

## An era of boom in Indian higher education beckons

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*By Narayanan Ramaswamy, Partner and Sector Head, Education and Skill Development, KPMG in India*

(5 min read)

India has the largest number of students in the world at 315 million.<sup>1</sup> The fact that only three countries have a total population larger than this number gives you an idea of the magnitude and complexity of the Indian education sector.

The country has recently undertaken a series of reforms across school education, higher education and vocational education including the announcement of the transformational NEP (National Education Policy) to cater to this demand. While this might increase the quality and quantity of higher education institutions in India, there should still be a significant number of students who could look at overseas institutions for their higher studies.

Given its size, it is not surprising that India has traditionally been a large contributor of students studying abroad (~15 per cent of all international students come from India, second largest after China). However, of late, we have been witnessing a drop in this figure. The number of Indian students studying overseas has declined from about 0.8 million during 2017–18 to close to 0.62 million during 2018–19<sup>2</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have contributed to a further decline in these numbers.

Some of the factors that influence the choice of students considering an overseas education are: i) quality and variety of programmes, ii) employability opportunities, iii) university reputation and iv) infrastructure and safety. The last couple of years have seen challenges with respect to post-work opportunities in different countries, geopolitical stability and unfavourable immigration policies. In the last year, we even saw the tightening visa regulations in the U.S., which put even the completion of courses at risk. Without a clear prospect of job opportunities combined with uncertainty in the visa programme, the U.S. has declined in its appeal for many Indian students. A similar situation is emerging with Brexit in the U.K. While Canada and Australia did gain on account of these changes, the overall attraction of foreign universities has taken a beating with Indian aspirants.

It was during this time that some new-age Indian higher education institutions offering niche, varied and offbeat programmes (e.g. photonics offered by a few IITs, gerontology, ethical hacking, cartography, courses on artificial intelligence and machine learning, etc.), better university infrastructure creation, flexible and student-centric courses emerged. Additionally, Indian higher education institutions started appearing in global rankings<sup>3</sup>.

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A combination of all the above factors led to a clear shift in the mindset of some of those looking to apply to foreign educational institutions. The humanities, pure arts and science courses also experienced a revival. Liberal arts universities rivalling established world-class institutions emerged in India. A recent survey conducted by one of the leading international higher education networks suggested that the recent pandemic situation has influenced the decision of around 48 per cent of students who were seeking to study abroad, and this is more pronounced in non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) courses.

The new NEP — NEP 2020 — has promised enhanced capacity creation and choices for students. The NEP has outlined various measures to improve the quality of higher education which is a determining factor for outbound student mobility. It proposes the transformation of existing institutions to multi-disciplinary universities and knowledge hubs that promote holistic development and foster innovation, and flexible curricular structure allowing multiple entries and exits and students to choose novel courses along with rigorous specialisations.

Three key policy measures outlined by the NEP are expected to influence outbound student mobility:

a) Promoting top-ranked (top 100) international universities to set up campuses in the country and encouraging and institutionalising international university collaborations for academic purposes. This would lead to India being positioned as a global education hub and ensure that global quality education is available to Indian students within the country itself. These academic collaboration and exchange programmes would then offer an international learning experience within domestic shores

b) Top Indian institutions could be encouraged to roll out high-quality online courses. The competition to get admission into a top-notch institution in the country is very high and a number of students who do not get admissions into these institutions often explore choices abroad. If these sought-after institutions can enhance their reach — with the help of technology — it could dissuade students from looking abroad

c) The concept of digitally storing your credits earned from different higher education institutions (HEIs), Indian or international within an 'academic bank of credit' could provide students with a platform to take select courses from foreign universities. The credits acquired thereby get transferred and is expected to ensure that the students can get the global education they aspire for through the institutional partnerships itself.

The autonomy prescribed in NEP 2020, including the key decision to move away from affiliated colleges, might help world-class universities emerge in India. With technology and collaborations, India's universities would be the source of learning from across the globe for Indian students. This would also reverse the trend and increase the number of international students who choose Indian universities as their destination.

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2011 data, Government of India, accessed on 25 January 2021

<sup>2</sup> MHRD response to a Lok Sabha query – (the U.K. enrolment data not considered), accessed on 25 January 2021

<sup>3</sup> 21 Indian Institutions in top 1000, QS World University rankings 2021, accessed on 25 January 2021 –

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