

Promise or pitfall?

While the idea of foreign universities setting up campuses in India may sound progressive, it comes with serious concerns.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

India's higher education sector has grown remarkably, boasting 1,168 registered universities and 45,473 colleges serving millions of students. Despite this expansive network, the government's move to allow foreign universities to establish campuses in India raises some concerns.

Studying abroad

Each year, eight to 10 lakh Indian students choose to pursue higher education abroad, even as over 4.33 crore students enroll in institutions within India. However, the decision to study overseas isn't driven by academic quality alone. Many of those who can afford the high costs often see international education as a worthwhile investment. What they're really seeking is not just a degree but the experience of living in a new culture, building global networks, and gaining professional exposure, which cannot be replicated by foreign campuses located within India.

Career prospects also play a significant role. Many students believe they stand a better chance of securing high-paying jobs in developed economies after graduation. In fact, education often becomes a stepping stone toward long-term goals like permanent residency in or citizenship of countries such as the U.S., U.K., Canada, or Australia, which attract stu-

dents with their stronger economies, higher salaries, and robust career opportunities. While foreign universities operating in India may offer excellent academic programmes, they could fall short of delivering these broader, more aspirational benefits.

Challenges

The idea of global institutions setting up campuses in India may sound progressive or even visionary, but it comes with several serious concerns that deserve closer examination.

A pressing issue is the

potential financial drain without corresponding benefits to the local education ecosystem. Foreign universities will likely repatriate profits to their home countries instead of reinvesting in India. In contrast, domestic institutions typically use their earnings for faculty development, fund research, and upgrade infrastructure. This means foreign campuses could create a steady outflow of resources that benefits their countries of origin more than India's education sector.

Another major concern

is the limited alignment of these campuses with the real aspirations of Indian students. Indian students seek overseas education for immigration benefits, international job markets, and cultural exposure. Without these incentives, their appeal remains limited.

There's also the risk of competitive displacement. India already boasts an extensive higher education network. Bringing in established global institutions could marginalise smaller or less-known Indian universities. The brand pow-

er of foreign universities might attract the best students and faculty, leaving local institutions to struggle for relevance and resources.

Cost is another major factor. Global universities tend to operate on a high-cost model, charging tuition fees far above what most Indian institutions ask for. If they follow a similar pricing strategy here, access will likely be limited to affluent students, creating an elitist and exclusionary education system. Such a model goes against the broader national goal of inclusive and equitable education for all.

Further, the long-term benefits of foreign campuses remain unproven. India already enables international education collaborations through IITs, IIMs, and other premier institutions. The effectiveness of standalone foreign campuses in significantly improving education standards remains uncertain, making the policy a risky experiment.

Alternatives

Given these concerns, India would do well to consider alternative strategies that enhance its higher education sector while maintaining economic and academic autonomy.

A more sustainable approach would begin with strengthening Indian universities themselves. This means increasing funding, expanding research opportunities, and investing in faculty development so that domestic institutions

can offer globally competitive education without depending on foreign players.

Another promising strategy involves encouraging global collaborations within Indian campuses. Joint research projects, faculty exchange programmes, and integrated curricula can bring international standards and perspectives into Indian classrooms without leading to large-scale financial outflows. Technology also offers an effective and affordable pathway to global exposure. Virtual exchange programmes, international webinars, and global faculty lectures could offer students exposure to world-class education at lower costs, making international learning more accessible.

Finally, if the objective is to facilitate global education, increasing scholarships for Indian students seeking international opportunities would be a more effective and targeted approach.

The focus should be on strengthening Indian institutions, fostering international collaborations, and expanding global exposure more effectively. For now, this policy seems like a miscalculated opportunity rather than a strategic advancement for India's higher education ecosystem.

(Views expressed are personal)