

## **Are We Marching towards Laissez-faireism in Higher Education Development?\***

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### **Abstract**

Over the years, many developing countries have showed apathy towards development of higher education, deliberately neglected higher education, reduced public investments in higher education, allowed laissez-faireism, and even adopted policies towards marketisation of higher education. Market forces have become very active; but since the markets in developing countries are ‘incomplete’ and ‘imperfect’, the outcomes are also far from perfect, and in fact, in many cases, the market forces produced disastrous consequences. The evolving state approach could be attributed to the faulty assumptions that (a) higher education is not important for development and (b) the State can as well withdraw from its responsibility of providing higher education in favour of the markets. But both assumptions are wrong, and have proved to be costly. The role of the state in higher education development is critical and cannot be reduced.

*“There is a place for the market, but the market must be kept in its place”*

Arthur Okun (1975, p.19)

### **Global Policy Context in Higher Education**

For a long time, higher education policies in many developing countries have been based on several questionable premises, such as:

Higher education has over-expanded in developing regions

Higher education has expanded at the cost of primary education,

Higher education is heavily subsidised by the State; and

Developing countries do not require higher education.

Policy prescriptions, particularly from the World Bank, have argued against the expansion of higher education, and for the exclusive focus on primary education. The unquestionable acceptance of the above has led to the overall neglect of higher education. Many developing countries have showed apathy towards higher education, deliberately ignored it, reduced public investments in it, allowed laissez-faireism, and even adopted

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policies towards marketisation of higher education. Market forces have become very active, but since the markets in developing countries are incomplete, and imperfect, the outcomes are also far from perfect, and in fact, in some cases, the market forces produced disastrous consequences.

In this context, some of the developments in the arena of higher education policies are worth noting. The chronological developments of the recent period, some of which are briefly listed in Table 1 narrate a story of a steady drift in the development of higher education. The 1986 World Bank policy paper, that has clearly recommended reallocation of public resources in favour of primary education and against higher education, has a tremendous effect on educational policies in developing countries. Second, a major positive outcome of the 1990 Jomtien conference on Education For All was that basic education received serious attention of the national governments and the international community; but at the same time this produced an undesirable effect on other levels of education. It was widely felt that basic education goals could be reached only if the public attention is diverted rather completely away from secondary and more particularly higher education. Thirdly, the 1994 World Bank paper, *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience*, reiterated the same much more eloquently.

A few major developments followed that however, did not influence much the public policies in higher education in developing countries. One was the international conference on higher education that was organised by Unesco in 1998, after realising that in the context of global EFA activities, higher education was getting neglected. The second one was a report prepared by the Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000), whose members include, *inter alia*, staff members of both World Bank and UNESCO. Both the International Conference and the Task Force have highlighted the need to pay serious attention to higher education. These ones and the World Bank's (2002) strategy paper on tertiary education argued in a sense a serious u-turn in the policies of the World Bank and of the governments that discouraged growth of higher education in developing countries. But they attracted little attention of the governments, which are engulfed in a 'continuing education crisis' and governments in developing countries continue to show apathy towards higher education, which is reflected in public sector disinvestment in higher education, and corresponding growth in private higher education.

Either higher education was ignored in the policy planning exercises of the governments

**Table 1. A Chronology of Some Important Events in Higher Education Development in the Recent Period**

1986	World Bank Paper on Financing Education in Developing Countries
1990	World Conference on EFA at Jomtien
1994	World Bank Paper on Higher Education
1998	Unesco Conference on Higher Education
2000	Taskforce Report on Higher Education and Society (Unesco-World Bank)
2002	World Bank Report on Knowledge Societies

and of the international organisations, or special measures were initiated to reduce the intensity of public efforts in higher education or both. Many policy and plan documents, and public discourses on education policy tend to pay at best, some lip service to higher education and to focus on preparation of plans for literacy and primary education. If at all the growing demand for higher education is recognised, it is assumed by the governments that such a demand can be met either by distance education programmes or by private sector, in neither of which governments have to invest any substantial resources.

Further, the economic reform policies that include stabilization and structural adjustment, introduced in almost all developing countries during the last quarter century, required a drastic cut in public expenditures across the board, including higher education. In fact, these policies set the tone for drastic reforms in higher education; and on the whole, higher education suffered severely (Tilak 2002). Public expenditure on higher education declined - in terms of relative priorities (proportion of GNP or of total government expenditure that is allocated to higher education), and/or in public expenditure on higher education in absolute terms in real prices (and sometimes even in nominal prices) - total as well as per student. Noticeable cuts could also be noted in several countries specifically in public expenditure on quality and equity related inputs in higher education (e.g., research, and scholarships). Recovery of costs of higher education from the students (in the form of high and even full cost-equivalent fees) has been an important strategy adopted in most countries, along with raising of resources from other non-governmental sources including industry, by forging close university-industry links.

As a result of all this, developing countries continue to lag behind the advanced countries in development of higher education systems. Gross enrolment ratios in higher education in many developing countries continue to be low. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, on average hardly four per cent of the relevant age group youth are enrolled in higher education.

**Table 2. Gross Enrolment Ratio in Tertiary Education, 1980-2000 (%)**

	1980	2000
High Income Countries	35	62
Low Income countries	6	8
Middle Income Countries	10	17
Lower	9	15
Upper	15	26
Low & Middle Income Countries	8	14
East Asia & Pacific	3	9
Europe & Central Asia	31	44
Latin America & Caribbean	14	21
Middle East & North Africa	11	22
South Asia	5	10
Sub-Saharan Africa	1	4

Source: *World Development Indicators 2003* (World Bank)

In many low income countries the ratio is less than ten per cent, while in many high income countries more than three fourths, and on average more than 60 per cent, of the relevant age-group youth population goes to higher education.

Along with a significant increase in public apathy for higher education, one can note a reemergence of forces in favour of private higher education. The lack of resources is one oft-cited reason for the growth of private higher education. But an equally important reason is the changes in attitudes towards higher education, and towards private higher education, and towards 'for-profit' private institutions of higher education, in particular. The public and merit good nature of higher education is being increasingly discounted. Private higher education is projected as an efficient system that can improve access and quality as well as equity! The march towards privatization of higher education is taking place through a variety of measures: financial privatization of public universities, transfer of ownership of public institutions, and establishment of private institutions - private institutions with government support, self-financing private institutions (with no government support), and profit-making private institutions. They also consist more of institutions without government recognition. As Johnstone (1999) described, the march towards 'high privateness' in higher education (shown in Table 3) is steady and even fast. The purpose of the universities, their ownership, sources of revenue, norms of management, and the role of the government in university development have been changing very fast. The changes are not confined to

**Table 3. Trends towards Private Higher Education**

Dimension	High Public ←-----→ High Private (Traditional) (Modern)			
Mission/ Purpose	Serves as a clear public mission as determined by the State/faculty	Mission avowedly both public and private	Mainly to respond to students' private interests	Mission serves private interests of students, clients, and owners
Ownership	Publicly owned	Public corporation or constitutional entity	Private non-profit; clear public accountability	Private for profit
Sources of Revenue	Public/tax payers	Mainly public, but some tuition or cost sharing	Mainly private, but some public assistance (to needy students)	All private, mainly tuition
Control by Government	High State control	Some control by the State	High degree of autonomy; State control limited to overseeing	Almost no control by the State
Norms of Management	Academic norms, shared governance, anti-authoritarianism	Academic norms, but acceptance of need for effective management	Limited adherence to academic norms, high management control	Operated like business, norms from business management

Source: Johnstone (1999)

newly established institutions, but even the universities established several decades ago, if not centuries ago, are affected by these changes.

The role of higher education is reinterpreted and redefined. Traditionally higher education is viewed as one that creates and diffuses knowledge. Rather expansion of frontiers of knowledge was regarded as the most important function of higher education. Secondly, higher education was viewed as an instrument of personal development of individuals, expanding intellectual horizons of the individuals, their interests and potential and empowering the individuals to have better quality of life, as contemporary sociologists and psychologists argue. Thirdly, higher education was viewed as an instrument of social

**Table 4. Emerging Trends in Policy, Planning and Financing of Higher Education in Developing Countries**

<b>Conventional System</b>	<b>Emerging System</b>
Welfare Approach	Market Approach
Public Higher Education	Mixed and Private Higher Education
Public Financing	Private Financing
Private: State Financed Institutions	Private: Self Financing Institutions
Private: Government Recognised Institutions	Private Institutions requiring no Government recognition
Private: Degree awarding Institutions	Private: Non-Degree (Diploma/ Certificate) awarding Institutions
Private: Philanthropy and educational Considerations	Private: commercial motives; profit motives
No Fees	Introduction of Fees
Low Levels of Fees	High Levels of Fees
No Student Loans	Introduction of Student Loan Programmes
Commercially Ineffective Loan Programmes -- no security High default rates	Effective/Commercially Viable Loan Programmes: security/mortgage Expected high recovery rates
but based on criteria of educational qualifications and economic needs	based more on commercial considerations
Scholarly/Academic Disciplines of study	Self-Financing/Commercially viable/profitable disciplines of study
Emphasis on Formal/Full-Time Education	Open/Distance/Part-Time Education
Selection criteria for Heads of Institutions: Academic background	Selection criteria for Heads of Institutions: Expertise in Financial/ Money Management; and in Resource Generation
Academic Institutions	Entrepreneurial universities and commercial institutions

Source: Tilak (1999)

engineering, socializing individuals to the values of the society -- social, ethical, cultural and political, so that societies become more virtuous with more and more higher educated people (*a la* sociologists like Durkheim). Lastly, the human capital theorists placed emphasis on the role of education in transformation of human beings into human capital, an instrument of production and economic growth and thereby economic well being of the people and societies (*a la* Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker). Many institutions of higher education in the contemporary period aimed at serving all these functions. Now with privatisation, particularly with rapid pace of privatisation characterized by profit motive, all these functions are getting replaced by financial motives, such as financial efficiency, measured in terms of revenue generation. In short, the emerging higher education system can be summed up as a transformation of academic institutions into 'entrepreneurial universities' and 'commercial

**Table 5. Distribution of Enrolments in Tertiary Education (ICED5A), 2000**

	Public	Government Supported Private	Independent Private		Public	Government Supported Private	Independent Private
High Income OECD Countries				Developing OECD Countries			
Australia	100.0			Mexico	69.0		31.0
Austria	95.8	4.2		Poland	72.2		27.8
Belgium	38.7	61.3		Turkey	95.7		4.3
Canada	100.0						
Czech	100.0						
Denmark	100.0						
Finland	89.7	10.3					
France	89.4	0.8	9.8				
Germany	100.0						
Greece	100.0						
Hungary	87.0	13.0		Non-OECD Countries			
Iceland	95.4	4.6		Israel	12.8	79.6	7.9
Ireland	95.3		4.7	Russian Federation	90.3		9.7
Italy	93.8		6.2	Uruguay	88.4		11.6
Japan	27.3		72.7	Thailand	88.3		11.7
Korea	23.2		76.8	Argentina	85.2		14.8
Portugal	64.3		35.7	Jamaica	81.4		18.6
Luxemburg	100.0			Malaysia	77.0		23.0
Netherlands	31.3	68.7		Jordan	69.2		30.8
New Zealand	99.0	1.0		Peru	62.3		37.7
Norway	88.6	11.4		Chile	33.0	23.0	43.7
Slovak Rep	100.0			Brazil	36.9		63.1
Sweden	94.6	5.4		Indonesia	31.4		68.6
Switzerland	92.4	6.1	1.5	Philippines	26.9		73.1
UK	100.0						
USA	68.7		31.3				

Note: ICED5A includes long term regular degree programmes.

Source: *Education at a Glance OECD Indicators*, OECD 2002, p. 233

institutions,' whose single most important objective seems to be mobilization of more and more resources (Raines & Leathers 2003; Bok 2003).

Today it is quite interesting to note that higher education systems in developing countries are, in a sense, more privatized than in developed countries, as can be noted from the available data presented in Table 5.

A disproportionately larger proportion of students are enrolled in private universities in the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Jordan, to quote a few, than in say, most advanced countries. The only exceptions among the advanced countries are Japan and South Korea. In fact, in many advanced countries more than 80 per cent of the students are enrolled in public institutions, and in some countries the corresponding proportion is more than 90 per cent, and in a few cases more than 95 per cent. Even in USA, nearly 70 per cent of the students in higher education are in public institutions.

### **Faulty Assumptions in Higher Education**

Why apathy for higher education? Why is the government unwilling to give priority to higher education? Governments' apathy is based on certain faulty assumptions on higher education. The most important assumption that was widely held for a long time was that higher education is not important for economic growth and development. Estimates of rates of return are used in this context. But the limitations of rates of return are now widely known. Moreover, though the rate of return to higher education is less than that to primary education, it should nevertheless be noted that higher education does yield an attractive rate of return to the society (above 10 per cent) and to the individual as well (19 per cent), as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6. Returns to Higher Education (%)**

	Social	Private
Asia*	11.0	18.2
Europe/Middle East/North Africa*	9.9	18.8
Latin America/Caribbean	12.3	19.5
OECD	8.5	11.6
Sub-Saharan Africa	11.3	27.8
World average	10.3	19.0

\*non-OECD

Source: Psacharopoulos & Patrinos (2002)

Further, the importance of higher education for economic growth is also clearly demonstrated by the experience of many developing and developed countries. Higher education can be expected to have a positive effect on the level of economic growth. In the production functions, if time lag is also allowed, the results have been more meaningful.

For example, regression equations on the data on 49 countries of the Asia Pacific region, show, despite the limitations such exercises carry, such as that they exhibit more of correlation than causal relationship, that gross enrolment ratio in higher education or higher education attainment of the population (percent of adult population with higher education) have significant effects on GDP per capita (Table 7).

**Table 7. Regression Estimates of Higher Education on Economic Development in Asia**

*Dependent Variable: ln GDP/pc*

Eqn.	Higher Education Variable	Intercept	Coefficient	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	F-value	Degrees of Freedom
1	GER	3.3904	0.0162 (4.005)	0.2628	0.2464	16.038	46
2	HEA	3.3943	0.0195 (3.917)	0.3911	0.3469	15.343	28

Note: Figures in parentheses are t-values. All coefficients are statistically significant at 99 per cent level of confidence.

Notation: GDP/pc: Gross Domestic Product per capita (PPP 1999); GER: Gross Enrolment Ratio (per cent) around 1990; HEA: Higher Education Attainment (Proportion of population with higher education) (latest: 1990s)

Source: Tilak (2003)

Further, in the rapidly technologically changing world, technology makes a significant difference to the economic growth of the nations. The level of achievement in technology critically depends upon the level of higher education in a given economy. After all, it is higher education and research that help in developing new technology; and it is higher education and research that contributes to innovations and in their diffusion. So one can expect a very strong effect of higher education on the development of technology in any society. In fact, the level of achievement in technology may be a close indicator of economic growth itself. Most countries with high enrolment ratios in higher education became 'leaders' in technology, as measured by the technology achievement index<sup>1</sup> with high levels of achievement in technology. The converse is also true: a large number of countries with low enrolment ratios (say less than ten per cent) are 'marginalized' in the area of technology. Those with medium level of enrolment ratios, nearly 20 per cent, like Singapore and Hong Kong in Asia have indeed become 'potential leaders' in technology. The simple regression equations on Asian countries estimated in Table 8 and the trend line shown in Figure 1 do show a very strong and statistically significant effect of higher education on the level of achievement of technology.

In sum, it is only those countries that have developed their higher education systems in

<sup>1</sup> The technology achievement index (TAI) is based on the degree of creation of technology in a given economy, the extent of diffusion of old and recent innovations, and human skills (UNDP 2001).

**Table 8. Regression Estimates of Higher Education on Achievement of Technology in Asia**

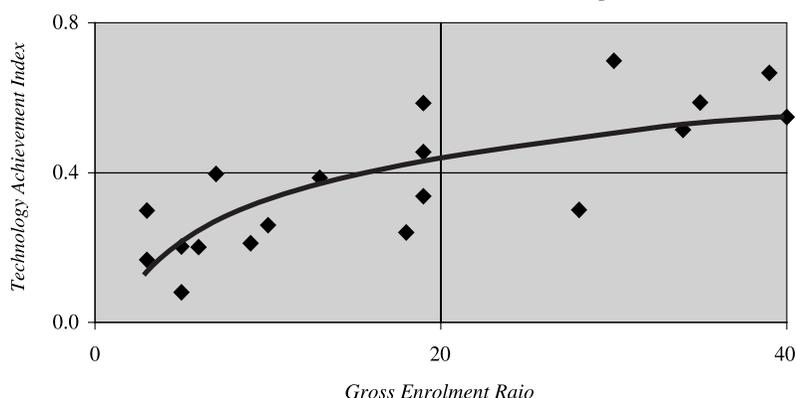
*Dependent Variable: ln Technology Achievement Index (TAI)*

Eqn.	Higher Education Variable	Intercept	Coefficient	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	F-value	Degrees of Freedom
1	GER	-0.7405	0.0143 (4.749)	0.570	0.545	22.552	17
2	HEA	-0.6535	0.0152 (3.055)	0.400	0.357	9.335	15

Note: Figures in parentheses are t-values

Source: Tilak (2003)

**Figure 1. GER in Higher Education and Achievement in Technology**  
(with a logarithmic trend line)



Source: Tilak (2003)

terms of quantity, quality and excellence could achieve economic miracles, and not the others. Among the advanced countries there is no single country, where higher education was not well expanded. In most developed countries higher education is fairly democratised, and is accessible to all. In fact, there are significant trends towards massification of the base of higher education. The gross enrolment ratio in higher education in advanced countries varies between 20 per cent and as high as 90 per cent. In contrast, in most of the developing countries, it is restricted to a small fraction of youth. No country could be found in the group of high-income countries with an enrolment ratio of less than 20 per cent. Thus 20 per cent enrolment ratio in higher education seems to be the critical threshold level for a country to become economically advanced.

Second important assumption that was also widely held was that developing countries couldn't fulfill their goals with respect to primary education, unless higher education is neglected. This assumption juxtaposes one level of education against another, and leads to fragmented look at education sector. Such an approach obviously ignored the interdependence

of various levels of education: primary education provides inputs into secondary and higher education, in turn, provides teachers, administrators and others for school education. Secondly, it also ignores the fact that growth in primary education would contribute to rapid rise in demand for secondary and higher education and the corresponding need for expansion of secondary and higher education. Further, the governments seem to be sharing the widely held belief that development of primary education, at best elementary education, is enough for development; or that is the maximum that can be afforded by the developing countries. International experience clearly shows that this cannot be true. Primary education is necessary for not only education development, but also social and economic development. At the same time the experience also demonstrates that primary education is not sufficient for economic growth and a sustainable development. Societies that have concentrated rather exclusively on primary education and ignored secondary and higher education could not achieve high levels of economic growth. In short, it is not adequate for fast economic growth to exclusively concentrate on primary education.

In the context of globalisation and international competition, higher education also becomes critically important. Higher education cannot wait until primary and secondary education is completely universal or well expanded. The traditional sequencing of first primary education, then secondary education and then only higher education may not work any more in the rapidly changing global system.

The third important faulty assumption is: if higher education is important, this can as well be provided by the private sector and that State need not necessarily provide it; and that State can withdraw from higher education and save its resources and private sector can fill the gap in the development of higher education. But private sector rarely provided good quality education on a large scale in any country. Exceptions are very few and those are such institutions established with a motive of philanthropy, a phenomenon which is disappearing rapidly. After all, private sector, by definition and nature, is associated with profit, self-interests, and short-term considerations. Wherever private sector expanded, it created more problems than it solved, in the spheres of quality and equity (Tilak 1991). Basically, it is not enough if higher education is expanded by any means, say through privatisation. Societies, e.g., Latin American countries, and the Philippines in South-East Asia that are having higher education systems which are predominantly private could not progress much - economically, socially, politically or even educationally. The exceptions are very few, e.g., Korea and Japan. It is only those societies where public higher education system expanded well, such as those in Europe and North America that could reach high levels of development.

## **Summary and Concluding Observations**

Higher education is an important form of investment in human capital development. In fact, it can be regarded as a high level or a specialised form of human capital, contribution of which to economic growth is very significant. It is rightly regarded as the “engine of

development in the new world economy” (Castells 1994, p.14). The contribution of higher education to development can be varied: it helps in the rapid industrialization of the economy, by providing manpower with professional, technical and managerial skills. In the present context of transformation of nations into knowledge economies and knowledge societies, higher education provides not just educated workers, but knowledge workers to the growth of the economy. It creates attitudes, and makes possible attitudinal changes necessary for the socialisation of the individuals and the modernisation and overall transformation of the societies. Fourthly and most importantly, higher education helps, through teaching and research in the creation, absorption and dissemination of knowledge. Public higher education also helps in the formation of a strong nation-state and at the same time helps in globalisation. Lastly, higher education allows people to enjoy an enhanced ‘life of mind’ offering the wider society both cultural and political benefits (TFHES 2000, p. 37).

But a look at the current scene in higher education reveals that higher education systems in many developing countries are characterised with a crisis, rather a continuing crisis, with overcrowding, inadequate staffing, deteriorating standards and quality, poor physical facilities, insufficient equipment, and declining public budgets. More importantly, higher education is subject to neglect and discrimination in public policy. Coherent long term policies for the development of higher education for development of nations are indeed missing. National governments and international organisations have to clearly recognise the critical importance of higher education in development. It is important to note that no nation that has not expanded reasonably well its higher education system could achieve a high level of economic development. International evidence shows that all advanced countries are those that have a gross enrolment ratio of above 20 per cent.

The world experience with the policies of globalisation and structural adjustment is also rich (Tilak 1997). Comparing the experiences of several countries, one may conclude that these policies succeeded only in those countries that have invested heavily in education, including specifically higher education. The converse is also true. These policies could not yield good results in those countries that have made low and inadequate levels of investment in higher education, reflected in low levels of educational levels of workforce, as in countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. After all, globalisation, including international competition, to be successful, requires highly skilled manpower, produced by higher education systems.

But for a couple of exceptions (e.g., Korea and Japan), large scale cross-country evidence shows that higher education systems which are predominantly private, may not produce significant economic pay-offs, and certainly will not be able to contribute to the transformation of the developing economies into developed/advanced economies. The example of the Philippines in Asia, and in general, the Latin American countries collaborate to this. The role of the state is very important in providing and financing education everywhere. Excessive reliance of the governments on private sector for the development of higher education may lead to strengthening of class inequalities and even produce new inequalities, besides adding to the problems of quality.

Of all, the absence of a clear coherent long term policy perspective on higher education in developing countries is the hallmark of the present higher education. As a result, either adhocism continues to prevail, or in the absence of even *ad hoc* policies chaos is created by the several actors of higher education - government, institutions of higher education, and most importantly the private sector. Market forces have become very active; but since the markets in developing countries are ‘incomplete’ and ‘imperfect’, the outcomes are also far from perfect, and in fact, in some areas, are disastrous.

In sum, the recent trends indicate a growing public apathy for higher education, followed by reduction in public expenditures on higher education. Along with all these, absence of any policy on development of higher education, that is helping erratic and unregulated growth of private higher education, may lead us to argue that we are rapidly marching towards *laissez-faireism* in higher education in developing countries. The doctrine of *laissez-faireism*, which means minimum State intervention and allowing of activities to take their own natural course, was described by Thomas Carlyle as “anarchy plus the constable.” Since the constable is weak, we have only anarchy in the higher education scene in developing countries.

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