

The Status of Global Postsecondary Education



Whitney International University System, Advisory Board, 6 March 2007

The Status of Global Postsecondary Education

Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Transcript

It is a pleasure to experience the gracious hospitality of Randy and Nancy Best in such beautiful surroundings and an honour to be in such distinguished company. Thank you for the invitation to summarise *The Status of Global Postsecondary Education* in eight minutes. That is a tall order. I recall Pascal's words: "I am writing you a long letter because I do not have time to write a short one."

Let me offer you a few words on each of ten themes: status; expansion; private for-profit; cross-border; distance learning; scale, student support, harmonisation; quality; and international community.

First, what is the **status** of global postsecondary education? It is good. For more than a decade agencies like the World Bank tried to persuade developing countries that postsecondary education was less important than basic education. Today a more balanced view prevails. People and governments all want more postsecondary education. I use the term postsecondary to mean everything after compulsory schooling, also called tertiary or higher education. Pre-university postsecondary education is particularly important. Two years ago I asked the education ministers of Commonwealth's 32 smallest countries what their priorities for postsecondary education were. They all came back with skills-related training directly linked to livelihoods.

Second theme: **expansion**. The growing status of postsecondary education is creating rapid expansion. From 68 million in 1991 global enrolments grew to 132 million by 2004 - almost a doubling. Forecasts of future enrolments have almost always proved to be underestimates in most countries. China now has the largest postsecondary system, with over 20 million students and India too will likely overtake the US with a decade. But even then the proportion of Indians accessing postsecondary will be a quarter of the US figure.

I shall say only two things about the US system. Number one: a demographic dip is on the way that will increase competition for students. Number two: the price of US postsecondary education has been rising faster than inflation for twenty years. This cannot go on forever. The arrival of more cost-efficient methods could cause real turbulence.

Third theme: **private for-profit**. For-profit postsecondary education is the fastest growing sector worldwide. Governments are increasingly unable to fund the expansion of postsecondary education that their people and their economies want. This is changing both the nature of providers and the methods of provision. Ron Perkinson talk later about ownership and economics. Let me say a word about types of provision.

Fourth theme: **cross-border postsecondary education** is set to grow fast. So far these providers aim for the richer developing countries but that will change if providers come up with a formula for getting costs down, because the potential volumes in the poorer developing countries in Asia and Africa are huge. Note that all cross-border provision is effectively for-profit in the receiving country, whatever the nature of the provider in the exporting country.

Fifth theme: **distance learning**. Many cross-border providers will set up local campuses and teach in a conventional manner within the cost structures of face-to-face instruction. The more ambitious providers, however, will develop new methods of distance learning in order to achieve economies of scale and the consistent quality of scale. This is attractive to for-profit providers because a higher upfront investment leads to low marginal costs once volume is achieved.

Sixth, the next theme is **scale**. Scale serves both the public good and the profits of private investors. It serves the public good because the potential enrolments in developing countries are in the tens of millions and it serves private profit because scale means large volumes. The search for scalable methods of teaching and learning is the most important task in postsecondary education today.

Seventh theme: **student support**. Successful and scalable distance learning requires quality in three areas: learning materials; logistics; and student support. Learning materials are probably the easiest part, especially with the growth of freely available open educational resources in eLearning formats that can be adapted for multiple purposes. Logistics is a matter of care, attention, competent people and good computer systems. Student support is the most difficult. The challenge is to achieve a good balance between standardisation, so that all students get effective support, and personalisation, so that students enjoy the contact with other human beings that is an essential part of all education.

Eighth theme: **harmonisation**. There is increasing harmonisation of qualifications as regional postsecondary education spaces are created in different parts of the world. Private providers must be part of this process.

Ninth theme: **quality**. National and international quality norms are emerging. Of particular importance are the Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Postsecondary Education developed by UNESCO and the OECD. All providers, but particularly private providers, should be punctilious in following these guidelines and should publicise the fact that they do. This will help to blunt the inevitable criticism and jealousy as large transnational providers begin to emerge.

Tenth, and last an **international community** of transnational providers is emerging. An important focus for its discussions is UNESCO's Global Forum for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications in Postsecondary Education. Private providers must join in and play a strong role in this and other forums so that they can help to define the global postsecondary education space in the coming decades of this century.

I am sure that we are all thrilled to be involved in the creation of the Whitney International University System because its vision matches so directly the challenges that I have outlined, namely to offer low cost higher education of quality at scale.