

Scripting a New Future in Education

Girish M Shah, Suchorita Chattopadhyay and Mathieu Boisvert present a unique bi-national perspective on collaborative educational activities between India and Canada, and the mechanisms to achieve these goals.

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visit to Canada in April 2015, he and his then Canadian counterpart Stephen Harper jointly laid out a bold vision for future collaborations between Canada and India. Their joint statement declared that nine specific areas of cooperation will be pursued with '*Naya Utsah: Nayee Kadam*' or 'New Vigour: New Steps', i.e., with an aim to rejuvenate existing ties and building new bridges.¹ Four of these areas are intimately connected with collaborative educational activities, namely 'Education and Skills Development', 'Science Technology and Innovation', 'Agriculture' and 'Culture and People-to-People Ties'.

It is not surprising that educational collaboration is at the heart of implementation strategy for many of these areas of collaborations, because first and foremost, educational institutions produce highly-informed and trained individuals that will conduct most of

these activities. More importantly, these institutions also conduct extensive original research and cooperate with governments, industries, commerce and other stakeholders such as NGOs in every sphere of human activity, ranging from biomedical sciences, management and engineering to social sciences and humanities. The industry-academia collaborations have now become the norm rather than exception in many educational institutions. In addition, governments in both countries often frame their social policies based on the analytical work conducted by researchers in the domain of social sciences and humanities. Thus, educational collaborative activities will serve as the most important route for implementation of the collaborative agenda between Canada and India.

MAJOR STAKEHOLDERS

There are three major stakeholders who must act in a concerted manner to achieve these lofty goals set by the two prime ministers. These stakeholders are:

- (a) Governments of both nations, which should lay out policies and guidelines and provide financial support
- (b) Universities and institutions with their staff, students and academic leadership who will be involved in the actual collaborative work
- (c) National or bi-national organisations, which have historically taken the lead in facilitating collaborations between Canada and India; and who have the wherewithal to execute such programmes for the benefit of the governments, universities and institutions

GOVERNMENTS

The two governments have already taken their first step by making this joint declaration; and now they need to determine where to direct their 'new enthusiasm or *Naya Utsah*' and which

'new steps or *Nayee Kadam*' are to be taken. Essentially, the two federal governments can and must play a key role in establishing the framework and providing funds to support the collaborative activities guided by

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those principles. The Government of India has also recently taken an admirable new step by designing the novel programme of Global Initiative for Academic Network (GIAN), aimed at supporting the targeted participation of Canadian and other international experts in designated Indian Institutions of higher education. We urge the Canadian Government to match this 'new step' of the Indian Government with a fitting and matching programme targeted for specific high-profile educational collaboration with India.

There is an added twist to this equation from the Canadian side. While the higher education is under Central jurisdiction in India, it is the provincial governments in Canada that largely control core education-related activities. However, the Canadian Federal Government still manages to play a very large role in education through its centralised funding agencies, which financially support and orient diverse types of research activities in all educational institutions of Canada. Thus, India should also remain open to striking agreements with Provincial Governments in Canada. In fact, some provinces, recent examples being Quebec and Saskatchewan, have established formal linkages for educational collaboration in India at the central and state levels with the help of other stakeholders. It should, however, be kept in mind that the governments can only set the stage, but the following two stakeholders must play a major role in executing the desires expressed by government policies.

PEOPLE

The second set of stakeholders at the centre of all educational collaborative activities are the people (professors, students and

academic leadership) in various universities and institutions in both countries. They need to buy into the concept of benefits from such collaborations, design projects with their counterparts in the other country, apply for and secure funds, and then, successfully execute the collaborative work. A small pool of individual professors at some of the major universities in India and Canada has historically carried out collaborative work with each other. However, the large majority of professors and staff members in both countries are unable to capitalise on these opportunities due to lack of previous experience, inability to identify suitable partners, and in general, due to the reluctance to tread into an unknown territory in a different country. This is where the third set of the stakeholders must step in to bridge the gap.

ORGANISATIONS

The third set of stakeholders is organisations that represent collectiveness of educational institutes in each country. While these organisations in Canada would serve as appropriate vehicles to power the educational collaborative activities, they are, by definition, beholden only to the Canadian government or to the interest of their Canadian members in all of their activities, whether related to India or not, and irrespective of the expressed desires and wishes of the Indian Government or Indian educational institutions. The same set of advantages and limitations would hold true for organisations in India, funded by and run for only India-based institutions.

In this context, a truly bi-national organisation, such as the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute (SICI or 'Shastri Institute') that is mandated to further educational collaborative activities only between Canada and India, and which can capably execute the wishes of each government through its semi-independent programmes targeted in each country, would serve as an ideal vehicle to facilitate the desire of the two governments to increase

collaboration between the two countries. With a bi-national membership of 91 highest ranking educational institutions, the Shastri Institute has unparalleled access to the expertise from all corners of both countries. It has cost-effectively delivered bi-national programmes and specific India-related programmes of individual Canadian provinces such as Saskatchewan and Quebec, to promote excellence through exchange of expertise, mobility of students and professors and joint research projects. It also promotes synergistic interaction among different stakeholders through all-inclusive conferences and workshops, such as the conference at Laval University in Quebec City.²

Any dream of achieving big goals for economically and socially beneficial educational collaboration between the two countries will require a solid foundation of willing and capable central set of stakeholders, i.e., participants at the grassroots levels who can build and deliver those ambitious projects. The governments, as the primary stakeholder, must provide the enthusiasm, direction and the means to achieve their desired goals of strong educational partnership that can provide benefits from its spin-offs. This can be mainly achieved by the governments providing constant support to the third pillar of stakeholders, namely organisations such as the Shastri Institute and others who have a proven track record of cost-effectively delivering goals set by the governments for the ultimate benefit of the population in both Canada and India.

Girish M Shah is Professor, Université Laval, Quebec (QC) Canada and President, Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute (Shastri Institute or SICI). Suchorita Chattopadhyay is Professor, Jadavpur University, Kolkata (West Bengal), India and Vice-President, SICI. Mathieu Boisvert is Professor, Université de Québec à Montréal, Montréal (QC) Canada and Secretary/Treasurer, SICI. Authors wish to acknowledge the generous support of three past Presidents of Shastri Institute in drafting this document, namely Professor Gary vanLoon of Queen's University, Professor Braj Sinha of University of Saskatchewan and Professor Biju Paul Abraham of Indian Institute of Management Calcutta.

NOTES

1. Joint declaration from Canadian PM's office: (<http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2015/04/15/india-canada-joint-statement>).
2. Canada-India Education Conference, May 15, 2015, Laval University, Quebec City: website: <http://www.sici.org/news/article/canada-india-education-conference/>