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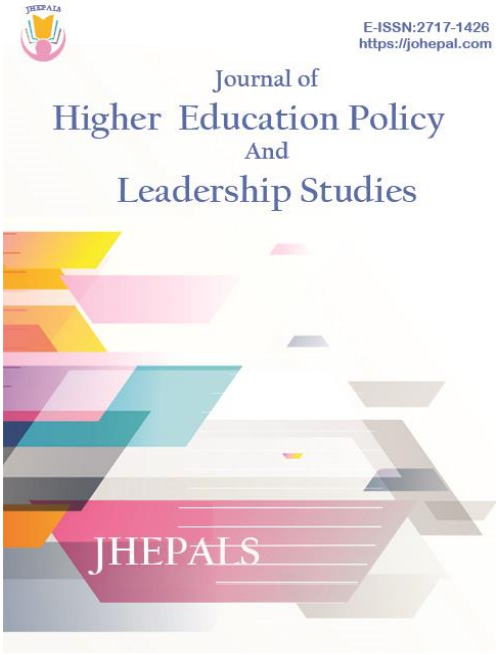

International Cooperation among Universities: Accommodating Diversity Within Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) has grown in its scope and priority. The history and approach of Indian universities to IHE has been distinct. The recent policy documents such as National Education Policy 2020 and draft document of Science, Technology and Innovation Policy 2020 emphasize on international cooperation of Indian universities. Though there is policy architecture, the response to IHE may differ across universities. This paper argues that, though a few universities have begun to recognize the importance and execution of international engagement, internationalization is not yet uniformly integrated in the Indian HE. The diversity in responses could be due to diversity in terms of number of types of higher education institutions, diversity among study programs, non-uniformities between number of incoming and outgoing students, distinct realities and attitudes towards internationalization among different university structures. We discuss how universities, as actors, are susceptible to change, and thus it is crucial to consider the structural differences among universities while assessing the effectiveness of policies and extent of institutional international engagement. The study may provide insights to higher education leaders and policymakers, who need to weigh different realities to strengthen the global competitiveness of Indian universities.

Keywords: Internationalization of Higher Education; Indian Universities; Systemic Diversity; NEP 2020

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Introduction

The transition towards producing knowledge based economies has triggered changes in the international higher education space. An important feature of knowledge economies is the embracing of an 'international' component by the higher education institutions (HEIs). Though universities have perpetually had an international direction, internationalization of higher education (IHE) as a process has grown further in scope in the past few years (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

While a range of factors shape the response to IHE, the national educational policy documents and institutional strategies are instrumental in shaping international engagement of any HEI. The drive for economic development and urge to create globally competent universities, has pushed the internationalization agenda at the national level (Wit & Deca, 2020). The policy documents at the national level also play an important role in building institutional readiness towards internationalization of HEIs (Sanders & Stewart, 2004). The national policies, are, in fact, a testimony to the commitment and priority given to international engagement of the universities in a particular country (Knight, 2008). In the Indian higher education context, the role of National Education Policy 2020 and the draft document report of Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, 2020 have been critical in creating a national policy architecture for internationalization, thereby emphasizing on awareness about IHE throughout the country.

At the institutional level, the HEIs, may wish to internationalize for economic and academic reasons (Alsharari, 2018). Moving beyond the policy framework, it is equally significant to understand how universities, as actors, respond to increasing global demands and enhance their global engagement. The Indian universities are functioning under the pressures and demands of the global rankings. Like the rest of the universities across the world, Indian universities are compelled to devise strategies today which help them attain visibility in global higher education space. The universities have responded to the global competition by encouraging mobility of scholars, internationalization of curriculum, study abroad programs or student exchanges, building intercultural competences, instilling skillsets among 21st century learners. Thus, IHE as an agenda is being embraced at the institutional and national level in India.

The response of Indian universities to IHE offers an interesting case study for multiple reasons. The recently revived realization and subsequent policies focused on the international engagement of universities, is a trend which needs closer attention and analysis. It needs attention because the aspect of 'diversity' presumably is significant in understanding the distinct responses to internationalization among Indian HEIs.

Keeping in mind various forms of diversity among different HEIs, this paper examines the areas of non-uniformities in the system which may influence the response of universities to different policy measures. The first part of the paper focuses on the literature on IHE, followed by the policy framework available for internationalization in the Indian higher education context. The second section sheds light on diversity in the Indian higher education ranging from systemic diversity between HEIs to diversity in student mobility flows from and in India.

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Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization of higher education, as a concept, has been around for decades; it is only recently that it has become a pro-active response (de Wit and Merkx 2012). The literature on internationalization typically points out to the work done by scholars such as Knight (2003), de Wit (2002), Altbach (2002), Rumbley (2020), Leask (2013), Coelen (2015) and others like Yeravdekar & Tiwari (2016), Powar (2012), Varghese (2020a) and others. A widely referred to definition by Knight (2003) states that internationalization of higher education is "a process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (p.1). This definition takes into account internationalization being a process of a range of activities, which are influenced by the context of the higher education environment (Knight, 2013).

IHE has been closely associated with scholar mobility. Moving beyond scholar mobility, staff exchange, internationalization of curriculum, collaborative research, dual degree programs, twinning programs, summer and winter schools are understood to be elements of international higher education. Siaya & Hayward (2003) identify foreign language training, curriculum development and study abroad experiences are being important aspects of IHE.

Rumbley et al (2019) opined that an internationalization strategy, training for international office staff, adequate funding facilitated the implementation of internationalization activities. In the same vein, Knight (2003) highlighted that lack of trained staff, absence of an internationalization strategy of lack of recognition of the academic work were hindrances to IHE.

Moving beyond the relevance of strategy in IHE (de Haan, 2014), there are an array of other institutional and external factors which play a role in internationalization. For instance, leadership is critical in steering the process of internationalization and creating the vision for the faculty members (Ellingboe, 1998). The organizational elements such as funding, infrastructure, international students, international programs are important drivers to IHE (Green & Olsen, 2003). While Wang et al. (2012) highlights the importance of governmental decision, commitment and actions in enhancing international research output and creating world class universities, Ayoubi and Massoud (2012) believe that partner selection and partnership agreements may help in long-term cooperation between universities. Inamdar (2019) has outlined the factors which determine an institution's readiness to execute internationalization. Inamdar (2019) refers to the institutional preparedness as well as the external factors which influence the readiness towards internationalization.

IHE, as a process, is evolving and is influenced by the changes in local, regional, national and global context (de Wit & Merkx, 2012). Given the considerable literature and attention in the field of IHE, Indian policymakers since 2019 have made concerted policy efforts in creating a framework for internationalization. The framework of NEP 2020 and draft STIP 2020 closely focus on IHE as an important segment of higher education.

Internationalization of Higher Education in India

The Indian universities, in the recent years, have found their presence in the global higher education space. Some of the Indian HEIs have made deliberate efforts at facilitating

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international student exchanges, strengthening international collaborations and enhancing research collaborations.

The keenness to collaborate with partner universities was seen back in time during 5th century A.D in Nalanda and Takshashila (Tilak, 2010) hosting scholars from Tibet, China and others. However, the country somehow lost the momentum owing to the structural and political climate which stunted the growth IHE in the country. It was only recently that it dawned on the higher education policymakers and national authorities about why and how Indian institutions need to actively participate in internationalization.

This realization is reflected in the importance given to internationalization as a theme in the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and Draft document of Science, Technology, Innovation Policy 2020 (STIP 2020). Both these documents make clear reference to IHE, rationales to internationalization for Indian universities and potential strategies to be developed to widen institutional and global engagement of the institutions. The revamping of higher education, integration of multi-disciplinarity in programs offers, restructuring of the program curriculum and the program structures, emphasis on research as an integral part of academics are some of the key features of NEP 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource and Development, 2020). The NEP 2020 acknowledges India's impending need to invest in IHE and urge HEIs to participate in world university rankings. Recognizing the disparity in incoming and outgoing student mobility numbers, the policy drafts newer innovative ways of attracting international students by increasing courses offered in Indian languages, Indian culture, Indian history and others.

The draft of 5th Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (STIP – 2020) (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2020), another policy initiative, aims for innovation in science and technology. The aspects of regional, national and international engagement are focused on in the document. The document urges Indian universities to participate in science and technology projects which may give them an edge in global educational space. The emphasis provided in the draft document on people-to-people connect through research, science and technology cannot be emphasized enough.

Further, schemes such as Global Initiative for Academic Networks (GIAN) or Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC) are recent efforts by Government of India to put Indian HEIs on the global map and help them expand their global outreach. Thus, in the Indian context, internationalization has come to occupy a major space in the policy framework as well as some of the institutional strategies.

While the national educational policies may provide the framework for HEIs, the diversity in the higher education system may result in distinct approaches to internationalization. In the Indian context, this diversity in higher education appears in different ways and it is important to consider to forms of diversity, which may have a further impact on the institutional response to internationalization.

Accommodating Systemic Diversity in Indian Higher Education

A glance at the governance and management of higher education in India reveals that the academic systems including the curriculum, teaching and learning practices, examination patterns among other components, heavily drew from the old universities in Britain (Agarwal, 2009). Unlike the time of independence characterized by higher education

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exclusively being the part of the public policy, post-independence era witnessed diversification of funding and emergence of self-financed public and private HEIs in India. As Kapur and Mehta (2004) point out the post globalized era saw privatization and greater autonomy to HEIs, especially compared to the period before the independence era. The period between the 1950 and 1960s saw sufficient autonomy to HEIs and academic freedom at the professoriate. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a shift from state controlled model of higher education to a model characterized by rise in private sector and a decline in public funding (Varghese & Malik, 2019). Thus, the Indian higher education system began to witness diversity in university structures since the 1970-80.

The authors find it relevant to mention the work done by Birnbaum (1983) regarding 'diversity' in higher education systems. Birnbaum was concerned with the external diversity (diversity between HEIs) rather than internal diversity (diversity within HEIs). The systemic diversity is concerned with institutional type and size. The structural diversity is focused on history of establishments among universities. The programmatic diversity emphasizes on the diversity in degree levels, focus of the study programs. The procedural diversity is concerned with diversity in teaching and learning across HEIs. The reputational diversity stresses on the perceived differences in the institutional image and visibility. The constituential diversity focuses on the diversity in different constituent units such as students, faculty. The values diversity focuses on the differences social environment at HEIs (Birnbaum, 1983).

The latest statistics on the size of the higher education system (systemic and structural diversity) reveals that it comprises a total of about 1043 universities, 42343 independent and affiliated college and approximately 11779 stand-alone institutions. These universities include private and public universities, which are funded by state and central (federal) government in the country. Moreover, there are 48 central universities, 135 institutions of national importance, 386 state public universities and 327 state private institutions (All India Survey of Higher Education, 2020). It is well established that different 'types' of HEIs have different histories and models pertaining to their governance and funding. For instance, HEIs in India can be established either by an Act of Parliament or by the state legislatures. The central universities are established by the Act of Parliament and state universities by the state legislatures are state universities. Moreover, certain HEIs are given 'deemed to be universities' by the central government under certain guidelines. There are a few HEIs called 'institutions of national importance' founded by the Parliament/state legislatures. These three types of HEIs (Universities, deemed to be universities and institutions of national importance) are degree granting institution. The colleges do not grant degrees, degrees are granted by the university they are affiliated to (Agarwal, 2006). Considering that these HEIs are different in terms of the academic, administrative and financial dimensions, it is likely that universities may react differently to educational policies. The institutional responses to internationalization cannot be understood without probing the systemic diversity in the Indian higher education. Further, these structural differences may have a further bearing on the approaches to internationalization in different types of HEIs.

Another important feature of the Indian higher education system is the diversity in study programs (programmatic diversity). Keeping aside the certificate courses and post-graduate diploma courses, there are three major levels of qualifications: Bachelor programs, Master programs and doctoral programs. While the Bachelor programs may last three to

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four to five years (depending on the discipline), the Master programs have usually been offered as two-year programs. However, the NEP 2020 has proposed altered structures under Bachelor and Master programs. For instance, Bachelor programs would be three year programs or four year programs with research or Honors, and certificate courses or diploma for a duration of a year. The Master programs could be for a year or two years. Though the rationales for introducing a change in the structure and duration of these programs are clearly laid out in the document, accommodating the emerging diversity might be challenging for HEIs.

There is also a difference in terms of regulations and guidelines prescribed by government with regard to the management of universities. Kumar (2018) points out that 'excessive interference' by the government may negatively impact the institutional autonomy to take decisions. The aspect of support from the government in terms of funding for private and public universities has caught attention of scholars. According to University Grants Commission (2002), the central institutions and deemed-to-be institutions obtain both plan and non-plan grants, whereas the state universities attain only plan grants. The plan grants are utilized for maintenance and academic resources; the non-plan grants are focused on equipment cost and renovation of university campuses.

In terms of autonomy, there is a distinction in the academic autonomy held by universities and colleges in India. While the universities have a fair share of academic autonomy, colleges do not have enough academic autonomy as they function under the directives of the affiliated university. In terms of the recruitment of teachers, even though universities may have autonomy; the universities follow the salary structures, rules and regulations laid out by the University Grants Commission (Varghese & Malik, 2019). The recruitment of teachers in government colleges is different, where they are recruited into the system and not the institution. The college teachers can be transferred from one college to another (Tilak & Mathew, 2016; Malik, 2017). In terms of financial autonomy, the universities do not sufficient freedom to make decisions. Moreover, in terms of financial autonomy, as India needs to focus more on building research intensive universities, not only is academic and intellectual autonomy required but also financial support to carry out research (GnY, 2018). The state universities are more affected than central universities in terms of budgets they receive. Moreover, colleges are more affected than universities in terms of the budgets they attain. The aspect of graded autonomy is receiving prominence, which implies that better than the university performance, lesser would be governmental control. Varghese and Malik reiterate that "universities either accredited by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) with a score of at least 3.5 or ranked in the top 50 institutions of National Institutions Ranking Framework (NIRF) for two consecutive years will be under the 'Category I'" (Varghese & Malik, 2019; p.52). The differences in autonomy also point out to how systemic diversity, structural diversity and values diversity may further have a bearing on the overall performance of universities.

Impact of Diversity on Institutional Performance

The systemic diversity, program diversity and diversity in other aspects of university management may have a bearing on the extent to which different types of universities can engage in international cooperation. The next few paragraphs will focus on how these forms

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of diversity have directly or indirectly affected the university performance in different national and international arenas.

The features of the international engagement of Indian universities requires further investigation in terms of sporadic participation of a certain few universities in internationalization and unequal number of incoming and outgoing students, with a small percentage of incoming international students and vast number of outgoing Indian students. While India sends close to 3,70,000 students to study abroad, the country attracts only about 47,000 international students, who chiefly come from countries neighbouring India (UNESCO, 2021). Varghese (2020b) reports that the outgoing number of students has increased by 4.5 times from 66,700 in 2000 to 305,000 in 2017. India hosts only 1 percent of international students. The incoming to outgoing mobility ratio is 1:10. This inequality makes one reassess the trends in international higher education in the country and reasons for these disparities in student mobility numbers in the country. Moreover, though private universities are preoccupied with branding of the study programs and visibility, Chattopadhyay (2021) points out Indian HEIs by and large do not feel the urgent need to promote the study programs at the universities (reputational diversity) as the revenue from international students do not form a significant part of the total university income. Though some universities are permitted to admit 10 or 15 percent of international students, Indian universities end up with less than 1 percent of international students (Varghese, 2020b). This particular finding can be probably attributed to the systemic diversity and the resulting response to international engagement.

The systemic diversity may have a bearing on the university's response to internationalization. Keeping in mind the diversity in the Indian higher education system, it is equally significant to understand the similarities and distinctions in university responses to IHE in specific. For example, research collaborations are found to be a vital area of internationalization. Previous research (Banshal et al, 2019) suggests that central universities and Institutions of National Importance in India tend to have larger research output than private universities (procedural diversity). A report by British Council (2015) showed that only certain public universities (state and central) worked towards curriculum development, whereas only a few private universities were keen on engaging in international cooperation. The state universities did not demonstrate similar interest as the private and central universities to collaborative research. The British Council report also revealed that Indian universities predominantly focused on student mobility. Altbach and Mathews (2015) stress that though outgoing mobility numbers have seen a significant rise, the incoming students largely come from neighbouring countries only.

Moreover, not all Indian universities participate in international cooperation. Barring a handful number of private universities, a few central universities host international students. These students come from countries such as Nepal, Afghanistan and Bhutan. Moreover, the approach to internationalization by state governments has been peculiar: even though governments wish that universities collaborate internationally, they expect universities take the required action (British Council, 2015). Thus, the guidance and direction from the state has been seemingly limited with regard to internationalization. Thus, it is clear that diversity in the Indian higher education has an impact on the response and approaches taken by universities to implement international activities.

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Conclusion

University has emerged as one of the main actors in the international system. The adaptive response of universities to social, political and cultural issues makes them into flexible institutions of thousand-year-old existence. Universities are vulnerable to societal variations and it will remain unknown if there ever will be a uniform reaction to change (change in terms of global development or national policies). The universities, by and large, are caught at the crossroads between preserving their diversity as well as homogenizing their structure to respond to global competition.

The different forms of diversity even within a higher education system, as seen in the Indian case may have far reaching impact on the response of universities to policy changes. The social realities, history of establishment of different types of universities or cultural upbringing may not allow for uniform implementation of educational policies. It is equally important to consider if there can be lesser emphasis on a 'commonly recognized' approach to internationalization, in terms of expected research output or number of international students' enrolments, because parameters to measure internationalization need to be devised keeping in mind the systemic or structural or programmatic diversity.

In the same vein, this particular investigation about diversity in Indian higher education system opens scope for further research in terms of nuanced approach to internationalization. For instance, if there should be different ranking instruments to measure the different aspects of institutional performance (instruments which are context specific) or should policymakers embrace 'commonly accepted' ranking agencies and their performance. It is about time we deliberate and reflect on whether diversity within and across universities is a reality to embrace and work on or should there be set expectations according to pre-determined standards of measurement.

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Human Participants

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