

# Two-way traffic key to optimizing educational cooperation

AJIT JAIN

Kam Rathee, president, Canada-India Business Council, calls Balbir Sahni, Professor Emeritus of economics at Concordia University in Montreal, the 'father of synergy in education'.

Dr Sahni, who co-chairs the Education Committee of the Focus India Group at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, has organized more conferences on education linkages between Canada and India than any other person or organization.

Fittingly, he was the main speaker at the C-IBC-sponsored Synergy I conference last year, and was again at the 'Synergy in Education II' forum June 2.

Of the 130,000 Indian students who go abroad for post-secondary education, till very recently about 2,500 were coming to Canada. That number is now 7,000 – 'a quantum jump', said Dr Sahni, adding that the number is still 'inadequate and [its] cumulative profile unclear and incomplete.'

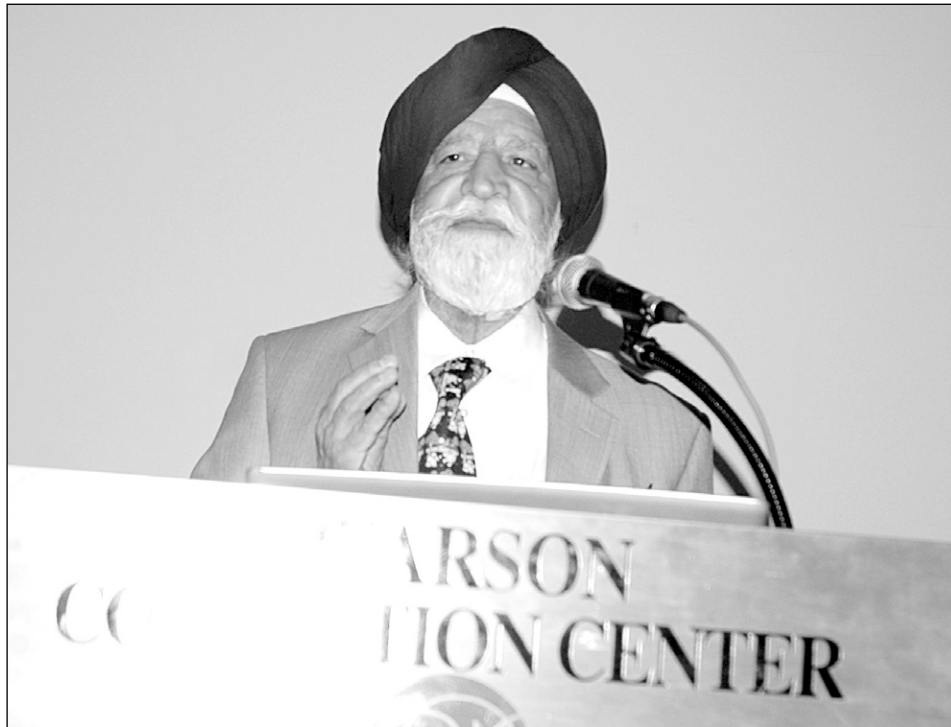
This is despite the fact that 'both countries maintain broad-based and vibrant educational institutional structures affording opportunities for enrichment of partnership,' said Dr Sahni.

The academic believes that education is a 'lynchpin' connecting technology, trade, and economies. India and Canada signed the Science and Technology Agreement two years back, and trade between the two countries has been on the increase for some time. 'Given the focus on science and technology as well as targeting trade flows, it is evident that education is increasingly viewed not in terms of purely academic linkages, but in its larger role affecting the economies.'

Dr Sahni favors two-way flows, with Indian students coming to Canada and vice versa.

It was widely discussed at Synergy II how Canadian universities have been going to India to recruit Indian students; it is time, participants suggested, that Indian universities likewise start recruiting Canadian students to study in India.

Two-way flows, Dr Sahni suggested, 'are essential for sustainability in the long run and realization of mutual benefits. The systems exist and work clearly at graduate and research levels, but should be utilized and encouraged more at the undergraduate level, including short-term two-way flows.'



■ Dr Balbir Sahni, Professor Emeritus of Economics, Concordia University

Dr Sahni elaborated on India's High Commissioner R L Narayan's point about the branding of schools, and pointed to the lack of quality information on the breadth of opportunities in both countries; 'as a result, only institutions with independent reputations are the major participants in flows.'

Leading from which, he suggested the need for intensive branding efforts to reduce the information gap, and said at the federal and provincial levels, Canada is making major efforts in this direction, as are Indian institutions. Dr Sahni felt additional resources should be allocated for the purpose.

Pointing to what is possible, he spoke of the setting up of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute in 1968 – a meager start, with only 10 to 12 Canadian universities becoming members. That number has since increased to over 75, and become bilateral with 33 Canadian universities and 43 to 45 Indian universities as members, including IITs, IIMs and other central universities.

Its mandate used to be to promote knowledge about India in Canada; now, it promotes Canadian studies in India and Indian studies in Canada, and facilitates an extensive exchange of students and faculty under SICI

sponsorships.

Dr Sahni referred to the visit of a delegation from India's University Grants Commission to Montreal sometime ago. At a reception in Ottawa, he told the delegation that the 'focus should be on education linkages', and UGC representatives said 'Canadian universities are coming to India to recruit Indian students and UGC wants to recruit Canadian students to come to India.'

'The stakeholders appear to be interested in both undergraduate and graduate degree programs,' Dr Sahni said, pointing out that this is to neglect vocational education and training – a sector that, he says, is not 'sufficiently well-defined in terms of the present bilateral context.'

The confusion arises because in Canada, there are community colleges, institutes of technology, and university colleges. 'While they all function to provide skills necessary for the spectrum of public and private sector enterprise and vocational development, they are subject to varying rules and systems.'

'In India, the vocational educational training [VET] is rendered by an independent network offering VET diplomats and in certain cases, a separate stream per-

mitting access to higher degree programs.'

Dr Sahni believes this area of institutional cooperation 'requires innovative approaches in a bilateral context', and is in favor of intensifying academia-industry cooperation through a short and long-term collaborative research agenda.

He further suggested that 'through a periodic bilateral consultative process, areas of mutual interest are established and the participants from academia and industry encouraged to focus on common priorities for both short term and long term. Academic research cooperation can be expanded to include biotechnology, nanotechnology, genetics, aerospace, environment, energy, automobiles and many more.'

Dr Sahni is a proponent of co-op programs; he points out that though the initial thrust was on engineering faculties, it has since expanded across the spectrum, with such programs now being offered at over 90 institutions across Canada.

The recognition of credentials from India has been a perennial problem; Dr Sahni called it 'a source of concern and unhappiness to students and professionals', and called for urgent, comprehensive solutions.

## Community colleges key element in education mix

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The 'Synergy in Education II' forum June 2 focused, this time, on community colleges – a radical departure from last year's inaugural forum.

James Knight, president, Association of Community Colleges, explained that post-secondary education in Canada is not simply universities but also community colleges, of which there are 157 such in the country with about 2 million students in the part time, and 65,000 in the full time, programs.

These colleges and institutes 'are very much community-based ... and they are deeply associated with the environment where they are located' and have linkages with local businesses. 'Often, talent and skills needed for particular industry in those areas are provided by these colleges,' Knight pointed out.

He explained that many such colleges have technical research capabilities; they establish relationship with local businesses to bring technology, new processes, and research to help provide what's needed by local businesses.

One such college in Nova Scotia, he pointed out as exemplar, has expertise in medical devices 'and it pioneered the creation of new set of medical devices in that province, and now they are sold worldwide.'

Knight touted the virtues of such 'relatively low-cost post-secondary education' programs, and spoke of how the ACCC brings these institutions together 'to discuss new ideas in teaching, new technology.'

Some such colleges have contacts in India, including Durham College campus in Bangalore; Centennial College which has joint programs with Vinayaka Mission University in Chennai (now called the Vinayaka Centennial Canadian Business School) and another in Delhi called the Picasso Centennial Animation School, and George Brown College, that has set up important teaching programs in various locations in India.

The Association of Community Colleges of Canada has a long history of cooperation with the Indian government, said Knight, particularly with the ministry of human resources, for institutional and practical

support in a number of cities in Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and other states to develop projects which focus on capacity building.

Knight believes India and Canada have common problems: 'Canada is facing acute skill shortages with summer colleges in crisis', he says, claiming that Canadian business leaders have told him 'we need more workers. You are producing wonderful construction technologists, aerospace workers, culinary talent, transportation workers for quite some time. You do it very well. We need many more graduates than you can produce.'

He spoke of an upcoming meeting with 15 business associations and business leaders aimed to address the critical shortage of skilled man power to meet the needs of the Canadian economy, and believes that though India produces a large number of graduates, it is still not sufficient to 'adequately support your various businesses and your economy.'

Given these common problems, it is advisable for India and Canada to work together, Knight argued. He spoke of a recent visit to Denmark, in course of which

he saw how the country understands 'knowledge-based economy.'

Denmark has 'no natural resources excepting wind, and yet they have created a standard of living which is considerably higher than Canada'; they have achieved this by deciding that if they have to create a global knowledge-based economy, they have to invest heavily in international experience in their training for students. 'They have wonderful international programs like 3-year business diplomas, and you can earn this by studying one year in Denmark, one year in California and one year in China.' This exemplifies 'international education that is addressing global reality, and that's remarkable.'

And additionally, 'post-secondary education [in Denmark] is free to all students who are qualified. There's no tuition.'

Referring to India's High Commissioner R L Narayan's observation that Canada is not getting a fair share of the 130,000-plus Indian students who go abroad for post-secondary education each year, Knight acknowledged, 'We have a lot of work to do in our country. We really need to advance.'