China’s Lead in Higher Education: Much to Learn for India

Vidya Rajiv Yeravdekar*, Gauri Tiwari

Symbiosis Centre for International Education, Symbiosis International University, Pune, India

Abstract

Higher education systems in India and China are boxed into rivalry as a matter of course: They have the two largest systems and are the largest “exporters” of international students. Both countries have made higher education an item of precedence, guided by planned shift towards knowledge economy. Then again, while China has held itself to exacting standards in the business of policy, India has yet to mature past unavailing attempts, which lead the system to go through the motions of attending to the most skeletal of the demands, and no more. China’s ascent is remarkable in and of itself, without referencing scorecard keeping against India. More to the point, China’s “long fought and hard won” battle proves to us that the centre-periphery paradigm in international education is not a foregone conclusion.

Keywords: Higher education, India, China, Knowledge economy, Asia, International education

1. Introduction

A discussion on the comparison of the higher education systems of India and China must begin with what seems to be the starkest difference of all: the budgetary allotments for higher education. Indeed, the difference in public expenditure on higher education is at the core—China’s $250 billion and India’s $37.13 billion (pwc, n.d.). That said, the difference in policy engineering is just as stark. Inasmuch as China’s ascent is a result of policies that were drawn with an eye to enhancing excellence and access, the Chinese have succeeded in whittling down to a goal-directed triad: increase in international competitiveness, gross enrolment ratio, and vocational training.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +91-20-25652444; fax: +0-000-000-0000.
E-mail address: dr-vidya@symbiosis.ac.in
2. Academic Excellence

China’s most striking strides relate to academic excellence. Its lead in research is head and shoulders ahead of India, not to say, all the BRICK countries. In 2011, India produced 45,172 research publications, and China 156,574 (Adams, Pendlebury and Stembridge, 2013). A number of initiatives have made this possible, for instance, the Knowledge Innovation Program of Chinese Academy of Sciences to launch innovation centers in fundamental and applied sciences and Project 211 in 1995 to upgrade 117 universities.

China has also succeeded in increasing postgraduate enrolment. India, on the other hand, continues to record peculiarly high undergraduate enrolment—87.4% in 2011-12 (EY-FICCI, 2012). In fact, at 19.8 million, India records the largest undergraduate enrolment, as compared to 12.7 million in China and 10.4 million in the U.S.

3. Internationalization of higher education

Internationalization is the new sine qua non of academic excellence. China has emerged one of the top “host countries” of international students (292,000 international students in 2011) from near insignificance (Project Atlas, n.d.). As early as 2003, legislation was in place to regulate foreign collaboration (Altbach, 2009). It is remarkable that China has managed to score so high on the inbound mobility aspect in spite of English not being the official medium of instruction: In 2011, US students accounted for 8% of the total international student population in China—an approximate 23,360 (Project Atlas, n.d.). Au contraire, only 782 US students were enrolled in India in 2012—a paltry figure considering English is the medium of instruction in practically all Indian institutions that draw international students (UNESCO, n.d.). The key to China’s success are focussed steps. The strategy of adding international competitiveness by way of “brain gain” serves as a representative example: The University of Beijing, among many others, actively draws in international researchers of Chinese origin as part of its policy on internationalization. The Indian Diaspora, which adds up to over 25 million in 130 countries, remains an unexploited resource in the context (Kumar, Sarkar and Sharma, 2009).

India’s policies on internationalization remain mired in deliberations and disputes. The Foreign Education Providers’ Bill is a case in point. India has a long way to go in drawing international students—only 21,778 in 2008-09 (Project Atlas, n.d.). It bears mentioning that this number is approximate at best as the data in question, much like other information on higher education, remains a fogbound corner.

4. Access to quality higher education

China’s leaps in excellence run parallel to the accessibility aspect. In 2000, China’s gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education was 7.76 per cent, which jumped to 24.33 per cent in 2011. India was ahead in 2000, with a corresponding figure of 9.53 per cent, but fell behind in 2011 at 23.27 per cent (UNESCO, n.d.). The structural anomaly in the system is profound. Were we to call to mind the system as a picture, we would see a pyramid with a very small apex and a very large base. A miniscule number of specialized institutions form the highpoint (IITs, IIMs, IISc, JNU, TIFR, and TISS). The majority of these do not even qualify as full-grown universities: the intake is small; their focus is concentrated; research is frequently not embedded in their mission; and social sciences are divorced from the STEM disciplines.

5. A burdensome past

Relatedly, the 659 Indian universities, based on the “London model”, are burdened unmanageably by affiliated colleges—over 35,000, which is the largest number of affiliated colleges (UGC, n.d.). This structural model, outdated and unbefitting, causes the system to continue “undifferentiated”, both at vertical and horizontal levels, without ample institutional and programmatic diversity. There are no mandates to stratify institutions by mission and concentration, and so funds are apportioned in butter-like spread. Similarly, lack of intra-institutional segmentation dulls focus in the twin forks of higher education—research and pedagogy—and resources, especially incremental grants, cannot be synergized optimally on priority areas.

The lack of coherence that results from a latticework of multiple jurisdictions (UGC, AICTE etc.), sponsorships (centre, state, aided, self-funded), institution types (deemed universities, specialized technical institutions,
polytechnics etc.) makes differentiation even more of a pressing need for India. The Government has invariably sidestepped state universities, which account for 47.3% of the total, in making investments in research and innovation (UGC, n.d.). Even worse is the Government’s neglect of the private sector, which is growing “far and away” faster than the public sector (64% institutions were private in 2012) (EY-FICCI, 2012). While the private sector is subject to punitive regulations, it receives little funding and shoring up, resulting in continued degeneration of the critical mass of institutions.

6. Initiatives

India’s undertakings have been both feeble and late in the coming—the National Knowledge Commission (2005) is perhaps the first among very few evidences of policy initiatives in the recent times. The more recent project to launch fourteen “innovation universities aiming at world class standards” has been an object of scathing criticism. It is really quite unlikely that in the face of piddling international research output and missing ecosystem, world class universities can be set up. The project exemplifies the government’s inclination to tokenism to mask its inability to grapple with core challenge.

The success of Chinese policies rests, partially, on operationalizing differentiation, resulting in effective “massification” of tertiary education in the face of resource constraints, while allowing select institutions to deliver excellence to a greater scale than would otherwise have been possible. And China has been at it for over two and a half decades. China’s system is also shaped like a pyramid, with a large base (879 regular colleges and universities, 1266 junior colleges, and 287 independent colleges), but it has a much larger apex than the Indian (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, n.d.). Project 211 and Project 985, which collectively cover over 150 universities, speak to the commitment to performance management of the system. Indeed, it is differentiation that has ensured institutional accountability by aligning funding with mission and performance. It has also allowed institutions to grow preferentially in areas of focus. The 2013 ARWU listed 28 Chinese (and one Indian) amongst the top 500 universities.

7. Contributions of the private participants

The private sector in China (min ban institutions), which made a comeback after thirty years (1952-82), is growing, but it does not have the same significance as does its Indian counterpart. This is so because public institutions have been adequately expanded, forestalling undue burdening of the private sector.

A particularly edifying case in respect of horizontal differentiation is the Chinese expansion of industry-based vocational education. China enrolls nearly 9.6 million students in vocational education as compared to 4 million in India. Unresponsive to the imperative requirement of labour market ‘preparedness’, the Indian system continues to be stubbornly lodged in general education: Enrolment in general education is twice that of professional-vocational education (14.3 and 7.1 million) (EY-FICCI, 2012).

8. Conclusion

The Chinese higher education system bears fruits of profound, some might say, radical policy actions. Most of it has to do with phenomenal spend, but the rest of it is about exemplary policy formulation and execution. While the Chinese have succeeded in building a coherent and differentiated system rushing to move inwards from periphery, India’s expansion is a slapdash reaction to “massification”. It suffers from gross underinvestment, but much worse is the affliction of policy paralysis: The reservoir of policy initiatives, which is scarce as it is, dribbles away as it sluices down endless disagreements and obstructions. India would do well to find a middle ground in policy design somewhere between the absolutistic quality of the Chinese system and the inefficacy of the Indian central planning apparatus. Higher education policies, in the context of jurisdiction in a federal democracy (a total of 29 states, each with its own regulatory structure) and relevance to a wide range of institution types, must be sufficiently adaptive, at no more than a reasonable cost to indisputability in interpretation and execution. Nested within a slew of developmental challenges and slow moving democratic processes, India’s higher education has many crosses to bear. Yet, India can take lesson from its neighbour, which has proved that policies that are encased in goal-oriented projects can reap extraordinary results.
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