

## Opening up to the world: on internationalising higher education

Since Independence, the challenges of building a mass higher education system with inadequate government funding has meant poor quality, increasing privatisation and politicisation. Excellence is possible, as the IITs and IIMs show, although it is limited to a tiny segment of a system that enrolls 35 million students. In the past several years, there are indications that things are changing, at least at the Central government level and at the top of the higher education system.

### Towards innovation

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), implemented in 2016, is India's first government-supported ranking of colleges and universities. It may in the future guide government financial support for higher education. It also provides the basis for differentiating among colleges and universities, and forces participating institutions to submit data on critical areas, permitting government to make key decisions. Unsurprisingly, there are allegations that a few private institutions manipulate the process.

Two additional initiatives build on the idea of creating elite, globally competitive world-class universities in India: the Institutions of Eminence (IoE) project and the Graded Autonomy project. The IoE project will recognise 20 universities, 10 public and 10 private, and provide significant government funds to the public institutions (no extra money to the privates) and give enhanced autonomy for them. It is similar to many of the "excellence initiatives" common worldwide in providing extra funding in return for innovative ideas to the winners. The Graded Autonomy programme provides considerable freedom for academic, financial and administrative innovation to the colleges and universities participating. Given the often stifling bureaucracy of higher education, it will be a significant stimulus for innovation. Both public and private institutions are involved.

Traditionally, colleges and universities have been restricted from deep international collaboration, and there has been little emphasis on attracting international students — only 47,575 international students study in India compared to the almost 400,000 in China. The Graded Autonomy programme makes it easier to hire international faculty, traditionally very difficult to do. The new Study in India initiative seeks to attract international students mainly from a group of African and Asian countries, and is aimed at doubling India's tiny share of global student mobility from 1% to 2%. India is moving towards signing a pact on mutual recognition of academic qualifications with 30 countries. Recently a government-to-government MoU was signed between India and France to mutually recognise academic qualifications, a historic development.

### Challenges

As always, the devil is in the detail. Upgrading 20 or more Indian universities to world-class quality will be complex. It will also take time and consistent funding, probably at a scale beyond what is envisaged in current plans. Further, greatly increased autonomy will be needed — and freedom from the bureaucratic shackles of government is not easy to attain. Just as important as autonomy are innovative ideas from the top universities themselves, of which there has been little evidence. Releasing the imagination of Indian professors is necessary. Ensuring that universities have imaginative leadership is also a key necessity. Carefully studying what has worked abroad may also provide useful ideas. India has shown academic innovations over the years, but on a limited scale and never in the comprehensive universities.

The national ranking initiative needs to be extended throughout the higher education system and requires simplification. Overly complex arrangements must not get in the way of practical

solutions.

Internationalisation is central to academic success in the 21st century — and India has been notably weak. The inability in recent years to pass legislation relating to foreign branch campuses and other relationships with overseas universities is an indication of the problem. The Study in India initiative and proposals relating to relationships between Indian and foreign institutions are useful beginnings. But more thinking must go into these ideas. For example, it is not enough to focus on Asia and Africa and full degree programmes. Students and post-docs from Western countries for shorter-term study are necessary to provide new ideas — such students will not be attracted for degree study, but can be lured for other arrangements. India has the advantage of using English as the main language of higher education.

Are Indian universities finally awakening to the challenges of the 21st century? At least several innovative programmes, backed by government, are in the works. Implementing them effectively remains the key challenge.

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