

The influence of Philip Foster on the World Bank

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At a conference on education in Addis Ababa in 1961 countries from all over the world gathered to assess their ambitions for education. Without exception, each brought a report justifying their plans in accordance with a manpower forecast. It did not matter whether they were socialist or capitalist, newly independent or of long standing independence; it did not matter whether they were Asian, African or European. Manpower plans had a monopoly, being the accepted technique to respond to the question: Should the public invest more in education and how can it know if the investment will be productive?

For the 18 years from the time of its first loan in 1962–1980, the World Bank justified every education lending operation through the use of manpower forecasting (Heyneman 2003). Among the consequences of this analytic monopoly was the restriction of all lending to specific skill instruction and to vocational and engineering schools. Primary and secondary schools were occasionally allowed to benefit from a loan, but only if they could be justified by adding workshops, handicraft centres and other “practical” facilities. Academic skills were described as being “impractical.” They were thought to lead students astray, to encourage them to migrate to the cities and to be disgruntled when they did not find work or work appropriate to their expectations, which were assumed to be unrealistic.

There were two problems with this. The first was that the bias introduced by manpower forecasting meant that important areas of the education sector had to be ignored (Heyneman 1986a). During this period the Bank could lend for the improvement of universities but only in the faculties of engineering. Regardless of the demand from the country, internal rules meant that the Bank could not assist general libraries, the liberal arts, the humanities, general science, primary or secondary education, preschool education, education research or statistics (Heyneman 1987). None of these areas could be justified with a manpower plan and hence they were forbidden.

The second problem concerned the demand for new kinds of lending. Vocational and technical education was a small part of the education sector and under President

In memoriam of Philip Foster (1927–2008).

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McNamara the Bank was on the lookout to expand operations into new arenas (Heyneman 1999). Manpower forecasting restricted that ambition.

Education staffing in the Bank consisted of three specializations: (i) manpower planner/economist; (ii) architect, and (iii) curriculum specialist. The architect was asked to design buildings. The curriculum specialist was asked to supply lists of equipment and pedagogical support. The manpower planner was asked to justify whether the investment was worthwhile. Of the manpower planner/economists in the Bank at this time, only one or two (Pierre Jallade and Emanuel Zymelmann) were familiar with analytic techniques other than manpower forecasting. Since Zymelmann's title was chief Manpower Planner, he was not inclined to promote any deviation from the accepted norm.

In 1974 the Bank added a new specialization to the education sector, that of Education Sociologist. The first to be acquired was Jacob (Jack) van Lutsenburg Maas who was completing his PhD in Comparative Education and Sociology at Teachers College. His training included the study of articles by Mary Jean Bowman, C. Arnold Anderson and Philip Foster at the University of Chicago. And the first thing he did as a staff member was to contact Phil Foster and ask him to give a seminar. Here is how Jack remembers it:

Phil's seminar was one of the best I can remember in the Bank. He ranged far beyond the narrow topic of the vocational school fallacy and instead addressed the role of markets vs. central planning in development education. ... The managers and staff in the Bank were wedded to manpower planning, which of course was a byproduct of central planning. Phil argued the futility of manpower or other aspects of central planning in a dynamic modern economy where no group of mandarins, including the Bank, could ever hope to predict where future demand would move. This paradigm gradually became more accepted over the subsequent decades, but in the mid 1970s Phil's perspective was still very much a minority view. That made it all the more memorable and, at least in my opinion, all the more important. (van Lutsenburg Maas 2008).

In 1977, after Jack Maas left the Central Projects Staff for an operational position in the East Africa Region, the Bank hired its second Education Sociologist, me. Phil Foster had been my dissertation advisor. His views on general academic education were familiar to me and to many in the academic community (Heyneman 1985, 1986b). I remember, however, sitting in a decision meeting to discuss a lending operation in Algeria. When I questioned the evidence for the statement that academic skills were impractical I was informed by the regional Chief Economist that there was no other view. I remember thinking, we have a problem. Where I was trained an alternative view definitely existed and was well published; but in the view of the senior managers and the economists at the Bank, no other view even existed.

When we decided to draft a policy paper on education in Sub-Saharan Africa, Peter Moock, George Psacharopoulos, Dean Jamison and I drew on Phil's ideas both directly and indirectly. The Director of the Education Department, Aklilu Habte asked that our paper be shown to two very important ministers at a private meeting at the Wye Plantation in Maryland. One of those ministers was Dzingai Mutimbuka from Zimbabwe. He had a reputation for strong, sometimes blunt opinions. He was also reputed to have a profound dislike for the World Bank.¹

¹ Dzingai Mutimbuka joined the staff of the World Bank in 1989, and has had a brilliant career which included being the chief of education operations for sub-Saharan Africa. He retired in October, 2007.

I remember Phil's presentation as if it were yesterday. He argued that vocational education was likely to be the least practical not the most practical. While rural school leavers were likely to migrate to cities, it was a rational decision on their part given the differences in earning potential. They migrated not because they were poorly trained, but the opposite, because they were well trained to know where they had a better opportunity. And using vocational education as a social mechanism for diverting students from secondary school and higher education was likely to be both economically ineffective and politically counter-productive. Rural Africans, Phil argued, had a realistic sense (surprising to only central planners) of their opportunity costs and potential benefits. The solution lay in the market place for agriculture and trade and not in a vocational curriculum.

When he finished there was this silence. No one spoke. Everything we had written and analyzed rested on the reaction which we were likely to get from the minister. Finally he said this:

I hate this argument. This is stupid. It goes against everything which I have been taught, everything which I have observed in my own country and everything which I believe. But... it is certainly interesting.

From that moment we knew that we had engaged Africa, finally, with choices in human capital strategies. And it turned out to be true. Dzingai Mutumbuka attended the open meeting with all of the ministers and presented Phil Foster to each of them with the introduction, colleagues you won't like what this man has to say. But you should listen to him very carefully.

What impact did Phil Foster have? Here is what Jack Maas says:

I believe that he had a strong influence on the thinking of at least a set of Bank staff. Another way to look at this question is to look at professors in other universities and ask what influence they had by comparison. I cannot think of anyone else who has had as much influence as Phil. I can think of some Harvard graduate school of education professors who had influence through Bank staff, but I would call that influence negative. They promoted manpower planning (Personal communication, February 15th, 2008).

In my view, Phil Foster has had a greater influence on the education thinking of the World Bank than any other member of faculty from any university. He helped the Bank question its deepest, most cherished assumptions. The strength of his arguments rested on logic and keen observation rather than any pioneering empirical model. In this way, he spoke to all staff and to all countries, without the need for a statistical interpreter. The Bank, and development education, is in a much stronger position than it could have achieved without the thinking of Phil Foster, and there are many individuals in far away places who stand grateful for this contribution.

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Author Biography

Stephen P. Heyneman (United States of America) received his PhD in comparative education from the University of Chicago in 1976. He served the World Bank for 22 years. Between 1976 and 1984 he helped research education quality and design policies to support educational effectiveness. Between 1984 and 1989 he was in charge of external training for senior officials world wide in education policy. And between 1989 and 1998, he was responsible for education policy and lending strategy, first for the Middle East and North Africa and later for the 27 countries of Europe and Central Asia. In July, 2000 he was appointed professor of International Education Policy at Vanderbilt University. Current interests include the effect of higher education on social cohesion, the international trade in education services and the economic and social cost to higher education corruption.