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THE RISE OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN JAMAICA: NEO-LIBERALISM AT WORK?

Abstract

The rise of private higher education in Jamaica plays a key role in expanding educational access to the masses. The shift towards the neo-liberal perspective has directed the focus of education policy reforms toward emphasizing economic efficiency, diversity in choice, and market mechanisms. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight, from the perspective of high level administrators at four local private higher education institutions in Jamaica, on why private higher education institutions have flourished as key providers of Jamaican higher education, how these institutions facilitate access to higher education, and to what extent private institutions contribute to achieving Jamaica's higher education goals.

The researcher utilized a holistic, multiple-case study design. Methods employed in this study included face-to-face individual interviews, document analysis, and site visits to private higher education institutions in Jamaica. Human capital theory was used as an analytical lens to examine the extent to which the neo-liberal framework is appropriate for understanding how higher education is unfolding in Jamaica. This paper focuses on the general conclusions of the research, which suggest that Jamaican private higher education institutions serve to challenge the status quo by providing access to members of the society who had been marginalized by the public higher education system.

Introduction

Higher education is of vital importance in the economic development of small nation-states, like Jamaica, if they are to become competitive participants within the global marketplace. For many developing countries, the demand for relevant, convenient, cost effective, quality higher education has outstripped the capacity of governments to meet such demands. In Jamaica, higher education has traditionally been socially biased, favoring students from the higher socio-economic groups and elite members of the society (Braitwaite, 1958; Jules, 2010; Williams, 1968). Students from the higher socio-economic groups tend to be better prepared to meet entry requirements and the academic rigor of higher education as they are able to access the necessary fiscal resources and possess the social capital needed to obtain a higher quality of education at the primary and secondary levels (Asplund, Adbelkarim & Skilli, 2008; Ziderman, 2005). A primary challenge for Jamaica is providing opportunities for greater access to higher education for a wider cross-section of students (Howe, 2003).

For most Jamaicans, higher education has historically afforded opportunities for social mobility (Cogan, 1983; Evans, 2001) by providing access to better paying jobs and career opportunities. As Jamaica strives to achieve developed country status by the year 2030, the economic value of higher education is often highlighted and is a key component of national discussions on higher education policy (Holding

& Burke, 2005). Jamaica, through its higher education system, hopes to produce “well rounded and qualified individuals who are able to function as creative and productive individuals in all spheres of society and be competitive in a global context” (PIOJ, 2009a, p. xxvii). In light of the increasing demand for Jamaican higher education, providing greater access to higher education is essential to improving Jamaica’s productive capacity and achieving its goals of economic development.

The growing demand for Jamaican higher education

Jamaica’s higher education enrollment rates have more than doubled over the past 15 years (Miller, 2005). Throughout the period from 2002 to 2009, there was a relatively steady increase in the total national enrollment in Jamaican higher education. In 2002, total enrollment in Jamaican higher education was 41,761, while total enrollment for the 2008-2009 academic year was 64,034 (PIOJ, 2009b). In the 2009-2010 academic year enrollment was estimated at 68,471 (PIOJ, 2010). As an aggregate the gross higher education enrollment rate continues to increase steadily. By 2010, the total gross enrollment of the tertiary cohort aged 20-24 grew to 32.8% (PIOJ, 2010) up from 18.1% in 2003 (PIOJ, 2009c). In 2003, the total private enrollment at Jamaican higher education institutions was estimated at 6,755, while in 2007 the total estimated private enrollment more than doubled to 17,389 (PIOJ, 2009c). The overall market share for private higher education enrollment in Jamaica jumped to 26.4% in 2007 from 17.1% in 2003 (PIOJ, 2009c).

Private higher education institutions emerge largely in response to existing demand for higher education that the public sector institutions are unable or unwilling to provide (Kisner, 2010; Altbach, 2000). The growth of Jamaica’s local private higher education sector is due to the limitations of the public higher education sector and the flexibility with which private institutions have responded to the changes in demand for Jamaican higher education. Fulton (1981) advanced that institutions of higher learning may adapt more readily to the needs of potential and existing students by facilitating opportunities for students to attain greater financial leverage and by expanding the range of qualifications considered in the admissions matriculation process. Some Jamaican private higher education institutions have adopted alternative admissions policies to facilitate greater access for non-traditional and underprepared students. Many of Jamaica’s public higher education institutions were reluctant to respond to changes in the local student demographics (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2006). With greater numbers of individuals who are employed full-time seeking higher education, there has been a significant demand for more flexible course offerings that would better accommodate and support these individuals in their academic endeavors. Honig (1996) posited that the growth in the demand for higher education in Jamaica occurred at a much faster rate than the government’s capacity to accommodate. The public higher education sector had blatantly overlooked the growing non-traditional segment of the higher education student population and was also reluctant to provide higher education in rural and suburban locations outside of Kingston. Thus, local private higher education providers emerged as principal suppliers of higher education and training for students living in rural Jamaica and those employed full-time within the workforce.

The neo-liberal agenda

The growing acceptance of neo-liberal economic principles among governments around the world has resulted in reductions in nation-states' investments in higher education and has promoted greater competition among national and cross-border higher education providers (Portnoi, Bagley & Rust, 2010). Although the neo-liberal agenda is at work within Jamaica's higher education sector, there is not a wholesale adoption of the neo-liberal philosophy by senior level administrators at local private higher education institutions. The neo-liberal ideology is evidenced by (a) multiple providers of higher education who compete for students; (b) private institutions operating autonomously of government interference; (c) institutions offering programs in response to market demands that the government is unable to meet; (d) students having a greater choice among degree granting programs and academic institutions; and (e) intensified focus on satisfying the student consumer. In addition, private institutions fill specific niche markets, are concerned about the profitability of the programs they offer, and stress the importance of efficient resource allocation.

Jamaican private higher education institutions have done much to construct themselves as different from public universities. Private institutions have distinguished themselves by (a) catering predominantly to part-time students, most of whom are employed full time; (b) establishing academic centers within rural communities; (c) offering flexible course schedules; and (d) providing flexible payment options (e.g., tuition discounts, monthly and pay as you go plans). Private institutions also help to advance the social justice agenda by expanding access to higher education with a view to promote and facilitate greater levels of social equality and upward mobility. Whiteman (2001), a former Minister of Education for Jamaica, asserted that within the Jamaican society it is generally assumed that higher education is "desirable because it offers the best [prospects] of a professional, well-paid job, and earn[s] you respect among the mainstream population" (p. 37). However, the fiscal and infrastructural limitations faced by the Jamaican government have restricted its ability to provide access to higher education for a significant segment of the Jamaican population. Individuals within this underserved segment are further marginalized due to the structure of the public higher education system which privileges those who are able to enroll in traditional full time study, and possess adequate financial resources to attend the public universities within Jamaica's urban center. In an effort to challenge the status quo, the local private higher education institutions cater predominantly to members of this marginalized segment of the Jamaican population.

Higher education in Jamaica is relatively more accessible today due to the presence of private higher education providers and local institutions in particular. Based on private higher education enrollment data available from the PIOJ, the reported student enrollment at private higher education institutions in Jamaica grew from 9,110 in 2002 to approximately 19,427 in 2009. During the eight year period from 2002 to 2009, there were a total of approximately 113, 459 students enrolled at private higher education institutions in Jamaica. Excluded from these enrollment estimates are students enrolled at private higher education institutions that are not registered with the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ).

Opportunities for accessing higher education locally have also improved significantly. Prior to the 1986, the University of the West Indies (UWI) was the

only degree granting higher education institution in Jamaica. Currently there are three local universities, seven teachers colleges, and several private institutions that offer full undergraduate degree programs. Local private higher education institutions have contributed to increasing access to quality higher education for segments of the population that were previously excluded or underserved by offering a wide range of mission-focused educational programs and providing higher education and training that is aligned with workforce needs. By facilitating greater access to higher education, local private higher education institutions play a crucial role in shaping Jamaica's national higher education goals.

Charting the future

As Jamaica strives to become a high-income economy or a developed country, *Vision 2030 Jamaica* (PIOJ, 2009a) has emphasized that increasing the productivity levels of Jamaica's greatest resource, the Jamaican people, is at the core of attaining this goal. It is against this backdrop that higher education is presented as an investment in human capital, a means of achieving economic growth and development, and a source of international competitiveness within the global marketplace. Within a developing middle income economy, like Jamaica, where there is an abundance of "human capital" it seems plausible that expanding access to higher education would serve to "lift production of goods and services up the value chain beyond simple processes and products" (PIOJ, 2009a, p. 58). Not only is it necessary to expand access to higher education by allowing local private higher education institutions to operate as complements to the public institutions within Jamaica, but it is also necessary to ensure that all higher education institutions function within a quality framework that is relevant to the needs of Jamaica and the Caribbean.

Jamaica's local private higher education providers have expanded access to higher education by focusing on the students' need for affordability and flexibility. Thus, Jamaican higher education policymakers and implementers must become more attuned to the range of access challenges faced by students in order to effectively formulate national and institutional policies that facilitate a variety of feasible alternatives for students. Clearly articulated higher education goals within an effective quality framework are essential to ensure that higher education institutions are indeed able to "impart skill areas that are relevant to existing and emerging jobs or career tracks" and meet the needs of the Jamaican society (PIOJ, 2009a, p. 68). Grant-Woodham (2007) asserted, "higher education contributes to labor productivity, entrepreneurial energy, and quality of life; enhances social mobility; strengthens society; and promotes democratic governance" (p. 134). This supports the notion that Jamaican higher education can serve as a tool for economic development and simultaneously facilitate greater levels of social equity and mobility, as these goals are not mutually exclusive.

The fact that the neo-liberal principles are evident within the Jamaican higher education system does not imply that the social benefits of higher education are secondary goals for local private higher education institutions. Local private higher education institutions continue to contribute to the expansion of access to Jamaican higher education. These institutions have etched out a niche within the Jamaican higher education sector by focusing on creating new ways of making higher

education more accessible and affordable. As Jamaica moves forward, it is likely that local private higher education institutions will play an increasing role within the Jamaican higher education landscape as they continue to challenge the status quo and expand the range of higher education options available to both non-traditional and traditional aged students.

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