

**Date:24/04/2010 URL:**

**<http://www.thehindu.com/2010/04/24/stories/2010042453231200.htm>**

---

[Back](#)

[Opinion](#) - [Leader Page Articles](#)

## **For access & excellence in higher education**

M.A. Baby

*The institutions to be set up by foreign educational providers are unlikely to improve access and quality. More public investment in higher education and academic collaboration with the best universities could bring in the desired results.*

Kapil Sibal, the Union Minister for Human Resource Development, has claimed that access to, and the quality of the Indian higher education would improve substantially with the entry of foreign educational providers in the country. The new institutions would add to the opportunities available in higher education, thereby potentially increasing enrolment. Improvement of quality could occur both directly and indirectly. The off-campus centres would directly provide “world-class education” to the students who can afford it and indirectly ensure better performance of Indian institutions through competition, so goes his contention.

Such arguments assume that there are universal parameters for quality and that competition would inevitably bring about improvement of quality.

The first of these assumptions ignores the organic character of higher education. Quality in education cannot be manufactured to order or transplanted across continents. It is rooted in the environment and the tradition in which it grows. It is linked up with time and milieu, with the project of nation-building. It evolves itself gradually. The short-cut of manufacturing quality through foreign universities or their Indian imitations ignores the importance of creativity. New knowledge is created through an arduous process of research. Scholars point out that the essence of modern research is interdisciplinarity, which is enriched through assimilation of knowledge from diverse sources, but degenerates through transplantation or imitation of external models. Courses transplanted across continents through off-campus centres will have little authenticity and relevance to the new environment.

The impact of even the best of off-campus courses of the best of universities delivered by the best of faculty on the overall quality of Indian education would be marginal. Our IITs and IIMs give us the clue. These have all along been isolated islands of excellence, contributing little to the general improvement of Indian higher education. While there may be some truth in the accusation of social insensitivity of these premier institutions, the reasons for their failure to significantly invigorate Indian higher education run deeper. External agencies can only play a minimal role in the process of quality enhancement. Improvement of quality is brought about through an internal process. External agencies can at best assist the process, but cannot substitute internal processes.

The unquestioning faith in the usefulness of competition is based on two myths: that the foreign educational providers would have the same mission as Indian universities and

that both would share the same platform for their operations. The avowed mission of public universities in the country is to contribute to the project of nation-building. It may be that a majority of the institutions have failed in their mission. The mission would still be potentially relevant in guiding their destinies. The public universities continue to undertake the study of basic disciplines, research and extension because of the compulsions of their vision and mission.

Would the foreign educational providers be bound by the mission of nation-building? It is very unlikely that foreign universities would be driven by altruistic motives of improving Indian higher education — which is what Mr. Sibal's bill would apparently expect — if it has no prospects of profits to offer. Those who come for profit are unlikely to invest in the study of basic disciplines and research where the prospects of immediate economic returns are not very promising.

### Unhealthy competition

Given the colonial hangover for foreign labels, a substantial number of bright students are likely to prefer off-campus centres of second-rate foreign universities to the best of Indian universities. They would not only ruin their academic prospects, but also potentially contribute to the intellectual impoverishment of Indian institutions. Whatever little research is undertaken in the Indian institutions is likely to suffer as a result of unhealthy competition with foreign educational providers. In their struggle for survival, average universities might compete with foreign educational providers in offering marketable courses at competitive rates and neglect their primary responsibilities towards the study of basic disciplines, research and extension.

The National Knowledge Commission presumes that setting up 1,500 universities and 50,000 colleges could address the question of access. A mere increase in the number of institutions or seats alone would not ensure greater access. What we need is equitable access, which foreign educational providers will not provide, more so as there is no cap on the fees and no provision for reservation of seats — both of which would tend to strengthen the existing iniquities in Indian higher education. In a country like India where the majority of the people live below the poverty line, access to higher education would be critically dependent upon the quantum of subsidies available.

How, then, do we increase access to and quality in, higher education? The modernisation of higher education requires huge investments. The requirement of inclusiveness further demands massive public investment. At present, government expenditure on education as a whole is only 3.5 per cent of GNP. The sectoral allocation for higher education is a meagre 0.37 per cent of the GNP. Going by the recommendations of the Kothari Commission and a committee appointed by the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), public expenditure on education should be increased to at least 6 per cent of GNP, of which 25 per cent should be set apart for higher education. The promises made in the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of the first United Progressive Alliance government to gradually increase public expenditure on education to 6 per cent of GDP is yet to be acted upon. With all the rhetoric about the 11th Plan being an “education plan,” the actual allotment in the Plan for major schemes in higher education is estimated to be only 12 per cent of the actual requirement of Rs. 252,000 crore. The rest of the investment is sought to be raised through public-private-partnership (PPP), which could actually result in large-scale privatisation of public assets, thereby shrinking even the limited spaces available for the poor. The Central budget for higher education for the current fiscal shows only an increase of 15 per cent over the last year. This compares poorly with the 112 per cent increase in Kerala's budget for higher education over the same period.

## Academic collaboration

Academic collaboration with the best of universities could help improve quality, unlike direct intervention by foreign educational providers. While such collaborations have always existed, we need to increase their scope and extent in the future. As a matter of fact, efforts are being made in different parts of the country to promote collaborative learning. The Kerala State Higher Education Council, for example, has evolved two innovative schemes for national and international academic collaboration. The national-level programme envisages exchange of teachers between the universities in the State and universities in other States. Exchanges have already taken place between universities in Kerala and West Bengal. Tamil Nadu has evinced interest in such exchanges with universities in Kerala. The scheme is likely to be implemented in the next academic year.

The “Erudite” scheme which has been implemented in the State is a scholar-in-residence programme which provides avenues for teachers and students to collaborate with internationally reputed scholars. A large number of scholars including Nobel laureates have visited the universities in the State during the last one year. Testimonies of the teachers and students of these universities and the visiting scholars show that the benefits have been mutual. The essence of such mutually beneficial academic collaboration is partnership based on equality. It cannot be based on a relationship of superiority and inferiority. It has to recognise the kaleidoscopic character of quality in higher education and the value of mutually enriching collaborative learning processes.

( The writer is Minister for Education and Culture, Government of Kerala.)

© Copyright 2000 - 2009 The Hindu