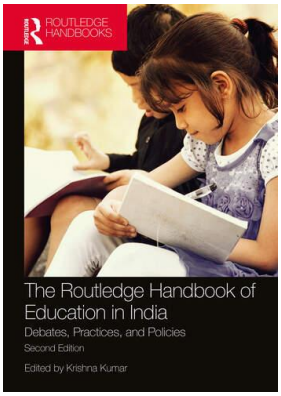

The Routledge Handbook of Education in India Debates, Practices, and Policies

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Indian higher education

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003030362-19
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Published online on: 30 Sep 2021

Part IV
Universities and society

The advent of universities in India is a major facet of modernity and institutionalised education. Universities are crucial to the modern occupational structure and forms of knowledge that arose under colonial conditions in India. Although universities existed in India, we do not have precise knowledge about how they functioned, and even less about their relationship with society. In any case, a vast chronological break – with obvious implications for society – separates those ancient institutions from India's present-day universities. The latter were formally set up to serve the emerging colonial state apparatus and the limited social needs this apparatus recognised in the mid-nineteenth century. This section opens with Philip Altbach's chapter on the development of universities in India since that time. For a while, universities performed mainly in examining and degree-granting roles; teaching was added later, and research later still. Thus, knowledge generation as an aspect of the higher education system has a relatively short history in modern India. The question Altbach focuses on is why excellence in this role continues to elude India despite its growing importance in the global economy. This chapter also draws the reader's attention to the institutional diversity that prevails in higher education (parallels with school education, discussed in Part I, are obvious). The policy-related matters this chapter discusses need to be considered in conjunction with conceptual issues raised in the context of curriculum design and the pedagogic and examining practices discussed in Part II. A larger theoretical perspective on knowledge and its generation is required to appreciate why so few universities in India meet the standards of quality that are commonly applied for international comparison. The latest strategy being used in India for pursuing quality is to encourage the private sector in higher education. Furqan Qamar's paper provides a historical background necessary for grasping this development and for distinguishing it from the older systemic tradition of encouraging private participation. The new private universities have emerged in the context of globalisation, which is both an economic and a socio-cultural phenomenon, marking a departure from the generally inclusive growth of opportunities for higher education. Readers will greatly benefit from studying Altbach along with Qamar and the chapters included in this section to address the issues faced by the lower castes and tribal groups in accessing higher education in India.

The other three chapters included in this section explore the social base of higher education in India. This, by itself, can be regarded as a factor of quality in the experience of learning

DOI: 10.4324/9781003030362-18

provided by institutions of higher education. However, that is not the way the debate on quality in higher education is normally looked at. Customarily, issues of access are considered different from issues of quality. This kind of separation permits the discussion of inclusivity as a moral goal. Apparently, the higher education sector in India has remained largely bereft of reflection and research on the role that pedagogic issues such as the social composition of the classroom or the medium of interaction play in determining the quality of teaching and learning. The Indian university has remained remarkably unchanged as far as its role as an examining body is concerned. In the matter of language, too, English has maintained its dominance. What has changed is the composition of the clientele, and the two main reasons to which this change is related are expansion of school education and the policy of reservation for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and the Other Backward Classes. In terms of their presence in the classroom, universities and colleges have become more inclusive. To an extent, the curricula and syllabi in certain areas have accommodated larger social concerns, but this kind of change is restricted to a handful of institutions.

This bigger picture of an institutional set-up helps us grasp both the nature of the problem that higher education faces in India and also enables us to assess more objectively the relevance of new remedies such as online or distance education and private universities. These remedies bypass the core problem that has to do with the social base of universities and the manner in which the extant narrow base keeps the pedagogic environment stagnant.

The chapters included in this part are aimed at assisting the reader to assess the size of the social base and the change it has undergone in the recent past. The chapter by Karuna Chanana focuses on the participation of women in higher education. She looks at both the presence of women and the areas of knowledge in which it occurs. The chapter underscores the practice of associating certain areas of knowledge with men and others with women. The chapter by Satish Deshpande examines university enrolment and performance from the perspective of social justice. More specifically, this chapter examines the provision of caste quotas as a means of pursuing the Constitutional goal of equality with social justice in higher education. The other chapter on this theme in this part discusses the experience of tribal groups in obtaining higher education. Here, Virginius Xaxa examines the status of higher education among the Scheduled Tribes of India. Xaxa locates the problem in the meagre expansion of the sector. Owing to limited expansion, higher education has become a site of intense competition. Data show that tribal groups continue to be a victim of deprivation of opportunities for knowledge and mobility that higher education is supposed to provide to all sections of society on an equitable basis. In as much as inclusivity is a factor of quality of educational experience at any level, these chapters demonstrate how large a constraint is placed upon the quality of higher education by the inequitable distribution of higher education among women, lower caste strata, and tribes. Inequitable distribution is also an indicator of the limited role that universities and colleges have been able to play in building a democratic social order.

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Indian higher education
Twenty-first-century challenges[1]

Philip G. Altbach

The saga of Indian higher education since the 1960s is complex, variegated, and reflects the country's development over time. The country's education development has, for much of this period, lagged behind economic and social development. Like India itself, higher education realities are contradictory. India, in 2015, has the world's second largest higher education system in terms of student numbers, having recently overtaken the United States in enrolments, with 20 million students enrolled in post-secondary education, attending more than 35,500 colleges and 574 universities. It is estimated that more than half of the world's post-secondary institutions are located in India – many of the colleges are uneconomically small. Approximately 20 per cent of the 18–22-year-old age cohort is in post-secondary education – with a goal of enrolling 25 per cent by 2017 and 32 per cent by 2022 – an extremely ambitious target (Rashtriya Uchchtar Shiksha Abhiyan 2013). Dropout rates are high, with many of those who enter the system failing to complete a degree. Quality is generally poor – although there are significant islands of excellence, the system overall is a sea of mediocrity – and none of India's universities score well on any of the international higher education rankings (Altbach 2006).

India, like many developing countries, has been swamped by massification – the rapid expansion of higher education enrolments that is the result of an unstoppable demand by growing segments of the population for access. India's challenges have been magnified by increased demand for access, combined with overall population growth. In no country has rapid expansion been accompanied by improvement in overall quality, and in this respect India is no different than many other countries (Carnoy *et al.* 2013).

India had several advantages at the time of Independence in 1947, but was unable to capitalise on them. English was the near-universal medium of higher education, giving India immediate links to the outside world, access to scientific information, and textbooks. India had developed a fairly mature, although fairly small, higher education system, with several reputable universities and specialised institutions at the top, and a respectable number of undergraduate colleges, a few of which were of international standard. While access was limited to a small urban elite and most higher education institutions were located in metropolitan areas, colleges and universities could be found throughout India.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003030362-19

Though the system grew fairly rapidly throughout most of the post-Independence period, population growth and an expansion of primary and secondary education meant that higher education could not keep up with demand. In line with global thinking concerning education and development, emphasis was placed on primary education and not on higher education. In most developing countries, overall quality declined as enrolments increased.

Despite considerable rhetoric in the past few years about India's higher education 'takeoff' and the link between higher education and recent economic growth, there is little evidence that economic success has had much effect on improvements in higher education. Indeed, it is argued that if higher education is not improved, India may lose the advantage of its 'demographic dividend' of a large population of young people who could, if well educated, spearhead continuing economic growth (Altbach and Jayaram 2010).

It is worth examining some of the broad trends that characterise Indian higher education. These are presented in no special order of importance. They are, however, linked and constitute a pattern of development over time.

A challenging history

Like much of the developing world, India experienced a long period of colonialism. British rule over much of the subcontinent lasted for several centuries – longer than the colonial experience of most other countries. British-style higher education dates back to 1823, when several colleges were founded – significantly by Indian initiatives rather than by the colonial rulers. Universities were established in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras in 1858 – around the same time that higher education was expanded beyond Oxford and Cambridge in England (Kaur 2003). When compared to most developing countries, India has had a longer history of modern higher education. For example, higher education was largely absent from sub-Saharan Africa until the 1960s (Ashby 1966).

While the British were in general not avid supporters of higher education in India, they did not prevent its establishment. After a laissez-faire period, higher education was organised as part of the colonial policy, ensuring that the language of instruction was English and that the organisation and structure of academic institutions conformed to British patterns and policy. The British were more supportive of higher education in India than they were in their colonial possessions in Africa (Ashby 1966). The colonial authorities spent few resources on higher education, and the impetus for the modest expansion of higher education in India during colonial rule was from Indians. Indeed, there were efforts to keep enrolments small in order to prevent the emergence of a subversive intelligentsia or unemployed graduates. Both of these goals were, at least in part, failures, since educated Indians spearheaded the Independence movement. The British sought to ensure that the graduates of the colleges and universities were suited to serve the needs of the colonial administration, rather than the emerging Indian society and industry.

At the time of Independence, there were 19 universities and 695 colleges, with an overall enrolment of fewer than 270,000 students. By the standards of newly independent developing countries in the mid-twentieth century, India was well situated. It had a relatively comprehensive array of higher education institutions, although few were vocationally or scientifically oriented. The quality of this small system was relatively high. While serving only a tiny proportion of the age cohort – well under 1 per cent – India had the basic structure of a higher education establishment to build.

The challenge of coping with the demands for expansion, combined with political and other pressures on higher education, meant that it was not possible to take advantage of existing strengths and to build for both quantity and quality. For example, the basic organisational

structure of the higher education system inherited from the British and designed for a tiny elite remains largely in place in 2015.

Language: a continuing dilemma

At the time of Independence, the language of instruction in higher education throughout India was almost exclusively English. While there are no accurate statistics for English literacy in India, it was quite unlikely that even 5 per cent of Indians were literate in English in 1950. Thus, the huge majority of Indians did not have access to higher education. There were fundamental disagreements among the founders of modern India about language policy. Mahatma Gandhi argued strongly for the use of Hindi as the national language – and the medium of instruction in higher education. India's first prime minister, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru, was sympathetic to the continued use of English. Many political leaders in the south and in some other parts of the country were opposed to Hindi and, thus, favoured English as a 'link language' and some emphasised the use of regional languages in education, while others favoured English. India's federal constitution gave authority over education largely to the states, which had considerable power to decide on language issues. These post-Independence realities resulted in a hodgepodge of policies in different parts of the country.

Some of the states in the 'Hindi Belt' in north India stressed the use of Hindi, and the central government made some efforts to produce and translate textbooks into Hindi for use in undergraduate education. Almost all of the universities and specialised research institutions, most sponsored by the central government, continued to use English as the language of instruction and scientific work. The states varied considerably in language policy. Most southern states continued English as the main language for higher education. Some permitted the use of regional languages. States in other parts of India varied in their policies. A few used a combination of English and the regional language. In some cases, specific universities preferred to retain instruction in English despite the state policy. Thus, language policy and practice in higher education was, and remains, varied throughout the country.

Without any reliable statistics, it is certainly the case that the use of the English language has increased in Indian higher education, especially in the more prestigious universities and colleges and in the highly selective institutions – such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management. Much of the private higher education sector functions in English as well. The research sector is entirely dominated by English, and most scholarly communication in journals and on the internet takes place in English. While the language debate in Indian higher education has not entirely ended, English has emerged as the key language in Indian higher education. Its role, always strong, has increased in importance as globalisation has affected the higher education sector in the twenty-first century.

The traditional role of English has given India significant advantages in global higher education. Professors and students can communicate easily with peers in other countries, and mobility is enhanced. Indian universities can more easily enrol international students. Indians may contribute directly to the global knowledge network (Altbach 2007). Yet there are some disadvantages as well. English is not the mother tongue of Indians, and it remains to some extent a foreign language. A large majority of Indians do not speak and are not literate in English – thus they are at a significant disadvantage in the higher education sector and unable to gain access to the social and economic mobility that English medium conveys in India. While there seems to be no accurate estimate of the proportion of Indians who speak English, 10 per cent seems to be a realistic number. This constitutes more than 100 million English speakers – more than the

populations of the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada combined – but still a modest percentage of Indians.

Indian universities in a globalised world

Indian higher education has interacted gingerly with the rest of the world. The higher education sector, as the economy in general until recently, has been largely protectionist. While many Indians have gone abroad for postgraduate study – and many have contributed significantly to technological and economic development in, for example, Silicon Valley in California as well as in India – Indian higher education has been largely closed to the rest of the world. Non-citizens cannot normally be hired as permanent members of academic staff, and branch campuses and other foreign academic transplants have not been allowed.

In the past decade there has been a lively debate in India concerning how Indian higher education should engage with the rest of the world. Kapil Sibal, the minister for human resource development from 2009 to 2012, proposed to open India's education market to the world and asked Parliament to approve legislation for this purpose. However, the legislation was repeatedly delayed, and thus India remains largely closed to foreign universities and other education providers. Even if the law is passed, the conditions for establishing branch campuses and other initiatives are sufficiently unfavourable for attracting foreign institutions – despite considerable interest overseas in the Indian education 'market'. However, many less formal arrangements have been put in place – including a number of joint-degree programmes, franchised arrangements, partnerships, and others. Thus, the door is perhaps half-open.

Some have argued that India is better off developing higher education on its own. Others favour an open door, and the idea that the rigours of the market would have a positive impact on Indian higher education. Clearly, India needs good ideas – and insulating the system from international concepts and practices is not helpful.

The sea of mediocrity

Indian higher education can be characterised by a sea of mediocrity, in which some islands of excellence can be found. A large majority of Indian students attend the 574 universities and the 35,500 colleges affiliated to them. While a few of the universities – most notably those without affiliated colleges, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, several other universities sponsored directly by the central government, and some colleges offer high quality teaching – most provide mediocre to poor quality instruction. Most of the 286 public universities that are managed by state governments, 111 private universities, and 129 'deemed' universities provide poor to middling quality education. The vast majority of colleges, particularly newer private 'unaided' colleges that receive little or no government funding, are of quite low quality. A small number of well-established colleges managed by state authorities, some of those established by Christian and other religious organisations, and a small number of others are quite good – but these are a small percentage of the total. As with much in India, there are exceptions to these generalisations. For example, several new non-profit private universities established by wealthy philanthropists, such as the Azim Premji University, the Ashoka University, and the Shiv Nadar University, show much promise.

Graduate unemployment in many fields, especially in art and science subjects, is a perennial problem in India. This situation, in part, is due to too many graduates for available jobs in these fields and in part due to the low quality of many degree holders. Even in fields such as management and engineering, where there is a demand from employers, graduates from many colleges

and universities are considered deficient in quality and poorly trained for the positions available. Employers indicate that they must retrain many of those they do hire.

To some extent, a decline in quality at the bottom tier of Indian higher education is an inevitable result of massification and can be found worldwide. Students with poorer academic qualifications are able to gain access to higher education. In India, the complex system of the reservations policy for disenfranchised groups has exacerbated this problem – while at the same time providing opportunities that did not exist before. The existing modest admissions standards are relaxed for these groups, while little extra help is provided for students without adequate secondary school achievement, thus contributing to high dropout rates. The reservation system identifies specific historically disadvantaged groups, such as lower caste populations, tribal groups, and 'other backward castes', and reserves a specific proportion of admissions place – and faculty slots – which can be filled only by these groups. The percentage that is reserved is often close to half of the total. This system also applies to faculty hiring in most fields, and contributes to a shortage of qualified teachers, since in many cases an insufficient number of applicants from the required groups seek employment.

Expansion has also brought many new types of institutions onto the post-secondary education landscape – mostly at the bottom of the system. Many of the 'deemed universities' are institutions of modest to poor quality – although some of the older ones are well established. New private universities present a similarly mixed picture, with most of lesser quality. Thousands of 'unfunded' undergraduate colleges in engineering, information technology, and other fields have emerged in the past several decades and are affiliated with universities and thus able to offer degrees. Again, the overall quality of these colleges is often quite poor, and many are quasi-for-profit institutions.

The traditional universities and their affiliated colleges have proved resistant to reform. In terms of their structure, role, and governance, these institutions have been virtually unchanged for half a century, despite widespread recognition of their problems. Some reforms have been put in place, such as permitting some of the best colleges to become independent of the universities and offer their own degrees, but implementation has been limited. The entrenched bureaucracy of the affiliating system remains the core of higher education; and until it is significantly improved or modified, essential improvement in Indian higher education will not be possible.

Islands of excellence

Despite the immense problems of the Indian higher education system, a small sector of globally competitive, high-quality post-secondary institutions exists. It is significant that all of them are outside the established university structure. Planners were unwilling to entrust new and innovative ideas to the traditional universities. The best known of these institutions are the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management. There are many others. These include the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (both in Mumbai), the Indian Statistical Institute in Kolkata, and others. Several of the national universities supported by the central government, including Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, are also held in high regard.

These institutions share several attributes. They are all public and funded by the central government. All are relatively small and are outside of the structure of the traditional universities. These institutions have a significant degree of autonomy that is somewhat unique in the Indian higher education system. They are all initiatives of the central government, with little or no involvement by the states. While none of these successful institutions are lavishly funded – indeed, by international standards they are all underfunded – they have achieved considerable success.

All of these successful institutions were able to attract professors committed to high standards of teaching and innovation – without paying exceptionally high salaries – showing that some Indian academics are attracted by new ideas and high standards. However, it is sometimes difficult to attract top talent – and some of the Indian Institutes of Technology have experienced difficulties in recruiting. These top institutions also attract the best students in India – and indeed they and some of the others may be the most selective institutions in the world, accepting only a tiny fraction of the students who take the national entrance examinations for these schools.

The failure of planning

Indian higher education has not failed to create a 'world-class' system because of a lack of ideas. At least half a dozen high-level commissions have issued intelligent reports over the past 60 years, starting perhaps with the University Education Commission (Radhakrishnan Report) in 1948, and including the National Knowledge Commission Report in 2007 and the Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education (Yashpal Committee) in 2009. The most recent effort, the 2013 Rashtriya Uchchtar Shiksha Abhiyan (National Higher Education Mission), is the latest well-documented and thoughtful analysis of current realities and recommendations for the future. These reports have recommended many ideas for thoughtful reform, development, and improvement. Over time, elements of some of these reports have been partly implemented, but in no case at all have any been comprehensively applied. The Planning Commission's five-year plans generally paid little attention to higher education, although occasionally initiatives were outlined and funds provided. The current 12th Plan for the first time gives some comprehensive focus to higher education. The Modi government's reorganising of the Planning Commission and new priorities at the central government level make it unlikely that the 12th Plan's recommendations will be implemented – joining the many other thoughtful suggestions on the shelf.

Although most of the funding and supervision of higher education is in the hands of the states, there is little evidence of planning or innovation at the state level. In general, the states have simply tried to keep up with the demand for expansion of higher education. A few have made some effort. Kerala has attempted to think systematically about higher education development, and Gujarat has recently focused on higher education as part of the state's development strategy in the 'Vibrant Gujarat' project.

The University Grants Commission – responsible at the national level for funding, innovation, and planning of higher education under the control of the central government – has developed some small-scale programmes in curriculum, teaching, and other areas, but by and large has not played an active role in large-scale innovation. The current proposal to establish a National Commission of Higher Education and Research will bring together a number of central government initiatives and provide a central focus for planning, research, and innovation.

As a result of divided control – lack of coordination among the different agencies with responsibility for higher education at the central and state levels, inadequate authority for implementation of change, and inadequate funding – it is fair to say that higher education planning has not been successful, despite a range of good proposals over the years.

The necessity of systems

Massification requires a higher education establishment, with institutions serving different purposes and missions that are organised logically to cater to different clientele and meet various

demands. The best organised examples, such as the renowned California public higher education system, articulate different kinds of institutions so that students can move from one type of college to another. In California's case, the public system has community colleges, four-year and master's degree universities, and research universities – such as the University of California, Berkeley – that offer doctorates. Students may enter one type of school and, if the quality of their academic work permits, can transfer up to a different type of institution. Systems of this type hold costs at appropriate levels, provide access, and ensure that the various societal needs are met. Government authorities control the missions and budgets of the institutions at the various levels – deterring 'mission creep' and ensuring that institutions stay focused on their established mission.

India has never developed a clearly articulated academic system, at neither the central nor state levels, although informal systems have evolved over time. India is a federal system, with much of the responsibility for higher education in the hands of states and some authority with the central government. India's 35 states have little in common and range from Uttar Pradesh, with a population of 200 million, to small states with just a few million. All of India's universities have a research mission; some are better able to engage in research than others. Few universities at the state level receive adequate budgets for research, and few have a research-oriented academic staff. The rapid expansion of undergraduate arts and sciences and also professional colleges has also taken place largely without planning. The specialised high-quality institutions such as the IITs are treated separately from the mainstream colleges and universities.

The recent centrally supported initiative to establish state higher education councils is a move towards more rational higher policy and planning at the state level. However, only a small number of states, such as Kerala, have fully implemented councils and have appropriate coordinating bodies in place.

India requires, at both the state and central levels, higher education systems that are rationally organised and differentiated in order to ensure that the increasingly diverse needs of higher education can be rationally met.

Politics

Indian higher education, much to its detriment, is infused with politics at all levels. Colleges are often established by political leaders as a patronage machine and a way of providing access and jobs to supporters. The location of universities is sometimes influenced by state or local politics. Even the central universities have occasionally been enmeshed in politics.

University and college elections are frequently politicised. National, regional, and local political machines are frequently engaged in campus politics. Student unions are often politicised. Academic decisions are determined more by political than academic considerations. Political intrigue and infighting may infuse campus life. In extreme cases, campus politics can turn violent, and disruption of normal academic life is not uncommon. More often than not, the politics is not ideological but rather regional or caste-based.

Universities and colleges, which employ considerable numbers of staff and offer access to a highly sought-after commodity – an educational credential – are valuable political engines. Academic institutions are often local power centres and are clearly seen as valuable sources of patronage.

As long as political calculations enter into decisions about the location of universities, the appointment of vice-chancellors and other academic leaders, approval for establishing new colleges and other institutions, and other aspects of higher education, India will be unable to fulfil its goals of quality, access, and the creation of a world-class higher education system.

A pattern of inadequate investment

Higher education has never been adequately funded. In 2011–12 India spent a modest 1.22 per cent of its gross domestic product on post-secondary education – a more modest investment than some other rapidly expanding economies and below European levels of expenditure. From the beginning, emphasis was placed on meeting the demands of mass access and expansion rather than building up a meaningful high-quality university sector, and even financial support for mass access has been inadequate.

The divided responsibility for supporting higher education by the states and the central government was an additional detriment, since coordination was difficult. In any case, most of the responsibility fell to the states, many of which were unable to provide the needed support – and in any case were more concerned with basic literacy and primary and secondary education rather than higher education. Indeed, for much of India's post-Independence history, the concern of policy-makers at all levels was for literacy and basic education, rather than higher education.

In the twenty-first century, with the beginning of the Indian economic transformation, higher education has received greater priority. The National Knowledge Commission's (2007) reports stressed the significance of the universities and encouraged both expansion of access and improvement in quality. Little has been done to implement the recommendations. Without adequate funding, higher education can neither expand appropriately nor improve in quality.

The fall and rise of the guru

At the heart of any academic institution is the professor. By international and particularly developing country standards, the Indian academic profession is relatively well-off. While most Indian academics have full-time appointments, service conditions are poor in most private institutions, especially the private colleges. Academics typically have job security, although a formal tenure system does not exist. Salaries, when compared with other countries according to purchasing power parity measures, fall into the upper-middle ranks of a 2012 study of academic salaries in 28 countries (Altbach *et al.* 2012). While Indian academics will not become rich with their salaries, they can generally live in a middle-class style, at least outside of the major metropolitan centres. This is in sharp contrast to many other countries, including China, where academic salaries must be supplemented by additional income.

Yet, the academic profession faces some serious problems (Jayaram 2003). The differences in status, working conditions, and salaries are significant between the large majority of the academic professionals who teach in undergraduate colleges and the small minority who hold appointments in university departments and teach postgraduate students. Yet, even college teachers can in general live in a middle-class style, based on their academic salaries, due in large part to significant salary increases in the past few years.

The academic profession is characterised by high levels of bureaucracy and is bound by civil service regulations. Most colleges are hierarchical in structure and provide few opportunities for participation in college governance or decision making. College teachers, particularly, possess little autonomy and only modest control over what they teach, and teaching loads tend to be fairly high. It has been observed that college teachers have only a little more autonomy than high-school teachers (Altbach 1979). For the large majority of colleges that are affiliated to universities, control over many aspects of teaching, curriculum, and examinations is regulated by the university.

The small minority of academics with appointments in university departments is expected to produce research: they have modest teaching responsibilities and much greater autonomy. Indeed, almost all of the published research by Indian academics is produced by university-based academics and not by college teachers. Salaries are also more favourable. University staff also supervise postgraduate students and, thus, play a key role in educating the next generation of the academic profession. Many university departments work closely with the colleges to organise curricula, set and administer examinations, and carry out other responsibilities of the affiliating system.

Indian academics are seldom evaluated for their work. Their jobs depend mainly on longevity and rank. Few, if any, efforts evaluate productivity in teaching or research, and those whose performance is seen as marginal are allowed to continue. Salaries are also allocated by the length and rank of service for the most part, and there is no way of rewarding good performance or punishing inadequate work. Where top quality is the norm, such as in the Indian Institutes of Technology, it is more the culture and tradition of the institution than any reward system that is responsible.

The Indian academic profession is in a somewhat paradoxical situation (Patel 2012). Compared to academics in other developing countries, Indian post-secondary teachers are not badly off – either in terms of salary or working conditions. Yet, for the most part, the organisation of the higher education system does not encourage academics to do their best work. Further, well-qualified academics are in short supply. The Indian Institutes of Technology, for example, report that they are understaffed by approximately 25 per cent – indicating that the 'best and brightest' are not attracted to the academic profession.

An increasingly dominant private sector

India's higher education system has always been a curious, and perhaps internationally unique, combination of public and private institutions. Almost from the beginning, most undergraduate colleges were established by private interests and managed by private agencies such as philanthropic societies, religious groups, or others. Most of these private colleges received government funds and thus were 'aided' institutions. The universities were all public institutions, for the most part established by the states.

This situation has changed dramatically in recent years (Agarwal 2009). Most of the private colleges established in the past several decades are 'unaided' and thus fully responsible for their own funding, through tuition charges or other private sources of funds. Where tuition fees are capped, some institutions levy other capitation (a kind of required donation) fees and other charges. Similarly, many of the 'deemed' – this term refers to an arrangement for government recognition of some institutions as universities outside of the normal pattern – universities are also private institutions, receiving no government funds. Some of the unaided colleges and universities seem to be 'for profit', although management and governance is often not very transparent. Most, although not all, are in the lower ranks of the academic hierarchy. The unaided private colleges are affiliated to a university in their region; and it is increasingly difficult for the universities to effectively supervise the large numbers of colleges, particularly when the financial aspects of the institutions are not obvious.

As in many countries, massification has contributed to the rise of the private sector in higher education. The state has been unwilling or unable to provide funding for mass access, and the private sector has stepped into the void. Public control over the direction of the new private sector has often been lost, and quality has suffered as well. The Indian case is particularly

complex, since the public sector universities that provide affiliation to the new unaided private colleges are directly involved in legitimising and supervising this new sector.

A new trend in private higher education is emerging as well. In the past several decades, a small number of civic-minded philanthropists have begun to invest in higher education, several of them creating non-profit universities with high standards and a social mission. The Azim Premji University, for example, focuses on the education system and is attempting to improve teacher education and research on education. These new institutions – if sustained, allowed sufficient autonomy, and endowed with innovative ideas as well as funds – may help to create world-class universities in India.

What has India done right?

If one were searching for international 'best practices' or 'top ideas' in higher education, there is little if anything from India that would spring to mind. As this chapter points out, India's contemporary higher education reality does not compare favourably with the most successful systems. When compared with two other BRIC nations, Brazil and China, India lags behind on most measures of higher education achievement.

At the same time, India has made significant progress in the context of post-Independence challenges. India's policy-makers stressed literacy and primary and secondary education in the first half-century of Independence and made significant progress in these areas, particularly taking into account continuing population growth. While post-secondary education did not receive the support it required, expansion was steady, and access has been steadily widened. Students from rural areas, disadvantaged groups, and especially young people from Dalit (formerly untouchable) communities have all gained greater access to higher education.

While the quality of Indian higher education has, overall, probably declined over the past half-century, it has not collapsed. The rigidities of the affiliating system and the bureaucratic arrangements have no doubt prevented the segment of the system from improving, but at the same time these systems have ensured stability in the context of continuing stress.

India has produced remarkable talent in the past half-century. The problem is that much of this talent left the country and is highly successful overseas. The statistics concerning graduates from the Indian Institutes of Technology are remarkable: a very high proportion of each graduating class leaves India and achieves remarkable accomplishments overseas. While a small number of graduates return to India, a somewhat larger group, based overseas, works with Indian colleagues and companies. Yet, it is fair to say that the 'brain drain' is still alive in the twenty-first century, although it is now combined with 'brain exchange' (Saxenian 2006).

A small but visible and impressive group of post-secondary institutions has flourished in the otherwise inhospitable soil of Indian higher education. Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, and a group of specialised teaching and research universities were built around the edges of the established academic system. Further, a small number among the thousands of colleges affiliated to India's universities have achieved high levels of excellence in undergraduate teaching. These examples clearly show that it is possible to build world-class higher education in India, if the conditions for their development are right.

There is no shortage of ideas for improving higher education in India. Various reports and commissions have pointed to a variety of ways forward. Small-scale experiments and innovative institutions have also proved successful. If these ideas and experiences could be used as templates for improvement, India may be able to move forward.

The challenges ahead

Given the realities of contemporary Indian higher education, it is not possible to be optimistic about a breakthrough in quality. It seems quite unlikely that any of India's existing universities will soon become world-class. Even if the Indian government identifies a dozen or so existing institutions for massive investment and upgrading, significant reforms in management, governance, and other areas would be required. It might be more successful to create entirely new institutions, without the constraints of existing universities. The establishment of the Indian Institutes of Technology shows that this can be successful, although in that case it was on a rather small scale. However, India does have the significant advantage of a diaspora that might be lured back for a worthy and realistic cause.

Due to the enormity of the challenges, the private sector will necessarily be a part of India's higher education future. But, so far, harnessing the private sector for the public good has been problematic. Yet, elements of solutions exist. Many of the traditional private non-profit colleges provide excellent undergraduate education, as do some private postgraduate professional colleges. A few of the new non-profit universities seem quite committed to their educational mission.

The greatest challenge, of course, is continued expansion of the system to provide access. In 2012, India enrolled approximately 20 per cent of the relevant age cohort – well under China's 26 per cent and below the other BRIC countries. Thus, India will need to devote resources and attention to continued expansion of post-secondary education. The National Knowledge Commission noted that 1,500 more universities will be needed. It has been estimated that China and India will account for more than half of the world's enrolment growth by 2050.

At the same time, India's increasingly sophisticated economy will need some colleges and universities of world-class standing – institutions that can compete with the best in the world – if manpower needs for the future are to be fulfilled. If India is to take advantage of its 'demographic dividend' and provide appropriate access and equity, the traditional universities and the thousands of colleges affiliated to them must be improved and reformed – this perhaps is the greatest challenge facing Indian higher education.

Note

1 An earlier version of this chapter entitled 'A World-Class Country without World-Class Higher Education: India's 21st Century Dilemma' appeared in Pawan Agarwal (ed.), *A Half-Century of Indian Higher Education* (New Delhi: Sage, 2012), pp. 78–83.

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