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Policy Brief | March 2020

# IS INDIA STILL THE NEIGHBOURHOOD'S EDUCATION HUB?

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Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Recommended citation:

Xavier, Constantino; Chaba, Aakshi & Dang, Geetika. “Is India Still the Neighbourhood’s Education Hub?”  
Brookings India Policy Brief 032020-02, March 2020. Brookings Institution India Center.

ISBN 978-81-946480-1-7

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Edited by Sunaina Dalaya for Brookings India

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Constantino Xavier, Aakshi Chaba and Geetika Dang<sup>1</sup>

## Key Takeaways



Students from South Asia constitute approximately half of the total foreign student population in India (49% in 2018-2019)



The year-on-year growth of students in India from the neighbourhood has decreased from 30% in 2011-2012 to just 9% in 2018-2019



China now receives approximately the same number of students from South Asia compared to India.

<sup>1</sup> We thank the following for reviewing earlier drafts of this brief and sharing their valuable feedback: Dr Indra Nath Mukherji, Former Professor, South Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Meeta Sengupta, Founder, Centre for Education Strategy, Dr Urvashi Sahni, Non-resident Fellow, Brookings Institution, and Neelanjana Gupta, Research Analyst, Brookings India.



## Introduction

India has long been an education hub for students from its neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> Besides economic benefits, India's capacity to attract students from neighbouring countries has helped it to form closer political ties and spread its cultural influence and values to the surrounding region. India's ability to provide quality higher education is a form of soft power that, subtly but surely, enhances India's connectivity with its neighbours. Some of the South Asian leaders who have benefited from an education in India include Nepal's former Prime

Minister B.P. Koirala, Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi and Afghanistan's former President Hamid Karzai. In 2018, however, only three serving world leaders had studied in India, compared to 58 in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

This policy brief maps the current status of India as a higher-education hub for students from South Asia. For a comparative analysis, mapping of outgoing students from the region to China has also been included.

## Methodology

The data on student inflows to India is from the annual All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports published by India's Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India, between 2010-11 and 2018-19.<sup>4</sup> The reports are based on data that has been uploaded voluntarily to the AISHE portal by all institutions of higher education, namely universities, colleges and stand-alone institutions. Therefore, the data reflects only the reported estimates. For the 2018-19 report, the survey reported a 94% rate of participation.<sup>5</sup>

The equivalent data for China is from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) ChinaPower Project, derived from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China.<sup>6</sup> However, this data set

does not have any data for Bhutan. Therefore, for consistency, the India-China comparison (Figure 4) does not include students from Bhutan. Further to maintain comparability, in this inter-country analysis, totals do not include students from either India or China. The same figure also does not include students from Pakistan because of China's preferential education policies towards the beneficiaries of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), resulting in a much higher number of Pakistani students studying in China.<sup>7</sup>

This policy brief covers student data for eight of India's neighbouring countries viz. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, collectively referred to as 'South Asia' or N8.

2 Yeravdekar, Vidya Rajiv & Tiwari, Gauri (2014). Internationalization of higher education in India: Contribution to regional capacity building in neighbouring countries. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 157, 373-80.

3 Only three serving world leaders studied in India, compared to 58 in US (2018, August 16). *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/only-three-serving-world-leaders-studied-in-india-compared-to-58-in-us/story-W8yCiW8Z0tZVtQbv77Q9zH.html>

4 Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) (2010-2018). All India Survey on Higher Education reports. Retrieved from <http://aishe.nic.in/aishe/reports>

5 Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) (2019). All India Survey on Higher Education Report, 2018-19. New Delhi: Department of Higher Education, MHRD, Government of India. Retrieved from <http://aishe.nic.in/aishe/viewDocument.action?documentId=262>

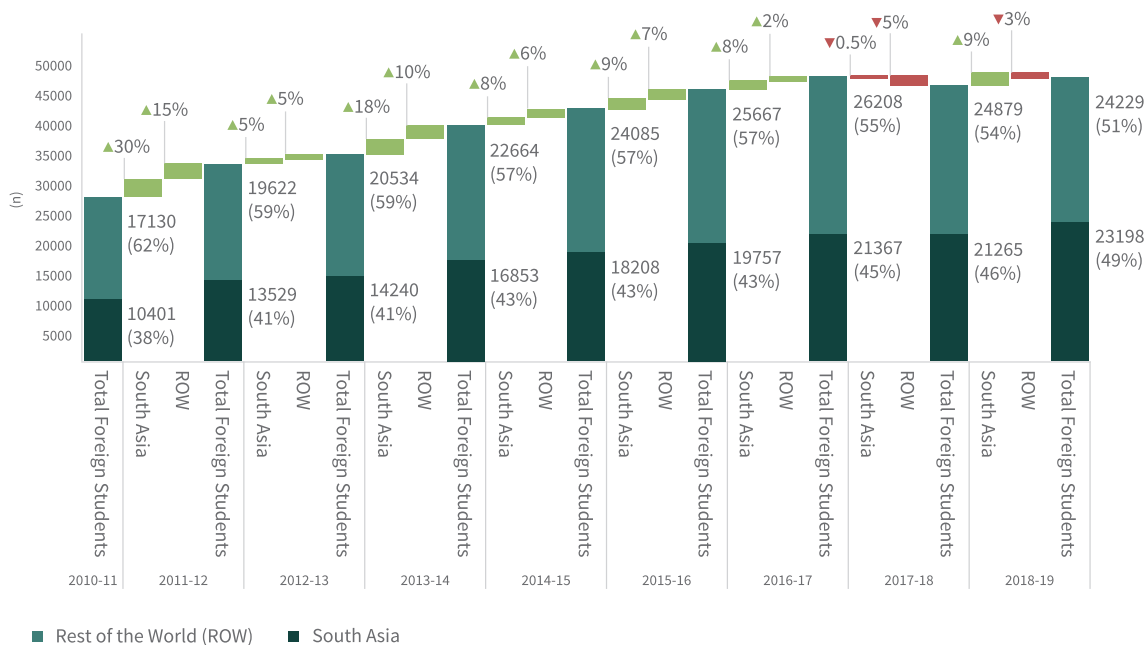
6 Inbound international students in China, 2005-2016. (2019, May 1). *ChinaPower*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from <https://chinapower.csis.org/data/inbound-international-students-china-2005-2016/>

7 Over 28,000 Pakistanis studying in China. (2019, April 15). *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2Vq0y6E>

## Inbound Foreign Student Population in India

**Figure 1: Total Students from South Asia (N8) vis-à-vis Total Foreign Students in India**

After a decline in 2017-18, the share of students from South Asia (N8) to India has increased



N8: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka  
 Source: MHRD's AISHE reports, 2010-2018. Growth calculated by the authors.

Historically, India has been the destination of choice for students from the South Asian region. In the 1950s, as India focused on establishing premier institutions of higher education, students from neighbouring countries such as Nepal were predominantly choosing India for higher education. This trend was encouraged by factors such as, cultural similarities, reduced travel time and lower costs.<sup>8</sup> However, in the last five years (2014-2019), the growth in the South Asian student population has plateaued.

**Students from South Asia constitute nearly half of the total foreign student population in India.**

Figure 1 shows that in 2018-19, of the total 47,427 foreign students in India, South Asians constituted nearly half of the share (49%). This has been increasing since 2010, when students from the neighbourhood formed 38% of the total foreign student population. During this decade, the total number of students from both South Asia and rest of the world has been increasing. However, as seen in Figure 1, between 2016 and 2019, the increase in the share of South Asian students from the total foreign students is attributed to the relative decrease in the number of students from rest of the world. Furthermore, it is reported that the total foreign students in India (including South Asians) decreased in 2017-18. It should be noted that this anomaly is a result of a possible error in the AISHE methodology for 2017-18, as shared by a former MHRD official, and

8 Yervadekar & Tiwari, op-cit.

cannot be interpreted as a decline in the number of students. In the succeeding year, the growth rate of students from both South Asia and rest of the world is maintained.

The share of incoming students from India's neighbourhood provides a more positive outlook of South Asian students in India. However, this figure is largely dependent on the number of total foreign students. To demonstrate growth in the numbers, Figure 1 also tracks the year-on-year percentage change in the number of incoming foreign students. It is seen that the growth was highest in 2011–12 and 2013–14, at 30% and 18%, respectively. Between 2014 and 2017, the percentage change stagnated at approximately 8%, and barring the anomaly in 2017-18 (as mentioned above), the figure maintained a growth of 9% in 2018-19. However, this figure recovered in 2018–19 with a growth of 9%.

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**The year-on-year growth of the number of students from India's neighbourhood—30% at its peak in 2011-12—has been mostly stagnant or decreasing since 2013**

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The slow growth in the number of students from South Asia and rest of the world can be attributed to a variety of reasons ranging from a lack of institutional quality in India to logistical concerns with regard to a dearth of facilities for foreign students.<sup>9</sup> Many students have to seek external housing with options often not providing basic facilities like WiFi.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the quality of life in Indian cities is particularly low. The highest-ranking Indian city in the 2018 Quality of Life rankings was Hyderabad at 143.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the highest-ranking Indian university in the QS World University Rankings is the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, placed at 162. In contrast, four universities of China (mainland) feature in the top 100.<sup>12</sup>

University life is a holistic experience, and one which is affected by many factors such as quality of education, housing, personal safety, security, and city life, all of which play important roles in a student's choice. If India wants more students from the region attending its educational institutions, it must undertake wide-ranging reforms to address the issues undermining its higher education systems and universities.

9 Skinner, Makala (2018, September 13). India as a destination: Ambitions and challenges. World Education News. Retrieved from <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/09/india-as-a-destination-ambitions-and-challenges>

10 Sharma, Ashwini (2019, June 10). Why student housing is gaining ground in India. Mint. Retrieved from <https://www.livemint.com/money/personal-finance/why-student-housing-is-gaining-ground-in-india-1560183549409.html>

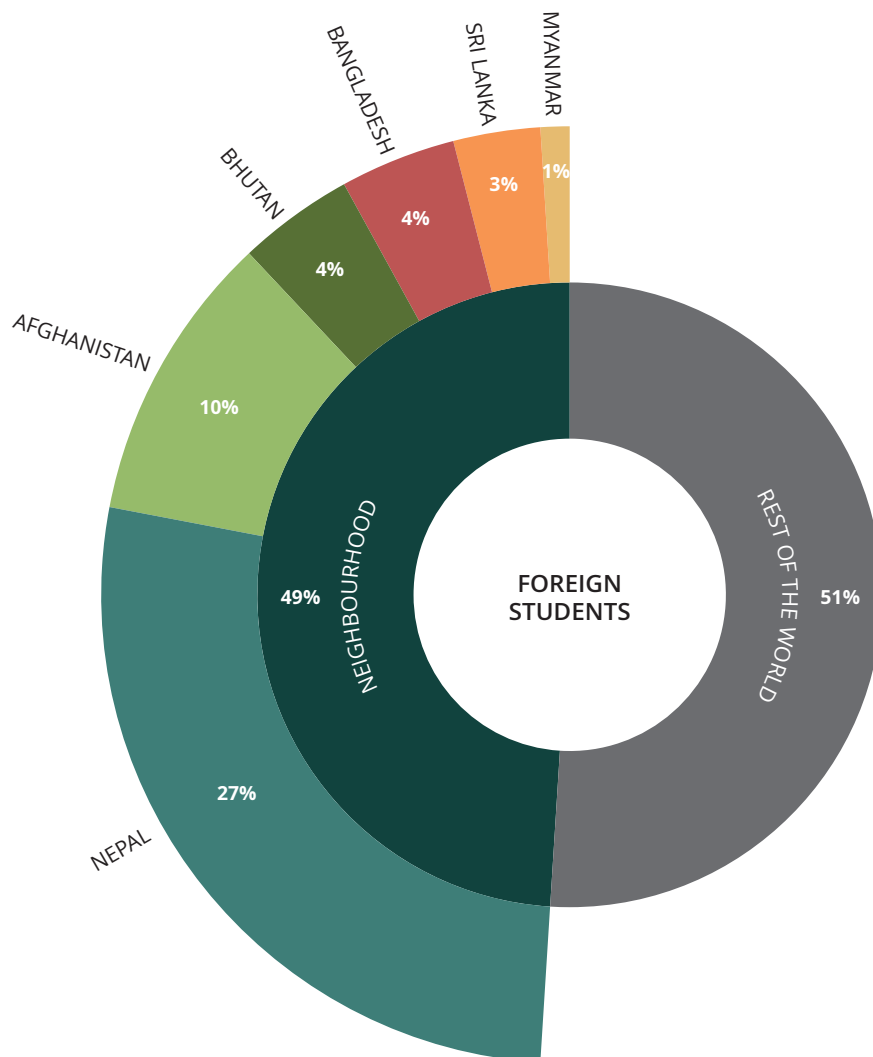
11 Quality of Living City Ranking (2018). Mercer. Retrieved from <https://mobilityexchange.mercer.com/Insights/quality-of-living-rankings>

12 QS World University Rankings 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2020>

## Nepal and Eight Others: Composition of South Asian Students

**Figure 2: Number of Students in India from the South Asian Region or N8 (2018-19)**

27% of the total foreign students in India are from Nepal



Note: The share of Maldives is less than 1%, hence not reflected in the figure.  
 N8: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka  
 Source: MHRD's AISHE report 2018-19

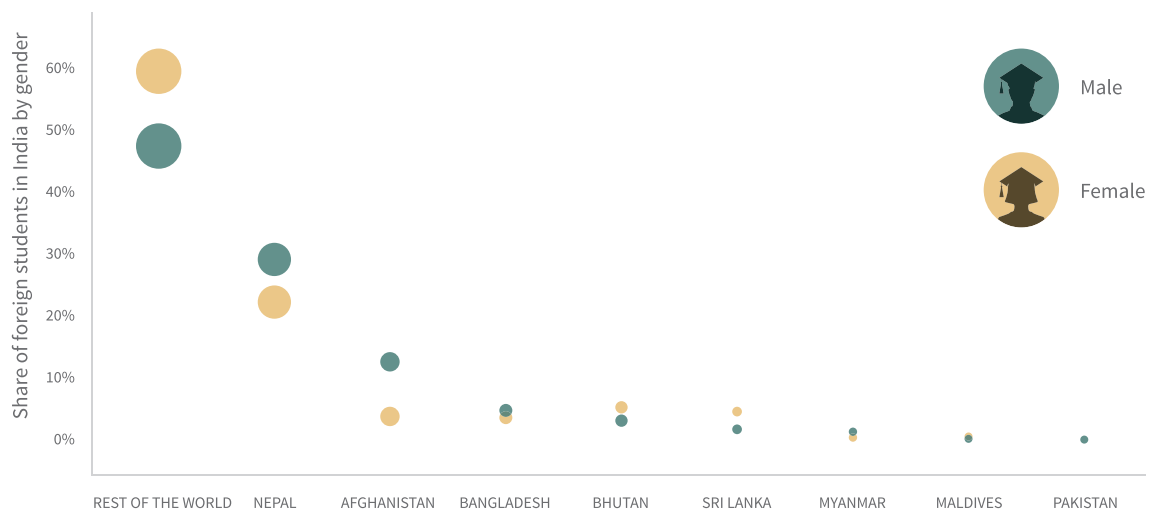
Figure 2 highlights that in 2018-19, Nepal was home to 27% of the total foreign students - a strong sign of connectivity between India and its northern neighbour. Students from the seven other South Asian nations and China combined

comprised just 10,557 students, or 22% of the total foreign student population in India in 2018-19. Thus, barring Nepal, only slightly more than one-fifth of international students in India come from the region.



**Figure 3: Proportion of Male and Female Foreign Students in India (2018-19)**

Globally, more female students study in India, whereas more male students from South Asia (N8) come to India



COUNTRIES	REST OF THE WORLD	NEPAL	AFGHANISTAN	BANGLADESH	BHUTAN	SRI LANKA	MYANMAR	MALDIVES	PAKISTAN
Share of Female Students	59%	22%	4%	4%	5%	5%	0%	1%	0%
Share of Male Students	47%	29%	13%	5%	3%	2%	1%	0%	0%

N8: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka  
 Source: MHRD's AISHE report 2018-19

Between 2011-12 and 2018-19, Nepal has retained its position as the top nation sending students to India (up to 27% from 19%)—Afghanistan has climbed up to the second position (10% from 8%) while Bhutan’s share has substantially decreased (from 8% to 4%). On further analysis, it becomes clear that the significant growth in Nepal’s share can be attributed to male students who come to India to pursue under-graduate courses.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has already undertaken efforts to promote cohesive regional educational centres via the creation of the South Asian University in Delhi, with part of its vision being

to “strengthen regional consciousness.”<sup>13</sup> The decision to place a UNESCO office in New Delhi, which covers a cluster of South Asian countries, also speaks to regional connectivity.

**Apart from Nepal, only slightly more than one-fifth of the total foreign student population in India come from the neighbourhood.**

In addition, the South Asia Foundation (SAF) in collaboration with several UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institutions of Excellence in the eight SAARC countries provide scholarships to students to study at various centres.<sup>14</sup> For

13 See South Asian University “vision” section at <http://www.sau.int/tenders-listing/8-sau.html>.

14 MoU between SAF and the National College, Kathmandu University to Establish UMCDSRC. (2012, May 12). South Asia Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.southasiafoundation.org/umcdsrc-article-52311.html>.

instance, the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institute of South Asia Regional Cooperation (UMISARC) in Puducherry, India, attracts 16 students from the neighbourhood on scholarship annually.

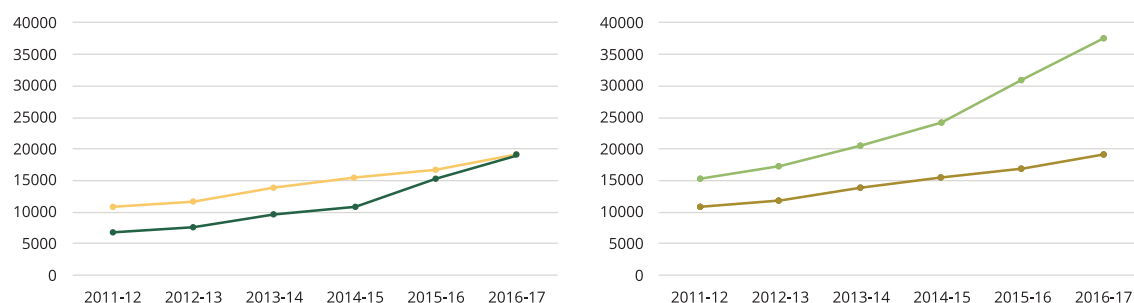
Other efforts have also been made. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) offers 23 types of scholarships to foreign students to study in India, at least 15 of which specifically target students from one or more of the South Asian countries.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 3,000 students from Nepal receive Indian scholarships to study in the country annually, and the ICCR and Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) alone offer a

total of 1,000 scholarships to Afghan students in India, as well as a total of 887 scholarships to Bhutanese students in 2016.<sup>16</sup> Despite this, other countries which also receive a high number of scholarships—e.g. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives—do not send as many students to India. Perhaps this suggests that the Indian government, like China, should adopt a more comprehensive approach to higher education, focusing more on the quality of its educational institutions and research instead of solely providing funding to attract foreign students.<sup>17</sup>

## China’s Rise as an Education Hub: Students from the Neighbourhood Going to India and China

**Figure 4: Total Students from the Neighbourhood going to India and China**

*Pakistan accounts for approximately 50% of all South Asian students in China*



Countries	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
<b>South Asian students in China (N6)</b>	6879	7694	9644	10820	15344	18966
<b>South Asian students in India (N6)</b>	10852	11751	13928	15476	16793	19053
<b>South Asian students in China (N7)</b>	15395	17324	20585	24180	30998	37592
<b>South Asian students in India (N7)</b>	10869	11772	13962	15511	16832	19083

Note: The year represents academic year

N6: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka

N7: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

Source: MHRD’s AISHE reports, CSIS’ China Power (China’s Foreign Affairs (2012-2017), Department of Policy Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P.R.C)

15 Admission to Alumni (A2A), ICCR Sponsorship Schemes (2019, October 9). Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Retrieved from <http://a2ascholarships.iccr.gov.in/home/getAllSchemeList>

16 Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) (2017). Annual Report, 2016–17, p. vii. New Delhi: Policy Planning and Research Division, MEA. Retrieved from [http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/29521\\_MEA\\_ANNUAL\\_REPORT\\_2016\\_17\\_new.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/29521_MEA_ANNUAL_REPORT_2016_17_new.pdf)  
Admission to Alumni (A2A).  
MEA, Annual Report, 2016–17, p. 8.

17 Dmitriy Frolovskiy (2017, December 29). China’s education boom. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/chinas-education-boom/>

Pakistan accounts for 50% of all South Asian students in China. Figure 4 demonstrates that Pakistan accounted for 18,626 students in 2016 out of the total 37,592 students from the South Asian region in China. This can be explained by the preferential education policies of China towards Pakistan, a beneficiary of its Belt and Road Initiative through the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). To understand China's ability to attract India's smaller neighbours in the region, the figure also removes outbound students from Pakistan.

As seen in Figure 5, the number of South Asian students has been increasing rapidly in China. In the last six years, the number of inbound students from India's neighbourhood to China has increased from 6,879 in 2011 to 18,966 in 2016—a growth of 176%. During the same period, the number of students from the region in India increased from 10,852 to 19,053, a 76% increase. The fact that these numbers exclude Pakistan—the largest source of South Asian students in China, and a key strategic partner—and yet still exhibit an alarming trend speaks volumes about China's new connectivity with India's neighbourhood.

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**Barring Pakistan, almost every country in the South Asian region now sends approximately the same number of students to China and India.**

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Almost every country in the South Asian region sends the same number, or more, of students to China than India. Bangladesh and Myanmar send a significantly higher number of students to

China. In 2016, Bangladesh sent 1,531 students to India and 4,905 to China, whereas Myanmar sent 17 times more students to China than to India.

Why would these students ignore geographic proximity and cultural ties with next-door India and instead travel farther to China? The answer lies in China's rise as an education hub as a result of a significant percentage of its GDP being channelled towards higher education, coupled with the role of private institutions and philanthropy in supporting higher educational institutions. In particular, China's "Double First-Class University" plan has been instrumental in establishing world-class institutions.<sup>18</sup>

In the QS World University Rankings, 22 Chinese institutions are in the global top 500, the best of which ranks 17. Only nine Indian universities are in the top 500, and the best ranks 162, demonstrating the gap in quality between Indian institutions and their Chinese counterparts. Another important factor that attracts both students and faculty alike is a university's research capability. As of 2015, India spent 0.6% of its GDP on research and development, while China spent 2% for the same year.<sup>19</sup> In terms of research output, China is second only to the United States, with contributions to 15,189 research articles in 2018.<sup>20</sup> In the total number of science publications, China has recently overtaken the United States.<sup>21</sup> In the same year and index, India ranked 15, having contributed to only 1,398 articles, 11 times less than the Chinese output.<sup>22</sup>

- 18 Notice of the State Council on Printing and Distributing the Overall Plan for Promoting the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines. (2015, November 5). State Council of China. Retrieved from [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-01/27/content\\_5163903.htm#1](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-01/27/content_5163903.htm#1)
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- 21 China declared world's largest producer of scientific articles (2018, January 18). Nature. Retrieved from <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-00927-4>
- 22 Raman, op-cit.

## Conclusion

Education connectivity can significantly influence diplomatic relations between nations. India has used this soft power technique strategically in the past, cementing itself both as an education hub and a regional leader—positions which go hand in hand. Yet, the facts and figures presented in this brief show how drastically regional educational flows have changed each year. An increasing number of N8 students are heading to China, while the year-on-year growth of students from the region in India dipped below zero in 2017–18. These patterns—and cultural indicators—speak volumes about the subtle power shift currently underway in the South Asian region. Against this changing regional context, India must attract more South Asian students to maintain its status as the home of high-quality higher education

institutions, and also to preserve its long-term influence in the region.

Most policy recommendations to address the issue of decreasing student inflow entail improving institutional quality, attracting qualified faculty, encouraging research, and increasing budgetary allocations all of which will positively impact India's higher education systems.<sup>23</sup> A close examination of China's higher education fee structures could also prove to be a useful model for India. After all, attracting more South Asian students to India is beneficial not only as a method of advancing India's foreign policy agenda but also as a domestic policy priority.

23 Budget 2019: Education sector gets ₹94,854 crore, research gets leg up (2019, July 2019). The Livemint. Retrieved from <https://www.livemint.com/budget/news/budget-2019-education-sector-gets-94-854-crore-research-gets-leg-up-1562338619002.html>



## Policy Recommendations

### **Subsidise Fees for Neighbourhood PhD**

**Students:** In 2017-18, PhD students constituted less than 0.1% of total student enrolment in Indian institutes of higher education.<sup>24</sup> The University Grants Commission (UGC) should subsidise the cost of PhD programmes for South Asian students in order to improve India's research ability and attract PhD students from neighbouring countries. Further, students from neighbouring less developed countries (LDCs) may be offered preferential rates over other non-LDCs or highly developed countries (HDCs).

### **Preferential Treatment to South Asian Students Who Have Studied in India in the**

**Employment Visa Application Process:** South Asian students educated in India should be given preferential treatment compared to students from other regions in the employment visa application process, for example, through a reduction of the requisite minimum annual salary of INR 16.25 lakh, or by allowing employment at a position lower than a "senior" position.<sup>25</sup>

**Trilateral Collaboration:** The ICCR can collaborate with its international counterparts to offer trilateral scholarships to students from the neighbourhood, with exchange components at foreign universities in Southeast Asia, Europe or North America. At the advanced doctoral level, in particular, this would allow a student from Nepal or Sri Lanka, for example, to be sponsored to study in India and then proceed to a third country, thus increasing collaborative ties.

**Collaborative Research Projects:** The UGC should support collaborative research projects in medicine, information technology, space, and the arts, between Indian and neighbouring country universities, which would include the exchange of faculty and students.

### **Expand National Knowledge Network**

**Partnerships:** During Prime Minister Modi's speech at the 2014 SAARC Summit in Nepal, he made a commitment to remove all barriers to quality education through the use of information technology: "India is prepared to connect our South Asian students through online courses and E-libraries. When we set up India's National Knowledge Network, we will be happy to extend it to the SAARC region."<sup>26</sup> As of 2019, partnerships have been extended to Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. The network should also be extended to neighbouring Afghanistan, Nepal and Myanmar.

### **Promote Campaigns in the Neighbourhood:**

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), with support from the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), should invest in a campaign to promote India as a higher education destination across neighbouring countries. This should include annual education fairs in neighbouring capitals.

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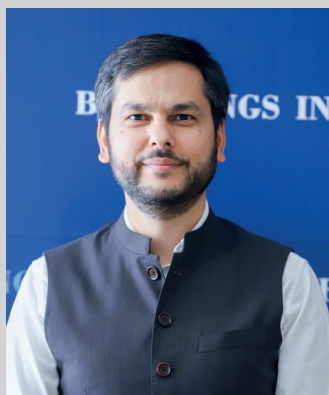
25 Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) (2018). Details of Visas Granted by India, Employment Visa. Retrieved from [https://mha.gov.in/PDF\\_Other/AnnexIII\\_01022018.pdf](https://mha.gov.in/PDF_Other/AnnexIII_01022018.pdf)

26 Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) (2014, November 26). Prime Minister's speech at the 18th SAARC summit. Retrieved from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24321/Prime+Ministers+speech+at+the+18th+SAARC+Summit>

## Further Readings

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## SAMBANDH

Regional Connectivity Initiative

Sambandh: Regional Connectivity Initiative conducts data-driven research to map India's links with neighbouring countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Driven by a holistic understanding of connectivity, Sambandh surveys India's regional integration across socio-cultural, economic, environmental, political and security indicators. Based on collaborative inputs from scholars and practitioners, this series of policy briefs offers empirical insights and recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders invested in reconnecting India with South Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

For an introduction to the research initiative, see policy brief, *Sambandh as Strategy: India's New Approach to Regional Connectivity*, by Dr. Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Brookings India

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ISBN 978-81-946480-1-7



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