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### A Study of Factors Influencing the Enrolment Decision Making of Higher Education Students from Afghanistan with India as a Study Abroad Destination

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**Abstract:** International Student Mobility (ISM) is arguably the most visible and sought after dimension of Internationalization of Higher education. In the recent years, Afghanistan has emerged as one of the leading contributors to the inflow of international students into Indian Higher Education Institutions. The purpose of the paper is to obtain insights about the factors that influence enrolment decision making of higher education students from Afghanistan with India as a cross-border destination. These insights would then help identify drivers to further facilitate the inflow of students from Afghanistan into Indian campuses. The paper examines the level of importance that students from Afghanistan assign of each of the identified factors that influence enrolment decision making of foreign students. The paper further also inspects if the level of importance of these factors show significant variations for students who enrol into either an Indian Deemed University or a State University respectively. The paper draws findings based on the analysis of primary data gained from responses of students from Afghanistan who are presently enrolled in Indian Higher Education Institutions and from secondary data sourced from well-established publications. The paper has possible implications for the Government and for Indian higher education providers who are looking to attract students from Afghanistan to their campuses.

**Keywords:** International Students, International Student Mobility, Indian Higher Education Institutions

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Higher education sector is one of the largest in the world in terms of enrolment. As per the AISHE Report 2015-16, the total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be 34.6 million and states that the number of foreign students in higher education to be 45,424 (AISHE, 2017). The recent paradigm shift towards the 'internationalization' of India Higher Education has highlighted the aspect of International Student Mobility (ISM) in and out of the Indian Higher Education sector. Leading Indian

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are devising sophisticated marketing strategies to attract foreign students for both, short term as well as long term programs. The top contributors to the inflow of international students are students from the regional developing countries of Asia and some countries of Africa.

The international student mobility trends strongly suggest that India is one of the prime contributors to the mobility of students across international borders. This is so chiefly because of its strong outbound mobility numbers where Indian students cross international borders for their education needs. In the year 2014 there were 1,81,872 Indian students studying abroad with US, Australia and the UK being the leading destination countries (IIE, 2017). The number of inbound international students in the year 2015/16 was 42,420 (IIE, 2017). The mobility figures clearly tell us that the number of outbound Indian students far exceed the inflow numbers and this should be a matter of concern.

The Government and Indian HEIs have been consistently taking initiatives to attract international students to Indian campuses. Amongst the sending countries one of the major contributors over the recent years has been Afghanistan. The inflow of students from Afghanistan has been promoted by Indian policy makers by offering scholarships to students through ICCR. Afghanistan is presently the second biggest contributor to the inflow numbers with 4,349 students for the year 2015/16 (IIE, 2017) and it is vital that the popularity of Indian HEIs as a higher education destination continues to grow.

### **This Paper**

The purpose of the study is to gain insights on student decision making and find ways to facilitate the inflow of students from Afghanistan. To gain insights the study identifies the most important factors in the enrolment decision making of international students from Afghanistan.

### **Objectives**

- To identify the level of significance that students from Afghanistan assign to each of the ten identified factors which influence the enrolment decision making of international students as they enrol into Indian HEIs.
- To ascertain if there is a significant difference on the importance given to each of the factors which influences the enrolment decision making of students from Afghanistan when they enrol into an Indian Deemed University or a State University respectively.

### **Hypothesis**

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the level of importance assigned to any of the ten identified factors which influence the decision making of Students from Afghanistan when they enrol into either an Indian “Deemed” or a “State” University respectively.

**H<sub>a</sub>:** There is a significant difference in the level of importance assigned to at least one of the ten identified factors which influence the decision making of Students from Afghanistan when they enrol into either an Indian “Deemed” or a “State” University respectively.

## **Methodology**

To conduct this study, the researcher has focused on Higher Education Institutions based in the Pune, a prominent city located in Western part of India. The city has been a popular destination for international students and to students from Afghanistan. For the study primary and secondary data was used as source of information. Primary data was generated through responses from students from Afghanistan enrolled in two Universities in Pune, India, namely Symbiosis International University (SIU) and Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU). Prior to administering the final questionnaire a pilot survey was conducted. Data was gathered by administering a questionnaire that catered to ten factors that influence international student enrolment decision making identified by researching reliable secondary sources. The set of the ten identified variables were rated by the respondents on a scale of 1 to 7 Likert scale denoting the level of importance of each of the factor. 1 denoted the least level of importance and 7 denoted the highest level of importance given to the variable. The data was analysed using SPSS statistical techniques. The discussions featured in the paper give insights of the priorities in the terms of the significance attributed to each of the factors for the said set of international students. Secondary data about mobility numbers was sourced from IIE and AIU.

The study has implications for the Government and Indian education providers wanting to attract international students from developing countries. The availability and willingness of the international students to share their though might be considered as a limitation. The other limitation is that not a lot of literature is published in the area of mobility of students from Afghanistan.

A research gap exists as there is a need for Indian HEIs to study the tendencies of students from Afghanistan, especially in a scenario where Indian providers seek International students. There are publications on the topic of International Student Mobility especially by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and Association of Indian Universities (AIU) but there is not a lot of visible study in the context of the internationally mobile student from Afghanistan with India as a cross border destination. Moreover it is imperative for Indian higher education stakeholders to study the motivations and decision making of students from Afghanistan as they are major contributors to the inflow of international students to India.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITRATURE**

### **International Student Mobility Trends: India a Prime Source Country**

Globally International Student Mobility is one of the most sought after dimension of internationalization. Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) say that “International student mobility is changing the global higher education landscape, with an increasing number of students going abroad for tertiary studies.” The international mobility of students globally has shown positive growth trends over the past decade. As per OECD data for the year 2013, there were 4.1 million internationally mobile students globally which is a significant increase over year 2000 figure of 2 million international students (UNESCO UIS, 2016). An increasing number of students from the developing countries now travel abroad to access education provided by foreign education provided based in developed countries such as the US. An illustration of this trend from the Indian perspective would be the substantial number of Indian students availing education in the US.

### **Inflow of International Students from Afghanistan into Indian Higher Education**

The major source of international students to Indian campuses in 2015/16 is from the regional Asian countries, namely Nepal (9,015), Afghanistan (4,349) and Bhutan (2,794). (IIE, 2017). It can be said that the top source countries are the developing countries and there is only a minute representation from developed countries. In 2015/16 the total international student enrolment in India was 42,420 (IIE, 2017).

Going back a few years, in 2011/12, the total enrolment of international students in Indian campuses stood at 33,151 with Afghanistan at the fourth position with 2,235 students in India. (IIE, 2017) Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Higher Education 2014. AISHE. In 2008/09 the total enrolment of international students in Indian campuses stood at 21,778 with Afghanistan as the fifth largest sending country with 1192 students. (IIE, 2017, Source: Association of Indian Universities (AIU)). The significant take away would be the clear trend of a healthy growth in the number of students from Afghanistan coming into Indian campuses during the 2008/09-2015/16 time period.

As we discuss the inflow numbers it would also be interesting to take a look at the Indian HEIs who have been successful in enrolling international students. In the year 2012-13, seven Indian Universities had more than thousand international students (Powar, 2014) and so one can say that only a few Indian universities have been successful in attracting foreign students. Pune, a metropolitan city in the state of Maharashtra is one of the most preferred destination city for international students and it is home to three Indian HEIs having a good number of international students. These three prominent Universities with international student enrolment are Savitribai Phule Pune University, SPPU (State University), Bharthi Vidyapeeth (Deemed University) and Symbiosis International University (Deemed University).

### **The Higher Education Student Mobility in Afghanistan**

UNESCO says that around 17,000 students from Afghanistan studied abroad in 2013 with Iran, India and Turkey being the leading destination countries. (WENR, September 6, 2016). The cross border student mobility of Afghanistan students is mainly to its regional neighbours. The ICEF Monitor mentions the doubling of students to India and Turkey (ICEF Monitor, 2015). On similar lines Deutsche Welle (DW) talks of India becoming the number one destination to students from Afghanistan (Deutsche Welle. DW, 2017).

### **Aspects important to international students**

A study of the variables which influence the decision making process of the target international student segment would be a vital component of readying a strategy to draw internationally mobile students. Choudaha and Chang opine that effective international student enrolment practices depend upon a deep understanding of student mobility patterns and student “decision making processes” which are a “complex interplay” of several variables (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). The factors which have importance as an influence to enrolment decision making for an international student would be multiple and varied. Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño (2006) discuss the model of international student preferences that discusses the aspects of personal reasons, image of the country, effect of city, institution effect and program evaluation on the purchase intentions. The EY-FICCI report states the prime reasons why foreign students from developing countries come to Indian HEIs as “better job prospects and immigration opportunities, opportunity to learn the English language and the diversity and allure of Indian culture. In the case of regional developing countries coming

to India the allure of the Indian culture could be an influencing aspect as most the regional populations would be very aware about aspects like the Indian language and cinema. A report by ICEF details the Hobsons' International Student Survey which mentions the most important factors for internationally mobile students to be education quality, recognition of qualification and the countries attitude towards foreign students as amongst significant factors (ICEF, 2014). Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) discuss the "push" and "pull" factors that motivate the decision to study abroad that seem to be important and say that the "awareness and reputation of the host country and its institutions are likely to be critical." factor.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### Analysis concerning Objective 1

Factor's influencing the enrolment decision making to study in Indian campuses.

The study looks at the following ten factors as variables which impact international student enrolment decision making. The identified factors are as mentioned in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Factors and their Respective Mean Scores Stating the Level of Importance**

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Factors (n=48)</i>	<i>Mean Scores</i>
1	Better job prospects and immigration opportunity	4.19
2	Opportunity to learn English	5.44
3	Diversity and allure of Indian culture.	4.63
4	Quality of education (compared to their home country)	4.92
5	International recognition of qualifications	4.98
6	The country's attitude to international students	4.96
7	Safety	6.08
8	Ease of getting a visa	5.35
9	Distance from home country	4.38
10	Ability to get permanent residency in the destination country after study	3.98

#### Analysis concerning Objective 2

Factors influencing the decision making process to enrol into Deemed and State Universities respectively.

The analysis is to do with the various factors and its importance to the students from Afghanistan when they look to enrol into an Indian Deemed University or a State University. For this, the reliability of the data was checked through the Cronbach's Alpha test following which the data was checked for Normality with the Kolmogorov-Smirnova test. The two tailed Student T test was applied for the significance of variables.

**Table 2**  
**Reliability Cronbach's Alpha**  
**Reliability Statistics**

<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	<i>N of Items</i>
.793	10

### Data was found to be normal through the Kolmogorov-Smirnova Test of Normality

**Table 3**  
**Test of Normality**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Kolmogorov-Smirnov<sup>a</sup></i>		
	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Better job prospects and immigration opportunity	.129	48	.043
Opportunity to learn English	.261	48	.000
Diversity and allure of Indian culture.	.192	48	.000
Quality of education (compared to their home country)	.189	48	.000
International recognition of qualifications	.173	48	.001
The country's attitude to international students	.194	48	.000
Safety	.382	48	.000
Ease of getting a visa	.253	48	.000
Distance from home country	.146	48	.012
Ability to get permanent residency in the destination country after study	.142	48	.017

**Student 'T' Test for Equality of Means was conducted where the Significance value of 2 tailed: significance value of less than 5% (P <0.05).**

SIU (n=24) SPPU (n=24)

**Table 4**  
**Group Statistics**

<i>University</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>	
Better job prospects and immigration opportunity	SIU	24	4.667	1.5228	.3108
	SPPU	24	3.708	1.6011	.3268
Opportunity to learn English	SIU	24	5.667	1.4346	.2928
	SPPU	24	5.208	1.7932	.3660
Diversity and allure of Indian culture.	SIU	24	4.458	1.6413	.3350
	SPPU	24	4.792	1.7440	.3560
Quality of education (compared to their home country)	SIU	24	5.042	1.5737	.3212
	SPPU	24	4.792	1.6413	.3350
International recognition of qualifications	SIU	24	4.833	1.3077	.2669
	SPPU	24	5.125	1.3929	.2843
The country's attitude to international students	SIU	24	5.083	1.7173	.3506
	SPPU	24	4.833	1.9708	.4023
Safety	SIU	24	6.375	1.4084	.2875
	SPPU	24	5.792	1.7688	.3611
Ease of getting a visa	SIU	24	5.542	1.7932	.3660
	SPPU	24	5.167	1.6061	.3279
Distance from home country	SIU	24	4.167	2.0782	.4242
	SPPU	24	4.583	2.0624	.4210
Ability to get permanent residency in the destination country after study	SIU	24	3.917	1.9318	.3943
	SPPU	24	4.042	1.9219	.3923



**Table 5**  
**Test of Significance (2 tailed)**  
**Independent Samples Test**

		<i>Sig.</i> <i>(2-tailed)</i>	<i>Mean</i> <i>Difference</i>	<i>Std. Error</i> <i>Difference</i>
Better job prospects and immigration opportunity	Equal variances assumed	.039	.9583	.4510
	Equal variances not assumed	.039	.9583	.4510
Opportunity to learn English	Equal variances assumed	.333	.4583	.4688
	Equal variances not assumed	.334	.4583	.4688
Diversity and allure of Indian culture.	Equal variances assumed	.499	-.3333	.4889
	Equal variances not assumed	.499	-.3333	.4889
Quality of education (compared to their home country)	Equal variances assumed	.593	.2500	.4641
	Equal variances not assumed	.593	.2500	.4641
International recognition of qualifications	Equal variances assumed	.458	-.2917	.3900
	Equal variances not assumed	.458	-.2917	.3900
The country's attitude to international students	Equal variances assumed	.642	.2500	.5336
	Equal variances not assumed	.642	.2500	.5336
Safety	Equal variances assumed	.213	.5833	.4615
	Equal variances not assumed	.213	.5833	.4615
Ease of getting a visa	Equal variances assumed	.449	.3750	.4914
	Equal variances not assumed	.449	.3750	.4914
Distance from home country	Equal variances assumed	.489	-.4167	.5977
	Equal variances not assumed	.489	-.4167	.5977
Ability to get permanent residency in the destination country after study	Equal variances assumed	.823	-.1250	.5562
	Equal variances not assumed	.823	-.1250	.5562

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

#### Findings concerning Objective 1

- The factors and their Respective Mean Scores Stating the Level of Importance tell us that a varying level of importance has been given to the ten different variables. The aspects in order of importance is as mentioned. The ‘Safety’ factors ranks first in the order of importance and “Ability to get permanent residency in the destination country after study” ranks last in the order of importance.

**Table 6**  
**Order of importance of each Factor**

<i>SrNo</i>	<i>Factor</i>	<i>Level of Importance</i>
1	Safety	1
2	Opportunity to learn English	2
3	Ease of getting a visa	3
4	International recognition of qualifications	4
5	The country's attitude to international students	5
6	Quality of education (compared to their home country)	6
7	Diversity and allure of Indian culture.	7
8	Distance from home country	8
9	Better job prospects and immigration opportunity	9
10	Ability to get permanent residency in the destination country after study	10

### **Findings concerning Objective 2 and Hypothesis**

- The data was found to be reliable as the **Cronbach's Alpha value** was found to be above 0.70.
- In the **Kolmogorov-Smirnov<sup>a</sup> test** of Normality the values for all variables the significance was found to be less than 0.05.
- In the **T Test** to check significance of variables for significance value of less than 5% ( $P < 0.05$ ). The variable with significance/ discriminatory factor is "Better job prospects and immigration opportunity".
- The alternate hypothesis  $H_a$  stands true as: there is a significant difference in perception of least one variable which influence the decision making of students from Afghanistan to enrol in Indian Deemed or State Universities at a significance value of less than 5% ( $P < 0.05$ )

### **4. DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The factors of safety, opportunity to learn English and ease of getting a visa rank as the top aspects of importance to students. These are the prime aspects around which the policy maker and the provider should weave their strategy around.

- On the first aspect of safety the Government, the respective HEI and the society would have to play a role and ensure safety. Required measures must be taken and all the three mentioned stakeholders should ensure that the students feel at home in the respective cities and campuses.
- In reference to the aspect of opportunity to learn English, the HEI management would have a dominant role to play in terms of programs. Having a specialized short term (4 to 6 week) and long term programs oriented towards learning the English language would be apt. These programs would be in addition to the regular programs in various popular streams. The importance given to English as a language in the regional job market underlines the importance of learning the English Language for students.
- On the aspect of ease of getting a visa again the government authorities would take the lead role. An Aljazeera article rates ease of getting visa to India as a facilitator to Afghanistan student flocking to Indian campuses (Aljazeera, June 3, 2013)

The factors which follow in order of importance are International recognition of qualifications the country's attitude to international students, quality of education (compared to their home country) and diversity and allure of Indian culture should also be given due prominence in deciding upon a strategy to attract students from Afghanistan. Here India should look at the push factor of quality of education (compared to their home country) as an opportunity and should endeavour to further enhance the quality of education here.

The aspects of a 'low cost of education' (The Economic Times, September 11, 2014) works towards enhancing the attractiveness of the Indian Education as a destination abroad. Varghese (2008) says that "among the factors influencing the country of choice for cross-border education is cost". Indian scholarships to students from Afghanistan and support encouragements is a big facilitator. India through ICCR offers around 1000 annual scholarships to students from Afghanistan (Business Standard, November 30, 2014).



The importance given to factors which influence decision making remain the same when enrolling into Deemed (SIU) and State Universities (SSPU) with the exception of the factor of 'better job prospects and immigration opportunity'. This means that more or less the strategy to attract students from Afghanistan can be similar or Deemed and State Universities.

## CONCLUSION

India has an opportunity to emerge as a prominent education destination if it can build upon its reputation of being a regional provider to its neighbouring countries. The recent trend of an increase in the number of students from Afghanistan coming into Indian campuses augers well towards India's endeavour to increase the inflow of International students. This success in terms of attracting more students should be studied well so that best practices can be identified and made use of going ahead. Indian scholarships to specific target countries as source of international students could also be a vital facilitator to increasing the number of students in Indian campuses. Indian education has an inherent advantages in terms of the English language being the medium of instruction and Indian education being less costly as compared to availing education in some developed countries. These two advantages that the Indian education system has should be leveraged upon. Also, there is need to prepare a road map on how to facilitate the inflow of students from Afghanistan and other countries where due considerations are given to established marketing concepts and strategies. Each country should be looked at as a separate segment were the needs of that specific segment are addressed through gaining insights about the needs and motivations of the respective student segment. Sharing of best practices amongst providers and Government policy makers through suitable forums would be one of the important initiatives to attract international students to Indian campuses.

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