

Institutional Readiness for Study Abroad: A Conceptual Review of Opportunities and Challenges in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract—India has become one of the biggest places from which students move to study abroad. Depending on the method used to count, the number of students leaving India is well over a million, though growth slowed down sharply in 2025 because of stricter visa rules in other countries. The higher education system that sends so many students abroad is also not fully ready to support, structure, and take advantage of that mobility, which is strange. This paper takes a broad look at how ready Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) are to help students study abroad. It does this by looking at six areas: the institutional infrastructure, the policy and regulatory ecosystem, the curriculum and credit-recognition systems, faculty capacity, financial support structures, and digital readiness. Then, using the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, University Grants Commission (UGC) regulations, and new secondary data, it makes a map of the main problems Indian institutions face, such as regulatory bottlenecks, financial constraints, broken partnerships, faculty exposure gaps, the digital divide between cities and rural areas, and policy instability in destination countries. At the end of the paper, suggestions are made for a more organised and fair method of internationalisation that goes beyond signing documents and focuses on measurable student results.

Index Terms—internationalization; study abroad; NEP 2020; institutional readiness; Indian higher education; student mobility

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most obvious signs of a higher education system's global merger is when students can move between countries. This line points in a certain direction for India: the country sends many more students abroad than it gets, and the difference has

stayed the same even though the government has tried to close it. According to data from the Ministry of External Affairs, there were more than 1.8 million Indian students studying abroad in 2025. However, separate data from the Bureau of Immigration, which only looks at departures during the year and not the total number of students studying abroad, shows that the number of students leaving the country has been going down for three years in a row, from about 908,000 in 2023 to about 626,000 in 2025 (Times Higher Education, 2026; ICEF Monitor, 2025). India is still one of the biggest places where students from other countries come to study, no matter what measure is used.

Along with these people going abroad, there is a higher education system in the United States that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 wants to make a global study destination by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy's internationalisation plan is unusually ambitious for a document of this size. It wants to let the best foreign universities open campuses in India, encourage Indian universities to open campuses abroad, make it easier for students to get credit for studying abroad, and set up International Student Offices at all higher education institutions (Ministry of Education, 2020; Press Information Bureau, n.d.). Some of these rules have been put into action since the policy text. The UGC's 2022 rules on twinning, joint, and dual-degree programs, the Academic Bank of Credits, and the opening of international offices at about 700 HEIs are some of the more concrete steps that have been taken so far (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Policy goals have not been met by institutions that are ready to do their jobs. Many of India's higher education institutions, both

public and private, were not built with cross-border mobility in mind. Even universities with a lot of resources often say that partnerships stay on paper and don't turn into structured student pathways (Eduprogress, 202). This essay looks at that gap. It asks two related questions: first, how should an Indian higher education institution be judged in terms of its readiness to help students study abroad? and second, what problems keep Indian institutions from being ready in the first place? Since this is a conceptual paper and not an empirical one, it uses policy documents, government data, and existing scholarly and journalistic literature instead of survey data. The goal is to build a framework that can be tested in later empirical work.

II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Knight (2004) said that the internationalisation of higher education is when an international, intercultural, or global dimension is added to the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education. This is a broad definition that includes both "internationalisation abroad" (when students, faculty, and programs move across borders) and "internationalisation at home" (when global content and perspectives are brought into the domestic classroom). Studying abroad is mostly in the first group, but Altbach and Knight (2007) say that outward student mobility and the strength of an institution's international relationships are closely linked: schools with weak international offices, few partnerships, and rigid curricula tend to encourage ad hoc, self-arranged mobility rather than structured exchange. In this case, "readiness" is better thought of as an idea at the institutional level rather than a single indicator. This paper uses the literature on internationalisation and the specifics of NEP 2020 to look at institutional readiness for study abroad as having six interconnected parts:

- A supportive policy and regulatory environment, both at the system level (UGC/AICTE rules) and within the institution's own statutes.
- Dedicated infrastructure - international relations offices, staff trained in visa and credit-transfer processes, and partnership-management capacity.
- Curricular flexibility and credit-recognition systems that allow study undertaken abroad to count toward an Indian degree or *Vise a versa*
- Faculty with international exposure, research networks, and comfort operating within joint or collaborative programmes.
- Financial support mechanisms, both institutional (scholarships, seed funding for partnerships) and individual (education loans, need-based aid).
- Digital and technological readiness, including the platforms needed to run joint courses, virtual exchange, and blended mobility.

India's NEP 2020 push for internationalisation helps with all six of these areas. The policy says that MoUs should be signed that are good for both sides, teacher and student exchange should be encouraged, International Student Offices should be set up, and credits earned abroad should be counted when it makes sense (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Section 3 looks at how far implementation has come in each area, and Section 4 talks about the problems that still need to be fixed.

III. DIAMENTINS OF INSTITUTIONAL READINESS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

3.1 Policy and Regulatory Ecosystem

NEP 2020 is still the clearest statement of India's societal goals. The Ministry of Education (n.d.) said that guidelines for internationalising higher education were released in July 2021, and in May 2022, UGC regulations were made available that allowed twinning, joint-degree, and dual-degree arrangements between Indian and foreign HEIs. A report from 2026 says that by 2025, more than 100 Indian higher education institutions will have some kind of joint academic program with a foreign partner. Some foreign universities, like the University of Southampton's India campus, have also been able to set up shop in India thanks to changes in the law. These universities can now do so in designated areas like Gujarat's GIFT City (Education for All in India, 2021).

3.2 Institutional infrastructure

Since the 2021 guidelines came out, about 700 HEIs have set up an office for foreign affairs (Ministry of Education, n.d.). In reality, though, capacity varies a lot. Some private and public universities run these offices as full-fledged departments with mobility counsellors, while many others see the job as an extra responsibility that comes with an existing administrative role.

3.3 Curriculum and Credit Recognition

Students can now earn credits at different schools and move those credits to other schools. The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) was created so that students could do this (Education for All in India, 2021). It's still not as useful for truly cross-border credit transfer as it is for multiple-entry, multiple-exit pathways within India, and institutions are still having trouble adapting foreign course credit and grading systems to Indian needs.

3.4 Faculty Capacity

Different professors don't have the same amount of experience with international teaching methods, joint research, and designing curriculum together. Some programs, like the Global Initiative of Academic Networks (GIAN) and the Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC), encourage international teachers to visit Indian classrooms and fund group research, which helps fill some of this gap (Khan Global Studies, 2021).

3.5 Financial Support

On the individual side, education-loan disbursement for overseas study rose sharply, with one estimate placing the increase at roughly 50 percent over two years, alongside a comparable rise in scholarship uptake (Meridean, 2026). Outside of a few well-funded institutions, institutional funding for partnerships that reach out to other institutions is still pretty limited. This includes seed money for joint research, mobility funds, and co-funded scholarships.

3.6 Digital Readiness

Focusing on digital learning platforms in NEP 2020 has helped virtual exchange and blended-mobility formats, but not everyone can use them. Many private and state universities, especially those outside of cities, still have problems with technology and infrastructure that makes it hard for them to offer internationally recognised, tech-enabled programs (Outlook Business, 2025).

IV. PROBLEMS FACED BY INDIAN INSTITUTIONS

4.1 Regularity and Bureaucratic Bottlenecks

Even in cases where UGC and AICTE rules allow institutions to work together, they often cite accreditation procedures, rules for hiring faculty, and

concerns about their own autonomy as problems that make it hard to form partnerships (Khan Global Studies, 2021). It's not always easy to get permission for a specific MoU or shared program when you have permission at the framework level.

4.2 Financial Constraints

As Education for All in India (2023) notes, internationalisation comes with real costs that many Indian institutions, especially those that aren't private or central universities with lots of money, can't easily handle. These costs include building partnerships, sending teachers on trips, sharing infrastructure, and co-funding scholarships. The cost of studying abroad has gone up a lot for students. One study found that an Indian student would have to pay about ₹10 lakh more over five years for a US degree because of rising tuition and the value of the dollar falling. This is on top of a 10–12 percent rise in the overall cost of studying abroad in 2025 (The PIE News, 2025). Costs going up have an indirect effect on institutional readiness because fewer students will be able to use the exchange pathways that institutions set up.

4.3 Fragmented and Underused Partnerships

Indian higher education institutions are often criticised for signing memorandums of understanding without a clear academic justification, clear learning outcomes, or a way to measure effect. This means that many partnerships don't happen after the signing ceremony (Eduprogress, 2025). Cross-border collaboration is more likely to happen when it's convenient than when it's planned because institutions don't have an internal internationalisation strategy that is similar to a project feasibility document.

4.4 Faculty Readiness Gaps

It's hard to keep academically rigorous joint programs going once the administrative MoU is in place because many faculty members haven't had much experience with foreign teaching methods, designing joint curricula, or working together on research projects (Outlook Business, 2021). Cultural inertia and a fear of taking risks among academic leaders can make it even harder to get foreign accreditation or work together on curriculum development.

4.5 Digital and Regional Divide

When it comes to digital readiness, the difference between well-funded urban schools and state or rural

colleges is very clear. Universities that don't have the right infrastructure for virtual classrooms, cross-border credit tracking, or online platforms for joint teaching are left out of many of the common blended-mobility formats used around the world (Outlook Business, 2021).

4.6 Limited Awareness and Counselling Capacity

Career and international-mobility counselling stays concentrated in a relatively small number of urban and elite schools. Students in tier-2 and tier-3 cities often depend on private overseas-education consultancies rather than institutional advising, which can leave decision-making about destinations, costs, and post-study outcomes disconnected from what the home school actually offers.

4.7 Curriculum and Credit Misalignment

It is still very hard to get India's school calendar, grade scale, and credit system to work with a partner country. As of 2026, differences in academic terms, grading standards, and semester structures are still making joint and dual-degree delivery harder, even when the government allows it (Eduprogess, 2021).

4.8 External Volatility in External Countries

The readiness of institutions is also tied to choices made outside of India. Tougher visa rules in Canada, the US, and the UK, along with new fees for international students in some markets, have caused a noticeable drop in Indians leaving the country after 2023. This makes it harder to set up institutional exchange programs that depend on stable visa access (ICEF Monitor, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2026). Institutions that built their relationships around the "Big Four" destinations are more likely to be affected by this change than institutions that have a wider range of partner networks.

V. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It looks like the policy framework is moving faster than the institutions' ability to handle it, and only a few well-resourced colleges are really ready. Based on the above analysis, we can go in four main directions. Now that MoUs have been signed, internationalisation needs to move on to tracking results. If an institution wants to go global, it should have a clear plan, like a project feasibility document, that includes the academic reasons, goal student numbers, and review

milestones for each partnership (Eduprogess, 2026) instead of just signing an MoU (Eduprogess, 2026). Second, building people's skills should go beyond just the most prestigious institutions. Since most of India's college students go to state and private colleges, focusing funding on international-affairs offices, credit-mapping systems, and faculty development in these schools would probably make the whole country more ready than putting more money into central universities that are already well-connected. Third, the Academic Bank of Credits and other systems that help recognise credits need clearer, more public rules for how to treat coursework from other countries so that each school doesn't have to negotiate credit transfer case by case. Fourth, planning for different types of destinations and money should be seen as separate problems of readiness. Institutions and students are both vulnerable to sudden policy changes in a small number of destination countries. This vulnerability could be reduced by expanding need-based scholarship support and expanding partnerships to markets like Germany, France, and other new destinations (ICEF Monitor, 2021).

VI. CONCLUSION

India is in a unique position in the world of higher education. It sends a lot of students abroad, but its policies are clearly aimed at becoming a major destination and partner in its own right. Indian higher education institutions now have a real, if not fully finished, set of tools thanks to NEP 2020 and the rules that go with it. These include international offices, ways to transfer credits, and a legal path for joint and dual-degree programs. What's still not even is how ready institutions being to use that toolkit: limited funds, uneven faculty exposure, broken partnerships, and a persistent gap between institutions with and without enough resources all make it harder for the policy vision to turn into structured opportunities for students. To close these gaps, institutions will need to keep investing in them instead of just making policy announcements once. They will also need to work harder to make internationalisation possible for more institutions than just the few that already have it. Future empirical research, especially surveys that compare the ability of different types of institutions' foreign offices, would help turn this conceptual framework into benchmarks that can be measured.

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