

Covid-19 and International Student Mobility from Punjab

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ABSTRACT: Outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic shook the world. Life came to a near standstill because of the pandemic. Each and every phase of everyone's life has been affected by the virus in one way or another. The phenomenon of migration which has a close relation with the spread of virus was also deeply affected by the outbreak of Covid-19. The present paper provides a deep insight on how international student mobility from Punjab was affected because of Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected the lives of many individuals and puts a break on the flight of dreams of many students in Punjab to go abroad for higher education. It is also anticipated that mass exodus of students to foreign land may be seen in the post pandemic world.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of migration and pandemics share a close relation as all pandemics require some sort of migration to spread. Mobility serves the purpose of disease carrier. The world today is dealing with a deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a novel infectious disease caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus. The virus was first reported from Wuhan, China in December, 2019 and was declared as pandemic by World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March, 2020. The carrier of this life-threatening virus is human being. Hence, in order to control the spread of the pandemic some sort of migration curtailments were required. In India the first case of the novel virus was reported from Kerala on 30 January, 2020 (Andrews *et al.*, 2020). Later, the world's largest democracy witnessed one of the toughest lockdown limiting the movement of the entire population of the country so as to break the chain of the virus. The lockdown was announced on the evening of March 24, 2020. Now nearly after two years (December, 2021) since its outbreak, a new

variant of the virus 'Omicron' has been detected and has been declared as 'a variant of concern' by WHO on 26 November, 2021.¹ The virus is changing its form and is coming back again and again. Hence, it is clear that the Covid-19 virus is here to stay and people will have to learn to live with this virus.

Outbreak of the pandemic shook the world and life came to near standstill because of the pandemic. Each and every phase of everyone's life has been affected by the virus in one way or another. Lockdowns, travel ban, social distancing were some of the new terms human beings were introduced with because of the crisis. It has changed the way of people's life. The arena of migration is deeply affected because of this virus. Mobility of people has been curtailed to a large extent because of the virus. The present paper provides an insight on how this health crisis has affect international student mobility.

Objective: The present paper aims to study the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on international student mobility from Punjab.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

The concept of international student mobility is

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not new and traditionally students are considered as the mobile sub-set of the population (Prazeres, 2013). Countries around the globe have introduced diverse educational programs to attract international students towards them. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) an internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin. The number of international students across the globe increased from 2 million in 2000 to 5.3 million in 2017. According to UNESCO in 2018, 5 million students went abroad for their higher education and 7,50,000 among them were from India. India is second most prominent country after China from where international student mobility takes place.

International student mobility is majorly divided into four categories. First is degree or diploma mobility where students are enrolled in higher education institutions in another country for the entire degree program. Second is credit, temporary or short-term mobility. It is also known as student exchange program. In this category students are enrolled in a higher education institution in some different country for one academic semester or year. Third is transnational education where students are enrolled with foreign university programme, but complete their education degree in their home country. Last is the short-term travel study tour which is developed as a part of home university course and usually lasts two to four weeks abroad (Prazeres, 2013).

According to Project Atlas, a project that was launched in 2001 with an aim to share accurate and timely data on global student mobility at higher education level, over 5.6 million higher education students studies abroad in 2020. United States (20%), United Kingdom (10%) and Canada (9%) were the top three host countries. The number of Indian students enrolled in the leading host countries is given in Table 1. The number of Indians enrolled in higher education is maximum in Canada followed by United States.

The reasons for opting education out of the country are many. Many are attracted by the quality of education provided by developed countries along

TABLE 1

Number of Indian students enrolled in higher education in the leading host countries

| Country | Number of students in higher education |
|----------------|--|
| United States | 193,124 |
| United Kingdom | 27,915 |
| Canada | 198,750 |
| China | 23,198* |
| Australia | 90,918 |
| Germany | 20,562 |
| Poland | 3,748 |
| New Zealand | 13,015 |
| Sweden | 2,179 |

* Data from Project Atlas, 2019,
Source: Project Atlas, 2020²

with the possibility of finding a decent job that matches their educational qualification. For some education is a medium of just moving out of their home country as they are not attracted by the employment options present in their country of origin. In addition, the presence of Indian community, socio economic status of the family who desires to send their child abroad and the cultural elements like language, religion, and infrastructure and university culture influence the students choice for migration. Apart from these push-pull factors mobility among young individuals in the contemporary times is driven by aspirations. Each and every individual aspires to climb high on the ladder of aspiration. Also, studying broad opens doors of global opportunities.

Cost of immigration process also plays a key role in international student mobility. The cost of immigration for United States is very high and is comparatively less for Canada and United Kingdom. It is moderate for Australia, New Zealand and Germany. Despite the high cost of immigration United States is the top preferred destination owing to the premium quality of education and its high return on investment (ROI).

Talking about Punjab as per the estimates, 1.5 lakh students from Punjab fly abroad every year spending an average of 12-14 lakh. The Minister of State for External Affairs in Lok Sabha stated that between 2016 and February 2021, about 9.84 lakh people from Punjab and Chandigarh moved to different countries. Among these 3.79 lakh were students and over 6 lakh were workers. To put it in other words, in the last five years 1 in 33 *Punjabis* moved out of their country of birth. The land of five rivers has the highest proportion in the country, nearly 38% of students

who move to foreign countries on student visa and with no intention of returning back.³

In the contemporary time, after completing higher secondary education the youth of the state sign up for institutions that provide courses to crack International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination. The agriculture in Punjab is not offering profitable returns and there is a dearth in the employment section. Punjab Economic Survey 2019-20 highlighted that the unemployment rate among the youth (15 to 29 years of age) in Punjab, in 2017-18, was 21.6% which was way more higher than the national average of 17.8%. The agricultural sector is also witnessing a downfall. The Gross Value Added (GVA) growth of agricultural and allied sectors in the state has declined from 4.6% (2017-18) to 2.3% (2019-20).⁴ The growth in the agricultural, industrial and service sector in the state is stagnate for many years. Hence, people are seeing migrating abroad as the only option that can aid them in having a prosperous life for themselves and their families. Therefore, the rate of international migration from Punjab is quite high.

COVID-19 AND MOBILITY

In an attempt to contain the spread of pandemic, all the countries closed their international borders and air travel was plummeted globally. All universities and schools across the globe were temporarily shut. India also saw one of the stringent lockdown in the whole world. The first go to spots for aspirants who desires to fly out of the country to foreign shores is immigration consultant and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) coaching centers. Passing the IELTS exams is the basic requirement for those desires to move out of the country especially for study purpose. During the lockdown these centers were closed. Visa regulations were tightened and visa processing was also halted temporarily during the lockdown period. Those who could not start the visa process end up taking admissions in local colleges in the fear of a gap year. The invisible enemy brought international emigration from Punjab to a halt and severely affected the emigration sector of the state.

Those students who had already enrolled in courses abroad but couldn't fly because of travel shutdown were also affected badly. They had to opt for online classes. Transnational mobility was seen

among such students. Technology plays a great role in such case. It has cut short the distance between different countries. With the help of internet students were able to attend online classes while sitting in their home country. However, the main purpose i.e. to earn more, for which they decide to emigrate, could not be fulfilled during this period.

Lockdown measures were relieved when the number of cases saw a dip in the state. Relaxations were given and international travel resume for those who were vaccinated. In Punjab students who were to go abroad for higher education were prioritized in vaccination process.

As per the annual report released by the Institute of International Education, the number of Indian students studying in United States decreased by nearly 13 per cent in 2020-21 because of coronavirus pandemic. Despite a decrease, Indian students still continues to be the second largest group of international students in United States after China.

FUTURE ANTICIPATION

The pandemic has badly hit the economy of the country and have affected the unemployment figures severely since its inception. Number of people lost their jobs during the pandemic and unemployment rate in the country rose to new heights. As per Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the unemployment rate in India during December, 2020 was 9.06% and rose to 11.84% during the second wave of the pandemic in May, 2021.⁵ With the rising unemployment rate and with considerable loss of employment the youth of the nation is in distress. It is anticipated that the number of students migrating to developed countries for higher education may increase after the pandemic.

A shift in the preferred destination among students for migration is also anticipated. This shift is because of the increase in the number of courses provided by different countries, scholarships provided by the universities; ease in visa policies and also because of the ease in the admission process.

During these unprecedented times governments of several countries and institutions altered their admission and post study work policies for international students, taking into consideration

students concerns, safety and needs. Some countries come up with policies for the students so that the faith of the students is maintained in them. During the pandemic Canada adopted student friendly federal policies so as to support the international students. The country safeguarded the interest of international students in Canada and made sure that all of them remain eligible for post-graduate work permit. In addition, the Government of Canada supported the international students, who have not even received Canadian citizenship with financial aid through their Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program. The country redesigned its policies in favor of students and made sure it still remains one of the loved destinations for students to immigrate. (Buckner *et al.*, 2021)

The report ‘Student, interrupted: International education and the pandemic’⁶ by Mitchell institute, Victoria University, Australia examined 5 major destinations (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the US and the UK) for international students from September 2019 to September 2021. These are the

countries were most of the Indian students prefer to enrol themselves for higher education. As per the report, new international students in Canada, United States and United Kingdom have largely recovered to pre-pandemic level with the UK experiencing the strongest recovery. Figure 1 shows the annual new international students in the 5 countries examined in the report. It also shows the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the international student visas. During the first wave of the pandemic the number of international student visas provided by these destination countries saw a dip. Later, as vaccinations were done and things started moving towards normalcy after a long halt, the number of international student visas granted by these top destination countries also started increasing and recovered to pre-covid level (except for Australia and New Zealand).

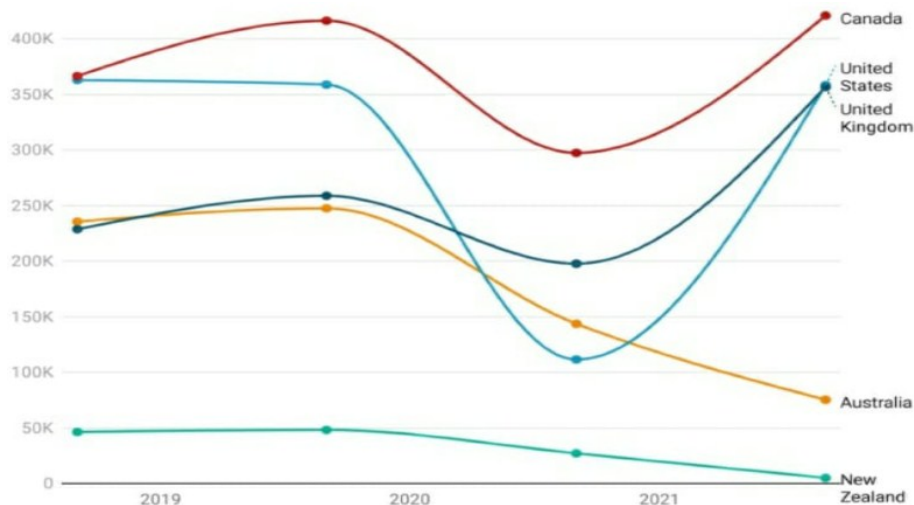


Figure 1: Annual new international student visa by the country.
Source: Mitchell Institute Report⁶

Also, as per the report, new international students from India have increased by about 27% compared to pre-pandemic level (Table 2). A shift in the country of destination is seen behind this increase. A reduction of 62% was observed in the total number of Indian international students going to Australia in the twelve

months to September 2021 compared to 2019. In contrast, the new Indian international students to the UK have more than doubled, up to 174%. India has now overtaken China as the largest source country of international students.

TABLE 2

Change in international student visas by country of origin

| Country | Total New Students | | | Change 2019/ 2021 |
|---------------|--------------------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| | 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | |
| Nigeria | 20,399 | 16,989 | 38,333 | +88% |
| France | 23,716 | 11,228 | 31,594 | +33% |
| India | 257,401 | 192,199 | 327,963 | +27% |
| Germany | 13,469 | 5,363 | 15,016 | +12% |
| China | 376,109 | 193,806 | 283,795 | -25% |
| United States | 31,971 | 19,770 | 23,867 | -25% |
| South Korea | 52,139 | 29,932 | 32,765 | -37% |
| Nepal | 19,341 | 10,061 | 11,195 | -42% |
| Malaysia | 16,019 | 8,158 | 8,759 | -46% |
| Japan | 32,165 | 15,919 | 17,303 | -46% |
| Vietnam | 40,018 | 22,157 | 19,905 | -50% |
| Brazil | 34,261 | 16,564 | 16,713 | -51% |

Source: Modified version of Mitchell Institute Report

Government is also taking several steps so as to promote international mobility among students. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was approved between India and United Kingdom on migration and mobility partnership. The partnership aims at promoting mobility of students, researchers and skilled professional between the two countries. The agreement will allow individuals with the age group of 18 to 30 years in India and UK to work and live in each other's country for up to two years.

With such lucrative measures during the middle of a pandemic the youth feels that their future is more secure in such Western countries. This may hence lead to an increase in emigration from Punjab.

CONCLUSION

The world today is very different from what it was before the inception of Covid-19 pandemic. Countries close their borders, when the pandemic struck. Air travel plummeted globally. But the development of effective vaccines has increased the likelihood of returning back to the stage of normalcy possible.

International students contribute greatly to the total investment in the education sector. Losing international students can have a big impact on education institutions, especially universities. In Australia, fees from international students provide about 27% of the total university revenue. Many universities subsidise their research projects from the fees paid by international students. Also, a large number of people like recruiters, counsellors,

landlords etc. earn their daily bread because of these students. A major portion of countries economy is dependent on these international students. Hence, in the post-pandemic environment governments all around the globe are seeking to grow and foster their international education sector. The US has announced a renewed commitment to international education and the UK government on the other hand is aiming for a 75% increase in the value of international education by 2030. While the pandemic has had a massive impact on international education, the scene is set for a return to a highly competitive global market. Countries like Canada have relied on immigration to drive their economic growth in the face of declining fertility rate. Immigration is necessary for economic recovery in the post-pandemic situation.

The pandemic has left the student community confused. They had to adjourn many of their plans. As the world was grappling with the virus, the students who aspire to migrate in near future were uncertain about their future. The international mobility among students is increasing and the destinations are diversifying. Flexibility in visa policies, post study job opportunities, quality of education and cultural diversity are responsible for the increasing diversity. Migration of Punjabis to abroad is thought to be potentially affected because of the pandemic but the trend of foreign migration will pick up more pace as the covid-19 curve flattens. A spurt is expected to be seen after the pandemic in the migration of youth from Punjab to western countries.

NOTES

1. [https://www.who.int/news/item/28-11-2021-update-on-omicron#:~:text=On%2026%20November%202021%2C%20WHO,Evolution%20\(TAG-VE\)](https://www.who.int/news/item/28-11-2021-update-on-omicron#:~:text=On%2026%20November%202021%2C%20WHO,Evolution%20(TAG-VE))
2. <https://iie.widen.net/s/g2bqxwkwqv/project-atlas-infographics-2020>
3. <https://theprint.in/india/few-jobs-bad-pay-so-why-should-we-stay-behind-punjab-youngsters-rush-for-ielts-migration/837041/>
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