



Learning the Hard Way in Namibia

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MONEY problems loom large at the University of Namibia. Indeed, a single problem encountered by administrators is relying almost exclusively on government funding.

When that funding gets cut because of the budgetary pressures now endemic to a developing country such as Namibia, educators have trouble finding other ways to pay the bills - the institution's as well as their own. Budget cuts also mean less pay for professors and administrators: students say many have turned to bribery to "supplement" their salaries. The recent "Angolagate" scandal at the University of Namibia whereby some Angolan students with fake qualifications were admitted to pursue courses, and of some staff members who stole huge amounts of funds from the university coffers, are still vivid in our memories. And it does not end there. It is alleged that every year, some students of certain higher institutions of learning bribe their lecturers to pass their term examinations. The practice is so widespread that there is almost no risk of getting caught: students prefer guaranteed marks to exposing corrupt lecturers and professors.

Even the Polytechnic of Namibia, widely regarded as Namibia's finest, has been caught in the money mess. "Confused, bewildered, underfunded and angry" is how one of the senior lecturers describes the current state of the system. In the past 16 years, the number of students has tripled whereas public spending has declined considerably. Many in Namibia worry about able students from impoverished backgrounds being shut out due to the ever rising fees and inadequate bursaries.

Faculty salaries are also considerably below the national average, which has meant a drain of some of Namibia's best brains. Inadequate funding turns off academic stars in other ways as well. Much more important are research facilities - that is state-of-the-art research facilities which are lacking at such institutions.

Government control can be a burden even when the money keeps flowing.

With the Ministry of Higher Education acting as "big brother", the Namibian system does not allow enough flexibility in everything - from paying tuition to choosing classes. Parents must pay in full - a particular burden since tuition has risen fivefold since independence. Academic rigidity turns off some of Namibia's best students, who are forced to pick majors while they're still in Grade 12. There is no room for intellectual experimentation.

I am even more outraged than people before about the sorry state of Namibia's university which can be described as "intellectual rubble". That may sound harsh, but few Namibian academics would disagree. The problems are many: a dearth of qualified Namibians, students ill prepared by a dismal public-education system, an often incompetent university bureaucracy and blatant government intervention. Professors have been turned into unmotivated civil servants, paid according to seniority rather than merit. On campuses, serious discussion of scientific, philosophic, social or political issues is virtually nonexistent. It is difficult to imagine a system in the modern world which has a greater antipathy to intellectual inquiry than the one which presently exists in Namibia.

Namibia must, therefore, introduce a huge reform effort, much of which involves copying the United States. The first step is to give the University and Polytechnic more autonomy, while avoiding outright privatization, so that each institution can do its own fund-raising and pick its own students, raising quality. The rest should be channelled into vocational and trade colleges. More and more professors should be paid on merit.

It is ironic that at a time when so many are decrying U.S. imperialism, they are openly copying America's educational system in order to keep their talent at home.

At the University of Namibia or Polytechnic, professors and lecturers teach and you take notes. At American universities, there is more communication between students and professors. Students sit and brainstorm. You can even tell jokes (Socratic method). No wonder students from all over the world are flocking to American universities due to America's tradition of academic freedom and its stellar research facilities.

As higher education becomes more of a global commodity in the next few decades it is crucial that Namibia's institutions of higher learning learn from the American example. Unlike most countries, the United States has always encouraged educational diversity, a sort of free-market approach. As Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers put it: "We let folks decide for themselves." In other words, let the best ideas win.
