

## A Path Dependency Approach to Understand the Role of Regions in the Development of New Universities

The growing demand of mass higher education(HE) has been accompanied by the establishment of new universities in many countries, including in India (Altbach, 2009; Agarwal, 2007). Such new universities are more inclined to engage with the regions than well-established universities (Boucher et al., 2003; Kwiek, 2012; Uyarra, 2010). However, prevailing studies (Gunasekara, 2006; Cowan and Zinovyeva, 2013; Benneworth and Sanderson, 2009) on regional engagement of universities focus on well-established universities, and their contributions to the regions. Such emphasis to contribute to the region is perhaps misplaced and unfair for new universities, who may have scant resources, no history of regional engagement, and national and global aspirations. Hence, this study problematises the university-region relationship to ask how do new universities leverage regional engagement for their own development. In order to do so, new universities are required to integrate regional missions into their core research and teaching missions, and find adequate support and resources to support such missions. The main research question in this study is: how can engagement with the region contribute to the development of new universities? This study provides an understanding of the tension and challenges faced by new universities for leveraging contributions from the regions. I use the theoretical framework proposed by Pinheiro et al. (2012, p. 256) for institutionalisation of regional engagement by universities. The framework describes the tensions and dilemmas faced by universities in engaging with the region, and identifies four factors that are essential for successful institutionalisation of regional engagement within the university.

The study was carried out in seven higher educational institutions(HEIs)<sup>1</sup> in India established by the federal government between 1995-2015. Five of the seven HEIs were located in urban regions, one was in a metropolitan region and one in a semi-urban region. Similarly, three of the seven HEIs were established in technology discipline, two were in management, and one each was in science, and architecture and planning. I collected the data by conducting semi-structured interviews with seventy-one faculty members in the HEIs, and from official documents, media reports and opinion pieces about the HEIs. The faculty members selected had the ranks of Associate Professor or Professor, with many of them also having administrative positions. I used coding techniques to analyse the interview transcripts and documents. The findings were triangulated with data from the HEIs established in different regional contexts. In addition, the selection of faculty members, who were associated with the HEIs for varied durations starting from the founding years, allowed collecting evidences that captured the temporal dimensions of the growth of the HEIs, and thus allowing for data triangulation from different times.

I argue that three conditions of the new HEIs - entrepreneurial environment, limited resourced and evolving institutional identity - make an evolutionary approach suitable to understand their regional engagement, and to enhance the existing theoretical framework about regional engagement. I find that the evolutionary paths of the new HEIs differed depending on the above conditions, and the different evolutionary paths led to differences in their engagement with the region. I use the conceptual framework

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<sup>1</sup>Due their focus on a single discipline, I use the term HEI to distinguish the institutions included in this study from multi-disciplinary universities.

of path dependency (Garud et al., 2010; Martin and Sunley, 2006; Sydow et al., 2009) to analyse the major decisions and events of the HEIs. I find that the placement of the HEIs in the region can act as a contingent event and can set off a series of sequential or self-reinforcing events for the HEIs that are hard to undo. I show that the initial conditions and decisions of the HEIs can be consequential to their future trajectories, and cannot simply be withered away during the course of time, resulting in path-dependent evolution of the HEIs.

I make three arguments to support the claim that the path dependent evolution of the HEIs shape the integration of regional engagement in to their research and teaching missions. First, I claim that three antecedents - ‘historical relational networks’, ‘threshold resources’ and ‘strong institutional legacies’ - influenced the tensions and challenges faced by the new HEIs to leverage the region for their development during the path creation phase. Second, I find that having to develop their infrastructure and constrained by resources, the new HEIs started their academic programmes first, followed by research activities, leading to reactive sequences and reinforcing their path dependent evolution. Such reactive sequencing of the activities of the HEIs in the path development phase shaped their preparedness of engaging with the region. Third, I find that a small group of faculty members along with the Director, with fair amount of flexibility and autonomy, influenced the emergence of a governance structure in the new HEIs. Based on the above findings, I suggest three distinct evolutionary paths for the new HEIs - canonical path dependent, evolutionary path dependent and non-path dependent. I suggest that new HEIs on each of these paths leverage the region differently for their development.

The main disciplinary contribution of this study is the application of path dependency theory to understand the regional engagement of new HEIs. I have revised the theoretical framework about institutionalisation of regional engagement suggested by Pinheiro et al. (2012) by contextualising it to new universities in India. The other main contribution is towards its implications on designing differentiated HE systems for countries that are moving towards massification. The study shows that differentiated HE systems need not just be built to meet diverse student needs (Marginson, 2016) but also has to factor in diverse capabilities and expectations of the regions that the HEIs are situated in. This study shows that it is possible for the regions to have lasting implications on the evolutions of the new HEIs and the design of national HE system could also consider relationships of the HEIs and the region as one of drivers for developing differentiated national HE systems.

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