

Why does Australia continue to be a Second Choice for Full-Fee Paying Indian Students?

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***Abstract:** Australia is in a strong position to provide quality education and training to overseas students due to favourable geographic, economic and historical reasons. But many Indians like many Asians, perceive a degree from a top American or European university as having more prestige and marketability than an equivalent qualification from an Australian institution. This is in spite of Australian universities offering competitive fee structures and lower living costs. Poor entry standards set by Australian universities contribute immensely to this image. Most universities in Australia can afford to increase their entry standards. This paper analyses the fundamental reasons for poor perceptions and what can be done to change this negative image about Australian education in future.*

***Keywords:** Education and training, Selection criterion, Merit and scholarship*

Introduction

The domination of North America as a preferred destination continues in India, even after a decade of aggressive education campaigns by Australian universities. In going for growth in numbers of international students, many Australian universities have ignored welfare of students and compromised quality of teaching. Essential resources for the full-fee paying students have been generally inadequate compared with their equivalent American counterparts. The negative impact of just providing full-fee paying education without any scholarships or institute/industry linkages has turned our education marketing campaigns into education business propaganda. In India private education agents have thrived with Australian marketing campaigns. Many small time agents routinely engage in unethical practices to woo the students. The key findings of the Australia India: New Horizons In Education and Training conference clearly identified that ‘the recruitment agency system contributes to a highly negative image of Australian education and training systems (AIEF- New Horizons conference report 1997).’ Yet little has been done to alter these arrangements.

The poor quality student intake in Australian universities is also a direct result of lower entry requirements and poor selection criteria. For these entire reasons full fee paying education is fast losing its merit and scholarly value in India. Australian universities need to demonstrate confidence in their programs and recruit high quality students into their programs. Indian politicians, educationalists and industrialists see the active participation of universities in student recruitment campaigns as a commercial activity. To alter this perception Australian universities should plan for mutually beneficial collaborative links and develop marketing strategies, which appear embedded with other activities that reflect commitment to mutually collaborative educational outcomes. We must focus on quality intake, giving due

consideration to merit and scholarship, and introduce entrance exams or competitive tests in selection processes.

At present admission is sought after fields such as computer science, engineering or business is possible from an Australian university without having to sit for any entrance tests. Neither does it require any stringent interview process. Often selection is done on the basis of evaluation of transcripts. This selection process may be legitimate but does not fit in with expected norms; therefore it goes down in value dramatically and is only accepted by those who cannot get a similar offer from their preferred universities in States or other similar traditional destination. Therefore, we are becoming more and more known for a soft, cheap and easy option for overseas education. This image we seriously need to alter.

A strategy needs to be developed which enhances the reputation of Australian education overseas. To start with Australian universities need to revisit their selection criterion. We need to lift the entrance requirements, and introduce competitive tests as an essential component of selection and admission. Australian universities should have the confidence that they can do so without losing a large number of overseas applicants. Secondly the present recruitment system through the private agency system contributes to a negative image of Australian education and training services. We need to be less aggressive about marketing and use alternative approaches by having direct liaisons with colleges and universities and by establishing mutually beneficial teaching and research activities. Finally we must be more liberal in rewarding merit and scholarships.

It is important to understand why Indian students seek western education. And why they choose Australia for education, and finally to try and understand why we still remain a second choice for overseas students.

Why do Indian Students Seek Western Qualifications?

Only a few elite Institutes of Technology's (IIT) and similar Institutes enjoy special grants and funding from the Indian government. They cannot cater for the ever-growing population of India. Hence this creates a need for many to go overseas to seek quality education.

The other reasons for Indian students to seek western qualifications are summarized below:

1. Better quality education – although India has the world's largest education system with over 200 universities, the standard of education is continually falling in many government universities due to funding cuts.
2. Better employment and career opportunities: Graduates with western qualifications generally enjoy better employment and career opportunities at home.
3. Status and social prestige for families of graduates with western qualifications is also a major contributor.
4. The prospect of permanent settlement in a western country also motivates some students to seek education abroad.

Why Indian Students Choose Australia for Overseas Education?

The main reasons are:

1. Australian education and living costs are generally cheaper than American or European countries.
2. A student Visa to Australia is obtained fairly easily compared to the UK or US.
3. Education systems in India and Australia are similar, as both follow the British model.
4. Education is at a lower price than in the US. Australia and New-Zealand fees are generally cheaper than US universities.
5. There is no language barrier, as English is the teaching language in higher education.
6. There is good quality of life due to the cheaper cost of living, good climate, closer vicinity to home, safe environment and multicultural society.

Why do we continue to remain second choice for Indian students?

Poor selection criteria

Poor selection criterions are the main reason for poor intake of OS students. Lack of entrance exams or competitive exams demerits Australian education instantly. Initially students and their parents used to express surprise at receiving on the spot admission during a visit to an Australian education exhibition or an interview session. It used to create a degree of scepticism also. Such marketing campaigns are routinely organised by International Development Programs (IDP) offices in India or by private agents. They are more popularly known as road shows in India. Such activities are good for increasing awareness of Australian universities but they should include participation by prominent Industries so that students can have the confidence that Australia is a technically advanced nation.

It is important that students with second-class degrees are not considered for admission by Australian universities unless they show significant proof of work experience or knowledge in the field of study. Second class in India is in a bracket of 40-59%. Therefore, students with marks between 40-50 % who would be have failed in Australia are successful in getting admission in some Australian universities. In IT and Business postgraduate programs most students qualify for admission with marks within the range 40-59%. This percentage would not qualify them for admission in any reputable universities in India. When the majority of students applying for admission fall in second-class category then this sends message that we are a destination for second-class students. This in turn discourages good students from applying.

Good students only apply for Australian education when their attempts at getting visas for the US, UK or Canada fail. So it can be said that the market for Australia has rapidly grown more from tightening of visa regulations at US embassy rather than from successful marketing campaigns of Australian universities.

It is seen that the selection criteria for an overseas student is generally lower than the Enter scores required by Victorian local students for the same program. My experience as a

selection officer for double degree shows that a local student with ENTER of 90 in his year 12 exams may not get into a double degree program of a top Faculty of Engineering in Australia but an overseas student with 70% in Year 12 board exam from India may easily manage a place. The same program in India requires above 85% to be even considered eligible to apply let alone be selected. This statistics is readily available from Engineering colleges in India. The criteria are equivalent between federal funded institutes in the two countries. (The scene in Indian private sector is too diverse and complicated to draw the same conclusion).

Lack of competitive exams in undergraduate selections such as Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and for postgraduate such as Graduate Aptitude Test (GAT) selection attracts further criticism that Australian degree programs are very easy to get into.

The solution lies in introduction of competitive exams and admissions should be based on high cut-off scores, which are at least at par with Australian local standards. Until recently no formal English requirements were imposed on these students. IELTS was not strictly compulsory before 1999 for either Visa or for admission. As a result students with inadequate English were getting admissions. Luckily putting compulsory IELTS requirement by universities in their admission criteria has rectified this problem. The IELTS introduction has made a remarkable difference in addressing and assessing the English language skills of the students. Similarly general aptitude tests that could cover fields of science, mathematics and English in little more rigorous way should be introduced.

The commercial nature of marketing campaigns

Australian universities have a very commercial approach to marketing in India and they have been openly criticised for it. Education campaigns of all Australian universities have a strong liaison with local agents and this arrangement attracts only those students who have money to pay but have generally poor academic records. This is especially true of intake in most postgraduate programs in all Australian universities. As a selection officer for postgraduate programs 1993 to 2002, I noticed that an average student studying in a postgraduate program had only 45-59% marks in their Bachelors degree and these marks are not sufficient for admission into any well-recognised postgraduate programs of either Indian or American universities. However with these percentages students are readily accepted in most Australian universities.

Given it is possible to obtain forged documents, selection based on entirely transcripts leads our selection and screening processes to open criticism. There are several media reports in India about the forged or duplicate documents available in the Indian market. A recent media report broadcast (by Sahara T.V news channel) showed police confiscated several hundred duplicate degree certificates of various universities. The news channel further said that such certificates are sold in the market for only 50-60,000Rs. Improved quality of scanning and printing techniques have made it very easy for such documents to be duplicated. What mechanism do we have in place to cross-check all these documents? Certificate verification check must be done before admission. Class B and C universities are often targeted for such certificate duplication. To ascertain if the student has been a bonafide student of the college, Australian universities must obtain a letter from the college principal or the registrar confirming his candidature at the colleges, completion date, and status of his marks. This should be undertaken directly by the Australian university and not left in the hands of private agents.

Also tougher visa requirements should be introduced that do not guarantee a permanent residency with a year of PG study in Australian PG diplomas. This scheme has seen mass enrolments in IT programs in the past. And this exodus has continued long after the IT boom has been over leaving many unemployed IT graduates.

The recent change in immigration policy requiring a two-year Postgraduate qualification before a student can apply for permanent residency status is a positive change and would reduce the intake of non-genuine students in our universities. My experience as a selection officer indicates many students in the past had taken admission in PG Programs such as IT solely for permanent settlement in Australia. In my opinion it should be further strengthened and in addition to two year study, one year job experience in the field should also be made essential for permanent residence status.

Optimum selection criteria for students from India.

General prerequisites

All students must meet minimum English requirements. IELTS should be raised to 7 as most students think Tofel is tougher than IELTS. Students must have 60% and above in their year 10 and 12 School Board Examinations.

Undergraduate Selection criteria: For all undergraduate professional degrees minimum eligibility requirements should be 70% and above with an average of 75% and above in their core subjects. For example for an Engineering degree one must look at candidates who have more than 75% average in Physics, Chemistry, Maths (which are generally termed as PCM) and 60% and more in English. We need to note there is a large discrepancy in school Boards. Some regional state boards do not have the same standard as the central board of secondary education and the All India Higher Secondary board. So adjustments must be made for such discrepancies.

Postgraduate Selection criteria: In postgraduate programs selection, in addition to a first class (60% and above) in Year 10 and 12 one must also look at the degree qualifications carefully. The university's status should be checked first as Indian universities and Institutes are classified into different categories such as A, B and C and this should serve as a good guide to selection officers. Only accept class A and B universities wherever possible. For class C universities add another 5-10% in your selection criterion. Ideally all Indian degrees should be equivalent to Australian university degrees.

One caution about first class award in Indian bachelor's degrees. For most Universities only the final year marks determine the classification (such as first, second, or third) of degree. An engineering student who maintains a percentage of only 40-50 % in first 3 years may suddenly pull his weight together and may pass his final year exams with 60% marks. This will allow him or her to be awarded a first class degree thereby misleading the selection officer. Therefore, it is better to take the average of marks in all semesters when evaluating a degree qualification. It may be a bit more work but it will be well worth the effort in selecting quality students. It takes care of another situation where a good student suddenly scores less than 50 % in the final year while maintaining high marks in the first three years. This will give him a second class in his degree certificate, thus unnecessarily disadvantaging him in his degree certificate.

All GPA averages should be converted to equivalent percentages.

Introduction of Competitive Exams

If introducing tailor made competitive exam is too tedious to administer or implement then Australian Universities should take advantage of existing SAT scores in their selection process. It is said that every Indian student aspiring for North American Universities for foreign education sits for SAT exams. So a reasonable SAT score requirement in addition to IELTS requirement should be placed on candidates applying for a Bachelor's degree. Similarly, India runs an entrance test by the name of Graduate Admission Test (GAT). If administering our own postgraduate entrance exam is difficult then make a GAT score mandatory.

Refine marketing strategy and shift from focus on commercial gains to educational objectives

Australian universities should try to capture distinct and discrete markets based on strengths and capacity in providing quality innovation and world-class education in sought after areas, (Sharda, 1998).

Universities must focus on marketing courses by direct liaison with colleges and institutes in areas of high demand, which have good career prospects. The Indian market attracts a very large number of coursework students in postgraduate courses as short duration of these degree programs increases their career prospects substantially and in areas of demand a permanent residency is granted almost always on completion of the Master's degree. Therefore, universities who want to capture a greater share of the market must offer quality courses in PG areas especially in the sought after fields of engineering, IT and business. But all marketing should be based on selection of quality students based on merit.

Our marketing campaigns should not be seen as commercial but mainly driven by educational objectives. This can be demonstrated by direct liaison with colleges and by having twinning programs that feed into Australian programs. It is also important that marketing team is well prepared and understands the educational and cultural differences of the two countries. Without this agents would always dominate the selection process. Universities must set out stringent guidelines for education agents and see they are strictly followed.

Conclusion

We remain a second choice destination in India even after 10 years of marketing programs simply because we continue to accept second-class students into our programs. This is why only few thousand Indian students are coming to Australia for education, whereas, nearly 40,000 students seek education in North America. More than 50% of the students who come to Australia do so as their request for student visa to the USA have been unsuccessful. Australia still has an image problem and suffers from the lack of recognition and awareness of its education programs in India. In India, education that can be bought has far less value than the one, which is obtained by entering into universities with entrance level competitions and merit-based selections. Lack of sufficient scholarships to reward the meritorious students is also evident by a very limited number of scholarships offered in India. This further confirms the belief that Australian education is available to anyone who can pay.

Australian universities can immensely enhance their image by entering into mutually beneficial research and teaching links with Indian counterparts. Australian universities must undertake to introduce competitive exams and provide scholarships to meritorious students in

order to attract quality students. They should develop increased linkages with Universities/Institutes and Industry in India. This will increase awareness between Indian educationist, and industrialist about Australia's technical and educational capability. The marketing strategies should be modified and embedded with mutually beneficial collaborative programs.

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