

Developing Globally Compatible Institutional Infrastructures for Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

We profile the quality assessment and student support structures that are currently deployed in various institutions of higher learning in India. On-site research conducted with senior administrators and student body members in the Indian state of West Bengal indicates that privately funded and distance learning institutions are outpacing traditional public schools in these areas, despite the central government's ambitious plans to reform the university system. The implications of these developments for the globalization of Indian higher education are discussed.

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Introduction

Enrollment of international students in institutions of higher education in the United States continues to rise,¹ and US colleges and universities increasingly recognize the need to prepare domestic students to work in a global economy and to function effectively as global citizens and leaders. Although institutions of higher education in the US are academically among the top worldwide, they are nonetheless continually challenged by the need to simultaneously address the cognitive, social, and intrapersonal development of students – a linked, integrated activity now called *learning* (Keeling, 2004). Even still, programs, services, and systems of support may remain fragmented and unintegrated despite the interwoven nature of learning. In the past, such fragmentation had been common among US institutions, but in recent years sophisticated student affairs models and infrastructures have developed, which have dramatically improved the student experience (and therefore, student success) in US colleges and universities. The questions we address in this article are: Can these methodologies be effectively transported to higher education institutions in developing nations, like India? How should they be modified to coalesce with the current departmental and administrative structures within Indian institutions? Have Indian institutions begun to make similar realizations about the global economy and taken logical, subsequent steps? We focus our attention in this article on India – which has arguably the fastest growing higher education market in the world – but similar changes are rapidly occurring in many other developing nations.

Some Indian institutions have already initiated the process of change. Surprisingly, it has not been among traditional public Indian universities, but among privately funded campus-based institutions and distance learning programs, which are both trying to fulfill a national demand and distinguish themselves among the elite world institutions. By incorporating student affairs programs and services – and endeavoring to reach out to aid underprivileged students - these newly created, non-traditional institutions could promote a different kind of graduate in India; one who is socially, developmentally, and globally competent. Striving to be more than diploma mills, these institutions are aware of the skills needed to be successful in a global environment, and are beginning to respond in kind.

¹ According to a Fall 2007 survey conducted by *Open Doors* among 702 US higher education institutions of all types representing higher education associations such as AACC, AACSCU, ACE, AAU, CGS, IIE, NAFSA, and NASULGC.

Higher educational reform in India

Despite political and economic constraints—due to which India may have to accept slower economic growth than that forecasted in its fiscal and political agenda—Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has unveiled a rigorous plan to create forty new universities, mostly in information technology, management, science education and research (Neelakantan, 2007). Waylaid by Parliament, progress in improving current institutions and increasing the number of Central Universities has been scant—even with the establishment of political entities like the National Knowledge Commission, a high level advisory body to the Prime Minister with the objective of transforming India into a knowledge society (Sinha 2006). The Knowledge Commission indicated through a recent report that it must increase the number of current universities, 350, to 1,500 by 2015 in order “to raise the proportion of 18-to-24 year olds entering higher education to at least 15 percent” (Neelakantan, 2008). Political roadblocks notwithstanding, such statistics indicate a strong demand for quality higher education programs in India.

With a new generation of successful Indian professionals anxious to give back to their country, and the remarkably increased interest in private investment in Indian education, a new breed of Indian educational institutions has recently surfaced, unfettered by the constraints of governmental funding and bureaucracy. One must inquire whether contemporary private institutions are in a better position and/or better qualified than their traditional and esteemed publicly funded competitors for reaching the goal of delivering quality education to a broad subsection of the Indian population. Given their private funding, do they promote labor skills over critical faculties, and threaten to suppress voices of imagination in the educational culture? Martha Nussbaum (2007) wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that in India, “such [imaginative] voices have now been silenced by the sheer demand for profitability in the global market.” Explicit in Nussbaum’s statement is the notion that learning has become second priority; in order to respond to the present economic boom and fuel these thriving businesses, creativity and innovation are being replaced by mechanization and standardization. Indeed, for many - not just in India - higher education has become an entrepreneurial enterprise. For-profit institutions have often neglected student development and learning activities and focused instead on analyzing profit margins and actively seeking investors. In this regard, some concern should linger about whether or not appropriate skills befitting a

knowledge society are even being developed, and consider the indelible effects of a system that may be devoid of channels for academic innovation.

Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that in a developing nation such as India, where only 7% of the college-age population currently receives any form of higher education at all (with similar fractions matriculating in other developing countries), it is essential for the near-term economic development of the nation to explore new channels for educational delivery. Moreover, current dogmas concerning the comparative quality of education at small, for-profit institutions versus public schools must be carefully reassessed in the Indian context. Even the oldest, most highly ranked schools in India could benefit from some degree of academic overhaul. India currently has 350 universities and 15,600 colleges, most of them public, graduating 2.5 million students each year. Every year, 350,000 students graduate with degrees in engineering – twice the number of engineering graduates in the US, but still a tiny fraction of the total population of 18-to-24 year olds. Despite its sheer number of university and college graduates, not one Indian public university ranks among the top 300 schools worldwide². Of course, there are several Indian public universities - such as the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), which ranks in the top 400, and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) – that excel in both teaching and research. But by and large, India's public education system is lagging behind international standards. For example, China has 6 public universities in the top 300. The top 100 world universities are largely concentrated in the US, Canada and Europe (Liu & Cheng, 2005).

What is it that distinguishes these latter institutions from the rest? Certainly faculty quality and educational resource budgets play a dominant role, but at an undergraduate level, middle-tier schools generally teach much the same academic curriculum as their top-tier counterparts. In the US and Europe, numerous studies have indicated that a dominant factor that contributes to the success of the most highly ranked schools is the attention afforded directly to the student and complementary support structures that exist for the primary goal of maximizing the productivity of the student experience (Schulz, Lee, Cantwell, McClellan, & Woodard, 2007). Historically, such attention has been lacking in India, and indeed in

² In Feb 2008, the Indian School of Business (ISB) in Hyderabad was listed as one of the top 20 global business schools by the Financial Times (FT) annual MBA 2008 rankings. A six-year old private school that places a premium on integrative programs and student services, ISB is representative of the progressive educational trends profiled in this paper.

developing nations as a whole. However, some institutions – most of them private - are proving to be the exception; they understand the advantages in providing more comprehensive student services, how they can be integrated throughout the whole institution, and how they are essential for entrepreneurial success. For example, defining and implementing a student affairs model and structure can lead to a greater level of institutional uniqueness, which in turn, could make a university more competitive by providing a superior student experience. A drive toward globalization in higher education – especially in the form of educational partnerships and student exchange programs across international boundaries – is providing further impetus for the implementation of compatible student affairs models in developing nations (Schulz et al., 2007).

In what follows, we survey the role that such student support and institutional assessment strategies play in Indian public and private traditional universities, Indian distance learning institutions, and collaborative international initiatives between Indian and foreign institutions. We illustrate our observations with specific examples drawn from institutions visited first-hand in the state of West Bengal.

A new breed of Indian University: Private institutions with student support structures

Broadly speaking, Indian universities - especially those supported by the Central government - have not been held to any level of institutional accountability with respect to student support structures. Throughout the United States, variations exist around a strong commitment to address student needs and issues that affect student learning and engagement; for example, many US institutions have health services departments, including counseling services, disability services, health promotion, and mental health services. Provoked by recent public attention, parents, students, and prioritization by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, institutional accountability has increased across the board (Spellings Commission Final Report, 2006). For parents of upper middle class US students, a primary attractor of top-tier universities is their dotting attention to individual student needs. For example, students at top US institutions are assigned individual tutors, receive access to clubs and state-of-the-art athletic facilities,

and have readily available health services and mental health advising; such individualized services do not exist in India.

In India, institutions such as Presidency College, the IITs, and the University of Delhi are the analogue of top-tier western universities. These universities are highly selective in their entrance requirements, and typically, most admitted students come from upper or middle class Indian families. However, similar student support services are lacking from almost every Indian traditional top-tier university. In India, the traditional lack of competition in providing high quality higher education has resulted in a lack of motivation for the development of such infrastructures even in the top schools.

For example, a visit to Presidency College in Kolkata, a premier college affiliated with the University of Kolkata in West Bengal, indicates a curious admixture of the best and brightest young minds and Indian faculty, but essentially absent horizontal communication channels between them. Many Presidency students, recognizing the difficulty of gaining acceptance to this leading Indian institution for undergraduate studies, find receiving lectures from distinguished professors sufficient in itself, and do not press for more progressive opportunities for interactive learning. Still, interviews with undergraduates at top public Indian universities reveal that many students find it increasingly difficult to cope with the competition inherent in an oversaturated market where only the top graduates will gain acceptance to a premier graduate program or even find a well-paying job (personal communication with students from Presidency College, July 3, 2007). These interviews indicate that student depression may be pervasive, but there is no formal record of such reports or actions taken to counsel despondent students.

Over the last decade, however, India has developed new and progressive institutions -- some of which are beginning to emulate foreign models, and some of which are innovating themselves in order to provide a better comprehensive student experience. Heritage Institute of Technology (HIT) in Kolkata—a premier privately funded educational institution, created and financed by the Kalyan Bharti Trust (established by a consortium of successful North Indian entrepreneurs and professionals), has only been in existence for six years. It has become a model for the new generation of private Indian institutions of higher education, even pulling faculty away from prestigious government funded universities because of the depth of financial resources from which to draw (Probir Roy, Vice Chancellor, HIT & Pradip Agarwal, CEO, Kalyan Bharti Trust, personal communication, October 28, 2007). HIT has been focusing on

enhancing the overall student experience and creating structures and metrics that will accurately gauge student success. HIT is adjacent to the K-12 Heritage School, which provides and mandates diverse extracurricular activities such as yoga and swimming. HIT formed a functional Alumni Association, created a Student's Council consisting of committees like Cultural, Academic, Magazine, Games, and Sports, and approved of student chapters of Computer Society of India (CSI), Instrumentation, Systems, & Automation Society (ISA), Indian Institute of Chemical Engineers (IChE) and Institute of Electrical & Electronics Engineers, who frequently organize seminars and workshops.

HIT is in pursuit of very progressive student support systems, which may inform and be informed by the most popular student support models currently employed in the US and Canada—inclusive among these models are the best practices for primary care and mental health services. HIT provides medical insurance for all students (virtually nonexistent among Indian public universities) as well as free textbooks and laptops. A sophisticated IT infrastructure, engineered in collaboration with private industry, supports the dissemination of these services. Throughout these efforts, HIT maintains a strong relationship with students in advancing their standing in a global setting. One student received an academic award as the World Wide Topper, an achievement that has always been a priority of both the Indian and British educational systems. Others have won international engineering contests, due increasingly to efforts by the Heritage administration to promote participation.

These remarkable achievements are enabled in part through the consistent training of faculty in the latest communication technologies and teaching methodologies. Pradip Agarwal, Chief Executive Officer of the Kalyan Bharti Trust, highlighted the faculty enrichment program at Heritage, which provides on-site training in both technical and administrative skills to faculty and community members at select corporate institutions (P. Roy & P. Agarwal, personal communication, July 3, 2007). HIT students are also encouraged to reach beyond the walls of the university to partake in integrative and service learning programs, such as teaching computer software skills to underprivileged children in India. Such service programs are especially important in developing nations, since they foster a sense of national awareness in students who might otherwise lose touch with their roots in an effort to modernize.

US and other foreign universities have begun to contact private Indian universities in search of collaborative student exchange programs. For example, the London School of Economics (LSE) and New

Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) have recently entered into negotiations with HIT. As discussed further below, the progressive approach of private institutions increases their willingness to send Indian students to take courses in the US for a semester, as HIT is doing in 2008 with NJIT. In turn, HIT seeks to offer international students an academic experience comparable to that they would receive at a top-tier Indian institution, while simultaneously offering a student experience on their own campus not unlike that at Western institutions. Established public universities may possess an advantage in terms of name recognition, but progressive Indian higher education institutions have a substantial advantage over public institutions in developing compatible student affairs structures, due to their flexibility and willingness to adopt infrastructures aligned with those of Western schools.

Despite these developments, a primary challenge facing both the Heritage Institute and Presidency College is the cultivation of a student affairs structure that supports innovation. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary that students can regularly and freely interact with members of multiple departments, such that cross-departmental collaboration can be achieved. This might be implemented through the engineering of effective horizontal and vertical structures that bridge the existing gap among faculty, administrators and students (Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007). Western educational leaders have recently begun to implement such structures within US, Canadian, and European schools; many of the same lessons are likely to be equally applicable within India.

HIT's efforts mirror in many ways developments at the Harrisburg University of Science and Technology (HUST) in Pennsylvania. Both institutions were founded in 2001 with a focus on science and technology, and both have taken a unique, accelerated path toward becoming a full fledged-university. HIT will undergo a review for university status by the National Board Accreditation next year. HUST seeks Middle States accreditation in 2009. Despite these similarities, the market demand and potential for growth of new private Indian institutions like HIT is substantially higher than that of comparable US institutions. Further efforts on the part of international educators to deploy their expertise on student support structures would have a tangible impact on the quality of the private sector of the Indian educational system.

Higher education for the masses: Innovations in distance learning

Whereas private institutions like Heritage have a substantial charitable endowment from which to draw in their efforts to design sophisticated student support structures, distance learning institutions – largely publicly funded at present and in the eyes of many the most essential component for transforming a developing nation into a knowledge community – must find innovative ways to deliver quality higher education to the underprivileged masses of the country under tight resource constraints.

Due to their more affordable tuition fees, distance learning schools do not typically provide traditional student support services. Experiments with distance learning in the United States indicate that it is nonetheless possible to effectively monitor learning outcomes through a dialogue with students. For example, the University of Phoenix, the largest US virtual university, does not offer traditional services, having no sports, fitness centers, student unions, fraternities, museums, research laboratories, or alumni events (Bachorz & Cronin, 2006). In fact, the majority of students at such institutions are too busy with employment and family affairs to be able to spend time on such services, even if they were to be offered. Still, Phoenix cares about students, especially student retention and persistence, ensuring that students who start a degree ordinarily complete a program. For example, Phoenix staff instructs online students they are expected to log on four times a week; if they do not, a representative phones them to see what is wrong and what help they need. By contrast, most traditional colleges do not check in until mid-semester warning time, which is often too late. Another Phoenix trademark is a tailor-made curriculum for distance learning students that differs fundamentally from the semester system at traditional schools. Courses are designed by a committee of subject-matter experts and standardized across the system in short semester blocks of five to six weeks.

Granted, distance learning institutions in the US are vastly different from those located in India. In the US, although more than 2,700 campus locations span the 50 states, the geographic size of the sector is matched by low enrollment numbers (Kinser, 2006). The opposite holds true in India, where some institutions now exceed enrollment of 100,000 students. In fact, the five largest distance learning programs in the world are all based in developing countries. They claimed an aggregate enrollment of

roughly 2 million students even in 1997, and account for 10% of enrollment growth in developing countries during the past two decades. Quality control and institutional assessment take on entirely new meanings in such a context. Moreover, a distinguishing feature of distance learning initiatives in India (as well as those in Europe) is that several of the largest such initiatives are government-funded. Is attention to student learning outcomes the norm in Indian distance learning initiatives? Is it reasonable to expect such attention to detail with a much larger student body and a greater dearth of qualified faculty?

Surprisingly, the answer is a resounding yes. Netaji Subhash Open University (NSOU), located in Kolkata, is currently a leader in the field of Indian distance learning, experiencing phenomenal growth since its founding in 1997 with the mission of “providing wider access to higher education especially to the backward and weaker sections of society.” (Surabhi Banerjee, Vice Chancellor, NSOU, personal communication, July 4, 2007). This includes a 2646% increase in enrolment, 346% increase in study centers, and 367% increase in the number of courses offered since 2002. In addition to undergraduate and masters programmes in all the central natural sciences and IT disciplines, since 2004 NSOU has been offering a PhD program in 8 different subjects (NSOU, 2007). These growth metrics dwarf those of US institutions like the University of Phoenix and provide an indicator of the tremendous opportunities surfacing in the Indian distance learning arena. This growth has been accompanied by an attention to student learning outcomes that is uncommon among traditional megauniversities. NSOU was recently recognized and awarded for its attention to student success through the Commonwealth of Learning Excellence in Distance Education Award at the Pan Commonwealth Forum conference on distance learning held in Jamaica in 2006 (NSOU, 2006).

NSOU has embraced developments in affordable information technology in its drive to establish a vital two-way learning interface to students that would be impossible to achieve under traditional models. Indeed, administrators like Vice Chancellor Surabi Banerjee have attributed much of NSOU's recent success to its ability to deploy high-speed communication links to the rural villages of West Bengal. Historically, a major bottleneck for advancing virtual education had been in the availability of sufficient IT resources in rural settings. The Indian government's strong new commitment to enhancing distance learning opportunities through cutting edge information technology is perhaps most clearly demonstrated via its launch of EduSat, a satellite intended solely for transmitting virtual distance learning programs to all

parts of India, in particular its remote rural sectors. EduSat will support 25 to 30 uplinks and about 5000 remote terminals per uplink. The Indian government, fully aware that the success or failure of the EduSat initiative is contingent on the quality of the content, has organized five regional and one national conference to discuss the capabilities and future use of the system, especially by distance learning institutions. NSOU currently has one on-campus EduSat receive terminal and has taken steps to establish an audio-visual studio that will be used to transmit teaching programs to the remote sectors of West Bengal (Indian Space Research Organization, 2004).

Still, there is often a substantial gap between access to information technology and its efficient exploitation by users in rural settings. There are many outstanding challenges to be met in properly assessing learning outcomes associated with curricula transmitted through EduSat. In the meantime, established US distance learning institutions including the University of Phoenix and Thomas Edison State College are eyeing India and China as their next frontier for growth. As such, the pressure will continue to mount for Indian distance learning institutions to instate additional assessment metrics.

Partnerships with Foreign Institutions

Although the drive to develop student support structures has been concentrated in Indian private and distance learning institutions, many traditional Indian centers of higher learning are also endeavoring to modernize in a less costly manner, through the development of partnerships with foreign schools. Within the last few years, the Central government of India has become more flexible and progressive in its education laws as they relate to foreign institutions. Much excitement has been generated around foreign investment in Indian institutions of higher learning as well as foreign institutions looking to open branches of their schools within India. According to one recent report, there are currently over 130 foreign universities that have tied-up with various Indian academic institutions (Sengupta, 2007); this list includes a wide range of Indian private, traditional public, and distance learning schools.

The drive to fashion such partnerships with Western institutions is fueled by two primary factors. First and foremost, Indian institutions are seeking to establish within their students a global competence and social maturity that is essential for success in today's job market, but is often lacking from the

education received at a traditional public institution. Second, Indian schools are pushing to establish the mark of quality that may render them competitive with their public counterparts. From the perspective of Western institutions, the opportunity to tap into a huge new student base in India for immediate tuition income and endowments is the primary motive, but in addition, these schools are hoping to establish strong ties during the nascent stages of India's economic development, so as to enjoy a privileged relationship that will enhance their international presence in the future. In March 2007, Karen Hughes, US Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, traveled to India with a delegation of American higher education administrators for the purpose of articulating these goals. In the words of Ms. Hughes, "The past few years have seen an explosion of business ties in which Indian and American businesses have found new, productive ways to work together... Much like their business counterparts, American universities are exploring new strategies for collaboration" (Hughes, 2007).

Foreign partnerships with private Indian institutions have already been highlighted above. Recent examples of alliances between top US institutions and top Indian public institutions, as well as distance learning initiatives, also abound. The following is a short list.

- Cornell University's President signed a three-year agreement with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to send visiting faculty – especially those from science, engineering, and computing departments - to Indian campus-based institutions. Moreover, Cornell has made a commitment to make its lectures available to Indian institutions through the EduSat service. Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Buffalo, UC Berkeley and UC San Diego are partners in the EduSat effort.
- The Canadian government, through its Department of Foreign Affairs, recently set up a committee to work on educational collaborations with Indian institutions including the IITs.
- Rutgers University currently has an exchange program underway with the prestigious St. Stephens College of the University of Delhi, generating demand at a level that is currently twice that of capacity.

- Brown University has developed similar programs at the University of Delhi, and Dartmouth College and Antioch College have established student exchange programs with universities in Pune and northern India, respectively.
- The Indian School of Business (ISB) has exchange programs with 32 leading business schools in the US, Europe, Israel, Africa, China, and the UK.

In the United States, interest in Indian study abroad programs is not limited to Indian-American students; applications have been received almost equally from Indians and non-Indians. US students have become increasingly aware of the growth in the Indian market, and many see the opportunity to spend a semester studying in India as a step toward landing a prestigious international appointment, especially in the consulting or financial services industries. As an indicator of interest, consider Harvard's new ambitious new South Asia Plan - spearheaded by new President Drew Faust - which Vice Provost for International Affairs Jorge Dominguez said "is [Harvard's] most fully developed plan related to any geographic region outside the US...South Asia is very much a model for us" (Haniffa, 2007).

The market for India-US student exchange programs is underscored by the prolific numbers of Indian students enrolling each year as full-time students in US schools. According to Open Doors 2006, an annual report released by the Institute of International Education (IIE), India remains the leading country of origin for international students studying at US universities. Although the report shows a decline of 4.9 percent in the 2005-2006 academic year compared to the previous year in the total number of students from India studying the US, other recent reports have indicated totals may increase in the coming years.³ Since the 2000-2001 academic year, the number of Indian students has risen from approximately 55,000 to more than 80,000 in 2004-5. 73.7% are enrolled at the graduate level, while 16.6 percent are undergraduate students and 9.6 percent are enrolled in other programs. India also has the third largest number of international scholars – teachers and researchers who are not enrolled as students – at US universities. By comparison, the number of Chinese students granted US visas was 20,200 in 2005.

³ According to a 2006 survey conducted by *Open Doors* among 702 US higher education institutions of all types representing higher education associations such as AACC, AACSCU, ACE, AAU, CGS, IIE, NAFSA, and NASULGC.

The push within Indian higher education for western partnerships is by no means limited to the US. Within the last year, the governments of Britain and India launched the \$50 million UK-India Education and Research Initiative, with top-tier UK schools vying to tie up with relatively young Indian institutions. This program will fund 40 courses for approximately 2,000 students over the next several years. For example, the University of Greenwich has won funding to offer masters courses in business and IT subjects in partnership with privately funded ITM Universe in Gwalior. Commenting on the arrangement, Lady Blackstone (2008), Vice Chancellor of the University of Greenwich, highlighted the complementary motives of the two universities in establishing a link: "The UK has an international reputation for excellence in higher education, with long experience of developing policy and practice in teaching and research, backed by a national system of quality assurance...on the research side, there will more Indian students completing research degrees in the UK, and more UK researchers undertaking work in India, along with joint research projects."

Such faculty exchange and information exchange between Western and Indian institutions are increasing hand-in-hand with student exchange. For example:

- Rutgers University South Asian Studies program is currently negotiating plans to bring experts in Indian literature and poetry from Visva Bharati University⁴ in West Bengal to their campus to teach undergraduate students (Professors Sumit Guha & Dipak Sarkar, Rutgers University, personal communication, November 16, 2007).
- IIT Kharagpur, one of India's most highly rated universities, has acknowledged faculty shortage in engineering disciplines, pushing for joint international programs to train faculty members.
- Within the last year, senior Canadian and Indian educators met at a landmark conference in Ottawa to discuss bi-directional student and faculty exchange.

⁴ Dr. Dilip Sinha, former Vice Chancellor at Visva-Bharati University and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at University of Kolkata, recently accepted an invitation to the ICSSIA Advisory Board. His expertise in mathematics education will allow ICSSIA to look at the integration and academic and student affairs in new dimensions.

- HIT has finalized plans to send several faculty members to European technological institutes for professional development in 2008 (P. Agarwal, personal communication, November 12, 2007).
- A considerable fraction of the Indian School of Business' current faculty is comprised of visiting professors from top US business schools, including the Wharton School of Business and the Kellogg School of Management.

In the near future, Western institutions will begin to form more and more alliances and exchange programs with Indian universities. With the influx of these universities, privately funded Indian institutions - due to their desire to compete with the traditional top-ranked universities - will move aggressively toward forming close relationships with Western schools. Due to their smaller size and willingness to embrace progressive modes of teaching, these schools are already leading the charge in the race to develop exchange programs, while many public schools linger at the early stages of negotiation. Unless top-ranked traditional Indian institutions begin to implement more comprehensive student support services to facilitate exchange, they may find that Indian private higher education may outpace them both in terms of the progressiveness of their support programs as well as in the prestige of their degree programs.

Educational and financial forecasters generally agree that these partnerships are but the first step toward a broader symbiosis between the higher education systems of developed and developing nations, which may culminate in the opening of foreign satellite campuses in countries like India. Several North American universities have already drafted detailed plans for the construction and financing of such campuses (personal communication with Subhabrata Basu, Quest Partners Mumbai and Schulich School of Business, Toronto, June 29, 2007). From the point of view of Indian students, attending a satellite branch of a Western institution in India may be the next best thing to attending that university itself. The competition for matriculation into top US schools from India is daunting. Only the absolute top elite students are granted acceptance. Given the international pre-eminence of top US and European schools, those opening branches in India have the potential to draw the nation's best students away from public universities.

The terms under which foreign institutions may be permitted to open such branches will be determined by the fate of recent legislation advanced in the Indian parliament. In March 2007 the Union Cabinet cleared the government move to introduce the Foreign Institutions (regulation of Entry and Operation and maintenance of Quality and Prevention of Commercialization) Bill. Though freed from the obligation of complying with Indian requirement of reservations and fee caps, the Foreign Institutions Bill requires that foreign universities invest at least 51% of the capital expenditure required to set up their establishment in India. If passed into law, all foreign institutes will have to be incorporated under Indian law, and will be given “deemed to be university” status. This would permit them to grant admission and award degrees, diplomas or certificates. An expert committee comprising representatives of the University Grants Commission and other statutory education councils like the AICTE (All-India Council for Technical Education) and MCI (Medical Council of India) will examine proposals (Joshua, 2007).

The bill, which had been scheduled for a vote in the budget session of Parliament, was recently put on hold because of opposition from the leftist parties in the coalition government. One of their primary concerns, discussed further below, is the same as that raised by Martha Nussbaum – that is, whether quality and accessibility will be compromised for the sake of profit. Although current indicators suggest that these dilatory bottlenecks will delay the opening of satellite campuses of foreign schools in India for at least a another couple of years, Western universities and investors in higher education are diligently studying the factors that will spell success or failure once the doors are opened, and offer competitive advantages within what will surely be an intense market.

One such factor is the compatibility of student affairs models across national boundaries. For example, a school wishing to open a complementary program in India will certainly need to go through all the proper political channels to acquire land, build the institution, and receive approval for its curricula prior to standing a chance at competing overseas, but it is almost equally important to ensure that US, UK, or Canadian students will be able to relate to the support structures present at the satellite campus, such that their likelihood of signing up for an overseas semester are enhanced. It is thus in the interests of Western administrators to work with progressive Indian educators to fashion support structures that address the needs of students from both backgrounds.

Institutional assessment: Challenges for the future

While the remarkable figures and milestones above generate optimism about the future possibilities of higher education in developing countries, they raise a red flag warning regarding the possibility of compromised quality in educational standards in the wake of such unbridled growth, and many associated questions. For example, how would an IT employer value an MA or PhD in Computer Engineering from NSOU, compared to one from IIT, or even Heritage? What metrics exist for such an employer to make a calculated decision? All university accreditation in India occurs through a single national agency. In the coming formative years, education of the majority of the country's population will likely need to be delivered through universities that have not yet received formal accreditation. Moreover, there is the danger that the pressure to accredit a growing body of schools will lower the quality bar for accreditation below international standards.

Within the last decade or so, for-profit private education in the US has also grown considerably in scope, and some argue that the quality of education has been compromised in response to providing educational channels for broader audiences. A primary concern surrounding the proliferation of higher education institutions is the reality of finding qualified faculty who will teach these new students. The majority of faculty at nascent institutions are not full-time employees. From the point of view of traditional academe, the biggest challenge facing the rapid growth of the private education sector is maintaining quality control in the teaching programs and faculty.

In India, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), an autonomous body funded by the University Grants Commission of the Government of India, manages assessment of university quality. Since its establishment in 1992 at the recommendation of the National Policy on Education, the NAAC has made accreditation decisions according to a standardized three-part process consisting of: 1) preparation and submission of a self-study report by the unit of assessment; 2) an on-site visit of the peer team for validation of the self-study report; 3) a final decision for or against accreditation made by the executive Committee of the NAAC (Rajagopalan, 2007).

It is unlikely that the NAAC's current metrics are adequate for assessing the quality of higher education across the broad spectrum of new private and distance learning initiatives opening in India. In

particular, the appropriate measures of quality for distance learning systems meant to reach millions of students are elusive. The ability of such institutions to effectively gauge student learning outcomes, as well as their capacity to implement custom-made educational curricula that will prepare their students to compete in the global arena, should undoubtedly be included in the assessment criteria.

It is imperative that international advisory boards be involved in the development of such curricula. Clearly, Indian students can be expected to respect the stamp of approval of an internationally developed curriculum more than that of a purely domestic curriculum, given the need for international translation of educational credentials. A benefit of international measures of accreditation and learning outcomes is that many features of these measures will likely be universal across developing countries. As such, in the coming years, accreditation by international standards may be expected to play an increasingly important role in developing nations, perhaps more important than accreditation by domestic agencies. Of course, details will need to be fine-tuned based on the specific environment. International consortiums, such as the recently founded International Center for Student Success and Institutional Accountability (ICSSIA),⁵ may play an important role in setting reasonable case-specific standards.

Just as Western educators have expressed concern about the quality of Indian institutions of higher education, some Indian administrators are moving to ensure adequate control of foreign institutions planning to open campuses in India. These latter efforts can be divided into two broad categories: 1) quality control of middle- or lower-tier Western institutions, whose interests in India may be short-sighted and devoid of concern for the repercussions of misinformation; 2) tuition control of top-tier Western universities that might otherwise charge fees that render their programs inaccessible to all but the wealthiest Indians, deepening class distinctions.

The Foreign Institutions Bill, described above, was drafted and circulated among the government ministries in 2007, pushed by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Commerce Ministry with the backing of the National Knowledge Commission. Under the proposed Bill, the University Grants Commission (UGC) will frame regulations that will provide for the incorporation of foreign education providers. The UGC is a statutory body under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD), the

⁵ The purpose of ICSSIA is to keep the promise of higher education for every student. Its role is to build the capacity of colleges and universities to 1) identify and strengthen the parameters of success for all students, 2) develop, assess, and be accountable for the achievement of essential student learning outcomes and indicators of institutional effectiveness, and 3) use every institutional resource to support the education and preparation of the whole student.

central government agency in charge of making recommendations to Parliament regarding educational legislation. The HRD administers 18 of the largest public universities in India and is the highest governing body on both secondary and higher education. Under its administration, the UGC will determine admission procedures, eligibility of candidates, and fee structure for foreign institutions (Rena, 2007).

In 2005, the eminent Indian scientist Dr. CNR Rao, along with five other top educators, was commissioned by the HRD to investigate regulatory issues and make recommendations surrounding the entry of foreign universities into India. The CNR Rao committee suggested that the government adopt a conservative two-pronged strategy (Basu, 2006). The committee was of the view that such universities should be allowed to carry out their educational activities only if their performance was found to be satisfactory during a trial period. In addition, it was suggested that these universities should help their Indian counterparts start operations in Western countries. These reservations are not far removed from those now surrounding the entry of Western financial institutions into India, an arena in which regulatory legislation is currently changing month-by-month in response to the latest recommendations (David, 2007).

Left-leaning government officials have gone further, drawing an analogy to the circumstance of foreign institutions of higher education entering China, and the methods by which the Chinese government is aiming to control these activities. Chinese provisions for foreign universities stipulate that half of the members of the governing body of the institution must be Chinese citizens, and that the post of president or the equivalent must be a Chinese citizen residing in China. According to an HRD ministry official, "In China, no foreign university can increase the fee without the prior approval of the authorities concerned. It is a very good provision and the Centre would certainly ensure the fee is not raised without approval of competent authority" (Roy, 2007).

At present, the HRD ministry remains opposed to any hurried decisions on the entry of foreign universities. Some critics maintain that these actions may slow the overall process of higher education reform across the country. Indeed, in early 2008, HRD minister Arjun Singh, who has consistently been against foreign educational institutions in India, used opposition from like-minded Leftists to stonewall the legislation being pushed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. With the situation hostile between the Prime Minister's Office and the Left on numerous other political issues, the PMO is not set to press

further. In the face of such uncertainty concerning the date at which the Foreign Institutions Bill may eventually be passed, Western universities interested in Indian expansion are currently increasing their push for partnerships with Indian schools rather than full-fledged satellite campuses (“Arjun has the last laugh,” 2008).

By diminishing international competition, these delays ostensibly act to preserve the premier status of Indian public universities. However, given India’s democratic system of government, the opening of its doors to the broader world – both in education and in commerce – is inevitable. Failing to hold public institutions accountable by international standards is a disservice to the Indian community, who will increasingly emigrate to obtain globally esteemed degrees (Das 2008). If anything, delaying competition will make it harder for these schools to adapt to the changing educational landscape once the Foreign Institutions Bill, or a suitable analogue, is passed.

Conclusion

As competition in the Indian higher education market grows, it will become increasingly difficult for top domestic Indian institutions to retain the pre-eminence of their degree programs without student support services and methods for gauging student learning outcomes. Since private institutions are unfettered by the need to pass decisions through bureaucratic committees, they have an advantage in developing such programs. Although in the West the value of a degree from a top traditional university holds a value with which for-profit institutions are unable to compete, institutions of higher education in India operate on an increasingly level playing field where integrative programs can make even the newest university an attractive candidate for international partnerships, exchange programs, and domestic demand.

Once assessment metrics are in place, institutions will be able to illustrate the impact of such programs and services. Assuming that students value these additional services, future Indian universities will need to take into consideration such models. Even government-funded institutions will have to take

notice, since they have a vested interest in providing competitive job opportunities to their students, opportunities that may only be available to globally aware and socially competent graduates.

Still, it is clear that the future economic development of developing nations like India rests largely on the shoulders of the success of their distance learning programs. The ultimate balance in distance and online education in India via government-funded and private channels has yet to be determined. The Indian government has already put substantial resources into distance learning initiatives, but with such support comes the added responsibility of developing and instating appropriate metrics for student success in such nonconventional learning environments. The ability, or lack thereof, of government-funded distance learning programs to adhere to a high quality standard - through interaction with international accreditation agencies and advisory boards - will likely play a decisive role in determining the preparedness of the majority of the Indian population to compete in the modern economy.

Premier Indian public universities undoubtedly possess the greatest name recognition today. However, progressive institutions of higher education in India are well on their way towards obtaining seals of approval from Western institutions and international experts. Who will be the next Harvard or Stanford equivalent? Or, rather, will India develop a new model for egalitarian education ideally suited to meet the challenges inherent in its socio-economic development? With minimal international standards for assessment and student support services, such progressive institutions could witness a growth far exceeding that of similar institutions in the West, where the target audience is much smaller and more limited in scope.

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