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South Asian University: Catalyst for Regional Cooperation?

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Abstract

Armed with a three-fold agenda of building a culture of understanding and regional consciousness; nurturing a new class of liberal, bright and quality leadership; and building the capacity of the region in science, technology and other disciplines, the South Asian University is set to open its gates this month. This brief analyses the efficacy of the university and whether it can act as a catalyst for regional cooperation.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's vision of a regional varsity is finally set to take shape in the form of the South Asian University (SAU), which opens its doors to students this month. A first of its kind, the university is a brainchild of the Prime Minister, who mooted the idea at the 13th annual meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Dhaka in 2005.² The SAU will initially offer two postgraduate courses; Master in Development Economics (two years) and Master of Computer Application (three years). Both courses will have 25 students each. In development economics, 13 students hail from other SAARC countries, while 12 are from India. Sixteen Indian students and nine students from other SAARC nations have enrolled for the computer application programme.³

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² 'South Asian University to start from August 26', *The Times of India* (2 August 2010), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/South-Asian-University-to-start-from-August-26/articleshow/6230022.cms>. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

³ Ibid.

The foundation stone of the SAU campus, at a 100-acre plot in Delhi's Maidan Garhi, was laid in 2008. The initial cost of US\$300 million for the university is being borne by the Indian government. However, all SAARC member countries will contribute towards operational costs and the university will also raise money from international financial institutions, educational foundations and donors. While the main campus is still under construction, the university will start functioning from its temporary campus in Akbar Bhavan in central Delhi.⁴

With keen focus on research and postgraduate level programmes, SAU hopes to ultimately offer 12 postgraduate science and non-science courses, along with a small stream of undergraduate studies.⁵ At full strength, the university envisages to accommodate around 7,000 students and 700 teachers. The admission process for SAU entails a common admission test for applicants in all eight SAARC nations. In order to have a balanced representation, no more than 50 per cent of students can be from India. Each SAARC country is to have at least 4 per cent of students at the SAU. To encourage enrollment, the Indian government has offered 50 'SAARC Silver Jubilee Scholarships' for meritorious students from SAARC's Least Developed Countries.⁶

Education is not a new item on SAARC's agenda. Given the lack of access to higher education options and suboptimal quality in several segments of the academic environment in South Asia, cooperation in education among members entered SAARC's agenda with the establishment of a Technical Committee on Education in 1989. Since reorganisation of the SAARC Integrated Programme of Action (SIPA) in 1999, the subject has come under the purview of the Technical Committee on Human Resources Development. The SAARC fellowship and scholarship schemes are also in operation.⁷ A SAARC Consortium of Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) has been created with a view to standardisation of curricula, mutual recognition of courses and promotion of transfer of credits. A SAARC Teachers Forum has also been established.

While SAARC may constantly be engaged in resolving the political and economic dilemmas amongst its members with limited success, optimists view the cooperation on education as one of the few achievements of SAARC. It may also be a catalyst for the regional integration process. The university aims to create a centre of excellence and produce leaders who

⁴ 'South Asian University to start functioning in August,' *The Hindu* (03 June 2010), <http://beta.thehindu.com/news/national/article445133.ece>. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced the scholarships at SAARC's annual meeting in Thimpu in April 2010. For details, see www.southasianuniversity.org/NewsLetter/news10.html. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

⁷ Though instituted in 1987, the scheme proved to be ineffective and it is only after revising the scheme first in 2002 and later in 2007, that it was finally implemented. Since 2008, Bangladesh, India and Nepal have offered the scholarships. Further details can be viewed at www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity_id=16. Accessed on 19 August 2010.

identify themselves as citizens of the region with a common vision of success for both their home country and the neighbours. A realistic and pragmatic leadership in the region could perhaps go a long way in resolving cross-border issues, while dealing with larger domestic problems. Given strained ties in the region, it may be difficult to be optimistic about the progress on the peace process between certain member countries. However, initiatives such as the SAU, may pave way for a process poised to move beyond initial pleasantries.

The challenge for every SAARC member, however, is still at home and unless domestic problems are tackled, the region is unlikely to progress. Capable leaders can definitely contribute to this progress. But can the SAU indeed train young leaders who are willing to devote their expertise both to the region and their home country? That said what needs to be seen is whether the university indeed will prove to be an effective instrument for regional cooperation or remain just a prototype for social interactions. Further, is there a demand from the youth of the region to be a part of the peace and solution building process via an SAU-like forum? A lobby of regionally 'conscious' young leaders, which can pressurise member country governments for engaging in a region-building process does not appear conspicuous till now.

For SAU, a key challenge will be to attract the right crop of academics and scholars to ensure quality education needed for its vision of excellence to be achieved. Can generous salaries with tax incentives and an academic environment free of interventions from regulatory bodies be lucrative enough for reputed international scholars to move to the university? The salaries to be paid to the faculty members have also caused disagreement within SAARC.⁸ Such a disagreement is reminiscent of the widely held notion that achieving consensus within SAARC is impossible without strife and contention.

In the absence of a precedent, the university representative of a South Asian identity would need much learning, unlearning and consensus-building over issues such as curricula and academic commitment. Rules and regulations are likely to be under constant review during the early years. That said, while the consensus on materialising the vision of cooperation in education is visible, it is clearly the implementation which may falter.

Timing is another challenge for the SAU with the high-profile Nalanda University commencing operations soon. Based on the ideal of the ancient university once situated in Nalanda, Bihar, the university is a dream project of the former Indian president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and has Japan, China, Korea and Singapore as key stakeholders. From an Indian vantage point, the university fits in with its 'Look East Policy'. It also personifies a pan-

⁸ 'Faculty salaries for South Asian University set to be slashed,' *The Indian Express* (19 April 2010), www.indianexpress.com/news/faculty-salaries-for-south-asian-university/608181/. Accessed on 18 August 2010.

Asian vision of the region and has a budget of Rs 1,005 crore (approx S\$290 million).⁹ Compared to the high profile project supported distinguished scholars such as Professor Amartya Sen and Lord Meghnad Desai, SAU is still a much modest vision.¹⁰

Through SAU, South Asia has an opportunity to build upon scientific and technical manpower, wherein it can provide the globalising world with competitive skilled labour. But in order to strengthen the human resource base of the region, attracting sustained public investment for a long term vision will remain a challenge. In this respect, it remains to be seen whether SAU can nurture true South Asian leaders capable of dissociating themselves from limited national identities for donning regional robes, or if it fizzles into another tame confidence building measure.

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⁹ 'Cabinet nod for Nalanda bill,' *The Times of India* (09 July 2010), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Cabinet-nod-for-Nalanda-bill/articleshow/6144055.cms>. Accessed on 18 August 2010.

¹⁰ 'Nalanda University set to reopen in '10, Amartya on faculty?' *The Times of India* (14 August 2008), http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Nalanda_University_to_reopen_in_10/articleshow/3362587.cms. Accessed on 19 August 2010.