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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A paradox of the public good: how far should we democratize? From principles to policy to practice

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In the complex real world of the higher education policy-maker, he/she often has to weave a tortuous route between universally held principles governing higher education in general and the actual formulation of operating policies that embody these principles. In addition he/she must monitor the implementation of these policies to see that their implementation actually achieves their intended purposes. Unfortunately, in practice, the desired effect is not always realized. This paper looks at one such universal principle, that of democratization of higher education, which conveys the twofold notion of equity of access, and providing as many places in higher education as society demands. It then looks at a few instances where this principle is translated into a variety of policies, with different results.

**Keywords:** higher education; policy; democratization; equity; access

## Public and private dimensions of higher education

There is no doubt that higher education benefits both the individual and the society it serves. Because of this, there is both a private dimension and a public dimension to higher education. Treating it as a purely private endeavour reduces higher education to a tradable commodity devoid of social responsibility considerations; holding it as entirely a public service ignores the vast potential and essential contribution of parents, students, and the private sector to this undertaking.

Because equitable access to all levels of education is a responsibility of the State, and because an educated citizenry is the bedrock upon which economic development is based, the government has a responsibility to govern higher education. Today, more than ever, it must take into account both private and public components of this sector. With the escalating demand for higher education and unprecedented quantum leaps in tertiary education enrolment, the role of private higher education, and indeed even of cross-border education, has correspondingly increased, even in countries where traditionally all higher education institutions were public and run by the State. Today there are countries in Asia where up to 80% of colleges and universities are non-governmental.

## Distinguishing between governance and administration

This is not to diminish the key role of governments in this situation. It however requires a sharper definition of their role. Whereas once, governments felt an obligation to provide higher education on their own, they now rely on the private sector to respond to much or even most

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of the demand for higher education. But governments cannot and must not abdicate their responsibility for the governance of this sector. In the past, many governments may have felt responsible for providing for higher education, not only governing the sector, but also administering and managing its institutions. In the present, however, when they often cannot or do not do this any more, governments nevertheless have a responsibility to see to it that higher education is somehow provided, within a framework consistent with national goals and priorities. This defines their role as governance rather than administration of the higher education institutions, public and private. To posit an analogy, it no longer runs all the trains, now run or managed by a variety of engineers according to their styles, speed, standards, and so on, but it is still responsible for laying down the tracks and setting the routes and the directions the trains will run.

Governance ultimately requires an articulation of goals, translating these into principles, and then further translating these into operational policies. In the complex real world of the higher education policy-maker, he/she often has to weave a tortuous route between universally held principles governing higher education in general and the actual formulation of operating policies that embody these principles. In addition he/she must monitor the implementation of these policies to see that their implementation actually achieves their intended purposes. Unfortunately, in practice, the desired effect is not always realized.

This paper looks at one such universal principle, that of democratization of higher education, and then looks at a few instances where this principle is translated into a variety of policies, with different results.

## Defining democratization

Democratization, like the term democracy itself, can have multiple meanings. In the context of higher education discussions, the term democratization has been used to mean any of the following:

- administrative democratization,
- greater popular control over or increased participation in the formation of government policy,
- disaggregated or decentralized governmental power from geographic distribution or through markets, or
- just generally greater and more diverse access to higher education opportunities.

For the purposes of this paper, we will take democratization of higher education to mean simply providing both a sufficient and an equitable number of places in higher education institutions to meet the growing demands for these places.

## The principles

First the principles. In November 1998, there was perhaps the largest and most senior world conference on higher education, hosted by UNESCO in Paris, attended by some 3000 ministers, university heads, and senior policy-makers from 140 countries, to bring the importance and changing nature of higher education back to the high priority agendas of governments and their collaborators (UNESCO 1998). At that meeting, again re-echoed by the follow-up conference five years later, in 2003, the sentiment was explicitly expressed that higher education must remain a government responsibility for the common good, and therefore a public good. As recently as 2005, a group of Nobel Prize winners from different fields hosted by the Global

University Network for Innovations, reacting to all sorts of diversification of forms of higher education and the inability of many governments to keep budgets apace with growing demand, nevertheless reiterated the public good character of higher education, 'We consider higher education a public good, not exclusive, whose benefits must reach all people as an essential tool for a balanced development' (GUNI 2005).

As indicated earlier, an interesting shift in the notion of government's responsibility towards education as a public good has taken place, given recent realities. Whereas once, especially in developing countries without a long history of private education, governmental responsibility was translated to mean providing and financing this higher education system, in effect managing and administering it, now the responsibility is shifting towards governing the system, providing the general policy guidelines and directions, and no longer actually running or financing it.

A second main principle underlined by the 1998 and 2003 World Conferences is the concept of democratization, framed in terms of access issues. In fact the preamble of the 1998 World Conference Declaration immediately harks back to the indisputable Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in Article 26 that 'every person has the right to education, . . .' and that 'higher education shall be accessible to all, on the basis of merit' (United Nations General Assembly 1948). Interestingly, the last phrase, 'on the basis of merit', is often omitted in national public discourses, partly to protect the notion of equitable access, and partly for political gain purposes.

In any case, translating this principle of democratization, coupled with worldwide escalating demand for higher education beyond the capacity of most governments to meet this demand by themselves, and with the more complex requirements of the world of work, is fraught with questions. The first and most basic question is: how far should governments democratize; what is their ultimate goal – to give every citizen a college or university degree? This is obviously neither achievable nor desirable. It should not be the goal of a society to have everyone be a lawyer, or engineer, or teacher. Citizens are needed to run the farms, do manual public services, engage in manufacturing, construction, keep the peace and civil order, and so on; for these tasks a university may not be necessary or even useful.[1]

When I was involved in the governance of the higher education system in the Philippines, over 20% of the college age cohort were enrolled in some sort of higher education institution. That put the Philippine participation rate in the top seven countries of the world. I was convinced that no further expansion was needed, even as I saw the Philippine economy not being able to absorb the graduates of higher education and the beginning of the great diaspora of Philippine professional workers overseas. But it was a highly unpopular stand, viewed as elitist and locking out opportunities for the less privileged. Coincidentally, I served then as consultant to the Korean higher education system, just beginning to expand at that time. I recall the Philippines then had 600 higher education institutions, and Korea had 72. In the intervening 30 or so years between then and now, Korean tertiary education has expanded to over 400 colleges and universities, and several hundred more post-secondary institutions offering a variety of non-degree courses. It now has the highest net enrolment ratio in the world, surpassing the USA and all of Europe. Obviously, Korea was not worried about an oversupply of educated manpower, and their economic success has proven them right. Inevitably, I have had to rethink my premises.

This raises a subsidiary but important area of discussion: the relationship between a citizenry's formal education level and its country's economic development. It is facile to assume that the more educated a citizenry, the greater the potential for economic growth. And Korea seems to validate that assumption. But countries like the Philippines, which continues to struggle economically despite high education attainment rates, and China, which on the other hand displays enviable economic growth in spite of low higher education participation rates, belie that assumption. Obviously, factors beyond mere participation, such as higher education quality and its relevance and 'fit' to a country's development needs, determine the strength of this symbiotic relationship. Also economists now argue that higher education may be as much an effect as a cause of economic growth (World Bank 2002). Moreover, higher education may not cause the growth, but may be needed to sustain it and see it progress above certain levels.[2]

To get back to the issue, both Korea and the Philippines rely heavily on the private sector to deliver and finance the bulk of higher education, and that continues in both countries to be an issue of constant debate, related to equity and quality. In other countries like Malaysia and Singapore where the bulk of higher education is still financed by government, the premises for discussion, such as outputs tied to perceived future professional needs of the nation, are quite different. In both cases, policy-makers and national budget planners have to face the question, in light of the democratization principle: how large in the long run should the higher education sector be? And how is it going to be managed and financed?

## From principles to policy

In order to shed light on actual policy dilemmas relative to translating the democratization, equity, and access principles of higher education, let me present six specific real or illustrative examples of how the best intentions can sometimes produce unforeseen consequences.

### *Case one: admission policies*

Some countries use nationally administered qualifying exams to determine who are eligible for admission to their tertiary level. In the Philippines, for example, where an official National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) only admitted the top 50 percentile of test takers, a populist parliament abolished the NCEE, claiming it was preventing the less privileged from accessing higher education. It seemed like a clear instance of applying the democratization principle, since in fact those from the less privileged tended to have lower scores. The result of implementing the policy, however, was that universities were flooded with twice the previous number of applications and left to their own devices on whom to accept. Because most higher institutions were private, increased demand made tuition rates rise inexorably, and the ability to pay, rather than the ability to learn, became the overriding determinant for admission. The dragon preventing those academically unprepared from entering the gates of higher education was replaced by the dragon preventing those who could not afford to pay for it. In effect, the new policy not only diluted the quality of the entering cohorts, it ironically exacerbated the rich–poor divide and militated against the very principle of democratization that the policy was intended to uphold (Asia Pacific Regional Academic Recognition Network 2005).

### *Case two: the practice of positive discrimination in favour of the underserved*

In any democracy, the tyranny of the majority must not be allowed to curtail the rights and equal access of the minority, but the reverse is also true – catering to the minority must not disadvantage the majority. On the other hand, serving the needs of the minority is invariably more expensive and involves real budgetary trade-offs. Several countries have established specialized universities or institutions serving specific target groups, whether they are geographically remote areas, or ethnic or religious groups, or specialized area studies. Their much higher cost per student must be viewed in the light of the opportunity cost of correspondingly having the same amount available for the larger number of mainstream students in regular institutions. The dilemma of positive discrimination for special target groups or interest groups is not peculiar to higher education. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of legislation for special education, which translates into an expenditure per special education student more than 10 times the expenditure for a regular student. Is this the wisest use of resources, especially when the regular education sector has not yet reached all out-of-school youth and is badly in need of quality improvement? And if each special interest minority group lobbies successfully for special treatment, is not the net effect a fragmented society rather than a truly democratic one?

### *Case three: common national standards*

Those responsible for establishing the governance frameworks for institutions of higher education must keep the balance between too loose a control mechanism and too tight a mechanism. Too loose a control, the near absence of standards established in conjunction with the professions involved, results in sub-standard schools, unacceptable standards, and incompetent graduates. On the other hand, too tight a mechanism, excessive regulation, prevents the mediocre from becoming bad, but also constricts the good from becoming excellent. Nevertheless, in the name of equity and democratization, the trend is towards the establishment of common standards, resulting in some cases in bringing all institutions down to the least common denominator. Vigorous debate on this issue is currently underway in Korea. Although Korea boasts of an adequate system with the highest participation rates in the world, it bemoans the fact that none of its universities figure in the top 40 universities of the world; many critics blame government's tendency to make uniform standards and regulations for all institutions.

There is another policy avenue that tries to preserve national standards without hampering the creativity and excellence of better institutions. It is the mechanism of accreditation, initiated by the universities themselves rather than by government, which allows those well above government standards the freedom from some of the regulatory frameworks to enable them to innovate and excel.[3] Recent trends in accreditation now focus not on centrally determined indicators of quality and capacity, but on effectiveness of institutions in actually performing what they set out to do. Another antidote to standardization is the explicit priority funding of recognized centres of excellence, although this also raises issues of positive discrimination and elitism (IDRC 2003, Asia Association of Agricultural Colleges and Universities 2005).

### *Case four: the phenomenon of virtual campuses and overseas branches*

In many countries, governments have for some time come to rely on private institutions of higher learning to meet the unmet demand for higher education places. Some of these institutions are faith-based, others are secular but philanthropic, while still others are established for profit. Mechanisms and policies are set in place to govern and regulate these institutions, according to national priorities and expectations.

There is a new type of institution governments must now face and govern. A recent phenomenon in the higher education scene is the proliferation of virtual campuses and overseas branches, which enter the scene without regard to national boundaries. Because the mother institutions of these branches design and operate their courses transnationally, they do not necessarily conform to the guidelines and curricular requirements of the host country. This presents a dilemma for the policy-maker. Where they are determined to be of good quality, governments welcome the increased access and democratization opportunities they provide. But as their offerings become increasingly commodified and commercialized, there is concern that nationally articulated curricular and other requirements will not figure in the new offerings, and yet will demand recognition from government. Quite apart from academic requirements, there is a parallel concern that education and its content, being a basic building block of national identity, must remain firmly in the hands of national institutions. And it does provide competitive alternatives to national public and private institutions, which can have both beneficial and deleterious effects.

In response to this burgeoning phenomenon, different countries have taken quite different policy stances, some much more stringent than others. In Thailand, for example, the government imposes as a condition for recognition at least as rigorous a standard for faculty, curricular requirements, physical plant, laboratories, etc., for overseas branches as for national institutions, in the effort to guarantee quality and filter out purely entrepreneurial adventurists. It can do little with regard to Internet-based and electronic offerings, and free forces of the market allow this alternative to grow unfettered. In both cases, however, where higher education opportunities are seen as services or 'products', their commodification has led the WTO and GAT to involve this service within their purview of ensuring free and unfettered trade, amidst vigorous objections from many parts of the global academic community.

### *Case five: the classic choice of improving access or improving quality*

Difficult resource allocation decisions often have to be made as a higher education system expands. In the name of democratization, and in response to the overwhelming demand for ever more places, the tendency is to allocate resources for new institutions or for expanding absorptive capacity of existing ones. As a result, resources for genuine needs of universities for quality improvement and relevant programmes are often siphoned off for this purpose. The consequence is a deterioration of quality and relevance.[4]

The analogy at lower levels of education can be illustrative. In the Education for All (EFA) campaign for universal primary schooling, countries in South Asia with low enrolment rates invested resources in additional classrooms and teachers, without adequate support for curriculum reform, teaching materials, and supplementary nutrition and community support programmes. Enrolments did increase initially, but dropout rates in the new schools were even higher than the already alarming rates in the rest of the system. Since a child reverts to illiteracy when he/she drops out before four years of schooling are completed, the net effect of the EFA effort on literacy was negligible. Rough calculations indicated that the same amount of resources, used to improve existing schools and thereby reduce dropouts, would have had a greater net effect on children staying in school and literacy than the effort to build additional schools. So also in tertiary education, the net competence output of a higher education system may be better served by investing in quality rather than by investing in additional infrastructure that produces mediocrity. Does this thinking go against the democratization principle, or does it in some way actually support it?

Turning to the private sector of higher education, where government does not directly finance the costs, autonomous institutions expand in response to market demand. Unfortunately, they are quick to respond to low cost demands that are easier to meet. Thus there is in many countries with predominantly private institutions a disproportionately large number of enrolees in the arts, humanities, business, and social sciences, and a smaller percentage than desired in the higher cost courses of health and natural sciences, engineering and technology, and other courses which require overheads of laboratories, clinics, and so on. Governments try to correct this imbalance through incentives and support packages for high cost programmes in the private sector, but market forces and tuition rates resist significant shifts in this distortion. Unbridled private sector response to market forces, that is, demand from students and parents, thus produces distribution distortions, not only in favouring those who can afford, but also in favouring certain disciplines. There is a third distortion, an equity one, which is geographical: a bias in favour of urban vs. rural areas, because that is where the clients exist in sufficient concentrations to make private effort economically viable. Public universities are theoretically established to right these balances, offering courses not otherwise available, for a fraction of the true cost, and in geographical areas not otherwise served by the private sector.



### *Case six: planning the future of the higher education sector: market-driven expansion vs. rationalization of access*

As higher education enrolments continue to escalate and various innovative forms of higher education keep emerging, governments are tempted to allow the growth and evolution of the system to be driven by market forces. It seems like too much of an effort to rein in the galloping speed of expansion and diversification. And yet its duty as the guarantor of the public good, and of the role that higher education must play in the nation's development, requires that some general policy direction be provided. The possible imbalances brought about by private sector entrepreneurship, overseas campuses, online experimental programmes, and so on, as referred to in the previous case study, must be addressed.

To be sure, imbalances are also found in state university systems. Many countries create higher education institutions by legislation, and national or local parliaments have the authority to establish new universities on the basis of perceived needs. In reality, the creation of such institutions create much political goodwill, and powerful parliamentarians sometimes use this mechanism to shore up their support with their constituencies, even when their area is already adequately served by both public and private educational institutions. The more underserved areas of the country, when they are represented by less powerful lobbies in parliament, do not get the access they need. Political influence and power, rather than a technical or rational analysis of where higher education needs to increase access, becomes the determinant in an eventually regressive expenditure pattern of expansion. Technical analyses, manpower projections, manpower mapping, and similar studies do little to influence the legislator or the budget officers.

On the other hand, the incredible pace and unpredictability of change today makes it more utopian than ever to imagine one can accurately predict the manpower and professional competence demands of the future. Even as early as the 1960s, small states like Singapore, which had a good a chance as any at forecasting their needs for educated professionals in various fields, eventually abandoned quantitative goal setting for the outputs of their university sector. In tomorrow's fast changing world, professions and skills will be needed that have not actually evolved yet, and the best higher education can do is to prepare tomorrow's educated workforce to adopt and continue learning. It is impossible to do manpower planning for a future whose shape and direction are very much unknown. Does this mean then, that we resign ourselves to accepting market forces as the ultimate determinant of the size and shape, and indeed objectives of higher education, recognizing its reality as a private commodity more than a public good?

## Concluding reflections

In translating principles into policy, the higher education policy-maker is faced with a bewildering array of choices. Some choices are tried and tested, others are innovative and responsive to the new shapes and directions that higher education has recently taken. What works in one country does not necessarily work in another. The implementation of near identical policies can have vastly different results in different cultural and institutional settings.

It is important to realize that any given policy, even when designed explicitly to make operative a general principle (such as democratization), also embodies with it explicitly or implicitly the interpretation of other principles. The actual implementation of such a policy impinges on other realities that are affected in ways that support or contravene other considerations or policies. Thus, for example, honouring the principle of greater access must not ignore the principle of ensuring of quality. Providing for the minority must not be at the expense of depriving the majority. Competing considerations must be weighed in the evaluation of the consequences of any given set of policies.

It is in this context that the above illustrative case studies are presented. These case studies are illustrations of how the principle of democratization takes policy shape in different contexts, with different expected and unexpected results. They are presented, not so much to illustrate good or bad examples of current practice, but as triggers for discussion on the 'democratization dilemma', within the debate on higher education as a public good vs. private commodity.



## Notes

1. An important clarification: I make a vital distinction here between post-secondary education and higher or tertiary education. One is more encompassing than the other; post-secondary education includes not only higher education but all forms of continuing education, vocational training, skills development, and short-term programmes, whereas higher education as I use it here limits itself generally to offerings, usually four-year courses, leading to a degree credential. In the above statement, the assertion is that not every citizen needs a college degree. But in the light of today's learning societies, post-secondary education, lifelong learning, is not only achievable but also desirable for everyone.
2. Among the truly novel elements of the past four decades of globalized development have been (a) the ability of developing nations to outsource much of the cost of higher education by sending students abroad, (b) leapfrogging various mini-stages of economic development that characterized the industrial revolution by using process engineering techniques which when coupled with FDI (foreign direct investment) have allowed for sophisticated production without what were previously held as commensurate levels of higher degree holders in the society, and (c) creating economic development at levels of global competitiveness and costs but without having to 'pay' the social costs to labour and the techno-intelligentsia that the developed countries did. This, again, is a 'benefit' of the economics of global production. The overall social costs to such countries is that by having these very rapid economic growth processes triggered by exogenous capacities, they have tended not to build up there own intellectual and resource stocks, especially in the professionalized middle classes. All this to the point that economic development as we want to conjoin it with these ideas of higher education may need to be spelled out more carefully in terms of the particular economic development experience to which reference is being made.
3. The term 'accreditation' takes on two distinct definitions in different countries, depending on who undertakes the process. As used here, it refers to the process as carried out in the USA and a few other countries by associations created by universities themselves for this purpose. The second definition applies to the process as it is carried out in many developing countries by government agencies themselves, blurring somewhat the distinction between recognition and accreditation. For more information, cf. Colin Brock, 'Historical and Societal Root of Regulation and Accreditation of Higher Education' and Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, 'The International Politics of Quality Assurance and Accreditation', both in *Higher Education in the World 2007*, Global University Network for Innovation, Barcelona, 2006.
4. Quality is of course another factor easy to identify in its presence or its absence, but hard to define and to measure. In the past there has been an effort to define and measure quality by the proxy of the inputs that contribute to it: facilities, libraries, faculty with doctoral degrees, etc. For both recognition/credentialing and accreditation processes, there is a tendency for minimum levels to be established for these inputs to ensure some modicum of quality. More recent efforts have supplemented this with attempts to measure outputs as well as inputs, such as numbers of graduates employed in appropriate professions and the time it takes them to get first jobs, research outputs, grants and contracts for consultancies with government and the private sector, and so on. Even more recent institutional evaluation efforts look beyond inputs and outputs and ask the basic question of what the institutions set out for themselves to do as objectives, and then hold them accountable to demonstrate their ability to accomplish these.

## Notes on contributor

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