

# Excellence as Duty

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## 1 Introduction

“Excellence as duty” is our title and it is intended to encompass some of the main issues, which a university striving-for-excellence encounters and for which appropriate and effective responses need to be formulated. First and foremost, the university believes it is duty-bound to produce graduates who, when they look back at their university careers, will view them as inspirational stages of their lives which brought out the best of their talents. University education today is vastly different from university education in the past (Sect. 2). In Sect. 3, we show the manner in which university education in Europe underwent a transformation from being exclusively available to societies’ elites to the present where education is available to the masses, sometimes in the process losing the perspective of “excellence” as a result of insufficient adjustment. It is only in recent times that international comparisons for the quality of universities and education in the form of rankings and of educational performance indicators, such as the Project International Student Assessment (PISA), have become available. These comparators enable tracking and measurement of quantum leaps in excellence as are being currently witnessed in Asia and in the Middle East (Sect. 4). Some elements of excellence in university education are discussed in Sect. 5, while Sect. 6 discusses the manner in which universities can become acquainted with “good practices” through the exchange of knowledge. The final section presents a summary and conclusion.

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## 2 Graduates as Drivers of Socio-Economic Development

### 2.1 *On Excellence and the Quality of Education*

The world has become familiar with the notion that education is not only essential for the development of a person, but that it also is an investment, which, just as with other investments, can subsequently yield beneficial returns. The investment notion implies costs and potential benefits, where the costs have to be met prior to benefits being reaped.

Since the early 1950s, schools have been recognized as being essential for economic development. The first use of the term ‘human capital’ was in countries which provided quality education. These also were the countries with the highest rates of economic growth. Causality was discussed: are high economic growth rates the cause for high levels of investment in human capital or is the reverse the case? It was likely to be the second, with a kind of spiral upward effect, because high growth countries would be in a position to invest a substantial part of that growth in education. Education also became recognized as a fast track for growth by low and middle-income countries. Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore are prime examples of such countries and such outcomes.

“Doing well” in education is more than enrolling children in education, as has been shown repeatedly. Those economists who tried to explain statistically the difference in economic growth rates across countries from the perspective of differences in the levels of education achieved in the working population by merely looking at numbers became disillusioned. “Where has all the education gone?” was the title of one of these studies [1]. It was the outcry of a researcher who had investigated the total number of education years in the labor force to explain statistically the contribution of education to economic development. He was unable to discover a significant relationship between that measure of human capital and economic growth.

Pritchett’s efforts were soon overtaken by researchers who applied quality standards to the years under scrutiny, often fairly clumsily as there is a danger of perceptible imprecision when measuring the quality of a year of education which a student has enjoyed. Barro and Lee [2] and Hanushek [3] are the pioneers in these efforts by using the scores in the Project International Student Achievement and the scores in the Project International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC), respectively, as indicators of education system quality. The not-so-surprising finding is that the contribution of quality education to economic growth is indeed substantial. A no-brainer: education is not simply concerned with being enrolled in education, but is concerned with learning. Quality has a face: where more is learned, the quality is better. ‘Excellence’ then can emerge from the shadows of vagueness and imprecision of meaning to become recognizable and identifiable. Excellence is about improving quality. The standards in this regard are no longer local or national, but have international standard implications and applications, as there is no reason why youngsters of other localities or other nations would learn

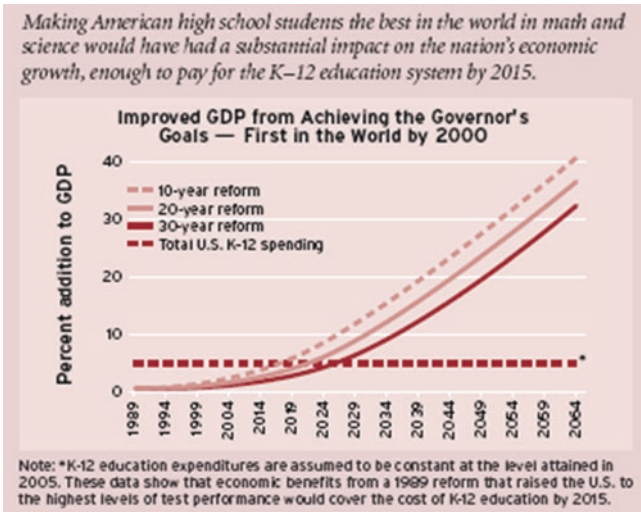


Fig. 1 The economic benefits of education reform. Source Hanushek et al. [5]

less in a year of education than those whose education occurs locally or nationally. Or, as Derek Bok, the Harvard President from 1971 to 1991 and from 2006 to 2007 recapped in 2014: “the number of college degrees is not nearly as important as how well students develop cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving” [4]. This is best demonstrated with Fig. 1 for the US, where the effects of education reform which would improve the quality of the skills of the labor force on economic growth are shown.

## 2.2 Higher Education

Recent insights into the importance of graduates for socio-economic development have placed universities at center stage. All quality education has an enduring impact on economic development, but it seems that university education in particular plays a central role in the current stage of globalized development where knowledge and its creative and problem solving use plays such an important role, while routine work is increasingly mechanized or robotized.

Research universities seem often not fully aware of the tremendous role of their graduates in economic development. They seem to primarily pride themselves on the quality of their research, not realizing that research does not need to take place in a university, but can well be housed in separate institutions, as is done for example in Germany where the Max Planck Institutes are independent organizations without an educational role. They point to the excellence in research, demonstrated for example in Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals won by their researchers