tertiary education to economic and social development. It also presents the challenges that this sector faces at present. But what we miss is a certain thoroughness in the analysis. We also miss the institutional side—the role of capacity and institution building and the lessons for donors. It is difficult to read from the report what progress the World Bank itself made since the last report of 1994. For example, how are the 'Guidelines for Future Lending' as mentioned in that earlier report, put into practice?

The Thoroughness of the Analysis

Let us give some critical comments on the thoroughness of the analysis. The analysis starts with the very concept of a knowledge society. What is it? Isn't every human society, however 'primitive' it may be, a 'knowledge society'? And if that is so, what does that mean for the analysis of the 'level' of knowledge needed for a society and individuals to achieve a certain level of social and economic development?

The report does not really explore the concept of a 'knowledge society,' and it gives us no analysis of what this concept means to, for instance, the least developed countries of this world. Much of the evidence presented in the report is based on experiences in Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and middle-income countries, whose economies are driven by highly educated policymakers and by the latest information technologies, and whose tertiary education institutes indeed play a crucial role in economic and social development. But this is not the case in many developing countries. In many of the least developed countries, the national innovation systems that are, according to the report, a necessary condition for creating a knowledge society, are simply absent.

David Court (2003) has argued recently that tertiary education institutes and societies in least developed countries do not lag behind only due to their lack of capacity or their resistance to change. According to Court, it has more to do with the inability of institutes to produce and disseminate local and contextually relevant knowledge: knowledge which enables individuals and communities to acquire awareness of locally available resources and of the skills to use them. Most universities in Africa are short of this kind of contextually relevant knowledge. Furthermore, unfortunately, the knowledge of African universities is often still of imported origin. The question is then: What do these institutes contribute to their own knowledge societies? The report could have explored this issue further.

A second example of a lack of in-depth analysis is the discussion on privatisation. We notice that the World Bank has withdrawn from earlier, more radical points of view here; but many questions still remain. In the last ten to fifteen years, there was a trend toward increased privatisation of tertiary education in many developing countries, including Africa. Such privatisation was often accompanied by a certain reluctance and fear on the part of the governments that liked to keep control of tertiary education institutions. The present report seems to be less outspoken on the benefits of privatisation than the bank used to be. Earlier, the bank had advocated privatisation more or less as *the* solution to many problems, but we did not find this perspective in *Constructing Knowledge Societies*. A shift in thinking seems to have occurred;

now the main message is that private tertiary education still has a valuable contribution to make but that it is not very successful in delivering the public good that higher education embodies.

This, very broadly, is the report's conclusion. What we then hoped to find was an analysis of how far this privatisation goes, what effects it has had on the quality of education and what its risks are. Will private education companies or institutions offer only the attractive, 'quick buck courses' in management sciences? Will that leave the money-wise less attractive courses (social sciences, arts) and those that need high investments (medicine, engineering) to the 'old' universities? How does private education relate to the public sector? What are the effects of this privatisation on brain drain? These issues deserve a more in-depth analysis than the report provides.

Furthermore, the analysis of the gender imbalance at universities is not very sophisticated: It stops with the conclusion that there *are* gender imbalances in student enrolments and in the teaching staff, e.g. in the fields of science and engineering. In many countries, gender disparities at universities can be related back to (a) the unnatural growth cycles of universities and their programmes, (b) gender differentiation in student recruitment—in particular in those fields that have much heavier funding (science, engineering) or that are underfunded (the arts, social sciences), and (c) gender disparities at lower levels of education.

As yet another point, the Ghana-South Korea comparison seems to be rather popular in World Bank circles these days (*Constructing Knowledge Societies*, pp. 10–11). It can also be found in the highly criticized report *Assessing Aid* (World Bank 1998). Our feeling is that the comparison is not very appropriate in this context. We think that this comparison isn't even a comparison between an apple and a pear, but between a cocoa grain and a steel plate: not very logical, to put it mildly. The level of development (social and economic) between these two countries was and is so deeply different that a comparison might be made with the GNP per capita as a starting point; but then, those who make this comparison totally neglect all the (major) differences between the two countries. This comparison will therefore not deliver useful insights on tertiary education development and government policy, nor does it give us good comparisons on the effect of 'good governance'.

Lastly, another issue which could have been given more attention, and which is related to relevance, is the links between tertiary education, poverty on the local level, and the labour market. The bank should have done better in addressing the question of whether existing tertiary education institutes are properly equipped to address issues of poverty, whether they can meet the needs of a changing labour market and whether they can produce and apply locally

relevant knowledge. A real poverty focus is lacking in the report, which is unfortunate. Developing countries probably need more than academically trained persons to address poverty. Non-academic tertiary education therefore would have deserved some more attention in the report as well.

Three Major Issues

Let us formulate our criticism in a more constructive way and extend it to three major issues: the balance in funding, institution building, and lessons for donor agencies.

The Balance of Funding

For developing countries (and also donor agencies, given the pressure of some major nongovernmental organizations for the Social Summit's 20–20) it would be important to find a good balance in the following areas:

1. In their budget allocations to the different education sub-sectors. How much, in what phase of social and economic development, should go to basic, to secondary and to tertiary education? The topic is briefly discussed (p. 82), but it should have been explored further.
2. Between private finance and the level of student support. To what extent should students be supported? How can systems be developed to support the really needy and to enhance equity in enrolment? Should support be given directly or indirectly? These questions need to be addressed to overcome what we could call the 'Niger Discrepancy'. *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience* (World Bank 1994) devoted its Chapter 4 to a discussion of this topic, but experiences since then should be evaluated.
3. Support for the different fields of tertiary education related to their level of development. How can funding support stimulate enrolment in courses that are important for the economy (sciences) or society (arts) and that are underrecruited in many countries at the moment? We think that it is very important to elaborate more on the distribution of funds and on the relation between several types of funding—to present ideas on what might be a good mix or formula under certain circumstances. This issue is particularly important with regard to least developed countries which could use advice on effective investments to build a 'knowledge society' under their specific circumstances. Such an approach offers at least a potential escape from the half-hearted and half-successful 'copying experiments' they are often involved in now.

Institution Building

Building tertiary education is a form of institution building. What amazes us is that *Constructing Knowledge Societies* does so little cross learning in relation to technical cooperation and institution building. Very little is learned from the linking experiments in the portfolio of bilateral donors. A series of evaluations has been carried out on these cooperation instruments in the last fifteen years, and they contain interesting lessons. Such lessons are surely of value for institution building, because that is what cooperation in this field is about. Universities and their sister-institutions are very specific organisations, because the majority of their staff have (in comparison) a high degree of education and are highly professional.

In such institutions, decisions and plans for change need broad support and the consensus of the implementers, who are the teaching staff. The management of such an institution asks for specific constitutions. We understand that the report was written under the guidance of Jo Ritzen who, as Minister of Education in The Netherlands, was responsible for a major change in university management by installing an omnipotent 'Dictator Dean' and thus putting an end to a democratically controlled university organisation. The idea was to speed up decision making by disbanding sub-faculty/department, faculty and university councils (remnants from the 1960s); but the experiment has not been a success. Decision making in most Dutch universities is now much slower and more fragmented than before.

We do not agree that the real problem of institution building is that, as *Constructing Knowledge Societies* claims (p. 62), control over universities is often in the hands of (parts of) the teaching staff. Rather, we think that the choice is more between authoritarian and closed versus more democratic and transparent institutions in which the consumers (students and parents) also have their say and in which there are regular quality assessments, not only of courses but also of individual staff members. Such assessments can be achieved with 'contribution contracts' or yearly evaluations that are not based on an assessment of research results alone, but which also value teaching and other tasks.

Lessons for Donor Agencies

What does this report mean for donor agencies working in the field of tertiary education development? As stated before, the report puts tertiary education on the agenda anew. But there is more. Donors' support of tertiary education was, for many years, more attractive than support to other sub-sectors of education, with the exception of vocational training. Also with respect to vocational training, there were ample opportunities to deliver equipment and to give

technical assistance. In the 1970s, for instance, Germany, Switzerland and The Netherlands were major donors in this field.

University cooperation gave donors (a) opportunities to deliver equipment and to train people in handling it who, in the future, might be in positions to decide on the purchase of this equipment; (b) high visibility and prestige with the construction of buildings bearing bronze plaques with the text: 'This building is a gift of her Royal Highness of (name of country)'; (c) a channel to keep old colonial relations intact by educating the new elites and leaders of the future.

Although this situation has definitely changed over the last decade, many bilateral donors still continue to run their own programmes for university cooperation, the agenda of which is often still controlled by the Northern partners. For many donors, this is still the only instrument of supporting tertiary education in developing countries. Such a relationship is unfortunate because the most pressing problems of tertiary education in developing countries cannot be solved by academic cooperation only. Why hasn't the bank analysed this situation in the report? It is a missed opportunity that this widely used instrument of support to tertiary education is not even mentioned in *Constructing Knowledge Societies*.

Consensus Building and Reform

The strategy for the development of tertiary education presented in the report is one of consensus building and reform. Both approaches are indeed very important, but it is rather strange that the report sees a rather prominent role for the World Bank in such consensus building. With this report, the bank once again seems to put itself in the limelight of being *the* knowledge bank, ready to share its experiences with the rest of the world. The criticism that this positioning has received over the past few years is probably well known and need not be repeated here. We feel sympathy for the complaint of bank officials that they are damned if they do (share their knowledge) and damned if they don't. And there is no doubt that the bank has an excellent group of higher education staff at its disposal.

But despite all this, the bank could have been a bit more modest with respect to the role it sees for itself. Annex F to the report shows that the bank has been active mainly in middle-income countries, which have already reached a certain level of development in which tertiary education can flourish. Only 7 per cent of the bank's lending to tertiary education in the last decade went to sub-Saharan Africa; and among the ten largest borrowers, there was neither a single least developed country nor a single country from sub-Saharan Africa. Of course one could say that tertiary education faces many similar problems

everywhere, but the range of potential solutions varies greatly. It is therefore a bit tricky to present the bank's experience, which comes mainly from its involvement in middle-income countries, as solutions for the poorest countries. Such an assumption may do more damage than good.

The bank, with this report, apparently admits that it has not been sufficiently involved in tertiary education in recent years. This situation is rooted far back in the bank's history (Jones 1992, chs. 2, 6). A logical deduction from this message would be that this lack of involvement in the tertiary education sector has left the bank without sufficient knowledge to plan and advise on interventions in the future. This issue was also raised at the international seminar 'From Peril to Promise: How Higher Education Can Deliver', organised by the British Council, in March 2002 and held in Bath, England. So one may question where the bank's comparative advantage lies. What legitimacy may the bank suddenly claim for positioning itself in the centre of tertiary education reform after having neglected the sector for so long?

It is very doubtful that the bank will increase its lending to tertiary education. The report is not about a new World Bank policy priority to which more money will be allocated. In fact, one rather has the impression that one of the report's main purposes is to serve internal politics within the bank. If this is the case, in practice it probably means only that the bank will consider requests for support for tertiary education from developing countries in a more balanced way than before. Although this development would be positive, it may backfire, because the report and the way it is presented at international conferences certainly raises higher expectations.

The Storms of Globalisation

In summary, what we miss in the report is a thorough analysis of the concept of a 'knowledge society'. What we miss is a discussion on thirty-five years of university cooperation with developing countries. What we miss is a discussion on academic institution building: its lessons, its successes and failures, its loopholes and traps.

But there is more. The analysis of the relation between globalisation and tertiary education in this report is too positive and rather biased; it does not give sufficient attention to the negative consequences that globalisation will definitely have for tertiary education in many developing countries. An example might be the worldwide increase in the often-aggressive activities of so-called offshore education providers. Such activities may aggravate the already existing problems. Michael Gibbons (2003), secretary general of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, predicted a 'global war on manpower'.

We are afraid that he is right. We even think that the ground forces have already invaded foreign territory.

We recently heard of an example from Kenya where an Australian university has opened a campus. It provides Australian courses, the content of which is largely irrelevant for Kenya, for fee-paying students who spend two years on campus in Kenya. Those with the best results are subsequently invited to continue their studies in Australia, fully subsidised by the Australians. The idea behind this venture clearly is to provide the Australian knowledge economy with the best brains in the world. This private enterprise doesn't seem to care what happens to those students who don't make it to Australia, but whose families have scraped every shilling together to get their kids into that school. It doesn't seem to care what effects such policies have on the tertiary education system in Kenya, and it clearly cannot be bothered by the fact that the best brains leave the country. On the contrary, that is its main objective.

The most recent figures show that *every year* 70,000 highly qualified Africans leave the continent and that 30,000 Africans with Ph.D. degrees already live and work outside Africa (Prosper and Odumasi-Ashanti 2003). A rough estimation is that Africa would need at least one million scientists and engineers to sustain its development prospects. They are not there in such numbers, and those who are trained are often quickly attracted by the richer knowledge economies of this world. So, what does creating knowledge societies in developing countries mean in this context? Is it a realistic option or wishful thinking? We think that the bank, although it mentions the brain drain in *Constructing Knowledge Societies*, underestimates the effects of this global war on manpower. At the very least, the bank fails to give the issue sufficient attention, while the tides are changing rapidly.

We can only conclude that, although the report touches on many issues related to tertiary education in developing countries, it does not provide sufficient analysis of some of the key issues. This is a missed opportunity, all the more since the publication of this report has already raised many expectations in developing countries. We are afraid that the bank cannot meet these expectations and that the bank might have to offer its apologies again ten years from now. Such a situation is not good for the bank's reputation and—which is far more important—it can frustrate the spirit and dampen the enthusiasm of key individuals and officials in developing countries who are devoted to innovation and change of their tertiary education systems.

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