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Academics Without Borders: Narrowing the Post-Secondary Capacity Gap

Post-secondary education is important to the health, wealth, civility and wellbeing of our societies. This assertion is equally true in the economically disadvantaged, unstable and insecure parts of our world as it is in those more fortunate countries where economic protectionism and xenophobia are on the rise.

The impact of post-secondary education cannot be realized in less economically privileged countries where it is so needed unless two conditions are met: the education must be offered locally and it must be of high quality.

Adequate post-secondary access cannot be solved by educating students away from home. Many of those who manage to study abroad fail to return upon graduation. Moreover, a university serves a community beyond its educational programs through knowledge transfer, community engagement, and regional economic stimulation.

The recognition of the critical role of higher education in growth and development is reflected in recent sharp increases in enrolment in countries whose universities previously served a relative few. However, most of these countries lack the resources necessary to provide the capacity and quality of higher education that this growing number of students need.

Despite these circumstances, governments and multi-lateral development agencies seldom support post-secondary capacity building, focusing instead – and understandably – on more pressing needs like shelter, sanitation, health, food security, and primary and secondary education. Thus, those who might become the teachers, health care workers, engineers, entrepreneurs, administrators, and societal leaders so essential to the longer-term resolution of these pressing issues cannot access the necessary education.

Academics Without Borders (AWB) supports capacity development in universities in less economically privileged countries. Many qualified academics and staff at universities in Canada and the US are willing to commit their time and energy to working with their sister institutions elsewhere. Through AWB, these volunteers respond to project proposals from those universities to enhance or create programs that are essential to their development. AWB has supported more than 75 projects involving more than 100 volunteers in 25 countries. Projects have included: program development in cardiology and public health, developing the fundamental policy and procedures framework for a new university, accommodating students with disabilities, enhancing pedagogical and evaluation practices in a nursing program, and implementing an efficient registration process. Some universities partner in only a single project while others are involved in multiple projects in a range of areas.

AWB projects follow a “train the trainer” model rather than providing short-term expertise. Costs are remarkably low, ranging from approximately US\$3000-\$9000 per project. AWB covers most of these costs and provides all administrative and logistical support. Partner universities contribute according to their ability. Volunteers’ travel and accommodations are provided and they receive a modest local living stipend but no remuneration.

Twenty-one Canadian universities have joined the AWB University Network and several institutions from elsewhere are ready to join. This network provides a means for faculty and staff to engage in international development activity and also represents commitment and engagement in true university internationalization.

Modest in its cost and simple in its operations, Academics Without Borders harnesses the expertise of university faculty and staff in established, high quality institutions to build the capacity and quality of programs in other parts of the world – an objective with wide-reaching and long-lasting impact.