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INDIA

Indian universities are pushing for international tie-ups

Yojana Sharma 18 June 2022

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India is buzzing with university delegations which follow hot on the heels of regulatory changes that allow tie-ups between Indian and foreign universities.

Dozens of individual overseas universities have expressed an interest in collaborations on twinning, joint degrees and dual degrees with India, while others join recent or planned university delegations, including from the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

In a move first flagged up in 2020 but officially announced in April, the Indian higher education regulatory body the University Grants Commission (UGC) **said joint programmes would no longer need UGC approval** and announced generally reduced red tape and conditions for tie-ups between Indian and foreign universities.

More strikingly, the announcement has been accompanied by a flurry of education ministry and diplomatic activities including talks between UGC Chairman Jagadesh Kumar and diplomats of several countries in New Delhi. Others point to the UGC calling on around 100 Indian university heads in April and May to push them to initiate and cement international collaborations.

Indian officials and diplomats overseas, including in the UK, Australia and the United States, have been stepping up visits to universities in those countries, persuading them to consider India's changed internationalisation environment and send university delegations to take a closer look.

A lot is happening on the policy front

"From the UK point of view, it feels like there is a lot happening on the Indian policy front, with the development of the National Education Policy (NEP) and the prospect of opening up new types of university relationships, and particularly around transnational education, joint and dual degrees, twinning arrangements, etc," said Vivienne Stern, head of Universities UK, who was part of a 22-member delegation of UK university leaders on a five-day visit to India from 6 June, which she said was one of the largest delegations to visit India.

The UK has been "deeply intertwined with the Indian education system, particularly on research, but we have not had the opportunity to visit Indian partners since COVID," Stern noted.

"So this was really the first opportunity we have had to get a large group of universities together to come out, rekindle some existing relationships and form some new ones, but also, crucially, to learn

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what the new educational policy might mean,” Stern told *University World News*.

The NEP is the government’s long-term **plan, released in 2020**, for reforming the Indian higher education sector to 2030. Internationalisation of higher education is mentioned as a key pillar of the strategy.

“This is an exciting time for Indian higher education,” said Vidya Yeravdekar, pro chancellor of Symbiosis International University in Pune, Maharashtra, who was on the Indian government’s global outreach committee for the NEP, which provided recommendations on internationalisation in Indian universities during 2021.

“Now in 2022, we see all these notifications coming out from the ministry and through the UGC. A whole lot of things have been announced.”

In particular, Yeravdekar pointed to the new regulations on dual and joint degrees. “That is very heartening because, till now, we did have collaborations with universities, but it was more to do with student mobility or faculty mobility. So it was not really institutionalised in a manner where we could engage with the [overseas] universities in stronger way.

“But now there seems to be more excitement, with a number of foreign universities wanting to tie up with Indian universities because India is a huge market for students,” Yeravdekar said. “It’s amazing to see a lot of interest from foreign universities in India. Even earlier there was [interest] but now I think with the NEP, the world is more aware of what India really wants to do.”

She points to the activities not just from the ministries and prime minister’s office but from state ministries as well.

Pressure from India

“There is consistent and clear rhetoric that India wants to pursue a progressive internationalisation agenda in terms of openness, and encouraging its higher education base to partner more actively with foreign institutions, so there’s certainly a high-profile positive intent,” said Adrian Mutton, CEO of Sannam S4 Group, an international business consultancy that facilitates tie-ups between companies and universities in India and elsewhere.

“One of the big changes I have seen is that Indian organisations and institutions are coming to us and asking us for help and then, if they haven’t heard from us for a few weeks, they’re chasing us. It never happened before.”

“There are a lot of activities from the Indian side,” Katja Lasch, director of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) regional office in New Delhi, concurred. “There’s a lot of movement at the moment but it is more because the Indian side is pushing, not the German side.”

German universities are reporting approaches for collaboration from Indian universities every week, Lasch noted. “Most German universities have an internationalisation strategy which Indian universities do not yet have. But the Indian model is to collaborate with an overseas university in different areas,” she told *University World News*.

Around 40-45 German universities are already engaged in projects with Indian institutions, particularly Indian Institutes of Technology and private universities, financed by the DAAD. “This is due to their autonomous status so it’s a bit easier to work with institutions of national importance and autonomous colleges and private institutions.”

But most cooperation is built from the bottom up, stemming from cooperation between professors, she notes, so it is harder to build institution-to-institution links.



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Premature rush?

Despite the evident buzz, some have urged caution and suggest that the rush to set up university delegations may be premature. For example, further on-the-ground reforms are needed in India before dual and joint degrees can go ahead with overseas partner universities.

And legislation is not yet in place for branch campuses of foreign universities to set up in India, despite interest expressed by several foreign universities.

Sources said while discussions for joint and dual degrees were at an “advanced” stage, some important issues have still to be ironed out before they can go ahead.

It is still not clear what needs approval and what does not, according to Mutton. “There are still many practical, unanswered questions. We’re having to double down and triple down on [our] resources to be able to help these institutions not get overexcited about areas that are going to take longer to implement, or alternatively not to miss the opportunity when they can get on with doing a lot of stuff that is no longer inhibiting them, and that’s quite complex.”

Some Indian universities are concerned about the cost of joint and dual degrees to Indian students, for example, with high-fee countries like the UK, the US and Australia, as well as the structuring of fees. One Jawaharlal Nehru University professor said if students have to pay for these exchange programmes, it would create further inequality in the education system.

Others say the ground needs to be prepared more carefully.

“The problem is that, at least for Germany, it’s not just about cooperation in higher education,” DAAD’s Lasch said, referring to the flurry of memoranda of understanding and visiting delegations and the idea that this is all that’s needed to set up collaborations. “That’s a bit naïve and it’s premature. If you look into the [Indian] regulations, a lot of things are not yet set out clearly.”

“There is, I think, a certain pressure on Indian universities now to perform,” said Lasch, which she ascribed to an internal aim to raise Indian institutions in Indian and international rankings and attract more inbound students. “The problem is you can’t solve this top down and things are not matching,” she said.

Nonetheless, she described the current pressure from the Indian government as a “good window of opportunity – it’s good that internationalisation is finally playing a role”.

In February, DAAD initiated a bilateral working group on double degree programmes “with the aim to publish a guide for double or joint degree programmes in the Germany-India context,” Lasch said. It would provide advice on working with partner institutions and “would help the German and Indian universities to navigate themselves through the legal frameworks of both systems”.

Such guidelines will help universities build up cooperation slowly, Lasch said. “We are running capacity development workshops – we have already done [this] over the last three years, helping Indian universities in establishing international offices. For instance, we run internationalisation conferences where we connect universities.”

The aim is “to better inform [people] about India and Germany and maybe get new German institutions on board so that we enlarge the network a bit”, said Lasch.

Equivalence

Another issue is how dual and joint degrees are defined, to ensure that people “are seeking and talking about the same thing”, she said.

But the really thorny issue is credit transfer and equivalence, which she described as a “crucial, crucial problem”.

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India's existing credit system for universities is not yet centralised. The NEP proposed an Academic Bank of Credits for credit transfer to enhance student mobility within India, but it is not yet up and running. "At the moment, it's a one-to-one decision (between universities), and there isn't a systematic decision," Lasch said.

India is working on a central credit transfer system and a central calculation of credits. "Then we would need to compare it with the European credit system, such as: What is the workload of one credit? What does it imply? And provide guidelines to universities on how to transfer credits," she said.

India's UGC last month set up a committee on recognition and equivalence of degrees from foreign institutions. Equivalence was previously agreed on a case-by-case basis by the **Association of Indian Universities** for Indian students returning with degrees from abroad.

"We definitely need to work on that [equivalence]," acknowledged Yeravdekar. "At an individual level, universities are struggling and they are trying to find some kind of solution."

"The government is also looking at the US and European credit systems," Yeravdekar added. "When you look at dual degrees and joint degrees, equivalence is going to be very critical."

Several private universities have found their own solutions including 'floating credits' that can be used for study abroad. But, Yeravdekar noted, "we need a central body that will look into this equivalence with different parts of the world".

Some Indian universities now have more autonomy to make these assessments with partner universities and these would be most likely to go ahead with double degrees in the near future. Even so, Yeravdekar believes the first dual or joint degrees won't be in place before late 2023 "when there is more clarity".

Exploring possibilities

Universities UK's Stern said there was no reason for universities not to explore possibilities now. During the UK delegation's trip, which included visits to Bengaluru, Ahmedabad and Kolkata, "institutions were meeting either established partners with whom they've already got a relationship, maybe in research or an exchange agreement of some kind. And they're exploring [how] to deepen that. Could we find an area where we'd like to develop a joint degree or a dual degree?"

Stern said: "As those conversations start gathering pace, the landscape will be clarified. But ultimately, the framework needs to be clear, and it needs to allow for institutions to recognise each other's credits, and it needs to allow for equivalence in this qualification recognition – issues that are still unresolved. So there is still some work to do.

"Partnerships have been quite geographically concentrated [within India] in the past, so getting universities out into different cities, perhaps places that some of those delegates had not been before, is quite important."

The Association of Indian Universities (AIU) is rolling out an Indian network for internationalisation of higher education where Indian institutions can upload their profiles, strengths and interests for partnering to a portal.

Universities UK has signed an agreement with AIU to work with them to try to make that portal more visible in the UK "as a potential tool for finding partnerships, but also to explore what we can do to bring potentially interesting universities together", according to Stern.

It will also help Indian universities "that are not so involved in internationalisation, to bring them to the forefront, because in India there are these smaller centres of excellence which don't internationalise as much as larger universities", noted Yeravdekar, who helped set up the platform in her role as higher education chair of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

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“The aim is to provide a bigger range of offerings for international students by getting these institutions on the platform as members, help them develop international offices, and help them develop a strategy for internationalisation,” Yeravdekar said.

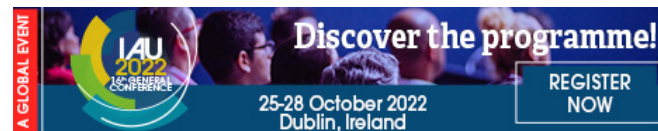
Going ahead

Lasch notes that while recruiting Indian students is the primary objective for many foreign universities, joint research is also an important goal, with joint PhDs and joint supervision likely to be among the first types of joint or dual degrees to get under way.

Stern is optimistic that “even in the next few weeks, we’ll see the emergence of some agreements. That means that programmes could open to Indian [student] applicants in the next academic year – that’s what we’re hoping, that we rapidly see the development of these types of relationships”.

Dual and joint degrees open up many possibilities for Indian students, she notes. “If you look at the proportion of people globally who studied the whole of a degree abroad, it’s always going to be a tiny minority of the global tertiary education population – about 2%. It’s a great experience, but it’s not going to be within everybody’s reach.”

So the opportunities in India for dual or joint degrees “open up the possibility of experiencing international higher education to a much wider range of people. And that’s a good thing.”



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