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Indian expansion plans

It has been clear for some time that the Indian university system needed to expand significantly despite the large numbers in its higher education institutions. Some details of planned expansion have been revealed during the recent visit to India by Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister of the UK.

In the eleventh Five Year Plan a massive expansion is proposed. While there are at present 12 Institutions of National Importance (such as the elite Indian Institutes of Technology), the plan suggests establishing 8 more IITs, 7 new Indian Institutes of Management and 5 new entities called Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISER). In addition there will be 30 new central universities to add to the present 20. The cost of this growth (which is expected to add 5 percent to the gross enrolment ratio, which is currently close to 10 percent) will be enormous; for this reason the government has been seeking international partners in the establishment of the new institutions.

A communiqué after Gordon Brown's visit, for example, confirmed that the British government would be willing to help with the establishment of "at least one new IIT, one new IISER and one Central University". There have been regular flows of interested Ministers of Education from advanced countries to India in recent years and similar promises have been sought from them. While there is not exactly a bidding war, it is clear that most governments are keen to establish good links with a potential major source of skilled engineers and scientists. India and China are everyone's favourite partner countries.

The UK has been building on its traditional links with India to establish itself as a future preferred partner. Its UK India Research Initiative (UKIERI) has just announced a second tranche of 37 collaborative research projects between Indian and UK institutions (interestingly four of these are with post 1992 universities), and 11 collaborative teaching programmes at the masters level, as well as a number of individual PhD scholarships. Two other collaborative strands in Gordon Brown's India package are an agreement to help Indian university faculty to develop their teaching skills and the launch this year of an India-UK Leadership Development Programme to develop leadership skills in Indian universities through exchanges at Pro Vice Chancellor level with UK institutions. Finally the UK Research Councils will be opening an office in Delhi later in the 2008.

What is unclear about the expansion plans is how much effort will be put into improving standards and quality in the present universities, which were criticised in the National Knowledge Commission report to the Prime Minister in November 2006. Steps in this direction are that the UGC has set out a set of minimum physical norms to which universities seeking development grants should conform and has identified 10 universities as having "potential for excellence". However, the assessments of the National Assessment And Accreditation Council are still voluntary.

The Indian approach is different to that in Pakistan where the focus of their massive higher education reform programme has been on strengthening the academic skills base of existing

staff and existing institutions through huge scholarship programmes. As yet the emphasis in Pakistan has not been on constructing new institutions, although this will follow.

Sources: See www.ukieri.ac.uk for the latest tranche of awards. Communique issued after the Prime Minister's visit, January 2008. Talk on January 9th 2008 at the Institute of Education, London by Professor Thorat, Chairman, University Grants Committee.

Is Limkokwing the start of a trend?

Late last year UK higher education was amazed to find that a Malaysian private university had opened a campus in London. Not only that but the opening was attended by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, as well as the university's founder and several UK Vice Chancellors. The institution, the Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, can be regarded either as a striking example of the globalisation of higher education or a maverick organisation that is unlikely to be repeated.

The home campus of Limkokwing in Malaysia boasts 6,000 students from over 90 countries drawn by the innovative programmes on offer and the focus on creativity, innovation and working closely with industry. The programmes cover design, architecture, multimedia, communications, IT and business at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The ambition of the founder Tan Sri Dato Professor Dr Limkokwing is boundless. Not only has he opened branch campuses in Asia – in Cambodia, Indonesia, Beijing and Brunei – but he has expanded into Africa with a very large investment in Botswana, opening a branch campus in 2006. It will produce technically skilled young innovators to drive the country's ambitions to be a regional education hub for Africa with a focus on innovation. No wonder that Botswana's Prime Minister was there to open the first of Limkokwing's campuses in Gaborone. The University is now planning other campuses overseas, starting with Lesotho and possibly Kenya and Russia.

What makes Limkokwing distinctive are two things: its offer to students of a "global classroom experience" through having partnership arrangements with universities and colleges in over 60 countries and its creation of an International Quality Assurance Board that reviews and vets the quality of all programmes on a regular basis. The Board contains representatives from 8 universities in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Another rare feature of the university is its closeness to government; at a time when in many countries the private sector of higher education is struggling to be accepted the mutual support that Limkokwing and the Malaysian government offer each other is unusual.

The only clouds on the horizon are of Limkokwing's own making. There are some obvious questions: how can it sustain such a rapid expansion and still maintain quality? Where will it find the multi-talented academic staff needed to support all its overseas ventures? Can it provide the same industrial links and placements to students in its overseas campuses – particularly in countries such as Lesotho where there is little large scale industry. These issues as well as the growing investment cost may slow down the University's heady growth. However, for host countries the arrival of institutions such as Limkokwing is the start of genuine multi-cultural trans-national education, although for some regulatory agencies the questions will be just beginning.

Source: Visit to and discussions with senior staff at the Cyberjaya campus of Limkokwing. See www.limkokwing.edu.my

ELQ – a policy against second degrees.

The UK has just decided to adopt a policy of ceasing to fund second degrees/qualifications for those who seek to retrain themselves or switch to a new career. These Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) will no longer be funded so that students wishing to study these would have to pay full cost fees. Despite a powerful lobbying campaign by those institutions who stand to lose substantial sums (such as the Open University and Birkbeck College, University

of London) Parliament has approved the policy and a reported majority of respondents to a consultation paper agree with it.

On the face of it the policy seems to run counter to much of the rhetoric of most governments about re-skilling and life long learning etc. But there are exceptions to the blanket ban which will meet some of the concerns; foundation degrees will still receive funding as will “strategically important and valuable subjects” such as science, technology and engineering.

The key point raised by critics of the policy is that it represents one more step by the government restricting the ability of universities to offer what the market wants. For a long time there have been restrictions on numbers or programmes in disciplines such as medicine and dentistry, but this policy represents a much broader limitation on certain types of students and could lead to a falling off in numbers of more mature and adult learners. For the Open University in particular the impact will be serious with an estimated loss of GBP 39 million after 2011 (12 percent of its income) in respect of the very learners that until now governments have sought to encourage.

Source: HEFCE Publication 2007/27 “Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower qualifications”. Evidence of the OU to the Select Committee on Innovation, Universities and Skills, 18th January 2008 at http://www.open.ac.uk/vice-chancellor/News_3A00_Insights/News-2008/VC_addresses_Select_Committee.html

The editor, Jay Kubler, and author, John Fielden, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.
