

# Final report on educational practices in India

Student Diversity and Academic Writing Project

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## Disclaimer:

This resource has been produced by the HEFCE-funded Student Diversity and Academic Writing (SDAW) Project based at Lancaster University Management School and conducted in conjunction with the London School of Economics. The project website carries more information, [www.sdaw.info](http://www.sdaw.info).

Under subproject A – the country visits to China, India and Greece – our intention was to compile information for staff in British higher education institutions to better understand and relate to the diversity in their classrooms, especially on taught postgraduate programmes in business and management studies that have come to enrol large number of students from overseas. The resources are designed specifically to help lecturers and other university staff appreciate student's previous experiences and to support them in supporting their students.

During the country visits to India, China and Greece we set out to learn about the HE system in the three countries primarily in terms of educational practices at tertiary level that would be relevant to those students that would continue their education in the UK – none of the videos or reports we have produced are

offered with a view to characterising HE systems in China, India and Greece in their entirety.

Prior to publication this report has been read and commented on by other members of the team (and others). These comments are gratefully received. However, it is important to stress that this report is based on the personal interpretations of the author.

For a shorter and more general overview of undergraduate education in India (or China, or Greece), readers may wish to refer to the website of the Student Diversity and Academic Writing Project. It provides access to a number of short films (10-15 minutes) on educational practices in each of these countries as well as additional reports and resources. It also offers materials that might be used during recruitment and as part of induction of new students.

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## ***1. Overview of Indian higher education system***

This overview serves as an introduction to the Indian HE system, it provides vital background information for the remainder of this report. Some of the aspects presented here will be explored in more detail in later chapters.

Higher education in India predates the colonial period by several centuries. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were several kinds of well established religious schools on the subcontinent, e.g. Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim. Indigenous systems of knowledge were initially accepted, but then rejected by the British.<sup>1</sup> To support the colonial endeavour, the first modern Indian universities were established in 1857 in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. They were directly modelled on the University of London and set up to impart European knowledge. Since Indian independence was achieved there have been many efforts to reform this system, but apart from the emergence of some novel forms of HE organisations it has essentially been expanding – in what Indian commentators describe as an unplanned manner. This is to say, the basic structure of the nineteenth century British model is still relevant.

In India higher education policy is shaped by the Human Resources Development (HRD) Ministry and executed at the level of the federal state (though in actual fact responsibilities overlap) and financial contributions are made by both sides (Pinto, 1995, p.11). The University Grants Commission (UGC) is responsible for higher education in terms of distributing funds, implementation of central policies, coordination and the maintenance of standards. The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) assists with facilitating the coordination and cooperation between the Union and the States. There are a number of other regulatory bodies responsible for professional education, e.g. the All India Council for Technical Education, etc.

Indian higher education (HE) is considered a highly diverse and ‘fragmented’ system. Institutions can be grouped in the following manner:

- The national government (through the Ministry of Human Resource Development) funds and maintains the so called *Central Universities* (of which there are at present 18). Each of these has a special remit such as postgraduate teaching, regional or language development and was established through an act of parliament.<sup>2</sup>
- State governments also have the right to establish and run their own universities. These are co-financed by the union government and their running is assisted by the UGC. At present there are 211 *State Universities*.<sup>3</sup>
- The most rapidly growing institutions are *Deemed (to be) Universities*, which are privately run (although some may still be in public ownership).

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1 Powar reports that the study of Arabic and Sanskrit literature was being funded by the British government (1995, p.38).

2 Examples include Jawaharlal Nehru University, the University of Delhi and Indra Gandhi National Open University, etc.

3 For example, the University of Mumbai and the University of Pune are both funded through the State of Maharashtra.

To date some 95 such organisations have been granted autonomy in recognition of their record.

Whilst the number of universities is has been growing steadily these are generally not the main education providers. Rather, universities operate as affiliating bodies: they oversee the syllabus, organise the exams and award degrees. The actual teaching of undergraduates takes place in affiliated colleges. There are at present nearly 18,000 such colleges in India, most enrolling around 600 students. Institutions vary considerably in their administrative, financial and academic arrangements. The overwhelming majority of colleges are not involved in academic research.

The structure of undergraduate programmes is similar to the UK, i.e. undergraduate studies will generally take three years (longer in medicine, architecture and engineering) and lead to a Bachelors degree. It is important to note that British institutions vary in how they judge qualifications from Indian HEIs: some will accept candidates from India only if they have completed a Masters degree in India; their assumption being that undergraduate studies in India are more akin to secondary school rather than equivalent to a British undergraduate degree. Taught postgraduate degrees in India will normally take two years and lead to a Masters degree.<sup>4</sup> Not many people in India currently hold PhDs; also at the many colleges few members are qualified up to PhD level. Much formal education in India is still conducted in English, which remains the main medium of instruction for higher education.<sup>5</sup>

In India students enter HE after completion of 10+2 years of study (typically aged 17 or 18) and having obtained a secondary school leaving certificate. Many different exam boards exist alongside international and state level qualifications. In some institutions students are admitted after having passed entrance exams; in others (what is called) a 'cut-off point' scheme is in operation.<sup>6</sup> Each university – and indeed each college – has different requirements. Some students access HE on the basis of a reservation scheme for disadvantaged groups. Others avail themselves of the rapidly growing private sector (some parts of which operate purely according to students' ability to pay).

Students generally attend college full-time and their education is financed by their parents. The vast majority of students will have to pay fees for their studies in India and these can vary considerably; not only depending on the type of institution (private or public), but also on the particular programme which students attend. Higher education still bestows considerable prestige on those who complete qualifications in India.

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4 An important exception are the world renowned Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management, which award MBAs and diplomas instead of degrees.

5 Provision in the major languages, i.e. Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil and Urdu is increasing, but is more relevant to primary and to some extent secondary level schooling.

6 This means that applicants are considered only if their marks are above the cut off point.

Demand for postgraduate qualifications is rising in India, as is the interest in professional subjects. We found that it is very popular among Indian students to pursue an MBA straight after finishing their undergraduate degree, i.e. without gaining work experience in between. An undergraduate degree in engineering followed by a taught PG degree in business or management studies seems to be the route that most students aspire to.

## ***2. Methodology for country visits***

This report is one of three – the other being about higher education in China and Greece. Some elements of the methodology are common to all three countries and these are reported first. The specifics of the visit to India can be found in the latter part of this section (for example, the number of institutions visited, mechanisms of access, etc.). All participants in the study were promised anonymity and hence data reported is not attributed to specific institutions, departments or individuals.

### **2.1 Approach to fieldwork**

The application for research funding for the Student Diversity and Academic Writing Project was based on a number of pilot studies. Focus groups had been conducted with groups of international students during the academic years 2003/04 (at the LSE) and 2004/05 (both at Lancaster and the LSE), by Niall Hayes and Lucas Introna, who were also leading the MSc programme at Lancaster. These sessions were taped and provided an early indication of educational practices in China, India and Greece.

With the beginning of the actual SDAW project in January 2005 the team (complemented by Edgar Whitley and Anja Timm) compiled a new schedule of questions for focus groups which were then conducted in the academic year 2005/06. A second round of focus groups – with the same students – took place after they had submitted their first assessed essay and this provided more detailed pointers in terms of students writing practices.<sup>7</sup>

Several versions of the schedule of questions were put together for different groups of interviewees (students, staff, and other relevant parties involved in the transfer of international students to the UK or knowledgeable about students' transitions). The basic set of questions was asked during fieldwork in all three countries and by all researchers. Other questions were added as new and specific information emerged. For example, in the context of Chinese universities, we enquired specifically into the role of class monitors. In Greece, the political context emerged as particularly relevant. And in India we were trying to understand what it meant to operate with a centralised syllabus.

On the overseas visits we intended to conduct research only in the type of institutions, which actually supplied students to the UK (and more specifically to universities such as Lancaster and the LSE). To identify those which most closely matched these criteria, we consulted current and past students' files (going back 3 years) on taught graduate programmes in business and management studies.<sup>8</sup> In this way we established a concrete list of 'sending'

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<sup>7</sup> The revised schedule based on the focus group questions was piloted during the first visit to Greece (in March 2005). At the time we were also exploring the use of a questionnaire – both in the UK and during the country visits. The SDAW Project questionnaire was in part based on the Academic Integrity Survey produced by Don McCabe. A number of questions that were originally developed for the questionnaire were subsequently moved into the schedule of questions for interviews and focus groups.

<sup>8</sup> Social science type business and management programmes were prioritised over those with a mainly quantitative focus (accounting, finance, economics) as issues of academic writing were less pronounced in these.

universities as well as a list of the subjects that would have been studied at undergraduate level (the subjects differed in the various countries).

The organisation of country visits drew heavily on the various prior contacts, i.e. former colleagues, former students, university friends, etc. etc. We also sought the advice of the units of the two universities that might provide knowledge and or contacts (International Office, Alumni Office, Recruitment Office, Branch Offices) as well as the British Council. These contacts varied in utility as well as relevance for each of the three countries.

We began to set up the visits several weeks prior to our trips. Sometimes we had to write ('cold') to the director, VC, or International Office; in other cases we had names of programme directors or lecturers who we contacted directly. All visits were timed so as not to interfere (and in turn be limited by) the busy beginning of the year, with religious or national holidays or with exam periods. We formally requested a visit to the institution and asked for interviews with teaching staff and officials (where necessary) and requested that we would be allowed to sit in on lectures and that focus groups with students be set up on our behalf. We also asked to be granted a tour of the campus, including the library.

Visits varied in duration and intensity: sometimes we would visit for several days, at other times we were in attendance for no more than a few hours. We sought to balance the organised programme (whenever there was one) with everyday type of activities, e.g. we ate in the canteen, used the campus photocopy shops, internet cafes, etc. to facilitate conversations with staff and students. We also sought opportunities for participant observation wherever possible, i.e. attending lectures *ad hoc*, visiting libraries independently (which allowed us to check out collections, access arrangements and student use). In addition we conducted interviews with British Council teams, education agents, alumni and local colleagues. Some British Council offices kindly arranged focus groups for us. We also attended education fairs where possible in an effort to appreciate the diversity of students coming to the UK and their concerns about studying abroad.

Most of the interviews and focus groups that we conducted were tape recorded; though not all. Sometimes it seemed inappropriate to even ask, at other times interviewees were uncomfortable and sometimes there was simply no location that allowed for audio recording (noisy overhead fans, etc.). Research interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, i.e. based on our schedule of questions (at least at the outset). We also took photographs and collected hard data whenever possible, e.g. we photocopied exam questions, bought or photocopied books, journals and textbooks, collected instructions and lecture notes such as they were available to students as well as flyers, etc. The taped data was transcribed and analysed together with the other data.

## **2.2 Visits to India**

Our visits to India were conducted in late 2005 and early 2006. Anja Timm spent two months in India (continuously), visiting institutions across the country. She was joined by Niall Hayes who spent ten days in Mumbai in November and Edgar Whitley who spent two weeks in New Delhi in December. Our visits to India amounted to fifteen person weeks in total and represent our longest and most intense engagement. This is particularly appropriate as India is becoming the largest sending country of international students.

Access to most Indian institutions was quite straight forward – we were welcome in many colleges and there was little supervision of our activities in the majority of places. English remains the language of instruction in the vast majority of colleges we visited, so this allowed for straight forward communication and we were made to feel welcome by almost all of the institutions contacted.

In total we visited eighteen institutions in India. These included the elite establishments such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and Management (IIM) and other institutions of national importance, but our efforts were mainly concentrated on the many undergraduate colleges from which most of the Indian students transfer into UK HE. To reflect the backgrounds of the student intake from India onto business and management studies (BMS) Masters programmes, we investigated various subject areas (engineering, social science and humanities). Due to the variation in entrance criteria set by UK institutions – some argue that the Indian Bachelor degree is incomparable to the British one and insist that students must have completed a Masters degree back in India before they can join British taught graduate programmes – we also looked at some of the Indian Masters programmes. Overall our sample has a clear elite bias as those students moving on to the UK for graduate studies tend to come from quite wealthy families and from the more established educational institutions. To appreciate the differences between the various types of colleges, we also explicitly sought out some of the newer private establishments and graduate programmes; however, these were not our main focus.

Geographically speaking, our visits were relatively well spread out. We visited the mega-cities (Delhi, Mumbai Chennai) as well as ‘smaller’ specialised HE cities, such as Pune and Lucknow.

### ***3. Thematic presentation of Indian data***

#### **3.1 Introduction**

##### **The historical context**

The ancient cities of Takshila, Vikramshila and Nalanda were important education centres where learning took place on a variety of subjects, including art, architecture, astronomy, literature, law and medicine – though religion and philosophy were their main foci (Powar, 1995, p.37). According to Agarwal: “Historians speculate that these centres had a remarkable resemblance to the European medieval universities that came up much later. The ancient education system in India slowly got extinguished following invasions and disorder in the country.” (2006, p.5). In many aspects, including higher education, the British colonial period has had a lasting impact in India. Following TB Macaulay’s (1800-1859) argument for the ‘improvement of the natives’ education with a Western style and content was being introduced; with English as the medium of instruction.<sup>9</sup> Initially, the curriculum was oriented towards the humanities and languages (Jayaram, N., 1990, p. 45-59); professional studies in medicine, law, etc. were added though initially less popular (Powar, 1995, p.38).

As mentioned above, the University of London served as the model for the first three institutions that were set up in 1857. The universities acted as examining (or affiliating) bodies for the 27 affiliated colleges that undertook the actual teaching. This scheme was replicated again and again across the territory. Chitnis observes:

“...these universities were not meant to be institutions for the advancement of knowledge, or full-fledged centers of higher learning. The British government had established them with two limited objectives: first, to introduce the Indian elite to European culture, and thus to colonize the country culturally; second, to produce a cadre of Indians equipped to serve the British administration...” (Chitnis, 1999, p.20).

By the 1950s India’s higher education consisted of around 30 universities, 600 colleges and some 170,000 students.

A national system of education was being formulated in the independence period in the mid 40s. Many of those involved in the nationalist movement had benefited from a European education and perceived of HE as an important arena for reform, i.e. they sought to conquer the colonial legacy. But education was also intended as one of the key instruments of India’s transformation, its economic development and as a mechanism to foster equality (Chitnis, 1999). Access for those from historically and structurally disadvantaged groups has

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<sup>9</sup> Jayaram reports that “Initially, efforts of the Christian missionaries and the East India Company generated a protracted controversy between the ‘Anglicists,’ who supported a Western course, and the ‘Orientalists,’ who favored an indigenous direction.” (Jayaram, N., 2004, p. 86). In the mid 19th century it was resolved in favour of the anglicists.

been a major and occasionally violent battleground ever since (e.g. students setting fire to themselves in protest of reservations, etc.).

One of the most lasting political decisions was to support the industrial development of the country through a focused investment into science and engineering. The idea of creating the Indian Institute of Technology (or IIT) was first mooted in 1946. Its structure, set up and elitist ethos were to mirror that of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Financial support for the establishment of these new organisations was originally provided – to celebrate India's independence – by UNESCO, the US, the Soviet Union and Germany. The first IIT opened in Kharagpur in 1951.

### **The current context for HE in India**

By international comparison, the higher education participation rate in India is fairly low. According to OECD data (reported by the American National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education) College Enrolment is 10% among young adults aged 18-24.<sup>10</sup> However, due to the size of the Indian population, this participation rate still amounts to well over ten million students. But it is important to bear in mind that the vast majority of those who make it into Indian universities are very privileged indeed – especially in comparison with the many millions who do not participate in any form of education, due to poverty. The privilege of HE students in India is further underlined by the fact that women make up 40% of enrolled students at tertiary level (for it is only the comparatively wealthy families who tend to educate their daughters).<sup>11</sup>

### **Current links between India and UK higher education**

For the UK higher education sector the Indian student 'market' is extraordinarily important. With a booming economy and a growing middle class Indian students are increasingly interested in (and capable of paying for) international study opportunities. Whilst the historical connection with Britain and the large British Asian community are clearly relevant to the decision making of students and their families, many more opt to study elsewhere; especially at US institutions where Indian students' attendance is oftentimes facilitated by generous scholarships. In the academic year 2005/06 there were 19,205 Indian students attending British Universities mainly on taught postgraduate programmes. This statistic represents a 15 percent increase on the figures from the previous year (UKCISA, The Council for International Student Affairs, [http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/about/statistics\\_he.php#table1](http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/about/statistics_he.php#table1)). According to the Observatory for Borderless Higher Education, in 2006, in the US there were 76,503 students from India enrolled at tertiary level. At the same time, in Australia, there were 36,078 (<http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/10/10/mobile>).

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<sup>10</sup> [http://measuringup.highereducation.org/commentary/introduction.cfm#\\_edn2](http://measuringup.highereducation.org/commentary/introduction.cfm#_edn2), accessed 09/11/06.

<sup>11</sup> In India the girl-child is recognised to be the most educationally deprived demographic, which warrants special policy attention at state, national and international levels.

Explanation of the themes: Some of the themes outlined below are derived from the particular social, political and educational context in each of the three countries. For the purposes of the Student Diversity and Academic Writing Project we are not primarily comparing formal education structures across the three countries. Rather we are keen to highlight the particular contexts and issues that are most relevant to understanding actual educational practices at undergraduate level in the particular country. Our considerations include curricular, extra-curricular and non-curricular aspects (as well as the wider historical and political context).

Other themes derive from the particular research focus of the Student Diversity and Academic Writing (SDAW) Project, i.e. academic writing, information literacy and academic misconduct. These are explicitly dealt with across the three countries visited. The following list provides an overview of the themes covered by this report on undergraduate studies in India:

- Indian higher education institutions explored: the affiliating system
- Key features of the centralised syllabus
- The centralised syllabus
- Teaching issues: coaching and public exams
- Parallel colleges, the *kunji* and other 'support mechanisms'
- Library use and information literacy
- Academic Writing within the curriculum
- Academic misconduct and plagiarism

## 3.2 Indian higher education institutions explored

### Elite institutions

This report on educational practices in Indian HEIs begins by looking at those organisations that most students would aspire to attend, in large part because of the kind of future, which such participation makes possible. In India there are a small number of elite establishments, the *institutes of national importance*. The most well-known among these – and most relevant in the context of this project and its focus on business and management studies – are the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). These institutes are highly prestigious and feature prominently in international comparisons and rankings.<sup>12</sup> Both types of institutes receive state funding well above that which is available to other Indian HEIs. Faculty in IITs and IIMs commonly hold PhDs (some of which have

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<sup>12</sup> In the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) World Ranking, the IITs jointly achieved rank 50 in 2005 ([http://www.thes.co.uk/statistics/international\\_comparisons/2005/top\\_unis.aspx?window\\_type=popup](http://www.thes.co.uk/statistics/international_comparisons/2005/top_unis.aspx?window_type=popup)). Among the THES World's top 100 technology universities they are ranked third, behind MIT and Berkeley, but before Stanford and Imperial College London ([http://www.thes.co.uk/statistics/international\\_comparisons/2005/top\\_100\\_tech.aspx](http://www.thes.co.uk/statistics/international_comparisons/2005/top_100_tech.aspx)). The IIM Ahmedabad offers the best Asian MBA according to Asiaweek (<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/features/mba/data/reputation.html>)

The only other Indian institution that appears in such rankings is JNU, a research based social science Central University.

been gained at top American schools) and there are some close links between the institutes and industry, which generates additional income streams.

As mentioned above, the IITs were intended to facilitate the training of engineers who were to play a vital role in the development of the country – their establishment represented a conscious departure from the inherited British system. The IIT model has proved successful and continues to be expanded (there are currently seven IITs and soon there will be 10). Whilst each institute is operated independently, the highly selective Joint Entrance Exams (IIT-JEE) are held jointly. Applicants are tested in maths, physics and chemistry. A recent newspaper article reported that only one in 40 applicants is successful.<sup>13</sup> To gain a place at an IIT (which acts as a guarantor for future life chances and income), applicants commonly prepare over a period of at least two years, involving a gruelling coaching and home study schedule in addition to their ordinary school attendance (since the school syllabus and entrance tests do not coincide).<sup>14</sup>

Each admissions cycle features heavily in the national media, as are stories about purported internet addictions and high suicide rates among current students. Several novels have appeared about the university lives of IIT-ians (as they are known). IITs have become emblematic for the social change taking place in India: their graduates are handpicked by top companies in the global technology sector (e.g. Apple, Google, Microsoft, etc.). Others continue their education in the US at the most high-status institutions, oftentimes on a full scholarship (although few of them opt to come to the UK). An IIT degree is an incredibly powerful credential and the existence of the institutes, and the success of their graduates are a source of national pride; their credentials also feature prominently in matrimonial adverts. IITs also offer graduate-level training, which integrates the graduates of the second tier engineering colleges into its realm. IITs also offer MBA programmes and other degrees, i.e. they have diversified from purely technical subjects.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, the IIMs only offer graduate training. Their Postgraduate Diploma in Management is the most desirable MBA on offer in India (even though the degree is not actually called that). Admissions are again operated jointly for all IIMs – six independent institutions spread out across India – through the Common Admission Test (CAT). For the most prestigious institution, the IIM Ahmedabad the ratio of applicants to places is as high as 700:1. This makes it considerably more competitive than any of the top American business schools (at Stanford it is 13:1).<sup>16</sup> IIMs are also more attractive financially; in 2005 fee levels were as low as \$3000.

## **Mainstream undergraduate education**

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<sup>13</sup> The Guardian, <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/worldwide/story/0,,1683695,00.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Over time it has become almost impossible to gain entrance without expensive coaching, which effectively means that only a particular type of student is likely to be successful. To address these issues the admissions process is currently being reformed.

<sup>15</sup> As Engineering institutions, however, IITs continue to be governed by the regulations of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE).

<sup>16</sup> Chakrawerti, S. "Them vs IIM" from the Sunday Times of India, Special Report 20 November 2005.

In contrast to these world class institutions the majority of Indian higher education is considered mediocre (or worse), according to Indian scholars and international commentators.

An influential Indian academic recently commented on the current situation:

“Higher education in India is fragmented, scattered, and takes place in nearly 16,000 institutions called affiliated colleges, many of which are tiny and a trace better than higher secondary schools. They do not have libraries worth the name. Most of them have a faculty strength varying from 100 to 200 and the number of faculty with doctoral qualification is pitifully low or nil in many cases. These institutions of higher learning perform only classroom teaching, preparing students for examinations like tutorial colleges. The affiliating system, which dominates the Indian scene, has long been given up even in the country of its origin. It does not exist anywhere in the world barring India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.” (Kulandaiswamy in *The Hindu*, 18/05/2005)

It serves as a fairly neat – if unforgiving – summary of the key issues faced by those involved with the Indian HE system.

The status quo is attributed largely to the uncontrolled and unplanned expansion of the sector (as indicated by the table below), the chronic under-funding and the lack of reform at the national and institutional level.

**Table 1: Growth of higher education institutions and enrolment in India**

Year	Universities	Colleges	Enrolment (in million)
1950/01	28	578	0.2
1970/01	93	3,277	2.0
1980/01	123	4,738	2.8
1990/01	184	5,748	4.4
2000/01	266	11,146	8.8
2005/06	348	17,625	10.5

Source: Agarwal, 2006, p.155

Over the years there have been several government commissions charged with investigating the state of HE in India with each of these pronouncing it to be in a desperate state of crisis.<sup>17</sup> In 1985 the *Challenge of Education* Report states: “the general condition of universities and colleges is a matter of great concern to the nation” (as reported in Powar, 1995, p.40).

In 2002 the well-respected education scholar Suma Chitnis wrote:

“Although enrolment is inadequate by comparative standards, the growth in the demand for higher education has been unmanageably large, rapid, and pressing. The centers of excellence have been protected. But the universities that constitute the backbone of the system have been stretched, their standards of teaching and of evaluation compromised in

<sup>17</sup> These include reports by the Radakrishnan Commission (appointed in 1948), the Kothari Commission (operating between 1964-66) and the Remamurti Committee, which reported in 1990. For details of the latest commission, see the update section.

order to accommodate demand. As a consequence, education at Indian universities has deteriorated into an examination-driven, certificate-oriented exercise. The faculties of the arts and the humanities, which account for 60 percent of the total enrolments in higher education in the country, have fared the worst." (Chitnis, 2002, p. 19-20).

Almost 90 percent of undergraduate teaching is provided through affiliated colleges (Agarwal, 2006, p.7), i.e. the colonial system that was inherited from the British and that has remained essentially unchanged. Historically, the division of labour between the college and their affiliating university was designed to ensure maintenance of quality standards, especially on account of the centralised examination structures. It also provided a geographical monopoly for the overseeing body. However, given the rising number of colleges universities are facing an uphill struggle to monitor and govern a diverse set of institutions that are also increasingly spread out geographically.<sup>18</sup>

### **Types of colleges**

Affiliated colleges vary hugely: there are old colleges that pre-date the introduction of universities in India (initially these tended to be Christian ones). Others were set up and financed through state or federal budgets. Other colleges were set up privately with the state later taking over their running costs. Tilak explains that these latter institutions originated "with a feeling of social responsibility of providing education to the people" (Tilak, 1995, p.231) and that capital costs were originally met (and / or continue to be met) through philanthropic donations.<sup>19</sup> These colleges are subject to the same regulations as the government colleges and known as *private-aided* or *private-grant-in-aid* colleges.

Since the mid-80s the government has been promoting the devolution of central control to the colleges themselves.<sup>20</sup> *Autonomous* colleges are in charge of their own course development and marking (which tends to make them more demanding of their staff and their students). In turn their name is included on the degree certificate that continues to be awarded by the university. It should be noted that autonomous status of a college is not a sign of financial and / or administrative independence from the university. Until 2006 only 214 colleges had opted to apply for autonomy, which indicates that as a reform initiative the introduction of autonomy at college level has not worked out as originally intended.<sup>21</sup> There is also considerable geographical variation here: some Indian

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18 It is worth noting that not all universities are affiliating bodies (this applies to only 131 of them); the others are unitary (Agarwal, 2006, p.6).

19 Agarwal (2006, p. 91) notes that in India there is a well established history of genuinely philanthropic involvement with education. Examples of this type include the industrial families Tata and Birla whose activities are continuing, e.g. Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, etc.

20 However, Sudha Rao (1995) explains that "Affiliated colleges have become handicapped not because they are controlled by university but because universities have no time to look after the colleges. Left to themselves a good number of colleges have much better potential and capability to exist and excel on their own." (p.192).

21 Since college autonomy offers more scope for innovation in terms of the syllabus and teaching and assessment methods it appears to be the way forward for many Indian HE institutions. However, there are relatively few incentives for faculty: despite potentially doing a lot more work – e.g. designing new syllabi, setting coursework rather than relying on exams and hence having to do more marking etc. – salaries and development opportunities remain limited (although some exist at an institutional level). University lecturers are well organised and their unions are related to

states were early adopters and have a large number of autonomous colleges (30% of all are found in Tamil Nadu), other states have none (Sudha Rao, 1995, p.195). During fieldwork we were repeatedly told that Tamil Nadu – and South India more generally – is well known for a particularly high quality education provision.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, education providers have sought to break free from the control hitherto imposed on them by the UGC and the state level ministries. Since the early nineties, this has led to the development of genuinely private (known as *private un-aided*) institutions, which represent nearly 30 percent of enrolments, primarily on professional courses (Agarwal, 2006, p.13). These truly self-financing institutions account for the rapid growth in the HE sector in India. As part of the private HE sector, there are private un-aided colleges and private-unaided *Deemed* universities (as indicated in the overview, section 1). The colleges are often set up and run by religious or charitable trusts. In the case of Indian HE, it is noteworthy that charitable status does not exclude profit-seeking activities. Indeed, it is important to understand that “[a]s many as 40% of the affiliated colleges are not eligible for UGC assistance as they do not fulfil the minimum conditions that have been prescribed for infrastructural facilities, teachers, etc.” (Powar, 1995, p.39).

Private institutions exist at two levels:

- Un-aided colleges are either affiliated, or temporarily affiliated to affiliating (and degree awarding) universities.
- Private un-aided Deemed Universities are in charge of their own admissions policies, coursework and syllabus. They also set their own fee levels and more importantly, have gained degree-awarding powers.<sup>23</sup>

Historically, becoming a Deemed University used to be a lengthy process and the title was awarded only to institutions with a long record of high standards. This is changing, however and in recent years the sector has grown rapidly. It is this acceleration that is contested, especially on the grounds that it leads to standards slipping in teaching and examining.

*Deemed* Universities have come under scrutiny because their status allows for certain irregularities and shortcuts.<sup>24</sup> For example, in theory, Deemed Universities are not allowed to act as affiliating bodies themselves. Once established, however, many have begun to set up *branch campuses* all over India; a practice which has hitherto remained unchallenged (Agarwal, 2006). The main concern about Deemed Universities has been the *capitation fee*

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political parties (George, KK & Raman, R (2001) “Changes in Indian Higher Education – an Insider’s View”, Centre for Higher Education Transformation, South Africa, p.7), which may account for some of the reluctance on the part of principals to push ahead with such reforms. In any case, autonomous status is not necessarily the magic bullet for it has been said that some colleges are autonomous only in name.

22 This is also echoed by Zachariah in his excellent summary of the issues affecting autonomous colleges, 1993, p.135-137.

23 See Gupta, A 2004, “Divided Government and Private Higher Education Growth in India” in International Higher Education, Quarterly Publication of the Center for International Higher Education Boston College, Number 35 , Spring 2004, p. 13-14, [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News35/text008.htm](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News35/text008.htm)

24 Agarwal (2006, p. 92) quotes Ananandakrishnan (2006) who states that only about 25 percent of private institutions are transparent in the running of their affairs.

practice, whereby institutions are charging students well over their costs, ignoring merit and hence limiting access for less well off candidates. Agarwal notes that many institutions are operating with blatant disregard for the fee ceiling put in place by the UGC (ibid.). In response to these practices several states have put into place additional legislation, especially regarding capitation fee charges. During our visit to India, there were heated debates in the media as to whether private un-aided institutions will have to operate quotas for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (similar to other aided HEIs) or whether they should be left operate unfettered.

Further complicating the provision of teaching at undergraduate level is the fact that some *public* and *private-aided* colleges have started to expand by providing *self-financing courses* oftentimes in the evenings or around the main programme.

At one well established and highly regarded college, students who attend the Bachelors degree in Commerce (BCom) study side-by-side with students undertaking a Bachelors in Business and Management studies (BMS) that is self-financed. Students on the BCom course paid INR 6000 per year, for a course on which the assessment was entirely by exam. Meanwhile the students on the BMS paid INR 20.000 for the new programme. In this particular case the self-financed course was – according to both staff and students – highly student-centred and professionally-oriented. On the BMS programme assessment was continuous and included considerable amounts of coursework; cohorts were smaller and student attendance was higher.<sup>25</sup>

At another very prestigious autonomous college self-financing courses were established and the college had built an extra building to accommodate the new students. However, the new evening programmes were considered very much a poor cousin to the main teaching activities (which were of conducted by highly qualified and committed teaching staff and among the most innovative programmes we saw anywhere). The self-financing cohort was less well qualified and the teaching staff seemed of a different calibre, with little teaching experience and on insecure badly-paid temporary contracts (rather than national UGC scales). The evening cohort was following the centralised university syllabus rather than capitalising on their independent status. However, the self-financed programmes were generating much needed income for the college. The college decided to introduce a mentoring system where staff from the main college co-taught with their new colleagues in order to improve the situation. An unusual feature of this situation was the fact that established college staff were willing to put in the (un-paid) extra work to safeguard a hard-won standard.

## Summary of college types

<sup>25</sup> In a further twist, students on the standard traditional degree reported that they were in effect expected – by their college – to also enrol on additional 'professional' courses, which represented a considerable additional expense. Thus they benefited from the curricular innovation, but they also contributed financially over and beyond the fee-level set by the affiliating university.

The typology of higher education institutions presented in this section is intended to aid orientation – to facilitate an understanding of the diversity and the key issues as related the fragmentation of Indian HEIs. None of the broad descriptors serve to indicate quality of educational provisions, i.e. *autonomous* status of a college does not necessarily mean that teaching is any better than at an *affiliated* one (although it often does), and – despite widespread perception – not all private un-aided colleges are bad, or rather, we were told that there was a sliding scale and that our list of institutions visited featured only ‘the good ones’.

For some time the affiliating system has been recognised as inefficient (also by the authorities). It has also been characterised as a ‘minimum demands system’ for all, i.e. students, teachers, administrators, and government officials. Because of their vested interest in the status quo, all parties are seen to be resisting the necessary changes within Indian HE. However, the results of increasing HE privatisation in India are mixed too: at times it seems these new institutions (and / or courses) are little more than cash cows, at others they represent an innovative attempt to overcome the limitations of the bureaucratic affiliating system with its centralised and outdated syllabus, old-fashioned assessment methods, etc.

Below is an example of the market logic working its way through; we gained this insight through personal contacts.

At one well-respected postgraduate teaching only private institution members of staff told us about the imperative to keep their fee-paying students satisfied. This satisfaction also had to be documented on the students’ teaching evaluation forms. If students were unhappy with the provision – and the effort that was required of them in order to manage the course – staff were unequivocally told to respond, even if this meant lowering standards. Consistently bad student evaluations could result in staff contracts being terminated.

Over the past decade privatization has acted as the driving force for change. However, neither national nor state governments appear willing to control or capable of simply monitoring the situation, despite the setting up of a body dedicated to this purpose.<sup>26</sup>

### **College accreditation**

In 1994 the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established and is charged, by the UGC with external quality assurance. It is important to note that HEIs volunteer for accreditation; a model apparently chosen because of the existing ‘controls’ through the regulatory framework (UGC / AICTE, etc.) and the strong affiliating system (Agarwal, 2006, p.105).

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26 This rendition of privatization in Indian HE purposely leaves aside ideological concerns, which are of course highly relevant. Readers are referred to a special issue of the Social Scientist, a journal produced by Indian academics (Social Scientist, Volume 33, Numbers 9-10, September-October 2005), which reports on the subject, especially the contributions from Sharma on commercialisation (2005) and Patnaik who deals with globalisation (2005). Kapu & Mehta (2004) explain the financial and political intricacies.

Furthermore, in practice accreditation has been underway only since 2003/04 and to date it has covered primarily public colleges and public universities (Agarwal, 2006, p. 105-6), where the need to evaluate is perhaps least pronounced. More recently, several states have made it compulsory for certain school types.

On external quality control in Indian HE, Agarwal comments:

“Despite the existence of NAAC for over ten years now, its impact on quality of higher education is not yet quite visible. (...) Perhaps the reasons for deteriorating standards of higher education in India are deep-rooted. To address the issues of lack of resources, the issues of financing higher education need to be fixed. To address the issues of violation of minimum standards, the regulatory framework needs to be made more effective. A voluntary accreditation process can not address this problem.” (Agarwal, 2006, p. 108).

Stella (2004) provides a more detailed (and more sympathetic summary) of the NAAC's tasks and the development of policies.

### **Separation of teaching and research**

One final important point to underline is the pronounced separation of teaching and research in Indian HE. Very few colleges would expect their staff to be involved in any kind of research – those who do struggle to provide the resources that are necessary for such a task (see below). Cutting edge and world class research does take place in Indian research institutions as well as the central universities and is supported centrally by the government. It also happens in the university departments of some state universities (where graduate students have historically been taught), but the research process is far removed from the teaching of undergraduates, which mainly takes place in affiliated colleges.

## **3.3 Key features of the centralised syllabus**

Under the affiliating system, the university acts as the central bureaucracy for the colleges: it is in charge of the curriculum – via the centralised syllabus – and responsible for organising and for running the central public examinations. This section outlines the structure (and nature) of this set up. The following section explains what it means for the actual teaching and learning at college level.

Under the centralised syllabus, the content of study and the teaching materials are centrally agreed by committees made up of teachers from various colleges as well as senior members of the university (i.e. academics who teach postgraduates through the university departments). Once the syllabus has been agreed, it is approved by the boards of study or academic councils of the universities. It is then prescribed to the colleges, which is to say, all colleges teach the same content and use the same materials. The exams are also conducted centrally and distributed for marking to especially appointed markers, i.e. students' scripts are not marked by the people who taught them.

The intention here was to maintain and safeguard a particular university-wide standard. It means that at the time of the examination it is not only students who are tested, but also colleges, i.e. in terms of how well they have inculcated the prescribed contents in their students.

Zachariah, writing in 1993, explains the implications of the affiliating system and the prescribed syllabus as they emerged historically:

“Within a decade, the weaknesses of the foreign transplant became evident. The examination system exercised a dominant influence on the way the affiliating colleges conducted their entire teaching, learning and administrative functions. The prominent role of government in higher education resulted in an atmosphere [...] in the colleges that emphasized a ‘civil service mentality’ (slavish adherence to rules and regulations [...]) instead of promotion of scholarly activities. The insistence that students read and write in English, a language that was culturally alien to them, encouraged an existing tendency in Indian culture to learn by rote. Inability to truly understand and master a heavily loaded curriculum also fostered memorization of selected sections of the curriculum.” (1993, p.118).

As will be outlined below, the repercussions of these developments are still relevant to the current situation in Indian HEIs.

What follows is an outline of the key features of the centralised syllabus as it operates to date:

Firstly, the fact that the curriculum is centrally agreed and applies to many colleges across the sector means that it has to be pitched at an intermediate level. Colleges, however, vary enormously in their staffing, facilities and ethos (structural variation was outlined in the previous section of this report). Whilst some colleges have dedicated scholars with PhDs and high expectations – and demands – of their students, other colleges have carved out an existence for themselves, with significantly less well qualified staff operating with inadequate resources.

The centralised syllabus is taught regardless of these differences. In turn it can severely limit the better colleges: they may be more ambitious for themselves and their students, but when it comes to the exams everyone is assessed on the same contents. Even if they are taught at a higher level, students have to dumb down again come exam time. In fact, the system discourages students from engaging beyond the minimum requirements since regardless of effort, they all sit the same exams and receive the same degree from the same university.

One affiliated Catholic college that we visited had found its own solution to the dilemma. It had implemented an *Honours Programme* (in the mid eighties) that encouraged students and staff to undertake additional studies and projects throughout their studies and assessment which continued according to the centralised syllabus. Upon graduation, students received an additional

certificate clearly outlining their achievements. Due to the college's international reputation, this certificate was thought to carry a recognisable value.

On the whole, however, "[t]he undue emphasis on certification rather than on the teaching and learning process – a proverbial case of the tail wagging the dog – has distorted the orientation of university education. Practically all that takes place in the university system is geared to examination." (Jayaram, 2004, p.93).

Secondly, syllabi tend to remain static over long periods. Frequent updating of the materials taught is hindered by the cost involved in purchasing (and reproducing new books or articles) on the required scale. Or, as one academic dryly observed, just one imported text book might cost more than tuition fees for one period. Some colleges might also teach in a language other than English, which would require for those materials to be translated. Moreover, staff in the different colleges might not be equally committed to such changes. Oftentimes it is easier to stick to the material that is well established. This means that in reality curricula rarely change. The consequence, as Agarwal notes, is that "...many universities in India have not changed their curriculum in decades" (Agarwal, 2006, p.54).

At one university, students told us about a library scheme that allowed them to borrow the textbooks that they needed for that year, for a small fee. As it turned out on our subsequent visit to the *textbook library*, that the collection was very old and had been put in place primarily to support poor students. The fee income was used to replace materials as they disintegrated. The age of textbooks varied but the majority of the lots were printed in the 50s, 60s and 70s.

Agarwal notes that the UGC devised (in 2001/02) a model curriculum that was then circulated to the universities. This was occasionally mentioned by the colleges to us – again as a measure that somehow safeguarded standards. Overall university teaching staff are apparently opposed to radical reform of the current curriculum 'design' process. Agarwal quotes from a 2005 study by the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE), which indicates that the vast majority of staff are happy with the current status quo. He adds: "...the system has nurtured and cultivated a large amount of vested interest that does not want to respond to the transformation taking place." (Agarwal, 2006, p.54).

### **3.4 Teaching & assessment issues: coaching and public exams**

This section concentrates on the implications of the centralised syllabus in terms of what goes on in Indian university classrooms in terms of teaching, learning and assessment.

As outlined above, the vast majority of students in India study in relatively small institutions of 500-600 students. They are mostly taught in medium sized cohorts between 30, 60 or 90 students (though class sizes vary depending on the subject and the institution). According to our research most students had between 20 and 25 hours of timetabled teaching per week; though some subjects involved additional labs and or practicals. On the whole, institutions are over subscribed and as one way of dealing with overcrowding they might run several cohorts with some groups taught in the morning and others attending in the early evening.

The vast majority of students will study full-time, though given the time tabling this does not preclude students from engaging in other activities as well. For example, students might work in parental businesses (it might be an opportunity to support the family and to gain work experience rather than in an effort to finance their studies). During our visits we did not see any attendance registers being taken. In practice, teachers and students seemed to know one another by face and by name and frequently had each other's mobile phone numbers, which came in handy for arranging focus groups. What seems to be in operation is an informal system where students are generally expected to attend. If they don't they might have to negotiate with individual lecturers about the handling of such absences.

Students are generally taught in lectures with a straight forward unidirectional delivery from a lecturer. Sometimes there might be questions, but whether these are encouraged depends entirely on the teacher. From what we observed, mainly students were expected to affirm rhetorical questions (en masse). At times students collectively spoke aloud and in unison; in general the response was a short text recalled from memory, for example a definition, usually in unison with the lecturer. We also observed lectures where students were given model questions and were then told to copy down the model answer, i.e. the lecturer might say: "write now... and stop", which struck us as a highly scripted form of exam preparation. Experienced teachers spoke freely and without notes, though a few younger ones might refer to a book for important passages.

At undergraduate level, seminars or small group teaching is rare and tends to happen only in the new innovative (and often self-financing) courses. Study materials – such as textbooks and supplementary readings – are prescribed by the centralised syllabus (Zachariah, 1993, p.124). Most students will have reading lists and study materials can in theory be borrowed from the college library (but see section 3.6 for how this operates in practice). However, most books are produced locally and hence relatively cheap to purchase or copy. Homework might consist of short answers to a series of questions or preparation for a multiple choice test, or quiz. Concern with these methods was expressed in a recent newspaper article that sought to explain the difference between Indian institutions and system prevalent in North America: "The problem, experts say, is a classroom environment that infantilizes students well into their mid-20s, emphasizing silent note-taking and discipline at the expense

of analysis, debate and persuasion." (International Herald Tribune, 26/11/2006).<sup>27</sup>

Some universities have introduced semesters (as have their affiliated colleges), but most still run a yearly cycle. Assessment in the vast majority of institutions / courses – especially the traditional ones – is almost entirely determined by the exams that take place at the end of each study period, i.e. either at the end of the semester, or at the end of the year. If coursework is required – though this is a relatively recent phenomenon – it makes up a small part of the mark. As is indicative from the class room activities outlined above students efforts are mainly concentrated on exam preparation. Or, as Zachariah puts it: "A few weeks before the public examination the students, if conscious-stricken, begin to read the textbooks and memorize..." (1993, p.125). During the exams the students can select some of the questions that they wish to answer (five out of ten, for example) though each student will have to complete a range of tasks, i.e. multiple choice, 'gap filling', providing definitions and some short answers of around 120-30 words. These may involve some form of application – of laws or theories, comparison and / or weighing up, but even in social sciences, essay-style components are rarely required.

According to Chitnis, "in most universities, teaching and learning have been reduced to purely examination-oriented exercises." (1993, p.25). Given that such preparation takes place relatively late in the study period, teachers and students have considerable time to devote to extra-curricular activities. On many of our visits to colleges we were struck – positively – by quite how close staff and students were, i.e. they were willing to spend time with one another also outside the classroom.

What also struck us as being in strong contrast to UK practices was that the lecturers were a one-stop shop dealing with whatever issues needed to be sorted out (that is no other student support system was seen as needed). In fact, quite a few teachers we met exhibited an almost parental attitude to their students with strong ideas about and interest in their welfare and future wellbeing, i.e. it seemed that they had entered a relationship that was not necessarily restricted to the period of study but would last well beyond that period.

We spoke to one student in India whose close friend was at the time studying in the UK. He told us that when the first essay topic was given, the UK student had pleaded for help and support from everyone back home – friends as well as former teachers – and they had all got involved with that first piece of coursework.

During college attendance, however, it did seem that academic concerns were sometimes sidelined (and / or restricted to the immediate pre-exam period). This meant that other opportunities for joint activities arose, such as drama, arts or sports. It seemed that as far as the students were concerned, the

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/11/26/business/india.php>

academic content of their programme was a given – in general, contents or delivery of course materials seemed to be of no particular interest to many students and it seemed that it was not something that they questioned. A few students did remark on the contents being rather outdated and that it had very limited relevance to their future employment concerns, for example.

In general it seemed that course requirements were simply being handled or covered; and the students we spoke to gave us the impression that this was done quite easily. For example, nobody admitted to struggling or failing – and when we asked about reasons why students in general might be expelled or chose to drop out those asked seemed puzzled – it was not something that they had come across or heard of.

At the end of one focus group with students at a highly reputable college asked us about entrance requirements to well-regarded UK institutions. As we mentioned marks, they all nodded – they were all doing well. But students were more concerned with standing out from the crowd – in their own words ‘lots of students would be applying with similar marks’. Would the admissions people in the UK be impressed by their starring role in the school drama or being a chair of some student society or association?

These students’ concerns showed that within the centralised syllabus and public examination system they had very limited opportunities to shine; the system limits not only colleges, but individual students too.

Further on the issue of memorization, Zachariah explains,

“Memorization as part of the process of teaching and learning, has always had a very honourable place in the Indian educational tradition. (...) Many Indians believe that memorization and frequent oral and written recall of what is stored in memory aids the process of genuine understanding.” (p.123).

This point was underscored by a recent BBC radio programme that charted the enormous popularity of quizzes in India. Zachariah suggests that because of this high esteem for memorization and recall on demand, the general public in India is generally in favour of the examination system as it operates, i.e. external to and separate from the place of teaching and learning. It should be noted that this belief coincides with occasional newspaper stories about leaked exam questions, students engaged in ‘mass copying’ (without interference from the invigilators), and the broadcasting of correct answers via loudspeakers, etc. etc. (Zachariah, 1993, p.125).

Whilst public belief in the examination system might well continue, educators and policy makers have been trying to reform the public examination system ever since the 1950s, with the most determined effort initiated by the UGC in the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> But resilience of the system remains strong, even today.<sup>29</sup> According to Altbach, the situation 15 years ago was as follows:

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<sup>28</sup> At the time, it was thought that “The marking of [answer] scripts even at the best public examinations is hurried and superficial. The marks obtained in examinations are not a reliable measure of a student’s performance... There is an increasing use of ‘unfair’ practice, leading to complex

“Examinations shape the curriculum and determine the nature of instruction. They reduce the autonomy of the instructor in the classroom and severely limit the possibility of innovation. There has been widespread criticism that examinations do not adequately measure what has been learned. The problems of administering the examination system have also been widely discussed – the inefficiency, occasional dishonesty and disruptions of the system have brought considerable disrepute to the academic system as a whole. At the same time, they are said to maintain a ‘floor’ of quality in a mass higher education system in which standards are difficult to maintain.” (Altbach, 1993, pp.28).

This section sought to outline the type of exams that students are being prepared for within Indian HEIs and by what means. It should be noted that this form of teaching has only limited success. Whilst colleges readily advertise their high achieving ‘toppers’ – many more students fail and need to retake their exams at the next opportunity (Altbach, 1993, p.30; Zachariah, 1993, p.30).<sup>30</sup> The following section summarises the type of additional support that is available to students, providing a further piece of the puzzle.

### **3.5 Parallel colleges, the *kunji* and other ‘support mechanisms’**

Whilst our research did not raise the issue of high student exam failure – partly because we didn’t ask about it (we were focusing on course work, see section 3.7, given its relevance to plagiarism), partly it is likely to be due to our focus on the more established colleges. In any case there is ample material in the literature that highlights it as a major issue for the Indian HE system (as noted in the previous section). What was hard to overlook during our visit, however, was the ubiquity of flyers and posters for tutorial support (as a paid for service). It is important to differentiate here: as outlined above, commercial coaching is a major issue for student entry into elite institutions in India, for the mainstream undergraduate sector that is taught at colleges, however, it is not the issue of getting in, but the matter of getting through. In fact, support mechanisms take several forms.

Zachariah explains the notion of the parallel college and how they work:

“Extremely high failure rates in many undergraduate subjects in public examinations have spawned a large number of (illegal or quasi-legal) private tutors, parallel colleges, and tutorial colleges all over the country. The private tutors are, in most instances, college instructors who offer, for exorbitant fees, to teach in private in early morning or late evening hours and presumably more effectively the same subjects they are paid a salary to teach during the day. (...) These tutorial and parallel colleges have usurped the coaching function of traditional affiliated colleges. To

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administrative problems including danger to [the] life and limb of the invigilators.” (Examination Reform: A plan of Action (1972), p.3 quoted in Zachariah, 1993, p.120).

29 See Altbach for the most authoritative account of why the reform of the Indian HE system is generally considered “impossible”, Altbach, 1993.

30 The official figures are unfortunately very old, though Altbach notes that university exams are failed by 20% in science and technology fields and a massive 60% in some arts and social sciences (1993, p.30).

ensure high success rates, many of them accept only students who have already scored high marks in earlier public examinations, are currently enrolled in legitimate college and pay for extra tuition to forestall failure in future public examinations!" (Zachariah, 1993, pp.122).

It is important to note that there are all these different sides to the staff-student relationships in India: At college level, teachers teach (they don't do research). Moreover, they are removed from the responsibility of grading their own students' exams. At the same time, they are benefiting from a system where they are paid as markers, i.e. in addition to their salary as a college teacher. Furthermore, many of them act as private tutors. Whilst tutoring through a parallel colleges is not officially sanctioned it seems penalties are not enforced either. In fact, the pitiful salaries of HE lecturers are surely part of the problem.<sup>31</sup> Altbach, notes that this type of provision – of official and 'shadow' education "is very much part of the traditional academic balance in India. Students know what to expect and means have been evolved to help students pass the traditional examinations." (Altbach, 1993, p.29).

Due to the very large number of students following the same curriculum – and the extended periods over which the curriculum has remained stable – other forms of support have emerged. Course curricula are amended about once every five years. This means that there was a five-year life-cycle not only for course materials, but for *guidebooks* too. Guidebooks are unofficial, commercial compendia that support each course, i.e. they prescribe a minimum content that the students must learn by heart to pass exams. If it is effectively reproduced in the exam, students are sure to pass the course. Learning from these books is a cheap way for students to ensure that they are 'covered', i.e. even if their own teacher isn't up to much.

Zachariah explains the relevance of guidebooks to exam preparation: "During this period of intense study the college teacher or more frequently an instructor in a tutorial or parallel college may assist the student to understand difficult areas of the syllabus, select the best guidebooks, and the most likely topics for concentrated study." (Zachariah, 1993, p.125).

One Indian student who came to continue his studies in the UK long after his first degree in India told us that there have always been aids to support students, even fifteen years ago when he studied for his undergraduate degree. The overall term used – according to him – is *kunji* (the Hindi word for 'key'). In the past such 'keys' consisted of past papers and the materials passed down from more advanced students who had already passed the exams.

By now, however, the *kunji* has become fully commercialised and dedicated publishers specialise in guidebooks. Each guidebook is clearly labelled in terms of the university, the course it accompanies, e.g. "Human Resource

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<sup>31</sup> Zachariah comments on academic staff working hours (1993, p.123); Jayaram quotes Indiresan on the frequency with which staff are truant (2004, p.).

Management, For Delhi University, BCom (Hons), *New Course*". Often they include sample, or past exam questions.

Guidebooks are usually obtained from market stalls close to colleges. These shops also sell stationary and dictionaries, and the common point of sale signals that guidebooks are regarded as rather commonplace.

A stall holder told us that the shelf-life of each guidebook is five years (in Pune). After that the curriculum is revised and in due course another guidebook appears. Sometimes these are written by the very people who were involved in designing the course.

On being asked about their use of guidebooks some students merely shrugged off the question – of course they had a copy and saw possession as making sure that they were prepared for the exams. This group indicated that it wasn't all that they read, and that they didn't think that the standard was particularly good. They were just making sure. And for this, a guidebook was the standard.

For the purpose of this study, which is concerned with academic writing, it should be noted that guidebooks generally do not attribute source materials. Of the samples we saw, the content is primarily descriptive (rather than analytical or discursive). Guidebooks inform students 'how it is'. There is no indication of why things should be so, or of multiple theories or viewpoints to facilitate interpretation. Students are expected to feed back to their teachers information much as it is given to them, sometimes word for word. Referencing of ideas and direct quotation rarely feature in the study materials that students use.

In addition to these general guidebooks, individual colleges – which are themselves competitive about the grades of their students – might also produce their own compendia:

In one top-twenty affiliated college a staff member told me that the college had devised its own set of notes that were sold to the students for a small fee. These college specific notes, he thought, were much better than the commercial ones: they outlined the material in such a way that was "unlikely to confuse students" (i.e. they had eliminated any controversy of interpretation). This 'superior' form of guidebook was considered a service to the college and its students. The cover clearly stated 'for internal use only'. It ensured that students did well in exams and in turn, this secured the college's ranking.

In summary, it seemed from our fieldwork that Indian students were experiencing a lot of understanding and support from their teachers, which applied not only to the academic content. For example, there was the potential for students and college staff to develop relationships that last beyond the student's college attendance (at least in many of the colleges we visited). Where academic support is not available or does not suffice for passing exams, students may take advantage of the ready supply of commercial tutors and guidebooks that are widely available. Jayaram likens undergraduate education

in affiliated colleges to little more than 'babysitting' (Jayaram, 2004, p.92). He equated the average libraries, laboratories and overall facilities to a slum. Our research on libraries is reported below.

### **3.6 Library use and information literacy**

Section 3.3 on the centralised syllabus described the nature of the official study materials that students are expected to use as part of their degree courses. It also gave an example of the (outdated) materials available in some textbook libraries. Below is a more detailed report on the library facilities available to most undergraduates.

The colleges we visited tended to have small libraries on their premises (one medium sized or two small rooms perhaps), generally without electronic catalogues and serving only a minority of staff and students. Holdings in these libraries seemed to match the wealth and history of the college and the interests and enthusiasm of the college administration and teaching staff. We saw some college libraries where the collections were clearly kept up to date – including international editions on inter-disciplinary topics (not usually taught in India) – but these were in the minority. Electronic access to academic journals was clearly beyond the financial means of individual colleges; although some engineering colleges (not IITs, but top second tier ones) seemed to fare better in this respect. Overall however, the scope for research at college libraries appeared limited. Once again, it should be underlined that most students at Indian colleges are not expected to read much beyond the prescribed materials anyway; independent projects at undergraduate level are rare.

We visited one branch campus of a major private university located in the outskirts of one of the mega cities. The institution conducted teaching at all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) and occupied many new buildings, which is to say that it was rather unlike the small colleges often clustered in the historical centres and located on plots that they were rapidly outgrowing). We were shown a room not unlike small public library, i.e. with a focus on entry level textbooks and cheap locally produced popular magazines and peripheral journals. The atmosphere was more that of a waiting room, rather than a working academic library. But this was the library (not just for a small college) – for thousands of students. Despite the hefty fees charged to students and despite the apparent affluence of the institution; this (apparently non-academic provision) was as good as it got.

In India there are other libraries too: the institutes of national importance that we visited house amazing collections, often in large scale, dedicated purpose built and air-conditioned surroundings, with holdings that are clearly kept up to date, including paper and electronic copies of international academic journals. But these are elite institutions; they exist alongside the affiliated colleges that provide the bulk of the undergraduate education.

Some regular universities too have central collections that complement the literature that is available in individual colleges. Many of these are in rather ramshackle buildings with many volumes spoilt (probably due to the climate). But the core collections themselves can be extensive and are accessible through electronic catalogues. In some cases they include international academic journals (in paper and via PCs). For example, the Central Reference Library on the North campus of Delhi University is clearly a working academic research facility of this type. The crux of the matter is that it that undergraduate students are not necessarily being admitted. Certainly in Delhi, students told us that as undergraduates, they were not allowed access.

In one smaller university town the central library was housed in a semi-dilapidated building. Many students looked puzzled on being asked for directions, some weren't quite sure where it was. Others immediately enquired why a foreign visitor might want to go there. Downstairs there was a nominal guard, but there was no information about the holdings, no catalogue and there were no signposts as to the set up; nor was there a librarian. In fact, the library appeared to consist of one huge reading room. The beautiful old book shelves were empty. The books were neatly lined up on the tables, spine upwards. They were old and dusty and clearly hadn't been touched in quite some time. Students did not come there to read, or to write. Small groups had gathered. There was banter and laughter; it was their social space.

Khanna provides a disarmingly honest account of the historical development of library provision in India. He points out that in the pre-independence area, "In the absence of the university and college libraries the students had no opportunity of forming the habit of independent reading and they took to cramming – a practice which continues till today" (Khanna, 1994, p.104). When facilities were being established, library staff were primarily appointed as 'custodians' and 'caretakers' of precious commodities – in Calcutta, they were required to leave a sizeable deposit prior to being appointed – and were held personally responsible for any loss of materials (Khanna, 1994, p.106). Even after independence was achieved there was limited emphasis on facilitating user access (via catalogues, off-site borrowing, and user training). By now, the profession has developed a great deal, but it has had – at times – limited recognition from local and central authorities (including the UGC). Furthermore, library funding appears precarious (Malhan, 2001). With an increasing emphasis on research and postgraduate teaching, the role of librarians is likely to change again.<sup>32</sup>

In summary, most Indian library facilities today are still quite limited – at least those that are accessible to undergraduate students. The libraries are underfunded and receive little support, which is perhaps unsurprising given the lack of research activity in the affiliated colleges. At the college level, students will be able to access a few additional books on each topic that is taught (though

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<sup>32</sup> The UGC is supporting individual University libraries to gain access to the Information and Library network (Inflibnet), but funds are insufficient to acquire computers and other the necessary infrastructure (Malhan, 2001, p.114); access for individual colleges is yet another matter.

many of these will be dated). Independent reading is not a requirement (see also section 3.7 below, on academic writing) and those students who do wish to extend beyond the minimum probably have some opportunity within the book collections that can be accessed simply by browsing the college library shelves.

Other resources however, such as databases or electronic journals that require subscription are not on regular students' radar. Students are not required to make use of these and they are unlikely to encounter them on taught courses. Instead students draw on a narrowly prescribed set of textbooks and other sources (which may include some photocopied academic articles from journals) – as dictated by the centralised syllabus – and they might make use of the freely available internet via search engines. Students are generally not taught to research, review and critically evaluate sources; electronic or otherwise.<sup>33</sup>

In this section, the intention is not to complain, judge or downgrade Indian university and college libraries; clearly, there are stark differences in provision between them. In any case, many librarians, senior university managers and academics are struggling, and have struggled to be able to provide the resources in the way that they are now available, given the very limited financial resources at their disposal. Rather, the aim is to facilitate better understanding of the library experiences of students, especially those at undergraduate level as this is likely to shape their expectations if and when they do continue their studies elsewhere.

### **3.7 Academic Writing within the curriculum**

As reported in section 3.4, which focused on classroom and assessment activities, Indian programmes rely very heavily on written exams at the end of the study period, i.e. either the end of the semester or the end of the study year. Under the affiliating system, it is only the marking based on public examinations that counts. Minor percentages might be given for attendance – and some of the newer fee paying courses might include some coursework, but this often refers to independent projects followed by presentations, which may or may not include written output – in any case, coursework is not the norm. The exams are what students are preparing for through classroom and / or parallel college tutoring (as outlined in section 3.5). There is a heavy focus on memorization and appropriate recall (as indicated in section 3.4).

Since essay writing is not required in the exams, it would be surprising to find much emphasis on it in the exam preparation period. According to our research in India, few students are expected to produce academic writing as part of their homework and / or coursework. The longest piece of writing they are likely to complete is restricted to 'short answers' (as noted above, these consist of around 125 words). Many students – for example those studying for the popular B.Com (Bachelor of Commerce) degree that is taught across the

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that specialised engineering and technology HEIs have fared slightly better in terms of provisioning and students attending Masters level courses are likely to experience better access to central facilities.

country – will complete their undergraduate degree without ever having to produce a piece of extended writing such as an essay. This means that a large number of students from India are unfamiliar with this task, its structure and conventions. The default assumption for writing in an academic context is often a straightforward descriptive account, i.e. telling it 'as it is'.

In some cases Indian students will be able to draw on their secondary schooling – depending on the exam board under which they studied – where academic writing might have formed part of their education, but this is not a given. Thus, students moving abroad after completing their undergraduate studies in India oftentimes require much explanation, training and support when it comes to academic writing. As outlined in section 3.7 on library use, it is likely that they lack basic research, citation and general information literacy skills. Given the heavy emphasis on memorisation in the Indian examination-driven system, many Indian graduates are unused to a large amount of reading (see section 3.6 on the use of *guidebooks*), to note taking, to employing the evidence provided in previous writing and to the task of building an argument.

Many receiving institutions in the UK are unaware of this lack of emphasis on academic writing in the Indian HE system. Proficiency in English language and an education system that appears to mirror the British HE framework, institutions and terminology are often assumed to have imbued the students with the kinds of educational practices that form part of many traditional UK degree courses. It is assumed that students arrive as proficient essay writers. In the case of most Indian graduates, however, this is likely to be an incorrect judgment in most instances.

### **3.8 Academic misconduct & Plagiarism**

As previously noted, cheating in exams is something that the Indian public examination system addresses by its very structure, i.e. marking being conducted outside of the college context is meant to preclude favouritism and corruptibility. Despite the in-built safeguards, the literature on exam misconduct in India notes inappropriate or insufficient invigilation, lack of malpractice procedures and sloppy marking (Zachariah, 1993, p.130) all of which impact on the validity of the examinations some of the time.

Plagiarism, however, is a different matter. As outlined in section 3.7, academic writing and coursework do not form an integral part of most Indian curricula, which are dominated by assessment by examination. It is unsurprising then, that we could not find written rules or regulations pertaining to the offence of plagiarism when we asked during the fieldwork in India. The term 'plagiarism' is not necessarily meaningful – a more suitable alternative (following popular usage in India) would be 'copy-paste' which directly draws on the computer command that is often employed in the process.

In one focus group in a prestigious college we were discussing homework requirements. This was one of the few groups of students that told us they had
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to submit written work throughout the year and we began by exploring how they completed this task, i.e. by hand or on a computer. The students explained that they used to submit computer generated assignments, but that the teachers were now demanding handwritten work. The students explained that the teachers had been receiving identical assignments from the group – the products of ‘copy paste’ from the entire group and got ‘fed up’. Most students acknowledged that it was normal for someone to simply find something suitable on the internet and hand that in – and that oftentimes, the majority of the group didn’t even bother with doing their own ‘research’.

Forcing students to revert to hand-writing their assignment was the teacher’s pragmatic attempt to insist on originality and student involvement with the task. The students went on to explain that there were now ‘handwriting’ services (involving copying by hand) available, just around the corner.

In this case students had not been formally charged with ‘plagiarism’ – what they were doing was not treated as seriously as it might be in some UK universities. They had not been pulled up for the lack of acknowledgement or for their approach to internet research. Students may have been taught how to complete such writing assignments – but it had made no lasting impression on them. Writing assignments of this kind were an aside, something that this particular teacher wanted. Meanwhile, the teacher had come up with their own measure to combat the situation, which had also failed on account of the market response that provided an easily accessible paid-for hand writing service.

‘Stealing’ ideas, themes and words is something that is discussed at length in the Indian media – the contexts vary from Bollywood movie plots to fashion – although the focus is more often on piracy and intellectual property, i.e. within a context of financial gain. Salacious scandals and court cases appear to inhabit a parallel world to what happens in affiliated colleges. In India, there have also been a few cases of senior academics and plagiarism in publications. But the vast majority of Indian affiliated colleges focus on teaching only and hence the production of original text has relatively little bearing. Indian academics who publish, i.e. those who are part of the research paradigm, are as far removed from everyday college activities as Bollywood actors are to Indian college students. Without understanding the research process – how one’s own work builds on that of one’s predecessors – the notion of academic dialogue and hence compulsory acknowledgement is much harder to appreciate.

As has been noted repeatedly – students are generally not required to complete extended writing tasks. Where they do, it seemed that ‘copy-paste’ does sometimes happen and that it normally goes unpunished and is not actively being addressed in terms of college policy. During our research we were struggling to find any universities that had regulations specifically relating to plagiarism as an offence. Some students had experienced that ‘copy-paste’ was frowned upon, but it had not resulted in any penalties. As a consequence they might have decided to go along with their teacher’s wishes, but it was not

under threat of severe punishment or expulsion. This lack of a framework for dealing with the unacknowledged work of others is unsurprising given the low significance of academic writing in the majority of Indian institutions and to the many other important issues that university authorities are struggling with on a daily and ongoing basis.

During our fieldwork there were a couple of articles in the mainstream newspapers that specifically focused on education. These also highlighted the willingness of parents to assist their children with homework / coursework (not unlike in the UK) and teachers turning a blind eye (again, similar stories are reported in the British context at secondary school level). What is perhaps different in India is the readiness of the market to respond to students' 'needs' and to provide a solution (as was outlined in section 3.5) that is affordable for many. Other contributing issues to students employing 'copy paste' when they do write is clearly to do with the low levels of information literacy (as discussed in section 3.6) and to the overall lack of academic writing (and hence skills training provision) within higher education and the low value attached to academic writing more generally (noted in section 3.7), especially in contrast with the all-important public examinations (described in section 3.4).

#### ***4. Conclusion***

This report set out to present a generalised picture of educational practices at undergraduate level in Indian higher education. The intention was to illuminate the background of students who might opt to continue their studies in the UK – and always mindful of the kinds of transitions that this might entail. It should be noted that this report is not meant as a judgment on educational practices in India. It does not seek to declare either the British or the Indian HE system as superior. Rather the emphasis has been on trying to understand the Indian HE sector on its own terms, i.e. by means of appreciating a whole range of contextual factors (historical, political and social) that impact on the system and which affect the logic that is variously employed by the many different participants within it. Thus readers are encouraged to not view the affiliating college system simplistically as an outmoded and impractical apparatus that should be abolished, but rather to try and understand the reasons why it has remained in force (despite its well documented shortcomings) and what kinds of restrictions this entails for both staff and students.

This conclusion draws together those aspects that are potentially problematic and that might be eased by the new (UK) host institution that receives graduates from India onto taught programmes at Masters level. As was highlighted in the main text of the report, UK institutions differ in terms of which level of Indian HE qualifications they expect for taught graduate programmes – partly because undergraduate education in India is so very different from that which is experienced by students in Britain.<sup>34</sup>

Firstly, it should be noted that Indian students who have had a college education are unlikely to have ever come into contact with research. Very few college lecturers hold research degrees and the vast majority are not expected to be involved in research as part of their duties at the colleges. Rather, they are full-time teachers, which can in many respects be beneficial to the students. Students who move to the UK context may need to be introduced to the dual role of British lecturers gently and sympathetically – so that they understand the influence of research on teaching and its role and contribution to academia. Also, students who are used to full time teachers at undergraduate level are unlikely to appreciate that in the UK student support is distributed across a whole range of functions and people. If this is not communicated to them they are likely to become frustrated by the unavailability of their teachers at UK insitutions.

Students who have previously studied in India are highly likely to be oriented towards the exams, as outlined in the main text, public examinations are absolutely central to Indian HE. This in turn means that they will be less familiar with course work and what this entails. Many Indian students are of course highly able – but they are not necessarily practiced in the kinds of assignments

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34 Indian taught graduate provision is different to undergraduate provision and was historically provided by university departments – rather than separately, in colleges. But this distinction is increasingly being blurred as colleges seek to open up new revenue streams.

that students routinely undertake in the British UG programme. Information literacy is a key skill that students from India are likely to struggle with – in their previous institutions provision was probably very different and in any case, students were not expected to read independently and / or conduct research on a topic.

This means that students new to the UK may have to be invited into the library and they may not only need leaflets and information, but actually modelling of what is expected of them in such a place. For example, the vast majority of students from India will be highly IT-literate, and yet they are unlikely to have worked with online data bases and academic journals. This means that, they are unlikely to have had to differentiate and assess the relative merit of different online sources and they have probably not had to manage their references and take notes in such a way as to be able to acknowledge and quote in line with British university guidelines. In fact, many students from India have probably never had to take notes (for the purpose of later reproduction and use in coursework). It is this level of detail that needs to be appreciated – students who are simply being told to get on with it are likely to revert to tried and tested means. Unless students new to the UK actually realise just how different the system is they are unlikely to take notice. A safe opportunity to learn – such as a fail mark in a formative assessment early on – followed up by detailed feedback, guidance and advice can serve students well for the rest of their academic career.

University staff in British institutions are often lulled into a false comfort by the excellent English language skills of students from India: the fact that students clearly comprehend the words that are being used effectively hides a gap in understanding of their meaning. Terms such as 'essay', 'critical' and 'argument' are but a few examples. But rather than being told over and over again that this is what is expected of them in the UK, students need instruction on their writing, feedback on their texts and probably models of essays and dissertations. For some students only dedicated academic writing support will do. Given that so many students in India will complete an undergraduate degree without ever writing a straightforward descriptive piece longer than 120 words (or so), that need is unsurprising. Of course, students can learn – and many do – but difficulties with writing need to be identified early on and the support provision has to be in place. Moreover, students need to be directed towards it, ideally within the first month of the first term. If they are not, many only wake up to the need towards the end of a short (one year) programme when recovery is difficult or impossible.

Study skills courses, which are often included in the pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes provision in the UK – can go some way to help students understand what it is expected of them. They also provide students with a period that is dedicated to navigating the transition and the early teething problems of moving to a new country. Unfortunately, these are often considered irrelevant for Indian candidates on account of their proven language proficiency. A hybrid provision might prove more attractive and relevant to this

group of students. At the same time it should be noted that even when there is a good general study skills provision, students will still need subject specific instruction in the conventions ideally provided by academic staff. After all, when allegations of plagiarism are made against students it is done on the basis of an academic judgment.

Lastly, it should be noted that struggling students that are unclear about what is expected of them and unclear about how they might fulfil the course requirements might readily draw on commercial support if left to their own devices. From our fieldwork in India this emerged as a viable and legitimate option.

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