

# Open Door in Higher Education: Unsustainable and Probably Ill-Advised

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The decision to enact legislation to permit foreign universities to set up shop in India is likely to have negative consequences and unlikely to have a positive impact on the provision of quality education services. India's higher education bureaucracy, in coping with the complexity of dealing with foreign education service providers, will find itself distracted from the more important task of improving the quality of Indian universities. The foreign universities themselves may be interested in offering services where they can make a profit, or in setting up advance postgraduate centres. There is little likelihood of a significant expansion of access. India may well find its hopes of riding the "branch campus" phenomenon belied.

As part of India's efforts to provide increased access to higher education, to improve the quality of the existing colleges and universities, and to internationalise India's rather insular system, the union cabinet has approved draft legislation for opening the higher education sector to foreign institutions. The proposals to open India's higher education market are ill-advised and are likely to have a range of negative consequences. Let me outline some of the problems and focus in some detail on one of the central themes of the proposals – branch campuses of western universities that might set up shop in India.

The underlying motivation – to provide increased opportunities for access and perhaps to improve Indian higher education by letting in some new ideas – is good, but the methods are unlikely to achieve the goals. Why?

Even if the most optimistic estimates are correct and a fairly large number of foreign institutions enter the Indian market, they will be a small drop in the bucket in terms of India's huge demand for post-secondary education. India now educates about 10% of its age group in higher education, less than half of China's 22% and dramatically below the 50% or more common in most middle income and upwards of 70% in many developed countries. It is inevitable that demand will grow significantly, and foreigners will not be able to solve this problem. Indeed, the complexity of issues engendered by foreign institutions entering India may well detract an already stressed higher education bureaucracy, both at the central and state levels, from focusing on the main challenge – managing and improving the quality of India's own higher education system. The fact is that foreign higher education providers are not going to solve India's deep academic problems.

An underlying fact of foreign provision of higher education in developing countries is the desire for most foreign institutions to make money. Foreign providers typically establish programmes that are inexpensive to set up and operate, and which have a ready market. Examples are business management, information technology, hospitality and tourism, and a few others. Seldom are high cost disciplines such as biomedical sciences offered. The conditions proposed in the legislation such as a required investment of \$11 million and restrictions on repatriation of profits will make entering the Indian market unattractive for most foreign providers. The fact is that if there is little money to be made in India, the chances for significant foreign interest are limited.

Foreign universities do not enter an overseas market to provide a guide to "best practices" or to stimulate reform. They come for quite specific purposes – often to earn a profit by offering popular degree programmes, or to engage in exchanges and collaborations of various kinds. Their purpose is not to demonstrate the complex nuances of the management and governance of the home campus – that is exhibited only on the home campus itself. It is possible that teaching methods, the creative use of information technology in the classroom, and other innovations may be on display at the branches, but such information is readily available in the literature on these topics and, these days, on the internet.

Some "high end" foreign institutions will seek to establish a beachhead in India for more sophisticated reasons, and here there may be greater potential for mutual success, but no possibility for providing significant access to Indian students. Top ranked United States, British and other universities may wish to establish academic centres offering very limited teaching in India but serving as hubs for research and perhaps advanced postgraduate work. Such centres provide advantages for professors and students from the host institution to work in India, but few opportunities for Indians. Further, they may serve as a place to recruit the "best and brightest" Indians to study at the home campus in America or Britain.

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Another serious problem for India is the present lack of an effective regulatory framework for the anticipated foreign “invasion”. It is critically important for India to be able to ensure that the foreign schools seeking to enter the Indian market are the ones that India wants to have. Thus, there needs to be an effective “gatekeeper”, to ensure appropriate standards of quality and relevance, at the time of entry and a means for quality control once foreign institutions are established and working. The existing institutions charged with supervising higher education, the University Grants Commission and the All-India Council for Technical Education cannot be expected to manage foreign institutions. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council too has been unable to assess a majority of the present Indian institutions of higher education.

India is “hot”, and there will, without doubt, be great interest worldwide in India’s newly opened academic door. But it is not clear how many institutions will actually walk through that door. The barriers to entry remain rather high – \$11 million and a ban on repatriating profits. Some will no doubt try to get around the restrictions. Others will simply be scared off. And many will wait and see if the rules are changed. To date, India does not have a distinguished international reputation for transparency, consistency in rule making, or (other than the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and a few others) high quality in higher education. It will be interesting to see how the open door is received internationally.

### The Branch Campus Phenomenon

Branch campuses are sprouting around the world, like mushrooms after a heavy rain. According to the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, the number of branch campuses has increased by 43% to a total of 162 between 2006 and 2009. Definitions are slippery; the Observatory’s description will suffice:

*An international branch campus is an offshore entity of a higher education institution operated by the institution or through a joint venture in which the institution is a partner (some countries require foreign providers to partner with a local organisation) in the name of the foreign institution.*

Upon successful completion of the course programme, which is fully undertaken at the unit abroad, students are awarded a degree from the foreign institution.

Many of the growing mushrooms may only hold a limited lifespan and a few might be poisonous. Let us be honest about branch campuses. With a few notable exceptions, they are not really campuses. They are, rather, small, specialised, and limited academic programmes offered offshore to take advantage of a perceived market. Not surprisingly, the most popular programmes offered are in business management and information technology – with fairly low set-up costs and significant worldwide demand. Except where generous hosts – such as in the Arabian gulf, Singapore, and a few other places – provide facilities and infrastructure, branch campuses become rather spartan places, resembling office complexes rather than academic institutions.

Ensuring that the professors teaching at branch campuses come from the home university typifies, perhaps, the greatest problem of sustainability. It is actually difficult to lure home faculty to branch campuses for a long period. Thus, courses are often taught in intensive modules. Without faculty from home, does the branch in fact comprise part of the home institution? Often, branch campuses hire professors who lack an affiliation or experience at the home campus. If the sponsor is an American institution, efforts are made to hire as instructors Americans in the region of the branch or elsewhere and sometimes locals who have US experience. Similarly, administrators and other staff are frequently not from the sponsoring institution.

The ability to attract home campus professors to the branches has been undermined. Research-active senior faculty feel reluctant to leave their work, especially in the sciences. Junior faculty worry that overseas teaching will not help their chances for promotion. Concerns about the education of children, employment of spouses, and other family issues also intervene. Even in cases where additional remuneration and other benefits are offered, it is frequently difficult to lure professors overseas. The problem is exacerbated over time. The relatively small number of home-campus faculty

willing to relocate is restricted and quickly exhausted.

### Replicating the Home Campus

Branches typically offer a limited curriculum – generally in fields that attract large enrolments, require limited infrastructure, and are relatively inexpensive to teach. Branch campuses seldom reflect the home university in terms of facilities, the breadth of curriculum, or the experience of studying at the sponsoring institution. As governments, accreditors, overseas partners, and students become savvier about their educational goals, they may demand the “real thing” in the branches. An interesting case is the university of Liverpool’s joint venture campus with Xi’an Jiao Tong University in Suzhou, China. Mainly focused on teaching, Liverpool’s Chinese partners have requested that the campus be research focused because Liverpool itself is a research-led university in the United Kingdom. It will be difficult for Liverpool to replicate this in China. The Johns Hopkins University’s medical programme in Singapore, which the local authorities did not feel was providing promised goals, resulted in the cancellation of the programme.

For a branch campus to provide an education equivalent to the form offered at the home university, the student body must also match, to a large extent, the one at home in terms of selectivity and quality. For the more prestigious institutions this model will be difficult to sustain. For the many lesser ranked institutions, maintaining a branch campus will not be as problematic. It is questionable even now whether most branches accept only students who would be qualified at home. These problems will likely become more serious given the increased competition for the top students in the host country.

In some cases, the pool of available students may become unpredictable as more branches are developed, and local institutions are inevitably improved. This particularly serious problem will likely infiltrate the Arabian gulf region, where numerous branches have been established and the local, and perhaps even the regional student population, will have many other options over time. Some of the branches,

established generally with funding from host governments or other agencies, are already facing enrolment problems and many are operating under capacity.

### **Changing Local Conditions**

The higher education environment has become fluid in many parts of the world. The demand for higher education has expanded throughout the developing world, resulting in a large numbers of students going overseas to study, as well as a significant demand for branch campuses in countries with inadequate domestic provision or where the quality of local institutions is perceived as low. In the immediate future, expansion is anticipated to be strong due to a broad demand

for access to both mass and elite institutions. But the longer term is more difficult to predict. Many countries, such as China, are expanding local capacity at all levels, and branch campuses may soon be less attractive. India, which has not allowed much foreign involvement till date, will be opening its doors soon. At the same time, local capacity at the top is quite limited. India has announced plans for significant expansion of its selective institutions, including more IITs, which will for the first time be open to international students. In short, the future market for branch campuses is difficult to predict.

Much is unclear about branch campuses. Universities establishing them

have in general not considered the long-term implications. Establishing a real branch campus that provides an education the same as at the home institution is not, initially, an easy task and the difficulty only increases as time goes on. Sustainability should be a central concern when establishing a branch campus, but there is little evidence of such a concept. And the longer-term prospects in the countries where branches are being set up remain unclear. Branch campuses may be the “flavour of the month”, but the pitfalls, with resulting damage to academic reputations, financial losses, and of course poor service to students, loom as significant prospects.