



# Access drive could hamper India's push for excellence

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**Indians may find it hard to widen participation and build world-class institutions, writes John Gill**

Much is made of India's rising star in global higher education, with the country often being mentioned as a future challenger to the dominance of Western nations.

But the 2007 Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings made clear the distance India still had to travel, with not one of its universities in the top 200.

This year, two institutions have broken in: the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Delhi at 154th and the IIT in Bombay at 174th.

William Lawton, a policy adviser at the UK Higher Education International Unit, said the Indian Government was acutely aware of its relatively weak showing in the league tables and was investing heavily to tackle the situation.

An "astronomical" increase in funding was intended, among other things, to support plans for 30 new state-funded universities, including 14 "world-class" institutions. India had the money to build the infrastructure, he said, but "it is less clear whether they'll be able to fill these institutions with high-quality staff".

Dr Lawton also said that India could struggle to achieve its ambition for "global excellence" at the same time as vastly expanding its widening-participation programme: "The fundamental problem is that India desperately needs to pursue the domestic agenda, but (it also) desperately wants international recognition and excellence."

Tim Gore, director of the Centre for Indian Business at the University of Greenwich, agreed that the Government had upped the ante in its bid for global recognition. But he said India's traditional model of higher education, which has kept teaching and research separate, was a major hurdle.

Dr Lawton concurred: "In the UK and elsewhere, teaching and research ideally go hand in hand. But in India, they haven't - institutions are very teaching-focused or research-focused, and they feel that to be recognised as world class they have to put these two things back together again."

Mr Gore, who is optimistic about progress in Indian higher education, recalled a visit to a research-led university in Pune, in western India, where he met talented Indian faculty who had been attracted back from universities in the West.

"It's a growing trend for talented faculty who have left India to return," he said. "Industry has been attracting good people back for a few years now, but I haven't seen that for academics before. Increasingly, though, as recession bites in the US, Indian faculty are coming back, which will be a very positive thing, injecting new thinking into the system."

He added: "I think the investment in higher education will yield results, but it's going to take time. There's clearly an impatience to get going, so I think we're looking medium term rather than long term for some quite considerable improvements."

"Of course, India has another advantage in that it is academically very well integrated into the world.

"Indian researchers are active and well connected with the UK in particular, but also with the US, so there is a lot going on at the research level that is a very good foundation."

Dr Lawton also saw signs for optimism but expressed doubts about how realistic the time frame set out in India's five-year plan might prove to be.

He said: "Whether or not India can pull off this trick in the next five years, I don't know - I don't think they will have solved the world-class excellence issue, and I know for a fact that they won't have solved their widening-participation issue in that time frame."

"India gets there eventually, but they seem to get there more slowly than, for example, China does, probably because there are so many domestic political and ideological constraints."