

Private Sector Has Key Role in Widening Global Access to Higher Education, Speakers Say

By Karin Fischer

Vancouver, British Columbia

Higher education may be a public good, but making a college education available to many more people around the world will take private-sector investment.

That was a key message to come out of the first day of an international-education meeting here, put on by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, a think tank based in Britain that conducts research on global-education trends and best practices. Organized around the theme "Leveling the International Playing Field," the conference drew more than 130 high-level delegates from some two-dozen countries.

While national governments may be important drivers of education policy, they often do not have the resources to expand college capacity, speakers said. "Governments have become reluctant to fund high-profile mass-education systems from their tax base," said Sir Drummond Bone, the chair of the Observatory's Advisory Board, in opening remarks.

In many cases, governments simply cannot meet the higher-education needs. Take India, which has more than 400 million residents between the ages of 17 and 30. Only 13 percent of the population in that age group is enrolled in higher education, said Duleep C. Deosthale, vice president for international education at Manipal Education.

The Indian government proposes to build 15 or 20 new national universities in the coming years, said Mr. Deosthale, who spoke on a panel about the private sector's role in expanding educational access, but "that will only scratch the surface. The private sector is going to make the difference."

Already, some 65 percent of India's college students are enrolled in universities operated by private firms like Mr. Deosthale's, which has institutions in Antigua, Dubai, Malaysia, and Nepal, in addition to several campuses in India.

One of Manipal's Indian institutions, Sikkim Manipal University of Health, Medical, and Technological Sciences, will grow to enroll one million students within five years, Mr. Deosthale said. It now has 200,000 students, many of whom take at least part of their coursework online.

The rise of for-profit education overseas isn't restricted to India. Some of the largest for-profit education companies are in countries like Brazil and China, said Svava Bjarnason, a senior education specialist with the International Finance Corporation.

The IFC, which is part of the World Bank, works to build private-sector capacity in emerging educational markets, Ms. Bjarnason said, during a session on the role of private capital in higher education. It makes loans to education providers in developing countries, typically between \$15-million and \$20-million, and helps to match them with other sources of financial support. "There's a real professionalization of the sector," she said.

Morshidi Sirat, deputy director general of the Department of Higher Education in Malaysia, said his country needs private partners if it is to realize its goal of becoming a higher-education hub in Southeast Asia.

The government is looking to for-profit companies, like Manipal, and to private, nonprofit institutions, like the Johns Hopkins University, which will open a medical campus in the country this fall. But it doesn't take such relationships casually, Mr. Sirat said during his talk, flashing a slide listing the many steps colleges must go through to be approved by the Malaysian government to offer educational programs.

"It's key to development in Malaysia," he said of the overseas relationships.

Joseph D. Duffey, a senior vice president of Laureate International Universities who spoke via a computer linkup, said this is a time of great change in international-education provision and partnerships. His company, based in the United States, has joint programs and campuses, typically with local partners, in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

"This is not your father's globalization," Mr. Duffey said.

The Observatory conference continues Friday, with sessions on topics including global student mobility, overseas branch campuses, and online education.