

HIGHER EDUCATION

From Politics to Market

The union human resource development (HRD) ministry's somersault in its decision-making over the proposal of the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) to set up a facility in Singapore is reflective of its ambivalent attitude to the ongoing commercialisation of higher education. The HRD ministry had, at first, in principle, approved the proposal,

only to later reject it, but quickly made an about-turn, in the face of elite opposition. The planned Singapore facility, with expected incremental revenue presumably far exceeding expected incremental cost, is part of IIMB's measures to become financially autonomous in the face of the government's decision to stop providing non-plan budgetary support. In the manner of corporations choosing from among a set of projects under evaluation, the expected surplus in comparative present value terms of the Singapore facility apparently marked it out as the preferred alternative.

It must be said that the transplantation of US style management education through a continuous, systematic and indiscriminate adoption of concepts, theoretical frameworks, content and pedagogy, and the underlying ideological orientation, albeit reshaped in Indian soil, has been more thoroughgoing in the IIMs than in business schools in the other emerging economies. At the end of their two-year stay on campus, the services of the top-20 students of the IIMs at Ahmedabad, Kolkata and Bangalore are increasingly demanded by and supplied to transnational finance and management consultant firms, involved in restructuring corporations in the emerging and transition economies in a manner desired by the logic of Wall Street and the Washington Consensus. The IIMs then seem to have a distinct competitive advantage in the international realm. So what if INSEAD, or the graduate business schools of Columbia University or the University of Chicago already have facilities in Singapore. The price-quality combination of an IIM could perhaps take them on at their own game.

The microeconomics of IIMB's decision apart, from the perspective of public policy one might like to examine the institute's international foray within the context and reality of the Indian higher education scenario today. The enrolment rate in the 18 to 23 years age group in India is currently at a very low level of around 6 per cent. Under the pretext of a fiscal constraint, prioritising the role of the private sector and pushing correspondence courses and distance learning are all sacrificing quality to increase quantity. The gap between the

need for funds in higher and technical education and the actual provisioning is widening. Because of the paucity of funding from the government, higher educational institutions are being driven to charge fees that cover the recurring costs. The responsibility of funding higher education is increasingly being shifted from the state to the household in the form of higher fees, and within the household, to the young, for it is they who are expected to repay student loans. But with all this comes the spread of a culture of commercialisation. With the reduction of public funding for research, academics have been forced to seek funding from agencies that "call the tune", learning the art of finding out what results the funding agency wants and how to generate such results. The best talent seems to be deciding against research and/or teaching as a profession within India or prefers to migrate to the developed countries to pursue such a career.

The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation has moved education into the category of a tradable service and India is now inclined to "commit" higher education under that agreement. Already we have witnessed the increasing spread of little-known foreign universities and other educational institutions franchising their degrees in India, these degrees/diplomas being lapped up as superior "brands" by Indian students. Some of them are not even accredited in their home countries and quite a number of their Indian partners, with whom they have entered into a "twinning arrangement", are not accredited over here. Meanwhile, the IIMs are now amending their memoranda of association to make possible their international forays. This might bring further internal pressure on India to "commit" higher education under the GATS. It may be said that while the IIMs gain financial and administrative autonomy by charging what the student-customer is willing and able to pay, and thereby progressively free themselves from accountability to the political power structure, they are concurrently coming under the grip of a different but harder task master – the market – that will fundamentally also increasingly undermine academic autonomy. ^{EDW}