



The International Institute of Migration and Development

Recruitment Experiences of International Indian Students

S Irudaya Rajan

Varsha Joshi

Rohit Irudayarajan

Recruitment Experiences of International Indian Students

September 2023

Working Paper No. 10



IIMAD

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
MIGRATION & DEVELOPMENT

Authors

S Irudaya Rajan

Varsha Joshi

Rohit Irudayarajan

Disclaimer

The International Institute of Migration and Development does not have a Centre view and does not aim to present one. Working Papers are the work of IIMAD members as well as visitors to the Institute's events. The analyses and opinions presented in the papers do not reflect those of the Institute but are those of the author alone

Abstract

India is one of the fastest-growing economies with a rising middle class. It also enjoys a demographic dividend owing to the expanding youth population. Simultaneously rising is the number of migrants from India, especially International Student Mobility (ISM). The outflow of Indian students to Anglophone countries such as the US, UK, Australia and Canada has doubled in the last two decades. Recruitment and consultant agencies are an integral part of the student migration infrastructure in India. However recent news reports have highlighted the lack of regulation and structure of the working of these agencies and their marketing influence over youth aspiring to pursue an education abroad having led to an increase in misinformation and deceits among student migrants. This study aims to unravel the recruitment experience of 20 Indian international students to further understand how recruiters influenced the decision-making of these students and the different kinds of challenges they have faced due to the involvement of recruiters in their migration journey.

Keywords: International Student Mobility, United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada

Introduction

An individual's decision of Pursuing higher education often comes with a lot of complex decision-making, this tends to intensify if the individual wants to move away from home for the sake of education. The internal and international movement for the pursuit of education has been an integral part of Indian student life due to the education structure in India. Students from smaller towns often have to relocate to bigger cities where most of the premier universities of the country are located. Simultaneously there is also a large outflow of students from India to different parts of the world in hopes of exposure to a new culture, quality education, better employment possibilities and upskilling (Andrade, 2006). The aspirations of students from developing countries such as India to study in universities located in the Global North have been widely discussed in academic literature wherein a wide range of push-pull factors have been established. India's colonial history and the medium of instruction in the majority of education courses being in English has led to the creation of a student migration corridor with the UK (Mazzarol & Soutar,2002). The development level of the host and the home country is another important dimension with regard to migration decisions (King & Raghuram, 2013). However, there are very few studies that look at the demand for overseas education being created by the Global North, which is equally important as they are eager to attract international students bringing in immense economic contributions to countries such as the US, the UK and Canada (Kahlon, 2023). In 2016, data from the US Department of Commerce revealed that international students contributed \$39.4 billion to the US economy. These countries are also in constant lookout to source talent from around the world. UK's 'high potential individual' visa launched earlier this year guarantees a two to three-year work visa for those who have attained a degree from one of the top 50 non-UK universities.

The mobility of students and young minds between countries of the Global North and South are often dictated and shaped by the demands and needs of the more economically superior and powerful countries of the former (Findlay, 2011). This makes for a difficult space to raise conversations regarding issues and challenges faced by international students, especially those from the Global South (Sondhi and King, 2017). This is an important point of discussion when factoring in the changing social and economic profiles of students migrating from the Global South in the last two decades. 2022 saw a drastic increase of up to more than 750,000 Indian students studying abroad. RBI data has revealed that educational loans have registered a 17 per cent surge towards the end of this financial year, March 2023. The rising middle class of India through accessible student loans are able to make large 'investments' for the sake of their child's education and career. The drastic increase of Indian international students over the last few years has given rise to a very powerful stakeholder in the overseas education market, the consulting/recruitment agencies. These agencies have over time become the one-stop solution for students dreaming of attaining a foreign education, offering a range of services including selection of university and course to visa and assistance in the admission process. With the addition of new stakeholders, the evolution of ISM from India and the vulnerability of these students going from the Global South, it is important that the recruitment experiences of Indian students be explored to shed light on how it has shaped their migration journey. This paper dwells deeper into the perspectives of the students in terms of their experience with recruitment agencies and their student life in the destination country including the major challenges faced. Primary data collected through in-depth interviews with 20 Indian students studying in Canada, the UK and the US helped in structuring the core arguments of this paper, including how recruitment and consulting agencies effectively use the 'push' and 'pull' factors to shape the migration decisions of their clients, young impressionable student minds and their enthusiastic parents with huge aspirations. Tracing the academic literature and news articles over the past decade has also helped in putting forth the importance of regulations to be placed on the agencies handling overseas education.

Recruitment agencies in India

Consulting and recruitment agencies in India play a crucial role in the migration journey of a majority of Indian students aspiring to attain a foreign education. There has been a monumental rise in the number of such agencies and they are mainly located in the various urban cities of the country. Universities abroad subcontract such agencies to recruit students on behalf of these colleges with an understanding of a commission being taken by the recruiter for each student that enrolls in a foreign university. Large expos and education fairs are organized by these agencies in luxury hotels, to catch the attention of young students and their families looking for higher education options and free consultations are offered to further ease them into the world of overseas education. It is this extensive networking and market knowledge of recruiters that make them very appealing to foreign universities and guarantee them to fill up their seats. Based on the universities they have collaborated with, most of the recruiters aggressively promote that particular city that the university belongs to as the next big thing (Rajan and Cherian, 2022). Although one might think that with the advent of social media, there is easier access to information, the goodwill and trust built by these recruiters give them a larger say in influencing the decisions of students (Kahlon, 2023). This is especially true in the case of students coming from smaller towns in India, who are largely dependent on these agents to help them through the admission process due to the limited exposure they possess. However, apart from rules and guidelines overseeing the opening of these agencies, there is limited governance over the recruitment process and partnerships these recruiters have with their partner overseas universities (Kahlon, 2023).

The Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for regulating overseas education consultancies in India. A Foreign Education Institution (FEI) License and registration with the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) are a must to represent foreign educational institutes in India. This is followed by certain state-specific approvals. Apart from rules on licenses and registration, there is an absence of strict guidelines regarding the functioning of such consultancies or agencies. Recent census in the U.K. lists Indian students as the largest group of international students and the same applies to Canada which has almost 226,450 Indian international students (The Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)). Along with these rising numbers, news related to scams and deceit faced by Indian students in the hands of recruiters has also plummeted. 700 Indian students in Canada were at the brim of deportation earlier this year when their college acceptance letters were found to be fake. Many universities in the UK and Australia have restricted entry of Indian students from certain states that are observed to have indulged in such dodgy practices. For sure, overseas education is no longer a step towards the pursuit of knowledge but rather a pathway for migration for many of the young students from the Global South. Irregularity in student migration brought on by the booming business of education consultants and recruiters fails to secure this guarantee for students who are kept in the dark about the realities of being an international student and later an immigrant worker in the destination country.

Methodology

The qualitative study has used primary data through semi structured in-depth interviews of 20 Indian students who were either pursuing or have completed their overseas education. 10 of the respondents were from the UK, 5 from Canada and the other 5 were from Australia. All the interviews were conducted online in languages comfortable for the respondents. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the study. 12 of the respondents were pursuing their master's, 5 of them were enrolled in undergraduate courses and the remaining 3 were in search of jobs after having completed their courses. 13 of our respondents identified as male and others as females. One-on-one interviews with the respondents aimed at understanding the primary focus of this paper which was regarding their recruitment experience. An extensive review of the literature including journal articles,

newspaper reports and other secondary data sources such as the census data was used to further support the findings from the primary data. The paper has tried to analyse the Push-pull factors influencing the migration decisions of Indian students and then tried corroborating this with the perception of students about their recruiters and consultants. The aim was to understand if these recruiters are directly (in-person interactions) or indirectly (marketing and Expos) making use of these push-pull factors to only highlights the merits attached to overseas education. Another important question the study aims to answer is if the respondents were able to make informed decisions about their migration, having received guidance from recruiters. In short how effective was the role of recruiters in the migration journey of the respondents and how did they shape important decisions regarding the overseas education of the migrants.

Findings

Push and Pull factors

Lee's (1966) theory of migration broadly categorizes the major four factors of migration which are the factors associated with place of origin, place of destination, intervening and obstacles and personal factors into 'push' and 'pull' factors. For the youth of India, rising unemployment and limited opportunities are large push factors that make life in the origin country difficult (Sharma, 2022). And this tends to further highlight the pull factors in the destination country like better exposure and job possibilities. As Lee (1966) points out, migrants have a definite understanding of the negatives in the origin country forcing them to migrate but are mostly only partially aware of the positives of the destination country, especially prior to their arrival at the destination country. Words such as freedom and independence were repeatedly used by the respondents when they were asked about their motivation to migrate to another country. This 'over evaluation' of positive factors and 'under evaluation' of negative factors can be compromised further with an added variable in the form of an agent or a recruiter who holds great power in influencing the decisions of students who want to migrate.

Education in India features in the concurrent list that requires the focus of both the state and the central government. Apart from a few central institutions that receive central funds, the responsibility of the larger section of the universities lies with the respective states. Central institutes account for less than 5 per cent of the total college-going students in India but have a larger fund at their disposal as compared to other universities dependent on state funding and are often found to be understaffed, lack diversity of courses and have poor infrastructure. These irregularities and compromised quality of higher education also seep into the employment opportunities available to the youth later. Mehrotra & Parida (2019) found that youth unemployment in India was above 30 per cent for those with post-secondary education, with a greater proportion being females. Internships and diverse courses are a major pull for Indian students to pursue their education overseas (Perez et al, 2021). The following excerpts from the interviews point towards the lack of diversity in courses available, the difficulty level of entrance exams and limited job opportunities in India to be major reasons why Indian students were seeking greener pastures abroad.

"I want to do Masters in banking and finance and there are not many Universities in India that offer the option. So I came to UK."

"I went to the UK in January 2020. I personally had a bad experience with my bachelors. So I felt if I could leave India and the way masters or bachelors were taught in India, and get exposed to a new culture and education system. I felt I would do better , that was one reason I chose the UK."

The extremely rich-poor division in the country also plays into the education system, wherein the children from economically well-off families are able to afford quality education and coaching classes that prepare them for difficult entrances and other qualifying tests. On the other hand children from poor families find it extremely hard to afford the coaching required to crack the entrances for the most pristine universities in the country offering subsidized Higher education (Agarwal, 2008).

Although the Indian government has constantly worked on making access to education for all sections of society through schemes like mid-day meals and the Right to Education, there still lies a wider scope in improving higher education in the country. The structural limitations of the education system in India make it extremely difficult for students belonging to lower economic or social sections to push forward in terms of economic and social mobility (Water 2006). The growing youth population with exposure to the wider world through social media looks at an education overseas and opportunities associated with it as a practical solution to the challenges they face at home and a safer bet in terms of failure as compared to the highly competitive environment in India.

Most of the respondents preferred Anglophone countries such as the UK, US, Canada and Australia due to their large Indian diaspora. The one-year master's program in the UK was also observed to be an appealing factor for young graduates from India hoping to shift bases.

Recruitment experiences

The main focus of this particular study was to understand the role of recruitment agents in the larger structure of overseas education in India. Rajan and Cherian's (2022) study on recruitment agencies in India establishes how these agencies undermine the autonomy of both the students and parents approaching them. They elaborate on how the aspirations of a better future and the ethic of self-responsibility of students are used by such agents to make studying abroad increasingly appealing. There are most definitely other important factors that influence the decision-making of students, especially the role of the family in the South Asian context (Hercog & Laar, 2017). Although students and their parents take up the decision to pursue education overseas, the principal decisions were often found to be left with these agents including vital decisions like that of course and university. Shyam is a typical example of a student in a small town reaching out to a consultant to seek guidance for pursuing his education abroad. Currently completing his course in Canada, Shyam summed up his recruitment process as the following.

"I am studying MSc IBM (International Business Management). I applied through an agency having an office in Aleppey. I am from Aleppey and I was having an office near to home. I went there and enquired about the course etc. I was not aware of this course, but I had an interest in Business Management. So, they guided me and suggested me this course called IBM at this university and said that this would be good for my career growth. So, I preferred this course and came to this country."

Agencies often tend to navigate the choices to the extent of making choices for the students in accordance with the partnerships of these agencies and have less to do with the interest areas of these students. As discussed, most of the recruiters in India operate in partnership with foreign universities that are keen to fill their seats with international students and are not necessarily invested in the long-term dreams of these students. This especially holds true with the rise of substandard universities recruiting from India, with most of them not even having a proper campus or reliable infrastructure. Most of the students who are often confused about their higher education courses are misguided by these agents. The lack of research done by the students due to many reasons including lack of awareness and sources of authentic information are exploited by agents by establishing a bond with them guaranteeing that they have the student's best interests at heart. Some of the excerpts from our interviews clearly portray the confusion and coerciveness faced by students at the hands of recruiters. *"There are students, who literally have no idea about what they are studying, what they are, why they are using the course, just because of what agency says, and they will blindly believe them. And they will take the course which really will land them to a very bad situation"*

"I feel they should provide more awareness regarding the realities here. They should inform us regarding all the paperwork and regulations here, for instance was not aware of PSW when I arrived here and I had to work to earn to pay for my PSW visa. They just paint this illusion of life in the UK being really easy and exciting. They use these false promises to try and entice us into going abroad."

“ I have considered many universities in UK for the course that I was looking for, because I have studied hospitality and management. My first consultancy was were forcing me to apply for Masters in Canada rather than going for it in the UK.”

The familiarity and bond created by these agencies through effective marketing and training emphasize only the success stories of a foreign degree and a bright future using self-funding such as loans or credits, highlighting the accessibility for the increasing middle class of India. In the lure of promises of breaking social and economic hierarchies at home, the crucial challenges of pursuing an education in a foreign country are sometimes very much underplayed. The notion of independence and freedom attached to living overseas is a given, but it also comes with heavy responsibilities for which one has to be prepared beforehand. Misinformation and false promises made by agents prior to the student’s migration go on to drastically impact the lives of these students once they reach the destination country. A common theme that surfaced in our study was the difficulty reported by the respondents in finding a part-time job once they reached the destination country. Most of the respondents had admitted to their financial challenges and were heavily dependent on part-time jobs to pay back the loans they had taken and to sustain their lives abroad. Most of them were promised by agents to find work and achieve an independent lifestyle. The following responses from the interview are reflective of the fake promises made by recruiters at the time of migration.

“They did not tell me the fact that the best option would be loan. It's not FD, but the loan will be accurate and easier. Certain agencies just hide the fact that it is not easy to get a part-time job.”

“There were opportunities mentioned by them regarding part-time job opportunities, facilities, and guidance in the university which were all non-existent in reality.”

“They told me that there were opportunities to get a salary of around 2 lakhs per month at these jobs. But when I got here, I found that all of that was wrong”

Challenges in the migration journey

Financial challenges were observed to be a major constraint among all the respondents. Some agents provided the service of aiding students in receiving loans for higher education abroad. However, this help did not continue once these students reached the destination country. These students were kept in the dark about the seriousness of the situation and the heavy burden of taking a loan. Part-time jobs were an absolute necessity for these students to manage their expenses as well as to pay back the loan. However, the saturated job market in the destination countries and the lack of availability of part-time job was not conveyed to any of the respondents by their agents.

“Financial challenges were the primary challenges before migration. Had to take loans

The challenge that I faced was financial in nature with regard to the delay in processing and receiving the loan.”

“My main challenge was on the financial front as my family couldn’t afford the course fee. Therefore, I applied for a student loan and went ahead with my admission process. Midway, the loan was rejected (because there was no driveway towards my house). Since my admission was confirmed and all other processes were done, I financed by mortgaging some gold and through borrowings.”

Another important challenge faced by most of the respondents was related to academics. Although they were aware that the education system in a new country would most definitely be different, they lacked the understanding that this required training and the acquisition of new skills. There were instances wherein respondents reported that they had been flagged for plagiarism, not because they mindlessly copied a work but because they did not know any better and replicated what they practised back home. The intense time requirement of these courses, mostly focusing on the self-study principle can be observed to have been really challenging for the Indian students overseas. Vital information about the academic requirements was not passed down to these students by any of their

agents. Others complained about the substandard quality of the universities they were enrolled in which had inadequate infrastructure and felt stuck in a foreign country with limited choices ahead.

“Yes, I struggled with the system here a lot. A lot of the learning here is independent, and the lecturers help, but not beyond a point. I couldn’t manage the coursework, so I took help from my roommates. But I was flagged for plagiarism”

“There is no teaching here. If we have to study, we have to do it by ourselves. It seems the fees we have paid are just for the certificate.”

Added to these struggles of grappling with a new education system, these students were also weighed down by the financial burden of high living expenses and expensive education loans. Some of them had to dedicate more time to work and shift focus from academics to even out their financial requirements.

“First I went to a warehouse that my friend suggested. But, it was a 12-hour shift which I was not used to. Moreover, it was hard labour, which I found very difficult. In my first semester, it was fine, because I had class only 3 days a week. But in my second semester, I had classes 5 days a week, which meant I could only work on Saturday and Sunday, which was inconvenient. Yes, because of my finances and the fees due, I had to focus more on my job than my academics.”

“Economically it was very hard to sustain. In the first year, it took a couple of months to figure out a job to manage the expenses. As per the guidance of the agency, we were to get jobs easily, but those were false promises, In the following years, I had to undertake more than two jobs to cover my tuition and living expenses.”

Pursuing one’s education overseas, especially if they are financially constrained comes with a complex set of challenges which are often not clearly communicated by agents aiding the migration journey of these students. Racism in the workplace and other public spaces are not stories of the last century as they are very much prevalent in today’s time (Lee and Rice, 2007). Thomas & Chui’s (2010) study emphasizes that international students largely face spoken language barriers, more than written language problems and seek better English language skills to better integrate into the destination country. Agents involved in overseas education must ensure that the students they engage with are mindful of all these challenges and are making informed decisions. There is a clear lack of any form of infrastructure to help and guide students once they reach the destination country. Studies over the years on the experiences of international students have established a series of challenges ranging from language barriers to financial and academic difficulties, alienation and discrimination that require a systematic approach on an institutional level (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Conclusion

Student migration is bound to surge in the coming years and the rising number of universities requires an international student cohort to ensure the flow of revenue and human capital. Post Brexit, the UK is to increase its international student intake up to 600,000 by 2030. Indians constitute 40 per cent of the international students taking up the two-year post-study work visa in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2022). Many ageing countries in the Global North such as Japan, the US, Australia and Germany face labour shortages and seek external labour. The youth population of the Global South, especially countries such as India that enjoys a demographic dividend can look at migration as an alternative option as compared to the structural unemployment issues in the home country. But this opportunity should be explored in a systematic manner that ensures that those who migrate for education and later work are assisted in an organized manner wherein the vulnerable section, especially young students, who want to engage in international mobility are protected from deceits and misinformation as seen from the findings above. The study observes that conversations of education and advancement in a career overseas have shifted to view admission to a foreign

university as a pathway to migration and not necessarily quality education. Students from developing countries are found to demonstrate high stay rates in the destination country upon the completion of their course (Waters et al, 2011).

Recruitment agencies too are tapping into this new demand that has shaped over the past two decades wherein students from the Global South aspire to have lives like their Global North counterparts. However, the misinformation or the lack of information that is conveyed to these students that markets a foreign degree as a definite entry card to high-paying jobs and careers needs to be reassessed. For example in Australia, recent news reports have discussed international students taking up vocational courses, which come at a much lower cost as compared to reputable courses to gain access to the jobs market. Although this ensures the students a relatively cheaper educational degree, most of them are unaware that such vocational degrees render them ineligible for permanent residency. Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Australia reports a heavy enrollment of Indian students in vocational courses such as cooking and hospitality since 2021.

Education overseas is not easy but it becomes extremely difficult when the person has to go in with half-baked information and a limited network in a completely new country. The recruitment agencies do facilitate and help build the dreams of millions of students from India, but at the same time, the thousands of stories of those whose dreams remain unfulfilled must not be forgotten. For these students reintegrating back into the Indian workforce and having an international degree may cause another set of problems. In fact, our interviewer also helped to bring forth cases wherein students could not complete their degrees and were struggling to pay back their loans.

This paper is definitely limited in its understanding with regard to the specific challenges and exploitations of recruitment agencies when layered out through different student identities. This includes exploring the differences of experience among students pursuing different courses in arts and science and exploring deeper into the various identities of the students in terms of their gender, religion, caste and class. We also did not dwell deeper into the impact of the pandemic since most of the respondents felt that the pandemic did not impact their migration decision. Nevertheless, the study aims to provide an overview of the working of a recruitment agency in India and the various nuances of overseas Indian students experiences who have received recruitment services. The findings indicate the challenging journey of a student migrant and how their life at their destination is severely impacted by the lack of information they had received from their recruiters. Financial constraints and difficulty in sustaining student life in terms of academics and balancing a part-time job can be observed to have been the biggest challenges Indian international students are facing. The conclusion of this study advocates that there has to be a much-needed focus on the regulation of recruitment agencies to ensure a much smoother migration of the Indian youth who aspire to pursue their education overseas. Rather than merely choosing the course and university, the recruiters should also be held responsible for the student's life once he or she reaches the destination country. These agencies should not be hiding behind a few of their success stories but should take accountability for students who trust them with one of the most important decisions in their lives. The need to maintain continuous communication channels and dissemination of timely and accurate information can help a great deal in aiding students in making informed decisions. Lastly, the following excerpt from one of our interviews with a student pursuing his masters in the UK sums up the central discussion point of this paper.

“In my opinion, they shouldn't give too many promises to students because many agencies guarantee accommodation facilities, jobs post course completion, etc. which are often not kept. Many students suffer in finding employment and accommodation. Rather these agencies should be true and transparent with respect to their offers and refrain from cheating students.”

Acknowledgments: This chapter is prepared as part of DemiKnow, an international collaboration among four migration research centres: ECU TRACS Migration Research Network, Edith Cowan University, Australia; Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Migration & Integration,

Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada; National Research Centre for Resettlement, Hohai University, China; International Institute of Migration and Development, India, funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canada. This chapter also appeared earlier as IIMAD Working Paper no.10.

References

- Kahlon, S. (2023). The International Institute of Migration and Development.
- Sondhi, G., & King, R. (2017). Gendering international student migration: An Indian case study. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(8), 1308-1324.
- Mehrotra, S., & Parida, J. K. (2021). Stalled Structural Change Brings an Employment Crisis in India. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 64(2), 281–308.
- Sharma, A. N. (2022). Youth Employment and Unemployment in India: Issues and Challenges. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 65(2), 237–267.
- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5(2), 131–154.
- Agarwal, P. (2008). India in the context of international student circulation: Status and prospects. *The dynamics of international student circulation in a global context*, 83-112.
- Lee, J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53, 381–409.
- Lee, E. S. (1966). A theory of migration. *Demography*, 3, 47-57.
- King, R., & Sondhi, G. (2018). International student migration: A comparison of UK and Indian students' motivations for studying abroad. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 16(2), 176-191.
- King, R., and P. Raghuram, eds (2013). "International Student Migration." Special Issue. *Population, Space and Place* 19 (2): 127–222.
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). "Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *International journal of educational management*, 16(2), 82-90.
- Findlay, A.M. 2011. "An Assessment of the Supply and Demand-Side Theorizations of International Student Mobility." *International Migration* 42 (2): 162–189.
- Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 16(1), 15–28.)
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P. & Chui, W.H. International students: a vulnerable student population. *High Educ* 60, 33–46 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z>
- Hercog, M., van de Laar, M. Motivations and Constraints of Moving Abroad for Indian Students. *Int. Migration & Integration* 18, 749–770 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-016-0499-4>