

Reimagining Indian Universities: Internationalization As the Pathway to the Future

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Abstract

Radical transformations brought on by globalizations drive higher education institutions to redefine their identity, vision, and functions. These transformations are not unique to higher education institutions at present: throughout history, universities have continued to evolve, as they have responded to their environments. If we are to draw accurate outlines of these transformations, we must first achieve some clarity about the many competing forces and undercurrents of the present day globalized world that impact contemporary societies.

India is a very important case in point. It stands at a crucial crossroad—an expanding higher education demographic cohort, policy-driven re-casting of the country as “knowledge economy,” and a compelling drive to forge links with global knowledge network and labour market necessitate that the Indian policy makers and higher education leaders collaborate and view globalization as an imperative. The author argues that, in order to contribute to socio-politico-economic institutions and processes in the future, institutions in India, as with institutions in other developing countries, need to bring internationalization to its shores. Universities of the future must view internationalization as a national and institutional policy imperative, not a matter of discretion.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“What is it to be a university? In what does the being of the university reside in the 21st century? . . . To address such questions seriously . . . requires in the first place a sense as to the past and present trajectory of the university. The dominant ideas—and forms—of the university have to be identified. A further step taken here is that of furnishing conceptual resources that may help us imagine the university into the future” (Barnett, 2011, p. 439).

Historically, universities have functioned in varied ways to serve their respective societies. Indeed, it is through their roles and responsibilities that they have evolved over the years: In the medieval times,

universities served state religions; in post-industrial societies, the primary responsibility of universities was to advance technology and research in the service of economic growth; and in the present day, the key role for universities relates to their contribution to “knowledge economies” and a globally-mobile and –competitive graduate labor market (Barnett, 2011).

Many researchers have argued that the mutual relationship between institutions and their surrounding environment has strengthened over the years. This has certainly been the case in India. The growth trajectory of higher education institutions in India has reflected the changing environs in the country. At a very broad-level, the higher education

sector has witnessed the following trends and emerging pathways: growing massification, privatization, and tertiarization.

All of the three patterns of growth are not unique to India; rather, these are observed in many developing countries—such as the BRICK nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and Korea)—in varying proportions. Internationalization, a phenomenon more pronounced in many fast-track developing countries, has grown in India in a “fits and starts” fashion. This is primarily because internationalization has not been a centralized, top-down policy agenda item in higher education. It has found more prominence within institutional activities than in think-tanks’ and policy-makers’ discussion tables. Further, even within institutions, it is limited to individual, unintegrated collaborative exercises with international universities (many of which aren’t even documented or reported to Government agencies such as AIU or UGC).

This has resulted in a dismal scenario—internationalization is neither channeled nor is it directed through central, nodal bodies; it does not benefit sufficiently from budget apportionments; it carries on in an unplanned ad-hoc manner, and often it does not find place in official documents and catalogues. Unless internationalization is viewed to be at the root of the higher education-“knowledge economy” alignment, it will continue to be poorly regulated and under-funded.

II. THE CURRENT SCENARIO IN INDIA

Growth in the higher education sector in India has panned out quite summarily, as a response to a compelling requirement to address a richly diverse and exponentially growing base of higher education co-hort; this has occurred without sufficient strategic planning, channeling, or direction. There is no gainsaying that the sector is witnessing unparalleled expansion and divergence; however, there also present systemic afflictions, which keep it from serving the human capital base in a satisfactory manner. These gaps require remedial measures at the top level of the central policy-making apparatus. For the sector to achieve sustainable and meaningful growth, Indian institutions and the sector in general need to follow planned differentiation, in order that they can fulfill leadership role as the country scales global (and regional) value chains, moves closer to its goal of emerging as “knowledge economy,” and make good its pledge of “access, equity, and quality”.

According to the latest available data (AISHE, 2019), the total enrolment in higher education is 37.4 million and the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is 26.3%. There are 993 universities, 39931 colleges and 10725 “Stand Alone Institutions”. Privatization has been precipitous; the same source reports that 85% Universities and 77.8% colleges are privately managed.

Internationalization does not figure prominently in the growth chart of higher education. The number of international students in India has continued to be worryingly low. The demographic profile of this student group, on the other hand, does not vary significantly from year to year. The above-mentioned source states that the total number of “foreign students” enrolled in higher education institutions in India is 47,427 (consider the figure in the context of total enrollment of 37.4 million). The foreign students come from 164 different countries from across the globe. The top ten source countries constitute 63.7% of the total foreign students enrolled. The highest share of foreign students come from the neighbouring countries, of which Nepal represents 26.88%, followed by, Afghanistan (9.8%).

This is not to say that internationalization has been insignificant. Many initiatives have borne fruit, and these have been guided by internal factors (Indian participants aspiring to achieve internationalization) as well as external (international actors aspiring to expand their internationalization efforts in India).

[The internal factors include] “plugging the demand–supply gap in provision and the quality gap in teaching and learning; closing the knowledge-creation gap in research capacity and performance; and equipping graduates with twenty-first century skills for employment . . . also trying to leverage its comparative advantage in South Asia and Africa in order to be recognized as a rising

educational hub . . . [Externally,] India is often a sought-after source for additional revenue generation, in light of its college-age cohort projected to reach 400 million by 2030 and an ever-growing Indian middle class with increased wealth and aspirations to study abroad” (Khare, 2015).

These complex aspirations and approaches frequently intersect and run parallel to each other. In the face of public policy inertia and lack of institutional vision, the multiplicity of interests and perspectives has impeded progress and resulted in haphazard, adhoc initiatives which do not amount to meaningful progress.

III. UNIVERSITIES IN INDIA: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INTERNATIONALIZATION

In the present-times, nation-building, global positioning, and international competitiveness are intrinsically linked to knowledge-creation and innovation. Internationalization is the singular pathway to advancement of the higher education sector. Across the world, countries aspire to move away from the post-industrial, and towards the knowledge-economy model, where higher education assumes centre stage. In this backdrop, the following considerations emerge for Indian institutions in the future.

Institutions must view internationalization as the ultimate path to emerging opportunities in the globalized world, which must be leveraged to serve national development goals, while also contributing to sustainable regional and global development. For

this to materialize, internationalisation goals must not be limited to universities; rather national governments and supra-national organizations must assume overarching responsibility related to regulatory management, integration, and provision of funds. Unless national and international authorities step in, the risk that internationalization falls prey to neo-liberal market principles will continue to loom.

At the very outset, it must be emphasized that universities, by themselves, cannot withstand the onslaught of commoditization of trans-national education. Unless the government takes onus and places ethical considerations front and centre by providing financial and policy incentives, it is unlikely that institutions can overcome the commercialization that come with the monetary compulsions of revenue generation. Internationalization must be value-laden, and not value-neutral, for it to hope to survive as an ideology in the future. In the absence of governmental encouragement and funding, it is likely that internationalization will be reduced to an institutional rhetoric for brand-building or a strategy to serve the imperative of the profit motive.

1. It is vital that Indian universities begin to appreciate the value of ushering in internationalization within the campus by embedding it in the length and breadth of their curricular and extra-curricular efforts. For too long, we have viewed student mobility as the sole mode of internationalization. Ironically,

international student mobility presents a very skewed and discouraging picture in India. In 2017, as many as 586,183 Indian students were enrolled in foreign universities (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018)—compare this figure against the figure of inbound student mobility mentioned elsewhere.

Universities of the future must aim to increase inbound student mobility by improving academic and infrastructural resources and streamlining administrative procedures. Indian universities have focused excessively on internationalization abroad and neglected internationalization at home (see foot note for explanation). A developing country like India, with limited financial and infrastructural resources, stands to benefit far more from internationalization at home.

2. Universities must also gain awareness about the many modes of internationalization. Student mobility, which has been doing most of the “heavy lifting” in internationalization, must be seen to be only one of many modes. Other modes have largely gone ignored or have not been pursued adequately. Faculty mobility in Indian universities has been very limited, in general. Program mobility, which is seen in dual-degree programs, is more or less limited to top-tier private institutions. The singular expression of institutional mobility have been branch campuses of Indian universities in Asian and African countries; the sad truth is that many of these had to be shut down. The

regulatory framework is far from conducive to successful operation of branch campuses, and this goes both ways—branch campuses of foreign universities haven't recorded great success in India either.

3. Indian universities must work to improve their international advantage by achieving standardization, collaborative compatibility, and compliance with regional/international regulatory structure. There is much to be done in this regard: academic qualification recognition, credit transfer, methodization of academic workload and assessment, curricular reforms etc. Thus far, Indian universities have collaborated with foreign universities mainly in one-on-one (institution-to-institution) agreements.
4. Pedagogical reforms, with special focus on technological advancement of instructional delivery, will be paramount for universities for the future. There is an urgent need to supplement and improve the traditional education routes. For Indian universities to contribute optimally to India's emergence as an education hub in the future, they must address the fluid dynamics of graduate labor market requirements.

In the future, institutions will need to ensure that degrees arm students with more than subject-specific knowledge: cosmopolitan capital, intercultural competencies, and personal/professional proficiencies that allow the student to navigate his way in the global

workplace will become essential. Career preparedness in the future will be a multi-faceted concept, not confined to the workplace, but tied closely with "learning communities," "communities of practice," and the global network of research and innovation.

Digitization, a concept limited to online learning in the past, has now become an integral part of teaching-learning reforms, as upskilling/reskilling, automation, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have assumed common popularity in the workforce:

"These students are aware of the ever-changing landscape of requirements that employers need to meet, especially with the rise of automation which is expected to affect 14% of the global workforce – nearly 375 million workers. As the learning sector broadens and meets digitization, India is at the forefront of this dynamic, steadily becoming the greatest education hub in the world" (Vijay, 2019, n.p.)

Job readiness assumes centrality in the discussion on internationalization when we consider that India is likely to have the world's largest workforce by 2027, with a billion people aged between 15 and 64 (Sharma, 2017). Unless curricular content and pedagogic practices are improved with the view to cater to professional contexts, universities cannot align their goals with the requirements of the future workforce. Higher education can respond to the changing job market only if it incorporates

transferable skills as part of core education. Technology is not the only way to achieve these goals; there are many others, such as inclusive and multidisciplinary curriculum and combining liberal education with professional and STEM programs.

5. The universities of the future will have to establish equilibrium between the dialectic of the global and the local through international education. They will have to shoulder the responsibility of striking a balance between the “local” sphere (for instance, national autonomy, institutional self-governance, and nation-building goals) and the global sphere (for instance, global job market, global competencies, and supra-national regulatory frameworks to achieve standardization of international education). The global-local nexus is a salient feature of globalization of higher education. Local entities re-interpret and re-form the global dimension in higher education by incorporating global challenges and solutions (Gacel-Ávila, 2005; Rossello, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). In order to incorporate the changes in the shifting global environment, higher education must re-conceptualise “global consciousness” in “educative paradigms”: “Educational strategies in the 21st century must begin with a common foundation, which would include the search for a standard . . . on an international level but adapted to local conditions” (Gacel-Ávila, 2005, p. 123).

6. Global citizenship, the sustained goal of internationalization: “Universities are at a crossroads of justifying their existence and meaning for knowledge and civilisations perhaps as never before . . . The role of universities in extension [of knowledge, culture, and information] is also paramount today. In fact, it is this role that facilitates their integration in communities worldwide in order to pursue similar goals” (Torres, 2015, p. 273).

Universities in India, as with universities elsewhere, must work to bring global citizenship education into the core of internationalization of higher education (Rossello, 2016; Torres, 2015; Yemini, 2017). The concept of global citizenship education has followed on from globalization of higher education. The idea of global citizenship, with its emphasis on sensitivity for issues of global concern and humanistic values for people across the globe, was originally defined in relation to national identity. As globalization has ushered in an “era of knowledge” (Rosello, 2016, n.p.), it has also created a need for re-working of the idea of education for the global citizen. Rosello (2016) explains why global citizenship is paramount in a globalized society: “[internationalization of higher education must be about developing] . . . international conscience through holistic and participative learning. Adding the “citizenship” aspect to the global education equation reflects a refocusing on a more active role involving global

responsibilities and human rights . [higher education must] provide this understanding of human plurality. . . As such, developing intercultural competencies must become an integral part of any university's institutional fabric . . .” (n.p.).

Global citizenship assumes that identities are spread across many denominators, not just nation-states, and that global citizenship is an affirmation of our shared role as interdependent entities within the global domain. Torres (2015, pp. 268-269) has defined global citizenship as “an understanding of global ties and a commitment to the collective good.” Relating the notion of global citizenship to the context of higher education institution and learners, Rhoads and Szelényi (2011) state that global citizenship refers to “. . . three basic dimensions of social life: the political (including civic aspects), the economic (including occupational aspects), and the social (including cultural aspects) . . . (Rhoads & Szelényi, 2011, p. 17)” (as cited in Torres, 2015, p. 269).

Global citizenship is inherently about plurality, interdependency and, therefore, global sustainability: “The global citizen is committed to act and assume responsibility in making the world a more sustainable place. . . The global citizen should have working knowledge of the interdependency . . . ” (Rossello, 2017, n.p.). Schechter (1993, as cited in Schoorman, 1999), has advocated that universities of the future must pursue three goals in higher education that

are aligned with global citizenship: the development of the pragmatic (global career preparedness skill), the liberal (inter-cultural empathy), and the civic (community-based activism).

In the globalized world, the prime goal of higher education must be “the fostering of a global consciousness among students . . . of interdependence . . . and respect for pluralism. All these aspects are the foundations of . . . global citizenship. In this context, the objective of internationalisation must be focused on . . . making global phenomena understandable while promoting intercultural understanding and sustainable human development . . . ” (Gacel-Ávila, 2005, p. 123).

7. Learner-centered approach: Indian universities, in keeping with global trends, must move away from institution-centered approach, and towards a learner-centered one. Internationalization is a wonderful instrument with which to achieve a learner-centric orientation.

In the discourse on internationalization, a shift from institution to the student has been documented by many studies (Gregersen-Hermans, 2014; Hawanini, 2011). Yemini (2017) has argued that this “narrowing of scope from organizational to individual outcomes is not unique to the field of internationalization” (p. 178); rather, this is a reflection of a much larger phenomenon in the higher education sector. In response to the many effects of globalization, the focus has now converged on

each learner's unique, personal gains (Deardorff, 2006). As institutions have gained greater self-governance, in their bid to respond to the higher education market, they have had to devise ways to deliver “international capital,” and, therefore, “capital-based advantage”, to the student (Weenink, 2009). This implies that, in the future, rationales and assessments in internationalization of higher education must focus on “individual-based factors,” (such as global competencies) both in the academic discourse and practice in institutions (Resnik, 2012).

The future universities must ensure that pedagogic practices undergo transformation in favor of greater interaction, “learner-centred” environment, real-world problem-solving, and multidisciplinary approach to curriculum development. Further, academic assessment must be reformed such that it captures each student's learning and experience. The future emphasis should be based on academic “portfolio management”, competency-based assessment, skills-enhancement rather than earning a transcript. Personal and professional proficiencies must also be included: for instance, teamwork, research and analysis, critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making, communication, independent and self-directed study, non-traditional learning models (such as peer-to-peer interaction), and “student engagement” experiences. Last but not the least, teachers must provide inspirational

mentorship in addition to the traditional teaching responsibility.

At the broader institutional level, a learner-centred approach would drive academic departments to grow less rigid and more fluid as curriculum, especially course development, becomes more interdisciplinary. Research must become an integral part of the whole spectrum of higher education, not merely post-graduate programs. Further, research must be encouraged at all institutions, not merely the elitist “research-oriented” institutions. In India, especially, there exists a divide between research and teaching institutions.

8. Service learning: Indian universities in the future must incorporate service learning through internationalization into student learning outcomes in a thorough and meaningful fashion. Across the world, service learning has moved inward to become part of the sum total of curricular content and assessment criteria. The concept of global service learning captures the significance of interdependence and reciprocity amongst the participants in a higher education system. Inherent in the idea is the recognition that higher education institutions are not the only source that support educative growth, but also that a rich diversity of groups of people, events, and organizations offer core learning opportunities. In the years to come, service learning will not be limited to national boundaries, and this empathizes the

significance of internationalization. Bringle and Hatcher (2011, p. 19) have defined international service-learning as follows:

“A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally.”

Thus, an education system that brings together traditional modes of internationalization of higher education (such as semester exchange programs) and service-learning on the same platform—and as integral components of the student learning experience—could be said to embrace international service learning. Although an emerging area in theory and practice, international service-learning shows promise to grow as a key pillar of internationalization of higher education, primarily because it champions the contemporary movement to strengthen the civic-engagement arm of higher education. International service learning emphasizes that civic-engagement, which has traditionally focused on local community services, must be re-oriented such that the practitioners think

globally while acting locally as well as expand their efforts to connect the local with the global.

IV. CONCLUSION

Indian universities of the future will have to assume leadership roles as powerful nodes in the global knowledge and innovation network. They will have to strike a balance as they fulfill their nation building and developmental responsibilities, while staying true to the growing global dimension of the modern society. Internationalization will carry institutions forward as they cope with multi-dimensional global forces and currents, move across borders, and gain global dimension.

Indian universities will be encouraged to deliver an immersive learning experience and student-centric education by combining traditional teaching-learning methods with the non-traditional ones. Certainly technology will play a big role here, but it will be aided by novel pedagogic practices that are proven to deliver positive learning outcomes and wholesome student experiences. Indian universities will have to align their vision and goals better with the industry, so that the students turn out to be thriving members of the global workforce and prove to be valuable “human capital” for the country.

As territorial boundaries are relegated to the past, the need to create global citizens will only grow. These global citizens must be sensitized to global concerns so that they may live peaceably with each other, while appreciating that diversity and a sense of service to others brings deep enrichment.

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