

## **It Matters to Increase Access for Talented but Financially Constrained Students from the Developing World**

Since decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, Western education has been a magnet for the best and brightest youth from the developing world. It is inextricably linked to the history of modern nation states in the Global South. During the colonial era, it had been perceived as an essential tool in the struggle to redeem these nations from the yoke of colonialism. The earliest recipients were motivated to rid their countries of 'poverty, illiteracy and disease' and steer their countries to self-determination. The second generation were caught up in the on-going Cold War between the Soviet Union and Western powers. Some headed west, others east. Despite receiving good education being their priority rather than a doctrine, this generation was torn apart by an ideological war between world powers and the result was often devastating for their countries. The third generation was the neoliberal generation which marked the end of the cold war, the World Bank and IMF-promoted austerity measures, and the introduction of multiparty democracy in these countries in the early nineties. Regardless of whichever generation one belonged to, Western education heralded a promise for success and an automatic ticket to the home country's elite circles.

A national call for a Western scholarship application in these countries often attracts the best minds in the land. It is a highly competitive and cut-throat competition, requiring an above-average talent and is often secured following a period of sustained brilliance. The most imaginative youth admire Western education and see it as the benchmark. The more talented they are the more they gravitate towards a Western education due to its perceived superior quality. So attractive is Western education that no talented and ambitious young person in the developing world feels adequate and complete without obtaining a degree from a Western institution. As Western education becomes increasingly accessible, so has grown the number and ambition of these youth. Hardly has a scholar or eminent person from the developing world ever gained global recognition and prominence without either having studied at a Western university or having already been based in a Western institution.

While their courses, professions and the trajectories they take will differ, they share three main features. A background of poverty, big ambitions and dreams, and, more importantly, a genuine desire to economically and politically transform their poor nations. For them, obtaining a Western education is not a mere personal advancement exercise and a search for eminence, but a chance to spark change and progress, and induce intellectual revolution in their countries. These youth understand the urgent need to modernise social life in their countries through science and technological advancement. They also realise that no civilisation has ever become great without great intelligentsia, and that education determines the shape of the society. They believe in the emancipatory power of education. These youth also want that to dispel the traditional stereotypes that modern education, critical thinking and pedagogy are exclusively a Western phenomenon, and that the so-called Third World is a backward society. When Joseph Conrad had taken a voyage up the Congo River in 1899 and wrote his famous novel *The Heart of Darkness*, it was clear the title sounded demeaning to the natives, let alone its content, then and now. These were the kind of prejudices these youth have been aware of.

The humble background of these youth is remarkable. The journey to a Western university is never smooth sailing for them. For some, their childhood was defined by social upheaval, ranging from civil war to extreme poverty, and battling against the odds has been a lifelong theme. Unlike the life of privilege and material possession that animated the western elite, the lives of these youth were characterised by material deprivation and constant personal struggle. When they secure a Western scholarship, it is a momentous occasion and a defining

moment in their lives. Stepping into the plane for their first Westerly journey, they feel proud of their remarkable feat and are grateful for whoever provided them with the opportunity. For those who are unsuccessful in their scholarship application, it is devastating and they will have to grapple with the awful feeling of being left behind.

The brightest youth in the developing world have big aspirations despite great odds. The story of a young African boy who herded goats and cows in open fields in the countryside, and later attended Oxford or Harvard is inspirational but not uncommon. The story of a young girl who, due to cultural beliefs and tradition, was denied education in South Asia or the Middle East, but confronted her family and society, made it to school, attended a Western university and finally held the most senior position in one of the United Nations' agencies, is also captivating but not uncommon. The story of a young boy in South America whose childhood had only known violence, poverty and social disorder, spent his formative years in an orphanage, and who, through hard work, made it to a Western college, returned home and rose to one of the country's most senior political positions, is astonishing but not uncommon.

While getting into an elite Western college is incredibly hard even for the locals, it is doubly tough for the economically disadvantaged youth from the Global South. First, they must secure an overseas scholarship, often offered by a Western government or college, which is not very common. The process involves completing an application form and having an in-person or video interview. Secondly, one must meet the required entrance criteria for getting an offer from a university. If applying, for example, to one of Britain's 'elite triangle of learning' i.e. Oxford, Cambridge or the London School of Economics, the process is very rigorous. An online application, an in-person or video interview, a high GPA result of a minimum of 3.7 in a 4.0 system and an IELTS English test result of 7.5. Should one meet both the scholarship and the college entrance criteria, one must apply for a visa. For these aspiring students, securing a North American or Schengen visa is an uphill task as these countries have increasingly tightened their visa application processes.

I think elite Western colleges need to revisit these overly strict criteria. I know many talented and committed students who would love to set foot at Oxford or Harvard or any other Western college, but English language is not the official language of their countries or the language of instruction in local schools. This is particularly important in French-speaking Africa or Spanish-speaking South America. There is a need to go beyond a high GPA and English test requirements. Western colleges need to consider the personal background of such applicants, the circumstances of the country, like a poor nation which is partly or completely in a civil war, a female student who has worked hard despite her family and society opposing her pursuit of education, a disabled student whose life has only known social obstacles, discrimination and poverty. I think there is a need to have a more comprehensive assessment of economically disadvantaged students from the developing world.

It is important to acknowledge that harnessing the talent of these youth who lack resources has significant implications not only for the individual students and their countries, but also for the world by triggering new possibilities, spearheading innovation and positively contributing to humanity's conscience. Western-educated youth have the potential to create a cadre of educated, effective and incorruptible leadership and government bureaucracy in their countries. When a young Lew Kuan Yew arrived at Cambridge University to study law during the colonial era, very few people expected that he would one day transform Singapore from a poor nation to a first world country. If one reads his book, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story*, it is inconceivable to imagine Yew would have transformed Singapore had he not acquired a Western education and exposure.

When Tom Mboya attended Ruskin College, Oxford during the colonial era in Kenya, it occurred to him that without educational development no progress will be possible in his home country of Kenya. Mboya, with the help of some American philanthropic individuals and foundations, had launched Airlift, a programme which enabled some 800 students from East and Central Africa to attend American colleges in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The program aimed at training the next generation of political leaders, civil servants and academicians who will take over from the colonial government and lead an independent Kenya. Among them was a young man called Barrack Obama Sr who met Ann Dunham at the University of Hawaii. The couple produced Barrack Obama, the 44<sup>th</sup> US president. The programme also produced Wangari Maathai, Africa's first female Nobel laureate, in addition to countless numbers of public figures in politics, business and academia in the region.

It is a fact that over the past decades, there has been a phenomenal expansion of higher education in the Global South. Following the introduction of World Bank and IMF-proposed austerity measures in these countries, governments have drastically reduced funding of higher education. This has led to the massive privatisation of tertiary education to cover cost. The privatisation led to a significant decline in the quality of education. There is negligible budget allocated for advanced research funding and innovation. The glaring inequality between the funding base of Western colleges and that of the Global South is evident. Unlike the vast research funding of Western colleges, the financial sources from endowments and other forms of personal donations are minuscule. Due to the tiny nature of the middle class, philanthropic culture has yet to take root in these countries. In fact, some Western college budgets are bigger than the national budget of some of these countries. And few of the researches conducted there are often in collaboration with a Western university which has funded the research. The Western university decides the theme and the scope of the research. Most of these universities haven't yet produced intellectuals of international calibre. This is further compounded by the curtailment of intellectual freedom in some of these countries.

Arriving in the West means, for some, is the first time they have lived in a democratic country, as some of these countries are run by repressive regimes. For others, it is the first time they have seen efficient public services and a government that genuinely cares for the welfare of their people, at least in the eyes of these youth. And nowhere is this demonstrated best than seeing the generous welfare programs that Western governments provide to the poorest segments of their societies. For some, taking their first underground subway is an exhilarating experience. But the biggest lesson they take from their Western adventure is that development is man-made and not a miracle. If they can do it, so can we. To me, this is the biggest lesson that such youth will acquire from the West.

While in the West, these youth are also acutely aware of the responsibility that comes with the privilege of standing out from a large field of equally talented peers. They understand that poverty means different things in different places. When a Western educated African professor researches poverty, for him/her, it is more of an actual experience than of a mere scholasticism. For these youth, it does not take long to figure out that the working class in the West corresponds to the middle and lower upper class in the developing world in material wealth and income. The remarkable freedom of the media and open national debate in the West astonishes them, something they mostly lack back home. And as they realise how rich and organised Western countries are, they also realise how poor and disorganised they were back home. It is these reflections that preoccupy their minds and harden their determination to bring about real social change upon returning home. I am familiar with a young man who, upon finishing college, went back to Africa despite having an active civil war raging in his

country. His determination was not shaken by his country's tumultuous state of affairs. What a determination!

Western education has laid the foundation for an elite class in the developing world. It has always been the means of stepping on to the high plateau of society. It has profoundly shaped the leadership of postcolonial societies. Western universities continue to become the breeding ground for the future elite of the Global South. The faces of the next generation of leaders in the developing world are best found in campuses of Western universities and no longer in military barracks. Western educated elites have always played prominent roles in their nation's political affairs. Over the past decades, a pattern has developed where most heads of state have increasingly become products of Western universities. They are also well represented in the legislatures of these countries. However, their domination is not confined to political arenas, they have also dominated business and civil society spheres. The education and connection received in the West also provided the key to the global elite dominated by the Western elite. And over the years, both elites have become intertwined.

Upon returning home, Western educated professionals demand international standards of public service like the one they enjoyed back in the West. It subjects the incompetent and ineffective leadership of the day to the critical scrutiny of Western educated young professionals. This means Western education sows the seeds of activism and hence potential transformation. This is what I call the Triple Dilemma of Western-educated professionals of the developing world. They have three options now: join the corrupt elite, stay out and take a safe route by pursuing a career in business, academia or in the aid sector, or challenge the authorities by demanding immediate and substantive change, in which case the stage is set for a merciless showdown with unrelenting and brutal regimes. Such critical and principled youth, who try to upend social order, find themselves at the receiving end of significant state violence. You will be forgiven if you ask why Western-educated professionals haven't economically and politically transformed their poor nations, it is simply because there has not yet been a critical mass of Western-educated principled dissidents, who have bravely taken on authorities, despite doing so coming at a considerable personal risk. But this shouldn't be the reason why we should give up on providing Western education for the talented, aspiring but economically challenged youth.

The ultimate decision that Western-educated youth should make is whether they will further entrench the elite or elevate the poor masses by redeeming them from the bonds of economic hardship. Why get the best education in the world if you are not going to economically transform your poor nation? Most of these youth want to help develop their countries. They believe that the knowledge, skills and exposure they acquired in the West would be useful in propelling their nations to the path of progress and economic transformation. The economic prosperity they witnessed in the West motivates them to improve the living standards of their own people. They have visceral contempt for the grinding poverty and bad governance in their countries. They understand that, joining the elite and detaching themselves from the poor masses from which they originally came, is a grave mistake. Their ultimate success depends on their connection with the poor masses who feel forgotten by the government and the ruling class. Their ability to speak for the masses, for the poor women, for orphaned children roaming around in the streets with no public service and protection, will define their legacy and not their Western education qualification. Developing their countries to the point that no one would travel to distant lands and cross oceans to get a good education should be their priority. Their first concern should not be joining the national bourgeoisie or brushing shoulders with the Western elite and getting recruited into what Carroll Quigley called the Anglo-American establishment, but rather improving the lives of their average citizens.

Talented but financially challenged students in the Global South expect a meritocracy and a fair selection process from the West which they could not find in their own countries. They have the potential to produce many Lee Kuan Yews, and who knows, the next Lee Kuan Yew might already be studying right here at Kellogg. There will always be a big mismatch between the copious amount of talented youth in these countries and the number of overseas scholarships available. As for now, many of the best and brightest youth who lack the financial resources hold Western education in high esteem and continue to aspire to go to a Western university. They pin their hopes down to a Western government, college or a private donor whose largesse would help underwrite their educational cost. It is my best hope that they won't stifle in their own ambitions, and that a Western donor will show up for them sooner than later, pluck them from obscurity, and from a sea of talent in the midst of poverty. In any case, Oxford will continue to top their dream universities, a far-fetched dream for many.

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