

African Students in India: Patterns of Mobility

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Under British colonial power, the British higher education system was introduced into both India and Africa; and the legacy continues till today, when India and most of the countries in Africa are independent nations. After national independence in 1947, India, having a better educational infrastructure, started attracting African students to Indian universities for higher education. The movement of African students to India has of late shown a dramatic decline. This raises a concern in India, and it is necessary to understand the reasons for this decline and to devise ways to reverse the deterioration. In this communication, while analyzing this issue, only students who actually cross national borders and live in India for their studies are taken into consideration. Students who are registered with Indian universities for distance education programs have not

been taken into account, for one believes that the true international education experience occurs only through cross-border education.

RISE AND FALL

In 1990/91, a total of 6,222 African students, from over 35 African countries, were studying in nearly 100 education institutions in India. At that time, nearly 12,900 international students were studying in India. Thus, the African student population formed nearly 48 percent of the total international students in India—showing India as a preferred destination of the African students. The other half of the international student population came, primarily, from Asia and the Middle East, while a small number of other students, from developed countries, had come for a much short-term global experience. The situation is different today, with the number of students from Asia nearly four times more than those from Africa; those from the developed world continue to be at a low level.

Over the years, the number of African students has steadily decreased, declining to about 2,700 in 2009/10. The African student population is now only 15 percent of the international student population. This percentage decline is significant, considering the fact that, as a commonwealth country—with similar evolution of a higher education system, as in most of the African countries—India should have attracted the African students in a more significant way; also since studying and living in India is less expensive than in other parts of the world. It is relevant to point out that, in India, foreign students are not looked upon as income sources. Unlike in the case of the developed Anglo-Saxon countries, the Indian government does not collect or publish statistics concerning income or other advantages from international students.

DISTANCE EDUCATION INITIATIVES

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in New Delhi is the largest distance higher education institution in the world. It has ambitious plans for providing cross-border education to students in West Asia and Africa. This Pan-African e-network started functioning in 2008, and IGNOU signed Memoranda of Understanding with 16 African countries. Teaching is conducted through a teleconferencing mode with a two-way communication link between students in Africa and a studio set up at IGNOU. The programs delivered are at postgraduate, undergraduate, diploma, and certificate levels. In the year 2008/09, over 2,000 African students had signed for the program, and over 3,000 did so in 2009/10. However, recent information received from Nigeria indicates that in 2008/09, of the 49 students admitted, many dropped out and only 24 successfully completed the program. Apparently, external funding that was available for this program has been stopped, resulting in this withdrawal.

While, a useful mode, distance education, without crossing national borders, does not include true spirit of international education—a principal objective to provide cross-cultural experiences. Thus, one of the reasons for the decline in the inflow of African students into India could well be the relative success of distance education initiatives by IGNOU, in Africa. However, one needs to evaluate other possible reasons for the decline. It may be noted that in 2008/09, out of the total international students in India, about 27 percent were in distance education programs. For African students, the corresponding number was as high as 45 percent. These numbers may appear small, compared to the nearly 4 million students registered with IGNOU. Nevertheless, this raises the

question of the impact of distance education on internationalization of higher education, in which student mobility is an important factor.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES

Indian institutions have not figured well in the top 500 world university rankings. Therefore, international students are unsure whether the quality of education that they may get in India would enable them to compete for jobs in the global market. In addition, with Africa's economic development, the capacity and willingness to pay for higher education has enhanced; and the choice for studying in developed countries is preferred, even though education and living in India is still considered inexpensive.

The admission procedures for international students, in Indian universities, are very cumbersome with time-consuming visa and document verification procedures. This has been a deterrent for students now having a wider choice across the world. India is known to be a hospitable country, and guests are honored and respected. However, there is apprehension that, for reasons of race and color, African students do find it difficult to be accepted in the Indian society; something that India should be concerned about.

The setting up of the African Union and its new initiative of setting up Pan-African universities across the various African countries, with partnerships from outside Africa, has also helped the students to stay within the African continent and also obtain an international exposure, as part of their education.

India has not created any major efforts at marketing Indian education abroad. Other developed and some developing countries—such as China—have

arranged major marketing and partnership efforts that have attracted African students and weaned them away from India.

NEW INITIATIVES?

Given the decline of the African student population, the Indian government needs to evolve a strategy to enhance and strengthen the India-Africa education partnership, through a combined effort of the Indian university system and the government education system.

The political forum of the India-Africa Summit, set up a few years before, should include “Higher Education Exchanges,” as part of the major collaboration agenda; universities from both sides should participate in this political forum. The forum needs to encourage collaboration between the several hundred Indian and African universities by establishing an India-Africa University Network. Higher education for women is a common agenda for India and Africa; setting up an Indo-African Women’s University in Africa could be a very positive initiative.

Indian and African universities should have discussions about sharing experiences on internationalization of higher education—a common agenda for both. The African Union has already organized three such conferences, in which India should participate. Joint conferences, on higher education issues of common interest should be organized periodically. There are subject areas like skills development, vocational training at the postsecondary level, medical education, technical and management education, and legal studies that are specifically needed in India and Africa. Collaborative arrangements for the

setting up of institutions, in both countries should be explored, through public and private partnership models.

India has over 50 corporations operating in Africa. These should be involved in supporting educational exchanges, through sponsoring scholarships and internships. They could also help African students studying in India to obtain suitable placement in their companies operating in the host country, when the students return home.

CONCLUSION

The declining population of African students should be seen by India, as a matter of concern for losing its traditional education partner. Possibly, India has taken for granted its robust relations with Africa, while other countries are wooing Africa. India needs to attract international students to its campuses, in order to expose its own students to other cultures of the world. It is time that several new initiatives are developed by India as a part of formulating a new education diplomacy policy.