AID POLICY FOR UNIVERSITIES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: A BRITISH VIEW

R. C. GRIFFITHS

Formerly Director, Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas, London, England

ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to the implications of recent British government policy decisions for cooperation with universities in developing countries. The writer, the former head of the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas, suggests that the increasing amount of central government control has led to a deterioration. Traditional governmental methods of organising technical assistance are unduly expensive in terms of cost and staff time and are unsuited to the type of institution-to-institution collaboration which is essential if aid programmes are to be effectively focussed upon key universities in the Third World. There has been an unnecessary proliferation of "in-house" expertise in various government or semi-government agencies. The author calls for a return to the de-centralised policy of the late 1960s when the government helped British universities to reconstitute the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas. The present policy of merging the activities of organisations such as the British Council and the Inter-University Council under the Overseas Development Administration is criticised and a case made for recognising that higher education should be a separate and distinct element in the programme for each country. Such activities are best handled by a single specialist agency which uses the method of facilitating direct collaboration between identified institutions.

As with most policies, aid policy towards universities in developing countries exists at various levels. At the highest level it consists of that element of the overall aid strategy of a country which is specifically stated to relate to the work of the universities in developing countries as an aid objective in its own right. Such a conscious aid policy may involve substantial well publicized activity... as it did in Britain from the end of the second war to the mid 1970's... or it may... as now... be muted. Overall aid strategy picks out highlights and is often expressed in emotive terms. "World hunger", "the poore of the poor", "energy conservation", "population control" have largely replaced the even more general concept of "overseas development" as the stated strategic objectives of aid.
These fashionable phrases are, I suggest, usually designed to explain in as graphic terms as possible to the tax-paying public of developed countries and their legislators the main areas of need, so as to encourage them to provide the wherewithal to finance the various national and international aid programmes. They also seek to establish priorities and to direct the attention of private foundations and other benefactors to the necessity for aid to be given. The arguments used will, it is hoped, be appreciated by developing country politicians and make them more kindly disposed, in international political and trading terms, towards the interests and aspirations of the developed countries concerned. This level is exemplified by such people as Mr. Macnamara of the World Bank, without whose constant efforts and leadership aid expenditure in most developed countries would not even carry the priority which it now does. The Commission under the former German Chancellor Willy Brandt has now powerfully joined the lobby.

Aid to universities in developing countries, in this context, is only worth mentioning insofar as it provides additional public appeal. In the immediate post-war world university expansion had both public and political appeal. Today the political appeal at least has largely disappeared. As the national popularity of university systems in the developed and in the developing world waxed and waned so did the existence, at the strategic level, of policies specifically aimed at university aid.

In 1968, Mr. Reg Prentice, as Minister of Overseas Development, wrote to the Inter-University Council that the promotion of higher education overseas and inter-university co-operation with developing countries, i.e. the specific role assigned to the IUC “... forms one of the most important of all the strands in our overseas aid”. By 1975 when Mr. Prentice returned to the Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM), he had changed his tune. In launching the aid policy White Paper (HMSO Cmd 6270) entitled, “The Changing Emphasis in British Aid Policies: More Help for the Poorest” he illustrated the policy changes he had in mind with the observation, “In Education we want to see a shift from helping universities to helping with vocational training and other aspects of education which are closer to the grass roots” Notwithstanding this rather shallow observation by the Minister, the White Paper itself undertook “... to continue to support education at all levels and especially in the least developed countries. They too need access to universities and polytechnics ...”. At the broad strategic level, there the Government’s aid policy for universities in developing countries rests. For the last five years, a process of attrition of university aid and increased centralization of control within ODM has been the order of the day, with no attempt to redefine policy.

Below the broad strategic level of aid policy formulation there is necessarily, in an almost wholly Government financed activity such as