

Address Given by Kamal Ahmad
to
The Higher Education Roundtable of the World Bank

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have been asked to speak about the report of the World Bank/UNESCO Task Force on Higher Education that I had the privilege of co-directing with David Bloom of Harvard University. The Task Force was formed in 1998 and brought together fourteen eminent people, including several cabinet members from around the world. Its goal was to refocus the attention of international agencies, national governments and others on the predicament of higher education in much of the developing world and thereby underscore the calamity that awaits in the event of continued neglect of this sector. The Task Force was chaired by Professor Henry Rosovsky of Harvard and Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, then the Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and now Managing Director for Human Development at the World Bank. The Report was officially launched by Jim Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, last March. I believe a copy of the Report is included in the package of materials for the Higher Education Roundtable here.

For many years, higher education in developing countries enjoyed the attention of governments and international agencies. A university, like a national airline, was often the symbol of nationhood, and a new university was born each time an independent nation emerged in the post-colonial era. Bangladesh, of course, saw its first university back in 1921, long before the birth of the nation; it was the prize for the division of Bengal. The late 1950s and 1960s saw a surge of activity in international higher education. The “Development University” model – the notion of universities as instruments for propelling economic development – was actively pursued by numerous donors, including the US Agency for International Development and the Rockefeller Foundation, among others. In this country, we saw the emergence of the Agriculture

University in Mymensingh and the Engineering University in Dhaka following the “Development University” model. By the early 1970s, the enthusiasm for higher education had already started to wane. I suspect that the tumultuous student activism of the 1960s in the wake of the Vietnam War, and other great social and political discontents of the time, must have dampened official interest in tertiary education. It was, however, the analytical work on the social rate of return on investment in education that decidedly shifted the balance away from higher education.

The Social Rate of Return Analysis and its Flaws

These analytical techniques seemed to show that higher education provided a much lower rate of return on investment compared to that of primary or even secondary education. The analysis provided a powerful justification for focusing public educational investment at the primary education level. This justification was further reinforced by the obvious gains in social equity associated with such a strategy, as highlighted and endorsed by the Jomtien Declaration of 1990. In this context, the international donor community concluded that their aid strategy should emphasize primary education, relegating higher education to a relatively minor place on its development agenda.

There can be no denial of the utmost importance of large public investment in primary and secondary education. However, we as a Task Force came to conclude that the rate of return analysis was fundamentally flawed in certain respects. Rate of return analysis values highly educated people only for the greater tax revenues they provide to society from their larger earnings. But highly educated people clearly have many other positive effects on society: they are well-positioned to be economic and social entrepreneurs, having a far-reaching impact on the social well-being of their communities. Good governance, strong institutions and a developed infrastructure are all essential for economic progress – and none of these is possible without highly educated people.

The Task Force believes that a more balanced approach to education at all levels is needed. The focus on primary education is important, but an approach that pursues primary education alone will leave societies dangerously unprepared for survival in tomorrow's world.

Reasserting the Public Interest in Higher Education

Under these circumstances, the first thing that the Task Force set out to do was to reassert the public interest in higher education – an issue that had been blinded by the social rate of return analysis. It is this public interest argument that I would like to focus on tonight. Of the many ways in which the less developed countries are separated from the more developed, perhaps none is as consequential as different levels of knowledge. Development is severely restrained when a society lacks competence to apply modern science and technology, to negotiate with understanding and strength, and to anticipate and prepare for the challenges of tomorrow. A country unable to close the knowledge gap between itself and its wealthier neighbors will find it nearly impossible to compete economically in world markets. The new knowledge and the trained labor force that result from a strong higher education system increase the material and symbolic goods and services produced by the society as a whole. This public interest transcends the private interests of persons and institutions that may benefit from specific outputs. Moreover, it is the educated people of a nation, even of a poor nation, who can assert their country's interests in the increasingly complex web of global economic, cultural and political transactions. Without better higher education, it is hard to imagine how many poor countries will cope. Improving higher education is therefore in every country's interest and has legitimate claims on public funds.

While reasserting the public interest in higher education, the Task Force did not lose sight of the fact that higher education offers a mixture of both public and private benefits. It is a waste of public funds to pay for those elements that offer solely private benefits. Inequality also results when public funds disproportionately subsidize the education of students from the wealthier strata of society. However, the Task Force

warned that private investment focused on the private benefits of education is highly unlikely to also fulfill the public and social benefits of higher education.

How to Better Serve the Public Interest: Differentiation

The Task Force took note of a number of ways through which higher education can better serve the public interest, including differentiation, competition and merit-based admissions. Differentiation refers to higher education systems that are composed of a number of different types of institutions ranging from research universities to vocational schools, from large residential campuses to distance learning facilities. Specialization and comparative advantage are implicit in the notion of differentiation: each institution cannot perform all purposes for everyone and still fulfill their objectives effectively and efficiently. The range of choices open to a potential body of students is expanded through differentiation: when functioning well, differentiation provides an opportunity to match individuals' interests and talents with a specific institution's goals and strengths. Individuals benefit by their ability to find the most suitable learning track for themselves. The society benefits not only by targeting its intellectual and financial resources in the most productive manner, but also by producing a diverse mix of skills and qualifications through the differentiated system. The public interest in a differentiated higher education system is clear: the higher the probability of a good fit between student attributes and educational programs, the better is the distribution of skills available to society.

A differentiated system, however, could also lead to segmentation and exclusion. By making a larger range of choices available, a differentiated system builds in the potential for inequalities. To overcome such tendencies, it is crucial to establish a system that permits both upward and lateral movement and that provides multiple exit and re-entry points to allow for still higher or lateral changes in academic pursuits.

In this context, one must also caution that as long as public universities in developing countries have a monopoly over higher education, their campuses will become the natural meeting points of students from all parts of the society – urban and

rural, privileged and not so privileged. As higher education institutions become more numerous and more differentiated, however, there may be a sharper divergence in the social background of students who enter different types of institutions. National programs of community service required for all students, irrespective of their institutional affiliation, or other such activities through which students from across the system can interact, could be useful in bridging such social gaps.

Competition Serves the Public Interest

The public interest in higher education is also promoted by competition among institutions. A differentiated system should permit greater competition among institutions than a unified public system possibly can. This competition will take the form of institutions claiming that they can offer better educational services at less cost, can secure higher career success rates for their graduates and can provide better colleagues and superior teaching and research opportunities for faculty. Because competition, properly managed, can improve efficiency and performance, institutional competition is in the public's interest.

Such competition is more likely to occur if there is a reasonably open transfer system for students that allows for transferring credits as well. The higher education system in Bangladesh seems particularly rigid and resistant to such a notion of transfer students and competition. A student in a private university, for instance, has little opportunity to switch to a public university in mid-stream without having to repeat courses. Students in open universities or other non-traditional institutions generally have no prospect of entering traditional institutions of higher learning despite a high level of preparedness. These rigidities impose serious costs by curtailing competition across institutions at the different stages of a student's studies and by deterring equity improvements in the system. It would be helpful to establish an appropriate credentialing mechanism so that every metric of learning is assessed, irrespective of how and where the actual learning occurs.

Faculty should also be free to move from one institution to another. It is only in this manner that a society can reap the benefit of centers of excellence. Centers of excellence occur in higher education when talent can be concentrated, justifying an investment in state-of-the-art facilities. A system of higher education that attempts to make every institution the equal of all others denies itself the opportunity to create and sustain excellence. Such a system also invites brain drain as superior scholars denied the best colleagues and students in their country will migrate in search of better working environments elsewhere.

Another benefit of institutional competition is that the better educational institutions act as a model. In the United States, institutions such as Harvard, Yale and Stanford serve as a reference point for all other highly aspiring universities and thereby quietly enforce a standard of excellence.

The Importance of Merit-Based Admissions

The Task Force believes that the public interest is best served if higher education offers access to the most talented and motivated in society through merit-based admissions. The most basic truth about higher education is that its limited spaces should go to those most able to take advantage of the education and training being offered. Any deviation from this basic principle is socially harmful. That is, society is harmed if those best equipped to be its doctors are not its doctors, and those most able to be its engineers are not its engineers, and so on. Any feature of higher education that interferes with the best match of talent and aptitude to specific roles in society imposes costs beyond individual injustice. No society can develop and prosper if its educational and credentialing systems are distorted by selection bias and if its distribution of rewards is based on ascriptive rather than achievement criteria. Such an educational system denies society of the contributions of its most talented and motivated members.

Because higher education has become the gatekeeper to significant privilege and prestige in society, it is perhaps not surprising that corruption sometimes occurs in the

university admissions process. This pattern is especially pronounced in free public universities that suffer from direct control by public bureaucrats and politicians. Every university admission awarded through corruption runs the risk of substituting a less deserving for a more deserving student. The logical result is an educated class that fails to reflect the true distribution of aptitude and talent in the society. The long-term harm to society is probably beyond measure, affecting every dimension of social, political and economic life. The use of standardized examinations in the admissions process seems to be an effective way to avoid such corruption. In a climate where higher education successfully resists corruption, universities can also help promote civic values beyond their walls. For example, when universities insist on merit criteria, it is not easy for the government to run a bureaucracy based on patronage; when higher education protects free inquiry, it is not as easy for society to impose controls on a free press. The best higher education institution is thus both a model for modern civil society and a source of pressure to create such a society.

Further Challenges and Potential Solutions

The Task Force also highlighted the severe governance problems that afflict higher education institutions in many developing countries. Although good governance is not sufficient for achieving high-quality institutions, it is certainly necessary: a mismanaged institution cannot possibly deliver on its intended goals. The election of academic leaders, as is common in many parts of the world including Bangladesh, generally results in weak leadership. On the other hand, the Task Force concluded that appointed leaders are less likely to allow their programs to be stalled by lack of consensus and are better placed to make unpopular, but necessary, decisions when required. Without strong leadership, higher education in Bangladesh, or for that matter, in any country, will be unlikely to break the status quo.

The Task Force found faculty quality to be the most important determinant of the overall caliber of a higher education institution and identified nepotism, cronyism and inbreeding as powerful impediments to achieving such faculty quality. The practice of

rewarding length of service, as seems to be the rule in Bangladesh, rather than rewarding scholarly performance vitiates academic quality. Where possible, such practices should be avoided. External peer reviews in making appointments to faculty and deciding on promotion can safeguard faculty quality by focusing candidate evaluation on proper technical grounds. The Task Force also recognized how important employment security for faculty members is for ensuring academic freedom. However, the Task Force recommended long-term contracts that can be terminated if periodic evaluations reveal substandard performance, rather than faculty appointments without time limits. The Task force did not address the difficult issue of what to do with faculty members who enjoy tenure despite inadequate qualifications or poor performance. Clearly, such professors' continued presence on university faculties will inhibit quality improvements.

Politicization of campuses has also forced its own peculiar governance crisis in higher education. Academic excellence will remain unattainable until this train of destruction is stopped. In saying this, I think we can agree that *some* protests have a legitimate function. After all, the universities were instrumental in paving the way for the birth of this nation. But at other points in time, protests cause more harm than good. In these circumstances, it is perhaps useful to recall a remark of Bertrand Russell: "Without rebellion, mankind would stagnate, and injustice would be irremediable. The man who refuses to obey authority has, therefore, in certain circumstances, a legitimate function, provided his disobedience has motives which are social rather than personal."¹

The Task Force also highlighted the importance of paying special attention to science and technology education. In Bangladesh – where only two percent of the bachelor degrees awarded each year are in technical subjects – revamping science and technology education is necessary to increase the country's economic progress. The government's proposal to establish a series of science and technology universities, however, goes against the Task Force's findings about what creates a robust educational system. As I mentioned earlier, excellence requires concentration. Dispersing an already

¹ Russell, Bertrand. *Russell on Ethics: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Charles R. Pigden, ed. Routledge, 1998. Page 220.

very limited pool of resources to so many different schools will not help attain quality higher education. Moreover, intervention may be necessary at a much earlier point in students' careers to steer them into science fields.

Computer-based technologies have the potential to dramatically transform higher education in developing countries and are particularly responsive to the needs of science education. Networks and new forms of teaching media have already influenced training and research in industrial countries by reducing intellectual isolation and providing increased access to the latest scientific information. I fear, however, that these approaches may still not prove fast enough to provide Bangladesh with the scientific and technological expertise that it urgently needs to address its myriad problems. Waiting for sufficient scientific and technological resources to develop before addressing our problems may be simply too late on many fronts. However, I do envision potential ways we could enlist Western scientific institutions to help address needs here. For example, a few years ago I had an opportunity to visit Tsukuba Science City outside of Tokyo – a wonderful establishment with many impressively trained people and cutting edge technologies. Yet, as we went through the litany of research topics being pursued there, I could not but feel that there was an acute shortage of meaningful research goals. Bangladesh could certainly provide institutions like Tsukuba some urgent and significant research goals.

The Role of Private Universities

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the emergence of private universities in Bangladesh. The influential philosopher and educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt defined the university as “nothing other than the spiritual life of those human beings who are moved by external leisure or internal pressures toward learning and research.”² Humboldt believed that such “internal pressures” motivate people throughout their lives so that even without universities, “one person would

² Quoted in: Chomsky, Noam. *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*. Carlos Peregrine Otero, ed. Routledge, 2002. Page 178.

privately reflect and collect, another join himself to men of his own age, a third find a circle of disciples.”³ Humboldt went on to say that “such is the picture to which the state must remain faithful if it wishes to give institutional form to such indefinite and rather accidental human operations.”⁴

I have taken the private universities in Bangladesh to be of this ‘accidental’ spirit. A systematic effort will be needed to turn these private institutions into an enduring force with significant positive consequences for the higher education sector. Such an effort will require first ascertaining each university’s potential for success and then assisting the most promising initiatives to mature into quality institutions.

Most private universities with low budgets and low enrollments, however, must first overcome structural impediments. As private universities tend to have small enrollments compared to their public counterparts, it is difficult for them to build substantial libraries, computing centers, laboratories or sport complexes without philanthropic intervention. The rather narrow spectrum of academic pursuits possible at such universities may be a direct result of such constraints. Science teaching, for instance, seems to be avoided due to the cost of providing essential laboratory support.

One approach to influence the curricular content of private universities could be through a public program to build and develop what we have called the “Learning Commons:” a combination of classroom facilities, libraries, museums, science laboratories, computing centers, sports complexes and the like, to which students from all universities, public or private, would have access. By relieving the private universities from the burden of having to develop such costly facilities individually, the Learning Commons would permit such institutions to focus their resources and attention on the more important issue of teaching and learning. The Learning Commons may even permit universities to teach courses, such as science disciplines, that they may not otherwise offer.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

I have tried, ladies and gentlemen, to report to you some of the issues and ideas we as a Task Force had the opportunity to discuss and explore. We are grateful that those conversations have stirred a new interest in higher education in so many quarters: our friend Jamil Salmi is at work on a new policy paper for the World Bank on higher education; a few months ago the Ford Foundation announced its largest grant program ever in higher education; and the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations, among others, have also started announcing similar commitments. But, of course, the real test is here. It helps to have a supportive environment and to know that some resources may be available from the outside, but it is what you do on the ground here that will make the difference.

Bangladesh is a country where over-population is testing the limits of capacity: we are so close to the depths of the ocean that a slight rise in temperature will devour large parts of the land; our people are materially so deprived that they seem to be perennially living in what a Chinese poet once described as the zero degree of life; our air is seriously polluted and our water is poisoned with arsenic. These are daunting challenges for anyone to confront. But a nation lacking modern knowledge will almost certainly fail. The future of some 130 million people is at stake here. It is in this context that the compass for rebuilding and reinvigorating the higher education system must be set. I believe that, with the commitment of people like all of you gathered here, there is indeed a warrant for hope here. And for that, I thank you.

Thank you.