

# Quest for International Education of African Students in India: Opportunities and Challenges

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**ABSTRACT:** India has been known as “Gyan ka Kendra” or a knowledge centre. Many African students come to India because they feel education in India is relatively cheap compared to western and other Asian countries. India is today one of the most attractive destinations for higher education. African students are more vulnerable to discrimination. African have immense opportunities as well as face many challenges.

**Key Words:** Gyan Kendra, Ino-Africa partnership, Higher Education, EDOOFA, Discrimination

Traditionally India has been known as “Gyan ka Kendra” or a knowledge centre. It earned this tag because the tradition of education and training dates back to the time when the Hindu scriptures were written, and subsequently to the days of Nalanda and Taksashila, where we have had one of the most celebrated teachers known for his political, economic astuteness and understanding of the warfare, namely Chanakya\*1. Today his work is widely referred to in matters of state, economy, and governance, much the same way as Machiavelli. The foundation of modern education system in India was laid by Lord Macaulay in 1835 during the British regime. Soon the universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were started in 1837 and thereafter higher education spread rapidly in India. Three medical colleges came up in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, and an engineering college in Roorkee in 1857\*2. After the independence, the country’s first prime minister, Pandit Nehru, understood the importance of education in the development of the nation and therefore the first education policy sowed the seeds for modern universities and national institutions like IITs, IIMs, Indian Institute of Science, All India Institute of Medical Sciences etc. With the dawn of the 21st century came an explosive growth in higher education, primarily driven by an aspirational society and entrepreneurial activity. Today the forces driving change in education are demography, technology and economic growth. At the same time, it is also driven by the changing value systems and a renewed vigour to make India a knowledge superpower.

## India’s opportunity

Given the above changes, India is today one of the most attractive destinations for higher education. Today all income groups are substantive in terms of the size offering opportunities for education programmes at all price points. Further, with almost about 70% of the population still living in smaller towns and rural areas, there is an urgent need to develop delivery models which will enable them to acquire a university degree or a diploma at a nominal price. This is an arena of innovations.

The quantum jump in enrolments in institutions makes it one of the largest education systems in the world. As of 2012, almost 29 million students in India enrolled in higher education as compared to just 11 million in 2002. This is expected to rise to 42.1 million by 2020 \*3.

According to QS Higher Education System Strength Ranking 2016, India is 25th among top 50 higher education systems in the world\*4. This shows the potential for improvement and augmentation. Given the demography, the talent, entrepreneurship and commitment of the government to make Indian education globally competitive, today is just the time to innovate and develop excellent institutions of world-class level. It is a rare opportunity.

The challenges and therefore the innovation opportunities lie in expanding access, developing excellence in institutions, making them more equitable and at the same offering education at affordable prices.

## Indo-African Partnership in Sustainable development

The global economy continues to face challenges in the aftermath of 2008 crisis, there are clear indications that the global balance has shifted towards the “South”, mainly led by India and China, and from whom the baton is expected to pass on to Africa, a continent with tremendous potential to grow. The expectation is that growth and dynamism of the Global South will reinvigorate the global economic order, and the North-

South trade equation will be increasingly complemented by the strengthening South-South relationship. From India's perspective, Africa is the most meaningful trade partner after the U.S., with a 32 percent annual growth between 2005 to 2011, and is expected to reach US\$90 billion by 2015\*5.

Historically, Africa has attracted attention due to its abject poverty, unemployment, diseases and governance gaps. While the developed countries have tried to make inroads via aid, it was always an accepted fact that to make the interventions sustainable, the continent needs skills development, jobs and capital investments for sustained economic growth. Given the fact that the average annual growth rate of real output of the continent increased from 1.8 per cent in the period 1980-1989 to 2.6 per cent in 1990-2000 and 5.3 per cent in the period 2000-2010, Africa is now grabbing interest as the next developing landscape. It offers not only a huge market and scope for business expansion, but is also the treasure trove of minerals, natural resources and agricultural commodities. While China has surged ahead to forge ties and strategic relationships through building critical infrastructure in exchange of exploiting mineral reserves and agricultural land of the continent, India must continue to take the more sustainable path of corporate investments and bilateral trade.

### **India's role in Higher Education in Africa**

India's role in higher education and training in Africa, is primarily conducted through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC). Many African students and professionals have benefited from ITEC derived projects like the Pan-African e-network project and the Special Commonwealth Assistance for Africa Programme (SCAAP). In terms of the Pan-African e-network project, it currently consists of three African universities, one from Ghana, Cameroon and Uganda and five India universities, the number universities as part of this initiative is expected to increase. The closest semblance to an institute that promotes India in any realm to African students in Africa is the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) and the India-Africa Network at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, both in South Africa. Both institutes have potential to promote genuine interest in India from African students where perhaps decision makers in India should consider financial commitment to the institutes in efforts to rebrand India's potential as an area of study for African students, promote Indian higher education institutions as an alternative place for study and use it as an avenue to disseminate Africa-India relations.

India's premier institute, IIT has virtually crossed the physical distance of over 4500 kilometres with Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to teach the students, construction technology and management, and chemical engineering. The institute is also planning to conduct computer engineering and manufacturing engineering courses in the next semester to complete its target of producing 10,000 science and engineering students in Ethiopia. The Indian Government has already pledged a US\$ 700 million contribution to education and skill development in the continent\*6.

### **Opportunities for African students in India for higher education**

Students who hail from Africa, feel completely at home as they pursue English, Medicine, Sciences and other courses at different Universities in India. They are all praise for their courses. It is impossible to ignore the presence of African students on Indian campuses there are over 1,500 African students in the country on funded programmes alone. Quality education, working parents in India, scholarships, and friendly people are what attracts them to the Indian education system\*7.

India is academically strong along with being economical which is not the case with the US and Europe. In India, English is a spoken second language whereas. Therefore, the teachers here have a better understanding and command over the language. EDOOFA (Education for all) awards such scholarships to international students every year with an aim to foster and strengthen cultural relations and build an empowered community of students who have access to good quality education at affordable cost. For John Christian, who is from Ghana, and is pursuing a masters in economics it is travelling and sports that fascinate him the most about India. *"I like the cultural versatility here and that is unique to India. I have travelled a lot in and around Delhi and down south to Goa. It is fun and also great learning experience."*\*8

### **The IT edge**

Students around the world view India as a leader in Information technology, and come here to develop their IT proficiency. "Where I come from, I hear that India is one of the best countries for IT. I was always interested in computers," shares Max Ndundula Nyembue, from Congo. He is pursuing a BSc in IT at an elite private institute, and intends to get an IT job when he goes back to his country. Kemana, from Rwanda, a BCA student studying in Bangalore, also came to India for technology studies. "Our country Rwanda is

developing a new system for technology, and they are looking for trained IT professionals. This has given me motivation to come to India,” shares Kemana\*9.

### English improvement

While Max from Congo articulates his thoughts proficiently in English, Kemana is fluent in French and his mother tongue Kinyarwanda. But in this modern age, even countries like Rwanda would be experiencing a paradigm shift from French learning to English learning system eventually. In countries like China and Korea as well, the mode of instruction is the local language. Hence, even they look up to India as an option for quality education in English medium. They feel their spoken English and listening skills get much improved in India as they get an opportunity to speak a lot of English on campus.

### The value proposition

Many African students come to India because they feel education in India is relatively cheap compared to western and other Asian countries. “For an education of high level at an affordable price India is the perfect choice,” says Lukunga Tanguy from Congo, who is studying Computer Engineering in India. For some perspective, the total cost of education and living in India comes out to be 1/10th that in U.S.A. It’s believed that universities in India have remained popular in Africa because it offers quality higher education at an affordable cost, the use of English as a medium of instruction, reasonable living costs, and the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity in the country as well. The government has also invested a lot in education, in the form of various scholarships and sponsorship for foreign students. It is well-known now that India is the 2nd country in the world with most freelance jobs, just behind the U.S. So many international students work part-time in order to self-finance their education, since the opportunities are aplenty. African students account for a sizeable 15 percent of the foreign student population \*10

### Challenges faced by African Students

On February 6, Mobarak was at the city’s Freedom Park with a group of international students. They were protesting the mob attack on a Tanzanian student on January 31 in Bangalore and also held a candle light vigil for the local woman who died in the accident that triggered the mob fury. Enraged and shocked, the young students were looking for a way out of this friction. A sense of fear gripped students from African countries after the January incident and the recent killing of a Congolese student in South Delhi on May 2018. Twenty-eight-year-old Bokor Moussa once nurtured romanticized notions about studying in India, but now thinks the security of African students is often compromised. “Since 2015 we’re getting harassed by colleges, policemen, even the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO). Now if someone asked me if India is a good place to study, I tell them to never come [here]”. An undergraduate student from Chad, Bokor serves as the current president of the Association for African Students in India (AASI)\*11.

### Unchecked institutional harassment

Karnataka alone attracts the highest share of foreign students (36.4%), according to a 2014 study. Out of the 25,000 students from different African countries studying in private and public institutions in India, an estimated 6000 are in Bengaluru alone. Most African students, however, come through agents and fall for advertisements with incorrect and hyped-up depictions of colleges affiliated to Bangalore University (BU). “My cousin was studying here and I checked the website. But the website was totally different from the college”, said Mobark.

In some cases, students have found facilities in the institutes are not up to the mark or as advertised, forcing them to apply for a ‘no objection certificate’ to be transferred to another college, which becomes another excuse for the college to extort the full course fee from them. Colleges have also been found to withhold certificates from students and ask for a ransom in the form of additional fees. This subsequently lands the students in trouble with the FRRO. The *bona fide* certificate is a document students are required to submit to extend their visa every six months to a year. In 2014, the People’s Union of Civil Liberties filed a complaint to the Karnataka State Human Rights Commission against Sree Omkar College of Commerce and Management on behalf of some Ugandan students, who alleged that the principal impounded their passports, and denied them attendance and bona fide certificates, which delayed their visa renewal. In response to the allegations, the director of the FRRO stated “the circumstances [were] beyond the jurisdiction of FRRO [cannot be] controlled by FRRO, and hence the action taken by them [the college] cannot be treated as cruel treatment and torture to students”.

However, the FRRO officials are required to make inspection visits to colleges where foreign students are enrolled.

Abigail Femi (23), who completed her bachelors and masters degrees at the Indian Institute of Science, said that parents back home still relied the most on word-of-mouth or a friend's recommendation for institutes to send their children to. "In Nigeria, students cross check a list of accredited universities on the website of the ministry of foreign affairs. So you look at the website and check if the school is on the government website, then it's okay". The information on the government website, however, may not always be updated.

### **African students more vulnerable to discrimination**

According to Bokor mostly African students who face institutional harassment, but he still finds it difficult to call the problem one of race. "Universities like Christ College don't treat students like this. It is only the colleges under BU because they don't have any control over the affiliated colleges. When we approached BU with this problem, they told us they're only responsible for results and conducting exams," he said.

She was asked to pay a different amount during admission but she held her ground. "I can't stand injustice. They wanted me to go but I paid the same amount as everyone else did". Despite paying the entire three-year tuition fee in her first year, her college had asked her to pay the fee again in the subsequent year. "The office lady told me there was some mix up and the person who made the mistake has left the job so I needed to pay," she said, adding that the college has now changed for the better.

Despite a directive being issued in October 2015 by Karnataka State Higher Education Council's overseas centre for foreign students, 30% of the universities have not yet appointed a nodal officer to address the grievances of foreign students, a *Times of India* report said. Meanwhile, FISAB (Federation of International Students Association-Bangaluru) plans to start an international cell in every college to address the problems faced by foreign students and a website that would cover FRRO relations and guidelines in all Indian states. "When students come here they're totally blank. They don't know where to go, what to do or what are the procedures. So this cell will have one person from the college administration and international students", Safra said.

Mobarak's fears are not unfounded. Days after the Congolese student was killed, foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj tweeted that the government would "launch a sensitization program to reiterate that such incidents with foreign nationals embarrass the country". Minister of state for foreign affairs V.K. Singh called the incident a "minor scuffle blown up by the media" and asked citizens to question the "motive of the media". All this while African nationals were being targeted in a series of attacks in Mehrauli in what seemed to be a further backlash to the stone pelting of Indian shops in Congo \*12. "The response is very weak", Bokor opines about the government's response to these attacks. He said he had approached the state home minister with a petition that is yet to see a definitive response. Student associations, which otherwise guide foreign students with the procedures and their way around colleges and the FRRO, have yet to be lent a serious ear by state and central authorities.

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