

The tough road to academic excellence

The winners of the [“excellence contest” of the Institutions of Eminence](#) (IoE) have been announced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. While 10 institutions were supposed to have been chosen, apparently only six were affordable — a telling reality, especially since only three will receive any government funds. And none of the winners is actually a public university — a multidisciplinary institution at the heart of any academic system. The three public institutions chosen (the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and two Indian Institutes of Technology, at Mumbai and Delhi) are all technologically-oriented institutions. The three in the private sector are the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) at Pilani, Rajasthan, the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Karnataka, and the “greenfield” Jio Institute, at Karjhat in Maharashtra — Mukesh Ambani’s as yet unspecified “world-class” university.

Selection of Institutes of Eminence not transparent: VIT Chancellor

While the public institutions will receive 1,000 crore (\$150 million) over five years, the private ones get none at all but will be provided significant freedom from government regulations and institutional autonomy. While 1,000 crore is “serious money”, it is by no means transformative. The increased funding will help the institutions with innovations or perhaps the ability to raise academic salaries to better compete internationally but will not permit fundamental changes. If the IoE institutions focus mainly on making the changes that will help them improve in the global rankings, they will be missing a huge opportunity for key reforms — and they are unlikely to achieve the result of a high ranking anyway.

The greenfield context

“Greenfield” experiments are always risky but in fact almost all of India’s top academic institutions are the result of such initiatives. The first few Indian Institutes of Technology were established in the 1950s, with the help of foreign partners, in order to quickly build top schools without having to deal with the entrenched bureaucracy of the traditional universities. Both BITS Pilani (1964) and Manipal (1953), private start-ups, were greenfield efforts at the time.

A list of questionable eminence

So, the Jio initiative is not unusual in the Indian context. But it faces significant challenges which includes clarity on the basic organising principle. How does it plan to differentiate itself from other universities in India and abroad, and at the same time match up to the best academic practices elsewhere? While the Reliance empire is the largest private business in India, the cost of creating a competitive world-class university is daunting especially when starting from scratch. For example, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) Saudi Arabia, established in 2009, spent \$1.5 billion on its facilities and has an endowment of \$10 billion for a current enrolment of 900 master’s and doctoral students.

World-class concept

While each world class university is unique there are three essential ingredients: talent, resources, and favourable governance. These will of course be necessary for all the IoEs. But let us focus on the specific needs of Jio Institute since, in our view, it faces the greatest challenges. We have mentioned resources already (a daunting challenge), especially since no public funds will be made available to Jio or the other private institutions. Let us focus on talent (faculty and students) and governance.

Faculty are at the heart of any university, affecting every aspect of realising and implementing the university mission. In the case of rankings ambition, research output is a key metric. So, attracting top research-oriented academic talent will not only require financial resources to pay faculty at global compensation rates but also providing an attractive quality of life for their families on and off campus. Would Karjat be able to provide an ecosystem of soft and hard infrastructure critical for attracting the best international talent?

Factor of student choice

Student demand for quality education in India remains strong, and the Reliance brands and an innovative curriculum would make it relatively easy to attract top students. However, the real challenge would be in attracting international students. International student decision-making process is complex, with many global choices available to the best students. For example, an “institute” does not command as strong a recognition among international students and faculty as a “university.” Can the Reliance, Ambani or Jio brand impress the global market and influence student choice towards India and the institute?

A helping hand for Indian universities

A positive element of the IoE programme is the high degree of autonomy and freedom from government policy and regulatory constraints. However, Jio (and the others chosen for IoE) need to have creative ideas for the organisation and governance of the institution. For example, to what degree would the decision-making process be collaborative with faculty involvement as compared to a top-down mandate? Traditional corporate management styles do not align with the governance expectations of a creative university.

Building world-class universities is a resource-intensive and highly creative endeavour which will be a test of patience and persistence. Indian higher education is in dire need of exemplars of excellence. We await the specific ideas and programmes necessary to realise these ambitions from Jio, and the others.

Philip G. Altbach is Research Professor and Founding Director, Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, U.S. Rahul Choudaha is Executive Vice President of Global Engagement and Research at Studyportals, U.S.

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