

Canada and India Discuss Closer Higher-Education Ties

By KAREN BIRCHARD

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India could become the next China for Canadian international higher education, according to senior Canadian and Indian educators who met in a landmark forum here on Sunday.

In conversations and presentations at the forum, which was part of a larger conference on international education that continues through Wednesday, the educators talked about expanding cooperation and partnerships between Canada and India, as well as having students move between the two countries.

"This a very high-powered and historic meeting," said J. Colin Dodds, president of Saint Mary's University, in Nova Scotia, and chair of the governing board of the Canadian Bureau for International Education, which organizes the annual conference and was one of the forum's sponsors.

Both countries have much in common, he said, but, until now, many Canadian universities and colleges have focused their international efforts on China.

China, which is the nation that sends the second-largest number of international students to Canada, behind South Korea, "remains a very important partner," Mr. Dodds said. "However, China became open for business in the 80s, and India has only recently become open for business" in terms of expanding international partnerships in higher education. "So there's much potential."

India is now seventh on the list of sending nations.

Higher education is booming in India as part of the government's strategy to lift millions of people out of poverty each year. India now has a middle class larger than the population of the United States, according to statistics presented at the forum. If the growth projections are correct, India will need 150 new universities over the next 20 years.

The country now has 342 universities with 10 million students and half a million faculty members.

Need for Science Educators

"We have an acute faculty shortage in the technical disciplines like engineering," said Damodar Acharya, director of the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur and the past chair of the All

India Council for Technical Education. He suggested joint programs to train faculty members and increase the number of Indian students earning master's degrees and Ph.D.'s.

Panjab Singh, vice chancellor of Banaras Hindu University, and other speakers said that India had not taken full advantage of the educational opportunities in Canada. "We need to explore our common interests in the social sciences and the humanities," Mr. Singh said. "Areas like multiculturalism, human-security issues, aboriginal and indigenous peoples, gender studies, the arts, and many more areas."

Some 160,000 Indian students go abroad every year to study, spending about \$4-billion (U.S.). Only about 2,500 Indian students come to Canada, a stark contrast with the tens of thousands who go to the United States and Britain. But the numbers are growing and are expected to jump when Canada develops a higher profile in India.

"Things are happening quickly. This is the third meeting in the past eight months and we've provided the backdrop, said Balbir Sahni, professor emeritus of economics at Concordia University, in Montreal, and co-chair of a committee to work on India education set up by the Canadian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. "Today you can see the enthusiasm."

The committee's other chair, Jean-Philippe Tachdjian, a federal trade commissioner, said in an interview: "Any institution that doesn't have an Indian strategy today is not in the international game. If they're not in India, they're not in the game."

A Call for Better Planning

Other speakers, however, raised concerns about the lack of a cohesive strategy. "My sense right now is that there is a stampede to India, which means lots of institutions from all over the globe moving, but without a clear direction," said Paul Evans, chairman of the executive committee of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. "We have rhetoric, we have interest, but not a national strategy."

But population pressure on India's education system makes it certain that demand for international education there will grow.

"Today the thirst for education is so high that an Indian parent will sacrifice anything for a good education for his or her child," said Kam Rathee, president of the Canada-India Business Council, which is sponsoring an education trade mission to India next year. "Canada is a leader in research and education, with universities and colleges of the highest quality and caliber," he said. "If we can link Canada and India together, we will get the best of both worlds."

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