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The power to attract

Why foreign students in India are an essential part of our diplomacy - and what must be done to increase their numbers

Kishan Rana

Foreign education is both a vital 'export' service that earns sizable revenue, and a powerful connector between countries and peoples. Then why are education facilities for foreign students treated as a neglected orphan in India? In effect this is the result of a policy vacuum, in which several different agencies have an interest, but the central player, the ministry of human resource development as the architect of education policy, seems to show limited understanding of the real utility of attracting more foreign students to India, make the needed investment, and act as a real facilitator.

'Soft power' is a popular term these days; Joseph S Nye coined this phrase as recently as 1990. While the operationalisation of this 'power' has many facets, a key feature common to all of them is the building of long-term relationships between countries, especially at the level of people and individuals. Receiving foreign students in one's country is one such powerful connector that continually delivers value. Objective research has shown that those that have studied abroad become advocates for strong ties with the country that educated them; even those that faced problems, carry well-round awareness of that foreign culture, and retain their positive experiences. Despite bouts of unthinking prejudice against Africans, for example, India's strength is its human connection with foreigners. I saw this in Kenya (1984-86) through the activities of a 'Kenya-India Friendship Association' that consisted primarily of returned foreign students, and counted cabinet ministers among its active members.

India's first education minister, the legendary nationalist Abul Kalam Azad, understood this well. When he created our Indian Council for Cultural Relations in 1951, in addition to entrusting to it two-way cultural relations with foreign countries, a special charge assigned to it was to look after foreign students in India. Today, it funds 'international student advisers' at 50 universities that have sizable concentrations of foreign students, and organises summer and winter camps, and study tours for them. ICCR's 2011-12 report (the latest on its website), mentions that it funds 2,404 scholarships for undergrad, graduate and doctoral study; HRD ministry and others, including MEA's Development Partnership Agency, and the department of culture, give many more scholarships, taking the

full total to at least 5,000 or more. ICCR gives no figure for the full number of foreign students in India, nor identifies the principal sending countries. We are left with guesstimates for the numbers, and one figure that crops up frequently is a total of 27,000. This seems an under-count, because institutions such as Symbiosis International University with its 3,000 foreign students, and Amity, Manipal, VTI and other big private universities have several thousand each; the total, when all the public universities, management schools and the rest are also included, should be closer to 50,000. But even that is low in international comparison.

A report by the US-based Institute of International Education, widely cited recently in our media, gave foreign student figures in the major destination countries: the US, 819,000; the UK, 488,000; China, 328,000; France, 289,000; Germany, 265,000; Australia, 245,000; Canada, 214,000; and distantly in 8th position, Japan with 137,000. Beyond these figures are the huge amounts that countries earn from receiving foreign students: the US earns \$24 billion in the fees and money spent by these students; Canada earns C\$8 billion; in Australia, they contributed 0.97 per cent of the country's GDP. In 2001, the number of foreign students in China was 60,000, which has since been ramped up remarkably through deliberate policy actions; their announced goal is to receive 500,000 foreign students by 2020.

How should we see foreign students? "Education is a tradable commodity", said Portugal's education minister in 2012. "The basis of power is shifting to intangible assets", declared Peter Varghese, secretary of the Australian department of foreign affairs and trade, in a November 2013 speech. Another perspective: "We need to increase the capacities of our training institutions to attract foreigners from friendly countries especially our strategic neighbourhood", from Non-Alignment 2.0, 2013, by Sunil Khilnani, et al.

What should we do to attract more foreign students? We need first of all to shift from viewing them as a responsibility to an opportunity. This means candid recognition that scholarships are a sweetener, a fine gesture of solidarity with foreign countries, but the real driver will be the self-funded student who comes both because of the quality and the competitive cost of an Indian education. There is nothing ignoble about charging realistic fees for foreign students, without which our public universities have little incentive to provide the needed facilities for them. Once we see the larger self-interest in attracting more foreign students, other consequences will follow, including:

First, recognition in our system that vibrant communities of foreign students add diversity and challenge to our education, including better realisation of the global context. Indirectly, this spurs our institutions into improving standards and, in turn, seeking a range of international cooperation in more active fashion.

Second, understanding that offering better living conditions for foreign students, say, by putting up more 'international houses' at our campuses, is part of

a process of facility upgradation, and that this becomes a platform for stronger student exchanges with foreign countries around the world. It is no secret that poor facilities are a real block today to enlarged two-way exchanges, especially at our public institutions.

Third, we need to move ahead with workable formulas for collaboration with foreign universities. Many ideas on this, and proposed amendments to our laws that would permit international exchanges, have been withering on the vine for several years, almost as if our establishment is fearful of such collaboration. Is it not strange that as an open democracy we appear to apprehend foreign education cooperation, when an authoritarian China sees little danger for itself and has scores of foreign campuses on its soil, of course operating on its terms? Is it beyond us to work out arrangements with international partners that protect essential Indian interests?

Four, our best institutions would get wings to go overseas. This is one area where we have unique strength, much ahead of anything in other non-Western countries, including China. But we seem to tie the hands of our best IITs and IIMs from establishing campuses in foreign countries. What is the logic? Do we not trust their faculty to do this in a way that will not weaken their institutions and dilute their own equity.

Finally, the best private institutions, including universities and schools, have established campuses and collaborations abroad - and in this we are ahead of the Chinese. We ought to help and facilitate them; they are builders of valuable links in foreign countries, who also add to an Indian power of attraction.

This is a classic inter-ministry issue, which lies blocked because of policy paralysis. The commerce department has pushed hard for action, while the foreign and the finance ministry seem to have been quiescent. At different times the HRD ministry has seemed ready with legislation, but nothing has come of this. This is one more issue that awaits government decisiveness.

The writer is honorary fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi