

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

## Higher Education: Globalization and Expansion

'Globalization' is a word that has come to be used with increasing frequency over the last few years. Words and phrases have a way of dominating our thinking, despite conveying different meanings to different people, at various times. Winston Churchill, while visiting the United States in the aftermath of his postwar electoral defeat, famously declared that '... from Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic an Iron Curtain has descended across the continent'. Churchillian rhetoric has a resonant ring and soon thereafter the 'iron curtain' became the common descriptor for the divide between the distinct political and economic ideologies of the erstwhile Soviet Union and its allies on the one hand and the Western powers led by the United States on the other. The Berlin Wall came to symbolize in stark, physical terms the political divide. Up to the late 1980s ideological barriers seemed to obstruct collaboration across national boundaries. Churchill's metaphorical 'iron curtain' vanished rather suddenly by the early 1990s; the spontaneous demolition of the wall in Berlin was a dramatic image of the times. The breaching of political barriers led seamlessly to an integration of economic activity; trade restrictions were suddenly undesirable. Open markets and free trade became the pillars of globalization. As a cloistered academic scientist, my first brushes with the new world order came when the number of foreign delegations visiting the campus of the Indian Institute of Science began to rise in dramatic fashion. Visiting groups included politicians, administrators and academics, all of whom appeared to seek collaboration and expansion of their activities on a global scale. Delegations come bearing gifts and I have been inundated with ties that I do not wear. But, one group appeared instinctively to sense that I was bemused by their stated objective of 'exploiting global markets in higher education'. They presented me a copy of Thomas Friedman's bestseller *The World is Flat* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), which is provocatively subtitled 'A brief history of the twenty-first century'. To me the 21st century seems too young to have a history. This is not a book that I would normally have read. It is a book that I would have glanced through, idly, while waiting for a delayed flight. However, there is something seductive about a hardbound book that is received as a gift; it compels the

recipient to browse. I turned instinctively to the index to look for the word 'globalization' and to my surprise it was missing. Only then did I realize that for Friedman globalization was an all pervasive term permeating (and indeed flattening) the world. The word had entered everyday usage and was no longer indexable. My ignorance lay further exposed when I turned to the 'Acknowledgements' and realized that Friedman's earlier book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999) was indeed on globalization. I did find several definitions of the word, but they all seemed context dependent; none seemed to be completely applicable to the rapidly changing face of academia. I like words that have a certain ring to them; in Friedman's 2005 book I found one that I disliked immediately. 'Glocalize' is a word that Friedman advances to describe the ability of cultures to absorb 'foreign ideas and best practices' easily melding them with local traditions. I hope this word, which really describes a pragmatic approach to progress, dies a quiet death.

Even as I have struggled with the unfamiliar terrain of Friedman's 'flat world', two more books arrived on my desk. The first, an edited volume entitled *The Globalization of Higher Education* (Weber, L. E. and Duderstadt, J. J., Economica, London, 2008) is the result of a colloquium that 'brought together university leaders from around the world in Glion above Montreux, Switzerland to consider the challenges, opportunities and responsibilities presented to higher education by the emerging global knowledge-driven economy' (p. xi). I have always wondered about phrases like the 'knowledge economy'. Is it not true that economic progress and knowledge and its application have always been linked, right through history? The 21st century will, of course, be no exception. Yet, there is a comforting feeling that future progress is in some way more organically linked to the creation of knowledge than was true in the past. For university leaders, this reiteration of the importance of research and innovation must surely be heartening. The second volume that I received was slimmer, glossier and closer to home. This was a report produced by the consulting firm of Ernst and Young, entitled *Globalizing Higher Education in India* (March 2008), produced for an event, EDGE-2008, held in Delhi; the acronym expands to 'Emerging

Directions in Global Education'. I have always been struck by the ability of 'consultants' to produce wonderfully attractive reports on complex themes. In scientific research, producing a critical review of the literature even in one's own area of expertise can be a formidable task, requiring a knowledge of the field that takes years to acquire. I suspect that the products of management schools, who are found in profusion within consulting firms, are a cleverer and bolder breed. They are able to quickly capture the essence of an area and have the ability to weave statistics into a skillfully produced presentation. Armed with these two books I could now begin to see the flat and globalized world a little less hazily.

The Glion colloquium begins with an extremely readable assessment of the meaning of globalization in the world of higher education. The economist Deepak Nayyar, a former Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, is emphatic: 'The spread of markets and the momentum of globalization, during the past two decades, have transformed the world of higher education almost beyond recognition. Market forces, driven by the threat of competition or the lure of profit have led to the emergence of higher education into a commercial activity that has had the greatest impact on the academic scene in India. Foreign universities regularly send teams to assess the potential for off-shore ventures. India's vast and untapped reservoir of youth presents a most desirable market for institutions, that can now 'sell' higher education. Until recently, the sector of higher education was largely publicly supported and subsidized. A transformation is imminent and has already taken place in areas like management. The inroads into the fields of medicine and engineering at undergraduate level by private institutions has been happening for some time. Postgraduate and research degrees will undoubtedly be areas where foreign institutions will have definite interest. Government regulations can impede the entry of

foreign institutions, but it is debatable as to whether this is a sustainable policy. Nayyar reflects on the dangers we face: 'What can we lose? First, markets should not decide on academic curricula or research agenda. . . Teaching and research cannot be simply about use-value and exchange-value. Second, management methods of business are not appropriate for universities. The objectives cannot be efficiency or profits'. He goes on to worry that 'markets and commercialization' can erode the 'values and ethics in the university community'. To some extent Nayyar's fears are already relevant in research institutions, where commercial interests can direct research goals and the distinctions between publicly funded facilities and private interests begin to blur.

Even as the shadow of globalization clouds the higher education scene in India, we have the prospect of an unprecedented expansion of universities and institutions for science and engineering. In the last sixty years the number of universities has increased by a factor of nearly 20, going from exactly 20 in 1947-48 to about 370 last year. The new institutions will add to this number and the fact that they are centrally supported may provide them a more robust platform for rapid expansion. The major limiting factor in the growth of the sector of research and higher education is the extreme shortage of well trained faculty to man these institutions. The growth of private institutions will pose severe problems for the new public universities, as both sectors compete to hire from a limited faculty pool. At some time in the future, the entry of foreign institutions will pose a major challenge for our public universities. The expansion of the higher education system in India is both necessary and imminent. Managing this expansion in a globalizing environment may require new strategies, within the framework of coherent and well-thought out public policy.

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