Will India host more international students post-COVID?

Tatiana Belousova 06 February 2021

There have been many discussions of late about future directions in international student mobility. While all of them suggest that there will be no return to the 'old normal', there are differing opinions on possible academic mobility trends going forward.

For example, some scholars believe that mobility will become more localised, with intensified exchanges taking place within regions. Others project that there will be a shift in terms of the receiving countries' profile, that is, from high-income countries to middle- or even low-income countries. If this is the case, it raises an important question about whether these countries are prepared to host a growing number of international students.

It is true that the pandemic, as devastating as it is, has also brought some opportunities for internationalisation of higher education in India. While we still need evidence-based data on the new realities of academic mobility, it has already become obvious that it will be influenced by a set of additional factors after COVID.

For example, important considerations will include health concerns, treatment of foreign students in host countries in the aftermath of the pandemic, visa and immigration policies, the amount of fees charged in the context of a global economic downturn, the format of course delivery and the quality of education abroad versus fee structures.

In such circumstances, we might see an increased number of internationally mobile students who may be willing to pursue their studies in India. In order to explore the situation on the ground, data is needed so I conducted a policy review in the state of Kerala, followed by a survey of international students.

Policy perspectives pre- and post-pandemic

Earlier, in 2018, I prepared a summary of policy initiatives introduced by the government of Kerala and Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC). Some of them, like the establishment of the International Relations Group, were designed to have a direct impact on internationalisation.

The International Relations Group was set up to find solutions to various challenges faced by universities in the state when it comes to international collaboration, for example, issues such as credit transfer, fee sharing, entry examination equivalency, faculty shortages, modern courses, selection criteria and administrative delays.

Another initiative was to establish the Academic City (or hub) and International Higher Academic Zones in the state of Kerala. While it received an enormous amount of support from the United Democratic Front government (2011-16), it totally disappeared from the policy agenda of the next government, that is, the Left Democratic Front government (2017-22).

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, KSHEC issued a number of initiatives for online learning that were based on a University Grants Commission directive which set out the details of online learning platforms which could be accessed by teachers, students and researchers in universities and colleges for broadening the pandemic learning horizon.

The list of initiatives included, for example, **SWAYAM online courses**, undergraduate and postgraduate MOOCs (massive open online courses), **e-postgraduate Pathshala**, e-content courseware in undergraduate subjects and many others.

In August 2020, the University of Kerala issued a *Report of the Expert Committee on University Education: COVID-19 period and after*. The report makes particular mention of digital resource mobilisation, centres of excellence in research, language issues and MOOC programmes. The data in the report suggests that the current pandemic has triggered much needed educational reforms in the state of Kerala.

In November 2020, the University Grants Commission published "Guidelines for Re-Opening of Universities and Colleges" in India. In this comprehensive and user-friendly document, there is a section that specifically mentions international students. It says that "online teaching-learning arrangements should be made for international students who could not join the programme due to travel restrictions or visa-related issues".

Survey results

Qualitative data was collected from a group of 19 international students in Kerala. Their countries of origin were mostly Afghanistan and Yemen (63% altogether), followed by the Gambia, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mali, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Vietnam. The participants' study levels were distributed between PhD (47%), masters (42%) and bachelor degrees (10.5%).

One part of the survey covered the forced digital transformation of the higher education sector in Kerala. It found that 72% of international students confirmed that their institutions transferred to online delivery of classes and created a virtual research environment during the pandemic. Interestingly, less than half of the respondents (47%) said that they had taken online classes prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Just over half of the participants stated that they had not received the necessary support from their universities and colleges during the COVID-19 lockdown.

These are some of the areas where educational institutions fell short on students' expectations during the pandemic:

• Arranging an open online platform for exchange of knowledge and experiences, especially for international students.

• Providing mental health support.

• Monitoring students' performance on a daily basis.

• Scheduling of exams.

• Preparing faculty members to support students during PhD pre-submission seminars and for the defence of their theses.

• Being unable to conduct online examinations.

• Not providing enough health check-ups on campus in order to isolate potential COVID patients.

Among the factors that caused major concern for international students in Kerala during the pandemic were maintaining good health (79%), having adequate financial resources (32%) and managing visa issues (21%).

Lastly, the participants were asked to highlight whether their attitude to academic mobility had changed due to the unexpected health emergency. Interestingly, more than half of them (53%) said yes; in other words, their opinion about study abroad had been changed. This is quite understandable given the unprecedented challenges they had to deal with while living outside their own countries.

More needs to be done

According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (2018-19), the total number of international students enrolled in India was 47,427. Before the pandemic, the Indian government had set an ambitious goal to increase this number five-fold within the next few years. Though the pandemic has forced it to adjust this goal, it has also provided new opportunities for inbound student mobility in India.

The central and state governments need to react swiftly and rethink their internationalisation policies in order to make Indian higher education more attractive for international students after the pandemic. As the survey results suggest, the country still has a long way to go on this front.

Tatiana Belousova is an assistant professor at the International Institute for Higher Education Research and Capacity Building, OP Jindal Global University, India.