

International Students as Drivers of Soft Power: Emerging Pathways

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Abstract

India, as with all countries, aims to empower its global positioning as well as to create favorable conditions for its long-term socio-economic development. In order to achieve these aims, national governments use a number of foreign policy channels, which are both of the hard and soft power variety. According to Nye (Nye, 2009), soft power “is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.” More recently, it has been observed that the use of soft power, as an instrument of foreign policy goals, has grown enormously. A key reason for this shift is globalization, which has increased the level of interdependence and engagement amongst countries. Soft power increases cooperation and mutuality between nations, bringing down the need for coercion and confrontation.

Key words: Diplomacy, Higher Education, International relations, International students, Soft power

Soft power through higher education: National interests and foreign policy goals

India, as with all countries, aims to empower its global positioning as well as to create favorable conditions for its long-term socio-economic development. In order to achieve these aims, national governments use a number of foreign policy channels, which are both of the hard and soft power variety. According to Nye (Nye, 20 09, p. 7) soft power “is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.” More recently, it has been observed that the use of soft power, as an instrument of foreign policy goals, has grown enormously. A key reason for this shift is globalization, which has increased the level of interdependence and engagement amongst countries. Soft power increases cooperation and mutuality between nations, bringing down the need for coercion and confrontation.

Education, specifically higher education, has continued to occupy a central role in the discussion on soft power since the early nineties (Nye, 2009). A national government in the globalized world determines its power by the sum total of influence it exerts on its allies and competitors, including the extent to which it impacts their development (Bogaturrov, 2006, p. 12). Nation states influence each other not only with respect to socio-economic and political components but also in terms of ideological and cultural values. In the present day globalized world, national leadership is not complete unless it advances what the UN describes as “human development”. As we transition into the globalized political world order, states compete and collaborate to shape and form the regulatory institutions and developmental models. An example of this is the emergence of the concept of “knowledge-based economy”.

India, alongside other fast-developing nations such as China and Brazil, focusses on the advancement and internationalization of its education system because education, particularly higher education, is the lever of innovation and development (Nye, 2008).

Thus, global integration and systemization of higher education assume priority in a country that aspires to compete internationally. According to Cowan and Arsenault (2008), only a higher education system that is able to positively contribute to innovation and a knowledge-based economy, and is integrated into the international educational and the scientific space can acquire global competitive advantages. This argument brings into the conversation the significance of the “global competition for minds” (Amirbek & Ydyrys, 2014, p. 501), which underlies the importance of attracting international students. The ability to provide high-quality educational opportunities for international students is a key lever of soft power.

International students who study in India benefit from its educational resources, but that is not all. They acquire new socio-cultural capital, learn about India’s world view, and benefit from its technological advances. When they return to the home countries, they come armed with additional personal and educational proficiencies. Furthermore, each one of them is a transmitter of India’s unique position on the global front. Collectively, they influence the global opinion on India. If the students have a positive student experience in India, we can hope that they will emerge as India’s brand ambassador. Thus, we cannot afford to neglect the number of international students, and nor can we ignore the impressions and images that they take with them. Indian Institutions, in addition to being repositories of academic and R&D assets, are contributors of significant soft power and geo-political influence. International students in India are the future generation of policy-makers who are sympathetic to India and are more likely to think and act in accordance with Indian interests.

Inbound mobility as instrument of internationalization: Notable recent actions

The number of international students in India has continued to be worryingly low. The demographic profile of this student group, on the other hand, does not vary significantly from year to year. According to AISHE (2019), the total number of “foreign students” enrolled in higher education institutions in India is 47,427 (consider the figure in the context of total enrollment of 37.4 million). The foreign students come from 164 different countries from across the globe. The top ten source countries constitute 63.7% of the total foreign students enrolled. The highest share of foreign students come from the neighbouring countries of which Nepal is 26.88% of the total, followed by, Afghanistan (9.8%), Bangladesh (4.38%), Sudan (4.02%), Bhutan constitutes (3.82%) and Nigeria (3.4%). Within the past couple of years,

India has invested considerable resources in initiatives and collaborations to improve international student enrollment and raise the standards of Indian higher education institutions. Although there have been many such steps across the country in the last few years, the following deserve particular note:

1. Renewed campaign to bolster the “Study in India” program, which aims to quadruple the current number of inbound students by the year 2023, is a remarkable effort. The Ministry

of Human Resources and Development (MHRD), in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), has recently undertaken concrete steps to make the Study in India program more fruitful. The press release from MHRD states that the top objective of this initiative is as follows: “to improve the soft power of India with focus on the neighbouring countries and use it as a tool in diplomacy.” Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman, the HRD minister, summing up the vision for the effort, stated,

“The programme focuses on attracting international students from select 30 plus countries across South-East Asia, Middle East and Africa. The programme envisages participation of select reputed Indian institutes and universities by way of offering seats for international students at affordable rates, along with fee waivers to meritorious foreign students ranging from 100 to 25 percent.”

Importantly, the initiatives provide for a centralised admission web portal, which is to function as a unified interface for admission and other processes related to international students. The website provides ample information and guidance to international students on academic and administrative procedures. The students have a large selection of institutions and programs/courses to select from: “The candidates have to choose among more than 160 private and public institutes that provide 1,500 courses in undergraduate, post-graduate and PhD level”.

According to Yeravdekar and deWit (2018), “the implementation body of Study in India (SII) is Educational Consultants India Limited (EdCIL), a public sector undertaking (PSU) under the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industries (FICCI) higher education division” .

The project was initiated in March 2018 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Ministry of External Affairs. The most significant plan is to increase the number of international students from the current 44,766 to 200,000 by 2023. Skinner (2018) elaborates on the Campaign,

“The initiative reserves 15,000 additional seats for foreign students within participating HEIs; the newly created seats will be in addition to the current number of spots available for domestic students. The Indian government has issued 1.5 billion rupees, the equivalent of approximately USD\$2.2 million, to promote the campaign over the next two years . . . Additional objectives of the campaign include doubling India’s market share of global education exports, bringing it up to 2 percent; and improving the quality of education at Indian HEIs.” (n.p.).

This initiative exemplifies that India is aspiring to emerge as an international and regional higher education hub, with the clear aim of increasing its soft power. The Campaign focusses on enhancing recruitment in neighboring countries; some countries are targeted more than others, so as to selectively and strategically work towards strengthening India’s regional diplomatic status.

The Campaign has been vocal about championing the South-South cause. It also brings into consideration the factor of affordability in higher education, which has traditionally been a formidable obstacle for students from developing countries. To attract international students, India is striving to become an affordable education destination within the region. Subject to several well-defined criteria, a large segment of international students are to benefit from some amount of financial waiver/exemption or assistance, ranging from 100 percent for the top quarter to 25 percent for the second to lowest quarter. There is also a provision for the General Scholarship Scheme, which is open to students from 60 countries.

2. The “Institutions of Eminence” project, which plans to raise the quality of Indian institutions and aspires to place twenty Indian institutions (10 public and 10 private) within the top 500 world rankings in the next ten years, was launched in 2018. The initiative’s long-term goal is to raise these institutions such that they feature in the top 100 of the world rankings. The chief strategy is to grant considerable institutional autonomy and self-governance, encouragement to recruit international faculty members and students, and form strategic collaborations with the top world-ranking institutions. The institutions are granted significant freedom to seek the approval of the University Grants Commission for operational decisions. The Government has invested generously in the project; selected institutions are to receive 10 billion rupees (approximately USD\$148.2 million) over five years.

3. The Indian Government is working on a series of agreements and Memorandum of Agreements with other countries, particularly those in Asia and Africa. The goal is to standardize and accept educational qualifications credentials on a bi-lateral and collective level. These collaborations are a brilliant symbol for soft power through regional partnerships. Not surprisingly, these agreements present a leaning towards neighboring developing countries.

India has traditionally enjoyed a headship role amongst the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam). It is notable that quite a lot of educational collaboration with these countries takes place through the ASEAN-India Student Exchange Program, which was started in 2008, but has witnessed revival and renewed activity in the recent years. An important responsibility of the program is to organize and coordinate short-term educational trips for ASEAN students, so that they may appreciate India’s educational system and cultural landscape.

The goal of enhancing soft power and diplomatic ties through higher education is reflected amply in India’s many collaborative pursuits with the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) through bilateral agreements. Recently, the Indian government created 10,000 new reserved seats for international students at the Indian Institutes of Technology and prioritized eight countries, five of which are members of SAARC.

The agreements are in no way limited to neighboring countries: in April 2018, French and Indian dignitaries signed a Memorandum of Understanding agreeing to recognize academic

credentials between their countries. India has future plans to recognize higher education credits and qualifications of 30 other countries as well, primarily but not confined to countries in Africa and Asia.

For about half a decade, internationalization of higher education has begun to gain significant prominence risen to become one of the top agenda items for the Government of India. Some of the key initiatives include the Global Initiative of Academic Networks and Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration, which aspires to draw in distinguished foreign faculty and researchers to enhance the international stature of the Indian system. It is notable that the Modi Government has also launched schemes to offer international professional development for Indian educationists and educators in educational and managerial growth programs with top-ranking international universities, for instance the Leadership for Academicians Programme, which was launched in 2019.

There has been a palpable shift in the recent years that indicates that the Government acknowledges the latent possibilities for growth that are inherent in the higher education sector to become the cornerstone of India's soft power and scale greater heights to enhance the country's international stature. An evidence of this paradigmatic shift is the draft of the National Education Policy, which was released in 2019, and drafted by a committee constituted from the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The draft clearly emphasizes the importance of developing an approach that is uniquely suited to the country's needs and goals. It lists suggestions to develop the country's regional leadership potential through the promotion of international educational partnerships and internationalization of Indian institutions. Mathews (2019) lists the major recommendations of the draft NEP that are directly relevant to internationalization:

1. Offer inexpensive but satisfactory education to draw in international students
2. Streamline visa and "Foreigner Registration Regional Office" steps and internship rules and regulations for international students
3. Provide more funds for Indian institutions that have the potential to emerge as international educational hubs. The Government must also offer financial assistance to scholars from developing countries
4. Provision of joint collaborations and international MoUs
5. "Global immersion programs" for Indian students
6. Eligible Indian universities will be supported to establish campuses in specific developing countries
7. Predetermined top ranking universities would be given incentives to collaborate with Indian universities through appropriate laws and regulatory framework.

Although the NEP is not yet finalized, its initial developments are important because they indicate the future orientation and priorities. Moreover, the important suggestions are already

in the operations phase; for instance, the campaign to strengthen Study in India program has been going on since 2018, and following the NEP draft recommendations, the campaign has centred on promoting India as a higher education hub and contributing to India's soft power. A similar example is the "VAJRA program", which aims at drawing in international talent to India's top research institutions.

Contribution to India's soft Power by channeling internationalization of higher education in areas of capacity-building in neighbouring, developing countries

India's role in capacity building through higher education in neighbouring, developing countries contributes greatly to India's soft power. The significance of this contribution is that this is a better way of helping neighboring countries than is financial aid, the traditional mode of assistance. Higher education uplifts the human capital base, which is self-generative and puts into motion a variety of developmental and nation building chain reactions that are infinitely renewable. The idea of capacity-building through higher education has been encouraged by the UN and many developmental economists as the preferred mode for developing countries. The guiding principle is that the enhancement of the knowledge base (or the "human capital") occurs chiefly through higher education.

Countries of the South are primarily developing economies; for the most part, they suffer from daunting gaps in their higher education systems. The main challenge is that their education systems are not structured to serve the requirements of "knowledge economy"; subject areas that enhance skill and career-preparedness, such as technology are too underdeveloped to contribute to nation-building goals.

The Indian higher education sector has been contributing to developing knowledge and innovation bases in neighbouring countries even before India won Independence. Traditionally and currently, the majority of international students in India are sourced from neighbouring countries: this figure can be as high as 95% (Powar, 2012, p. 243). %).

In developing economies such as Bhutan and Nigeria, it can be quite difficult to build higher education capacity from the grass root level without foreign assistance, the most restrictive problem being finding financial resources and skilled/educated workforce in specialized areas. International collaboration allows these countries to expand their skill base and achieve global competencies in the workforce without diverting limited funds away from core nation-building areas (Lane & Kinser, 2011).

In India, the inflow of international students from neighboring countries is very diverse with respect to demographic and academic backgrounds. A considerable population of students come to India through their governments' support, and are often "contractually bound" to return to the home country to finish pre-specified assignments. Many scholarship provided by the Indian and home country governments target those subject areas that are important from the viewpoint of development and core infrastructure.

India's solid reputation as the regional leader in higher education and the Indian Diaspora have only bolstered the inflow of international students. The Indian Government, appreciative

of the potential, has successfully carried out several projects to add to India's contribution in upskilling the human capital base in neighbouring countries, for examples the "Committee for the promotion of Indian Education Abroad" "(COPIE)" by the "Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)" (Powar, 2002, p. 22), the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs' "scholarship programs for Diaspora children" (knowindia, 2012), and scholarships offered by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) (Powar, 2013, p. 22).

Knowledge about India's internationalization efforts also emanates from the success of alumni international students, who are the most effective spokespeople for Indian institutions. In many neighboring countries, academic credentials from an Indian institution are highly prized by both higher education institutions and the graduate labour market. Many Asian and African countries boast a solid track records of luminaries in politics, research, and the corporate sector who received their higher education in India. It is well-known that a number of political leaders in Asia and Africa came to Indian institutions, for instance Aung San Suu Kyi, (Vijetha, 2012) and Hamid Karzai (Kanwar, 2003). The alumni success stories continue to inspire and draw international students to India.

Although the advantages in the realm of skill-base, knowledge networks, and career competencies are readily evident, the benefits that accrue in socio-political values and institutions are not easily perceivable. Iniguez (2011) elaborates on the role that international education plays in promoting liberal and democratic value systems. India's forward-looking socio-political systems and world-views continue to influence and shape ideas and perspectives in source countries through the medium of higher education.

The Government's approach to the promotion of internationalization of higher education is "related to its overall diplomatic and ambassadorial status (Sharma, 2008; Tharoor, 2012). The concept of "soft power" (cf. Nye, 2005) and its relevance to the Indian case by Tharoor (2012) indicates the importance of strengthening knowledge networks that raise India's stature, especially amongst neighbors as the leader of international education.

Although the inflow of international students is the most important mode of student mobility, recently, Indian branch campuses have emerged and prospered in many Asian countries. The overwhelming majority of them are privately managed.

"South-South" cooperation and internationalization of higher education in India

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is responsible for organizing, funding, and conducting many projects related to "South-South cooperation" through higher education. India's development partnerships are the "jewel in the crown" of foreign diplomacy, especially regional diplomacy. The MEA works closely with the MHRD and the UGC, but there is some room for improvement here. The MEA carries out collaborative activities by bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

The role of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) is notable in this regard. The ITEC, founded in 1964, is an agency that works on bilateral assistance in key developmental sectors such as capacity building, infrastructure, communication, and

education. (The MEA has recently set up the Development Partnership Administration, which focuses exclusively on bilateral and multilateral collaborative projects. This is significant because South-South cooperation has been encouraged by the United Nations, specifically the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)). The ITEC's traditional mode of operation is bi-lateral/multi-lateral agreements in higher education, upskilling, and training. The initiatives are designed to respond to the specific capacity building requirements of the aid-recipient country. Since its institution, the organization has invested over two billion dollars, boasting an average annual expenditure of over 100 million dollars in recent years.

The Pan African E-network Project is a brilliant example of initiatives related to "South-South cooperation". It connects Indian institutions with their respective counterparts in eleven African countries (Ethiopia, Senegal, Seychelles, Benin, Gabon, The Gambia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Ghana, and Burkina Faso). The project was the brain child of then President Dr. A. P. J. Kalam and was approved by the Government in July 2007. These countries constitute the Phase One of the project, which aims to increase the connectivity amongst the offices of the heads of state of all the fifty-three African countries. India has presented a satellite for e-connectivity in the sub-Saharan region, entirely free of cost, with the goal of remedying digital illiteracy. Seven Indian institutions are to participate in the project (Indian Institute of Science, Amity University, University of Madras, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Birla Institute of Technology and Science, University of Delhi, and IIT Kanpur).

India-Africa Virtual University Project: The Indian Government has brought in the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to foster many partnerships with the goal of "South-South cooperation". The IGNOU was instrumental in launching and conducting the India-Africa Virtual University Project in May 2010. The Indo-Africa Virtual University (IAVU), a follow-on to the Pan-African e-project, was initiated by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). The guiding goal was to promote Indo-African relations through higher education.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR): The ICCR was founded in 1950 as a centralized nodal body to devise and implement policies and projects related to soft power: [its goal was to strengthen] "India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; and to develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture" (ICCR, n.d.). With the goal of furthering knowledge about India's educational and cultural heritage, the Council established thirty-five "Indian Cultural Centres" in foreign countries. The ICCR's main method of pushing internationalization is the grant of scholarships to international students. The ICCR offers 3365 scholarships under twenty-four scholarship schemes every year to students from 135 countries.

Concluding thoughts

Internationalization of higher education, particularly inflow of international students, is a powerful driver of soft power. India's case in the discussion presents a complex and dynamic picture: there are very encouraging possibilities along with alarmingly poor outcomes. That said, the Indian Government, in the recent years, has undertaken many unprecedented initiatives with sincere and concrete planning and fund allocations. There is every reason to hope that the results will begin to bear fruits soon.

Diplomacy, the craft of international relations, used to be the realm of national leaders in the past. In the recent times, its parameters have grown to include the idea of "public diplomacy," an expression that includes a wide-range of actors and institutions who promote favorable national stature in relation to other countries. The higher education sector and individual institutions have grown to emerge as some of the most influential drivers of soft power. India, a fast-growing, post-colonial economy, the largest democracy, and a wondrous cultural-ideological heritage, is poised to benefit tremendously from utilizing its higher education system as an instrument of soft power.

The Indian Government has demonstrated its aim of recasting India as a knowledge economy and a regional/international education hub, while also strengthening its soft power. The MHRD and MEA have been guided by centralized policy directions to join hands in formulating plans and implementing several programs and projects. The statistics on international students indicate that the flow of inbound students presents a minuscule share of the total enrolment in the country, and worse yet is the finding that the rate of growth of inbound students as well as the inbound-outbound ratio of students is not encouraging at all. More optimized central-state alignment, inter-organizational collaborations, budgetary allocations, institutional leadership, and greater autonomy and financial incentives to the private sector emerge as some recommendations for improving outcomes at the national and institutional levels.

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