Realism about Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

Indian higher education is opening to the world, but there are many aspects of the world's second largest system that need to be understood by the global community. A stress on expansion has prevented the emergence of world-class universities. At present, Hindu nationalism and politicization are important forces in India. Academia has traditionally been highly bureaucratic. These are among the underlying realities of one of the key national academic systems in the global landscape.

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Indian higher education has suddenly become "hot," with delegations of global university leaders and politicians flocking to the country—the latest group from Australia. Governments and universities from around the world are signing memoranda of understanding with Indian counterparts and making big plans for research collaboration, joint degrees, and other initiatives. Recent regulations for setting up international branch campuses in Gujarat and the interest expressed by some foreign universities in doing so is the latest trend.

This is not surprising. India is now the world's second largest higher education system, with around 38 million students in 50,000 academic institutions (including 1,057 universities) and a goal of doubling gross enrollment rates from the current 26.3 percent to 50 percent by 2035. Further, India is the second largest source of international students (after China) globally. Interest is also stimulated by the National Education Policy (NEP) released in 2020, which promises major investment in postsecondary education and significant improvement in India's top universities, with an emphasis, for the first time, on internationalization. Importantly, the NEP promises to open up a highly regulated and largely closed academic system to the world. The traditional *swadeshi* (encouraging local products) ideology will, it is proposed, be replaced by an open door. Skepticism about China, especially in Western countries, its "zero COVID" policy, and a modest decline in the number of internationally mobile Chinese students have also stimulated interest in India.

While there is enthusiasm, little is known about the realities of Indian higher education, and data are limited. It is worth looking at some of the challenges that international partners will face in India. This brief discussion on these challenges is intended as a contribution to a realistic approach to future collaboration and partnerships. Of

course, there are tremendous opportunities for those who engage realistically with understanding of the context.

Populism and Politics

Indian higher education today exists in a highly toxic political and societal environment—as is the case in many countries—and this has fundamental implications for how academic institutions from other countries should consider possible collaboration and involvement. A few examples illustrate the point. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government's *Hindutva* ideology, especially its anti-Muslim rhetoric and activism, is without question a hindrance to global higher education collaboration. There are numerous examples of visa denials, such as the case of a University of Sussex professor, an expert on Kerala, who was refused entry at the Thiruvananthapuram airport and was deported on his way to a conference, with no explanation provided.

Academic freedom issues in India as reported in the international media are all problematical. Indeed, reports of academic freedom threats are common. There were reports that government interference led to the resignation of an eminent professor, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, from Ashoka University, a private institution. The recent proposal by home minister Amit Shah to emphasize Hindi in the central universities and in the Hindi-speaking states will similarly be seen as a turn toward nationalism. Promoting pseudoscience in the name of promoting Indian knowledge systems in prominent institutions, promoting Hindi for medical degrees in the state of Madhya Pradesh, etc., can be harmful for the country's higher education system in efforts to compete globally.

Complexity and Bureaucracy

Without question, India has one of the most complicated higher education systems in the world. Most undergraduate students study in private colleges of diverse quality. Of the 1,057 universities that mostly offer graduate programs, around 450 are private. Most higher education institutions are under the jurisdiction of India's 28 states and 8 union territories. The highest quality public universities and research institutes, about 7 percent of the total, are central government institutions. There is also a small recently established high prestige private university sector. There is a complex arrangement for quality assurance, through the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) for colleges and universities and through the National Board of Accreditation for assessing the quality of engineering and technology, management, pharmacy, architecture, and several other fields. But only a minority of institutions (around 14 percent of colleges and 35 percent of universities) have undergone accreditation by NAAC.

The country is known for its bureaucracy, inherited from British colonialism and ingrained in independent India. Rules and regulations, often inconsistently or slowly applied, cover many aspects of higher education. Internal bureaucracy combines with cumbersome governmental regulation. The constitution of India allows both the central government and state governments to enact laws related to the higher education sector. This division of powers has often led to confrontation between central and state governments. The confrontations between the centrally appointed governors and the state governments of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab on matters related to vice-chancellor appointments, including the mass firings of nine vice-chancellors in Kerala, are recent examples.

Underfunding

Indian higher education, at both state and central levels, has been dramatically underfunded for decades. Much of the significant expansion of recent years has been in colleges that receive no direct government funding, although a small proportion of students in select institutions are eligible for need-based assistance or scholarships based on caste or other status. The private university sector has witnessed significant growth in recent years. But most of the private universities are only "big colleges" in terms of student enrollment and physical infrastructure. The NEP 2020 promises a major infusion of funds for higher education and research, but significant allocations have not yet been distributed. And the NEP mainly covers standards and procedures governed by

the central government and does not affect the states much—where the bulk of higher education governance resides. Without question, neither significant improvement in quality nor the planned massive enrollment expansion can be achieved without much enhanced funding from both the central and state governments.

Good (in Part) but Not Great

While India wants to partner with world-class universities in other countries, it cannot claim to have any world-class universities of its own, at least as measured by the 2023 *Times Higher Education* rankings. India's highest ranking institution is the Indian Institute of Science, which is in the 251-300 range. India does have 75 universities included in the rankings, but rather far down on the lists. The country does have a number of outstanding specialized institutions, including the Indian Institutes of Technology (especially the original five IITs located in Delhi, Mumbai, Kanpur, Kharagpur, and Chennai), the Indian Institutes of Management, and several research institutions.

India also has some excellent public universities with globally recognized postgraduate programs in selected fields. Further, an Institutions of Eminence (IoE) scheme was launched in 2017, with the goal of identifying 20 universities to achieve "world-class standards." Although each public institution selected under the scheme is eligible for around USD 122 million over a period of five years, only less than half of the originally sanctioned amount has been released for the eight public institutions recognized under this program. Poor project implementation and absorption capacity of beneficiary institutions are the main reasons for the underutilization of funds. By August 2022, only eight public and three private institutions were approved by the government under the scheme, including Jio Institute, a not yet established new university in the "greenfield" category. Only public institutions are eligible for receiving funds from the government under this program. The IoE scheme is, therefore, very much a work in progress.

Approximately 20 of India's 54 central universities and 20 of its 126 "deemed universities" meet reasonably good standards and some, such as the Indian Institute of Science Bangalore, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research–Mumbai, and Tata Institute of Social Sciences–Mumbai, are excellent. Most of India's 28 states have at least one comprehensive university with some research focus that is of reasonable quality. Some of the oldest universities, such as the University of Mumbai, the University of Calcutta, and the University of Madras are sponsored by the state governments.

There is also a large and growing private sector. Around 78 percent of India's colleges are in the private sector (government-aided and unaided together) and they constitute around 66 percent of total student enrollments in the country. There are around 450 private universities, most of which are of poor quality and have marginal reputations. However, there is a small but growing number, perhaps a dozen, high quality, nonprofit, and well-resourced private universities. These new institutions, which have earned high status in a short time, largely serve undergraduate students.

India has more than 100 research laboratories in diverse areas sponsored by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and other central government agencies. Some are outstanding in terms of their research contributions.

From the perspective of overseas universities seeking partners in India, a rough estimate of the number of appropriate partner Indian universities may be around 50, based on overall quality. It is important to plan both an institution-specific and a department-specific strategy for identifying potential partners in India. As elsewhere in the world, some second-tier universities have a few departments that are at par with peer departments of top-rated 50 universities, even if the entire university is not top quality.

The Academic Profession

At the heart of university quality and culture is the professoriate. The Indian academic profession is perennially troubled. Subject to strict bureaucratic rules, with many staff subject to extensive teaching responsibilities at the undergraduate level and often lacking adequate facilities to teach STEM and other fields, the profession now faces significant shortages. In much of the system, up to 38 percent of the posts are lying vacant. Around

33 percent of the 18,905 academic positions in central universities were vacant last year, and the situation is worse in state institutions. Staffing at the IITs is particularly problematic, as top talent can earn much more in the booming tech sector, both in India and abroad. The result is that 2,231 academic posts within the IITs of Delhi, Mumbai, Madras, Kharagpur, and Kanpur were recently vacant. While there have been efforts to increase the proportion of total faculty with doctorates, many academics do not hold a terminal degree. And more concerning still, many of India's top researchers work overseas.

Internationalization

The NEP has placed emphasis on internationalization, particularly on increasing the small number of international students in India, as well as building links and programs with top-ranking foreign universities, setting up international student offices in institutions, and attracting foreign branch campuses. But the fact is that India has never had an international academic strategy and has been a largely closed system for a half-century. The infrastructure and policies necessary for effective internationalization are lacking. Few universities have professional staff prepared to deal with foreign collaboration or significant numbers of international students. Government regulations on everything from financial regulations to visa policy will need to be significantly changed—and this is not easy in the Indian context. The NEP recommendation that only universities in the top 100 of the global rankings will be welcome is entirely unrealistic and bad policy as well (this recommendation is being rethought). The NEP will no doubt give a boost to higher education internationalization, but without major reforms and significant investment by both universities and government, success will be impossible.

These developments are both encouraging and discouraging. The recent Central Regulations *"International Financial Services Centres Authority, (Setting up and Operation of International Branch Campuses and Offshore Education Centres) 2022"* allows both "top 500" universities and "other foreign institutions" to establish campuses and offer programs in financial management, fintech, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in the "GIFT City" in Gujarat. These regulations allow only foreign campuses to be established on that specific site. How this will affect other parts of the country is unclear. The clauses of these regulations also allow "Foreign Educational Institutions" other than universities to establish campuses. This might allow the entry of fly-by-night operators.

In sum, the global academic community will need to examine the realities of Indian higher education before pursuing any level of involvement in the world's second largest academic system. ◢

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