

Stay in India, Study in India: Higher education in the corona era

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C. Raj Kumar and Sreeram Chaulia on how the worldwide lockdown could transform India from a 'sending market' of students to international universities to a 'retaining market' and eventually even a 'receiving market' for foreign students



Representational Image

The global coronavirus pandemic has had a cascading effect on all facets of economy, polity and society. While we are still in the crisis and its full impact is yet to manifest or be accurately forecasted, there is no doubt that higher education will be profoundly reordered in unimaginable ways. Under these circumstances, Indian students who were previously thinking of going abroad, especially for undergraduate education soon after high school, need to seriously reconsider their plans because of four key factors.

1. Uncertain international environment

The bedrock assumption of international higher education is free mobility and travel. If these two elements are hampered, at least for the next three to five years, the very foundation of international education gets adversely affected. According to the Institute of International Education, three-quarters of American colleges and universities have reported a negative influence of COVID-19 on foreign student recruitment this year.

It is useful to keep in mind that 370,000 students, or 33.7% of America's total international students, are from China. Decreased enrolment of Chinese students has already impaired the economies of Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Over the last decade, middle and upper class Indians with the means to send their children abroad for college education, both Bachelor's and Master's degrees, had pressed the accelerator and formed an exodus of sorts from India. In the year 2010, there were approximately 2.1 lakh Indian students pursuing degree programmes abroad. By 2018, this figure had reached a whopping 7.5 lakh, earning India the tag of 'second-largest sending market' after China.

Statistics also reveal that roughly three in four Indian students (72%) headed to five leading destinations, viz. the United States (211,703 as of July 2018), Canada (124,000), Australia (87,115), Saudi Arabia (70,800), and the United Arab Emirates (50,000). Coincidentally, the deadly coronavirus has devastated public health and crippled normal functioning of several top recipient countries and the regions which surround them, meaning that it cannot be business as usual in terms of easy mobility to these places.

2. Prohibitive costs without adequate value

Studying in foreign universities has always been expensive and few Indian students could afford it. Barring those who receive scholarships and some form of financial aid, most Indian students are self-funded by drawing upon savings of their families or taking out bank loans. Despite the costs, enormous value and

prestige have been associated with foreign degrees. The perceived benefits include possibilities of securing internships and placements in those countries and possibly even immigrating after completion of studies.

All these calculations and aspirations have been rattled by the Corona shock. While online education is being promoted by foreign universities as a substitute to physical classes until the virus abates, there are question marks about the nature and quality of virtual education. After all, the expectation of moving to another country is not just about learning in the classroom, but also being part of a new culture, society, ecosystem and the broader institutional environment.

While it is one thing to pursue online education within India as a stopgap arrangement to pursue higher education opportunities till the crisis is over and things get better, it does not make much sense to leave India, go abroad and end up receiving online education there.

3. Employment and immigration under threat

The sight of foreign universities making a beeline to tap into fee-paying Indian youth through promotional recruitment drives in elite schools across urban India has become a familiar fixture in recent years. The phrase 'internationalisation of education' has come to imply an unending process of outbound mobility of young Indians in search of higher quality of education, coupled with chances of permanently immigrating overseas.

Research shows a direct correlation between Indians' choice of foreign destinations and the potential to find employment and citizenship in those countries after completion of degrees there. For instance, when the hard-line anti-immigrant President Donald Trump's administration came to power in the United States in 2017, there was a sharp dip in Indians opting to go to US universities and a redistribution of those numbers to Canada and Australia, which were politically more open and liberal to absorb immigrants.

But the Corona jolt has wiped off all these permutations and readjustments in one fell swoop. It is now no longer a question of diverting outgoing educational traffic from less hospitable to more hospitable countries. The public health emergency has rendered almost all the favourite study abroad locations of Indians in the Western world shut and unsure about admitting foreign students.

Unprecedented foreign travel restrictions, indefinite closure of foreign university campuses, cratering economies in North America, Europe and Australia, and an inward shift in these hard-hit regions to care for their own citizens' health and employment, are body blows to the model of Western universities attracting increasing volumes of foreign students and generating massive revenues for the economies of their host nations.

For instance, the Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, commented as the burden of treating Corona victims was growing in his country, that it was "lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times", but foreign students can "make your way home" and "ensure that you can receive the supports that are available in your home countries." He added, "at this time, Australia must focus on its citizens. Our focus and our priority is on supporting Australians and Australian residents with the economic supports that are available."

Imagine how unnerving it can be, if foreign countries hosting Indian students are forced by repeated waves of the virus over the coming winter and year to expel them back to India, with no guarantee of whether or when they can resume their degrees. This is not a hypothetical scenario. Thousands of foreign students who are already enrolled in foreign universities have not been able to return to North America, Europe and Australia in the last few months. They are stranded and left in limbo.

4. Quality Indian universities are the best alternatives

To be sure, the deadly Coronavirus pandemic is causing serious damage to India's own economy, across agriculture, manufacturing and service sectors. Yet, there is one silver lining. The pandemic offers an unexpected opening for India's leading higher education institutions to absorb more Indian students and keep them rooted in their home country.

Professor Simon Marginson, a renowned scholar of higher education at the University of Oxford, predicts that “international education is going to take a massive hit” and there will be “a five-year recovery period in terms of global numbers of people who move between countries for education.”

This five-year gap may constitute a financial disaster for Western universities, which depend on foreign students as cash cows and lifelines amid shrinking state subsidies in their countries. But the flip side of the coin is that this is a five-year window to revolutionise India’s domestic higher education horizons. With lakhs of Indian students ‘all dressed up but nowhere to go’, their upward aspirations for knowledge and careers have to find a new imagination within India.

The phenomenon of young Indians ready to pack their bags and head out, especially to Western universities, no longer has relevance in the Corona age, where the larger forces of globalisation and borderless mobility have come to a screeching halt. The ball is now in the court of Indian universities to accommodate the captive market of these wannabe foreign-bound youth and to retain them sustainably in India.

Good Indian universities which have already made a mark in global rankings in various disciplines have the intellectual human resources in the form of outstanding faculty, publication track record, research ecosystem, infrastructural facilities, international partnerships and career support services, which can equal or surpass those of foreign universities. The lakhs of Indian students who had intended to study abroad must look at these Indian universities with fresh eyes. There is a sufficient supply of quality Indian universities which can meet their demand.

It is practically astute, particularly for high school-leaving Indian students, to reorient their sights and take up undergraduate degrees in India until the dust of the Corona disruption settles down over the coming three to five years. Home has never been sweeter and more welcoming.

By choosing to study in Indian universities, the hitherto foreign-prepping students will not only help themselves, but also contribute to the bigger cause of transforming India from a ‘sending market’ of students into a ‘retaining market’, and eventually even a ‘receiving market’ for foreign students. The Corona tragedy is a revolutionary inflection point whose ultimate winner could be the Indian higher education.

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