

## Higher Education: For a Different Paradigm

*Foreign provision of higher education cannot be based on the need to create skills for the global economy.*

In May 2007, a proposal to introduce the Foreign Educational Institutions Regulatory Bill, prepared by the ministry of human resource development (HRD), in Parliament failed because of opposition by allies of the government. Since 2000, there has been provision for 100 per cent foreign direct investment in education in the automatic route, but this is "subject to sectoral policies". The 2007 bill was supposed to regulate entry of foreign educational providers other than those that partner existing recognised institutes in the country.

The objective behind the aborted bill was to mitigate the problems of commercialisation and commodification of education in the country because of the entry of "fly-by-night" operators and at the same time provide incentives to "accredited" foreign institutions to set up educational centres in the country. This was in line with the National Knowledge Commission's (NKC) recommendations to utilise the qualitative advantages of foreign institutions in higher education.

The state of higher education in India needs no elaboration. Starved of adequate funding, with only a few institutions of quality and relatively low enrolment from the relevant age-groups, higher education needs a major overhaul and a new thrust. The key argument, however, offered for foreign entry in higher education, particularly by the commerce ministry in a 2005 consultation note, is that there exists a quality and quantity gap between what is required by the market and what is produced in institutions of higher learning. More higher educational institutes are therefore necessary to plug this gap in skilled manpower and this could be achieved by utilising the norms of trade as may evolve in the General Agreement on Trade in Services, or so the argument goes.

The paradigmatic understanding here is the treatment of higher education as a "value adding" service that gels well with building manpower to service the global economy. While the commerce ministry note concentrates on building a competitive skill base through higher education, the HRD ministry focuses on keeping this process away from crass commercialisation. There is a serious lacuna in this vision itself: nowhere is the necessity to see institutes of higher learning as creators of organic intellectuals attuned to the specificities of Indian society acknowledged.

With respect to social sciences and humanities, there is a need in particular to build indigenous institutes that focus on

the particularities of the Indian context and do not necessarily ape the methodological and epistemological structures of the west. This is especially so at a time when the Washington consensus exercises an ideological influence over the nature of development – a crucial aspect of nation building in which higher education plays an important part. Surely the entry of foreign institutions in the realm of social sciences, despite perfunctory regulation of the kind proposed by the bill, will work against this consideration. This does not mean that any exchange of knowledge and ideas transcending national boundaries should be avoided; only the treatment of such exchange as purely commercial ventures needs to be rejected.

In the case of technical and basic science education as well, the same emphasis by the government that sees higher education as a product of commercial value makes foreign investment problematic. The government has recently announced the establishment of 38 new central universities, 8 new IITs and a school of architecture in the country. This is a small beginning and much more can be done with the public university system itself. The argument that all the costs of building indigenous centres of excellence cannot be managed because of a lack of adequate resources does not hold water. For one thing, India continues to spend far too small an amount on higher education. It currently spends only 0.37 per cent of GDP on higher education, compared to China where the corresponding figure is 0.5 per cent. With the tax-GDP ratio rising and scope for reducing outlays in other areas such as defence, resource mobilisation can no longer be the problem it once was, especially in expanding science and technical education. If at the end of a major expansion of the public university system – in both numbers and quality – there is still space for foreign providers of higher education, that is something that could then be considered.

The enormous lack of research and technical facility as well as expertise plus the problem of a "brain drain" mean that there is a very real need for resource mobilisation for basic science and technical education in the country in conjunction with participation by technological and scientific institutions from across the world through exchange programmes, bilateral knowledge sharing agreements, etc. It is at the same time very necessary to reduce the income gaps between the professional and academic spheres so that the exodus of human capital from the

teaching/research areas to the non-academic world in India and to foreign shores is stemmed.

Social justice and the socio-economic imperative to address students from the deprived sections with a low fee structure, scholarships and affirmative action also need to be given due weightage while deciding to let in foreign players. Foreign institutions, with their focus on cost recovery and commercial gain by tapping into student "consumers" of their academic

"products", will not weigh initiatives of social justice in the same manner as a publicly funded institution under public scrutiny would.

In essence, a paradigmatic shift that brings back the focus on higher education as a public good with concomitant increases in public funding, and that also overhauls our entire understanding of higher education is something that is expected of the government.