

U.S.-India Higher Education Collaboration

Remarks by Ambassador T.P. Sreenivasan

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I am grateful to my former colleague and permanent friend, Rick Inderfurth, for inviting me to speak under the auspices of the Wadhvani Chair he heads. He and I go back a long time, even before many in India believing that Inder Gujral and Inderfurth were brothers. At a farewell at the State Department in 2000, Rick spoke about my “five faces” as the DCM in Washington. This time, he has asked me to speak on education, perhaps, because he wants to explore the sixth face I acquired less than two years ago as an educationist. He already knows my views on all other aspects of India-US collaboration.

I must confess, however, that I am not qualified as yet to speak on India-US collaboration in Education. Much of my time as the Executive Head of the Kerala Higher Education Council was spent in an effort to identify the urgent needs of higher education in Kerala and the ways to meet them. Although I understand my exposure to the education systems abroad, including the US, was a factor in my appointment, I have just begun some work on international collaboration between four of the Universities the Council covers, Kerala, Kottayam, Kochi and Kannur and foreign universities. The Kerala Government has recently constituted an International Relations Group I chair, which acts as a catalyst and coordinator. These Universities have several tie-ups with foreign Universities and one of them, Kottayam, has a project under the Obama-Singh Initiative.

The Universities in Kerala have students from various countries, including the US and our own teachers and students do have opportunities to study and research abroad. We would like to see these expanded considerably, even as the bills pertaining to foreign collaboration are pending in the Indian Parliament. Specifically with the US, the exchange of Fulbright scholars has tripled and we are constantly in touch with the US Consulate in Chennai to explore new avenues. Two schemes we have recently drawn up are India Study Programs in various Universities to enable US students to spend a Semester or more in Kerala and a Masters Program specifically meant for American students. In these schemes, particular emphasis is placed on Kerala history, culture, fine arts, indigenous medicine, martial arts etc, which will fit into the India studies programs in the Universities. We expect to have these courses begin in the next academic year, with special facilities in the campuses for US students. We hope that as India US collaboration in education gathers momentum, the Universities in Kerala will play an active role.

We have been following closely the development of education as an important part of our strategic partnership as reflected in the Education Summit in 2011, Mr. Pallam Raju’s recent visit to Washington and the expected exchanges in the forthcoming dialogue in New Delhi. As two knowledge

based economies, we have worked together in education even in the old days of the cold war. The presence of a vast cadre of brilliant academics of Indian origin in the United States is testimony to the synergy of the past. Today, it is estimated that 100,000 Indian students are in the US and 2700 Americans are in India, doing short courses. The full potential for collaboration can be realized only by the identification of complementarities in the two systems. The long history of interaction between the academics of the two countries and the presence of the large Indian American community in the US, together with the language advantage, should lead to educational collaboration for mutual advantage.

An eminent educationist from Kerala, Dr. Achutshankar Nair stressed the relevance of India-US collaboration today by using an image from the oil industry. “Whereas the US possesses an excellent knowledge refinery in its university system, India has immense crude material—human resource with great potential that awaits to be made the fuel of economic progress of the world. The Indian university system is waking up from its slumber and positioning itself to leverage this”, he said. The mutuality of this endeavor is beyond question.

The needs of India have been identified in the many reform reports available. We endeavor constantly to get our universities to the level of world-class universities listed in world rankings, but more importantly, education in India aims at expansion, equity, excellence and employability. No doubt, we have accomplished expansion to a certain degree, though we are below many developed countries in enrollment rate. In Kerala’s blue print for higher education reform, we have begun to address inadequacies in infrastructure, use of technology, training of teachers, research, autonomy, industrial linkages and internationalization. Specific recommendations have been drawn up and the Government of Kerala has decided to establish autonomous colleges for the first time, to set up a State Accreditation and Assessment Council and to establish a Faculty Training Institute. At a time when the digital world challenges the lecture driven teaching system, we have to embrace technology on a massive scale. Skills development and job creation should be a priority for us.

Needless to say, the US Universities have accomplished most of these and the possibilities of collaboration are endless. Time is not far when American Universities will be able to open campuses in India, thus directly educating Indians in India. Several University research centers are already operating in Indian cities. The polytechnics in India were modeled on the community colleges system of the US and a program of expansion of such institutions is on the anvil to develop the work force. The importance of creating job pools is a priority for both India and the US. Knowledge networks that link research institutions in the two countries will be of immense value. International research collaboration now holds the key to competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. In the Twelfth Five Year Plan of India (2012-2017) special efforts would be made to strengthen international research linkages and involve a large number of Indian institutions in forging such links. Such collaboration would leverage the

Indian Diaspora, which is recognized worldwide as a powerful asset for research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The US experience in collaboration between the academia and the industry should be of immense value to India. India would be setting up a body to promote such collaboration. The corporate sector could participate in existing higher education institutions by setting up of institutes offering degrees in specific fields, creating centers of excellence for research and postgraduate teaching, establish teaching-training centers to train faculty. Appropriate corporate bodies in the US such as the US India Business Council should be able to work with CII and FICCI in India.

India may become an attractive destination for American students, who may be looking for inexpensive higher education as Indian educational institutions attain excellence. The IITs in India can match the best institutions in the world at a fraction of the cost of US education. IIT graduates from India have had no difficulty in getting jobs in the US. Many engineering and management schools are already attracting foreign students. Like it has happened in the field of health, the availability of equivalent or even better services at lower cost should attract university students to India.

A strategy for higher education internationalization envisaged in India during the Twelfth Five Year Plan would include faculty and student exchange programs, institutional collaborations for teaching and research, exposure to diverse teaching-learning models and enhanced use of ICTs. Globally compatible academic credit systems, curricula internationalization and processes for mutual recognition of qualifications are envisaged. The US, as the home of several world-class Universities, will be able to play a major role in these activities. I have no doubt that these areas will engage the attention of our leaders and planners when education becomes the driving force in the forthcoming strategic dialogue.

Thank you.

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