
Indian Prime Minister Describes Plan to Create 40 New Universities

By [SHAILAJA NEELAKANTAN](#) New Delhi

India's university system, which the government has largely neglected in recent years, is now the focus of a reform and development agenda, the country's prime minister, Manmohan Singh, said on Wednesday, as he announced plans for several new higher-education institutions.

To ensure that at least a fifth of Indians age 18 to 24 go to college, up from around a tenth, Mr. Singh announced that the government would set up five new Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, eight new Indian Institutes of Technology, seven new Indian Institutes of Management, and 20 new Indian Institutes of Information Technology.

The prime minister did not specify how much the ambitious plan would cost, but two months ago, India's higher-education regulator asked for more than \$13-billion for expanding the higher-education system.

"These will generate new educational opportunities for our youth," Mr. Singh said in an address to the country on the 60th anniversary of its independence from the British. "I wish to see a revolution in the field of modern education in the next few years," he added.

India's National Knowledge Commission, an advisory body, says only 7 percent of India's 18-to-24-year-olds are enrolled in higher-education institutions, a proportion that is just half the average for Asian countries. In January the Knowledge Commission said in a report that India must increase its number of universities to 1,500 by 2015, from 350 now, to raise the proportion of 18-to-24-year-olds entering higher education to at least 15 percent.

Mr. Singh also announced on Wednesday more scholarships for the needy. He didn't specify the amount or the nature of the scholarships. "It is my fervent desire that India becomes a fully educated, modern, progressive nation," he said. In June, Mr. Singh announced that to improve access to higher education nationwide, the government would set up at least one central university in each of the 16 states that lack one and at least one degree-granting college in 350 of India's 604 local governing districts that lack one ([The Chronicle](#), June 4).

Also in June, he lamented that almost two-thirds of the nation's universities and 90 percent of its degree-granting colleges were rated as below average in quality and that university curricula were typically not synchronized with the needs of employers or job seekers ([The Chronicle](#), June 25).

"We should seek not just functional literacy, but good-quality education -- education that is affordable, accessible, equitable, and available to every boy and girl who seeks to study," Mr. Singh reiterated on Wednesday.

Surendra Prasad, director of the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, one of seven such institutes in the country, applauded the prime minister's plan to expand the number of the elite institutes, but said that it would take more than money to make the initiative succeed. The challenge, he said, would be "finding the right intellectual resources to man these institutions."

Most Indian Institutes of Technology are unable to fill 25 to 30 percent of their faculty positions, a problem that will only grow as many faculty members are set to retire in the next few years. And India's booming economy is drawing prospective faculty members away from academe and into the higher-paying private sector.

"Unless you make an academic career more attractive and interesting to the next generation by making salaries more realistic to the market," said Mr. Prasad, the challenges will become even harder to overcome.

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