

Internationalisation of Higher education: strategic implications

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Abstract

India's strategy with regard to internationalisation of higher education should be based on its potential to be an effective aid to the mitigation of the basic problems facing this sector. So far, the liberalisation policies have induced foreign providers to focus only on certain technical and professional fields of study that can earn them good market returns. In contrast to these modes, it is better to design a strategy that taps foreign universities and institutes of acceptable quality to work together with Indian universities/institutes to improve both access and quality. Augmenting and strengthening the capacity to produce more faculties in selected fields through such partnerships will help public universities play a more effective role in higher education.

1. Introduction

Internationalisation" is not an altogether unknown phenomenon in higher education in India and other developing countries. Students have for many decades gone abroad for higher studies and professionals have gone out to teach or do research. Foreign faculty have come to our shores for teaching and managing institutions. Foreign books and journals have been an indispensable source of knowledge for our university students and teachers. Thus, teaching and learning, research and institution-building have all been influenced by some form of internationalisation or the other. What is new, however, is the much larger scale of such activities and inputs today, and the adoption of new modes of delivery of higher education. Foreign universities or colleges opening branch campuses abroad or offering joint programmes of study in partnership with local institutions are examples of new modes of delivery. The use of new technologies that permit students to enrol in foreign educational programmes while sitting at home and learning "on line" is also a novel approach. Government policies that permit foreign investment in higher education, and negotiations to treat education as a tradable service under international agreements such as General Agreement on Trades in Services (GATS) are taking the internationalisation of higher education to a new level.

The reasons behind the explosion of the phenomenon of internationalisation are not difficult to fathom. The opening up of our economy through the new policies of liberalisation, easier capital flows and access to new technologies facilitated by globalisation have helped expand the scale and modes of internationalisation. Liberal policies have created opportunities for education service providers, both within the country and abroad, to invest in a big way in setting up new institutions or joint ventures to offer educational programmes that are in great demand. That the main players in this arena are from the private sector is not surprising. It is they who have the resources and the incentives to undertake these ventures. The non-profit providers have also entered the scene, given their interest in expanding and diversifying their activities. This trend, however, would not have gained currency in the absence of two other factors. First of all, there is an unmet demand for higher education in India and other countries that many foreign providers and investors have rightly recognised. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) of higher education in India is a mere 10%. The growing population, the rising incomes of the middle class and increased awareness of the value of education by lower income groups have widened the supply-demand gap in higher education. It explains why a large number of students go abroad every year at their own cost or enrol in private institutions at home, paying exorbitant fees (Agarwal 2006). The second factor is the failure of the State to increase its investment in higher education. There has hardly been any increase in the number of public universities in India in the past two decades. Primary and secondary education has received higher priority than higher education in government circles. It is the private sector that has stepped in to fill the resultant gap in demand. Foreign programmes and partnerships have been brought to India largely by these private sector players. The vast majority of colleges in India are private entities, though a good proportion of them receive government aid. A similar trend can be found in other developing countries too.

2. Trends in internationalisation

As a result of the interplay of these factors, further internationalisation of higher education is already in progress in

India. The following evidence, though not comprehensive, will give us a sense of the directions and trends on the ground (Panchamukhi 2008; Kapur 2008). A total of 1,00,000 Indian students are presently studying abroad, at an annual cost of over \$4 billion. This number is next only to that of China which has also sent their students abroad in a big way. A good proportion of the Indian students, of course, do not return to the home country. In 2005, there were 131 foreign educational programmes being offered in India in partnership with Indian institutions. A few thousand students are enrolled in these programmes which also offer them opportunities to study in foreign countries for a part of their courses. These programmes are largely in technical and vocational subjects. Fee levels are uniformly high in these programmes. However, capital investment by the foreign providers is minimal in these ventures. There is no guarantee that these programmes are accredited in the country of origin of the provider. Hundred per cent foreign investment in higher education is now permitted by law in India. Though foreign universities have evinced interest in setting up their campuses in India, so far there is no case of this kind. Nor is there any evidence that top notch foreign universities have been attracted to India under this liberal policy. The unprecedented expansion of the private sector and the entry of foreign education providers in India's higher education arena have caught the regulatory authorities off guard. There is, as yet, no coherent regulatory framework to monitor or accredit these new players. Whether their quality, standards, and related management practices are of an acceptable level, is a matter for conjecture.

3. What are others doing?

Before we propose a strategy for the internationalisation of higher education in India, we need to understand and assess what other countries are doing in this regard. This is not to say that we should follow their examples. But since we live in a competitive world, it will be useful to find out how other countries are responding to the same challenge (Kapur 2008; Huang 2007).

(1) Study abroad by students is still the most visible mode of internationalisation. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries dominate this arena. The United States (US) leads in this regard with 6,00,000 visiting students. China alone has 3,50,000 students studying abroad. India and China account for the largest proportion of foreign students in the US. This mode is adopted by those who can afford to meet the high cost of foreign education. Needless to add, liberalisation policies have clearly aided the popularity and large-scale expansion of this mode.

(2) The reverse process is now catching on. Foreign education providers are setting up campuses or partnerships with local institutions in many developing countries. Twinning arrangements, cross border franchise mechanisms, validation, subcontracting and distance learning involving foreign institutions are becoming ever more popular in several countries. Under twinning, students study in their home countries for the most part, but go overseas to complete the course and receive degrees from the foreign university.

(3) Education hubs to attract and serve foreign students is another strategy some countries have adopted. Singapore has attracted 16 foreign universities to offer degree programmes in the city-state. Financial incentives are offered to entice the universities to join this initiative. The project operates in partnership with the local universities. The degree programmes are in professional and technical fields. Dubai has set up an international academic city with a dedicated tertiary education cluster development³ Qatar also has a similar project.

(4) Distance learning has assumed growing importance in recent years as advances in technology became available across the world. Tertiary distance education accounts for 15% of all tertiary education enrolments around the globe. Virtual education is thus another example of internationalisation, despite some of its much discussed limitations. In a recent development in 2006, over 100 higher education institutions from different parts of the world launched the "open courseware consortium", each pledging to offer online course materials for at least 10 courses without any charge.

(5) China is a country where much progress has been made in terms of internationalisation, and where the pursuit of a deliberate strategy to achieve it is under way (Huang 2007). As already noted, China leads in the export of students for study abroad. In 1990, China had hardly 7,600 students abroad. Presently, it has nearly 3,50,000 students abroad. It caters to 77,000 foreign students who are enrolled in Chinese institutions. In 2004, China had nearly 750 joint programmes in partnership with foreign institutions, of which 165 awarded degrees of foreign or Hong Kong universities. It has not approved the establishment of branch campuses of foreign universities. Instead, the Chinese government is investing in the development of 38 world-class universities to upgrade the access to and quality of higher education.

4. What are the Key issues?

Compared to the developments in China and other countries, India's forays into internationalisation have been modest. As noted above, these include the liberalisation of foreign exchange for those who wish to study abroad, easing of restrictions on foreign investment, and a limited number of collaborative programmes with foreign providers. The key Indian players that have taken advantage of the new policies are from the private sector. Public universities have not been active on this front so far, nor do they have the resources to take such initiatives. There is, however, no effective and coherent strategic or regulatory framework to monitor and assess these activities. The net result is that internationalisation has been dominated by foreign and Indian institutions which are not in all cases known for their high standards and educational quality. A consensus on India's policies on internationalisation in higher education is yet to emerge. This is understandable, given the democratic setting of the country, and the diversity of views held by different parts of the government, experts and other stakeholders. The ministry of human resource development and ministry of commerce have divergent views on the role of foreign providers and investment. Regulatory bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the National Knowledge Commission do not see eye to eye on the role and nature of regulation. State governments and the central government have had their share of conflicting views. Managements of private sector institutions and public universities differ on several counts. Some of these difficulties can be traced to differences in values and ideologies of the parties involved. The upshot is that the country's direction in terms of internationalisation is neither clear nor coherent. Piecemeal decisions have been taken so far, without guidance from an overall strategy. The judiciary had to intervene in the policymaking process as some of the disputed issues have been taken to court (Agarwal 2006).

Rather than regurgitate the current confused policy scenario and the underlying conflicts, we propose to begin with an assessment of the key problems and challenges facing the higher education sector in India, and ask whether internationalisation offers any opportunities or answers to at least some of these problems. There is no implication here that internationalisation holds the key to solving all the problems thus identified. But even if some problems can be mitigated through this route, it will be a step forward. We could then explore the modes of internationalisation that will be appropriate in the Indian context, given the sector's problems and priorities. Based on this reflection and assessment, we might be able to put together the outline of a tentative strategy for the internationalisation in higher education. Let us begin with a review of where India's higher education sector stands today. There are many detailed treatises on this subject. Our purpose, however, is to present the essential evidence that can help us reach a consensus on the basic problems and challenges facing the sector.

5. Access to Higher education:

India has the largest number of higher education institutions. Its universities and colleges add up to 18,000, well above those of the US and China. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education, however, is a mere 10%. This number tells us that the sector caters only to a small proportion of those eligible to go for higher education. In developed countries, the GER exceeds 50%. Other BRIC countries, Brazil, Russia and China, have much higher GERs than India. Even Indonesia that has lagged behind India has a GER of 16%. There is thus a big gap in terms of the access to higher education in India. The 11th Plan envisages raising GER to 15% – a modest target. But this implies expanding student intake by over seven million in five years! A major quantitative expansion of student numbers is necessary if the country's future requirements of skilled personnel are to be met. It points to the urgent need to invest vast resources for the expansion of the sector.

6. Quality and standards:

Though the higher education sector is relatively small in relation to future needs, its record in terms of quality and standards of performance leaves much to be desired. In global rankings of universities, very few Indian institutions find a place. The Shanghai world rankings of the top 500 universities/institutes include only three Indian Institutes of Technologies (IITs) and one Indian Institute of Management (IIM), and that, too, at the lower end. The Times global rankings of the top 100 also find a mention of just a couple of Indian institutions. In terms of published papers (an indicator of research output), India has slipped from the 8th place in 1985 to the 14th in 2006. Thus, though we have a few outstanding colleges and other higher education institutions, the vast majority do not meet international standards of quality and excellence. According to some observers, the entry of self-financing private colleges in a big way has exacerbated this problem. This, in turn, has negative implications for the acceptance of our degrees and of the graduates of the system in other countries and markets

7. Resources, financial and human:

Paucity of resources is another disquieting feature of India's higher education sector. Public expenditure in this sector as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) is 0.37% compared to 0.50% in China and 1.40% in the US (Agarwal 2006). Government has traditionally been the primary investor in higher education in India, though private colleges do play a major role in the delivery of education. However, in recent decades, there has been a shift of government priority in favour of primary and secondary education.⁴ Expansion of public universities and upgradation of their infrastructure have been negligible since the 1980s. It is not merely that funds are scarce, but that there is also a shortage of qualified faculty and researchers to meet the growing demand. The slack has been taken up by the private sector, but largely in the sub-sector of technical and professional education, where the unmet demand is perceived to be significant. Here again, faculty shortage is a serious issue.

8. Regulation of Higher education:

The foregoing problems are linked to a large degree to the weaknesses in the regulatory framework of higher education. This applies especially to the question of quality and standards. The overload on the regulatory authorities, enforcement failure, overlaps and conflicts between agencies, and collusion due to political or other influences have all played a role in this outcome. There is much confusion also about the role of these agencies in the regulation of private and foreign providers. In summary, India's higher education sector is currently facing serious challenges in respect of the need to expand student intake (access), upgrading quality and achieving excellence, mobilising the needed resources, and strengthening the regulatory function. All these are complex issues, and there are no simple remedies that can solve them. Many commissions and working groups have made recommendations to deal with them. Nevertheless, progress has been slow with respect to all the four problem areas. How then should we respond to this situation? One could take a "do nothing" attitude and believe that time will take care of these problems. After all, the country's growth rate has accelerated, and as more resources become available, suitable steps could be taken to improve the situation. Some others might argue that the entry of the private sector will help bring in more resources and meet the rising demand for higher education. While there is some truth in this argument, there is little evidence to show that the Indian private sector institutions have done much to upgrade quality and standards or to cater to the educational needs of our less well-off families. Governments, both central and state, do not seem to have the resources to tackle the major problems identified above.

It is against this background that we should examine whether internationalisation can play a positive role in remedying these gaps. This is not an option for those who are against international involvements and exchanges. The risks that come with trade and unequal exchanges are real and cannot be wished away. On the other hand, policymakers can assess such risks, and make a judgment as to whether this option will generate some net benefits for the country while taking steps to minimise the risks. The rest of this paper is rooted in this view and takes a critical look at how internationalisation can be used in the national interest to strengthen the higher education sub-sector. There is no presumption here that internationalisation is the "magic bullet" we are seeking. We should pick and choose, negotiate and adopt only those modes of internationalisation that subserve our interests. What we need to ask, therefore, is whether the instrument of internationalisation has the potential to tackle some or all the challenges discussed above. If the answer is "yes", we could then explore the areas in which it can be an aid, and reject aspects that are of little benefit to us. It is through this process that we should formulate a strategy to make use of the opportunities that internationalisation can create in the Indian context. Internationalisation entails exchanges between domestic and foreign parties interested in these activities. The more developed countries (OECD, for example) have an interest in exporting educational services in which they hold an advantage. Developing countries, on the other hand, are recipients of the services from the former. This is not to say that they cannot export services in which other countries are interested. Some developing countries such as China and India, for example, are attracting overseas students to their institutions. It means that eventually they may develop the capacity and incentive to engage in both the export and import of educational services.

9. Towards a strategy

As far as India is concerned, since our priority will be in tackling the basic problems discussed above, we should be looking for the "import" of services and resources that can aid us in this important endeavour. Successful resolution of these

problems could eventually pave the way for us to “export” our services to other countries. But this clearly is not our priority at this stage of our development. What modes of internationalisation are pertinent to the Indian context of higher education? Which modes will help us to improve access and quality so that higher education becomes more equitable through the expansion of its reach? We present below seven modes and offer a brief assessment of the relevance of each.

- (1) Scale up the movement of students to foreign countries for higher studies.
- (2) Facilitate the participation of students in the distance education programmes of foreign universities (online learning).
- (3) Permit foreign universities to establish branch campuses in India to offer educational programmes.
- (4) Encourage foreign universities to offer joint programmes in collaboration with Indian institutions on a much larger scale. This could include twinning, franchising and other modes.
- (5) Award contracts to reputed foreign universities to collaborate in the creation of world-class universities in India.
- (6) Make our top universities/institutes a destination for foreign students on a large scale.
- (7) Encourage Indian institutions to set up campuses/collaborations in other countries to meet the growing international demand for higher education. Each of these modes can be evaluated in terms of its likely contribution to solving the problems of our higher education sector. Will it improve access and quality? Will it augment the reach of higher education and achieve the goal of equity? Will it help the country to augment resources or improve its regulatory effectiveness? Is it likely to succeed at this stage of the country's development? Perhaps, none of these options will satisfy all of our criteria. But some indication of which modes are more appropriate and timely may come out of this assessment.

9.1 Movement of students for studies Abroad:

The focus here is on scaling up this mode which has already been popular for a long time. It is a way to meet the demand gap, especially in technical and professional fields. Increased mobility through liberalisation has also facilitated the movement of teachers and other professional to work abroad. But the down-side is that this mode can be accessed only by the elite sections of society. While it is bound to remain popular, it cannot be counted on to solve the problem of access that faces the majority of our students. For them, the answer lies in creating opportunities for higher studies within the country.

9.2 Distance education and Online Learning:

This mode is more cost-effective than the physical movement of students to foreign countries. To the extent that internet access is improving in the country, a larger number of students could take advantage of this option. Regulation of this mode will be difficult, and hence, quality and standards cannot be assured. This limitation applies also to the first mode discussed above. Furthermore, the high fees charged may make this mode beyond the reach of the less well-off students. There is, however, opportunities here to turn this mode around to benefit the less well and rural-based students. If online learning can be made available to rural and small town institutions, access and quality of higher education can be improved for the students involved. The question of fees still remains and may need support from government.

9.3 Establishment of Branch campuses by Foreign Universities:

This mode can, to some extent, alleviate the problem of access. However, it can still be expensive for students as foreign providers are likely to charge relatively high fees. Since only a few universities are likely to take this route, enrolments will be limited. It is feasible to regulate and monitor this mode. For example, approval may be given only to accredited institutions. They can be asked to comply with national policies, and standards of transparency and disclosure with regard to admission, fees, etc. Judged by the criteria of access and equity, this mode will, for the most part, remain elitist, though it could set new standards of quality.

9.4 Joint programmes with foreign providers:

Joint programmes imply partnerships, twinning arrangements, and the like. The participation of local institutions has the potential to develop local capabilities and compensate for the gaps in local skills and resources such as faculty. They may also award joint degrees that may prove attractive to the students. But much depends on the quality of the foreign partners. It is here that the regulatory framework can be used to ensure that only foreign providers of certain minimum standards enter the scene. So far, this is a neglected aspect of joint programmes in India. When properly designed and regulated, this mode (compared to the other modes discussed above) has the potential to positively impact on both access

and quality in areas of higher education that are in need of upgrading.

9.5 Award of contracts to Build World class institutions:

In the final analysis, access and quality can be improved only when we have an adequate number of institutions that can cater to large numbers of students while upholding quality. Since upgrading quality and intake in all institutions is not easy, a beginning has to be made by creating model institutions from which others can learn. Since universities are at the centre of higher education, these world-class models should be established in the university system. Future faculty and research personnel for other institutions should come from these world-class universities. To the extent that a country does not have the faculty resources to mount this effort, there is a case for getting well-known foreign institutions to play an institution-building role to achieve global standards. They will naturally expect to be paid for their services. The original IITs and IIMs were set up on this basis, in collaboration with reputed foreign institutions. Private sector providers in India may well be able to finance this effort on their own. But if this mode is to make an impact, it should be applied to India's public universities. The selection of public universities for this purpose is a matter to be carefully considered. More importantly, funds for this important initiative will have to come from the government. It should be seen as an investment in order to create the faculty for the future who in turn will set standards in many other universities, and may well create the foundation to make Indian universities a destination for foreign students too.

9.6 Making Our Universities Attractive to Foreign students:

In terms of sequence, this mode cannot emerge in a real sense until our universities and other institutions become world-class and have the capacity to provide high quality education to the visitors. Some of our universities do attract foreign students, and they should continue to provide this service. In terms of our national priorities, however, this will rate rather low at this juncture.

9.7 Establishing Indian campuses Abroad:

This is an option that developed country institutions are currently exploiting, given the demand for their services and their capacity to invest resources abroad. A few Indian institutions have also entered this commercially profitable arena. Though there will be a growing potential for this mode, it is unlikely to be an important one at present from the Indian standpoint. In any case, when access to education is a problem for Indian students, the diversion of our public resources to serve other markets cannot be considered a high priority. As noted earlier, our approach should be to see whether some or all of these modes of internationalisation are in the national interest. It is this assessment that should guide our future policy, and not the provisions of GATS or the compulsions of our trade policy. In any case, GATS leaves us considerable leeway to choose the options that benefit us or to delay the process of negotiation. We should satisfy ourselves at the outset that we seek the route of internationalisation primarily because it offers us better opportunities to solve the problems of access and quality and achieve educational excellence for as large a segment of our educational institutions as possible. Our objective should be to achieve both growth and equity through the modes of internationalisation that we decide to adopt. It is from this perspective that the following elements of a strategy are being offered.

(1) Among the seven modes discussed above, the first three do not qualify to be the cornerstone of our national policy. It is not that they will not have an impact on access or quality. But the impact will be marginal, and limited to the elite segments that can take advantage of them. The only exception is the online learning which could benefit rural students if proper arrangements are made. The challenge, however, is to nudge foreign providers to be partners in meeting the high priority needs of higher education in India. It is pointless to decry their commercial motives. No one is going to serve our interests for free. The trick is to offer them the needed incentives to contribute to the upgrading and renewal of our education system as indicated below.

(2) A similar word of caution is in order with respect to the last two modes. At this stage of our development, our scarce public resources need not be devoted to the education of foreign students or to meet inter-national demand. The priority has to be to solve our internal problems of access and quality. However, if private resources are available to launch ventures abroad, they could be treated on par with the foreign investments of other Indian entrepreneurs.

(3) A more attractive option is to encourage foreign institutions to partner with Indian universities/institutions in selected fields of education of mutual interest and that may serve our national interest. Such collaborations or twinning arrangements should be limited to foreign providers of established reputation and quality. For example, pre-qualifications can be set

for prospective foreign partners (those who are in the first 300 in the Shanghai rankings). That these providers may have a commercial interest should not prevent us from utilising their services. The contentious issue of foreign providers charging high student fees can be taken care of by government paying the former for their services and determining student fee levels as a separate matter. The early IITs and IIMs have gone through this experience. The regulatory framework should be used to ensure that the selected partners are of the quality acceptable to us.

(4) Internationalisation can be an aid also in the creation of a few world-class universities that can lay the foundation for the upgrading of many other universities in the country. But this will require substantial public investments as collaborating partners will have to be paid for their services. So far, the more reputed universities have not shown much interest in partnering Indian institutions except in limited areas such as research or training projects. Pune University is one example of a state university that has taken some initiatives in this direction (Jadhav 2008). (5) It is easier to apply this mode when new universities are being set up. They have the advantage of starting on a clean slate unlike older institutions where resistance to change is likely to be strong. The establishment of 30 new central universities and technology institutes provides us an opportunity to organise the inputs necessary to turn them into world-class institutions. The focus here should be in achieving the world-class status not only in the relevant fields of knowledge, but also in the governance of the new universities. Faculty shortage is at the core of the problem of both access and quality in our higher education institutions. There is a strong case to use foreign collaborations to mount postgraduate work and faculty development programmes (including PHD and post-doctoral programmes) in selected subjects to eliminate faculty shortages. As part of such collaborations, online learning and video conferencing can be used take advantage of specialised courses being offered in reputed universities abroad. Part of the course work could be done in foreign countries. It is essential that adequate fellowships are offered to encourage young scholars of merit, especially from the disadvantaged groups, to join this programme. When a substantial number of new faculty of good quality are available, many universities will be able to expand and upgrade their faculty. Needless to say, compensation, promotion and related issues will have also to be set right if such faculty is to be retained in the university system.

The suggestions offered above do have important implications for the role of governments in our higher education sector. If internationalisation is to sub serve our national interest, governments should, first of all, identify the areas in which foreign inputs are most useful. Secondly, governments should be willing to allocate adequate resources to pay for the providers' services and to equip the Indian institutions to absorb the needed inputs.

Thirdly, governments need to put in place an effective regulatory framework to ensure that foreign providers who enter India are of the requisite quality and are held accountable for their performance.

10. Concluding comments

This article has presented an overview of the modes of internationalisation in higher education that are at work in different parts of the world. It argues that India's strategy with regard to internationalisation should be based on its potential to be an effective aid to the mitigation of the basic problems facing our higher education sub-sector. Liberalisation policies that open up the sector to foreign investment and permit the unregulated entry of private players will have only a marginal impact on the sector's basic problems such as access and quality. So far, these policies have induced foreign providers to focus only on certain technical and professional fields of study that can earn them good market returns. In contrast to these modes, it is better to design a strategy that taps foreign universities and institutes of acceptable quality to work together with Indian universities/institutes to improve both access and quality. Augmenting and strengthening the capacity to produce more faculty in selected fields through such partnerships will help public universities play a more effective role in higher education. This approach, however, will call for strategic investments by governments in these universities and to pay for the services of the foreign partners.

10.1 Notes

1 Nearly two-thirds of the Indian students doing PhD in science and technology in the US in 2005 said that they do not plan to return to their country immediately despite India's growing attractiveness in terms of jobs.

2 This has happened primarily in management and allied programmes.

3 A few Indian education institutions have joined this venture, mainly to cater to NRI students.

4 Recent central government budgets have allocated larger amounts for specified higher education institutions.

5 As noted earlier, there is also the risk of brain drain in this mode. It is a problem faced by all developing countries.

6 At present the Indian regulations require that the foreign partners be accredited.

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