

<DH>PERSPECTIVES</DH>

Nix the BRICs—At Least for Higher Education Scholarship

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Although the “BRIC” moniker for the group of emerging economic powers—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—has become ubiquitous among financial analysts, it was actually coined by former Goldman Sachs economist Jim O’Neill as much for its clear imagery as for any actual commonalities amongst the countries (O’Neill, 2001). The bloc is even less relevant in understanding the complex higher education environments in these or other emerging economic powers such as Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey (for which O’Neill has coined another clever acronym: the MINTs).

But the higher education community has been grouping them for analytic purposes for a number of years. A few books and many journal articles have been published that do so, more than one international conference on higher education in the BRICs has taken place, and there is talk of setting up a network of BRIC-country universities. Thus, it is useful to take a look at what can be learned from examining the BRICs as an analytic group.

In our view—not much.

While grouping the BRIC countries might arguably be somewhat illuminating for economists, it makes little sense to lump them together for analytical purposes in higher education research. And, the capital “S” that was added to the original BRIC collective in 2010 in order to admit South Africa into the grouping further weakened the similarities within this multinational bloc (South Africa and its economy are significantly smaller than the other BRIC nations).

VARIATIONS BUT FEW THEMES

In vitally relevant respects, the four BRIC nations differ greatly from each other across the spectrum of higher education measurement norms. The four come from different academic traditions (albeit with some similarities between China and Russia), use different languages, have employed quite different academic strategies, and have no history of academic cooperation or competition.

Neither students nor professors from these countries engage in regular or systematic exchanges or partnerships.

Of the four, only two—China and Russia—have ambitions to break into the “world-class” league tables. China alone has a significant national strategy to build up its research universities, in which it has invested heavily and with considerable success; Russia is only now beginning its efforts, while India trails far behind.

China has been effective in building a differentiated academic system that serves a range of national needs and students. Particularly important now, China has the world’s largest student population, with 24 percent of its age cohort enrolled in postsecondary education. This is similar to the gross enrollment rate of Brazil, which is approximately 25 percent (World Bank, 2014).

Two of the four BRICs, China and India, are major “sending” countries in terms of international students, with China alone accounting for 17 percent of the world’s overseas student population (UIS, 2012). Students from these two countries go mainly to the major English-speaking universities. Brazil, which only recently began a major overseas scholarship program, focuses more on Europe, and Russia is not a significant contributor to global academic mobility.

Unlike China, with its politically powerful and embedded strategy for higher education expansion, India has had no higher education strategy per se, although the recently promulgated 12th five-year plan articulates elements of a policy. The country has no highly ranked universities, and there is general agreement in India that the quality of the entire system is poor.

Russia's higher education system deteriorated dramatically in the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union and is only now starting experience a rebound, with a focus on the research university sector. Brazil also lacks a coherent strategy, and the national government has shown little interest in improving the quality of the system as a whole, with management of the sector having largely devolved to regions and municipalities.

CHINA AND RUSSIA: SIMILAR CHALLENGES

While neither Russia nor China look to the other for examples of good practice—or common problems, for that matter—they do share some key characteristics. China’s post-1949 higher education system was largely modeled after the Soviet one, with the emergence of many small, specialized institutions linked to government ministries and a separation of research from teaching by delegating the former to the Academy of Science institutions and the latter to the universities.

The Soviet model, for the most part, did not benefit either country in the long run. It fractured the most talented academic staff into separate cadres of teacher and researchers and deprived students and teachers of the training and educational benefit of conducting research. The Soviet Union could claim a few top-ranking academy institutions and universities during its era, but in the immediate aftermath of the 1991 collapse, higher education and research were underfunded and even more drastically decoupled. The result was that many top scientists left the country, and the academic system was severely weakened.

China's higher education development after 1949 was similarly unimpressive. Mao Tse-tung's 1966 Cultural Revolution closed down all of higher education for a decade, basically destroying the existing system and eliminating—sometimes literally—the intellectuals needed to sustain the academic viability of any country.

China began to rebuild its higher education and research infrastructure in the 1980s, looking largely to Western—especially American—models. Massive resources were and continue to be invested into the system, resulting in the development of some 100 research universities, of which a dozen or so are approaching world-class status.

Russia did not commit similar levels of investment in its higher education sector during this same period, causing a marked difference between the global status of its higher education sector and that of China. In the past decade, however, the Russian government has developed several key initiatives—such as the creation of federal “flagship” universities and, most recently, a program to provide additional support to a group of 17 competitively selected universities, with the goal of having some of them enter the top 100 universities in the global rankings by 2020.

Regardless, both countries have found it difficult to achieve reforms in this area, due to the conservative nature of academic staff and the limited capacity of the existing university facilities to absorb modern research initiatives. Moreover, academic salaries are quite low in both countries—at the bottom of a group of 28 countries recently analyzed. These low salaries make it difficult to recruit bright young people to the academic profession and make it necessary for many to hold more than one job.

Both Russia and China have paid little attention to the non-elite segments of their higher education systems, with the predictable result that quality tends to be low. Both countries rely on the questionable practice of dual-track enrollments: admitting the best-qualified students—as determined by one-off high-stakes examinations—to universities based on a state allocation of seats at low or free tuition levels, then filling out their classrooms with students who are not as well qualified but who pay a much higher tuition. While this practice

helps balance the budget, it also creates inequity, quality variations, and inefficiencies in the system.

BRAZIL: FOR-PROFITS AND PROVINCIALISM

As is typical in much of Latin America, more than 80 percent of Brazilian postsecondary students attend private institutions, most of which are for-profit and of variable quality. Similar to the almost regressive admission and financing policies in China and Russia described above, the top students in Brazil choose to go to public universities, where tuition is free and entry standards are frequently quite high. Thus, students from wealthy families, who can afford private secondary schools and coaching classes to prepare for the high-stakes admission test, gain access to the best, most prestigious, and least-expensive higher education, while poor students pay more for lower quality.

Further, Brazil has paid little attention to building high-quality universities or competing globally. An exception to this generalization is São Paulo, Brazil's richest state, where several of Latin America's top research universities—although none yet considered among the best in the world—are located.

Brazilians tend to attribute their lack of global or regional recognition on the language barrier caused by teaching, conducting research, and publishing in Portuguese. The lack of English-language publications in particular is a barrier for China and Russia as well. While language is undoubtedly one challenge in being globally competitive, it is by no means the only one facing these countries.

INDIA: SLOWLY EMERGING

There is much concern in India regarding the country's "demographic dividend"—a large population of young and potentially highly productive people failing to be properly educated or prepared for a 21st-century global economy by a poor-quality higher education establishment. Few Indian institutions appear in any of the league tables, and none is highly ranked.

India's governmental authorities, at both the state and central levels, have invested comparatively little in higher education, and there has been no strategy for linking higher education to development goals. India has the genuine advantage of using English as the medium of instruction in over half of the institutions in its higher education system, but it has faced myriad other barriers to qualitative improvements comparable to the global best.

COMMON BRIC REALITIES

There are some realities that are shared by at least some combination of the BRIC nations, although the details vary, and there are few, if any, common strategies in place or even on the table to deal with the challenges they face. Among these are the following:

Governance

All of the BRIC countries have serious problems of internal university management and governance. None has a pattern of shared governance that is widely regarded as necessary for academic success, particularly at research universities. Internal governance tends to be highly bureaucratic and often inefficient.

Public universities in the BRIC countries are subject to rigid governmental control, leaving little scope for institutional autonomy or creativity. Politics often enters into academic decisions—in China, the intrusions are often ideological in nature, while in India, Russia, and Brazil, politics may be linked to local issues or particular political agendas.

The Academic Profession

The academic profession faces significant challenges in the BRIC countries. In China and Russia, salaries are on average extraordinarily low, even though a few top researchers are able to obtain decent remuneration. Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct remain a concern.

Expansion and Equity

All of these countries, with the exception of Russia, have rapidly expanding higher education systems, and they all face the challenges of serving a larger proportion of their young people. But equity of access and possibilities for success in each of these countries is problematic, as few resources are focused on helping students from lower socioeconomic groups, rural areas, or other underrepresented groups avenues persist to higher-education completion.

Moreover, the regressive nature of dual-track enrollments and high-stakes entry examinations ensure that the elites will continue to reap the rewards of the higher education sector—at little or no cost—while forcing poorer students and those with less access to high-quality secondary education to subsidize the elites through taxation and the paying of tuition and fees.

Global Importance

Without doubt, the four BRIC countries are important players globally. All are large countries with considerable higher education capacity. China has made itself a player on the academic world stage, and the other three have considerable potential and some important successes.

BRIC DIFFERENCES

Yet the BRIC countries otherwise have little in common. Each of the four has emerged from significantly different pasts—politically, socially, and economically—and many of the current realities they face are different. So it is not evident that their problems can be solved with the same interventions.

We question, then, the utility and validity of talking about the BRICs in understanding the comparative realities of global higher education. Does the concept shed light on the higher education experience of other emerging economies? Not really. Do they offer any collective insights different from what can be learned in other country contexts? Again, not really.

Indeed, it is possible that by grouping them together, we do a disservice to each by envisioning common solutions across all. So far, each of these countries has looked in different directions for insights and is developing varying responses to their current challenges—with an emerging common thread that all, perhaps with the exception of Brazil, are looking at least in part to the major English-speaking academic systems for viable models.

So let's think instead about the varying approaches to higher education and the current challenges it faces—in the BRICs but also in countries such as Chile, Mexico, Korea, Nigeria, Poland, and others with important higher education reform histories—that can expand our understanding of what is possible for higher education in emerging and developing economies.

Resources

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