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Will “Study in India” be able to build Inclusive Futures? Preliminary Findings from a National Survey

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ABSTRACT: *In many Western countries, the internationalization of higher education is driven by the aim of attracting more full-fee-paying international students. A business model guides this agenda to generate revenue for universities with a steady decline in public funding. In contrast, the recent "Study in India" mission of the Indian government has been driven primarily by the philosophy of "Internationalization at Home," which aims to provide international and intercultural experiences to both domestic and international students. This paper presents preliminary evidence from an ongoing national survey funded by the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) to discuss ways to fulfill the "Study in India" mission and build inclusive futures, nurturing global citizens for sustainable development.*

Keywords: Experience, Higher Education, Internationalization at Home, Motivations, Student Mobility, Study in India

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Introduction

In 2020, the Indian government introduced the third National Education Policy (NEP) after a gap of more than three decades, marking a crucial shift in the country's educational discourse. NEP 2020 recognizes the importance of positioning India as the global hub of knowledge, or *Vishwa Guru*, and emphasizes multiple transformative objectives across various levels of educational institutions, including the internationalization of higher education as a key objective. The policy envisions India as an attractive destination for international students and promotes academic collaboration, faculty, and student exchanges. Furthermore, the policy advocates the establishment of offshore campuses by Indian institutions abroad, as well as invitations to top foreign universities to establish campuses in India.

Leveraging this energy, in 2023 the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) collaborated to launch an upgraded version of the Study in India portal, originally introduced in 2018. This renewed portal streamlines the application process for international students, offering a unified platform to explore India's top-ranked institutions, access scholarship information, submit applications, and perform other documentation processes. This move reflected a broader, strategic effort to simplify entry procedures for international students, improve visa facilitation, and enhance India's visibility in the global education arena.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has also played a foundational and enduring role in promoting educational diplomacy. Established in 1950, the ICCR serves as a key institution in advancing India's soft power. It administers a wide range of scholarship programs for international and Indian diaspora students and promotes cultural exchange through education. The ICSSR aims to establish and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries, promote cultural and academic exchange, and support measures that enhance India's educational outreach globally. This is also one of the initial initiatives of the Indian government toward the internationalization of higher education.

All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) reports from 2021--22 quote the enrollment of 46,878 international students in Indian higher education (IHE) institutions. The data show that international student populations range over 170 nationalities, with the highest number of students enrolled from neighboring countries, such as Nepal, which sends approximately 28%, and Afghanistan, which contributes to 6.7% of the overall international student community in India. For future NEP 2020, this number is expected to increase to 2,00,000 by the year 2030.

However, the following questions remain: How would that happen without knowing what motivates international students to come to India? What have been their experiences after arriving here to study? It is important to answer these important questions to develop research evidence-based policies to recruit and retain international students for their successful degree of completion and the

“Study in India” mission to promote “internationalization at home” to provide larger masses of Indian students with international and intercultural experience.

The general apex body that looks after higher education institutions across India, the University Grants Commission (UGC), issued several guidelines to support internationalization in 2021. However, the guidelines lack a solid evidence base to ensure that the envisioned outcomes, such as increased student mobility and the vision of “internationalization at home,” will be achieved, as intended.

Hence, a mixed methods study was designed to address this knowledge gap by conducting a Pan-India survey of international students and their administrators. The main objective of this study is to understand what motivates international students to choose India as their study abroad destination and what their experiences were after arriving in India. The study has received funding from the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) and O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU).

This paper presents an analysis of preliminary qualitative data gathered through this ongoing Pan-India survey. The findings serve as an initial step toward understanding the gap between policy objectives and the lived experiences of international students in India, while reflecting on the idea of an “inclusive future” that India has envisioned for all through the Study in India mission and its internationalization-at-home priority.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The extensive body of literature on the internationalization of higher education is mostly composed of research from the Global North. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have thoroughly investigated international student mobility, informing policy through empirical facts (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Similarly, East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea have developed internationalization strategies, backed by strong research. In contrast, India has seen minimal academic research on international students' experiences, with only two doctoral theses and several journal publications. Kumar et al. (2024) and Mitra (2020) provide general commentary on the internationalization of higher education in India, whereas Tokas et al. (2023) and Belousova's (2019, 2018) journal articles are based on empirical evidence from PhD theses drawing on data from Delhi (Tokas, 2017) and the state of Kerala (Belousova 2019), respectively. There is a real need to expand the evidence base by gathering and analyzing Pan-India data. This is particularly important considering the ambitious internationalization goals specified in the NEP 2020.

Studies on internationalization from other global contexts indicate mixed outcomes. For example, in East Asian countries such as China and South Korea, internationalization has significantly increased global rankings and student mobility, but it has also led to increased competition for resources and inequalities within the education system (Wen et al., 2022). In contrast, Kondakci's (2011) research highlights the role of robust institutional frameworks and policy

measures that ensure inclusivity to increase the quality of education and foster equity.

Moreover, Hazelkorn (2015) focused on global rankings prioritizing criteria such as research output, faculty qualifications, and international collaboration while overlooking contextual issues such as student diversity, inclusive pedagogy, and affordable access.

The literature on internationalization aids in shedding light on common issues in international student migration and acculturation. It addresses theoretical underpinnings, student motivation, and everyday experiences—academic, institutional, and sociopolitical hurdles.

1. Conceptual and Theoretical Arguments

Conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of internationalization are essential for understanding how HEIs internationalize themselves. As Bamberger & Morris (2024) noted, there has been a critique of paradigms dominated by the Global North, which might not be in line with the sociopolitical conditions of Global South nations, such as India. Therefore, we reviewed a list of literature from different perspectives and contexts to understand what unfolds when we discuss internationalization. Since the internationalization of higher education is a less researched area in the Indian context, we have specifically reviewed the literature from diverse contexts to create a comprehensive understanding while being context specific.

In the context of UK higher education, Bamberger and Morris (2024) critiqued Western-based models by challenging the premise that international mobility leads to equity. This paper examines how international student mobility can be reconstructed through critical cosmopolitanism. The authors critique prevailing, neoliberal frameworks of internationalization that tend to conceive international students as passive receivers of education or sources of revenue in the British context. Hence, they have argued for a regional, decolonized strategy of internationalization through South–South collaboration.

Hou (2023) condemns the gap between rhetorical expectations and pragmatic necessities in internationalization, especially in China. Referring to Confucian philosophy, Hou advocates context-dependent paradigms, contending that Western models are insensitive to the cultural and political specificity of other contexts. The argument is very pertinent for nations where internationalization needs to consider local socioeconomic systems and norms.

Rooted in the context of South American universities, Stallivieri and Vianna (2020) critiqued the western model of internationalization, which considers international students as sources of revenue, by suggesting an alternative "Responsible Internationalization" (RI) framework, promoting values of balance, accountability, sustainability, inclusion, and compliance (BASIC). The paper highlights a connection between sustainable development goals and internationalization and demands a change in basic assumptions toward the quality of internationalization rather than limiting it to just numbers. The responsible international (RI) framework, which promotes BASIC values, as

suggested in the paper, is especially important for HEIs to make them more inclusive and equitable destinations for international students.

2. Motivations behind International Student Mobility

International student mobility (ISM) is driven by a range of complicated motivations. In the special issue of case studies in international education (2024), researchers reflected upon the accounts of eight international students studying at various educational levels at different universities across the world. Slater and Bryson (2024) investigated student athletes' international mobility for career progression, whereas Kajee (2024) investigated students' attempts to construct global competences. Lee (2021) and Cao (2020) investigate how family expectations and employability influence study abroad choices, illustrating how higher education can facilitate and limit social mobility. Qiqieh (2021) discovered that international students from the UAE are driven by worldwide exposure but face challenges in adjusting. This study highlights the importance of highly trained staff to facilitate student transitions. Similarly, from another perspective of ISM, Odegbami and Ogunfiditimi (2024) emphasize mobility as a path to security for vulnerable learners, for example, LGBTQI+ students pursuing asylum through education. Similarly, Alzukari (2024) provides a psychological perspective, with academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation as the most predictive factors for satisfaction.

Similarly, while discussing the noneconomic motivations of ISM, Tokas et al. (2023) & Tokas (2017) argue that a complex set of noneconomic motivations drives international students, including personal development and the possibility of enhancing social and cultural capital. Hence, to promote "Study in India," it is important to consider these noneconomic motivations for studying abroad to attract more students.

In her paper, Belousova (2019) juxtaposes India's rhetorical commitments with the ground reality and, in doing so, points out policy ambition–institutional capacity gaps. With empirical evidence from her thesis, Belousova argues that India's internationalization strategy is still in its nascent stages and strongly bounded by structural inefficiencies. She contends that for India to be a competitively viable destination for international students, it needs to undertake deep systemic reforms. This involves enhancing regulatory transparency, providing freedom to institutions to cater to the needs of their students, investing in international student services, developing effective global partnerships, and embedding internationalization within the academic mission of institutions.

Mitra (2010) advocated systemic reforms, enhanced quality assurance, and enhanced international student services to solidify India's global position in higher education. He also warns that India's aspirations are inhibited by policy incoherence, infrastructural deficiencies, limited faculty internationalization, and diminished cross-cultural integration practices. On the other hand, Kumar et al. (2014) argue for a decolonial approach to the internationalization of higher education in India by shaping pedagogical approaches toward understanding and

mainstreaming the inherent “Bhartiya Anubhav” (Indian experience) in the “Vaishwik” (global) context.

3. Experiences and challenges faced by international students

International students experience various academic, social, and emotional difficulties while they are on their academic journey. In her book (2024), which was drawn on a decade of interviews, online surveys, and ethnographic observations in campuses, cities, and gig-economy workplaces in the Australian context, Gomes (2024) redefines international students as "transient migrants", a group whose temporary yet impactful presence shapes both their own identities and those of host societies.

Case studies by Carter (2024), rooted in the context of a southern university in the U.S., and Kajee (2024), rooted in the context of an international Taiwanese school that follows the American curriculum, illustrate how language barriers and cultural misunderstandings hamper students' academic and social well-being. While Carter's case study discusses urgent and proactive mental health support for international students, Kajee's case reflects the role of “collaboration” in developing intercultural competence among students.

Alzukari (2024) illustrates how student satisfaction is influenced by both academic and social self-efficacy. In the context of the UK's university setup, Alzukari's study deconstructs the components of self-efficacy and motivation and offers targeted insights for supporting international students. Zhao's (2021) study is also situated within the context of the UK adopting the push and pull framework, which differentiates between "push" factors such as economic hardship, limited opportunities at home, and "pull" factors such as reputation, cultural appeal, and language learning for international student enrollment. In a similar vein, Ng's (2021) study within the UK context investigated how acculturation orientations, specifically integration and separation modes, impact international students' psychological experiences on campus. Ng's thesis integrates environmental and acculturation psychology, offering fresh insights into how physical spaces support international students' well-being.

While writing about student challenges, Al Ghamdi's (2020) study explores the acculturation journeys and identity negotiations of Saudi students studying in the UK, drawing on two interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) studies. This study reveals staged acculturation experiences shaped by religious and gender identity, highlighting challenges such as self-development and the negotiation of identities between the UK and Saudi cultures.

A critical aspect of Belousova's (2018) findings is her focus on diaspora involvement, namely, the part played by NRI (Nonresident Indian) and OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) students in the Indian internationalization strategy. Belousova proposed that cultural connections, language comfort, reduced expenses relative to Western universities, and access to reserved seats in professional programmes combine to make India an attractive location for diaspora students.

3.1 Academic challenges

For any international student, shifting to a new academic system is particularly challenging. Language skills, academic writing conventions, and strange pedagogies present significant academic challenges. Brenna Butler's (2021) thesis provides compelling evidence and urges institutions to move away from a "one-size-fits-all" writing support model and instead develop nuanced, discipline-sensitive programmes that equip international students as nonnative English speakers to succeed both during and after their doctoral studies.

Edwards (2021) and Liu (2021) identify sentence construction, grammar, and oracy challenges in British higher education, particularly for Chinese learners. While oracy (speaking and listening) is increasingly recognized as central to academic success, particularly in seminar-based, dialogic, and collaborative learning environments, support for oracy remains limited, both pedagogically and institutionally. The thesis also advocates for discipline-specific and culturally responsive pedagogies.

3.2 Administrative Barriers

Administrative frameworks tend to follow a "one-size-fits-all" policy that does not cater to international students' distinctive needs, as they come from different countries and diverse contexts. Jones (2017) dissects the dichotomous distinction between domestic and international students, whereas Hidalgo (2021) and Diki (2020) illustrate that standardized student support systems in the U.S. negatively impact students' sense of belonging. In his PhD thesis, Brotherhood (2020) discusses how visitation restrictions and restrictions on work introduce uncertainty into the studies and careers of students. This thesis discusses how agencies work at the nexus of education-migration. In both Japan and the UK, this thesis emphasizes how bureaucratic impediments, particularly with respect to migration policy and visa systems, limit the agency of international students. These obstacles include convoluted visa processes, unclear rules, uncertain policy changes, and the absence of poststudy migration routes. Students are usually unable to make well-informed long-term choices because of this bureaucratic uncertainty. These obstacles impact not only their current choices but also their capacity to envision and plan for future career paths.

3.3 Sociopolitical barriers

Race, identity, and systemic bias also shape the experiences of international students globally. Yao et al. (2019) use critical race theory to show how non-Caucasian, non-English-speaking students are marginalized in U.S. institutions. They noted that international students usually experience explicit and implicit racism and xenophobia on U.S. campuses. Gueracague (2021) explores how African students in France experience racial discrimination and economic hardship. The thesis combines the use of critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and Bourdieu's field and capital concepts to understand how students navigate

identity, enact resistance, and experience empowerment through academic achievement, religious practice, and dreams of the future.

Similarly, Stier (2004) frames these challenges within broader ideological forces, suggesting that internationalization often reflects and reinforces societal inequalities, as many universities claim good intercultural understanding, but they end up following Western ideas, norms, and styles that leave no way for international students to participate in the process equally.

Another sociopolitical barrier could be seen in Mittelmeier's (2025) article, where she criticizes the dominant use of the term "integration" in research and institutional approaches to international students, arguing that it often reinforces assimilationist and deficit-based perspectives. She contends that integration discourses assume that international students must adapt to existing structures while overlooking how these structures themselves may be exclusionary, eurocentric, or unwelcoming.

A review of the literature suggests that India, through South–South collaboration, regional alliances, and pedagogies rooted in cultural sensitivity, could develop an alternative model of internationalization that prioritizes equity, inclusion, and sustainability without imitating predominant Western norms. There are only two doctoral thesis length empirical studies based on data from HEIs in the capital city, Delhi (Tokas, 2017), and from the state of Kerala (Belousova, 2019). Therefore, India first needs to develop a robust evidence base to guide internationalization policies, which, to date, is very thin.

Research Questions

Hence, two main research questions were framed for this study.

1. What motivates international students to choose India as their study abroad destination?
2. What have been the academic and sociocultural experiences of international students studying in India?

METHODOLOGY

To address the above questions, a community-based participatory approach was taken to design a mixed-methods study involving 4 international and 2 domestic students as field investigators to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from international students, as well as administrators, who hold the responsibility of internationalization in their respective HEIs and work with international students on a daily basis. The questionnaires were set up on a cloud-based software tool called Qualtrics to collect data online.

The first phase of the research involved designing survey questionnaires in consultation with a convenient sample of international students and administrators and thereafter conducting a nationwide online survey. To complement the data being collected through online survey questionnaires, semistructured interviews were designed to collect qualitative data. The participants for the interviews were

recruited by field investigators, who themselves are international students enrolled in universities in the North, South, East and Western regions of India.

To date, the Principal Investigator (PI) of the study and research associate has visited approximately forty campuses to conduct interviews and focus group discussions with students, and the collection of data continues. Presently, online surveys are being conducted in 104 HEIs across India that recruit international students in various programmes.

This paper focuses on qualitative data collected from 24 HEIs in 8 states—Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam, and Meghalaya—and two union territories—Delhi and Chandigarh. The qualitative data include field observations by the PI and research associate, as well as data from interviews and focus group discussions with international students conducted by the PI. The interviews were recorded with prior informed consent from the participants. Later, they were transcribed and coded on ATLAS.ti to identify common themes in the data.

Researchers' Positionality

This paper was written by two researchers who worked together with the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) and O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU), who sponsored research projects studying the motivations and experiences of international students in Indian HEIs. The Principal Investigator (PI) has been an international student in two major Western countries, the United States and Australia, and has administrative experience in the internationalization of higher education. She also has over two decades of academic experience researching the internationalization of higher education, which includes a thesis length study on the experiences of American students studying in Italy and China, postdoc studies on Indian international students studying in Australian universities during the pandemic and another study with a group of international/Tibetan refugee students in India. These past experiences and the positionality of the researcher have led to a distinct sensitivity in understanding the issues and challenges faced by international students outside the comfort zone of their home country.

The second author is a student of education who has experience working with state research bodies. Working as a research associate for this project with international students, she brings in the perspective of an outsider as a citizen of India with limited previous experience with international students. This positionality of the researchers has influenced the ontological understanding and methodological choices of the research.

DATA ANALYSIS

A pilot study involving five international student field investigators was conducted to help refine the interview questions. A snowball sampling method was adopted to select twenty-one participants for interviews and focus group discussions at the preliminary stage. On the basis of prior experience in this area,

the PI of the research project designed an intercultural sensitivity workshop to steer discussions on sensitive cross-cultural issues during focus groups with international students during field visits to HEI campuses. Qualitative data were also gathered through ethnographic field observations by the PI of the study.

Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the interviews were recorded. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and anonymous. The following are the countries from which these twenty-one students came, their level and area of higher education, and the type of institutions they are enrolled in:

Table 1: Details of the interviewed students (N=21)

Country of Origin	Details of Studies	Type of Institution
Bangladesh	PhD, Sociology	International University
Abu Dhabi	PhD, Management (OCI student)	Public Institution of National Importance
Saudi Arabia	PhD, Management (OCI student)	Public Institution of National Importance
USA	PhD, Management (OCI Student)	Public Institution of National Importance
Nepal	PhD, Biotechnology	Public Institution of National Importance
Iran	PhD, Engineering	Public Institution of National Importance
Ethiopia	PhD, Engineering	Public Institution of National Importance
Rwanda	MTech, Engineering	Public Institution of National Importance
Nepal	MTech, Engineering	Private Elite
Fiji	MTech, Engineering	Private Elite
Kenya	MSc, Computer Science	Public State University
Uganda	MSc, Statistics	Public State University
Hong Kong	MA, Humanities	Private Elite
Myanmar	MA, Social Science	Public State University
Namibia	B. Des	Private Elite
Nigeria	BA, Social Science	Public State University
Congo	BA, Journalism	Private Elite

France	BCom, Banking & Finance (OCI student)	Private Elite
Russia	BA, Social Science (semester exchange student)	Private Elite
France	MTech (short-term Exchange student)	Public Institution of National Importance
Germany	MTech (short-term Exchange student)	Public Institution of National Importance

Note: These are the interviews conducted during the preliminary phase of data collection. More interviews have been conducted since this paper was drafted.

As is evident from the list above, eighteen out of the twenty-one students interviewed came for full degree programmes. Seven of them are pursuing doctoral studies in social sciences, biotechnology, and engineering, and five are pursuing master's degrees in the STEM field. Two of them are pursuing master's degrees in humanities and social sciences, and five are pursuing undergraduate bachelor's degrees in design, social sciences, banking, and finance. Additionally, four of the students were overseas citizens of India (OCIs).

i. Application and visual processes

Our data show that international students' experiences in India differ in terms of their regional and financial backgrounds. European, North American, Russian, OCI/NRI students and students with scholarships from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) reported the least amount of trouble in procuring their study visas. Some students reported difficulties due to the instability of the visa application website and the distance of the Indian embassy from their hometown. The students who received support from their host university experienced the entire process of visa application and arriving to India smoothly, similar to this student from the Congo:

I wanted to study at another university, where someone I know studied before. The reason I chose X University in Gujarat for my higher studies in India is that they were prompt in responding to all my queries over the email. I selected three universities in that state for my application. However, the X university administrative staff guided me from the beginning of the process nicely. They also guided me to apply for my visa, and it was all exceptionally smooth. The Study in India portal initially sends an OTP, and it was not coming to my international number. The staff at X University office helped me register by giving their local phone number and sharing the OTP number with me for registration.

The above quote demonstrates that proactive support from university international office staff played a key role in students selecting that university, as highlighted by Qiqieh (2021). Additionally, with respect to students from African

countries and neighboring South Asian countries, receiving a recommendation from someone they know plays a significant role in making decisions about admission, as Lee (2021) and Cao (2020) highlighted in their respective work. These decisions are shaped deeply by community knowledge, trust networks, and known paths (Odegbami & Ogunfiditimi, 2024; Kajee, 2024).

ii. Motivations

In terms of their motivations to come to India, the OCI students, who were working professionals in Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia and the United States, expressed strong interest in quickly returning to India with their entire family. However, since they have been away from India for decades, they realize that it will not be easy to return to their roots without establishing academic and professional linkages. They saw the pursuit of a doctoral degree from a premier management institute in India as a route through which they can return to India more smoothly. This aligns with the arguments made by Tokas et al. (2023) & Tokas (2017) about the noneconomic motivations of pursuing study abroad, such as making social and professional networks.

The cost of the degree from an Indian HEI was also a major factor in decision-making by working professionals from the U.S. This finding is supported by the arguments of Mitra (2010) and Belousova (2018). In contrast, the two working professionals from the Middle East had the opportunity to pursue similar degrees from Middle Eastern universities paid for by their employers for professional development, but they still chose to enroll at a premier Indian Management Institute because of their future plans to return to India with their families.

Compared with their respective home countries and financial support, the motivations of all the students from Asian and African countries were better opportunities for education in India. The African students and neighboring South Asian students were particularly looking at global rankings while making their decisions. Once again, this finding supports earlier arguments made by Mitra (2010), Lee (2021), and Cao (2020). This became more evident during a focus group discussion at a premier research institute with a group of students from Nepal, Bangladesh, Kenya, Iran, France, and Germany. The following vignette from the focus group discussion demonstrates this well.

I saw the Kenyan student particularly fix his gaze at the French and German exchange students. He then started speaking boldly: “Ma’am, I am incredibly happy with the decision I made to come to India. I am getting much better education and training here than my friends studying in France and Germany. This institute is ranked much higher in global rankings than the universities where my friends are studying. They are also experiencing the worst kind of racism as black men in France and Germany. They will also return to Kenya, with less valuable academic and cultural experience from Germany and France than me. I have a good life here on campus in India. Everyone is very respectful and friendly.

The only difficulty I face is when I go outside and cannot speak in the local language to hire an auto or buy something from local vendors.

Financial security through the availability of scholarships from the ICCR and premier public research institutes in India, including IITs, IIMs, and IISc, as well as some elite private universities, played a key role in their decision-making to come to India.

iii. Academic Experiences

In terms of academic experience, most of the students interviewed expressed positive experiences. However, a number of African students, including one OCI student, expressed significant challenges in their studies because of the language of instruction in their college/university. The ICCR sends all international scholarship recipients to public institutions. The language of instruction in these HEIs is officially English; however, many universities/colleges use the local state language. Many of the research participants reported that even if there was not constant use of the local language, there were instances of code switching during lectures. There are twenty-two local state languages recognized in the Indian constitution. This creates significant learning challenges for international students, who are themselves coming from English as a second language (ESL) backgrounds to India for higher education and without any knowledge of the local state languages. This finding aligns with Belousova's (2018) study drawing data from the state of Kerala.

In fact, even students in private elite universities face issues with the language of instruction and curricular content, as is evident from the data from this study. The following two excerpts from interviews conducted with a Nigerian student studying at an affiliated college under a state university and an OCI student from France studying at a private elite university demonstrate these challenges.

S1: You see when I was coming to India, I knew English was the official language here like in Nigeria. You see we do speak pidgin English at home. However, in schools and colleges, it is standard English. Here, it is all Gujarati and then we had to pass compulsory Indian knowledge system (IKS) and Sanskrit courses. Some of my African friends returned to their country, as they could not pass the compulsory Sanskrit. One guy from Uganda sat for the exam three times but could not pass.

PI: How did you pass the exam then, you are completing your third year, right?

S1: Well, I mastered a trick to visualize the scripts and memorize them as pictures such as music notations in my mind. You see, I am a musician and an artist. Therefore, I managed somehow to pass.

S2: Sometimes I am at a loss in class. The Professors keep switching from English to Gujarati and Hindi. I find it hard to follow the class lectures

PI: However, don't you speak in Gujarati and Hindi at home? Isn't your father Indian? You just told me that your grandfather was getting old and sick. Therefore, your father decided to move back to India to look after family business and take care of the grandfather.

S2: Yes, that's right, but we speak in English at home.

PI: I am confused. Didn't you just say that your mother is French and you were born in France. You did your schooling there.

S2: Yes, that's also right. However, we speak in English at home because my father comes from a mixed family background. He is half English and half *Parsi*. His family is also from South India and does not speak *Gujrati* or Hindi.

PI: Now I understand. Are there any other academic challenges that you face here?

S2: Initially, I also struggled a little with the Indian metric and numbering system, which is a little different from what I was used to in France. However, it was not too difficult to learn these days with Google. What upset me most was the attitude of the Professor, who asked me to put my hands down the moment I raised my hands to ask what a core and an acre is. It was like, stop asking stupid questions. I wish there were some preparatory courses for students like us.

The above excerpt from two interviews demonstrates well the language issues that some students face while studying abroad in India, which aligns with Butler's (2021) findings in her thesis, which was written in the context of the U.K. In fact, the data tell us that students are also facing difficulties with curricular content. It is quite evident from the excerpts above that the lived experiences of the students are not in sync with postcolonial policies regarding the language of instruction and curriculum content in Indian higher education institutions. Despite differences in the context and language of instruction, these challenges are similar to the academic challenges many international students face within the context of HEIs in the UK from ESL backgrounds, as argued by Edwards (2021) and Liu (2021).

There is no doubt that India needs to preserve its indigenous languages, culture, heritage, and knowledge systems. Some students, such as a Russian semester exchange student, whom we interviewed, chose to come to India to learn the local language, history, and philosophy. It is part of her bachelor's degree programme in 'Indo-Aryan Philology' at St. Petersburg University. However, for those students who are pursuing higher degrees and skills in specific disciplinary areas in the social sciences and STEM fields, it is difficult for them to study any classical Indian language and learn about Indian knowledge systems as a mandatory part of their degree program.

To make the classroom and campus environment more inclusive of internationally and intranationally mobile students, Indian HEIs need to seriously

rethink the professional development of educators, incorporating intercultural sensitivity to India's internal multicultural diversity and the diversity that international students are now bringing into global Indian classrooms. Institutions also need to rethink policies regarding the language of instruction and curricular content, as suggested by Hou (2023) and Stallivieri & Vianna (2020) in the context of Chinese and South American universities, respectively. As one Nigerian student stated during our interview: "Students should be given freedom to choose to learn a local language, rather than mandatory learning of a classical language even if it is not part of the major area of your higher study. Learning the local language can at least help us understand class lectures." This also resonates with Kumar et al.'s (2024) argument that students should be allowed to choose one Indian language alongside the main curriculum to develop cross-cultural competence, empathy, and connection.

Our interactions with an Ethiopian student at a technical institute further reinforced the fact that providing a crash course to learn to speak in the local language has proven to be helpful for international students. Learning the local language has helped international students gain a sense of belonging inside their host campuses and outside the remote rural community. The following vignette from the field notes illustrates this fact very well.

As we were sitting inside the Dean's office, a very tall African man entered the room suddenly and greeted us by smiling and saying, "Namaste Ma'am, Kaise hai aap?" (Hello Ma'am, how are you?) Both my research assistant and I were startled hearing this tall African man speaking to us in Hindi. The Dean smiled with a sense of pride on his face. He explained to us that this is a new initiative they have started for international students, a 6-month conversational course in the local language. The African student informed us that he was from Ethiopia. He is currently pursuing a PhD in mechanical engineering from that institute. However, he has also received his master's degree from another technical institute in India. He stated that all international students genuinely enjoy learning the language and that it has helped them gain a sense of belonging in the local community. He stated that "The people in the community, the landlords and local vendors treat us very nicely now. It is a matter of respect. We respect them by speaking in the local language and preserving their culture. They also respect us."

The above statements from Ethiopian students regarding the ease of interaction with people in the local community are significant within a larger Indian context, where 60% of the students interviewed stated that they experienced biases and microaggression based on racial stereotypes within and outside their respective campuses. Despite these contextual differences, the findings of the current study are also similar to those of studies on international student experiences in other parts of the world, such as Gueracagua (2021), Yao et al. (2019), Stier (2004), and Mittelmeier (2025).

iv Social Experience

The following vignettes from an interview with an international student at a state university campus and then from a focus group discussion at a private elite university campus particularly demonstrate the struggles of African students within the Indian context.

Ma'am, the greatest difficulty I faced was finding suitable accommodations. The A block hostels that the University allocated to all international students was the worst of all the student hostels. One of the Ugandan students caught dengue and died. Even the embassy people came from Delhi for this incident, and it was all over the local news. Frankly, the environment was so unhygienic that I would not have our pet dog at home sleep in those rooms and so were the washrooms. Therefore, I had to go out looking for suitable accommodations. You see I am not that dark, not that tall and have sharp features. I could easily pass on the road as an Indian, except for my hair. Therefore, initially, the landlords behaved nicely with me. However, the moment they came to know I am from Nigeria and saw my passport, I was asked to leave. They would scream and say, "You guys' smoke pot and smuggle drugs! We can't rent the apartment to you." Then, they don't want you to cook or eat anything nonvegetarian in the apartment. You see, I am a deeply religious Catholic. I don't even smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol. In fact, in the first 3 months, I was at a spiritual loss, as I could not find any church community here. Then, through another international student from Kenya, I found a church community. The pastor of that church helped me find a suitable accommodation. Now I feel at home here, as I have a sense of community and my landlord is respectful. He also allows us to eat nonvegetarian food.

-Nigerian Student at a Public State University

Ma'am, I did not decide to come to India. My father knew an employee of this university, and she recommended the undergraduate programme here very highly. I wanted to study abroad after high school, and I was hooked on Bollywood movies back home. I am an enormous fan of Akshay Kumar and Shahrukh Khan, so when my father decided to send me to India, I was happy and excited. It is a residential campus, so my parents felt safe after visiting the campus with me. However, I started feeling depressed after the first month. First, only vegetarian food is available in the canteen, and I am not accustomed to eating the kind of Indian food that is served here. I am also lactose intolerant and not used to eating so many lentils as Indians do. Therefore, I started feeling weak due to a lack of protein in my diet. Back home, we speak in English, and I was told that in India, they also speak in English in college. However,

here sometimes I am at a loss in class. I cannot catch what the Professor says, as they mix English with the local language. When I raise my hands, ask them to explain. They say, please ask your friends. Then, Ma'am, I might also pay my friends and not the university for my education. The worst experience was the daily microaggression experienced on campus. They comment on my hair and accent. In fact, one day, a group of boys advised me to straighten my hair and asked if they could call me the "N" word. That was the last straw. I did not speak with them after that incident and informed our coordinator here. I also told them please do not call me to pose in front of the camera as a poster boy to advertise diversity on campus. I am paying for my education here and receiving such bad behavior. Therefore, you might as well pay me to pose in front of the camera.

-Namibian student at a private elite residential university

The above excerpts demonstrate very well the microaggression that African students face on campus from peers and Professors and from people outside the campus. It is also evident that they are struggling with intercultural adaptations, particularly food habits and language of instruction, in their respective HEIs, both public and private. This finding is similar to the findings concerning international student experiences in the UK, the U.S. and France. (Mittelmeire, 2025; Yao et al., 2019; Gueracague, 2021).

V. Finances

Adequacy of financial support was a major problem for most students. Some students also reported additional stress in dealing with queries of landlords and paying electricity and internet bills on time due to delays in receiving scholarship stipends from ICCRs or their host institutes/Universities. Self-financed students have also reported challenges with finances. Sometimes if their parents or family would transfer substantial amounts of money in their Indian bank account for paying fees and other expenses, the account would freeze. The students also highlighted this as some kind of systemic bias against international students, who are seen as a population engaged in money laundering. The financial challenges compound, as international students do not have any official work rights. Once again, this finding is similar to the struggles many international students face in the contemporary context of neoliberal policies in many Western countries, which has led to visa restrictions and restrictions on the work rights of international students (Brotherhood, 2020 & Diki, 2020).

Vi. Infrastructure

On a positive note, many students identified a series of good experiences, which included campus infrastructure and quality of education (despite language challenges). The students from African countries were particularly impressed with

the infrastructure and facilities in the HEIs (both public and private). They also expressed a great deal of satisfaction with receiving good healthcare services, stable electricity and internet supplies and cheaper telecommunication facilities than they did in their own home countries.

DISCUSSION

India's attempt toward internationalization at home through the "Study in India" initiative under NEP 2020's recommendation seems to be a bold yet spontaneous attempt to position the nation as a global education hub or Vishwaguru. However, the data analysis and literature review require more effort from policymakers and HEIs. Empirical data suggest that not all Indian HEIs are yet completely capable of welcoming hundreds of thousands of international students in an equitable, inclusive, and empowering manner. While the narrative around "internationalization at home" sounds convincing, the data show gaps in the delivery of services, student satisfaction, and institutional readiness.

Responsible Internationalization (Stallivieri & Vianna, 2020) focuses on ethical values such as inclusion, sustainability, and responsibility and proposes an alternative BASIC model. Our data show that such elements were missing from the Indian HEIs' strategy toward international students. Although academic provisions are satisfactory at the postgraduate and PhD levels, undergraduate student support, religious or cultural support, and social integration issues continue to persist, with both long-term degree-seeking and exchange students.

The lived experiences reported in interviews echo the invisibility and marginalization discussed by Gomes (2024) in the Australian context. Many African students, although drawn by academic opportunities, report discrimination, and both survey and interview data point to social exclusion, financial hardship, and limited institutional support. Most students felt that language support, religious accommodation, and career services were underdeveloped, confirming Alzukari's (2024) findings from within the U.S. context and the argument that academic self-efficacy alone is insufficient without broader institutional care.

Moreover, the uniquely diverse multilinguistic landscape of the Indian subcontinent is not well explored in the literature available around the ISM globally. Constant code switching and shifting need to be studied along with empirical evidence, as presented in this research paper. Previous studies, such as Yao et al. (2019) and Gueracague's (2021) use of critical race theory along with postcolonial theory and Bourdieu's field and capital concepts in the context of the U.S. and France, respectively, fail to capture this unique challenge. Mittelmeier's (2025) critique of the dominant understanding of internationalization is important. This highlights that we need to conduct more empirical research on the South–South and North–South mobility of international students to counter the dominant understanding of these challenges and generate empirical evidence-based contextual understanding.

The empirical findings from this study and the existing research literature from India and other countries suggest that Indian HEIs and the Ministry of

Education need to take affirmative action to make academic and social experiences more inclusive to open their arms to international students. Although India has made significant strides in attracting global talent and becoming a regional education center, this study shows that its higher education sector has yet to deliver the inclusive and empowering experience that international students need.

CONCLUSION

Although the pan-India survey is still ongoing, on the basis of our analysis of preliminary qualitative data, we argue that the "Study in India" programme lacks adequate support for international students, despite its strategic importance. Unless India critically reflects on the contemporary empirical reality and lived experiences of students to transform its structures, policies, and procedures, the "internationalization at home" mission will remain unattained. "Study in India" will remain simply a slogan, and the dream of establishing India as "Viswaguru" will become a mirage. In fact, preliminary data from this nationwide survey suggest that "Study in India" risks reproducing the same exclusionary models of international student experiences that it wishes to overcome. Internationalization needs to be more than a numbers game; it needs to be a qualitative shift grounded in ethics, equity, and contextual wisdom.

This starts by identifying international students not just as consumers but also as contributors to the Indian knowledge economy, which indeed is the objective of the "internationalization at home" document. Additionally, Indian HEIs are not inclusive of international students unless they implement significant, evidence-based structural reforms. Institutions need to actively create career-aligned academic programmes and international industry connections; language and cultural integration support; administrative reform, such as creating a dedicated 24/7 helpline for international student queries on visas and housing to streamline visa, enrollment, and settlement procedures; and inclusive spaces, such as curriculum revisiting committees with international student representatives and pedagogies that are consistent with India's pluralist and democratic ideals. India needs to shift toward a context-sensitive, decolonial, and inclusive vision of internationalization.

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- ☒ None
- ☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Some sections, with extensive editing
- ☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

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