

## Report on TLRP UKIERI visit March 2007

The UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI) was launched by the Prime Minister Tony Blair in April 2006. The aim of the initiative is to improve the educational links between India and the UK and, in the longer term, ensuring they become each other's 'partner of choice' in education. The UK has pledged £12million from public funds and the private sector has added £4 million through four corporate champions – BAE, Shell, BP and GSK. The Indian Government's Department of Science and Technology has pledged further funding in science-related collaboration.

The UKIERI sponsored seminar, entitled 'Widening Participation in Higher Education in India and the UK- a UK-India Policy Dialogue' took place in Kolkata, India in late March 2007. TLRP was represented by Chris Hockings, University of Wolverhampton and Sandra Cooke, University of Birmingham. The aim of the seminar was to share our respective understandings of widening participation policies in both countries and to explore the possibilities for collaborative research work in the future. Senior practitioners, policy makers and researchers from both countries took part.

Four clear themes emerged from the discussions, where there were areas of overlapping interest and experience between India and the UK. The first such area was that of the structure and financing of systems for Higher Education. Both countries face policy commitments to expand numbers of students, with India facing the need to develop over two thousand institutions of Higher Education in the next twenty years or so. With limited commitments of public monies, this expansion is focussed within the private sector, leading to some interesting discussions about the experiences of the UK Higher Education sector's increasing reliance on other funding.

The second major theme to emerge was that of ensuring equity in the distribution of educational opportunity. The caste system in India raises particular concerns about progression, but both countries face challenges in overcoming barriers of class, gender and race. These challenges are felt in all sectors of the education systems, from early years to Higher Education. Ensuring sound progression between sectors is a key priority. In India for example, retention in secondary school is a huge issue, particularly amongst certain groups within the population. The seminar heard from interesting projects and schemes, including Aimhigher work in the UK, aimed at supporting students in their progression.

Ensuring the quality of educational provision, particularly in a segmented, disparate system such as exists in India is clearly a major challenge. With faint echoes of the standards debate in schools in the UK, it is clear that systems need to be developed to ensure both the quality of provision and the relevance of the curriculum in a global education world. Both countries are asking questions of their education systems about their ability to equip the next generation with the skills and knowledge they will need in the longer term. The perceived conflict between skills and knowledge for work and the more liberal aspirations of global citizenship have resonance in both systems.