

Higher Education and the Formation of Developmental Elites: A literature review and preliminary data analysis

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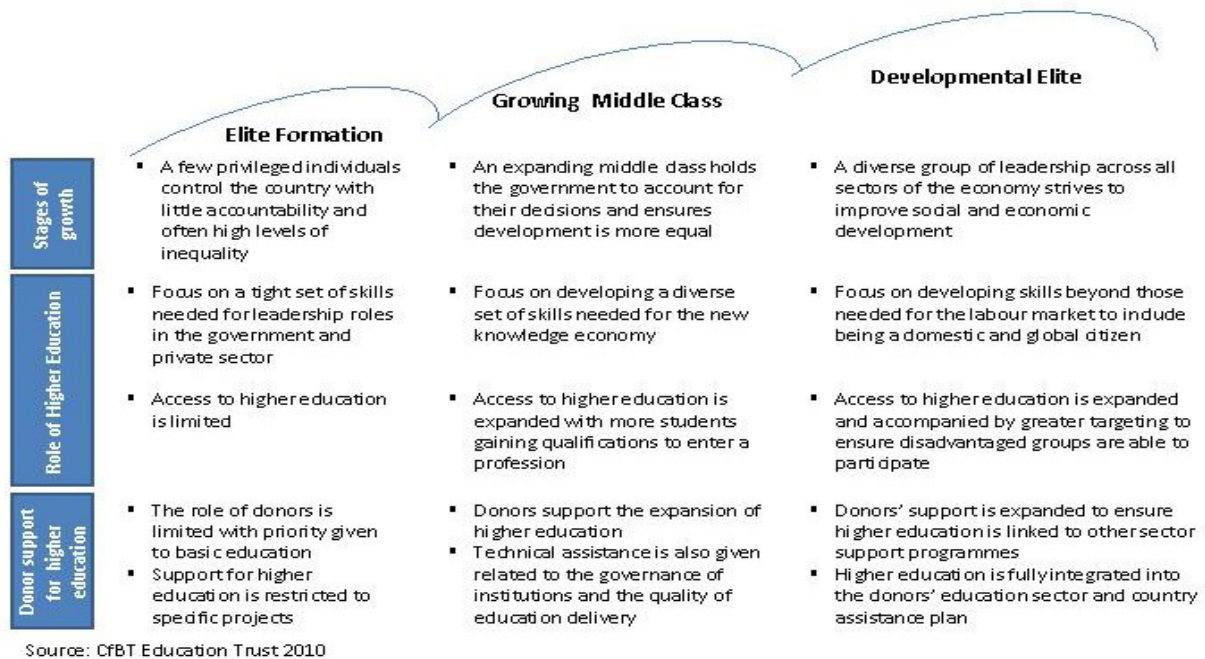
Does higher education have a role to play in facilitating the emergence of developmental leaders and elites? There is increasing recognition that overcoming the challenges of security and development will require leadership across the public and private sectors. But how do developmental leaders emerge and acquire the necessary skills and values to lead? How might higher education influence this process and how can it contribute towards improved governance?

This paper is the product of the first phase of a Development Leadership Program (DLP)¹ research study exploring the hitherto neglected question of whether and how higher education may contribute to the emergence of developmental leadership. The paper undertakes data analysis mapping higher education gross enrolment rates (GERs) with a 20-year lag against the Worldwide Governance Indicators, used here as a proxy for the existence of developmental elites. This first phase of research has identified a positive correlation between higher education and good governance. While at this stage no definitive causation can be established, a review of literature has enabled the study to illustrate ways in which higher education can contribute towards the formation of developmental elites. It also suggests some themes for future consideration, both for the international community and in planning the next phase of this research.

Key findings

- **Higher education has multiple purposes:** from developing technical skills (in order to meet the skills needs of the economy) to influencing individual behaviours, values and attitudes. As a result, higher education is associated not only with the creation of a skilled workforce, but also with the creation of elites, a middle class, and individuals who are socially engaged. The literature also reflects that the purpose of higher education is not static, rather it is adaptive and changes according to the systems of provision and the vision of different institutes of higher education.
- **The purpose and scope of higher education** has broadened from an original focus on elite development to a system of mass or universal education in many Western countries, as the diagram below illustrates.

The role of higher education in supporting developmental elites



Developing countries are still mostly at the 'elite formation' stage, but have found their higher education systems largely under-funded, both nationally and by the international donor community.

- Both the data analysis and literature review found evidence for a positive correlation between higher education and good governance. Within the data analysis a general pattern of positive correlation was seen, indicating that increased levels of tertiary enrolment are positively linked with indicators of good governance. Whilst this pattern held true globally, there is some regional variation. Stronger positive correlation was seen in East Asia and the Pacific, whilst trends were sometimes negative in Central and Eastern Europe largely linked to countries where high levels of tertiary enrolment have not been associated with improved levels of governance. The data analysis also highlighted some countries where there had been significant improvements in tertiary enrolment, were not associated with changes in governance indicators. This suggests that whilst tertiary education may be an influential factor in improving governance, the mechanisms through which any improvement takes place are complex, and are likely to be influenced by the political, economic and social context. It is important to consider which other factors are influencing improve-

ments in governance and/or driving improvements in higher education reforms.

- Donor support for higher education has varied over recent decades. During the 1960s, higher education was highly valued as an important driver of development and accompanied by significant levels of support. However, since the 1980s greater emphasis has been placed on other levels of education, most notably primary and basic education. This was originally linked to research demonstrating higher levels of social and economic returns for investments at primary level, and more recently has been reinforced by the Millennium Development Goals and the focus on universal primary education. Yet this has been countered by evidence emphasising the social returns of higher education and its importance in political and social development, as well as its contribution to economic growth. **In particular, research indicates that the norms, values and attitudes fostered within higher education are highly influential in the development of civil society, social cohesion and democratic reforms.**
- Whilst higher education by itself may not be a sufficient pre-condition for democratic processes and improved governance, evidence does indicate that it is a contributory factor. The extent to which higher education institutes achieve this 'value-added' is dependent upon their structure, teaching methods and curricula. Moreover, while such

institutes are in a position to encourage the development of positive attitudes and values, this is not normally their primary function. However, they will play a role in developing a 'critical mass' of highly educated individuals who can support and encourage state-building processes and developmental outcomes.

Considerations for future developmental planning

The research identified four key areas in which higher education can be influential in the formation of developmental elites and improved levels of governance:

(i) **Creation of a growing middle class**, that is better positioned to hold government to account and to shape the institutions that foster good governance. Expanding access to higher education and facilitating the growth of a middle class, and a network of professional associations commonly associated with it, helps to broaden civic participation, to consolidate democratic reforms and to promote economic growth.

(ii) **Meeting the needs of the labour market.** Higher education will need to continue to change in order to meet the new demands of, and skills needed for, the knowledge economy and globalisation. There is increasing recognition that the role of universities in research, evaluation, information transfer, and technology development is crucial to national social progress and economic growth.

(iii) **Focus on skills as well as increasing access.** It is important to recognise the role of higher education institutes in developing non-technical, cross-sectoral skills such as creativity, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, critical reasoning, perseverance, social ethics and service. Such skills help to develop individuals who are both better placed to meet the needs of the changing economy, and more

likely to be engaged and responsible citizens.

(iv) **Financial support to developing countries wishing to expand higher education opportunities is critical**, to enable them to address the three issues outlined above. This requires donors to recognise the significant external benefits of higher education.

Broader demands are being placed on higher education, with the expectation that it is no longer focused on the development of elites, but on creating a skilled workforce that can respond to the rapidly changing needs of the new knowledge economy and positively contribute to the societies in which it lives.

This does not mean that higher education no longer has a role to play in elite formation. Rather, that the nature of forming elites requires a two-fold strategy:

- firstly, to create the very small elite who will be the **strategic players at the top of society**;
- secondly, to create a **wider elite that occupies key positions** in the public, private and third sectors, and who constitute a growing middle class that has knowledge, skills and capacity to hold the smaller exclusive elite to account.

The emerging findings of this research, whilst still tentative, offer some strong indications on the potential role of higher education and the emergence of developmental elites. This paper concludes by identifying a number of ways in which this initial phase of the research programme can be built upon in later stages. In particular, it suggests further and more detailed country-level analysis to explore issues of causation and the relationship between higher education and other factors affecting elite formation.

Download the paper [here](#)

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1. The DLP is a multi-stakeholder initiative committed to expanding the evidence base on the role that leaders, elites and coalitions play in development, focusing on how they shape institutions and influence development outcomes. Further information can be found at: www.dlprog.org.

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