

Tertiary Education in Africa and the Transformation of Neo-liberalism: The World Bank's "Accelerating Catch-Up".

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This paper provides a critical discussion of the World Bank's 2009 publication "*Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*". The World Bank is an influential generator and broker of development knowledge – in 1981 *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* heralded the period of structural adjustment lending, while in 1989 *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* introduced the concept of good governance. Both of these publications amounted to reconstruction of the World Bank's conception of the role of the state in development. *Accelerating Catch-up*, it is here argued, envisages state functions beyond that of providing good governance. This is not to imply a non-neoliberal view of the relationship between the state and market. The paper argues instead that a more nuanced understanding of the role of the state in Africa's neo-liberal transformation is being presented in this publication.

In *Accelerating Catch-up*, the World Bank's policy narrative concerning tertiary education in Africa clearly focuses on core neo-liberal concerns: macro-economic stability, productivity growth, flexible workforces, and, by building knowledge economies, "accelerating" economic growth as means to development in a transnational context. The drive towards privatisation and liberalisation in tertiary education is clearly apparent, and the fundamental role of the market within neo-liberalism remains unchallenged. However, this paper argues that the underlying argument of *Accelerating Catch-up* is in fact one of building 'national innovation systems' (NIS), an approach derived from comparative political economy that engages directly with national structures of innovation and policy incentives. This approach is more congruent with the developmental and interventionist but 'market friendly' model of the state controversially defended by the World Bank in 1993's *The East Asian Miracle* – a document which thus far has had little influence on the World Bank's view of African development. Consequently, whereas most research on neo-liberalism in Africa focuses upon contestation by African states and societies, this paper raises the prospect of the transformation of neo-liberalism *within* the World Bank.