The impact of Covid-19 on postgraduate-level student migration from India to Germany

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Covid-19 crisis is impacting Indians' plans to study for a postgraduate degree in Germany, and how Indians currently studying in Germany have been affected. It draws on interviews conducted with Indian Master's students in Germany and digital ethnographic research carried out within social media communities used by prospective students. The paper shows how, apart from concerns about a disrupted educational experience, prospective and current students were very concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on the German job market and the ability of an international student to secure a good job in their field of study upon graduation. The paper explains why, despite these concerns, most prospective students do not appear to be rethinking their plans to study in Germany. However, they are facing major hurdles in applying to universities, obtaining visas, and organising travel, as a result of lockdowns in India and international travel restrictions. These logistical problems might lead to a fall in postgraduate student flows from India to Germany this year.

Introduction

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on international student mobility has been estimated to be significant. Between March and July 2020, numerous surveys have been conducted by institutions ranging from the British Council to various education consultancies in an attempt to gauge the pulse and sentiment of prospective students from key source countries. A number of these surveys have included a focus on India, the second most important source of international students world-wide. These surveys suggest that the majority of Indians applying to universities abroad are unlikely to cancel or delay their plans (57% of Indians, according to a British Council estimate, compared to 38% of Chinese prospective students).[1] Indeed, an EY survey concludes that compared to prospective international students from other countries, Indians might be particularly "resilient", with most keen to proceed with their study abroad plans despite the pandemic.[2] While such surveys offer a useful gauge of the general trends, we lack more detailed insight into how exactly the pandemic and related disruptions might be impacting and reshaping Indians' decisions and journeys to study abroad, and how Indians currently studying abroad have been affected.

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[1] https://education-services.britishcouncil.org/node/40584?no_cache=1594843497

[2] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/pandemic-redistribute-international-student-flows-report

In this paper, I will attempt to illustrate some of the complexity of the situation on the ground, through focus on Indian student mobility to an increasingly popular study destination for Indian students: Germany. After briefly outlining the reasons behind Germany's popularity as a study destination and providing an overview of the research on which this paper is based, I will discuss how Indians at different stages of the student journey, from prospective students to recent graduates, are being impacted by the pandemic. I will argue that—despite significant concerns about the experience and outcomes of a degree in the current circumstances as well as serious administrative and logistical hurdles in the application process—most prospective students are not rethinking their plans to study in Germany.

Research methods

This paper is based on my ongoing research into the aspirations and infrastructures driving postgraduate-level student mobility from India to Germany. Between 2017 and 2018, I conducted interviews with 40 Indian Master's students studying at 18 German universities. I also conducted digital ethnographic fieldwork within mutual-help Facebook and WhatsApp groups, which are being used by Indians aspiring to study in Germany in order to connect with others—previously unknown to them—who are also working towards going to Germany for study. Finally, I analysed the content of a new genre of YouTube channels, run by Indians who are already studying in Germany, which are offering aspirant student migrants back home detailed information on the application process, universities, work prospects, and life abroad. These YouTubers can be viewed as important education influencers who play a crucial role in mediating student mobility from India. Reflecting the fact that the vast majority of Indians studying in Germany are enrolled on Information Technology (IT) and Engineering Master's courses,[3] almost all my interlocutors were engineers.

Between March and June 2020, in order to specifically examine the impact of the Covid-19 student flows from India to Germany, I conducted informal follow-up conversations with 15 of the Indians studying in Germany, whom I had interviewed during the previous phase of my project. Some were still studying for a Master's degree, while others had recently graduated. I also examined the conversations taking place in the mutual-help 'Study in Germany' Facebook and WhatsApp groups as well as on the most widely watched YouTube channel for Indians interested in study in Germany. Apart from fieldwork focused on Germany, I also conducted short periods of ethnographic research within a WhatsApp group for Indians interested in study in the UK and followed a YouTube channel for Indians interested in study in the US, in order to get a sense of the extent to which the impact of the pandemic on Indian student mobility to Germany bears similarities with or differs from other destination countries.

Reasons for studying in Germany

Between 2008/09 and 2018/19, there was close to a 500% increase in the number of Indian students at German universities.[4] The vast majority of Indians studying in Germany are enrolled on Information Technology (IT) and Engineering Master's courses. The popularity of Germany as a postgraduate study destination among Indians is closely related to the job market for engineers in both India and Germany. In India, a Bachelor's degree in Engineering has long been viewed as a prestigious education credential, which has led to an oversupply of graduates. Furthermore, the bulk of the available engineering jobs are now in the IT sector. This means that a large percentage of Engineering graduates—particularly those in specialisations other than Computer Science—find it difficult to get the kinds of jobs that they are trained and qualified to do.[5] This was a major topic that emerged in my interviews with Indian students in Germany, most of whom had been left feeling stuck, unhappy, and frustrated by the job market for engineers in India.

[3] https://www.daad.in/en/2019/11/30/germany-welcomes-record-number-of-indian-students-in-2018-19
[4] http://www.wissenschaftweltoffen.de/publikation/wiwe_2015_verlinkt.pdf.
https://www.daad.in/en/2019/11/30/germany-welcomes-record-number-of-indian-students-in-2018-19
[5] https://www.thenewsminute.com/lives/609

In this context, my interlocutors saw the possibility of study in Germany as an accessible opportunity to have a chance to do interesting work in their area of specialisation. Study in Germany was viewed as attractive and accessible for a number of reasons. First, in recent years, German universities have started offering a large number of Master's courses in English, making higher education in the country more accessible to non-German-speakers. Second, study in Germany was viewed as relatively affordable, given that German public universities—which constitute the majority of the education provision in the country—charge no or only very modest tuition fees, even for international students. Although most of my interlocutors had to take loans in order to able to support their living expenses in Germany, this was still viewed as a relatively manageable financial investment. Third, the job market for engineers in Germany is viewed as excellent, and the visa policies of the government made it possible to spend up to 18 months after graduation in Germany looking for a job.

Besides the chance to study at a German university and have an international educational experience, for the vast majority of my interlocutors, an important goal of getting a Master's degree in Germany was to get a job in Germany—in their area of specialisation within the field of Engineering—upon graduation, and to work in Germany for some years. Strikingly, many felt that were they to return to India or migrate to another country, it would be their work experience at a German company, more than a Master's degree from a German university, which would really boost their career prospects. Without this work experience, it was felt that they would be viewed as "freshers" and would struggle to get good jobs.

Impact of the Covid-19 crisis: Top concerns

Job market concerns

A major concern for my interlocutors—from prospective students to recent graduates—was the impact that the Covid-19 crisis would have on the German economy and job market. A few of my interlocutors who had recently graduated were faced with a predictably difficult job market. Some had applied for jobs and had received automated emails that the processing of applications was going to be significantly delayed. Others were dismayed to find that the companies to which they were planning to apply had implemented hiring freezes. From the experiences of their 'seniors'—those in the years ahead of them—they had anticipated that getting a job could take between a few months and a year. They now worried that this job search period might be significantly extended, which would have, among other things, serious financial implications for them.

Another group of my interlocutors were in the second and third years of their degrees, and due to be undertaking internships or Master's thesis placements at companies, which they viewed as a crucial step towards securing employment after graduation. They all knew of seniors who had been offered jobs at the companies at which they had had work placements, or who credited the social networks they had developed during such placements as helping them subsequently find employment elsewhere. However, for many in this group, hiring freezes had come in the way of securing such opportunities. In some cases, offers of internships and Master's thesis placements had been withdrawn.

Those of my interlocutors who had already begun work placements prior to the start of the Covid crisis in Germany, counted themselves as very lucky to be gaining work experience and receiving a stable income during what were very difficult times for many of their peers. Nevertheless, many expressed disappointment at the impact of the Covid-related disruptions on their work experience. For instance, one of my interlocutors, who was doing an internship, had been told by his boss to come into work just one day a week. On the day that he was at the office, he had barely any contact with his colleagues because of social distancing. He worried that with such a limited engagement with his workplace, he was losing the chance to fully experience working in a German company, to get to know his colleagues well, and to build social network crucial for improving his career prospects.

Even among the prospective students in the 'Study in Germany' Facebook and WhatsApp groups, there was significant anxiety that a recession might come in the way of finding placements at companies during their degree and suitable jobs in the longer run. Discussions about the job market and how it might be impacted in the years to come constituted a regular theme of discussion in these social media groups.

Sub-par educational experience
Some of my interlocutors had arrived in Germany to begin their Master's programmes in March, just weeks before universities were shut and the lockdown was imposed. In interviews with me, these students expressed regret at the loss of the 'university experience' they had been eagerly anticipating: the chance to engage with and learn from German professors, do internships at companies, meet people from different parts of the world, and enjoy the student life. Sitting in their rooms and learning online felt disappointing, and some expressed concern that their learning was being compromised or that they might be viewed by future employers as a 'Corona batch' whose training had been less rigorous.

The prospect of months of online classes also weighed heavily on prospective students. German universities have two intakes each year: a summer intake (April) and a winter intake (October). Particularly in March and April, there was a lot of discussion within the social media groups about whether the entire summer semester would be online and whether things would go back to 'normal' by the winter semester. Prospective students were eager to hear from those who had recently arrived in Germany about their experiences of online learning. In March, some students due to begin their Master's programmes in the summer semester were considering postponing their plans to come to Germany by a term in order to avoid losing out on face-to-face lectures and interactions. However, by June, people appeared to be getting more used to the idea of online classes, and the possibility of a winter semester that was largely or completely online did not appear to deter most people's plans to study in Germany, despite persisting concerns about what this educational experience would look like, and for how long they would need to study online and/or from India.

Health and safety concerns
Strikingly, despite the fact that Covid-19 is first and foremost a health crisis, health-related fears about studying in Germany during a pandemic were largely absent. There was a feeling that Germany was handling the pandemic well, and the spread of the virus was being contained. The students and recent graduates in Germany whom I interviewed stressed that they felt well supported; they expressed confidence about the German healthcare system, and some said their regional governments were making interest-free loans and hardship funds available to international students in need. No one felt nervous or anxious about remaining in Germany and continuing their studies or work. Those of the current students I interviewed who had gone back to India had gone back early in the year for a holiday and had not been able to return to Germany because of travel restrictions.

Prospective students heard about these largely positive experiences of those currently in Germany through the 'Study in Germany' Facebook and WhatsApp groups and YouTube channels, further reducing health-related concerns about moving to Germany. Indeed, people with admission letters from German universities were keen to go to Germany at the earliest and were mainly preoccupied with getting a visa or organising travel. This is in contrast to some surveys, which have suggested that Indian students have significant health and safety concerns with respect to going abroad for study (British Council, 2020), and this contrast is likely to be related to Germany's handling of the pandemic thus far.

Prospective students: to go or not to go

Despite significant concerns about whether their investment of time and money in a Master's degree in Germany would be something they could translate into a job in their field, and anxiety about the prospect of a Covid-disrupted university experience, most prospective students did not appear to be reconsidering their plans to go to Germany for study.

This was for a number of reasons. To begin with, for most prospective students the relatively affordable cost of study in Germany reduced the perceived risk of the decision to begin a postgraduate degree there. (In contrast, for many of those interested in study in the US or UK, the significantly greater financial investment this would involve was an important factor that made the decision to study abroad during a pandemic, and potentially graduate during an economic recession, feel much riskier). My interlocutors also felt that Germany was handling the pandemic well and was, by and large, a safe place in which to study and live, despite uncertainty regarding how the Covid-19 crisis would evolve. Moreover, despite the fact that there was a lot of concern about the impact of a recession on future job prospects, it was felt that the German economy was stronger than that of many other countries and would therefore be relatively better equipped to bounce back from a recession.

In addition, the fact that many felt that they did not have good alternative plans constituted an important 'push' factor. Some had already resigned from their jobs in anticipation of going to Germany for study. Some were unhappily working in jobs outside their field of specialisation, having not been able to find jobs that matched their qualifications. Still others were in the final year of their Bachelor's degree and aware that their chances of getting a good job in India upon graduating were even less promising than usual. All feared that were they not to pursue their plans to study in Germany, they would be faced with a long period of inactivity and stagnation in India. Furthermore, putting their plans to study in Germany on hold was perceived as being risky for several reasons. To begin with, prospective students were afraid that, in the coming years, competition for a place at a German university would skyrocket. Even before Covid-19, it was felt that the admission criteria of German universities had been getting more and more selective each year. Given the pandemic, prospective students now worried that many other applicants might be postponing their plans for a Master's in Germany, which would make the competition for places at German universities fiercer than ever in 2021. There was also anxiety that a recession might lead universities in Germany to place restrictions on international student numbers, and perhaps even re-introduce tuition fees for international students. Similarly, aspirants worried that in the event of a prolonged recession, more restrictive visa policies might be introduced.

Immediate logistical problems
As a result, in the Facebook and WhatsApp groups I studied, the exchanges centred on the very significant bureaucratic and logistical problems and hurdles—caused by the Covid-crisis—with which applicants were faced in the process of organising to go to Germany for study. Since 25 March, India has spent significant time under strict lockdown, with different parts of the country moving in and out of lockdown as the Covid-19 situation evolves. This has created severe problems for people at all stages of the application process.

The exact nature of these problems has been changing as a result of changes in the Covid-related restrictions and disruptions in the country. At the time of my fieldwork, some of my interlocutors had missed the application deadlines of German universities because they had been unable to get copies of their degree certificate from their university in India, had been unable to sit required language tests, or had been unable to courier their applications to their target universities (some universities require hard copies of documents). Those prospective students who had already received admission at a German university faced a whole range of problems applying for a visa, given that the German consulates/embassies in India and the offices of the private company to which visa processing has been outsourced have been shut for long periods of time due to the pandemic. For instance, many applicants who had received an admission letter from a German university had no way to make a visa appointment. Some of my interlocutors had submitted their visa applications prior to the lockdown, but these had been returned to them, unprocessed, when the consulates and visa offices closed. Others already had their visa applications approved but were unable to submit their passports to be stamped with their visa. While some German universities permitted those with an admission letter for the summer semester to enrol for and begin their course online, even if they did not have a visa, others restricted online enrolment to visa

holders. This meant that a number of applicants had simply lost the chance to enrol at their target universities because of logistical and administrative issues.

There were also people who had received their visas—initially issued with a validity of just a few months, to be extended upon arrival in Germany—prior to lockdown, but because of various travel restrictions enforced by both the Indian and German governments, were unable to leave for Germany. Many of these people were unlikely to be able to leave India before their visas expired and now needed to apply for them to be extended, but the available appointments for visa extensions were very limited. These high levels of uncertainty left my interlocutors feeling stuck in a stressful limbo.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that the Covid-19 crisis does not appear to be having a significantly adverse impact on Indian prospective students' decisions to study in Germany. From my short periods of examination of a WhatsApp group of Indians interested in study in the UK and a YouTube channel for Indians interested in study in the US, it appears that Indians considering study in these countries were much more likely to be uncertain about proceeding with their plans, and to be considering deferring. Germany's unique position appears to relate to the relatively affordable cost of study, the efficient handling of the Covid-19 situation (including the humane and generous treatment of Indians currently studying in Germany), the relatively stable and non-hostile visa policies, and perceptions of a strong job market (at least for those in the field of STEM).

However, as described above, the pandemic has severely disrupted the process of applying to study in Germany and of moving there. If there is a fall in the number of Indians going to Germany for postgraduate degrees this year, it is likely to be because of difficulties applicants are facing in submitting university applications, obtaining visas, and beginning courses remotely, rather than a result of them rethinking their plans to study abroad. Given that, in India, the virus has not been contained, and different parts of the country are moving in and out of lockdown on a regular basis, Indians interested in studying in Germany—and other study destinations abroad—are likely to continue facing significant hurdles at all steps of the application process. In order to support continued student flows from India, it is important that adjustments are made to address and accommodate the disruptions caused by these exceptional circumstances. This could be in the form of more relaxed application deadlines and a removal of the requirement to submit hard copies of application documents; increased capacity for visa processing; and permitting students in India unable to travel abroad to begin their study programmes online without visas.

While concerns about online modes of teaching and learning do not appear to be significantly deterring Indians from going forward with their plans to study in Germany, it is important for universities to help prospective students better grasp and imagine what such online learning could look like, through, for instance, providing concrete 'tasters' of the experience. Furthermore, for Indians interested in study in Germany—and other international study destinations—study abroad is valued beyond the content of a study programme. The chance to interact with classmates from around the world, participate in extra-curricular activities, and do internships and placements at companies are all seen as key elements of the study abroad experience, and also important for increasing employability in the study destination after graduation. Just as universities are putting substantial efforts into translating face-to-face modes of delivery into online and blended learning formats, examining how other valued dimensions of the student experience can be similarly translated would go a long way in allaying prospective students' concerns of a sub-par student experience.

Related research from this project was presented in a CGHE Global Webinar 138 – 'Engineering Mobility: An ethnographic study of how social media platforms are mediating transnational student mobility from India' on Thursday 11 June 2020