

# Nix the BRICs: At least for higher education scholarship

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## Nix the BRICs—At Least for the Higher Education Debate

Philip G. Altbach and Roberta Malee Bassett

Though the BRIC concept has become almost trite in encompassing the new economic power brokers—that Brazil, Russia, India, and China seem to represent—the concept of this bloc is actually of little relevance in understanding the complex higher education environment in these or other emerging economic powers. Indeed, the BRIC collective is itself a marketing artifice, identified a dozen years ago by former Goldman Sachs economist, Jim O’Neill, as much for its clear and basic imagery as with any actual commonalities amongst these particular countries.<sup>1</sup> We posit here that higher education research, at least, needs to step back and take a new and different look at the BRICs. We do not think that the four countries actually have a lot in common, and it makes little analytic sense to discuss them together. Indeed, in an article in *Times Higher Education* (December 5, 2013), O’Neil has shifted his focus to the MINTs (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey). He sees MINTs as demographically poised for economic success for a number of reasons, which now contrast the experiences of the BRICs, including population aging. The MINT populations are growing and

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<sup>1</sup> O’Neill, J. (30 November 2001). Building Better Global Economic BRICs. *Global Economics* Paper No: 66. Retrieved 10 January 2014 from <http://www.content.gs.com/japan/ideas/brics/building-better-pdf.pdf>

relatively balanced, while the BRICs, with the exception of India, have older populations less well suited for rapid economic expansion in the coming decades.

Our argument here is simple. Looking at the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, China, and India—might make some arguable sense in terms of economic development, and grouping them for analytical purposes in higher education is simply not relevant. Further, a capital “S” was added to the original BRICs in 2010 to admit South Africa<sup>2</sup> into the grouping, further weakening the links among this multinational bloc. South Africa is so much smaller than the other BRIC nations—with an economy significantly smaller than the other four.

#### *Variations but Few Themes*

In vitally relevant and comparative respects, the four BRIC nations differ greatly from each other across the spectrum of higher education measurement norms. The four use different languages, come from different academic traditions (with some similarities between China and Russia), have had quite different academic strategies, and have no history of academic cooperation or competition. Neither students nor professors from these countries mingle much. Two of the four,

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<sup>2</sup> O’Neill, in his original conceptualization, did not include South Africa, but the BRIC consortium that emerged from his thinking invited South Africa to participate in their meetings beginning in 2010.

China and Russia, focus on breaking into the “world-class” league tables, and Russia is only now beginning its efforts. India trails far behind.

Two of the four, China and India, are major “sending” countries in terms of international students, with China alone accounting for 17 percent of the world’s overseas student population.<sup>3</sup> Students from these two countries go mainly to the major English-speaking universities. Brazil, which only recently began a major overseas scholarship program, focuses more on Europe; and Russia is not a significant player.

China, alone among the four, has a significant national strategy to build world-class elite research universities and has invested heavily and with considerable success. It has been effective in building an effective differentiated academic system that serves a range of national needs and student populations. Particularly important now, China has the world’s largest student population, with 24 percent of its age cohort enrolled in postsecondary education, similar to the gross enrollment rate of Brazil, which is approximately 25 percent.<sup>4</sup> Unlike China, with its politically powerful and embedded strategy for higher education expansion, India has had no higher education strategy, per se, although the recently promulgated 12th Five Year Plan articulates elements of a policy. The

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<sup>3</sup> UIS (2012). Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students. Retrieved 6 January 2014, from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/EDUCATION/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank. (2014). School enrollment, tertiary (% gross). Retrieved 6 January 2014, from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR>

country has no highly ranked universities, and there is general agreement in India that the quality of the entire system is poor.

Russia has permitted its higher education system to deteriorate dramatically in the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union and is only now starting to rebuild the system and focus on the research university sector. Brazil also lacks a coherent strategy, and the national government seemingly has little interest in improving the quality of the system as a whole. One Brazilian state, São Paulo, has invested heavily in its higher education sector and, as a result, has several of the best universities in Latin America, though none yet considered among the best in the world.

#### *China and Russia: Similar Challenges*

While neither Russia nor China look carefully at one another for examples of good practice—or common problems, in fact—both share many similar characteristics. China's post-1949 higher education system was largely copied from the Soviet model, with the emergence of many small specialized institutions linked to government ministries and a separation of research from teaching by delineating research as an activity mainly for the Academy of Science institutions and not for universities. The Soviet model, for the most part, did not benefit either country, in separating the training and education benefit of conducting

research from the vast majority of students and teachers. At least, before its dissolution, the Soviet Union, at least, could claim a few top-ranking academy institutions and some universities.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet system, however, higher education and research were drastically decoupled and underfunded, resulting in many top scientists leaving the country, and severely weakening the academic system. China's higher education development after 1949 was similarly unimpressive. The Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 on Mao Tse-tung's orders, closed down all of higher education for a decade, basically destroying the system; and the intellectuals needed to sustain academic viability for any country.

China began to rebuild its higher education and research infrastructure in the 1980s, largely looking to Western, and especially to American, models. Massive resources were, and continue to be, put into the system, resulting in the development of some 100 research universities, with a dozen or so approaching world-class status. Russia did not promote such levels of investment in its higher education sector during this same period, causing a marked differentiation in global status of its higher education sector from that of China. In the past decade, however, the Russian government has developed several key initiatives, such as the creation of federal "flagship" universities and most recently a program to

provide additional support to a group of 17 competitively selected universities, with the goal of having some of them enter the top 100 universities in the global rankings by 2020.

Using the Soviet model, both countries relied predominantly on the institutes of the Academy of Science for much of their research. Thus, the universities were largely excluded from research mission. For various reasons, including the integration of research into teaching and learning and economies of scale for the best use of the most talented academic staff, this model no longer works very well; but both countries have found it difficult to achieve reforms in this area, often due to the conservative nature of academic staff and the limited capacity of university facilities to absorb research initiatives. Moreover, academic salaries are quite low in both countries—at the bottom of a group of 28 countries recently analyzed. These low salaries make it difficult to recruit bright young people to the academic profession and make it necessary for many to hold more than one job.

Both Russia and China have paid little attention to the nonelite segments of their higher education systems, with the result that quality tends to be low. Both countries rely on the questionable system of admitting the best-qualified students—as determined by one-off high stakes examinations—to universities based on a state allocation of seats at low or free tuition levels, then filling out

their classrooms with students who are not as well qualified but who pay a much higher tuition—thus helping to balance the budget but creating quality variations and other inefficiencies in the system.

*Brazil: For-Profits and Provincialism*

Like much of Latin America, more than 80 percent of Brazilian postsecondary students attend private institutions, most of which are for-profit and of variable quality. Similar to the almost regressive admission and financing policies in China and Russia, the top students in Brazil choose to go to public universities, where tuition is free and entry standards frequently quite high. Thus, students from wealthy families, which can afford private secondary schools and coaching classes, get access to the best and least expensive higher education, while lower socioeconomic status students pay more for lower quality. Further, Brazil has paid little attention to building high-quality universities or competing globally, often attributing this gap in global or regional recognition on the language barriers caused by working—teaching, conducting research, and publishing—in Portuguese. The lack of English-language publications, in particular, is a barrier for China and Russia, as well, in this regard. An exception to this generalization is São Paulo, Brazil's richest state, with several of Latin America's top research universities.

### *India: Slowly Emerging*

There is much debate in India concerning the country's "demographic dividend"—a large population of young and potentially highly productive people failing to be properly educated or prepared for a 21st century globally engaged economy by a poor quality and inadequate higher education establishment. It is universally agreed that the overall quality of India's universities and colleges is poor, and this is reflected by the fact that few Indian institutions appear in any of the league tables and none are highly ranked. India's governmental authorities, at both the state and central levels, have invested comparatively little in higher education, and there has been no strategy for harnessing higher education to development goals. India has the potential advantage of using English as the medium of instruction for more than half of the higher education system, but the country has no internationalization strategy.

### *BRIC Realities*

There are some realities that are shared by at least some of the BRIC nations, although the details vary and there are few, if any, common strategies in place or even suggested. Among these are:

- All of the BRIC countries have serious problems of internal university management and governance. None has a pattern of shared governance

that most deem necessary for academic success, particularly for research universities. Internal governance tends to be highly bureaucratic and very often rather inefficient.

- Public universities in the BRIC countries are subject to often rigid government control, leaving little scope for institutional autonomy or creativity. Politics often enters into academic decisions—in China often ideological in nature, while in India, Russia, and Brazil politics may be linked to local issues or particular political agendas.
- The academic profession faces significant challenges. In China and Russia, salaries are extraordinarily low for most, while a few top researchers are able to obtain decent remuneration. Plagiarism and other misconduct remains a concern.
- Equity of access and success in each of these countries is problematic, as few resources are focused on providing students from lower socioeconomic groups, rural areas, or other underrepresented group avenues for achievement in higher education. Moreover, the regressive nature of dual-track enrollments and high-stakes entry examinations ensure that the elites will continue to reap the rewards of the higher education sector—at little or no cost—while forcing poorer students and

those with less access to quality secondary education to subsidize the elites, through taxation and the paying of tuition and fees.

### *A Discussion of Realities*

Without doubt, the four BRIC countries are important players globally. All are large countries with considerable higher education capacity. China has achieved much, and the other three have considerable potential and some important successes. All, except Russia, have rapidly expanding higher education systems and face challenges of serving a larger proportion of their young people.

Yet, in fact, there is little in common among them. Indeed, each of these four countries has emerged from significantly different pasts—politically, socially, and economically—and face rather different current realities. It is not evident that their challenges are in any significant way common. Indeed, it is possible that by grouping these countries together, we do a disservice to each by envisioning common realities that are unrealistic and not helpful to solving the genuine and different challenges faced by each. So far, each of these countries has looked in different directions for insights and is developing different responses to their current challenges—with a common thread that, perhaps with the exception of Brazil, all have looked to the major mainly English-speaking academic systems.

We question, then, the utility and validity of talking about the BRICs in understanding the comparative realities of global higher education. Does the concept shed light on the higher education experience of other emerging economies? Not really. Do they offer any collective insights unique from what can be learned in other country contexts? Again, not really. Chile, Mexico, Korea, Nigeria, Poland, and others are all countries with important higher education reform histories that provide useful comparative contexts for understanding what has been done and what might work for others.

We wonder if this focus on the BRICs gives credence to an idea of a bloc experience that is not supported by each country's individual reality. So, we posit here, that perhaps it is time to stop talking about the BRIC bloc as if there is anything significant in common among them. We should start anew with thinking about shared experiences and different approaches to higher education that can expand our thinking about what is possible for higher education to serve emerging and developing economies to the best of its abilities.

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