

**SYSTEMS OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION  
IN TWELVE  
COUNTRIES**

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**A Comparative View**

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**Neill P. Eurich**

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## Preface

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In 1978 the International Council for Educational Development (ICED) published reports from 12 different countries, each one describing what was happening in higher education. All were part of a study to evaluate the effectiveness of systems emerging around the world: how they operate, what problems they are encountering, and the solutions being tried. This book summarizes the scene and compares the results. It is a composite view of major issues and efforts.

The 12 countries may seem an odd lot: Australia, Canada, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Thailand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They were not selected with carefully defined criteria in mind; in fact, they simply responded to an invitation and had leadership interested in participating. As it happens, the countries circle the globe, but all are in the northern hemisphere except Australia. Thus, there is no representation from the continents of Africa and South America. Such a study remains to be done in those important areas.

All countries adhered generally to guidelines provided for the study, except France where the report was based on a research project to gather selective opinion on current reforms in French higher education. The guidelines asked for 1) a description of the system, its size, and organization, 2) an evaluation of how it really operates, and 3) an evaluation of its flexibility, efficiency, and effectiveness in meeting goals. A copy of the guidelines is found in Appendix A.

It is immediately apparent that two-thirds of the study was evaluative and not quantitative. It called for the writers' opinions and any evidence they chose to give. In this aspect especially the study is unusual. Most comparative studies, particularly when so many countries are included, present a description, more or less factual, on each country. This one, in contrast, deals

with more subjective and qualitative judgements. Furthermore, I have not hesitated to add my opinion on what is happening, what is missing, and the directions in which higher education is changing.

I have not drawn on other sources and interpretations of experts, but stayed with the material presented in the 12 countries' reports. There is more than enough substance in these reports alone, which also have the values of timeliness and structure from the study's framework. Thus, the study rests basically on a current view of the situation as seen by leaders of higher education in their own countries.

There is another feature that is somewhat different in this presentation. Instead of dealing separately with each country's higher education system and then concluding with a general comparison of their effectiveness, I have compared the different systems throughout the book in major aspects which constitute chapter titles: goals, government and funding, planning, coordination, academic autonomy, admissions, research, and innovation. While the traditional method for comparative studies might have lessened the likelihood of error, it would not have promoted consideration of trends and directions in which higher education is moving. This latter advantage seemed to me to outweigh the benefits of the safer approach. Without assumptions and projections, even if they prove wrong, we can do little to improve performance. Indeed, we cannot even create alternative possibilities.

Diversity among the countries challenges both generalizations and comparisons, but it does not defeat them. Many similarities exist in higher education systems, and frequently differences are only superficial. Above all, higher education shares problems which show little regard for national boundaries; they are epidemic across the lines drawn by historical circumstance.

Differences are more apt to appear clearly in the solutions that are being tried to cope with the problems. Responses are limited by a country's social and cultural background, its stage of economic development, and by political stance and leadership. Therefore, the analysis tends primarily toward comparison among the countries of their handling of the problems that beset all of them. Considering different solutions with their attendant mistakes and the new problems they create may be valuable to those in other countries who are contemplating similar developments. Perhaps it is too much to hope that we may learn from the errors of others, but at least there is the chance.

One country—Iran—requires special mention because its report was published a few months before the revolution early in 1979. It is included, like the others, since the report summarizes the status of Iranian higher education that the new regime inherited and on which it must build. Obviously, there can be few safe predictions on the future of Iran's higher education system.

There is the further question of defining *higher education* and *systems*. Both terms are elastic. Higher education is broadening to embrace many types of education beyond the traditional forms. Technical institutes, shorter forms of study, and various kinds of continuing education have lately been included in the concept of higher education. It has widened to mean all education at the tertiary level. This extension itself is a phenomenon indicating the more comprehensive view of higher education that governments are taking.

UNESCO follows a broad policy that classifies non-university institutions as third-level education for which completion of secondary school or its equivalent is necessary. Statistics include part-time students when possible, evening courses of the recognized level, correspondence courses in well-defined cases, and private as well as public institutions regardless of whether they confer university degrees. In the 1975 summary volume on *Classification of Educational Systems*, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development adopted UNESCO's definition for future studies, but five years later, UNESCO is still working on the complexities of an international standard classification.

For these reasons our study did not attempt a universally acceptable definition of higher education. Different countries have varying policies and changing definitions in practice. Significant evidence lies in the increasing use of the phrase "or its equivalent" whenever standards of achievement are mentioned for entrance in higher education.

The definition of higher education becomes doubly important for national planning, allocation of funds, and the structure of administration. Governments are widening the classification: they want the larger view in order to see their total financial commitment and the scope of higher education opportunities. Inside higher education, the view is commonly more narrow and is fragmented into categories like universities, two- or four-year colleges, technical and special institutes, and so on. The study concentrates on those categories presently incorporated in higher education systems, but specific reference is made to developments in the wider setting as they affect the established branches.

I might add that, because of the uncertainties over exactly what is included in the higher education category in various countries, I have not used comparative, quantitative tables. The data are simply not dependable on an international scale and are too apt to carry erroneous implications.

*System* has recently entered the vocabulary in higher education partly because of the fragmentation referred to among types of institutions. Most countries say they do not have a system of higher education; instead they have several systems, each for a type of institution, or they may consider higher education a system with subsystems or sectors for each type. Seldom

is there one formal system operating coherently with organic parts that constitute an orderly whole. The search for such a system is in process. This is most apparent in the chapters on coordination and planning. I use the word *system* rather loosely as meaning the whole operation, recognizing it is not a formal structure but a scene with multiple parts or sectors that are interacting more and more frequently.

My deep appreciation goes to the most distinguished group of readers who participated in the ICED study: Burton R. Clark at the University of California at Los Angeles, Rune Premfors of Sweden, and Edward Sheffield of Canada for their helpful criticism of an early draft. I am especially indebted to Professor Lyman Glenny of Berkeley and Martin Meyerson, former President of the University of Pennsylvania, for painstaking analysis of a later draft. Their criticism was essential.

I also wish to thank James A. Perkins, Chairman of ICED, for the opportunity to work in this study under his wise and experienced leadership. It was a rare chance for me to learn a great deal. Now I only hope that the study may be valuable or at least provocative to others concerned with higher education around the world.



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# 1

## THE MILIEU

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The 12 countries of the study—Australia, Canada, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Thailand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—present a great mixture of completely unique characteristics and yet similarities that permit grouping them in types of one sort or another. Each has its own historical context in which the structure of higher education has taken shape and the program has evolved. Fashioned by a country's geographic location, its nature and size, historical events, religious, social and cultural attitudes, and political and economic developments, the higher education system, along with other social institutions, has emerged into what is now a more integrated world.

Some major problems and issues today confront all higher education systems regardless of their separate origins and distinctive characteristics. Their responses to the common problems retain the differences conditioned by their origin and development, while the problems reflect the growing international relationships of one society to another and the increasing speed at which issues encircle the civilized world. These common issues are discussed in subsequent chapters that show the range of solutions being tried by the individual countries.

At the same time, higher education, in any country, shares tasks common to all. Certain functions are basic, like teaching and research, and the fulfillment of individual abilities and society's needs. In this sense, goals for higher education become international, crossing the various national borders. Probably in no respect are the systems more alike than in statements of goals or, put affirmatively, goals are stated in much the same way by the different countries. Nevertheless, there are significant variations in emphasis and scope.

Before examining national goals, a preliminary glance at the broad spectrum of diversity represented by the countries is necessary. The view is cursory, but it serves as a reminder of the different contexts for the 12 higher education systems and as a caution against sweeping generalizations or grand summary statements.

## **HISTORY**

The 12 countries have rather long histories, especially when Persia is remembered as the forerunner of Iran, and Siam as the precursor of Thailand, which took its present name only in 1949. With the historical view in mind, Iran can claim the earliest university, Jondishapur in Ahwaz, with faculties in philosophy, medicine, and pharmacy in the third century. Further, the Iranian report cites the existence of a "multicampus system" of seven campuses established in the eleventh century by Nezam el-Mulk in the Seljuk Empire. The institutions were financed largely by government, and students were provided room and board, with scholarships available for the needy. Of these institutions, the one at Isfahan survived until the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

In the Western world, Oxford and the Sorbonne appeared in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, respectively, and the universities at Heidelberg and Kraków in the fourteenth century. Uppsala University in Sweden followed in the next century. Moving to the Americas, the Spanish Crown established the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico in 1551; and Canada and the United States, through private initiative, began higher institutions in the seventeenth century. Australia and Japan started universities in the nineteenth century that led modern developments, and Thailand in the twentieth.

Although the countries are spread over many centuries in the dates for their foundation of higher learning institutions, they are joined together in this century, particularly since World War II, in the phenomenal growth of such institutions and the numbers of students enrolled. Every one of them has experienced an enormous and unprecedented increase, making higher education an ever more important part of their economy and society.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND SIZE**

The higher education systems of the study are in countries that differ dramatically in size—both in area and population—and resources. Canada is the largest in area with the United States and Australia next in that order. The United Kingdom and West Germany are the smallest and also have the greatest density of population per square mile with the exception, of course,

of Japan. Yet, it is interesting to realize that Japan is considerably larger in territory than the other two, and even somewhat larger than Poland.

If density alone is compared, the range is staggering—from Japan's nearly 800 to Australia's not quite 5 people per square mile. And, probably little known, Iran has only about 5 more people per square mile than Sweden. Poland, moreover, a country smaller than Japan, has greater population density than Thailand or France.<sup>2</sup> Naturally the size of the population directly affects the size of the higher education system if the country is moving toward equality of opportunity as is true of every country in the ICED study. The birthrate and pattern of longevity with deathrates are further factors changing the marketplace for advanced learning by increasing or decreasing demand.

At present, most of these countries have lowered their birthrates, but Mexico, Iran, and Thailand continue to face the challenge of rapidly multiplying populations. Their systems of higher education are confronted with tremendous problems in numbers of people to be served now and in the future, as well as the need to offer a very wide variety of courses addressing the many social and technical areas for the development of their countries. On the other hand, those countries that have lowered birthrates now anticipate fewer students of the traditional age group in higher education and so face problems of an opposite sort—falling enrollments and subsequent cutbacks.

Concentration of population has also played a key part in the location of higher education institutions and the types of delivery systems needed to reach people. Following the natural environment, the Australian population is concentrated largely along the coastline while the central desert is sparsely populated. Most Canadians live within one hundred miles of the United States border, and the majority of Swedes live in the warmer, southern half of their kingdom. Universities and colleges tend to be grouped in the more populated regions. Consequently, the distribution of opportunities for advanced learning is often geographically distorted, and the higher education system is lopsided in the placement of its units.

The phenomenon of urbanization has compounded the natural flow of population and has centered huge masses of people in places like Bangkok, Teheran, and Mexico City. Earlier, other major capitals of the world experienced such growth with the problems attendant on becoming a megalopolis. In Thailand today, most of the government universities are located in Bangkok, and of the ten private colleges, only two are outside the metropolitan area. Rural areas are served primarily by government colleges.<sup>3</sup>

After World War II, one of the important reforms in Japanese higher education was to alleviate the concentration of universities in metropolitan areas and establish "at least one national university in each prefecture."<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the French system has tried to reduce the drawing power of Paris and its environs which have attracted students disproportionately to that region.

Large and small countries alike are aware of the need to make higher education programs available to the people not now being adequately served. Even Poland and West Germany with relatively high population density patterns have the problem of developing regional opportunities. In the Swedish report, Rune Premfors comments directly on the influence of geographic and population factors:

The geographical dispersion of institutions in Sweden corresponds closely to the distribution of the population. Although no systematic study has proven it, we are convinced that the 'population factor' has for long been decisive when institutions were founded.... Not until the late 1960s and work of U68 have considerations of regional development and social justice come to play an important role in public policy.<sup>5</sup>

Every country in the study recognizes the task of equalizing opportunity, not only economically and socially, but geographically for access. More than setting up additional institutions in less populated areas, "distance learning" and extension courses are gaining renewed attention, encouraged by the possibilities of technological media. The geographic dispersal of institutions is part of the basic design and organization of higher education systems just as population affects the size and nature of such systems.

Regional differences further condition the system's structure and functioning, especially when differences are marked and strongly held. In Canada, for example, the differences among the ten provinces are sufficiently sharp and distinct to prompt a regional presentation of the report with separate chapters from the Atlantic Provinces, Quebec, Ontario, and Western Canada. Each province is distinctive in its characteristics and in its system of higher education.

Such differences might be expected in the United States, but regional distinction is less apparent in organizational structures for higher education than the extraordinary diversity that exists among the 50 states. Variations are extremely wide in the size of systems and the numbers enrolled, in the combination of public and private institutions, in the position of state governments with regard to control, and in the structural forms of the systems.

Larger countries like Canada and the United States may inevitably have pronounced differences whether regional or by individual states, but small countries also exhibit similar differences. One needs only look at the United Kingdom's coalition of Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and England. Over many years, the four regions have maintained unique characteristics.

Today Northern Ireland and Scotland have their own education departments that function somewhat differently from the others.

## **HOMOGENEITY AND DIVERSITY**

Often related to regional differences within countries is the cultural composition of populations that naturally affects the higher education system. Demands upon higher education multiply with the diversity among the peoples of the society, and methods of operating within the system are affected as well. A relatively homogeneous population can, for example, act more easily on a consensus basis than a population made up of people from many diverse backgrounds. Such is the case in Sweden and Japan. Both operate from strong similarity and stability in their ethnic bases. Japan, closed to foreigners for more than a century, has built a society with a high degree of conformity in behavior and custom, and group identification is valued more than individualism. Decisions can be made through consultation and consensus.

On a scale ranging from homogeneity at one end to diversity at the other, most of the countries cluster toward the homogeneous end with the majority of their people relatively similar in ethnic background. West Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Thailand rank fairly high on the uniform end of the scale. Australia is close with over 90 percent of the population of British origin. France, from an ethnic base of various European and Mediterranean groups, has created a remarkably homogenous and unified population.<sup>6</sup>

Mexico and Iran have greater mixtures and fall toward the middle of the scale. Canada reflects the notable bicultural combination of English and French which, at present, means that roughly three-quarters of their students in higher education are using the English language while the rest speak French.<sup>7</sup> Yet nearly one-fourth of Canada's population comes from other European countries and elsewhere.

The United States stands at the point of utmost diversity—wholly apart from the other countries in its circumstances of birth and growth. It is an extreme mixture of people from Britain, western and eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Canada. Immigrants have literally come from north, south, east, and west, and the largest numbers now entering are Spanish-speaking from south of the border and the Caribbean Islands.

With this remarkable cultural mix, consensus could hardly be expected to operate; decisions perforce are determined by majority opinion. Highest regard is accorded to private initiative and individualism which, together with the backing of many religious groups, have been factors leading to the establishment of the strong private sector in the higher education system.



Diversity, which is the distinctive feature of the higher education system in the United States, is so broad and great that it challenges the very idea of a single system. It would be more accurate to say 50 systems exist in the United States, but in the aggregate they form a “system” reflecting the quirks and peculiarities of the country itself. And, in lesser degrees, the same may be said for the other countries in the study: each of the nationwide systems harbors variations in patterns and functions that result from its setting, the composition of the population, and the untold ingredients that nourish its evolution.

Whatever the combination of ethnic roots, traditions, customs, and religious beliefs forming a country, a cultural heritage emerges as a nation’s cultural identity—which higher education systems are expected to protect and advance. This purpose for higher education, whether expressed or assumed, will be among a country’s goals for its system.

## **ECONOMIC STAGE**

The various economic stages in which countries find themselves are a further factor determining what the society wants from its system of higher education, the goals they set deliberately or unconsciously, and how much money they are willing to spend on higher education. Again, the range among the countries is exceedingly great.

Most are highly developed, industrialized nations, “postindustrialized” some would say. Japan, West Germany, and the United States lead the world in gross national product. These are technological economies supported by advanced levels of specialized research and study in universities and training in skills, production, and performance in other institutions of their higher education systems. The emphasis on specialization has often resulted in narrow training and the consequent need for more general education, related studies, and a broader focus on complex issues.

On the other hand, Mexico, Iran, and Thailand have agricultural bases for their economies and are considered developing societies. Mexico and Iran, however, possess vast resources in oil that produce rapid wealth and hasten progress toward industrialization if funds are so spent. Technological development is still a great challenge to them and their higher education systems. Training in a wide number of basic fields is required; the number and quality of teachers must be increased, and student motivation and talent encouraged.

In a more advanced stage, Poland is working toward modernization, and Australia also faces the challenge of internal technological development and building its own economy if it is not to leave the development of its rich natural resources to multinational corporations. These countries are in a