## Future Considerations

Current challenges surrounding the measurement of learning in higher education are not novel. Throughout the history of education, educators and other stakeholders have often labored to develop a set of common outcomes that can be measured and evaluated. Given the challenges of this endeavor, commensuration—or the process of finding a common metric to measure characteristics that normally have different units—would undoubtedly be a necessity. Doing so offers a standardized way to compare values that might initially seem incomparable.

On the issue of commensurability, however, sociologists Wendy Espeland and Mitchell Stevens have highlighted the influence of such efforts on changing behaviors, molding expectations, and altering the very values of things. In education, regardless of what experts might know to be true about the inherent limitations of assessment indicators, quantification influences the behavior of students, parents, schools, administrations, and governments. This is evident in school rankings and high-stakes testing (i.e., testing situations that have important consequences for students, such as admission to colleges, or for schools, such as funding). Although the dangers of misuse are there, Espeland and Stevens remind us that it is a necessary part of life. Hopefully, the recent studies that have ventured to find a valid and reliable measure of student learning will be used to inform the search for proof that our institutions of higher learning are fulfilling their role of shaping a promising future. ∎

# Indian Higher Education: Time for a Serious Rethink

## Santosh Mehrotra

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Barely 11 percent of the relevant age group were enrolled in higher education in India in 2007. The Indian state has been so underinvested in education as a whole since independence in 1947, that higher education was bound to arrive at this juncture. During the 11th-plan period (2007–2012) the objective is to increase that enrollment rate to 15 percent. The government of India has raised allocations for higher and technical education to five times the allocation made during the preceding five-year plan period. However, major constraints remain toward the achievement of this otherwise laudable objective.

## Narrow Pyramid

The first problem involves the narrowness of the education pyramid in India. Primary school enrollment has only been universalized earlier this decade, and enrollment at the upper-primary level itself is not yet universal. Worse still, school education quality is so low and learning outcomes so poor, that dropout rates at the end of the primary cycle remain significant, and by the end of the upper-primary cycle the dropout rates are 52 percent. Not surprisingly, secondary enrollment rates (grades 9–10) are only 57 percent, and higher secondary (grades 11–12) only 23 percent. With such a narrow pyramid, the possibility of rapidly expanding enrollment at higher education levels seems difficult.

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These problems of a narrow education pyramid have risen from historical neglect of public education in government budgets. In India's federal constitution, education was for many decades a state subject, and although since the mid-1970s it became a subject on which the central as well as the state governments can legislate, 85 percent of total education expenditure is still accounted for by state governments. Most universities are controlled by state governments, although there are a small but growing number of central universities.

## A Highly Segmented System

Nevertheless, education as a whole and school education for the masses were neglected for 40 years (until about 1990), which has created a highly segmented higher education system. Students who come to the higher education system from the high-quality, relatively expensive, private English-medium schools join the elite higher education institutions of the country—the globally known Indian Institutes of Technology, the Indian Institutes of Management, and good medical schools. The remainder of the higher education system, especially the degree colleges linked to universities, consist merely of degree-awarding bodies with little monitoring of quality of education by the overseeing universities.

## Low-Cost Recovery

Quality is also affected by the fact that most of these degree colleges and universities recover less than 20 percent of their per student costs from fees levied on students. After 1990, with governments turning their attention seriously to elementary education, public funding for higher education tended to stagnate. Thus, an already highly skewed higher education system—with elite institutions at one end of the spectrum and low-quality, degree-awarding mass colleges on the other—became even more inefficient as a provider of skilled manpow-

er to a growing economy. A small number of the colleges are very good (e.g., Elphinstone College, Mumbai, St. Stephen's College, Delhi, Madras Christian College, Chennai, Presidency College, Kolkatta, to name a few). However, the narrow skill base has resulted in salaries for skilled staff growing sharply in the last decade or more—increasing rural vs. urban income inequalities and intraurban income inequalities as well.

The mass of students in higher education have always been provided with relatively low-cost public education. This system appears in complete contrast to a high-achieving economy like South Korea, which has ensured from the 1950s onwards that most of its students in higher education attended private universities. This trend continues to be the case today (while children in primary schools have always attended well-funded government schools). Private higher education has expanded in India rapidly in response to growing incomes and the demand

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derived from that increase. This growth is particularly true for the southern states of India, especially in the fields of medicine and engineering. This region has thus served as a magnet for students from the north who have failed to get admission into publicly funded institutions in the northern states. Private provision has, of course, increased in the northern states, as well, in recent years—thus absorbing the demand from the upper-middle classes in the north. Nevertheless, as yet, private provision nowhere meets the levels that are needed.

### The Disconnect Between Research and Teaching
As another major structural problem, a near-bifurcation nearly exists within the higher education system between teaching and research. A lot of research in the sciences, in fact, is not located in the universities. In 1996/97, nearly three-fourths of the central government's R&D expenditure went to the department of Defence Research and Development, the Department of Space, and the Department of Atomic Energy (and included 9.3% for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research). Similarly, in the social sciences, research has remained concentrated in the research institutions funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, which funds in each state at least one research institution largely focused on the research requirements in that state or its neighbors. These research institutions all function quite independent of the university system. Universities have ended up becoming undergraduate teaching institutions, especially those that have a large number of degree colleges linked to them. The heavy teaching load provides little time or energy or even funding for research. This

bifurcation between research and teaching results in a disconnect between teaching and research, quite unlike what prevails in most OECD countries. Not surprisingly, no real world-class universities are in place.

One outcome specified that the upper-middle classes have been deserting the Indian university system, sending their children abroad for undergraduate education—a phenomenon that did not exist on a large scale until the early 1990s. Until then, most Indian students going abroad would do so only to pursue a master's degree or a doctorate. This desertion by the upper-middle classes has further taken the pressure off the public higher education system to provide quality education.

### The 11th Five-Year Plan (2007–2012)
The central government has indeed responded in the 11th five-year plan by increasing central allocations for higher and technical education fivefold compared to the 10th plan. Seven new Indian Institutes of Technology, six new Indian Institutes of Management, and 30 new central universities have been provided for. The pace of expansion in the new few years may well turn out to be frenetic. The most serious problem that this sudden expansion will entail is finding faculty of appropriate quality in the public higher education system. Therefore, an initiative to be seriously considered involves giving greater financial autonomy to universities, to enable them to mobilize resources from sources other than the government—partly to attract Indian academics teaching abroad back to India. Salaries have risen sharply recently, thanks to the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations to make returning home attractive for nonresident Indians. However, the requisite autonomy of universities is also needed to encourage them to attract faculty back to India. ∎

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# India: The Inevitable Consequences of the Open Door in Higher Education

### Philip G. Altbach

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The new Indian minister of human resource development, Kapil Sibal, has promised to open India's doors to foreign universities and to promote private investment in higher education. Past policy has been skeptical of foreign involvement in Indian education. As India is about to embark in a new higher