

# One Aspirational Future for India's Higher-Education Sector

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*Several recent encouraging experiments in Indian higher education suggest a plausible aspirational path toward a more salubrious future than that suggested by an otherwise struggling system. Four case studies of privately conceived and funded universities each exhibit a novel model of collective philanthropy. Typically, each case features multiple entrepreneurs with self-created “new” wealth, often with exposure to Western liberal arts educations, sharing in the university’s governance. The university is not hostage to the vagaries of a single family’s preferences. Encouragingly, each experiment here has built on its predecessors, and an entrepreneurial ecosystem has emerged that has privileged pedagogical excellence. However, formal research still lags. It remains to be seen whether the latter lacunae can be remedied without concerted public funding that is the norm in Western educational landscapes.*

**A**s I write this, India is the one large economy with the wind in its sails, while the United States maneuvers amidst deep political polarization to avoid a recession, the European Union is mired in conflict, and China turns insularly inward. In India, private entrepreneurship continues untrammelled, only temporarily derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic and global financial stresses. This essay does not distinguish between for-profit and social entrepreneurship, both creative and significant to India’s growth story. India’s thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, the world’s third largest after the United States and China, has infected a hitherto staid higher-education sector. The Indian education landscape is littered with dozens of experiments by private universities. Many of these universities suffer from the desire of their principal promoters to remain tethered to their own families. Some could break out of this cognitive trap to develop a private higher-education model that could shape whether and how India capitalizes on its demographic dividend.

Higher education in India has witnessed a resurgence of philanthropic private entrepreneurship, embodying the spirit of nation-building as it did during its founding years. Before India’s independence in 1947, large industrial houses, like the Tatas and Birlas, established not-for-profit trusts that paved the way for private higher education and research institutions to contribute to India’s devel-

opment. They were the earliest institution builders that gave the nation the prestigious Indian Institute of Science (IISc, established in 1909), the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (established in 1936), the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR, established in 1945), and the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS, established in 1929, first as an intermediate college). Of these, the IISc and the TIFR have consistently represented India in global higher-education rankings with their relentless focus on research. These institutions aimed to provide a world-class education to Indian students at a fraction of the cost of studying abroad. They nurtured scientists and engineers who led India's foundational science and technology movements after 1947.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I provide an overview of current experiments in India's higher-education landscape to situate some prominent entrepreneurial efforts led by philanthropists over the past few decades. Thereafter, I consider lessons from this path, identifying residual shortcomings that stand in the way of designating these institutions as "world-class." These experiments showcase one plausible aspirational path toward a more salubrious future for Indian higher education.

**T**he roots of India's modern university system can be traced to 1857 when the British established three universities in Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Madras (Chennai) to build a pool of educated Indians to serve their economic, political, and administrative interests in colonial India. Modeled on the University of London, these universities were focused on teaching English and the humanities.

All subsequent universities were patterned on these three institutions. In the postindependence era, former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized higher education over primary education, for which he is both praised and derided. This created India's vaunted institutions of technical excellence, the Indian Institutes of Technology, and comparably and intensely competitive institutions of management, medicine, and public policy.

Yet universities struggled with low enrollments, outdated curricula, and research standards far behind global ones. Although India's higher-education landscape exploded from 20 universities, 496 colleges, and 250,000 students in 1947 to 1,113 universities, 43,796 colleges, and more than 41 million students in 2021, the student enrollment paled in comparison to India's 254 million youth (ages 15 to 24).<sup>2</sup> Presently, nearly 67 percent of India's population is in the working age group.<sup>3</sup> India is expected to contribute approximately 25 percent of the incremental global workforce in the coming decade.<sup>4</sup>

Using this potential demographic dividend requires extensive higher-education reform. Traditionally, India's university system pushed students into early career specialization through degrees in engineering, medicine, management, and law – safe employment bets – leaving students with little chance to explore their own

interests. While specialist institutions can be excellent, the higher-education tapestry has lacked institutions that cultivate broad intellectual exposure and multidisciplinary outlooks on relevant societal issues.

The underlying institutional structure has struggled to keep pace with demand. The primary regulatory body, the University Grants Commission (UGC), was set up in 1956, mimicking the structure of the eponymous organization in the United Kingdom. The role of the UGC is to advise the government of India on establishing universities; allocating funds, scholarships, and fellowships; and maintaining standards at institutions of higher education.<sup>5</sup> Over time, the UGC has drawn criticism for inadequate staffing and enforcing complex policies that have stifled universities and innovative endeavors.<sup>6</sup>

In an attempt at policy innovation, the government of India initiated the Institutes of Eminence (IOE) program in 2017 to build a regulatory structure that would enable Indian higher-education institutions to become world-class in teaching and research. An Empowered Expert Committee (EEC) was constituted to identify ten public and ten private higher-education institutions that could break into the top five hundred ranked universities in the world within ten years and, eventually, the top one hundred rankings.<sup>7</sup> The EEC followed a rigorous process to identify these institutions, allotting IOE status to a few. However, the process lost momentum, and several institutions had their approval for IOE status postponed indefinitely. In 2023, a parliamentary panel recommended speeding up the IOE approval process and increasing funding to grant the status more widely.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, in 2020, India launched a new National Education Policy (NEP) to provide universal access to quality education.<sup>9</sup> It aimed to expand the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education (including vocational education) from approximately 27 percent to 50 percent (for comparison, China has a GER of approximately 54 percent, the United States approximately 88 percent).<sup>10</sup> This goal will require a near doubling of higher-education capacity from catering to approximately 39 million students in 2020 to approximately 73 million by 2035, and addressing a faculty shortage – the student to faculty ratio in India is approximately 28 percent compared to approximately 20 percent in China and South Korea.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the NEP seeks to break from India's specialist-institution model and make all higher-education institutions multidisciplinary by 2040.

State governments also liberalized in the 1990s, believing investment in higher education would improve their economies and image. They provided land at subsidized rates. By 2021, the private sector ran more than 31,000 colleges (over 70 percent of the country's colleges), typically as for-profit institutions.<sup>12</sup>

Private universities, however, have not exactly distinguished themselves in a positive manner.<sup>13</sup> One researcher documented that one-third of politicians in the populous state of Uttar Pradesh ran the colleges in the region, gaining control of otherwise inaccessible land at concessional rates. Since the governance of edu-

cational institutions often permits less transparency, they used the schools as a means to shield the flow of funds. This flurry of entries in the higher-education market resulted in regulators closing several colleges – especially those ostensibly set up to deliver technical and trade education. It also led the Supreme Court to rule against some egregious instances of land-grabbing by corporations attempting to establish new universities.<sup>14</sup>

Yet some universities have broken out of the pack. These alternative paths have been funded by new-age entrepreneurs who have prospered in an emerging and globalizing India, many with exposure to education globally, and typically in acts of collective philanthropy so that no one family controls an institution.

I consider various examples to illustrate these points, starting with the Indian School of Business, where some institutionally innovative characteristics have emerged, specifically in a professional education setting. Thereafter, I describe Ashoka University, closely modeled on an Ivy League liberal arts education, Plaksha University, which is reimagining engineering education using techniques inspired by the liberal arts, and Krea University, which is blending the liberal arts and the professions. Table 1 provides some descriptive information on three respected preexisting privately founded universities as a comparative benchmark, alongside the four I have presented here. This is not an exhaustive list. My choice to include these particular institutions is driven by expository convenience.<sup>15</sup>

**T**he Indian School of Business (ISB) was the vision of some idealistic business leaders and Indian-origin entrepreneurs. In the last two decades, it has become one of the few management institutions from Asia, and the only one from India, that has consistently been featured in the top fifty global rankings of management education institutions. ISB competes successfully with long-established two-year MBA programs in India despite its MBA equivalent, the postgraduate program (PGP) in management, being only a one-year program and not officially recognized by Indian regulatory authorities.<sup>16</sup>

During India's liberalization, a need emerged for managers with a global perspective not offered by incumbent MBA programs. Further, those MBA programs did not insist on practical work experience before enrollment, a feature of the global best. In 1995, V. S. Raju, then director of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi, and IIT Delhi alum Rajat Gupta (former global managing director of McKinsey & Co.) met to discuss this challenge.

The initial idea, to build a School of Management within IIT Delhi and capitalize on its brand and infrastructure, was abandoned because a regulated public institution with rule-bound budget allocation offered limited scope for innovation. This meant ISB would have to be established through private capital. A governing board comprising global stalwarts from industry was formed, with each board member contributing the equivalent of US\$1 million. By 1996, this group raised US\$15 mil-

*Table 1*  
 India's Institutions of Higher Education, 2021–2022

<p><b>St. Stephen's College</b></p> <p>Established in New Delhi in 1881 with a religious foundation called the Cambridge Mission. A constituent college governed by Delhi University with 1,263 students pursuing bachelor's degrees, 71 students pursuing master's degrees, and 49 full-time faculty members with PhDs.</p> <p>Disciplines include engineering, humanities, social science, management, and natural science.</p>
<p><b>Azim Premji University</b></p> <p>Established in Bangalore, Karnataka, in 2011 through family philanthropy. A non-profit university governed by the Azim Premji Foundation with 338 students pursuing bachelor's degrees, 197 students pursuing master's degrees, and 140 full-time faculty members with PhDs.</p> <p>Disciplines include natural and social sciences, economics, education, philosophy, and English. It opened a new campus in Bhopal in 2023.</p>
<p><b>Shiv Nadar University</b></p> <p>Established in Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, in 2011 through family philanthropy. A private university governed by the Shiv Nadar Foundation with 2,290 students pursuing bachelor's degrees, 248 students pursuing master's degrees, 364 doctoral students, and 248 full-time faculty members with PhDs.</p> <p>Disciplines include engineering, natural and social sciences, and humanities.</p> <p>Global academic collaborations include University of California, Berkeley; University of Michigan; University of Queensland; and University of Warwick.</p>
<p><b>Indian School of Business</b></p> <p>Established in Hyderabad, Telangana, in 2001 through collective philanthropy. It opened a new campus in Mohali, Punjab, in 2012. It is registered as a Section-8 nonprofit organization. A nonprofit business school with 927 students pursuing master's degrees and 69 full-time faculty members with PhDs.</p> <p>Disciplines include finance, economics and public policy, strategy and entrepreneurship, information systems, accounting, finance, operations management, and organization behavior.</p> <p>Global academic collaborations include Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and the Fletcher School at Tufts University.</p>

Table 1, continued

<p><b>Ashoka University</b></p> <p>Established in Sonapat, Haryana, in 2014 through collective philanthropy. A non-profit university sponsored by the International Foundation for Research and Education with 1,603 students pursuing bachelor's degrees, 524 students pursuing master's degrees, 83 doctoral students, and 209 full-time faculty members with PhDs.</p> <p>Disciplines include liberal arts, economics, biology, computer science, physics, chemistry, math, political science, and English.</p> <p>Global academic collaborations include King's College London, Connecticut College, University of Cambridge, and Duke University.</p>
<p><b>Krea University</b></p> <p>Established in Sri City, Andhra Pradesh, in 2018 through collective philanthropy. A nonprofit university sponsored by the Institute for Financial Management and Research with 435 students pursuing bachelor's degrees, 363 students pursuing master's degrees, 20 doctoral students, and 74 full-time faculty members with PhDs.</p> <p>Disciplines include humanities, natural and social sciences, literature, arts, and business.</p> <p>Global academic collaborations include MIT (J-PAL South Asia), Yale University (Inclusion Economics), King's College London, and University of Chicago.</p>
<p><b>Plaksha University</b></p> <p>Established in Mohali, Punjab, in 2021 through collective philanthropy. A non-profit university sponsored by the Reimagining Higher Education Foundation with 86 students pursuing bachelor's degrees, 50 students pursuing master's degrees, 1 doctoral student, and 20 full-time faculty members with PhDs.</p> <p>Disciplines include engineering, entrepreneurship, and leadership.</p> <p>Global academic collaborations include University of California, Berkeley; Purdue University; and University of California, San Diego.</p>

The first three schools represent institutions with models that do not fit the collective governance of the schools profiled in this essay. The latter four represent a wave of more recent entrants, mostly driven by newer age entrepreneurs. Dates when the schools were established begin from the year the first batch of students was admitted. Source: Data for St. Stephen's College, Azim Premji University, and Shiv Nadar University were compiled from the latest information available on their respective websites, institutional brochures, and India's Ministry of Education's National Institutional Ranking Framework 2023. Data for Indian School of Business, Ashoka University, Krea University, and Plaksha University have been sourced and verified directly from the institutions. See "National Institutional Ranking Framework 2023," Ministry of Education, Government of India, <https://www.nirfindia.org/2023/Ranking.html> (accessed February 23, 2024).

lion.<sup>17</sup> This approach would later be termed “collective philanthropy” – in which multiple people pool their philanthropic donations for a common cause. ISB’s governance superseded individuals’ independent ambitions to own the school. Therefore, irrespective of the money contributed, each board member got one vote.

Andhra Pradesh’s then chief minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, offered land at subsidized rates in Hyderabad. He saw ISB as a catalyst to shape the city’s image as one with global aspirations and a magnet to draw investments into the state. However, land and money proved easier to find than a world-class faculty, which ISB tried (unsuccessfully) to do through McKinsey’s pro-bono services. Realizing the challenge of attracting international faculty to an unknown Indian business school, they pursued academic partnerships with global business schools as a way to facilitate knowledge and faculty exchange. Several significant decisions followed.

The first decision was to build a one-year MBA program, liked by students because of the lower cost and quicker reentry into the job market. The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University helped design this effort, modeled on INSEAD in Fontainebleau and IMD in Lausanne. A traditional two-year MBA program comprising roughly six hundred forty teaching hours was compressed into an intensive year of learning, while retaining the contact hours to preserve the program’s rigor and quality.<sup>18</sup> However, ISB’s MBA program would not get official recognition from India’s apex regulatory body, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), which mandates that MBA programs need to take two years to complete. Instead, ISB applied for and received international accreditations, ensuring that employers would value certificates that the school issued to its students.

The second decision was to build an executive education program alongside the postgraduate program to generate additional funding for growth. The third was to adopt a model in which visiting faculty would teach one or two courses over a five-to-six-week period each year, allowing ISB to invite top faculty from renowned international business schools without disrupting their academic and personal lives. This structure relieved ISB of pressure to recruit a cadre of permanent faculty before opening. By the time ISB opened its doors, it had hired four permanent faculty and twenty-three visiting faculty. With these “experiments” in place, ISB welcomed its first class of one hundred twenty-eight students to campus in 2001. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee inaugurated ISB – a move crucial to establishing the credibility of this nonaccredited higher-education institution.

Twenty-two years after its inauguration, ISB became the one hundredth school in the world to earn the “triple crown” of accreditations – a feat achieved by only the top 1 percent of business schools.<sup>19</sup> With an annual intake of nine hundred students, it is on the way to becoming one of the largest MBA programs globally. It offers scholarships to provide needs-cum-merit support to students, helping increase accessibility to its postgraduate program, which costs approximately US\$45,000.<sup>20</sup> ISB’s experiments – the collective philanthropy model, the one-year nonaccredit-

ed certificate program, the visiting faculty strategy, and the parallel running executive education program – would be borrowed many times by upcoming higher-education institutions claiming to provide world-class education in India.

**I**n 2007, six years after ISB's opening, four philanthropists and entrepreneurs in India's capital New Delhi discussed the need to build a university that would provide a world-class, liberal undergraduate education in India at a fraction of the cost of a similar U.S. degree.<sup>21</sup> Their vision was to build an institutional model that could be replicated to meet the demands for high-quality university education nationwide. They named the institution Ashoka University after Emperor Ashoka (c. 304–232 BC) of India, who is said to have represented India's highest ideals through liberal thought.<sup>22</sup> Launched in 2014, Ashoka University (Ashoka) has demonstrated the viability of an excellent liberal arts education in India while being more affordable than American Ivy League schools.<sup>23</sup>

Ashoka's founding group believed that India's students could study liberal arts and build sustainable careers if they were part of a great educational institution. The founders felt undergraduates should explore their intellectual interests before specializing, design their own interdisciplinary courses of study, and be admitted on holistic criteria (rather than single-dimensional test scores), all departures from Indian educational practice. The group identified five guiding principles to shape Ashoka: embrace private philanthropy, provide a multidisciplinary liberal arts education, create a self-sustaining financial model, partner with world-class visiting international faculty, and position the institution as an Ivy League–quality education alternative.<sup>24</sup>

In 2008, the founders set up an independent not-for-profit company, the International Foundation for Research and Education (IFRE), inspired by ISB's experience of using a model of collective philanthropy. Hence, regardless of their donation, every founder had one vote for decision-making. Soon, India's top philanthropists, private-equity investors, industrialists, and entrepreneurs recognized the opportunity offered by Ashoka to play a role in nation-building. This was reminiscent of the sentiment from the 1930s through the 1970s when established business houses, such as the Tatas and Birlas, funded the establishment of institutions in education and health care.

The founding group realized it would take several years to demonstrate the viability of a world-class liberal arts education. They had to acquire land, get regulatory approvals, build a state-of-the-art campus, attract the first batch of students, and then wait four years for them to graduate and become alumni. Therefore, in 2011, the founding group launched a one-year graduate program called the Young India Fellowship (YIF) to build an alumni base. The fellows in the program would be rigorously selected from a pool of working undergraduates. They would undergo a one-year liberal arts education program, taking eighteen to twenty-two

courses, each lasting four to six weeks, taught by visiting world-class faculty. Like the ISB model, the students would be trained in leadership, communication, and critical writing and provided internship opportunities. The first few classes of the YIF were generously funded. Many fellows went on to top graduate degree programs in the United States and Europe. Others were hired by top organizations in India through the founders' networks.

Like the model for ISB's postgraduate program, YIF granted a certificate to the graduates at the end of one year. In 2014, when Ashoka was officially launched, the fellowship was brought under its aegis and became a recognized and accredited residential, graduate diploma-granting program in liberal studies. Today, it boasts of having nurtured more than twenty-one thousand socially conscious leaders and changemakers for the twenty-first century and has emerged as one of the most sought-after programs in India for young professionals.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike other prominent, Pan-Indian, university-independent fellowships, such as Teach for India (established in 2008) and the Legislative Assistants to Members of Parliament (LAMP) Fellowship (established in 2010), in which fellows are paid a monthly stipend, the Young India Fellows pay an annual fee to attend Ashoka. The university provides need-based financial aid and partners with financial institutions to provide loans to cover the rest of the costs. As of 2023, 65 percent of the fellows are on need-based financial aid.<sup>26</sup>

The pool of visiting faculty for the YIF came from different parts of India and the world to teach at Ashoka's temporary campus in New Delhi. The visiting faculty helped both to establish the credibility of Ashoka's mission and to recruit full-time faculty. While the paperwork to create the university was underway, partnerships were forged with the University of Pennsylvania and Carleton College for academic planning and certifications. The experiment's novelty attracted some top liberal arts and leadership faculty to the YIF, and eventually to Ashoka overall. Some faculty gave public lectures to drive Ashoka's outreach and fundraising efforts.

By 2014, when Ashoka formally launched its campus in Haryana and admitted the first set of more than one hundred twenty undergraduates, YIF had paved the way for over two hundred credible alumni, who were placed in top organizations and global universities. This success drew faculty from India's top institutions to move to Ashoka full-time. Today, Ashoka has over four thousand alumni (undergraduate, graduate, and YIF attendees) spread across more than thirty countries. It currently operates on a twenty-five-acre campus housing forty-five hundred students, of which nearly 49 percent receive financial aid.

**I**n 2015, when Ashoka University was in its second year, a few technology experts dreamt of reimagining technology education, motivated by the dismal quality of India's engineering graduates.<sup>27</sup> The would-be founders, all technologists with international experience, conceived of a university named Plaksha, a refer-

ence to the ancient Indian centers of learning, or gurukuls, that flourished under the shade of the Plaksha (or Ficus) tree.<sup>28</sup>

Since 2021, Plaksha has sought to reimagine technology education, enable a research and innovation ecosystem, and address the challenges of health, security, mobility, energy, and manufacturing.<sup>29</sup> The founders strive to deliver an education that addresses real-world problems by employing multiple technological know-how streams, drawing from liberal arts and business education, and offering a project-oriented curriculum connected to industry, an approach embraced by institutions like MIT (which emphasizes grand challenges) and the Olin College of Engineering (which encourages curricular innovation).

Inspired by ISB's and Ashoka's collective philanthropy, the founding group raised funds from more than thirty-five business leaders in India, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Singapore. The state of Punjab, which had earlier lost competitive educational institutions to its neighbor Haryana because of the latter's proximity to New Delhi, provided Plaksha with subsidized land in Mohali, near the state capital.

While acquiring the land, Plaksha launched a yearlong graduate liberal arts-based program in technology called the Technology Leaders Program (TLP), in partnership with Purdue University and the University of California, Berkeley, in a temporary campus in Gurgaon, Haryana, similar to Ashoka's YIF. A global community of CEOs, entrepreneurs, and academics designed TLP, and they put fifty-nine handpicked high-potential young individuals through its rigorous program. The TLP curriculum was focused on fields that Plaksha wanted to teach at undergraduate levels, such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, design thinking, systems thinking, data science, entrepreneurship, and leadership. The first batch of TLP participants who graduated in 2020 all got jobs. By 2021, when Plaksha officially opened, TLP had emerged as a sought-after program for Indian youth interested in working at the intersection of technology, product development, and the social sciences. Plaksha University then launched four unique bachelor of technology programs in computer science and artificial intelligence, robotics and cyber-physical systems, biological systems engineering, and data science, economics, and business.

To attract high school students, Plaksha started the Young Technology Scholars (YTS) program. A two-week intensive summer program, YTS exposes students to real-world problem-solving through hands-on learning and interdisciplinary coursework.<sup>30</sup> Plaksha is leveraging takeaways from both ISB and Ashoka as well as from the reputations of its founders with the hope of becoming a model that can inspire several other "Plakshas."

**K**rea University (Krea), led by the chairperson of its executive committee, Kapil Vishwanathan, represents a recent effort to reimagine liberal arts education for the world. *Krea* means an "action-oriented approach" in

Sanskrit. The university's mission is to help humanity prepare for an unpredictable world, using the pedagogical concept of interwoven learning that combines thought with action, joins the arts with the sciences, and connects learnings from the past with preparedness for the future.<sup>31</sup> Krea aims to develop agile, ethical, and purposeful leaders prepared to navigate human-human, human-machine, and human-environment relationships.

Krea is located in Sri City in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Ashoka, Plaksha, and ISB, whose parent bodies were instituted a few years before their founding, Krea's sponsoring body is the Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR), established in 1970 to provide research input to industries and to the government of India in finance and economics. IFMR was sponsored by major industrial groups as a form of collective philanthropy. Governing council members, who represent a cross section of society, serve three-year terms.

Krea houses two schools – the School of Interwoven Arts and Sciences and the IFMR Graduate School of Business – and oversees three research centers – Leveraging Evidence for Access and Development (LEAD), J-PAL South Asia (an affiliate of the Boston-based global Poverty Action Lab), and the Centre for Digital Financial Inclusion (CDFI). Krea welcomed its first cohort of one hundred thirteen undergraduate students in August 2019, about half of whom are on need-blind financial aid. Undergraduates are empowered to design their own course of study.

While the first class of students is yet to graduate, the business program has been leading the charge in establishing an image for Krea graduates, serving a purpose similar to the YIF and TLP models of Ashoka and Plaksha.

**W**hat will it take to become world-class? I'm a clear-eyed optimist who believes entrepreneurship can create productive societal change. Higher education in the developing world – of which India is perhaps an exemplar – is in dire need of this. The Indian example of the past few decades has infused dynamism on the margins of an otherwise staid system, run experiments that are largely succeeding, and chiseled away at the mistrust that has often bedeviled collaboration between private entrepreneurs and the rest of society (see Table 2).

A key to these lessons is the rise of philanthropically minded private entrepreneurs, typically entering higher education laterally, rather than being career educators. They have pioneered newer institutional ideas, often borrowing from their global experiences to contextualize these concepts to India's needs.<sup>33</sup> Continued success requires these entrepreneurs to remain mindful of the ambient suspicion of the private sector. These individuals, mostly from (self-earned) privilege, are, fairly or otherwise, subject to the critique that they are elitist. Many are attempting to address this impression by providing need-based financial aid and broader outreach, but there is always more work to be done on true social and economic inclusion.

*Table 2*

**Lessons and Key Highlights from the Experiments with New Institutions of Higher Education in India**

<p><b>Collective Philanthropy</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Philanthropists, entrepreneurs, high-net-worth individuals, and private organizations with a common vision to improve education collaboratively contribute capital and resources such as time and networks over an extended period.</li><li>2. These benefactors believe the autonomy and goodwill of the desired institution will supersede the desire for recognition or control by any individual donor or group.</li><li>3. Members of the governing boards get one vote, irrespective of their donation size. No individual group can claim ownership.</li><li>4. The founders' group attracts more donors from their networks.</li><li>5. The donors are often recognized as cofounders of the institutions, sponsors of scholarships and centers, and promoters of various infrastructural facilities.</li></ol>
<p><b>Shared Governance Model</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Different stakeholders of the institution, such as faculty, staff, governing board, academic council, student bodies, and alumni, participate in building policies and driving decision-making for the institution.</li><li>2. A distinction is maintained between the academic, administrative, and advancement functioning of the institution wherein respective bodies inform but do not interfere with each other's work.</li></ol>
<p><b>Obsession with High-Quality Faculty and Students</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Institutions prioritize recruiting high-quality faculty with a global outlook who can inspire students with a love for learning.</li><li>2. Institutions adopt a visiting faculty model to get globally renowned professors, academics, and practitioners to teach in fixed-week blocks, building a trustworthy academic perception to attract students.</li><li>3. Visiting faculty fill the early gaps for high-quality instructors until permanent faculty are hired in the coming years.</li><li>4. Institutions use philanthropic capital to build world-class services to distinguish themselves—from academic engagement to campus facilities, extra-curricular activities, research, branding, outreach, and placement results.</li></ol>

Table 2, continued

<p><b>Global Academic Collaborations</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institutions build academic partnerships with top international universities to drive faculty exchange, program design, and collaborative branding.</li> <li>2. Global partnerships create opportunities for international student exchanges, as well as research collaborations.</li> </ol>
<p><b>State Governments' Support</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. State governments liberalize policies that enable private players to establish educational institutions, seeing new universities as investments to generate employment and improve the state's image.</li> <li>2. State governments offer land and other resources at subsidized rates to the founders of educational institutions, often the result of interstate competition to attract such institutions.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Experimentation outside Regulatory Regimes</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institutions continue to experiment with nonaccredited models that have successfully coexisted with accredited programs.</li> <li>2. Institutions create alternate models in undergraduate and graduate program structures to give students flexibility to design their own academic journeys. For example, undergraduate programs not limited to the traditional three-year bachelor's degree, returning graduate programs, and the like.</li> <li>3. Institutions adopt diverse, flexible, and liberal admission processes aligned with central and state regulatory policies that allow them to cater to a wider candidate pool.</li> <li>4. Regulators allow some of these innovations to thrive despite not coming under their control, viewing them as experiments that could lead to more formal solutions for the country's future educational needs.</li> </ol>

Source : Author's compilation of data.

Further, for all the excellence in teaching that prioritizes more than a purely technical education, research has received relatively scant attention. None of the entrepreneurial efforts profiled here are within plausible distance of being world-class in research. The institutions that I have highlighted have focused on becoming teaching universities first and foremost.<sup>34</sup> ISB, with the longest gestation period, is perhaps the most research-oriented, but that too is a work in progress, and only in management. ISB has set up multidisciplinary centers that are not siloed like departments in science and humanities colleges, and Ashoka and Krea have followed suit. Some have taken nascent steps toward developing doctoral programs, but it is a long road ahead.

Additionally, a true liberal arts education requires institutional maturity from universities and broader societal structures, including the state's machinery. This was brought to the fore recently with regard to freedom of expression when some saw Ashoka to be bending to political pressure to contain views antithetical to the government's philosophy.<sup>35</sup>

There has not been an opportunity in this essay to comment on the geopolitical moment within which India finds herself, but it is relevant to the rise of the new universities. The United States and India have edged closer together – a rapprochement in the post-Cold War era that has survived changes in governments in both countries. This closeness has increased connectivity to the West as well. These new alliances are buttressed by the coming of age of the Indian diaspora in the West (primarily Indian-origin CEOs of leading Western companies, such as Alphabet, Microsoft, Novartis, and Starbucks) and in political circles (Vice President Kamala Harris in the United States and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in the United Kingdom). The spillovers of this bonhomie are manifesting in a greater exchange of ideas between the West and India.

Perhaps the most encouraging part of this emergent narrative is that an entrepreneurial ecosystem is taking shape regarding private philanthropy directed toward higher education. It manifests itself in openness to ideas, whatever their provenance, a *sine qua non* for unfettered inquiry and creativity. Ashoka learned from ISB, and Plaksha and Krea from Ashoka, and they are all competing for good students and faculty. In the process, they have created the possibility for preexisting universities to up their game. Society should nurture this entrepreneurial process.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These nation-building private entrepreneurs did not limit themselves to education. Khwaja Abdul Hamied, for example, founded Cipla in 1935, convinced that global quality medicines could be produced in India, even as the country fought for independence. Under the leadership of Hamied's son, Yusuf, Cipla grew into one of the world's largest generic medicine producers, and today manufactures most HIV medication consumed by patients globally. See Muhammad H. Zaman and Tarun Khanna, "The Cost and Evolution of Quality at Cipla Ltd., 1935–2016," *Business History Review* 95 (2) (2021): 249–274.
- <sup>2</sup> A university can award degrees under some Act of Parliament or of a State Legislature. A college, in contrast, cannot provide a degree in its own name, and therefore must be affiliated with a university. There are stand-alone institutions that are unaffiliated with universities, and they therefore cannot provide degrees, but they do grant diplomas. A private university is established through a legislative act by the center or a state, following a body of rules in place. An Institute of National Importance is explicitly anointed as such by an Act of Parliament. Examples include the Indian Institute of Technology, National Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, and All India Institute of Medical Science. See Narayana Jayaram and Phillip G. Altbach, "Confucius and the Guru: The Changing Status of the Academic Profession in China and India," *Journal of Education Planning and Administration* 20 (4) (2006): 395; *All India Survey of Higher Education Report 2020–2021* (New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2021); and United Nations Population Fund, *Annual Report 2022* (New Delhi: United Nations Population Fund: India, 2022), [https://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa\\_annual\\_report\\_2022.pdf](https://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa_annual_report_2022.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Working Age Population," <https://data.oecd.org/pop/working-age-population.htm> (accessed February 16, 2024).
- <sup>4</sup> "India@100: Reaping the Demographic Dividend," EY India, [https://www.ey.com/en\\_in/india-at-100/reaping-the-demographic-dividend](https://www.ey.com/en_in/india-at-100/reaping-the-demographic-dividend) (accessed February 16, 2024).

- <sup>5</sup> “Genesis,” University Grants Commission, <https://www.ugc.gov.in/Aboutus/Genesis> (accessed February 16, 2024).
- <sup>6</sup> A parallel organization, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), was founded in 1945 to oversee technical education in fields such as engineering, management, pharma, computer science, applied arts, architecture, and hotel management; see “History,” All India Council for Technical Education, <https://www.aicte-india.org/about-us/history> (accessed February 16, 2024). AICTE oversaw the establishment of technical institutions and the introduction of new courses, and monitored capacity intake. Over time, these rules have been relaxed; for example, the universities described in this essay (Ashoka, Krea, Plaksha) do not have to get AICTE approval.
- <sup>7</sup> I was one of four members of the Empowered Expert Committee, led by former Chief Election Commissioner of India Gopalaswami Needamanglam.
- <sup>8</sup> R. Radhika and Aeshwarya Tiwari, “IITs, DU, BHU, Public Institutions of Eminence Have Got under 50% of Promised Funds,” *Careers360*, May 1, 2023, <https://news.careers360.com/institutes-of-eminence-ioe-status-iit-bombay-delhi-madras-du-bhu-uoh-under-50-percent-funds-list-india>.
- <sup>9</sup> *National Education Policy 2020* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020), [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) measures the number of students enrolled in higher education as a percentage of the population in the age group eighteen to twenty-three years old.
- <sup>11</sup> “Higher Education in India: Vision 2047,” FICCI-EY Parthenon Higher Education in India: Vision 2047 Report.
- <sup>12</sup> “Majority of Indian Colleges Are Run by Private Sector, Govt Tells Rajya Sabha,” *Live Mint*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/majority-of-indian-colleges-are-run-by-private-sector-govt-tells-rajya-sabha-11627556238570.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> Rahul Verma, “Politicians Will Pose the Biggest Challenge to NEP,” *Hindustan Times*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/politicians-will-pose-the-biggest-challenge-to-nep/story-eg3ygujv9rfg3xb6wajp2i.html>.
- <sup>14</sup> “Supreme Court rules against land acquisition for Vedanta Group’s proposed university,” *India Infoline News Service*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.indiaonline.com/news/uncategorized/supreme-court-rules-against-land-acquisition-for-vedanta-groups-proposed-university>.
- <sup>15</sup> Several other higher-education institutions have also provided lessons that I have drawn from here. For example, St. Stephen’s College in New Delhi has been a hallmark of excellence for decades, as have more recent private universities like Shiv Nadar University and Azim Premji University, both funded by individual fortunes made from the software industry. None of these, however, fits the model on which this essay is focused.
- <sup>16</sup> India had a different nomenclature for educational programs. Undergraduate programs were called graduate programs and graduate programs were called postgraduate programs.
- <sup>17</sup> Pramath Raj Sinha, *An Idea Whose Time Has Come: The Story of the Indian School of Business* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011), 13.

- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 25–39.
- <sup>19</sup> Indian School of Business has received accreditation from the Association of MBAs, EFMD Quality Improvement Systems, and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.
- <sup>20</sup> This compares to about US\$30,000 for IIM Ahmedabad’s two-year MBA program, about US\$130,000 for University of Massachusetts Amherst’s two-year MBA program, and about US\$230,000 for a two-year MBA program at Harvard Business School. These estimates are based on information on these institutions’ websites, and on the current exchange rate.
- <sup>21</sup> Pramath Sinha (founding dean of Indian School of Business; PhD from the University of Pennsylvania), Ashish Dhawan (founder of Central Square Foundation and Chrys Capital; undergraduate degree from Yale University and MBA from Harvard Business School), Vineet Gupta (founder of Jamboree Education; degree from Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi), and Sanjiv Bikchandani (founder of Naukri Group; MBA from Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad).
- <sup>22</sup> “About Us,” Ashoka University, <https://www.ashoka.edu.in/about-us> (accessed February 22, 2024).
- <sup>23</sup> “The Making of a World Class University,” *Samvad: The Newsletter from Ashoka University* 8 (2017): 1–2, [https://ashoka.edu.in/static/doc\\_uploads/file\\_1509445097.pdf](https://ashoka.edu.in/static/doc_uploads/file_1509445097.pdf).
- <sup>24</sup> “Ashoka University, A Quest to Transform Higher Education in India,” internal document, February 26, 2013.
- <sup>25</sup> “Young India Fellowship,” Ashoka University, <https://www.ashoka.edu.in/academic-programme/young-india-fellowship> (accessed February 22, 2024).
- <sup>26</sup> “Financing Your YIF [Young India Fellows] Education,” Ashoka University, <https://www.ashoka.edu.in/financial-aid-application-process-2> (accessed February 22, 2024).
- <sup>27</sup> The analysis was done by Aspiring Minds, a software firm I cofounded in 2008 that was acquired by SHL (a company based in the United Kingdom) in 2019. “Thought Leadership White Papers and Reports,” SHL, <https://www.shl.com/en-in/resources/by-type/whitepapers-and-reports/national-employability-report-engineers-2019> (accessed February 22, 2024).
- <sup>28</sup> “Reimagining Higher Education Foundation (RHEF) Plaksha,” Berkeley Sutardja Center for Entrepreneurship and Technology, <https://scet.berkeley.edu/global-partner/reimagining-higher-education-foundation-rhef-plaksha> (accessed February 22, 2024). University rankings are from QS World University Rankings 2019.
- <sup>29</sup> Internal document, “Reimagining Higher Education Foundation (RHEF): Building a 21st Century Technology University in India.” See also “About Grand Challenges Initiatives,” Grand Challenges, <https://www.grandchallenges.org/about> (accessed February 23, 2024).
- <sup>30</sup> “Young Technology Scholars,” Plaksha University, <https://plaksha.edu.in/hs/young-technology-scholars> (accessed February 23, 2024). Similar in spirit but at nationwide scale is the establishment of tens of thousands of tinkering labs, maker spaces in Indian high schools to encourage enthusiasm for the sciences. These labs are under the auspices of the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), the flagship innovation policymaking body for the government of India. AIM in turn was established as a result of a public commission I chaired in 2015. Tarun Khanna, Rukmini Banerji, Shri Binod Kumar Bawri, et al., *Report*

of the Expert Committee on Innovation and Entrepreneurship (New Delhi: NITI Aayog, 2015), <https://smartnet.niua.org/sites/default/files/resources/report-of-the-expert-committee.pdf>. See also "About AIM," Atal Innovation Mission, <https://aim.gov.in> (accessed February 23, 2024).

<sup>31</sup> "Krea Mission," Krea University, <https://krea.edu.in/about> (accessed February 23, 2024).

<sup>32</sup> Krea University, *Annual Report 2019–2020* (Sri City, India: Krea University, 2020), [https://krea.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Annual-report-05102020\\_w-ofinancials.pdf](https://krea.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Annual-report-05102020_w-ofinancials.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> See my essay on contextualizing organizational models to various locales. Tarun Khanna, "Contextual Intelligence," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/09/contextual-intelligence>.

<sup>34</sup> Therefore, these are unlike "research universities" that focus on research, with teaching as a derivative preoccupation. See Pankaj Jalote, *Building Research Universities in India* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publishing, 2021). Ideally, research and teaching should, and do, complement each other.

<sup>35</sup> A recent opinion piece accuses liberal arts institutions in India of politically expedient hypocrisy. Aakash Joshi, "Ashoka University and the Hypocrisy of 'Liberal' Branding," *The Indian Express*, June 5, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/ashoka-university-and-the-hypocrisy-of-liberal-branding-8646715>.