

and information technology, though also culturally oriented programs, including the creative arts and education. This specialization is a product of both their smaller size and narrower range of offerings. After all, the government providers have left only a restricted range of opportunities. Another aspect of the growth of the private sector—also a product of how private higher education is restricted to niches—is its heavy concentration on the diploma, rather than the degree level. Private providers have over 35 percent of all diploma enrollments in New Zealand, compared to only 3 percent of degree enrollments.

FURTHER NICHE OPPORTUNITIES

Yet, private niche development, resulting from publicly imposed restrictions, is not the full story. Public-sector policies also open private opportunities. Government polytechnics have tended to shift their emphasis away from traditional vocational courses, toward the development and delivery of degree-level programs. This represents the well-known concept of academic drift. Understandable in terms of academic ambition, status, and self-interest, such drift tends to undermine intended differentiation. But, if there is a kind of public failure or change here, it is one that has provided a gap for the private sector. If society does not get one of its major demands, met in the government's own (public) sector, it may find a useful contribution from the private sector.

Typical of this state of affairs is New Zealand, whose higher education sector is dominated by a number of government-owned universities and polytechnics.

In a number of countries, the growth of the private higher education sector has helped to create opportunities for students from traditionally unrepresented groups in higher education. This may hold especially in nonuniversity level offerings. Indeed there is a higher proportion of enrollments in private providers of Maori and Pacific Island students, which is a reflection of the fact that a number of private education providers specialize in the delivery of programs that target students of those ethnic groups. This role in New Zealand, however, is restricted due to the presence of the Maori institutions.

Overall, private higher education providers in New Zealand are niche institutions. They are relatively small, focus on diploma rather than degree studies, and concentrate on vocational courses at that diploma level. This has

meant that private higher education in New Zealand, by both policy design and natural development, has identifiable functions and is simultaneously both important and yet not challenging to the public sector's academic and status dominance. The private sector often responds quickly to changes in market demand and to demand for vocationally orientated programs, giving it a role that the public institutions are either slow or unwilling to take on. This niche configuration has wide validity for the developed western countries, especially those of the Commonwealth, which have mature education systems. ■

India's Private Universities: Solutions or Problems?

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India, often described as the land of diversity, has a confusing variety of universities. The degree-awarding, university-level institutions are generally grouped into five categories—institutions of national importance, central universities, state universities, state private universities, and deemed universities. Their mode of establishment, sources of finance and even functioning are different, as is the relative emphasis on teaching and research. The first two types are established by Acts of Parliament and the next two types by Acts of State Legislatures. The deemed university (more correctly, deemed-to-be-a-university) status is granted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India under Section 3 of the University Grants Commission Act, 1956. While the first three types are public institutions, the state private universities and the majority of the deemed universities are “self-financing” (i.e., private).

THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

In 2006, the National Knowledge Commission, in its report to the prime minister, stressed the need to set up 50 national universities, and to increase the number of universities (then about 360) to 1,500 by 2015. In educational circles, the recommendations were considered impractical in view of the huge financial and human resources requirements. The governments (central and state) simply do not have the wherewithal to make meaningful contributions. The finance, therefore, has to come from the private sector.

A major stumbling block to the private sector making meaningful contributions is the legal arrangements that decree that education is a not-for-profit venture. A Supreme Court judgment does allow higher education institutions to have a “reasonable” surplus from revenue generated through tuition and other fees, but the term “reasonable” has not been quantified. Moreover, the condition is that the surplus has to be ploughed back for the development of the institution. For the hard-nosed but honest businessman this does not make sense, unless the money is to be invested as a part of the mandatory contribution under corporate social responsibility or spent as philanthropy.

The National Knowledge Commission did appreciate this difficulty and had recommended that efforts should be made to re-create the tradition of philanthropic contributions, of the late 19th and early 20th century, on which the Indian higher education system is based. It pointed out that there have to be incentives for both universities and donors. The present tax laws and trust laws were a disincentive, and they needed to be modified. Moreover, the Indian higher education system is highly regulated with diverse statutory bodies having a say, even in routine academic matters. The system as a whole is overregulated and undergoverned. Unfortunately, no action has been taken by the government on these issues.

FACILITATING PRIVATE INITIATIVES

The educators’ skepticism is not shared by all businessmen. Many of them see professional higher education as a lucrative business, provided one is prepared to tweak rules—and grease palms. The government has tried to promote increased private participation in higher education, by introducing appropriate legislation. However, the failure of the central government to get the Private Universities Bill of 1995 passed by parliament was a setback that led to the emergence of the “deemed university route.” The deemed university status was traditionally granted to institutions having a long tradition of excellence in teaching and research. In the first 42 years, between 1958 and 2000, it was granted to 44 institutions. However, between 2000 and 2003 the status was granted to 42 institutions, mostly self-financing professional institutions; and subsequently to 55 others, again largely self-financing. There are presently 129 deemed universities of which 89 are private.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India did a rethink toward the end of the last decade and stopped granting deemed university status to new institutions. It also started demanding from the existing deemed universities quality teaching and substantial research output. A new route, for the private sector to enter higher education, was found in the form of state private universities established through Acts of State Legislatures.

The eligibility conditions are in most states minimal; and, consequently, there has been a proliferation of state private universities. There are now 189 state private universities in 21 states and union territories and the number is fast increasing.

Society and community are divided regarding this proliferation of private institutions. Some see in the private institutions a solution, at least for the economically upper and middle classes, to the problem of access to relatively better-quality education. Others believe that the private institutions are the fountainhead of inequality and the source of corruption.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

The private universities largely offer education in the professional disciplines—engineering & technology, medicine and related health-care sciences, management and teacher education. By and large they have excellent physical infrastructure. In many universities the teachers are highly qualified and experienced, thanks to the statutory councils allowing individuals to teach till the age of 70—even though the age of retirement for teachers, in public universities, is 58/60/62. A good teacher, after retirement from a public institution, can now teach for a decade more in a private institution.

Pressure from the Ministry of Human Resource Development has compelled the deemed universities to promote research that leads to publications in highly rated journals. This has had a positive effect and many deemed universities are now engaged in frontline research. If one goes by the assessment of the National Accreditation and Assessment Council, the quality of education in private-deemed universities is better than in the majority of public universities. At a rough estimate, the quality of education imparted in about two-thirds of the private deemed universities is good, or at least satisfactory. The state private universities are essentially teaching universities and only a few have undergone assessment. Unfortunately, the quality of education is in many cases suspect. Like the for-profit universities in the United States, they provide the minimum, cutting out frills. A disturbing fact that has emerged is that many of the pri-

vate universities make use of external research supervisors and enroll a large number of doctoral students. These institutions are heading toward becoming doctoral-degree mills.

The main problems of the private universities relate to the de facto management—the trustees of the sponsoring societies or trusts. They control all financial transactions from the purchase of stationery, to purchase of the most sophisticated equipment. They also have a say in the appointment of faculty. Admissions in many universities are manipulated, though they are supposedly made on merit—determined by annual entrance tests, conducted by the university. The attempts of the government to make admissions on the basis of a single national entrance examination have repeatedly failed. Reportedly, large amounts pass under the table in the form of a “capitation fee” that goes not to the institution, but to the sponsors. The tuition fees are high. The fact of the matter is that a student belonging to a family of average means does not get admission to the well-known private universities. Many private universities, though legally not-for-profit, are actually for-profit institutions. For the “haves” private universities provide a solution to the problem of access to higher education. For the “have nots” private universities are a social evil responsible for the widening of the economic and social divides. ■

UK Research Excellence: Getting Better All the Time?

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Each half decade, the UK higher education system puts itself through a massive exercise run by the national higher education regulator, designed to catalogue, compute, and judge university research. This time consuming and intensely competitive process, once known as the Research Assessment Exercise, has become the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The results of the first REF were published just before Christmas.

PURPOSES OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

The REF has a number of purposes, not always consistent with each other. It is used to allocate research-specific funding support and to concentrate resources in the highest per-

forming institutions and disciplines, stretching the national research dollar, as far as possible. It shapes the academic labor market, encouraging researchers to shift to high-performing units, and universities to bid for the best researchers. It is also meant to strengthen the focus on high-quality work—researchers submit their four-best publications for evaluation—and to compare UK research against global standards, while at the same time showcasing that same UK research before the world. It also encourages researchers to focus on the economic and social impact of research, as universities are required to submit evidence of such impact.

Any system of research assessment is only partly reliable as an indicator of the real quality of research. Research assessment has a dual character. On one hand it is rooted in material facts and objective methods. On the other hand, it favors some norms, activities, and interests above others—no assessment can cover everything in the same way, each assessment uses specific and partial methods, and the experienced and high-status players are best at gaming the system.

Some aspects of research, such as citations in top journals, are easier to standardize than other aspects, such as the long-term impacts of research on policy and professions. Comparisons between disciplines, between universities with different missions, between experienced professors and early career researchers, and between established ideas and new ideas are all fraught.

The outcome of the UK REF was partly shaped by the universities that selected and fashioned the data for competitive purposes, and the REF’s own subject area panels that defined the research judged to be outstanding on a global scale. Precise league table positions in the REF should be taken with a grain of salt.

MEASURING RESEARCH IMPACT?

In the UK REF the indicators for “impact,” new to the 2014 assessment, are the most vulnerable to manipulation. This is partly because of the intrinsic difficulty of measuring the changes to society, economy, and policy induced by knowledge, especially in the long term. It is also because of the kind of crafted “impact-related” data that were collected during the REF assessment process. A sophisticated industry has emerged in the manufacture of examples of the relevant “evidence” of impact. The REF assessed simulations of the impact of research, rather than actual impact.

At best, it got everyone thinking about real connectivity with the users of research, which was one of the starting points when producing impact documentation. At worst, the measures of “impact” collapsed into a smoke and mirrors exercise, producing data that bear as much relation to reality as the statements of output made by Soviet factories