

Overview

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.

H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History*

The Task Force

The Task Force on Higher Education and Society was convened by the World Bank and UNESCO to bring together experts from 13 countries for the purpose of exploring the future of higher education in the developing world.

Based on research and intensive discussion and hearings conducted over a two-year period, the Task Force has concluded that, without more and better higher education, developing countries will find it increasingly difficult to benefit from the global knowledge-based economy.

The Task Force has attempted to clarify the arguments for higher education development, especially from the standpoint of public policymakers and the international community. It has also diagnosed specific problems that are common across the developing world—home to more than 80 percent of the world’s population—and suggested potential solutions. *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* is split into six chapters, which address:

- higher education’s long-standing problems and the new realities it faces;
- the nature of the public interest in higher education;

- the issue of how focusing on higher education as a system will yield the benefits of planned diversification;
- the need to improve standards of governance;
- the particularly acute requirement for better science and technology education; and
- a call to develop imaginative general education curricula for certain students.

Peril and Promise

The world economy is changing as knowledge supplants physical capital as the source of present (and future) wealth. Technology is driving much of this process, with information technology, biotechnology, and other innovations leading to remarkable changes in the way we live and work.

As knowledge becomes more important, so does higher education. Countries need to educate more of their young people to a higher standard—a degree is now a basic qualification for many skilled jobs. The quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions, and its availability to the wider economy, is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness.

This poses a serious challenge to the developing world. Since the 1980s, many national governments and international donors have assigned higher education a relatively low priority. Narrow—and, in our view, misleading—economic analysis has contributed to the view that public investment in universities and colleges brings meager returns compared to investment in primary and secondary schools, and that higher education magnifies income inequality.

As a result, higher education systems in developing countries are under great strain. They are chronically underfunded, but face escalating demand—approximately half of today’s higher education students live in the developing world. Faculty are often underqualified, lack motivation, and are poorly rewarded. Students are poorly taught and curricula underdeveloped. Developed countries, meanwhile, are constantly raising the stakes. Quite simply, many developing countries will need to work much harder just to maintain their position, let alone catch up. There are notable exceptions, but currently, across most of the developing world, the potential of higher education to promote development is being realized only marginally.

Wider Focus

The Task Force is united in the belief that urgent action to expand the quantity and improve the quality of higher education in developing countries should be a top development priority. Developing countries need higher education to:

- provide increasing numbers of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with specialized skills, because specialists are increasingly in demand in all sectors of the world economy;

- produce a body of students with a general education that encourages flexibility and innovation, thus allowing the continual renewal of economic and social structures relevant to a fast-changing world;
- teach students not just what is currently known, but also how to keep their knowledge up to date, so that they will be able to refresh their skills as the economic environment changes; and
- increase the amount and quality of in-country research, thus allowing the developing world to select, absorb, and create new knowledge more efficiently and rapidly than it currently does.

The Task Force recognizes that there are many difficulties in achieving these aims, including the plethora of competing demands for public money. Action, therefore, will need creativity and persistence. A new vision of what higher education can achieve is required, combined with better planning and higher standards of management. The strengths of all players—public and private—must be used, with the international community at last emerging to provide strong and coordinated support and leadership in this critical area.

System Focus

The Task Force recommends that each developing country make it a national priority to debate and determine what it can realistically expect its higher education system to deliver. The debate must be informed by historical and comparative knowledge about the contribution of higher education to social, economic, and political development—but also should take clear account of the challenges the future will bring. It should establish for each higher education system clear goals that policymakers can use to view the higher edu-

cation system as a whole, determining what each part can contribute to the public good.

This kind of holistic analysis of higher education systems has rarely been attempted. It does not mean reverting to centrally planned systems—far from it. Instead, it offers the ability to balance strategic direction with the diversity now found in higher education systems across the developing world. This diversification—a reaction to increased demand—has brought new providers (especially from the private sector) into the system and encouraged new types of institutions to emerge. It promises increased competition and, ultimately, improved quality.

Unfortunately, this promise will not be delivered if diversification continues to be chaotic and unplanned. Players, new and old, will thrive only in higher education systems that develop core qualities. These qualities include:

- sufficient autonomy, with governments providing clear supervision, while avoiding day-to-day management;
- explicit stratification, allowing institutions to play to their strengths and serve different needs, while competing for funding, faculty, and students;
- cooperation as well as competition, whereby human and physical capital, as well as knowledge and ideas, can be profitably shared within the system, creating, for example, a “learning commons” where facilities—computers, libraries, and laboratories—are open to all students; and
- increased openness, encouraging higher education institutions to develop knowledge- (and revenue-) sharing links with business and to deepen the dialogue with society that will lead to stronger democracy and more resilient nation states.

On its own, the market will certainly not devise this kind of system. Markets require profit and this can crowd out important educational duties and opportunities. Basic sciences and the humanities, for example, are essential for national development. They are likely to be underfunded, unless they are actively encouraged by leaders in education who have the resources to realize this vision.

Governments need to develop a new role as supervisors, rather than directors, of higher education. They should concentrate on establishing the parameters within which success can be achieved, while allowing specific solutions to emerge from the creativity of higher education professionals.

Practical Solutions

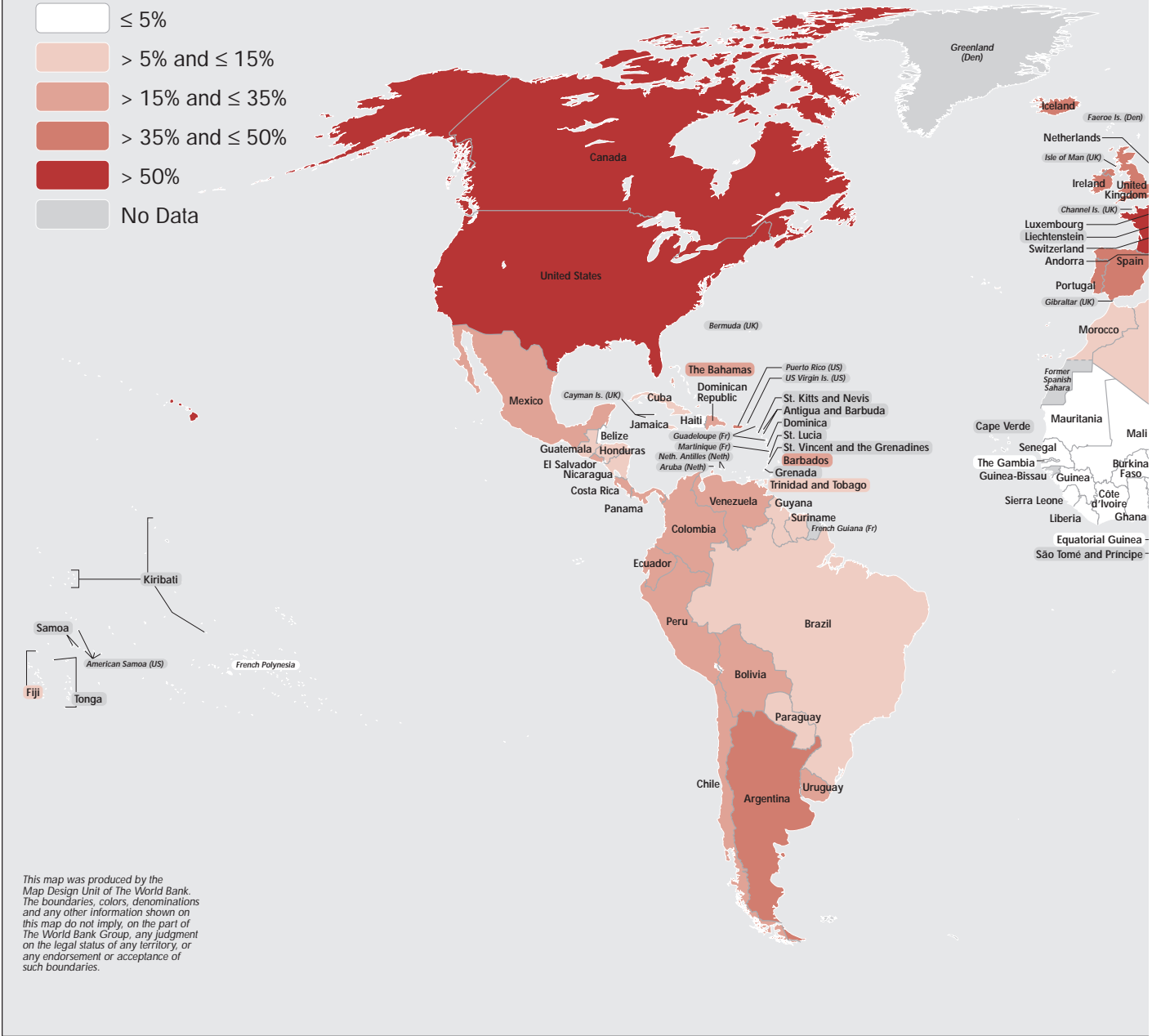
The Task Force has identified a number of areas where immediate, practical action is needed. These include:

- **funding**—the Task Force suggests a mixed funding model to maximize the financial input of the private sector, philanthropic individuals and institutions, and students. It also calls for more consistent and productive public funding mechanisms.
- **resources**—the Task Force makes practical suggestions for the more effective use of physical and human capital, including an urgent plea for access to the new technologies needed to connect developing countries to the global intellectual mainstream.
- **governance**—the Task Force proposes a set of principles of good governance (acknowledged by many as the central problem facing higher education in developing countries) and discusses tools that promote their implementation; better management will lead to the more effective deployment of limited resources.

Figure 1

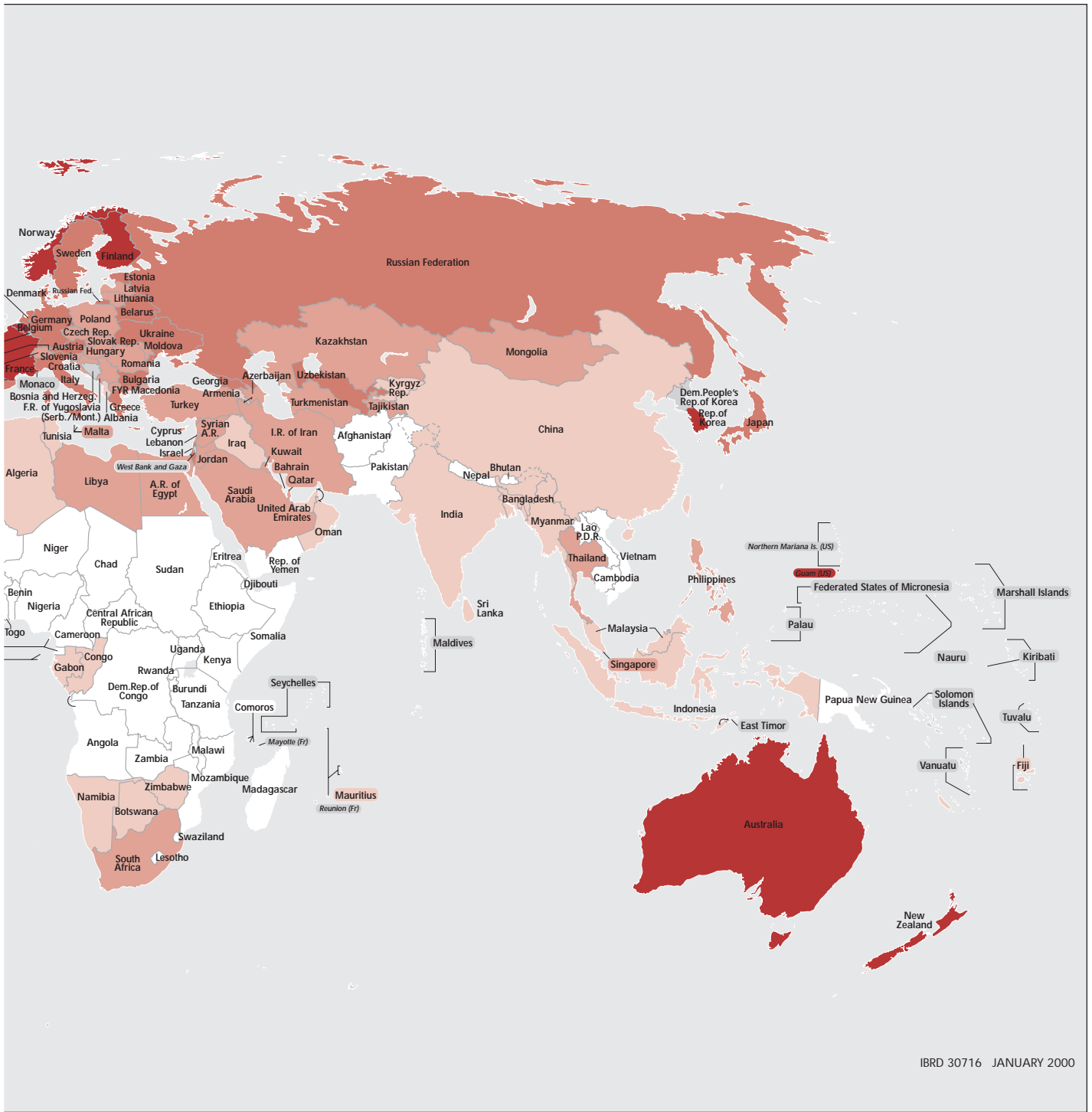
Tertiary Enrollment Ratios, 1995

- ≤ 5%
- > 5% and ≤ 15%
- > 15% and ≤ 35%
- > 35% and ≤ 50%
- > 50%
- No Data



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This map shows the variation in tertiary gross enrollment ratios across the countries of the world. In general, people in countries that are more developed economically are more likely to be enrolled in higher education. Nevertheless, there are also regional trends, and numerous countries have different enrollment ratios than might be expected on the basis of per-capita income.



- **curriculum development, especially in two contrasting areas, science and technology, and general education**—the Task Force believes that, in the knowledge economy, highly trained specialists and broadly educated generalists will be at a premium, and both will need to be educated more flexibly so that they continue to learn as their environment develops.

The Way Forward

Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise does not offer a universal blueprint for reforming higher education systems, but it does provide a starting point for action. The greatest desire of the Task Force is to catalyze dialogue in countries around the world. While the benefits of higher education continue to rise, the costs of being left behind are also growing. Higher education is no longer a luxury: it is essential to national social and economic development.