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In India, Limits on Foreign Universities Lead to Creative Partnerships

By SHAILAJA NEELAKANTAN, New Delhi

One recent January afternoon, about 40 students from the Ansal Institute of Technology waited anxiously outside the office of a high-ranking official from North Dakota State University. "You have to write the date the American way, month first, not day first!" yelled one student to another, as they sifted through various documents needed to get their visas approved by the U.S. Embassy.

"I only have one proof of my finances. Is that enough?" another student asked loudly, of no one in particular. She got a dozen answers from various parts of the room.

The students had been admitted to the university, but not as freshmen. When they arrive in Fargo in August, they will begin their junior year. Ansal Institute has had a "twinning arrangement," as it is commonly called, with North Dakota State since 2004, which allows Indian students to study for two years at home and then travel to the United States to earn undergraduate degrees from their institution's American partner.

Eager to get into India's lucrative higher-education market but not permitted to do so independently, at least 130 foreign providers have forged similar partnerships with local, mostly unaccredited, private institutions.

The local institutions have themselves circumvented the law — one that says they can't call themselves universities or offer degrees unless recognized by regulators. Instead, they call themselves institutes, academies, schools, and foundations, and they offer diplomas instead of degrees.

Ansal, based in a suburb of New Delhi, has arrangements with a number of other American universities, including Clemson, Eastern Michigan, San Jose State, and Tarleton State. Other local, private higher-education providers run twinning collaborations with at least a dozen American institutions, including Carnegie Mellon, Marshall, Purdue at Calumet, and Western Michigan Universities and Union College, in New York.

More broadly, though, various government regulations and restrictions have made it nearly impossible to coherently track who is doing what in India. "It is very hard to get exact numbers," says Sudhanshu Bhushan, the author of a three-year-old government-commissioned study of foreign education providers in India.

According to Mr. Bhushan's study, American institutions run 66 collaborations with local, private players, more than any other country. Britain has the next highest number, with 59.

Twinning arrangements are the most popular form of partnership, the study showed, because they involve the least risk for foreign institutions and offer the most income. The partners share tuition revenue for the part of the program taught in India, but the foreign institution keeps all the tuition students pay once they transfer in. Generally, faculty members from the Indian institutions teach a curriculum provided by the foreign partner. But exact arrangements vary from program to program.

Hoping to Do More

Many of America's top universities, although interested in getting into India, have avoided such partnerships. Instead, some of them collaborate with public universities through joint research programs and student and faculty exchanges.

George Washington University Law School is helping the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur design the curriculum and train the faculty for its school of intellectual-property law. The partnership is a nod to India's growing economic power as it has begun to develop intellectual property in fields like biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology, and software. The business schools at Columbia and Stanford Universities signed agreements last January with the Indian Institutes of Management, in Ahmedabad and Bangalore, respectively, to start student-exchange programs. Simmons School of Management, a women's institution in Boston, and the Indian Institute of Management in Kolkata also have a student-exchange program.

Still, a number of American universities are hoping to do more. Last June the Georgia Institute of Technology signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh to set up an offshore campus there. It will initially offer undergraduate degrees in three or four disciplines. But the deal can't move forward until India's government passes a bill, a draft of which has yet to be introduced in Parliament, to allow foreign universities to operate in the country.

"We want to be invited here," says Gary Schuster, Georgia Tech's provost, who recently traveled to New Delhi with other senior administrators to meet with key higher-education regulators. "We are not colonialists or invaders, and we will come in fully transparent and conform with the laws of India and of the U.S." he says.

Georgia Tech, he adds, will not ask for money from the government to set up the campus, and will reinvest any profit back into its India campus.

India is committed to education and research, so starting a campus here fits with Georgia Tech's objective of being a global university where ideas can be traded, says Mr. Schuster. "But we need sufficient autonomy to have the ability to maintain our standards. The issue of brand is very important."

Many Indian academics and government officials, however, do not want foreign institutions to have much autonomy, a view that is reflected in the broader fight over whether to allow foreign universities to set up stand-alone programs.

Many Challenges

American institutions that do make twinning arrangements with unregulated Indian institutions are left to their own devices to ensure the quality of the programs. Sudhir Mehta, North Dakota State's associate vice president for academic affairs, says he closely monitors the 10 twinning programs his university offers with Ansal Institute, as well as programs with the university's partners in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Thailand.

"I have been stationed here to do just that, and I visit Ansal every month," says Mr. Mehta, as he takes a break from advising the dozens of students waiting outside his office. He admits that the collaboration turned out to be harder than North Dakota State anticipated because the Indian higher-education system is very different from the American one.

"I didn't think there would be so many challenges," he says, pointing to differences in the two institutions' approaches to performance assessment, emphasis on laboratory work, and cultural norms. "There were so many complaints [from North Dakota State] about the first batch of students, in 2006, that we wondered if we should even continue this program."

But he notes that Ansal Institute officials have been able to make enough adjustments since then that North Dakota State had almost no complaints about last year's group of 60 students. The institute, he says, "has been very open to suggestions and made the necessary improvements."

The joint programs are popular enough with Indian students that the private Indian institutions can charge an average of 45 times the tuition at top public universities. But critics say that's only because the private institutions hype their foreign collaborations, not because their programs are necessarily good.

"Indian students are gullible and need to be protected from fly-by-night operators," said Arjun Singh, India's minister in charge of higher education, at a recent conference.

Students at Ansal seem happy enough to pay the higher rates.

"For a U.S. degree, the fee structure here is quite low," says Mukul Jain, a mechanical-engineering student who has been admitted to North Dakota State. "I have chatted with my seniors who did the same program, and they are earning very good salaries."

"The best part about this degree is that you get to study abroad and get a whole new perspective on another world," says Rahul Pruthi, a 2005 graduate in computer information systems from another Ansal partner, Tarleton State. Mr. Pruthi, who was on the campus for an alumni event, adds that the higher fees were not a deterrent because he got a "degree from abroad."

For North Dakota State — which has some 300 students-in-waiting in Delhi and about 100 students from Ansal already on the Fargo campus — the twinning arrangement has clearly brought in money. But even if India does eventually allow foreign universities to operate independently here, Mr. Mehta says, North Dakota may not set up shop.

"It will be viable only if we can charge \$10,000 to \$15,000 in fees annually, and many Indians may not be able to afford that," he says.

Georgia Tech is more confident that if it opens an Indian campus, it can charge the same tuition as it does in the United States. But, says Mr. Schuster, if the branch campus isn't possible, it, too, may pursue a twinning partnership.

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