

Introduction to the Special International Issue

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Source: *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 83, No. 1, International Issue (2008), pp. 1-4

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25594773>

Accessed: 11-11-2017 14:43 UTC

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Introduction to the Special International Issue

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It is axiomatic to suggest that the world of education is influenced by global trends. What may not be so obvious is the fact that some trends have deep historical roots, that progress can be stimulated by looking to see how other nations handle particular problems, and that global trends can have a positive effect. The articles in this issue illustrate each of these points.

John Smyth's article "The Origins of the International Standard Classification of Education" is an illustration of an important global effort to acquire a standard definition of educational institutions. Few of us may realize that statistics such as enrollment rates, the percentage of a population in higher education, or the percentage of students studying in vocational schools require a common metric. That metric is referred to as ISCED. This article recalls the earliest attempts to compile international educational statistics going back into the 19th century and retraces the steps that led up to the formulation and adoption of ISCED. In large part, it is a story of how international educational statistics came to be developed.

Much attention has been devoted to the problems of achieving universal basic education. In many low-income countries school tuition and other fees have been a significant barrier. Some scholars have asked why countries don't make primary education free. In their article "Implementing Free Primary Education Policy in Malawi and Ghana: Equity and Efficiency Analysis" Kazuma Inoue and Moses Oketch tell the story of two nations that eliminated tuition. They find that when the new policy is a political objective without attention to the required resources in teacher training and equipment, the result can increase both inefficiency and inequality. These two cases illustrate this point.

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The principles that govern higher education admissions have shifted all around the world. In the article “Globalization and Implementation of an Equity Norm in Higher Education: Admission Processes and Funding Framework Under Scrutiny,” Gaële Goastellec reports that these principles have shifted from “inherited” merit to a principle of equality of opportunity. Her article describes this shift and how the changes in policy are implemented. Goastellec examines how higher education “traduces” or “transcodes” the principle into practice when designing admission and funding policies. She concentrates on one of the consequences of the globalization of higher education, namely, the affirmation of equity as the key ingredient by which the organization and management of higher education systems will be judged.

The 15 new republics that emerged from the implosion of the former Soviet Union have many common educational characteristics, including a long history of centralized education finance. But all 15 nations have regional authorities and long traditions of local pride. The question is whether there will be any role for regional authority in the governance and/or financing of higher education. Rita Kasa, in her article titled “Aspects of Fiscal Federalism in Higher Education Cost Sharing in Latvia,” finds that that the answer is yes. Local authorities in Latvia have identified a role for themselves in higher education finance by helping to guarantee the loans of higher education students from their particular districts. However, the fact that regional authorities have identified a role does not mean that the role they have identified is strategically well formulated or consistent with national higher education objectives.

Globally, three demands characterize higher education: the demand for higher quality, the demand for higher access, and the demand for higher equity. Wherever public resources are limited, such as in East Africa, no nation has been able to meet these demands on the basis of public expenditures alone. Instead countries have had to seek financing from nonpublic sources, including tuition. But how can nations maintain their sense of equity in the face of rising tuitions? Many countries have responded to this dilemma by instituting “dual track” policies in which the most capable applicants are financed from public resources. The article by Marcucci, Johnstone, and Ngolovoi titled “Higher Education Cost-Sharing, Dual-Track Tuition Fees and Higher Education Access: The East African Experience” describes dual track policies in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. The authors find what may have been anticipated given similar policies in Europe and North America, namely, that rewarding academic merit may not increase educational opportunity for the poor.

The quality of higher education is associated with economic development. In general, higher education quality is lower in countries with lower incomes/capita. What has been the effect of electronic technologies? Have the new technologies exacerbated or ameliorated these inequalities? In his article titled “Do Electronic Technologies Increase or Narrow Differences in Higher Education Quality

Between Low- and High-Income Countries?” Norman Clark Capshaw addresses this question. He constructs different answers to the question at the national level, the level of the individual institution, and the level of the classroom within specific institutions. He finds that usage of the Internet, and other computer technologies, in low- to middle-income countries is less than in high-income countries. But when specific enabling policies are put into place, the use of electronic technologies has the potential of ameliorating many of the international differences in higher education quality.

The role of education in fostering economic growth and social development is universally recognized. Although history places the provision of education firmly within national control, countries increasingly search outside national borders for alternative distribution frameworks. The World Trade Organization recently included education as service trade sector in the General Agreement for Trade in Services negotiations. Such activity increases debate about control as countries struggle to create policies that balance nationalism with economic responsiveness. The article titled “Compulsion, Craft, or Commodity? Education Services Trade in the Larger Context” by Brandyn Payne employs multivariate analysis to ask several questions. The first is whether trade openness in 162 countries was associated with openness to trade in education. The second is whether countries’ commitments to lower barriers to education trade paralleled the strength of their commitments to lower barriers to all trade. She finds that countries with World Trade Organization education trade commitments have higher levels of general trade openness than those without education commitments. In lower middle income countries, education trade openness and general trade openness were positively related. When controlling for education, population, geography, and income, lower levels of education trade barriers were the single best predictor of countries’ having made education commitments under General Agreement for Trade in Services. The question of whether international trade is ‘good’ for education is addressed in some detail. Her lesson might suggest that the debates over whether treating education as a tradable commodity is “bad” or “good” have failed to influence the authorities responsible for trade. If a nation is inclined to open itself to international trade, it will also do so in the field of education.

Special education is an increasing concern to educators. The proportion of children diagnosed with learning disabilities is on the increase, as are the resources needed for special education interventions. But how universal are these trends? Is the incidence of special education identical across societies? Are the interventions, judged to be necessary in one nation, considered equally necessary in another? In her article titled “Diagnosis, Treatment, and Educational Implications for Students with ADHD in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom,” Sarah Schlachter responds to these questions. She finds that there are two definitions of ADHD used internationally and that the incidences, resources, and interventions used to address the problem differ dramatically from one environment to another.

These articles are representative of the conclusions from international education policy more generally. The Smyth article teaches us that little progress can be made without a consensus on common structures necessary for comparison. The Schlachter article reminds us that a nation which designs policy by solely utilizing its own experience may risk creating unnecessary distortions. The Kasa article; the Inoue and Oketch article; and the Marcucci, Johnstone, and Ngolovoi article suggest that, however compelling, international reform norms can be problematic unless attention is paid to the local implementation requirements. The Payne and Capshaw articles suggest that there is progress in international education and that nations with open policies intelligently administered may well be future leaders of us all.