

The West Needs to Adopt Innovative Policies to Attract Talent

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Ties between Western countries and China have deteriorated in recent years owing to several factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, and the imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong by China. As a result of the downward spiral in ties with China; UK, Canada and Australia are seeking to reduce their economic dependence upon Beijing and examining alternatives.

The passing of the India-Australia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) by Australian Parliament on Nov. 22, 2022 is an example of how Australia is seeking to diversify its economic relations. In a tweet, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said “BREAKING: Our Free Trade Agreement with India has passed through parliament.”

Here it would be pertinent to point out that the UK too is in the process of negotiating an FTA with India, the key propelling factors for this are Brexit as well as the strains in UK-China ties.

One of the areas which has got impacted because of the deterioration of ties between China and Western nations, as well as Australia, is the higher education sector. For very long, Chinese nationals have been the largest group within the international student community in the US, Australia and UK – in the imminent future, Chinese students are likely to remain the largest group – and contribute significantly to the economies of these countries. The UK has also witnessed increasing collaboration between Chinese and British researchers. According to an article in the *Conversation*: “Education was the UK’s largest service export in 2018 and in 2019, one in every nine UK academic papers involved collaboration between British and Chinese researchers. China has had a rapid rise among the rankings of the UK’s research partners – going from ninth to second place in less than a decade.”

To diversify the international student pool, Western and Australian universities are trying to increase the intake of students from other countries – especially India. As of June 2022, the number of UK student visas issued to Indian nationals is 118,000 which surpassed that of Chinese students.

While UK has taken several important steps, which may make it an attractive destination for Indian students; the first being the two year post-study work visa after completion of degree, which will give students an opportunity to gather work experience and look for job opportunities, and more recently, the announcement by UK that 3000 Indian nationals, between the age of 18 and 30, would be able to work and live for two years under the UK-

India young professionals scheme . It would be pertinent to point out that the rejection of student visa applications by Canada has also led to more students from India applying to British universities.

Despite the UK saying it is open to talent, there are sections which are unwilling to adopt a nuanced approach towards immigration and view it solely from the prism of illegal immigration.

A clear example is the statement of UK Home Secretary, Suella Braverman who expressed her concerns vis-à-vis visa related provisions of the India-UK FTA. Said Braverman in an interview to the “Spectator” magazine in October 2022, “The largest group of people who overstay are Indian migrants...We even reached an agreement with the Indian government last year to encourage and facilitate better co-operation in this regard. It has not necessarily worked very well.”

Braverman’s remarks have resulted in a delay in the signing of the India-UK FTA, which was to be signed last month.

Recently, British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak stated that the UK did not want to be left behind any country in Artificial Intelligence and announced a program to attract the world’s top 100 AI professionals.

With Britain focusing on attracting talent for its tech sector, India along with many other developing countries could be one of the beneficiaries. It is important to realize, however, that an excessively inward-looking immigration policy will send out the wrong message even to prospective international students from India, who will look at alternative options. It is no longer just the West, international students from India can explore other opportunities in countries like UAE and Singapore which are trying to attract talent from different parts of the world. While the issue of illegal immigration needs to be acknowledged, it is important to bear in mind that most immigrants – including those from India have not just integrated well but have made a mark in different professions. Indian students too have distinguished themselves in different parts of the world. It is thus unfair to view any easing of work visas for professionals or Indian students from a zero-sum perspective.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.

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