

Transformative Agenda for Foreign Students Enrolment in Higher Education in India

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Abstract: The study explores initiatives recently taken in India aimed at attracting the foreign students, and goes on to suggest a sustainable education model to address the underlying issues and challenges in higher education in India. International students increase soft power, since they often carry back with them good memories and a good image of the institution and the country. Studying along with international students also promotes a global learning environment in the class/ course. For every international student enrolled, numerous income earning opportunities are created or supported. Both quantifiable and non quantifiable benefits of encouraging enrolment of foreign students make a case for conducting a deeper investigation into this topic. Government has recently taken initiatives to boost the growth in the entry of foreign students in India, such as, “Study in India’ scheme, scholarships, Institutions of eminence (IOE), etc. Higher education system in India has started gaining attention due to these measures but various issues are still remain unaddressed. The study presents hosts of challenges and concerns plaguing enrolment of foreign students in India, such as, quality in higher education, capacity building of institutions, safe living conditions, etc. The study proposes building sustainable education model by synergizing three elements, namely, course content, teaching methodology and research skills. The teaching methodology be oriented towards promoting self-learning, critical thinking skills and enhance knowledge that motivates the students to do further research. The study lists policy implications for both government authorities and educational institutions. To conclude, this paper makes a systematic investigation of phenomena, problems, issues, concerns, etc underlying enrolment of international students in India and gives insights into how India can successfully navigate its way through the sea of higher education in today’s information age.

Keywords: Higher education, Study in India, International students, Teaching and learning methodology

A host of reform measures and increased financial outlays in recent years in education sector in India has been undertaken to transform India into a learning haven. Late Smt. Sushma Swaraj, aptly observed that the quest for knowledge has always been fundamental to India’s culture and civilization. Throughout our history, India has made seminal contributions to human thought, philosophy and development. Our ancient philosophical concepts, such as Vasudeva Kuttumbakam and Sarva Dharma Sambhava, remain eternal. India was the knowledge hub of the world education with cherished heritage of Nalanda university & Takshashila. In this modern era when international student travel and student exchange programs have reached unprecedented

heights, India is lagging behind. The government, at present, permits a provision of 10 per cent to 15 per cent supernumerary seats for foreign students in higher education. This provision remains largely under-utilised across universities and colleges. Currently, India is home to about 45,424 foreign students enrolled in India in 2015-16, the latest year for which data is available from the All India Survey on Higher Education conducted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, which accounts for just 1 per cent of the global student mobility. These students come from 165 different countries, but the top 10 countries—which are geographically proximate to India—contribute three out of every five foreign students. Highest share of foreign students come from

the neighboring countries of which Nepal is 21% of the total, followed by, Afghanistan (10%), Bhutan (6%). Nigeria and Sudan constitutes (5%) each. Nearly 80% of all foreign students are enrolled in undergraduate courses, and another 14% in post-graduate courses. Male foreign students outnumber their female counterparts in nearly all categories. The most popular courses for foreign students are Bachelor of Technology and Bachelor of Business Administration, followed by Bachelor of Arts, Science and Commerce degrees. The number of students who come to study in India each year is only a fourth of the number of Indian students who go overseas.

The number of foreign students who sought visa to study in Indian universities saw a decline in 2017 compared to 2016. According to government figures, 36,887 students from abroad were granted student visas in 2017 while 38,947 had been given visas in 2016, marking a decline of about 6 per cent. This decrease is significant considering the fact that there are so few foreign students enrolled in institutes of higher learning in India. Numerous initiatives have recently been taken in India aimed at systematic brand-building, identification of quality institutions for receiving the foreign students, creating requisite infrastructure and student facilitation structures.

RECENT INITIATIVES: Various new government initiatives to boost the growth of the entry of foreign students in India are listed further.

Study in India scheme: The “Study in India” scheme aims to attract students from neighbouring countries in South Asia, South-East Asia, Middle East and Africa to join and gain the very best of academic learning experience in India. The Study in India programme is a joint initiative of Ministry of HRD, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The¹ objectives of the scheme are to (quoting *verbatim*):

1. Improve the soft power of India with focus on the neighbouring countries and use it as a tool in diplomacy.
2. Boost the number of inbound International students in India
3. Double India’s market share of global education exports from less than 1 percent to 2 percent.
4. Increase contribution of international students in the form of direct spends, indirect spends, spillover effects, etc.

5. Improve overall quality of higher education
6. Increase global ranking of India [by improving its desirability] as an educational destination
7. Reduce the export-import imbalance in the number of international students, and
8. Grow India’s global market share of international students

The Government of India has approved Rs 150 crore for ‘Study in India’ for 2018 and 2019, chiefly for brand promotion activities. With ‘Study in India’, the government hopes the country will start attracting 1.5 lakh to 2 lakh international students by the year 2022 ‘Study in India’, with a sanctioned budget of Rs 150 crore for two years aimed to promote India as a top destination for higher education and funnel demand in the direction of the supernumerary seats.

The “Study in India Portal” : This government website provides a single window to cover all aspects relating to studying in India for foreign students. The website is supported by an App and a Helpline number. The website provides latest information about Indian education opportunities and also facilitates the foreign students to make informed choices based on individual aptitudes and career goals. EdCIL (India) Limited, a Mini Ratna Category I CPSE is the implementing agency of the Ministry of HRD for the Study in India education campaign. NIRF ranked and NAAC accredited institutions with a 3.26 score have been included in the programme.

Government of India Scholarships for International Students: The Government of India offers a number of scholarships every year to international students to encourage them to pursue their studies in India. Offer of scholarships are sent to the respective Governments through Indian diplomatic missions abroad. Nominations are received from the respective Governments in the Indian diplomatic missions concerned. Some of the scholarships are²; General Cultural Scholarship Scheme (GCSS), Cultural Exchange Programme, Commonwealth Fellowship Plan, Reciprocal Scholarships Scheme, Technical Cooperation Scheme of the Colombo Plan, SAARC Fellowship Scheme, ICCR Scholarship Scheme, Craft Instructors Scheme and scholarship scheme for Sri Lanka and Mauritius.

Fee waiver schemes: To attract talented foreign students, the government has started fee waiver for meritorious students. It offers complete fee waiver

to top 25 per cent meritorious applicants, 50 per cent fee waiver to the next 25 per cent applicants and 25 per cent waiver to the next 25 per cent foreign students. As Prakash Javadekar, the Human Resource Development minister at the time of launching 'Study in India', remarked, "India can become a hub of affordable education for foreign students." To that end, the government announced that 55% of the total of 15,000 seats shall be on offer at the top universities and colleges³ by merit-based fee-waivers at differential rates to students from Asia and Africa.

'Institutions of Eminence' (IoE) initiative: Government officials and higher education officials are also hopeful that India's 'Institutions of Eminence' (IoE) initiative – which will identify 10 'best' public and 10 private institutions – for special support⁴ to enhance the quality of education at these elite universities and will make them sought-after by foreign students. Graded autonomy has been granted to many colleges, wherein, they are given freedom to expand on their own; they can improve upon their existing programs and launch new programs as per the requirement. The HRD Ministry has also allowed them to take in foreign faculty & foreign students.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES: India's higher education institutes are facing numerous infrastructural constraints as well as challenges regarding updation of course curriculums, faculty appointments, and residential accommodation, posing a formidable challenge to be in the priority list of ambitious students around the world. Some of the major current problems faced by higher education system and also listed in the New education policy 2020 in India include⁵: "(a) a severely fragmented higher educational ecosystem; (b) less emphasis on the development of cognitive skills and learning outcomes; (c) a rigid separation of disciplines, with early specialisation and streaming of students into narrow areas of study". The Government of India has taken several steps including opening of IIT's and IIM's in new locations as well as allocating educational grants for research scholars in most government institutions. The country has become the second largest market for e-learning after the US. The sector is expected to reach US\$ 1.96 billion by 2021 with around 9.5 million users. India is projected to become home to the world's largest population of college aged students– 119 million – by 2025⁶. There lies the opportunity to reap economic gains from the foreign students studying in India. For every inter-

national student enrolled, numerous income earning opportunities are created or supported, such as, travel insurance, medical insurance, restaurant, hotel, lodging, tourism, etc. The total amount of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) inflow into the education sector in India stood at US\$ 1.67 billion from April 2000 to December 2017, according to data released by Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP). Also the non-quantifiable benefit of foreign students studying in India is gain of soft power. The sources of soft power are said to lay in ⁷ "the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" – whether democracy, human rights or individual opportunities – so that peoples and nations around the world aspire to emulate that country. International students can also increase soft power, since they often carry back with them good memories and a good image of the institution and the country. Studying along with international students also promotes a global learning environment in the class/course so that all classmates are more likely to enhance their own self-confidence, presentation and quantitative skills.

The underlying challenge to reap the above mentioned economic and non economic benefits is to overcome India's inability to attract students from rich nations and neighboring countries both. From the developed countries which have reputed higher education systems in place, international students are less likely to be drawn to India for short term courses or under aegis of student exchange programs rather than full fledged courses. India can focus on attracting foreign students from developing countries where there are severe deficiencies in higher education sector; towards science and technology programs in India and study in social sciences and humanities programs, such as, courses in history, politics, sociology, psychology, culture and Indian languages. However, from our neighboring countries, where higher education systems are mostly in worse state than ours not many students come to study in India probably due to their low income levels. In a report on foreign students at India's colleges and universities, it was stated that "Students from even the South Asian region ⁸do not seem to have much interest in studying at our universities. Bureaucratic and other hurdles are among the many key factors that discourage students, from neighbouring countries and elsewhere, from seeking to study in India.". Sincere steps are urgently required to improve living conditions

in India. Affordable Hostel, better Paying guests with economical rentals, food joints serving quality food at reasonable rates are some of the concerns that need to be addressed to make Indian universities campus liveable for foreign students, especially for those who belong to poorer countries. Thus, building a conducive environment to attract international students is the necessary prerequisite to increase enrolment of foreign students in India. In 2030, it is estimated in EY-FICCI Report on Higher Education in India: Vision 2030 that India's higher education will emerge as a single largest provider of global talent, with one in four graduates in the world being a product of the Indian higher education system. The target stated in this report is to be among the top 5 countries in the world in terms of research output with an annual R&D spent of US\$ 140 billion and have more than 20 universities among the global top 200. Furthermore, with online modes of education being started by several educational institutes, the capacity of higher education sector in India is set for some major leap in the years to come.

SUGGESTED SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION MODEL : The higher education system needs to be vibrant and significant not only in terms of infrastructure, number of teachers, but also responsive to new research and curriculum revisions. The study proposes building sustainable education model by synergizing three elements, namely, course content, teaching methodology and research skills as depicted in figure 1. The underlying premise of the model is to encourage high-quality multidisciplinary

and cross-disciplinary teaching and research across fields. Theoretical concepts as included in course content must be of practical use in solving real time solutions then only it makes the higher education worth pursuing. Course curriculum ought to be designed in a manner that students can transfer credits earned in India to their home country institutions without any conflict. Further Industry-academia interface be made compulsory wherein lectures and presentations by MNCs in educational institutions and internships are encouraged. The higher educational institutions also need to look into revision of their course curriculums and examination patterns frequently. The teaching methodology should aim to harness the teacher's strengths while blending it with the demands of diverse range of students. Teaching methodologies need to be tailored to suit student needs and appropriate subject matter. Teaching methodologies that encourage students to ask questions and develop skills to seek answers and solutions should be ideally followed. The quality of education can be improved by including case studies, projects and corporate presentations wherein, teacher interacts with students for not just testing knowledge through memorization but also prompts them toward discovery of new ideas. The teaching practices aim to have the right balance of theory, practice and experience. The teaching methodology in higher education should aim at promoting self-learning and help students develop critical thinking, analytical skills and enhance knowledge that enables them to achieve self-actualization. In many ways Teachers

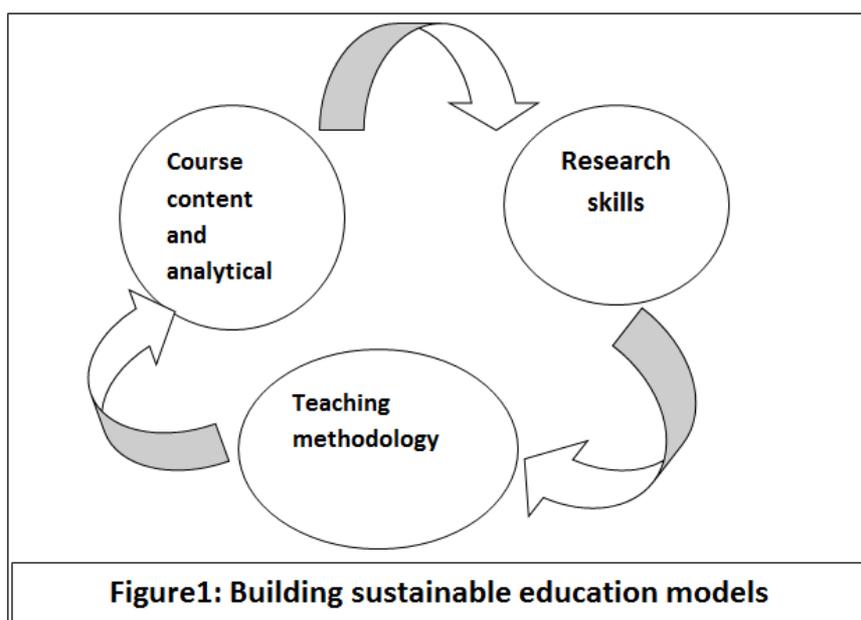


Figure1: Building sustainable education models

can become collaborators and coaches rather than just delivering class room lectures. Teachers can play a unique role in project based learning by helping their students in undertaking their practical/challenging research projects. Creative and stimulating class room environment will enable the students to develop research aptitude along with learning about the subject. Higher education institutions should continue to expand their foreign student enrolment strategies by actively seeking research collaborations with foreign governments, institutions and corporations, while also empathizing with the needs and behaviours of specific international student segments.

The educational institutions need to work continually towards bridging the gap between students' hopes/expectations and their actual experience after they arrive on campus. Top institutions accredited for Open Distance Learning should be encouraged and supported by government, if needed, to develop high-quality online courses. The curricula of HEIs should offer a blended mode of online and class room teaching of these high quality courses.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS and SUGGESTIONS: The present study lucidly lays down the transformative agenda to overcome the current issues and challenges in the enrolment of foreign students in higher education in India and has policy implications too for both government authorities and educational institutions. The New Education Policy 2020 has also emphasised upon re-energising the higher education system to address these challenges and thereby suggested strategies to deliver high-quality higher education, such as; revamping curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and student support for enhanced student experiences accompanied with "light but tight" regulation by a single regulator for higher education. The New Education Policy (2020) lays down that all higher education institutions (HEIs) shall aim to become vibrant multidisciplinary institutions by 2040 and shall aim to gradually multiply student enrolments (preferably in the thousands), for optimal use of infrastructure and resources.

India must capitalize on its strengths ; our knowledge of the *vedas* (oldest Indian scriptures), yoga and

languages like Sanskrit, to attract international students in social sciences. Reputed universities in tier I and tier II cities which are more likely to be preferred by foreign students need to focus on improving their hostels by providing facilities for students, domestic or foreign both, such as, dining, sports, club, swimming pools, internet café, multi lingual library, and recreation so that India is regarded as safe place by foreign students. Further, even small countries like Singapore and UAE have professional bodies to promote their higher education institutions abroad. It's important for Indian government to propagate that India's best universities offer the benefits of high-quality English medium education only at fraction of the price of university education in Western countries. Strenuous efforts may be focused particularly in Asia and Africa to build brand image of India's education.

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