Vedanta University: a flawed pipe dream

Given the contemporary realities, one cannot be very optimistic about the chances for success of the proposed university.

Philip G. Altbach

The latest grandiose and probably unrealistic idea for establishing a world-class university is Anil Agarwal's Vedanta University, planned to be opened in 2008 in Orissa. Mr. Agarwal, a mining magnate, has pledged an initial $1 billion for the project. International architects have been hired, the State authorities are on board, and a group of academic leaders is being hired from around the world.

The idea is to create a university with 100,000 students, offering degrees in the major fields and stressing an interdisciplinary approach. While the details of the university's organisation have not been revealed, it is intended to look like Harvard and Stanford. While it is always a good deed when one of the world's richest men takes an interest in higher education, it is unlikely that Vedanta University will achieve the desired results, no matter how much money Mr. Agarwal spends on it.

In India, where so much of the emerging private higher education sector is de facto for-profit and narrowly focusses on a few high-demand vocational fields, it is good that a major industrialist is investing in higher education.

The clear public interest motivation for the university is also heartening as is the goal of planning an institution that will offer an array of disciplines and not just business administration or information technology.

Does the proposed university have an overarching educational philosophy and strategy to obtain the goal of building a world-class university? Is there an educational vision behind the money? Building impressive physical facilities are a start but will by no means ensure success. The heart of any university consists of its faculty — the professors who do the actual academic work and who must have the autonomy to shape the institution's programmes. Academic leadership is also a necessity — leadership with an intellectual vision as well as the ability to build and manage a complex organisation.

A modest sum in reality

A billion dollars sounds like a lot of money, but when spread around a university of 100,000 students, it is in fact a more modest sum. One must separate the cost of building the campus from the operating costs of a major research university.

The annual budgets of universities such as Harvard and Stanford are about $1 billion; the major European universities spend less but are in this league. An average American research university typically has an operating budget of close to half a billion dollars.

No research university in the world has 100,000 students or even anything close. The University of Chicago, one of the few top-ranking institutions established in 1890 with the idea of being a world-class research facility, today has 13,700 students, 4,000 of them undergraduates and an annual budget of more than $1 billion. Its major benefactor, John D. Rockefeller, at the time the world's richest man, spent several billion dollars in the currency equivalent of the time.

Even more significantly, Chicago's founding president, William Rainey Harper, had a vision for the university that he was able to implement. The idea came first, the money second. It was also possible to lure many of the world's best scholars to the new university with top salaries and the promise of academic freedom and autonomy. The university was located in one of America's fastest-growing cities — a centre of the emerging technologies of the early 20th century. Stanford University, established in 1891, took longer to mature. It did not become a major research university until after the Second World War, benefiting from innovative leadership and the development of the high-tech industries of the Silicon Valley of northern California. Stanford's enrolment and budget are similar to the University of Chicago.

The Chicago and Stanford examples have several lessons for the proposed university, as do the realities of Indian higher education. The goal of serving 100,000 students will doom Vedanta University. Indeed, the University of California, Berkeley, one the largest highly ranked research universities in the United States, enrols 33,000 students, and its size has been capped. One of the reasons for the success of the Indian Institutes of Technology, the Birla Institute of Science and Technology (BITS), and a few others has been their small size. These institutions have been able to maintain high standards and create a real academic community in part because of a manageable size.

Location important

Location is also a significant element. It is hard to imagine a world-class university emerging in rural Orissa. Most of the world's distinguished universities are in or at least near metropolitan centres. India's highly regarded institutes of technology are near major cities for the most part.

There are a few exceptions to this metropolitan rule. Several of America's major public universities were established in the 19th century in rural areas at a time when the U.S. was still an agricultural society. Examples include the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Pennsylvania State University or the Russian academic complex around Novosibirsk. BITS has done well in Pilani. But all of these institutions struggle against their geographical isolation to maintain their excellence.

It is difficult to lure academics and students to out-of-the-way places and to support intellectual and cultural institutions. Even in the age of the Internet, location matters a great deal. Indeed, it can be argued that in the era of globalisation, location is even more important because all top universities must attract the best and brightest talent from around the world. It is unlikely that in rural Orissa, Vedanta University will be a significant lure.

Will the university be a public or private institution? With hardly any exceptions, there are no successful private research universities outside of the U.S. and Japan. All the rest are public, state-supported institutions. The reason for this is the high cost of sustaining research universities over time. It is not enough to pour money into the development of a campus and the initial start-up costs. Distinguished research universities need massive financial resources over time. Some of this support must come from public sources. Other funds can be generated from student tuition and fees and from research grants from public and private sources obtained by the professors. Many research universities around the world have not achieved their goals because of the lack of sustained financial backing. While $1 billion or $3 billion is a large investment and will go far towards establishing world-class facilities, additional funds will be needed to sustain the university, especially in its early years, once it is up and running.

Will Vedanta become a global university located in Orissa or an Indian university with significant global influences? If it is a global institution, then how will it contribute to India's development? If it is Indian, will it be overwhelmed by the well-known problems of bureaucratic control, minor corruption, and other issues that affect most of Indian higher education?

Given the contemporary realities, one cannot be very optimistic about Vedanta's chances for success. Let us hope that those funding the project will have the foresight to anticipate the problems and maximise the chances for success.

(The writer is Monan professor of higher education and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.)