

Kerala: The Dilemmas of Equality in Higher Education

Philip G. Altbach and Eldho Mathews

Philip G. Altbach is the Monan University Professor and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. E-mail: altbach@bc.edu.

Eldho Mathews is research officer at the Kerala State Higher Education Council. E-mail: eldhomathews@gmail.com.

One of India's smaller states offers some interesting lessons concerning higher education and its role in development as well as alternative approaches to higher education policy. The state of Kerala, on India's southwest coast, is unusual in the Indian context. The state's social and political circumstances have contributed to its higher education development. Kerala has a population of 31 million, with an unusual religious mix by Indian standards—one-quarter Christian, one-quarter Muslim, and about half Hindu. It may be a useful case not only for India but for other developing countries.

While not wealthy even by Indian standards—it ranks ninth in gross domestic product among India's 28 states—Kerala is by most measures the most advanced state in India in education. It has universal literacy and enrolls around 18 percent of the age group in postsecondary education, double India's average and almost on a par with rapidly developing China. Women constitute more than 60 percent of the total higher education enrollment—the highest in India. The state also boasts the highest Human Development Index rating in India, with

the highest life expectancy and the lowest infant-mortality rate.

Politically, Kerala also represents an interesting case. Its current government is a coalition dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The communists, who have been in power off and on since the 1950s, have in many ways shaped modern Kerala's society. Kerala was the first state in the world to actually elect communists to power. Early on, they were able to push through meaningful land reform and have emphasized social services, education, and income redistribution. An active media keeps debate lively and helps to promote transparency and a high degree, by Indian standards, of probity in government. Everyone seems to belong to a union—including university and college teachers, students, and campus workers. One vice chancellor said that one of her main jobs was keeping track of and consulting with unions. Most of the population seem to be represented by some organization, thus giving a voice to much of the population.

The vast chasm between rich and poor, so evident in India and much of the developing world, seems much less obvious in everyday life in Kerala. Corruption seems less endemic and social relations, in general, more stable.

Kerala missed out on India's "industrial revolution." Perhaps industries were leery of the well-entrenched unions. This means that the pollution of the environment common elsewhere is largely missing in Kerala—the state's informal motto is "God's Own Country"—an effort to build up Kerala's successful tourist industry. There is also not much of an economic base—agriculture and the fishing sector remain important, as does tourism, and also the export of skilled personnel, especially to the Gulf countries. Here, Kerala's high levels of literacy and its well-educated population have contributed to the

attractiveness of its world force. Almost a quarter of the state's gross domestic product comes from the remittances of overseas workers. Policymakers are now fostering "technoparks" in the hope of making the state attractive to India's burgeoning information-technology sector; the first technopark was established in Thiruvananthapuram, the state's capital in 1990. Yet, Bangalore is currently the major hub for information technology companies and is India's "silicon valley," and Kerala is struggling to catch up.

Higher Education in the Mix

Kerala shares India's higher education problems but has tried with some success to ameliorate them. The "affiliating" system ties undergraduate colleges to universities that set examinations, impose a variety of rules, and regulate them. The University of Kerala, one among the first 16 universities established in India, is the state's premier institution. It has 198 affiliated colleges that educate around 100,000 students. Some of these colleges are located as far as 140 kilometers from the university campus. A majority of the colleges are private and managed by a variety of religious, social, and other nonprofit organizations. Many are "aided" and receive government funds; they tend to be the better ones in terms of infrastructure and facilities. The growth in recent years of private colleges, mainly in such fields as medicine, engineering, information technology, nursing, and management studies that receive no government funding—many of which are quasi-for-profit—has created problems for the university authorities as they are asked to provide affiliation to institutions that may be of questionable quality. Nearly half of the affiliated colleges—a total of 797 in the state—are controlled by private managements, mainly sponsored by the Christian or

Muslim minority communities or individuals belonging to these communities.

Facilities at most of the colleges and in the university departments as well are well below international standards, often with outdated laboratories and rudimentary information technology facilities and inadequate libraries. In addition to supervising the colleges, the universities provide postbaccalaureate instruction. All postsecondary education in the state is in English.

Kerala's Higher Education Policies

The state's approach to higher education is somewhat unique in the Indian context. Most higher education in the state was at one time supervised and funded by the state government. However, this situation has been changing, especially during the last decade. Resource crunch and budget constraints have forced the universities to change priorities. While India's central government has with a few exceptions ignored Kerala, given its commitment to sponsor at least one central university in each of India's states, the government plans are proceeding to build a central institution in a rather isolated location in the northern part of the state. This development is not understood by most higher education experts in the state, since it is unlikely that such an institution located far from academic or urban centers can succeed.

In keeping with its egalitarian philosophy, the government has provided generally equal support to all of the universities and has not identified any as a "flagship." Thus, there are few nationally or internationally prominent universities in the state. One exception is the Cochin University of Science and Technology. The central Ministry of Human Resource Development recognized the university's excellence and supported upgrading it to the level of the Indian

Institutes of Technology. However, a campaign against the conversion of the university into an IIT forced the authorities to shelve the plans. The Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology has been recently established by the central government in Thiruvananthapuram. The Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences & Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, is another exception; this institution has the status of a university and offers postdoctoral, doctoral, and postgraduate courses in medical specialties and health care technology and is under the administrative control of the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Thiruvananthapuram, established in 2008, can also be considered a nationally prominent institution. It is an autonomous institution affiliated to the Ministry of Human Resources Development. As a matter of policy, Kerala might be well served if these institutions were closely linked or even merged so as to combine these high-quality institutions and produce a world-class scientific institution in the state.

Several of the arts and sciences undergraduate colleges that have a long historical tradition—such as University College in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital, or Maharaja’s College in Kochi—are able to attract a number of bright students. But these institutions’ facilities are far from world class. However, most of the top students prefer professional courses in engineering, medicine (which is an undergraduate subject area in India), and business. Currently there are 96 engineering colleges in Kerala. Almost 90 percent of them had started functioning during the last decade, and only 11 of these colleges are government sponsored. Of the 96 colleges, 60 of them are purely private institutions. In general, their facilities are no better than the average found in the state.

Kerala has instituted a few significant reforms—changes suggested by national authorities but not initiated widely so far. These innovations include a semester system and reforms in the traditional undergraduate examinations. The idea is to provide better assessment through more frequent examinations and evaluations tied more closely to course content. This reform required significant changes in the way the curriculum was organized, how courses are taught, and how they are assessed. Policymakers hope that it will result in improvements in teaching. The Higher Education Council was set up to provide advice to the state government, conduct research on higher education issues, and serve as a forum for discussion about higher education. The central government recommended that all of the states organize such agencies, but so far only a few states have done so. The council does not have the power to implement reforms and only makes recommendations to government and the universities.

Kerala, like all of the states, is grappling with the rapid and largely unregulated expansion of new private colleges and specialized postsecondary institutions. On the one hand, there is a need for greater access, and these new private colleges provide this. But on the other, many of them are of dubious quality, operate on the edges of quality control, and are largely organized to earn a profit for the owners. They serve high-demand fields such as management, information technology, and related technical fields. A few are medical colleges. So far, a good deal of grumbling about these institutions has taken place but little action to control them.

Although an increase in the number of higher education institutions and student enrollment over the last two decades has taken place, inequalities based on the quality of primary and secondary schooling have been on the rise during

this period. One of the most observable effects of this change is in the relationship between type of schools attended and admission to professional colleges. This trend is evident in the outcome of medical-engineering entrance examinations conducted by the government. Entrance to the medical and engineering colleges in Kerala is largely based on an entrance examination conducted by the government every year. However, students from the Central Board of Secondary Education affiliated schools and Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations affiliated schools have a better chance to bag the top ranks of this examination. Most of these schools are in the unaided/for profit sector. However, more than 80 percent of the higher secondary students in the state are pursuing studies in plus-two schools affiliated to the Directorate of Higher Secondary Education of the Government of Kerala.

The majority of the top-rank holders of the entrance examination for professional courses emerge from the middle and upper strata of the society. The parents have the financial capacity to send these students to entrance coaching centers. This has created a situation in which the entry routes to higher education are differentiated on the basis of wealth. Coupled with this, personal and parental choices have become an important feature of Kerala's higher education. Students and parents these days are quite conscious about the inseparable link between academic choice and careers. The emergence of a new middle class in Kerala society accentuated this phenomenon. Naturally, this period witnessed an increase in the number of self-supporting students from Kerala going abroad to study.

A Way Forward

Kerala quietly has provided acceptable-quality higher education, by Indian standards, to a remarkably large part of its population. It has implemented several meaningful reforms in recent years, and higher education remains an issue of concern for the government and the public at large. A few policy initiatives may be useful to further improve the system.

The state's higher education institutions are largely similar in quality, focus, and funding. With the few exceptions noted here, none of these stand out either within the state or nationally. A mass higher education system needs to be differentiated—with institutions serving different missions, patterns of funding, and quality. Kerala needs at least one “world-class” university—an institution that can attract the best students in the state, be recognized as among the top universities in India, and gain visibility abroad as well. This strategy will not be easy since Kerala has a strong tradition of egalitarianism, but it is a necessary policy if the state is to fully participate in the global knowledge society of the 21st century. It is likely that the University of Kerala, perhaps merged with several high-profile scientific institutions located in the capital, is the logical choice, probably along with the Cochin University of Science and Technology. This does not mean that the other universities can be neglected. Some will focus largely on teaching and serving their specific regions, while a few, perhaps those focusing on science and technology, can retain some research mission.

In common with all regions of India, the large number of colleges affiliated to universities need to be appropriately supervised but at the same time permitted leeway to start innovative programs and achieve a degree of autonomy. A special problem concerns the growing number of new private

“unaided” colleges, a majority of which are for-profit. Perhaps an effective accrediting system, supervised by the Higher Education Council or some other governmental body, could provide a basic standard of quality for all of the colleges and remove some of the burden from the universities.

Kerala’s universities have the potential of jump-starting the state’s move into the knowledge era. They can provide the training needed for a new generation of professionals ready to work in information technology and other knowledge industries. Kerala has the disadvantage of starting late. The giant info-tech superpower in Bangalore, for example, is far ahead—even though the first “technopark” in India was established in Thiruvananthapuram. But Kerala has a well-educated workforce, a tradition of hard work, and an ability to collaborate with people from many different backgrounds. An important step would be to immediately improve the quality of engineering education. The info-tech companies estimate that only one-fifth of engineering graduates can be immediately put to work; the rest need additional training. If Kerala can provide an engineering education that can produce engineers who can be immediately put to work without expensive further education, it will immediately improve its prospects for luring high technology to the state. Moreover, these graduates will be quite competitive on the international job market as well.

The state’s higher education future is complex but practical. Expansion will continue, although the pressures may be somewhat less than in other parts of India because of Kerala’s impressive access rates. Careful attention needs to be given to the organization of the higher education system. Some additional funds are required to transform at least one university into a research-intensive institution, while at the same time supporting a better-defined differentiated

higher education system.