April 21, 2010

I.H.T. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Rise of Asia's Universities

By RICHARD C. LEVIN

The rapid economic development of Asia since World War II — starting with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, then extending to Hong Kong and Singapore, and finally taking hold powerfully in India and mainland China — has forever altered the global balance of power. These countries recognize the importance of an educated work force to economic growth, and they understand that investing in research makes their economies more innovative and competitive.

Beginning in the 1960s, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan sought to provide their populations with greater access to post-secondary education, and they achieved impressive results. Today, China and India have an even more ambitious agenda. Both seek to expand their higher-education systems, and since the late 1990s, China has done so dramatically.

The results of Beijing’s investment have been staggering. Over the past decade, the number of institutions of higher education in China more than doubled, from 1,022 to 2,263. Meanwhile, the number of Chinese who enroll in a university each year has quintupled.

India’s achievement to date has not been nearly as impressive, but its aspirations are no less ambitious. To fuel the country’s economic growth, India aims to increase its gross enrollment ratio in post-secondary education from 12 percent to 30 percent by 2020. This goal translates to an increase of 40 million students in Indian universities over the next decade.

Having made tremendous progress in expanding access to higher education, the leading countries of Asia are focused on an even more challenging goal: building universities that can compete with the finest in the world. The governments of China, India, Singapore and South Korea are explicitly seeking to elevate some of their universities to this exalted status because they recognize the important role that university-based scientific research has played in driving economic growth in the United States, Western Europe and Japan.

Developing top universities is a tall order. World-class universities achieve their status by assembling scholars who are global leaders in their fields. In the sciences, this requires first-class facilities, adequate funding, and competitive salaries and benefits. China is making substantial investments on all three fronts. And beyond the material conditions required to attract faculty, an efficient system of allocating research funding is also needed.

It takes more than research capacity alone for a nation to develop economically, however. It takes well-educated citizens of broad perspective and dynamic entrepreneurs capable of independent and original thinking. The leaders of China, in particular, have been very explicit in recognizing that two elements are missing from their universities: multidisciplinary breadth and the cultivation of critical thinking.

The traditional Asian approaches to curriculum and pedagogy may work well for training line engineers and
midlevel government officials, but they are less suited to fostering leadership and innovation. Students who aspire to be leaders in business, medicine, law, government or academia need “the discipline” of mind — the ability to adapt to constantly changing circumstances, confront new facts, and find creative ways to solve problems. Cultivating such habits requires students to be more than passive recipients of information; they must learn to think for themselves.

There has already been dramatic movement toward American-style curriculum in Asia. But changing the style of teaching presents a more challenging problem. It is more expensive to offer classes with smaller enrollments, and it requires the faculty to adopt new methods.

Not every university can or needs to be world class. Japan and South Korea have learned this lesson and have well-funded flagship universities. China understands this strategy, too. But India is an anomalous case. It established five Indian Institutes of Technology in the 1950s and 1960s, and 10 more in the past two decades. These are outstanding institutions for educating engineers, but they have not become globally competitive in research. The egalitarian politics of India make it difficult to focus on developing a small number of world-class research universities.

In one respect, however, India has a powerful advantage over China, at least for now. It affords faculty members the freedom to pursue their intellectual interests wherever they may lead and allows students and faculty alike to express, and thus test, their most heretical and unconventional theories — freedoms that are an indispensable feature of any great university.

As barriers to the flow of people, goods and information have come down, and as the process of economic development proceeds, Asian countries have increasing access to the human, physical and informational resources needed to create top universities. If they concentrate their growing resources on a handful of institutions, tap a worldwide pool of talent, and embrace freedom of expression and freedom of inquiry, they will succeed in building world-class universities. It will not happen overnight; it will take decades. But it may happen faster than ever before.

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