Higher Education: The Lobby-less Sector Among the Privileged Cousins

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For its issue of March 28-April 3, 2015, the Economist featured a cover page story on higher education with a captivating title “The whole world is going to university: Is it worth it?” It noted:

A bachleor’s degree in America still yields, on average, a 15 percent return. . . . If graduates earn more than non-graduates because their studies have made them more productive, then university education will boost economic growth and society should want more of it.

In this same issue, the globally influential bulletin also critically examined the anticipated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—the follow-up to the popularly recognized development goals, widely known as the Millennium Development Goals. Now formulated in 17 goals and a whopping 169 targets, the Economist describes it as “ambitious on a Biblical scale—not in a good way” and charges that “every lobby group has pitched in for its own special interest.”

The Power of Lobbying

The power of lobbying for persuading public opinions, policy-making, and resource deployment is well established. The Economist was alluding to this powerful tool, which many in the corridors of power at regional and international fora are known to deploy it aggressively.

But the absence of active lobbyists for higher education is evident in its virtual absence from the SDGs. The feeble position of higher education in the document stands out starkly in the way it was noted in the context of equity as well as scholarship opportunities. In fact, postsecondary education appears only twice in the entire draft document as such: “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university” and “By 2020, expand by [x] per cent globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular … African countries, for enrolment in higher education in developed countries and other developing countries” [the per cent missing on the document].

Needless to say, the scope and dynamics of African higher education—for that matter, higher education development anywhere in developing countries—far and beyond exceed the infinitesimal scholarship opportunities advanced on its behalf. For instance, even if the scholarship opportunities for African students currently granted—through such visible players as DAAD, EU, NORAD, SIDA, among others—would multiply many times over, the demand would fail to meet the need. For an estimated 14 million students in the region, for instance, only about 35,000 students study in the United States—most
of these are not even on government scholarships nor do they have a good track record of return at the culmination of their studies. These handicaps thus call for an integrated, massive, and holistic support beyond the flimsily articulated two provisions noted above.

**The Power of Rate of Return on SDGs**

The African higher education community recently cheered the unveiling of a new study on rate of return on the sector. According to the study’s author, the World Bank, a rate of return on higher education for Africa currently stands at more than 20 percent—the highest rate globally and, even more impressively, a complete contrast to the earliest figures for the region. The new figures, I trust, have resulted from a rigorous and in-depth analysis—though one of my perennial critics privately chastised me for “falling for it” promptly, given my earlier critical position on the veracity of similar study by the bank.

Even an unsophisticated observer may well be puzzled by how the intended massive infrastructure development placed centrally in the SDGs could be met without engineers and architects. Or how national (maternal and child) healthcare could be improved without the express and full deployment of doctors, nurses, public health specialists, and policy-makers who directly confront the contemporary and emerging healthcare challenges without building and vitalizing the very institutions where these are produced. Or how will it be possible to expand and improve education opportunities without teachers and principals? The absence of a dedicated lobbyist on behalf of higher education could not be clearer.

It is probably a foregone conclusion that if lobbyists for higher education exist at all, either they are weak, disorganized, or have yet to perfect the art of lobbying. In the absence of meaningful skilled lobbyists for higher education, we are left to hope that the pledges made at the African Higher Education Summit in Dakar in March 2015 may fill that void.

**Contemplating the “Wedlock” of Agendas?**

We recognize now that current SDGs seem to have largely overlooked higher education as a critical development priority—contrary to what has been unequivocally declared and universally agreed. Furthermore, for many observers the projection of Agenda 2063 of the African Union, which amounts to a view of the next half century, appears too distant to have immediate implications for higher education.

As the manoeuvring to situate higher education in the regional and international agendas continues, it is probably appropriate to concurrently initiate efforts that consolidate national development plans with firm priority in higher education. These efforts should not only highlight expansion but particularly focus on the role of consolidation and differentiation to enhance research capacity and innovation. Countries therefore need to be prepared to deploy their own resources—generated through measures such as taxes or
loan mechanisms, although in the latter case, such loans may not escape scrutiny in the context of prioritized development goals.

**More Goals, More Money?**

It is probably relevant to draw on a particular section of the *Economist* article entitled “169 Commandments” noted earlier. The article stated: “Developing countries seem to think that the more goals there are, the more aid money they will receive. They are wrong.” While this observation may have considerable traction, diminishing the global effort of conceiving development agendas as a scheme for “money exchanging hands,” so to speak is naïve, if not cynical.

The conception and implementation of development agendas at regional and international levels have direct—and at times overwhelming—implications at national level. Development goals enunciated by major players—such as rich and powerful nations, corporations, and development banks—are well known to the national and regional agendas regardless of the source of money. When a development agenda such as MDG is agreed to, countries do adopt it, not only for the direct financial reward that may be embedded among its best-publicized provisions, but also because those agendas are important blueprints for shaping national development plans—either on the country’s own volition or response to external persuasion/pressure to do so.

A living example is the now-defunct World Bank Policy on higher education. When the bank decided to focus on primary education at the expense of tertiary education, not only the global behemoth itself and other development players followed suit, but the regional and national priorities of countries also shifted. Money which often follows policy also shapes its trajectory.

**Conclusion**

It is now evident that setting priorities in the articulation of the new development goals is not a mere academic exercise. In the widespread battleground of development actors, where incessant conversations and constant positioning and repositioning are everyday realities, the need for an active and organized body that pushes for a dedicated agenda, needless to say, is self-evident. It may be time for the African higher education community to take note of this global policy-making culture in positioning the sector where it belongs—at the heart of it.

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