

Higher education: India's own Ivy League?

In an effort to keep up with other world powers, India tries to grow its own Ivies.

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MUMBAI, India — You may not be able to take the Harvard out of Cambridge, but what are the odds India can grow its own Ivy League?

In an effort to boost the country's presence on the global stage and improve the quality of its higher education, India has announced plans to create a so-called Indian Ivy League. The government hopes to build world-class universities that compete with the likes of Yale and Princeton, according to Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal.

The creation of Navratna Universities also aims to satisfy some of the increasing demand in India for higher education as the pool of lower middle-class and female students in this rapidly developing country grows.

Education experts in India applaud the government's ambitions. However, they also question whether this goal will be possible in the current environment, where regulations are plentiful and funding can be scarce.

"Countries around the world are setting up world class universities," said Pawan Agarwal, author of "Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future." "Why should India be left behind?"

The new universities will be [public non-profits](#) but given "generous" financial support, the ability to access external funding and "total autonomy to free them from the shackles of government control," the minister said during a speech this month.

Despite some fears in the United States that its education system is falling behind and the nation is becoming less competitive, things are not rosy here either. There is a huge need in India for more access to quality higher education. As Vivek Wadhwa, a visiting scholar at University of California at Berkeley, wrote in Foreign Policy, "[India and China's successes](#) aren't due to their education systems, but despite them."

India has a select few elite schools that offer top quality education, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management. However, the vast majority of students attend colleges and universities that offer a mediocre education at best, say education specialists.



Indian students prepare for their board exams at the entrance to The Asiatic Society Library in Mumbai.
(Sajjad Hussain/AFP/Getty)

At the bulk of these schools, specialists say, classes are large, resources are few, facilities are rundown and students and even teachers have poor attendance. These colleges also face criticism for teaching solely for an end-of-year exam, rather than teaching students to value intellectual curiosity, develop their creativity or learn critical thinking.

“We may have large numbers of schools and colleges and universities, but we have essentially

dumbed them down over the years. We give out degrees, but we are not necessarily producing scholars,” said Rajeev Gowda, a professor of economics and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore.

Even the elite schools, he said, do not offer a quality of education and research facilities comparable to top institutions in the West. And only about a [quarter of Indian graduates are employable](#), according to Human Capital, a consulting arm of Mercer.

Like most challenges in India, higher education faces a problem of numbers. Despite the government’s subsidizing of the system, only about 12 percent of the country’s 90 million college-age citizens attend college.

If India wants to continue its GDP growth rate, which is expected to reach 8.75 percent in 2011, it must increase the number of students it sends to college in 2014 by another 8 million, Karan Khemka of the consulting group Parthenon Group said in a Forbes India report. These students will be needed for India to develop a [“high-skilled labor force”](#) and support its “growth trajectory.” Similarly, the National Knowledge Commission has called for more than a tripling of universities to 1,500 to meet India’s human resources needs.

The government aims to increase the proportion of students enrolled in colleges and universities to 30 percent by 2020, according to the minister. But if India fails to do so, it may face a bigger risk than a slowing GDP.

“If we don’t find a way to educate them, we are going to do ourselves a disservice,” said Gowda. “We aren’t going to have a demographic dividend; we’re going to have a demographic disaster.”

Furthermore, the students who traditionally have had access to higher education have come from only certain segments of society: notably, the urban, wealthy and higher caste, according to G.G. Wankhede, a professor in the Centre for Studies in Sociology of Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

“The majority of the Indian population,” he said, “has been historically, traditionally deprived of higher education.”

That is slowly changing as various government programs try to provide more seats to disadvantaged groups, but implementation problems often prevent these schemes from enabling the lower classes and castes to graduate from elite schools, Wankhede said.

While education specialists welcome the Ivy League proposal, they said they fear this too will face implementation problems.

“For all intents and purposes, with the kind of regulatory environment we have today, there is no possibility of that ever happening,” said Pramath Sinha, founding dean of the Indian School of Business.

He attributed India’s “regulating and over-regulating” of higher education to a vicious cycle that began with the government deciding education should be a publicly funded, not-for-profit activity. Any university or college that grants a degree must now be a not-for-profit. The government, however, could not meet the demand for education, and “fly-by-night” businesses and politicians began setting up schools that they claimed were not-for-profits but were making money on the side.

The government has attempted to keep these unethical players out of the system by regulating the industry. But in effect, the unethical ones continue to operate by beating the system, and the ethical ones fear entering the system because they cannot compete with stricter and stricter rules.

In addition to regulation challenges, the Ivy League schools will struggle to secure enough funding to develop world-class research facilities and attract the top academics. India already faces an acute shortage of professors, according to Agarwal.

The American Ivy League universities have large endowments to support themselves. But in India, philanthropy has not yet taken off, and restrictions can be so tight that people do not want to donate.

“If you want to create excellence,” Sinha said, “excellence doesn’t come cheap.”

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