

X. IS IT GATS OR NOTHING?

Barriers to international trade in education services that are universally found to be ill-conceived can be removed through bilateral treaties and conventions outside of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS). While the activities centered around GATS (the submission of negotiating positions, for example) have attracted probably the most attention from those interested in the larger issue of globalization and education, there are many suggested alternatives to GATS.

For example, the Joint Declaration on Higher Education and the General Agreement on Trade in Services—developed and signed by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the American Council on Education, the European University Association, and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation—calls for nations not to make commitments to higher education (or in adult education or ‘other education services’) under GATS. Rather, it calls for supporting the liberalization of some educational services through conventions and bilateral treaties.

Many of the most fundamental issues raised by GATS remain generally unresolved. It has not even been decided to what degree GATS affects public services and/or whether or not the provision of education at any level would be considered a public service. It has not been conclusively decided how valuable (or destructive) the increased role of the private sector and other recent developments in educational service delivery (distance learning, for example) will turn out to be, or the extent to which they should be encouraged. It has not been conclusively decided what the primary purpose of a nation’s educational delivery system should be—to provide the economic benefits of a more market-ready workforce, to inculcate cultural values, or to promote scientific inquiry?

It seems that an informed stance on GATS is impossible without wrestling with these larger issues. Certainly, progress on the nation’s commitment to GATS should not precede the national discussion on these issues. Interested parties should make their views known to the United States Trade Representative (USTR) as he enters into further negotiations. Similarly, the next time “fast track” legislation comes up for congressional approval, activists should tell their representatives that they think fast track short-circuits debate and unfairly compresses the time for people to become informed and active regarding changes in trade rules or adoption of new treaties.