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India's post-secondary education sector is huge and is opening up to foreign participation. Canada can develop a key facet of expanded bilateral ties with India if it puts in place a focused strategy that meets Indian needs.

Post-Secondary Collaborations as the New Cornerstone in Canada-India Relations

The stampede of Canadian premiers and educators to India in the past three years stands in stark contrast to the thin and sporadic efforts by Canadian institutions to keep alive the connections to India that ripened during the Colombo Plan and withered after Delhi's 1974 nuclear tests. In the past three years, representatives of more than 70 Canadian universities and colleges have visited India. Last week, senior representatives from 40 Canadian post-secondary institutions and the presidents of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the Association of Community Colleges in Canada participated in Delhi in the Higher Education Summit 2008 organized by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

In pursuing collaborations with counterpart institutions in India and building two-way connections, Canada has slipped out of the top ten. The number of Indian students studying in Canadian post-secondary institutions is now just over 3,500; in Australia it is about 47,000; in the United States about 95,000.

Two studies just released by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada provide a broad analysis of the Indian education sector and the obstacles and opportunities that Canada faces. The reports titled -"[Canadian Post-Secondary Players in India: Obstacles, Issues, and Opportunities](#)" and "[Imagining Success: Canada - India Academic Relations](#)" -- provide a critical look at recent programs and initiatives and also make recommendations for Canadian institutions to make inroads in India.

The drivers of renewed Canadian interest start with changing demographics. With 65% of its population below 34 years of age, extremely limited capacity for domestic growth of high-quality education, and increased domestic spending power, the post-secondary market sector is enormous. At present, only about 10% of Indian youth have access to higher education.

Major changes in the structure and funding of the higher education system are taking shape. Whether or not a Foreign Education Bill now before the Indian parliament passes, a process of reform and liberalization of the education sector is in train. It offers increased possibilities for a larger foreign presence and commercial returns in a country that continues to highly value accessibility.

The goddess of wealth and the goddess of learning may be sisters but they are not twins. Canadian and Indian institutions face the common problem of encouraging the sisters to live under one roof.

Canadian colleges and universities see an immediate opportunity in recruiting much larger numbers of qualified Indian students at all levels of our system ranging from employment-related skills training to graduate study. But they also see opportunities for collaborative partnerships, both to facilitate student recruitment and exchange and enrich advanced research and commercialization opportunities. They rightly see collaboration with India as a key ingredient of long-term economic competitiveness.

Canada's own experience of the higher education revolution over the past 40 years has featured enormous increases in enrollment and a blend of funding mechanisms in a system that is basically public funded. It has also seen the increasing focus on student needs, mobility across college and university lines and the on-going challenge to balance accessibility and quality. This experience makes Canadian educators familiar with the path ahead for India.

Being familiar is not the same as being competitive. Canadian institutions are eager but scarcely making a scratch. As [Randall Martin underlines](#), institutions and agencies from the US, the UK, Australia and the EU are better organized, better financed and better positioned in the sector than Canada. And as [Kathleen Scherf documents](#), bilateral cooperation with India faces a variety of major hurdles including a low level of mutual knowledge, credential recognition, visa issuance, jurisdictional divides between our provinces and federal government, and little cooperation among Canadian institutions themselves. She is organizing an event at the Banff Centre in February 2009 to formulate concrete activities to address each of these.

Recent adjustments to Canadian visa and immigration policies are working to the advantage of Canadian collaborators. And the "Brand Canada" and advocacy efforts by the Canadian High Commission in Delhi are proving helpful. Meanwhile, Canadian institutions are gradually getting a sense of each other's activities and the complexities of the educational system in India.

Coming out of the FICCI Educational Summit, the Canadian participants identified three essential steps to make Canada competitive. First, Canada needs a national strategy for expanding higher education cooperation with India as part of a broader effort to deepen the foundations of bilateral ties. A task force composed of representatives of the leaders of the institutions most deeply involved in India collaborations plus senior representatives of the federal and provincial governments is suggested.

Second, Canada should set targets for expanding the number of Indian students studying at Canadian institutions, looking to raise the level to 15,000 per year by 2014. And we should ensure that at least 1,000 Canadian students a year take advantage of opportunities in India. This will take a major investment from Canadian institutions themselves plus new scholarship and marketing resources with public support. Can a specified number of the new Vanier Scholarships be targeted at India?

Third, India is facing an enormous challenge in strengthening and expanding its own post-secondary system. There is already an acute shortage of qualified Ph.D.s to teach in them. Some of the Institutes of Technology already are short of up to 30% of their desired teaching complement. Some of this need can be met by traditional graduate training and, at a later point, by off-shore education. But what is needed to deepen partnerships in the short and medium term are “Canada-India Mobility Fellowships” to facilitate a year’s placement for an advanced graduate student or post-doctoral fellow in the other country on the basis of a co-supervisory model. The aim would be to create 500 such fellowships for award over the next five years.

These are big ambitions that are only one step toward creating a durable and mutually-beneficial relationship with an emerging India. Their success will depend upon a new form of national leadership that includes public-private partnerships on both sides and inter-institutional and inter-governmental cooperation in Canada. Are we ready for the challenge? Is Ottawa ready to move beyond rhetoric and bring new resources and ideas to the table?

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