

6 The Provision of Post-Secondary Education

Kazim Bacchus

Writing with experience of the establishment of the University and the development of other post-secondary educational facilities in Guyana, and also as adviser on higher education and Principal of The College of The Bahamas, Kazim Bacchus observes that the amount and type of education that small nation states need depends on the development strategy which they decide to follow. In particular it depends on the degree to which they accept the idea that providing a certain amount of education for the entire population is, in effect, a right rather than a privilege.

He considers development strategies and post-primary needs in small countries, comparing the Caribbean based approaches of Demas and Best to this issue. This is related to the problem of identifying and providing the appropriate content, at the right standard, in the tertiary education sector. The need for flexibility in constrained economic circumstances sets a direct challenge to those charged with the provision of educational delivery systems at the tertiary level, especially in the context of reducing dependency on external influences. If this challenge can be met, then through its post-secondary sector a small nation state can achieve a more independent position in meeting its skill needs.

Approaches to post-secondary education

If education is viewed as a right then providing universal primary education is a first step. If this has not already been achieved, it must precede the development of general post-secondary provision. Primary education should use instructional strategies that will contain the cost of education, without necessarily reducing overall standards. Effective supervisory services, especially in remote areas, are essential.

The education which is offered should prepare students to be flexible in their choice of further education and training opportunities. Personnel in small countries are usually called upon to perform multi-functional roles. This usually makes it inappropriate to copy training programmes offered to individuals in larger states, where role-specialisation has become a major characteristic of labour markets. Therefore, school programmes offered in small states should not encourage early specialisation but offer pupils a good general education, as a basic foundation, in order that they may achieve the flexibility and adaptability which they will need within jobs and in changes of employment. In addition, the instructional strategies should be of the type that develop a spirit of enquiry, experimentation and enterprise. While this is obviously a necessity in all societies it is of particular importance in small states. Entrepreneurial activities are likely to be on a small scale, with a higher relative dependence on individual ingenuity and innovation than may be the case in larger countries.

The Demas approach

Demas, an economic planner from the Caribbean, was probably one of the first to examine the constraints which size imposes on the type of development strategy which a country can successfully pursue. He has argued that the nature of the economic development process or socio-economic transformation in small scale societies would, of necessity, be different from that of large scale economies. He pointed out that the presence of certain major non-manipulable variables such as limited population size, small internal markets, lack of capital

resources for investment and, often, the absence of any substantial natural resource, together adversely affect the ability of small states to foster internally propelled development and create a self-sustaining economy that would offer some kind of balanced economic growth.

Therefore the social and economic transformation via more balanced economic growth which, according to Demas, is more feasible for countries with a large population base is usually difficult to achieve in small nation states. Because their total output is not likely to be very large they would need to specialise in the production of one or a very limited number of commodities for export to a few markets. So, in the West Indies, he saw the future of small islands as being bound up with the export of the traditional primary products, increasing their productivity in the domestic food sector and in the development of tourism, rather than in manufacturing.

This development strategy would require small scale economies to direct their efforts to compete in terms of the quality and the prices of their products with other countries which are engaged in the same type of production. The ability of small states to outprice their larger competitors on the international market is severely constrained, unless they happen to be in a monopoly situation as in the case of Nauru with its supply of guano.

Therefore the personnel working in these specialised areas of production, whether they are providing holiday facilities for tourists from the West or assembling computers or televisions from imported parts, need skills which are not very different from those required in the economically more developed countries. However, they would usually be at a lower level because the 'screwdriver' type industries which are common to many small states require little technological sophistication on the part of the employees engaged in assembly work. Even in the service industries, such as tourism, the products and services provided tend to be patterned on developed countries, with which the potential consumers are already familiar.

As far as post-secondary education is concerned this type of economy involves providing a limited number of individuals with a narrow range of skills in the few selected fields which the country has

chosen to develop. If these skills are to be provided locally the per capita costs are likely to be high in relative terms. So while the larger of these small scale economies may be able to make provision locally for some higher level education and training, for others it is economically worthwhile either to make arrangements for training to be undertaken on a regional basis or to send their students beyond the region for training, especially if external aid is available to help them. For example, an island like Montserrat in the Caribbean does not even have its own specialised institution for the training of teachers because, with a total teaching force of 150, it finds it cheaper to send its students to study in nearby territories such as Antigua, St Lucia and Guyana.

One of the outcomes of such a development strategy is that the export sectors of the economy have rarely been able to absorb more than a small portion of the potential labour force. In addition, the marked gap in income which develops between those who are working in the export sector and those who are producing for local consumption, results in individuals demanding post-primary and tertiary education in order to escape the lower standards of living in the traditional sector. This group is usually much larger than the export or modern sector can absorb. Therefore, when an effort is made to meet this popular demand for higher levels of education, a substantial proportion of the educated manpower which results is likely to remain unemployed and to seek opportunities to migrate to urban centres or to the economically more developed countries where the job prospects for their skills often seem greater.

The Best approach

An alternative development strategy implicitly suggested by Best in his criticism of Demas's thesis is one which sees the constraints which small scale economies face more as challenges which national development efforts must take into consideration. Best, again drawing on Caribbean experience, draws attention to the need for countries to take stock of and reassess the potential of their resources for development, the factors which have contributed to their present

underutilisation, and how they might be exploited more fully in the future. He sees economic development as more a problem of management, and the inability of individuals to perceive, create and exploit a multiplicity of little openings and opportunities which are available in small scale economies. Small states, he argued, would be in a better position to pursue a more independent development strategy if they followed a more creative approach. This would help reduce their economic and cultural vulnerability. For example, rather than depending on the type of tourism which calls for heavy inputs of foreign capital to construct international hotels and provide imported foodstuffs, the possibility of building up an alternative or supplementary type of tourism with local operators owning small hotels, utilising locally grown foodstuffs, and providing services which do not depend on large inputs of foreign capital, all need to be explored. This is more likely to result in breaking the economic constraints which size is perceived as imposing and thereby helping to stimulate development, especially in view of the fact that there is no known association between size and per capita income or rate of growth. But such a strategy would increase the need for quality post-primary and tertiary education for a larger number of not only well educated but also creative individuals with a variety of skills. This would better prepare them to play a more active part in their own national development thereby reducing the almost total dependency on foreign capital for development.

The kind of higher level manpower which such a development approach requires is, in many ways, different from economically more developed countries. Aid would continue to be welcome, but in support of educational plans and programmes which small states have developed as part of their own overall development strategy. The major aim of development aid for education would be not to determine educational policies but to help work out their detailed implications.

Because this strategy calls for a greater number of individuals with post-secondary education, in the long-term it becomes economically more feasible for many small states to support an educational

institution at this level. In some cases this need can be met through regional co-operation most notably in the development of regional universities. This widens the recruitment base for students and in theory should make it more possible for training and research activities to be undertaken in direct response to the needs of the countries of a region. Whether national or regional this requires the post-secondary institution to offer a range of courses and programmes to meet a wide spectrum of manpower needs. It requires too, a new outlook on the part of the people of small states, one which helps them to be both outward and inward looking at the same time and encourage them to see more clearly the potential benefits of co-operation. Regional co-operation in the provision of post-secondary education and in the conduct of research and development can help to develop the vision of what regional unity and regional co-operation can contribute to the overall development of small nation states.

Challenges of post-secondary provision

The approach suggested by Best highlights a number of challenges for the post-secondary sector. The provision of one effective and economical post-secondary educational institution to meet a variety of educational and training needs presents many problems. It requires imagination and insight along with a philosophy of education which subscribes to the view that it is possible and necessary to break down the traditional separation which has existed in most educational systems between 'academic' and 'practical'. The erosion of this division is mutually beneficial to both groups of students.

This separation has been reinforced by the fact that many who teach in higher education institutions such as universities are not usually trained in the art of teaching. They find it difficult to impart knowledge successfully to students with a less academic orientation. If a single national post-secondary educational institution is established to meet the varied needs of a wide range of students then great care has to be taken in the selection and training of the staff. While

appropriate academic qualifications are important they are not enough if the dualistic pattern of education and training is to be eroded and if institutions are really to become multi-purpose, which is so necessary in small nation states. Brock, in his report for the Commonwealth Secretariat on *Scale, Isolation and Dependence* made a similar point in attempting to support the view of Michael who argued that academic standards need not be reduced if the teaching staff of higher education institutions attempt to offer and even to integrate both academic and practical training. As Michael points out:

... real academic standards can be obtained through good teaching at any level... the enduring benefits to an individual of academic work include the development of imagination, ingenuity and creativity; knowing when information is needed and how to set about finding it. A university can, without shame, undertake the education (not just the training) of competent and thoughtful craftsmen because their work... can be analytical, imaginative and well informed and thus of good academic standard.¹

Another major issue relates to the delivery of educational services and the need to devise the most appropriate delivery systems for this level of education and training, especially bearing in mind the cost factor. Here a number of valuable approaches can be developed including short-term training courses offered as part of regular skill upgrading or continuing general education programmes, and the use of distance education. Institutions and their staff have to develop new approaches to teaching students with a wide variety of backgrounds and interests. The education provided and the instructional methodology used should both be of the type that will foster creativity, stimulate the imagination, encourage students to challenge orthodoxy and treat as problematic what is usually taken as given. To achieve these objectives it is obvious that the simple passing on of new skills and knowledge, though important, will not be enough. It is the whole approach to education and teaching, that characterises a particular institution, which would help to develop these qualities in

students. And while such innovative approaches are generally necessary in all educational systems they are of particular importance in small scale economies if they are going to survive and develop on their already slender resources and not become perpetually dependent on other societies for aid. It is in these areas too, which deal not with policies but with the actual delivery of instructional programmes that external aid can be of greatest assistance.

It must always be remembered that in small scale economies the provision of particular skills and knowledge should not be the only concern of a local post-secondary education institution. Small states can only survive and develop if they are quickly able to perceive new opportunities and to adapt readily to changing economic situations. Therefore maximum flexibility in developing new educational programmes is essential if institutions are to meet changing needs and resist institutional rigidities that would reduce their capacity to adapt to new situations.

It is crucial too, for small states to develop research and development activities to increase the value of their own national resources and domestic production, and to improve the percentage of consumption that can be met from local products. Ultimately such research and development activities can fuel the type of industrialisation which would utilise a high proportion of local inputs. This helps to provide concrete alternatives to the growing disenchantment which is taking place in the LDCs with the production of raw materials as the engine of their economic growth and lead to further processing of local products before they are exported. With capital resources being difficult to obtain for small scale economies, these countries could, through their own research and development activities, produce more appropriate technologies which would not only help to reduce the demand for capital intensive production but also reduce their level of unemployment.

Summary

The central point is that whatever development strategy a small nation chooses to pursue it has important implications for the

education system. There is general acceptance for the view that small nation states need to follow a development policy to reduce their present economic dependence - one which is likely to make their economies less open and promote internally propelled development.

On the one hand these societies cannot close off their economies to the outside world by shutting off all imports and compelling their inhabitants to become completely self-reliant. As Demas argues, to seal off one's economy is to choose economic stagnation and a much lower standard of living. In other words these countries need to pursue a more balanced development strategy. The challenge here arises from the fact that while small nation states cannot do anything about their size they have to try and improve their development prospects by skilful manipulation of the control variables within which they operate.

This calls for greater flexibility in their approach to development and one of the key elements of such a strategy is the training and husbanding of their own human resources, especially at the post-secondary level, through innovative educational and training policies. Central concerns in this policy include the need to reduce dependence on expatriate manpower, where it still exists, and to develop, among their own population, a high degree of flexibility, by virtue of the skills and the knowledge which the education system can offer and which will stand them in good stead in a variety of economic and employment circumstances. Students should be so educated that their initiative will not be stifled. They would be encouraged to be enterprising and innovative.

These are obviously objectives which should characterise any good educational programme but they are even more important in small scale societies. This is because if these nations are to survive economically in a context in which capital resources are not readily available to them, their populations would have to be encouraged to seek out every opportunity that presents itself for purposeful economic activity and to adapt readily to changing economic conditions, especially those affecting their relationships with the outside world.

Reference

- 1 Brock, C (1984) *Scale, Isolation and Dependence : Educational Development in Island, Developing and Other Specialised Disadvantaged States* (p.47), Commonwealth Secretariat, London