

THE HINDU



Online edition of India's National Newspaper

Tuesday, Apr 12, 2005

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Higher education in India

Philip G. Altbach

To compete successfully in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century, India needs enough universities that can support sophisticated research.

INDIA IS rushing headlong toward economic success and modernisation, counting on high-tech industries such as information technology and biotechnology to propel the nation to prosperity. India's recent announcement that it would no longer produce unlicensed inexpensive generic pharmaceuticals bowed to the realities of the World Trade Organisation while at the same time challenging the domestic drug industry to compete with the multinational firms. Unfortunately, its weak higher education sector constitutes the Achilles' Heel of this strategy. Its systematic disinvestment in higher education in recent years has yielded neither world-class research nor very many highly trained scholars, scientists, or managers to sustain high-tech development.

India's main competitors — especially China but also Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea — are investing in large and differentiated higher education systems. They are providing access to large numbers of students at the bottom of the academic system while at the same time building some research-based universities that are able to compete with the world's best institutions. The recent *London Times Higher Education Supplement* ranking of the world's top 200 universities included three in China, three in Hong Kong, three in South Korea, one in Taiwan, and one in

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India (an Indian Institute of Technology at number 41— the specific campus was not specified). These countries are positioning themselves for leadership in the knowledge-based economies of the coming era.

There was a time when countries could achieve economic success with cheap labour and low-tech manufacturing. Low wages still help, but contemporary large-scale development requires a sophisticated and at least partly knowledge-based economy. India has chosen that path, but will find a major stumbling block in its university system.

India has significant advantages in the 21st century knowledge race. It has a large higher education sector — the third largest in the world in student numbers, after China and the United States. It uses English as a primary language of higher education and research. It has a long academic tradition. Academic freedom is respected. There are a small number of high quality institutions, departments, and centres that can form the basis of quality sector in higher education. The fact that the States, rather than the Central Government, exercise major responsibility for higher education creates a rather cumbersome structure, but the system allows for a variety of policies and approaches.

Yet the weaknesses far outweigh the strengths. India educates approximately 10 per cent of its young people in higher education compared with more than half in the major industrialised countries and 15 per cent in China. Almost all of the world's academic systems resemble a pyramid, with a small high quality tier at the top and a massive sector at the bottom. India has a tiny top tier. None of its universities occupies a solid position at the top. A few of the best universities have some excellent departments and centres, and there is a small number of outstanding undergraduate colleges. The University Grants Commission's recent major support of five universities to build on their recognised strength is a step toward recognising a differentiated academic system — and fostering excellence. At present, the world-class institutions are mainly limited to the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and perhaps a few others such as the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. These institutions, combined, enrol well under 1 per cent of the student population.

India's colleges and universities, with just a few exceptions, have become large, under-funded, ungovernable institutions. At many of them, politics has intruded into campus life, influencing academic appointments and decisions across levels. Under-investment in libraries, information technology, laboratories, and classrooms makes it very difficult to provide top-quality instruction or engage in cutting-edge research.

The rise in the number of part-time teachers and the freeze on new full-time appointments in many places have affected morale in the academic profession. The lack of accountability means that teaching and research performance is seldom measured. The system provides few incentives to perform. Bureaucratic inertia hampers change. Student unrest and occasional faculty agitation disrupt operations. Nevertheless, with a semblance of normality, faculty administrators are able to provide teaching, coordinate examinations, and award degrees.

Even the small top tier of higher education faces serious problems. Many IIT graduates, well trained in technology, have chosen not to contribute their skills to the burgeoning technology sector in India. Perhaps half leave the country immediately upon graduation to pursue advanced study abroad — and most do not return. A stunning 86 per cent of students in science and technology fields from India who obtain degrees in the United States do not return home immediately following their study. Another significant group, of about 30 per cent, decides to earn MBAs in India because local salaries are higher — and are lost to science and technology. A corps of dedicated and able teachers work at the IITs and IIMs, but the lure of jobs abroad and in the private sector make it increasingly difficult to lure the best and brightest to the academic profession.

Few in India are thinking creatively about higher education. There is no field of higher education research. Those in government as well as academic leaders seem content to do the "same old thing." Academic institutions and systems have become large and complex. They need good data, careful analysis, and creative ideas. In China, more than two-dozen higher education research centres, and several government agencies are involved in higher education policy.

India has survived with an increasingly mediocre higher education system for decades. Now as India strives to

compete in a globalised economy in areas that require highly trained professionals, the quality of higher education becomes increasingly important. So far, India's large educated population base and its reservoir of at least moderately well-trained university graduates have permitted the country to move ahead. But the competition is fierce. China in particular is heavily investing in improving its best universities with the aim of making a small group of them world class in the coming decade, and making a larger number internationally competitive research universities. Other Asian countries are also upgrading higher education with the aim of building world class-universities. Taiwan, which is a major designer and producer of IT hardware, is considering merging several of its top technological universities to create an "Asian MIT."

To compete successfully in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century, India needs enough universities that not only produce bright graduates for export but can also support sophisticated research in a number of scientific and scholarly fields and produce at least some of the knowledge and technology needed for an expanding economy. How can India build a higher education system that will permit it to join developed economies? The newly emerging private sector in higher education cannot spearhead academic growth. Several of the well-endowed and effectively managed private institutions maintain reasonably high standards, although it is not clear that these institutions will be able to sustain themselves in the long run. They can help produce well-qualified graduates in such fields as management, but they cannot form the basis for comprehensive research universities. This sector lacks the resources to build the facilities required for quality instruction and research in the sciences. Nor can enough money be earned by providing instruction in the mainstream arts and sciences disciplines. Most of the private institutions do not focus on advanced training in the sciences.

Only public universities have the potential to be truly world class institutions. Institutions and programmes of national prominence have already been identified by the Government. But these institutions have not been adequately or consistently supported. The top institutions require sustained funding from public sources. Academic salaries must be high enough to attract excellent scientists and scholars. Fellowships and other grants should be available for bright students. An academic culture that is based on merit-based norms and competition for

advancement and research funds is a necessary component, as is a judicious mix of autonomy to do creative research and accountability to ensure productivity. World class universities require world class professors and students — and a culture to sustain and stimulate them.

A clearly differentiated academic system has not been created in India — a system where there are some clearly identified institutions that receive significantly greater resources than other universities. One of the main reasons that the University of California at Berkeley is so good is that other California universities receive much less support. India's best universities require sustained state support — they require the recognition that they are indeed top institutions and deserve commensurate support. But they also require effective management and an ethos of an academic meritocracy. At present, the structures are not in place to permit building and sustaining top-quality programmes even if resources are provided.

A combination of specific conditions and resources are needed to create outstanding universities.

Sustained financial support, with an appropriate mix of accountability and autonomy.

The development of a clearly differentiated academic system — including private institutions — in which academic institutions have different missions, resources, and purposes.

Managerial reforms and the introduction of effective administration.

Truly merit-based hiring and promotion policies for the academic profession, and similarly rigorous and honest recruitment, selection, and instruction of students.

India cannot build internationally recognised research-oriented universities overnight, but the country has the key elements in place to begin and sustain the process. India will need to create a dozen or more universities that can compete internationally to fully participate in the new world economy. Without these universities, India is destined to remain a scientific backwater.

(Philip G. Altbach is Monan professor of higher education

and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.)

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