

India's International Education Strategy—Is There One?

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Across the world, the profile of higher education is changing. Globalization has opened up global markets for employment, and the students are eager to grasp them. The need for students to become “global citizens” is recognized by all education providers. In some developed country institutions, higher education is being recognized as a for-profit activity, by setting up campuses abroad, as part of the new economic domain. For some, enrolling international students is proving to be a source of revenue, for balancing the dwindling budgets of the institutions. The student is becoming the driving force for promoting international education. In India, however, this is not yet how internationalization of education is perceived. India is still debating on how to react to the process of internationalization. A new scheme is being formulated in the latest Five Year Plan for the development of the country.

EXPANSION—ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

India's international strategy is constrained by domestic considerations. With the growing demand on higher education and a low gross enrollment rate of about 19 percent, the national concern is to expand the available pool of higher

education institutions. The resources required are beyond the available budgets. Increasingly, the country is appealing to private and international higher education providers, to add to the national capacity. The market is economically attractive to private higher education providers. The doors for entry of individual foreign higher education institutions are still not fully opened. Under these constraints, one may approve of looking at all means of partnerships at the government level. At this stage, it may be interesting to see how India has benefited from international partnerships in the past and whether some of those models are still relevant.

As a case in point, one would like to use India's experience with the United States—in selected areas of education, such as agriculture and science and technology. In the agriculture sector, in the 1950s, the introduction of the "Green revolution" in India can be traced back to Indo-US collaborations in agricultural sciences. This helped to sustain research and education in agriculture. Agriculture education in India has greatly benefited from the government-level collaboration in education through these colleges.

In the 1960s, a consortium of American universities facilitated the establishment of educational institutions, like the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur; and the National Council of Educational Research & Training, New Delhi, both founded with academic partnerships under the umbrella of the two governments. Both these institutions are now totally Indian in terms of faculty and governance. Can one use this model to help the Indian government's effort to increase the number of colleges and universities, through private and public initiatives? Can some of the new educational institutions be partnered by the two governments? If the older models have proved effective, it

is clear that such government-level partnerships can be more effective than leaving the expansion program totally in the hands of private initiatives. It is also possible that through mutual agreements, an educational institution in India could also be set up jointly by an Indian and an American university. The new Five Year Plan for higher education has hinted at a policy for internationalization. Can the new policy make way for such government-level initiatives?

According to a report by the Association of Indian Universities, about 630 foreign higher education institutions were operating in India as of 2010. Almost all of them are unregulated and not recognized by the Indian government to offer degrees. Students obtaining degrees from these institutions are not in a position to get jobs in the public sector or cannot enroll in Indian graduate programs. The national legislation that is expected to be brought out in the future shall necessarily demand that these institutions get registered with the Indian government. The fate of these institutions is uncertain in the coming years. Such foreign education providers have, in a way, tarnished the image of internationalization of higher education in India.

COLLABORATION FOR TEACHING FACULTY

In India, based on an overall shortage of good-quality teaching faculty the government has stepped in to consider the route of internationalization in the new plan. Government schemes have been announced, and arrangements are being worked out with advanced countries, to accept Indian faculty for being trained in international standards of teaching and research. While the initiative is

useful, the basic problem still remains filling the large number of vacant faculty positions in even good-quality Indian institutions, like the Indian Institutes of Technology. The government policies do not approve the regular appointment of foreign faculty to be employed in India. Moreover, the salaries that can be offered will not be attractive to faculty. With no solution yet to fill the vacant faculty positions from within or outside the country, internationalizing our education system merely through “faculty training abroad” is not going to be an effective strategy.

OFFERING JOINT DEGREES THROUGH COLLABORATION

The government is attempting an international education strategy to encourage Indian institutions to enter into partnerships with foreign universities, to offer joint degrees to Indian students. The foreign universities do not have to open campuses in India, but their faculty would teach approved courses in India. The student will spend part of the four-year bachelor’s degree program in India and the remaining period at the foreign university. This is an attractive approach for internationalization, giving an opportunity of “global immersion” to Indian students, who also get a foreign degree at a reduced cost. The academic quality, the financial implications, and administrative arrangements for recognizing the joint degree have yet to be worked out between partnering institutions. Yet, before the institutions could explore this opportunity, the government has come up with a caveat for the choice of institutions with which the private educational institutions in India could collaborate. Government insists that Indian institutions can only select a “partner” institution abroad, which is within the top

500 ranked internationally. As is well known, hardly any of the Indian institutions are ranked within the top 500 world institutions. So, are the well-ranked foreign institutions expected to come down to partner with the “non-ranked” Indian institutions? This is not an attractive offer for partnership. Unfortunately, this approach to internationalization does not seem to be workable, either.

NO FOCUS ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The final area of internationalization strategy pertains to sending Indian students abroad and attracting foreign students to India. Government has left it free for Indian students to study anywhere abroad. Government has no plans, (unlike what Brazil has) to provide scholarships for studying in countries such as the United States. There are also no plans to promote the cultural understanding of other countries, by supporting Indian students to study, for example, in a country like China or Brazil. One has seen President Obama’s “100,000 strong” program initiative of supporting American students going to China. India also has no major schemes for attracting foreign students. The infrastructure, in terms of good hostels, trained staff, and adequate student advising services, required to host international students, does not exist in the majority of the higher education institutions. Numbers of students, earlier coming from Africa, have reduced over recent years, and India has not yet shown any concern for attracting them back. The student focus, in the internationalization strategy of India, is totally missing.

CONCLUSION

India has fiddled with the various stakeholders of internationalization—the students, the faculty, and the educational institutions—in a lackadaisical manner using administrative and regulatory framework. In 2004, the government did set up academic committees under the aegis of its apex body—University Grants Commission—to Promote Indian Higher Education Abroad and in 2009 to prepare an Action Plan for Internationalization of Higher Education. Unfortunately, the strategies recommended by both these committees have not been reflected in India’s internationalization strategy. The new plan proposes that a professional national agency, the India International Education Centre would be created to undertake internationalization activities. It is expected to support selected institutions to establish dedicated internationalization units. Hopefully, this new proposed agency does not become a nonstarter in the bureaucratic maze of the Indian higher education system.