

Emerging directions in global education*

Higher education in India is at a turning point. The government, administrative, statutory bodies, special interest groups and thought leaders have all proposed a fundamental relook at the vision that drives higher education and the National Knowledge Commission Report gives apt glimpses of aspirations. This vision will have to respond to the clear shift of the process of knowledge production, where the university or for that matter institutions of higher education are not the focus, but individuals and competencies become the central categories of analysis¹.

The theme of EDGE 2008 was internationalization of higher education. The conference was inaugurated by Arjun Singh, Minister, Human Resource Department (HRD), Government of India. A series of events preceded the conference, which had seven focus sessions covering contemporary concerns in higher education. The India Vision Document and the Ernst and Young Report on Globalization of Higher Education were two landmark documents brought out as part of EDGE 2008.

Apart from the international conference, the events included two pre-conference workshops; a round table – Making India a global destination; an awards evening to felicitate the best educationists in the country; an exhibition showcasing the emerging trends in higher education, and a vision talk by Sam Pitroda. The 400 delegates in the events included various stakeholders in the higher education sector, eminent educators and educational administrators, members from industry and corporate groups, policy-makers, representatives of international education missions, and students.

The tone of the pre-conference workshop was set in the inaugural session by K. Kasturirangan (NIAS, Bangalore) calling attention to the fact that India will soon have the largest working population

in the world and the challenge is to convert them into knowledge workers. Public-private partnerships are key to address the twin issues of access and quality in higher education. Healthy competition, entry of select foreign universities, and learning from experiences of other countries are essential for this expansion. Creating and retaining talent in the teaching profession, providing academic freedom and autonomy, propelled by three academic processes, namely tenure, peer-evaluation and shared governance are crucial to such processes. Interdisciplinary studies, introduction of research in a phased manner from school to post-graduation levels and networking of faculty from varied disciplines and geographical regions are necessary to bring about a much needed change. Kasturirangan reiterated the importance of the Indian diaspora, to create trans-border brain circulation networks involving technology firms in home countries and developed countries through initiatives like EDGE 2008.

The conference had seven focus topics. The first session on the first day was titled 'Internationalization of Indian education: The big picture'. In this session, B. Mungekar (Planning Commission) dealt with the conceptual differences between the processes of internationalization and globalization. According to him, while one still needs to outline the issues on ground for Indian education, internationalization is the integration of the national education system across the globe. This process of integration must be sensitive to diversity. India has the potential to becoming a global destination in higher education. Web-based information, assurance of basic amenities, transfer of credits and tie-ups are the key challenges to attract international students. The central problem of higher education in India is that policy makers in higher education are unwilling to ask difficult questions that are critical to the sector.

The second session titled 'International education initiatives: Best practices for a global vision' brought together the Institute of International Education, The British Council, German Academic Exchange Service, and China Scholarship

Council to discuss global mobility and exchange to provide Indian educators with insights into global best practices, and the emerging trend of 'brain-exchange'. German universities consider intelligence as academic currency and believe that interculturalism promotes creativity. According to them, there are long-term economic returns of international alumni in terms of international collaboration, opportunity for exchange programmes, gaining visibility, etc. The best practices in Chinese higher education institutions regarding internationalization include student/staff exchange, joint-run schools (programmes), and joint research projects (laboratories).

The session on 'Paradigm shift in education through emerging technologies' emphasized that teachers and education administrators need to be familiar with technologies like Web 2.0, YouTube, video conferencing and tele presence. Empowering teachers to integrate this into the teaching-learning process is essential for this shift. It was reiterated that technology does not replace but augments the teacher. Among the popular technologies, the notebook sector is particularly showing the largest growth at 80% and students are the largest consumers. Cisco's vision for learning, leveraging Web 2.0 and the teleportation technologies was highlighted.

The session on 'Innovative financing solutions in education' brought different methods of financing for educational institutions and students into sharp focus. Mohandas Pai (Infosys, Bangalore) urged for complete autonomy for universities, which have to gear up to raise and manage resources. He called for setting up of a National Scholarship Programme and a National Science Foundation. Establishing private universities is critical to addressing the resource and educational infrastructure gaps that exist today.

The session on 'Human resource development: Challenges for industry and opportunities for institutes' focused on areas of collaboration of human resource experts and educators. The mismatch between skills required by the industry and those produced by the higher education institutions was brought to the forefront.

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Although India fares better than other countries in the area of soft skills, studies point to the need to further develop soft skills in India to harness greater opportunities. Severe crisis due to the absence of faculty re-learning, old curriculum and the absence of incentives based on performance is the feature of higher education in India. There is a wide variation in the quality of vocational education and the lack of its integration into the higher education system. This needs to be urgently addressed.

The session on 'Technology enabled learning' (TEL) highlighted the critical role of open learning, e-learning systems and virtual classrooms. Virtual education is not just a technical issue, but requires a fundamental shift in thinking and action. The on-line education sector in the US is growing by several folds, with an astonishing two-thirds of the enrolled students being women. On-line student information system, on-line library access and on-line interaction with peers and teachers are the features of these courses.

'Innovative systems in evaluation and assessment' called for a continuous reform of the system nationwide. Technology can be an enabler in this process. Games, open book, open web exams (OBOW), and mobile phones can be harnessed to improve assessment methods. Research points to the fact that OBOW is much superior to closed book exams, where the focus of the former is application-based and calls for decision-making skills. Assessment in education is not just about optimal test design, but also about robust delivery models subjected to continuous innovations. The scale of infrastructure is huge and not cost-effective. Connectivity in terms of access to stable internet bandwidth, candidate identification across locations and handling large student numbers pose huge challenges.

In the roundtable, the Secretary, Higher Education, enunciated the focus of the Government of India on issues of access, equity and excellence. The enrolment in higher education in India is about half that in developed countries in absolute numbers. The government has increased budgetary allocation for education by almost nine fold in the 11th Plan, com-

pared to the allocation in the 10th Plan. The semester system and mechanisms for credit transfer are being instituted. Accreditation is going to be made compulsory. Other innovations such as student evaluation of faculty, increased research focus, modes of sharing consultancy fees between faculty and institutions, industry-institution interface, and summer training programmes for faculty are being promoted by the Ministry of HRD.

The roundtable also addressed central questions about India becoming a global player – Who does India want as students? Does India want to become regional educational hub, catering primarily to students from Asia and Africa, or become a truly international educational destination? How many Indian institutions are prepared to take the initiatives for internationalization and in what time-frame?

India has to consider international students not as a potential source of revenue generation, but as future cultural ambassadors of India. Unlike some other countries, we need not treat higher education as an exportable commodity. Rather, we should use it as a way to extend India's soft power. The session concluded by expressing the hope that India will soon become a global hub for higher education.

The key recommendations that emerged from this conference are as follows. There is a need to have a standard measure that would lend for comparisons of education levels across countries. The focus must progressively shift from issues of 'access to processes' and further move to 'educational outcome as numbers and quality of graduates' in educational institutions. Development of a common evaluation system that is dynamic and robust in delivery to regulate entry of students from within and outside the country is essential.

It was pointed out that the pixels of higher education are reforms and restructuring through autonomy; building a faculty pool; adopting pedagogy change through technology, and using excellence as a performance measure. The regulatory scenario has to escape the tyranny of the use of 'OR' in the context of private sector and government. Rather, it is not 'OR' but 'AND' and, hence, the need for

the government and private sector to work with each other. Promotion of faculty and student exchange programmes and having an agency at the national level to drive the process of internationalization of higher education are crucial.

Concerted efforts for curriculum reforms and empowering teachers to handle changes need to go hand in hand. Addressing the huge gap in the 'comfort zone' of students and teachers with the use of new technologies cannot be ignored. Innovative financial solutions must locate education in the public sector, but not government-driven. An important suggestion was the creation of the Education Guarantee Corporation of India to give student loans. State Bank of India and Infrastructure Development Finance Company will contribute to the equity and suggested that the government has to make a substantial contribution to the corpus, to the tune of rupees 500 crores.

The emphasis was to simultaneously create a vocational and professional stream with forward and backward linkages that can respond to the ever-changing skill requirements of the employment market. Industry and academia need to work together such that universities create industry-relevant curriculum and remove the apparent shortage of trained human power amidst plenty. Distance education can be a major player in this process.

The conference has generated a debate on internationalization of education in all circles, including the government, private sector, industry and most importantly, the citizens of this country and the world over. Anand Sudarshan (Manipal Education) on behalf of EDGE proposed a e-journal, and the creation of a virtual think-tank as an immediate action plan, with the announcement of EDGE 2009 in February 2009.

1. Gibbons, M. *et al.*, *The New Production of Knowledge – The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, Sage Publications, London, 2005.

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