



EU Education Outreach in India

A response from the India Platform

January 2013

The Context

This note is a response to the concept note “EU Education Outreach in India”, written by the Embassy of Belgium in India and sent to the India Platform in December 2012 for feedback. The idea outlined in the concept note was to build further on the success of the European Higher Education Fairs of 2006-2008 and to organise both roadshows and educational fairs. The objective was (1) to increase visibility of European institutions of higher education, (2) to attract Indian students to Europe, and (3) to increase mutual understanding and collaborations. The suggested roadshows and educational fairs organised by European member states together were meant to compliment and build further on the existing collaborations and fairs of many European member states in India.

The activities planned in the note were (1) A 1-2 day Education Fair in Delhi complemented with a symposium where EU-India policies, strategies and initiatives would be discussed and (2) An Educational Roadshow in the metropolitan and tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

Europe’s reputation in India

One of the major problems the India Platform sees in India, is that Europe is not known in India. Every European working in India or collaborating with Indians knows this: Indians do not know Europe as an entity. Of course they know the UK and often they know Germany or France. Portugal, Denmark, Belgium other European member states are happily invisible in the Indian image of the territory between Asia and the US. Most of us are not even surprised anymore when an Indian call center mistakes “Europe” for “New York”, or when our European capital Brussels is understood as “Brazil”.

This is, more than a painful realization for us, Europeans, a huge missed opportunity for India. The reason being that Europe has a lot to offer to India, however old-fashioned, anxious and unattractive its reputation is in 21st century India. Consider the following reality to appreciate the scale of the missed opportunity: Indians who do happen to know Europe and its quality of life appreciate it at such a level that they (1) do not think of going to the US anymore and (2) want to introduce some of our social and educational systems in India. In this sense, the promotion of European higher education is extremely important and necessary. Joint actions such as roadshows, symposia or education fairs *appear* to be a good starting point.

Although the problem analysis in the concept note of the Belgian Embassy is correct, the proposed solutions are not. We will explain what we mean by describing a few facts typical of the India of today.

1. A young Indian interested in quality education is being bombarded by hundreds if not thousands of 'education providers': private universities, government institutions, US advertisers, Indian education marketers, Asian education marketers and since some years, also European education institutions, some of them paying an Indian HR company to be visible in India. One more education fair or roadshow, however well promoted, will not make a difference. In the best case scenario it will get picked up by a certain layer of the Indian society and attract students and institutions from a particular sector, vaguely expressing their interest.
2. As explained in the India Platform vision note (see www.india-platform.org / policy and vision), the Indian higher education sector is not indigenously structured through institutions. Trying to establish merely institution-to-institution contacts will at best attract Indian institutions aiming to piggyback on the brand name of a European institution. This kind of 'collaboration' will not only be useless to the European institution, but it will exclude the many European countries which do not have a name in India, let alone the quality universities in those countries.
3. Indians are businessmen, also in education. European institutions still believe in the Humboldtian vision of higher education including a long-term and broad vision on what education is and its contribution to a society. Most of the deciding players in Indian education however do not. If we do not take this into account and develop a vision to guide us we will end up selling the soul of European education for Indian money.
4. Indian students who come to Europe often end up disillusioned. Being used to the Indian education reality, they expect receiving extra services like boarding and lodging or tutorship availability in return for paying registration fees. Elite institutions in India also often guarantee a job, since they are being visited by top level companies to recruit graduates. Most European universities do not offer these services, leaving the Indian student to himself during his studies and without a job after his studies. He comes back to India with little to be proud of. On top of it his friends and family do not know the university or the country where he has studied. In fact, he has less in his hands than he would have had if he had stayed in India or gone to the US.
5. The Indian higher education ministers of the recent central and state governments are fed up with the brain drain from sending their bright minds to foreign countries. The newest policies not only discourage studies abroad but are also calling back Indians residing in the US to India.

When planning roadshows and education fairs, these are some of the facts we must take into account if we want to achieve the objectives mentioned in the concept note:

- increase collaboration between EU and Indian higher education institutions and foster inter-institutional exchanges

- reach out to captive Indian students and increase their knowledge about the EU HEIs
- increase understanding of opportunities and barriers on both sides.

A European strategy for India

Instead of imitating the US strategy with traditional PR tactics and hoping that Indian students will come to our institutions, Europe could re-examine its strengths and aim at a new and more interesting relationship with India. The advantage is that Europe, as a culture, has certain assets to seduce India, and to make her want to collaborate with us. In the following lines we will briefly sketch what a European strategy in higher education could consist of.

The reason India is investing so much money in building of new universities, in attracting foreign institutions to come to India and in experimenting with some aspects of liberal arts education, is that she faces a lot of challenges in her higher education. What she lacks is a centuries old tradition in higher education where research plays a vital role. Of course, India has her own research institutes but they function the way American research institutes function: without connection to education and without concerning themselves with contribution to society and culture. We all know that intimate connection between research, education and contribution to society has always been the strength of European higher education and still is. Nowhere else in the world does a researcher have the kind of greenhouse environment to nurture and develop innovative ideas while building on generations before him and preparing the ground for generations coming after him. Only European universities succeed in playing the crucial role of being a link between generations. More than three centuries of doing research in this way has given us a research culture of which Americans or Asians can only dream of.

How is this relevant for a European strategy for higher education in India? It is relevant because this is exactly why India would want to collaborate with Europe, if she only knew about it. If we are able to show her what we can offer, we can establish a bond between Europe and India, two of the most important cultural entities in the world of today. A bond based not on instrumentality but on mutual respect and admiration. A bond which cannot be easily broken. This is the first reason why the proposed actions are not adequate answers to the problem: it is impossible to increase mutual understanding about something as deep, rich and varied in one-time meetings.

There is another reason why roadshows and education fairs will not be able to convey what we have to offer: the targeted geographical regions are too big. In India one gets things done through informal rather than formal relationships. Although this is also true of Europe to some extent, it is of greater importance in India. Organising something in the entire country without strong local connections in the different regions is difficult even for the Indian Government or big political parties like Congress or the BJP, so we can safely say that it is impossible for institutions of the European higher education sector.

The India Platform advises a focus on a region as a strategy for the first few years. The advantages are manifold: many different actors in society can be addressed at the same time (students, researchers, politicians, administrators, businessmen, cultural representatives,...), the regional press can make the

events as big as we want them to be, local organisations can take up responsibilities in the management of the events generating an ownership and a commitment towards Europe, and so on. In a second phase, the focus could be broadened to neighbouring regions that will definitely be interested if the events are well organised. From there the rest of India can be addressed in the subsequent years.

Within a region, the format of a road show or an education fair can be interesting. What would however be even more interesting is an event in which focused discussion about the needs and the offers of both Indian and European educational players can be analysed and discussed. Different levels will be addressed appropriately through different formats: a conference for teachers and researchers, a policy meeting for policy makers, a fair with presentations for institutional providers and educational entrepreneurs, workshops and seminars for students and faculty, and so on. If a series of these activities take place in a well prepared and well organised manner, the European higher education sector would gain an excellent name in a span of two to three years in one region. It will then be able to expand this visibility easily to other regions in the following years – provided that an existing network and organisational facilities can be made use of. When starting without such a network and facilities many more years will be required.

It goes without saying that the India Platform is willing to offer help in the regions where it already has a network (Karnataka, and to some extent Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra).

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