

# *Optimising a Vital Contribution to the Expansion of Higher Education*

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*Meeting of Private ODL Institutions in India*

*Pune*

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*Inaugural Remarks*

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It is a great pleasure to be with you today in Pune. Ever since we conceived the idea of this meeting I have been looking forward to it immensely.

My anticipation of an important event was increased by reading the exhilarating book *Symbiosis: The Biography of an Idea*. It has been a very great privilege to meet Dr Mujumdar and I express the warm thanks of the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO to Symbiosis for organising and hosting this important first gathering of private-sector providers of distance education in India.

The Commonwealth of Learning , COL for short, has teamed up with UNESCO to facilitate this meeting and I have worked with two esteemed colleagues in preparing these remarks.

Professor Asha Kanwar is our Vice-President and Programme Director at COL. She is actually in India at the moment but unfortunately could not be with us here in Pune today. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić is the Chief of the Section for Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance at UNESCO headquarters in Paris . Sadly she could not be here today either, but is ably represented by her colleague Molly Lee from UNESCO's Bangkok Office.

Professor Kanwar, Ms. Uvalić-Trumbić and I have written a number of papers together in recent years about the urgent imperative of expanding higher education to meet the exploding demand for access, particularly in developing countries. They are the co-authors of these remarks. Much of our thinking is

summarised in a paper that we published in *Change: The Magazine of Higher Education* in 2006. One of the key themes of that paper, which is the focus of our short address to you now, is the absolute importance of encouraging private institutions to contribute to that expansion and of building an integrated higher education sector that includes public and private providers, both for profit and not for profit. Tomorrow I shall focus more on the issue of quality in distance education.

Let me start by putting my remarks in context. Wide participation in higher education is important. It is seen as one of the keys to national development and success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Expanding higher education: four challenges

But the expansion of higher education faces massive challenges in almost all countries.

The first challenge is the disparity in access to higher education around the world. The most developed countries now consider it normal for about half 18-23 year-old age cohort to undertake higher education. Yet in many developing countries, including very big ones like India, the Age Participation Rate or APR is less than 10%. In parts of Africa it is less than 5%.

And it is not just a question of raising the participation rate for young people. This is an era of lifelong learning, when many people will return to higher education at various points in their lives. This is more than a theoretical idea; as I know from experience. Since I completed my doctoral degree in 1969 I have completed a master's degree, a diploma, and six other university courses as a lifelong learner.

The second challenge is that most countries have built up their higher education systems on models that cannot readily be expanded at reasonable cost and are probably not appropriate to today's needs even if they could be scaled up. The nub of the problem is the role of the state. The extreme cases - and it is not an accident that they are the ones with the lowest participation rates - are those countries where all higher education is provided by the state and no tuition fees are charged.

No country - not even the richest countries - can provide all the higher education that their citizens need on this economic model. There is simply not enough money in any national treasury.

The third challenge is that in countries with low access to higher education the existing institutions conceive their roles too narrowly. First, they focus too much on teaching in classrooms on campus. This is unsuitable for many adult lifelong learners and is also increasingly unsuitable for younger students who want to be employed, at least part time, so that they can afford to study.

Second, the higher education curriculum does not properly reflect the very diverse needs of the world we live in. Courses and programmes must reflect a greater awareness of the ways in which their students will earn their livelihoods.

The fourth challenge - and I shall limit myself to four challenges - is that even where institutions are trying to diversify their methods and their offerings they are missing important opportunities. In particular, they assume that they must 'go it alone' and develop all curriculum and systems themselves, rather than taking advantage of the rich resources that globalisation makes available.

For these reasons the profile of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to be very different from what we have been used to. Higher education will be a much larger enterprise. China recently doubled enrolments in a few years and numerous countries now have double digit growth rates in higher education. This much-expanded world system will differ from what we have now in four ways.

First, the private sector, whether for profit or not for profit, will have a much larger role.

Second, study programmes will relate more closely to livelihoods. The key question will be: 'How does this study prepare me for employment or self-employment?'

Third, a far greater proportion of higher education will take place by distance learning, which many today call eLearning.

Fourth, and particularly in distance learning, we shall see the emergence of many cross-border partnerships that will improve the quality, lower the cost, and enrich the curricula of the courses on offer. Can partnerships and collaboration help countries to develop their higher education systems?

I shall address the first three of these issues briefly.

First, a word about private education.

## Private universities

Higher education is a private good that gives direct benefits to those who participate; but it is also a public good. The proportion of people with higher education correlates well with a society's economic and civic development.

By tradition, governments control public goods in order to extend their benefits to all citizens. But how far should the principle of public control apply to higher education?

Practice, principle, and pragmatism all challenge the notion of higher education as a public monopoly.

Past practice reveals that philanthropists and religious bodies were providing higher education long before governments took an interest in doing so. At independence there were 496 private higher education institutions in India and in 1950 less 50% of the funds for higher education came from government.

The challenge from principle concerns the right role of government and holds that apart from services like defence, government may be most effective when it monitors and regulates the provision of public services by others, rather than controlling them directly. As a frequent visitor to India I am struck, for example, by the contrast between Indian Airlines and Jet Airways in terms of customer service.

In higher education demography and demand present pragmatic challenges. Rapidly increasing numbers of young adults will want education at all levels. In this era of lifelong learning there is no way that governments can provide, at no cost, all the education that people will need throughout life. They will have to focus their contributions.

There is a choice between inadequate provision of higher education by a public-sector monopoly and meeting the demand by a combination of public and private institutions. This is a political dilemma for many developing-country governments, which now realize that a public-sector monopoly on higher education is a serious handicap to national development.

How can governments get more resources into higher education by taking advantage of private-sector higher education? The answer is to achieve a balance between accessibility for students, quality of provision and economic viability.

## Fees: The Heart of the Issue

The heart of the issue is fees, because fees ensure economic viability. Fees are a special problem for those countries that made higher education free - i.e., totally subsidized by the state - in the days when only a tiny proportion of the population was expected to go to university. At that time entry to higher education was highly competitive, but many citizens believed - and still believe - that the combination of competitive entry and free tuition would produce equitable participation in higher education from all socio-economic groups.

A bundant research now shows that this is simply not true. The socio-economic profile of students in countries that charge fees while also providing scholarships and loans for poorer students is more broadly based than in those that do not charge fees. This is a very important finding, and one that governments are only gradually finding the courage to act on.

Having a free public sector alongside an expensive private sector does not create an effective higher education system. As countries gradually introduce fees in the public sector, either because of a conviction that it is more socially equitable or because there is no financial alternative, the private sector finds itself on a more level playing field.

This in turn makes it easier for the private sector to build arrangements for need-based scholarships and loans into their fees regimes. Obviously it takes time to build up enough scholarship funds for admissions policies to be truly blind to a student's wealth, but if private institutions are to play a major role in the expansion of higher education, they must be able to attract a diversity of people. Only then can they truly claim that private investment in higher education is making its contribution to widening access and that it is thus contributing to the public good.

In widening access, private institutions also foster good relations with governments and the public higher education sector, thereby gradually reducing the scepticism of many governments about expanding the private sector.

The trends in India are most encouraging. In the 1980s the share of government funding of higher education rose to 80%. This stimulated considerable expansion of the sector, although the World Bank has commented that this was done at the price of considerable regulation and loss of autonomy that led subsequently to an erosion of efficiency and quality.

From 1991 the economic liberalisation policy has encouraged the expansion of self financing higher education which is now India 's most dynamic and growing sector. Whereas private provision accounted for only 57% of the sector in the 1980s it grew to 75% in the 1990s.

Another important trend is that the proportion of students enrolled in the private sector in professional programmes such as engineering, medicine, management, information technology and teacher training has grown from less than 15% in the 1990s to 50% in 2007. Let me say a word about relating learning to livelihoods.

## Learning for Livelihoods

We live in a young world. In some developing countries the median age is less than 20 years and in many it is less than 25. Enabling these youngsters to grow up into adults with livelihoods is the greatest development challenge facing the world today.

Although there is a general correlation between education and the ability to earn a livelihood, many countries complain of unemployed or underemployed graduates. The challenge is to make the link between education, training and livelihoods much tighter.

Private institutions, by following the market, have tended to focus naturally on livelihood-related programmes. Indeed, in some jurisdictions private institutions seem to focus exclusively on business, information technology and languages. This is fine, but private institutions - and public institutions - do need to do a reality check from time to time to ensure that the topics they teach really do link well to livelihoods. Market signals sometimes lag the reality. Yesterday I visited the Symbiosis Institute of Design, which is a nice example of catering to an emerging need.

Remember also that linking education to livelihoods is not just a matter of what you teach but how you teach it. For many people it will be more effective, as well as much more economic, to study part time while continuing in employment. Studying for a Master's in Business Administration is a particularly striking example where feedback indicates that combining work and study and thereby confronting theory and practice on a daily basis produces much deeper learning than studying full time.

## Distance Education

This brings me to my third issue, which is distance learning. Enabling part-time study on campus by offering courses in the evening allows many urban people to engage in lifelong learning. However, for those who do not live in cities, or whose work does not follow a predictable schedule, evening courses in a classroom are not the answer. In the last thirty years we have seen dramatic growth in distance learning. In India , for example, a quarter of all tertiary students are learning at a distance.

I shall come back to this in my comments tomorrow, but let me end now by saying how delighted I am that the private sector is taking this up and that some of you are doing this on a large scale.

Ten years ago I coined the term '*mega-university*' for a university teaching at a distance that enrolled more than 100,000 students. Thirty years ago there were no such institutions. Now there are eight mega-

universities in the Commonwealth alone and they enrol four million students between them. I note that the SCDL, with over 100,000 students, qualifies as a mega-institution on my measure.

Whether you operate on a small scale or a large scale distance education has its own dynamic. There is an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, because distance education requires a systematic approach and uses the principles of specialisation and division of labour, it is actually easier to assure quality through this mode than in face-to-face instruction. On the other hand we all know that there is a tendency to denigrate distance learning and, indeed, that it is the preferred mode of operation of some dubious providers and bogus colleges.

As a result some jurisdictions refuse to recognise qualifications gained through eLearning. This seems to me like taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but it must be a concern to institutions like yours.

That is why the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO are so glad to be involved in this meeting of private-sector providers of distance education in India . Although you compete in the market place you have a common interest in enhancing the credibility of distance learning with the public and giving your students the best possible experience within the resources available. I hope that this event will be helpful not just in bringing you together not just for fellowship but for joint action.

There are many things you can do that will help all of you without dulling the edge of the competition that encourages innovation.

First, everyone in India admits that the higher education system has outgrown the regulatory mechanisms that are in place. Private providers in particular are handicapped by the plethora of regulatory bodies that make approval processes unclear. Private investors hate uncertainty and I am sure that by working together you can influence reforms of the regulatory systems in directions that help the whole higher education community, private and public.

Second, you might want to explore how you can take advantage collectively of the rapidly expanding pool of open educational resources. There is no virtue in everyone re-inventing the same wheels when it comes to developing course content. Much better to take advantage of what exists, or develop some curricula collectively and then compete on giving students the best possible support as they study the courses.

I am sure that at this meeting you will develop other important collaborative initiatives. The Association of private providers of distance learning that you are creating here will be much stronger if it has a joint agenda for action. Fellowship is fine, but by joint action you can secure a better future for your institutions while at the same time contributing substantially to the development of higher education in India.

That brings me to our final point. The government of India is pleased that this meeting is taking place and very interested in the outcomes.

You have an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that private provision is a public good. UNESCO and COL are delighted to have helped to make this meeting happen and we wish you well. Thank you.