



# Attracting international students to Indian campuses: sequential mixed-method research on student perceptions and pull factors

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## ABSTRACT

Several non-traditional higher education destination countries have increased their efforts to attract international students. In this research, we examine the perceptions of international students enrolled in Indian universities and explore the aspects to observe for India to become a favoured study-abroad destination. Adopting a sequential mixed-method approach, this research proposes a conceptual model developed using an initial interview-based qualitative study. Subsequently, it tests the model via a quantitative questionnaire-based survey. The rating responses were analysed using SPSS and SmartPLS. Four distinct factors emerged: internationally recognised education at an affordable cost, campus readiness, employment opportunities in India, and the experience of Indian culture. Findings signal the prospect of competing on differentiation to attract international students. This study is a marketing intelligence input for the inbound international student mobility ambitions of the Indian government and other aspiring Asian higher education destinations.

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## 1. Introduction

Increasing the number of international students is a vital element of the internationalisation dialogue in Indian higher education (HE). The recent National Education Policy of the Indian government (NEP 2020) envisions Indian HE as a more prevalent international student destination (Ministry of Human Resource Development Government of India [MHRD-GOI], 2022). In particular, India aims to recruit 0.2 million international students in the coming years, an aspirational four-fold increase over the present enrollment numbers (Gunjan, 2023; Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020). Earlier, plans were developed by the Association of Indian Universities and the University Grants Commission (UGC), specifying particular actions by the UGC and other statutory bodies and universities to market Indian HE to international students (Pawar, 2013). Announced first in 2016 by the Finance Minister in the Budget speech, UGCs' 'institutions of eminence' scheme aims to create 20 first-rate education establishments that are envisioned to rank among the world's upper 100 and have a more significant presence of international students. India has looked to actively promote the 'Study in India' program, a 2018 government initiative to market India with the image of 'quality education at affordable cost'. The Indian rationales to promote inbound international student mobility (ISM) include global prominence, soft power, status (as a global education hub), and

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the benefits of internationalisation at home for Indian students to improve global competencies (Khare, 2021). These Indian ISM rationales are similar to China's, where the desired outcomes are the political agenda, the country's reputation, and status (Yang, 2022). Government policymakers recommend the provision of scholarships, an Alumni connection, brand building, and academic market research on prospective student sets as approaches to engage overseas students (University Grants Commission Ministry of Education Government of India [UGC], 2021). Inbound ISM trends indicate that, thus far, India's progress in enrolling overseas students has been rather unimpressive.

Some traditional international student sending countries are becoming more significant receivers, with others, like India, following in their footsteps (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Given the maturing horizontal (south-south) or Asian ISM flows and the changing character of traditional student choice factors, a greater need exists to focus on the 'pulls' of emerging Asian HE destinations (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Phan & Fry, 2021). For example, the choice factors now include novelty and challenge seeking, an outlook on the developing Asian country's prosperous future, and the social and cultural factors of the Asian host country (Singh et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2021). Strategies of higher education institutions (HEIs) and governments to attract international students are yet under-researched in the Asian emerging HE destination context (Khanh & Ngoc, 2022). In particular, countries in the South-Asian sub-continent, such as India, have been overlooked (Phan & Fry, 2021). We argue that there lies a significant blind spot in examining international students' post-enrollment perceptions and decision-making. Accordingly, this research contributes to the international marketing of higher education (IMHE) and international student mobility (ISM) literature by examining factors that attract international students to Indian HE. Employing a sequential mixed method design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to understand international student perceptions of Indian HE as a receiving country, this study seeks to answer the following research question.

*RQ. According to international students enrolled in Indian higher education, what are the aspects to observe for India to attract more international students?*

Examining the perceptions of enrolled international students on the best ways to attract more international students is a suitable way to formulate host government policies (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). This study first examined international students' perceptions of Indian HE services provision and their thoughts on how India could become a favoured HE destination. Specifically, based on the initial qualitative results, we propose a conceptual model geared to a more holistic understanding of the factors that would draw international students to Indian campuses. We developed a scale to measure the critical factors for Indian HE to become an attractive destination.

This research is among the initial attempts to identify attractive elements for an emerging Asian HE destination by analysing post-purchase perceptions of international HE consumers with a sequential mixed-method approach. Given the evidence of convergent and discriminant validities of the identified factors, we reason future researchers should refer to this scale in examining models to engage overseas scholars for enrollment purposes. This NEP 2020 motivated research offers insights to policymakers and HEI managers in many countries to rethink strategies by observing distinct recruitment models to gain a competitive advantage.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Inbound ISM in Indian higher education

India is the second largest source country of international students. In 2021, about half a million HE students left Indian shores to study abroad – mainly in the classic English-speaking developed countries (UNESCO UIS, 2023). Compared to the sizeable outbound mobility number, the inbound mobility of students to Indian HE is small (Pawar, 2024); in 2021, the number of inbound students was less than 50,000. The highly skewed nature of ISM in India and the sluggish increase in the presence of international students is a matter of great concern.

The source region-wise inbound student numbers during the recent decade reveal important facts for Indian HE (Table 1). One, there has been a steady decline in the share of East Asian students (from 13% to 7 and 4%, respectively, in 2020 and 2021). Two, South Asia remains the region to drive the increase

**Table 1.** Inbound ISM in Indian higher education – the main source regions (2012–2021).

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total inbound	28,335	34,419	38,992	41,993	44,766	46,703	46,077	47,424	49,348	48,040
Arab states	4862	5942	6746	8027	8625	8190	7836	7646	8265	9033
East Asia and the Pacific	3825	3922	4339	3894	3718	3980	3165	3145	3289	1883
Sub-Saharan Africa	4585	6472	7512	7992	8730	9076	8752	9130	9033	9073
South and West Asia	13,410	15,857	17,443	19,128	20,342	21,680	22,462	23,844	24,706	23,765

Source: UNESCO UIS (2023).

in inbound mobility to Indian HE with an appeal that is presently only regional, with some support from the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab regions. In 2021, about half of the international students in India came from South and West Asian countries, and another 23% from Africa. Nepal (28%) is by far the leading sender, followed by Afghanistan (9%) and Bangladesh (6%) (UNESCO UIS, 2023). Next, the presence of students from other regions continues to be very low. Students from the USA, the fourth largest sender, are of NRI and expatriate backgrounds – and seek admission in private medical and engineering institutions, possibly because education in these study streams is relatively less expensive in India than in the countries of their residence (Powar, 2013). The other noteworthy countries that send students to India are Bhutan, Nigeria, Tanzania and Yemen.

## 2.2. The pulls that have determined student flows

Driven by the considerable soft power and revenue that international students bring, the global HE industry is now subject to consumeristic pressures typical of highly marketised and competitive environments (Guan et al., 2023; Lomer, 2018; Pawar, 2023; Woodall et al., 2014). This present scenario demands a greater understanding of student choice behaviour and the use of sophisticated marketing frameworks and techniques (Cassar & Caruana, 2023; Pawar, 2022; Pawar & Vispute, 2023). Previous research suggests that international student flows are driven by various student motivation factors (Gyamera & Asare, 2023; Pawar, 2023). Several destination-related pull factors influence the enrollment decision-making of international students (Guan et al., 2023; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001). These pull factors typically work with push factors, which are various home-country shortcomings that make studying abroad attractive for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001). In their seminal study involving international students from four Asian countries, Mazzarol and Soutar (2001) found the country's reputation and awareness and the recommendations of the family to be the essential pull elements in host country choice; they found employers' perspective, university reputation and teaching quality to be vital in selecting an overseas HEI. Studying African students in the UK, Maringe and Carter (2007) found international recognition of qualifications, a friendly application method, a first-rate learning atmosphere, prospects for part-time work and safety as the main pull elements. Wu (2014) finds that knowing different cultures, the English environment, and career goals are the fundamental motivations of Chinese students to study abroad. Interestingly, these results differ greatly from the scholarly motivations identified in some of the pre-2000 studies and hint at a shift in choice criteria for students from the most significant source region (Wu, 2014).

Compared to the extent of empirical examinations of student perceptions to gain enrollment strategy perspectives in English-speaking Western host settings, Asian destination context studies are yet nascent; moreover, researchers have unsurprisingly focused more on China (Khanh & Ngoc, 2022; Pawar, 2023; Phan & Fry, 2021). The range of topics for examination has been more toward choice criteria of international students than on HEI and government strategies of countries to attract international students (Khanh & Ngoc, 2022). A review of the empirical literature to identify the 'pulls' of the Asian destinations include the bright economic scenarios of Vietnam (Khanh & Ngoc, 2022) and China (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2019). The scholastic pulls include the university's reputation (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Khanh & Ngoc, 2022; Wen & Hu, 2019) and quality of education (Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020; Wen & Hu, 2019).

Although many pull elements found in the Asian destinations are similar to those identified in the highly cited studies set in the classic English-speaking industrialised world, language and culture offer uniqueness to the appeal of emerging Asian destinations (Khanh & Ngoc, 2022). The language, e.g., Vietnamese (Khanh & Ngoc, 2022), Chinese (Ding, 2016) and English in Indian HE (Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020); and

scholarships, cultural proximity and word of mouth in Thailand (Snodin, 2019). Earlier, Singh et al., 2014) found that social and cultural pull factors such as shared cultural values and the students' background influence the choice of Malaysia as a study-abroad destination.

### 2.3. Differentiation as a competitive advantage

Generally, companies compete on cost or differentiation (Porter, 1985). In a differentiation approach, a firm seeks uniqueness in the industry with attributes that the consumers value. Competing on differentiation can result in a competitive advantage when a firm delivers value the competitor cannot match. Firms offering value attributes consumers perceive as 'different' are less prone to price competition. Competing on cost requires the business to incur the lowest cost, i.e., attain cost leadership – enabling them to charge the consumer a lower price for their product. Interestingly, research indicates that companies that can deliver a combination of differentiation and low cost may attain a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 2002). In the international HE context, Mazzarol and Hosie (1996) say that HEIs must plan added value to achieve differentiation in the maturing international HE industry effectively. Previous HE research has discussed differentiation based on adopting different courses and programs (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001) and reputation (Hazelkorn, 2009) to create a competitive advantage. More recent research indicates that experiences to do with culture and language might help create a differentiation strategy (Wang & Chang, 2016; Wu, 2014). Herein, the culture and language may be unique to the respective host country settings.

## 3. Methodology

This research followed a sequential mixed-method plan. An initial qualitative method stage was followed by a quantitative method stage of data collection and findings to elaborate on the initial findings. The initial use of qualitative techniques gave a conceptual model to be tested through a quantitative analysis of data collected by administering questionnaires.

### 3.1. Qualitative methods

The method employed to elicit qualitative information was semi-structured, in-depth interviews with international students enrolled at three large Indian universities based in western India. A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was followed to ensure diversity in the country of origin of the international students and their study stream. Prospective students were identified through the university's international student office, and their willingness to share relevant information was ascertained. Progressively, other students who were references to the already interviewed students were approached. In identifying prospective students, the nationality of the prospective students was noted to enable a more diverse respondent set in terms of their home country.

In the qualitative stage of this study, 16 international students were interviewed (Table 2). The participants came from 10 developing Asian and African nations. 25% were enrolled in undergraduate degrees, and the others were enrolled in post-graduate or doctoral degrees.

**Table 2.** List of interview participants ( $n = 16$ ).

Code	Age	Gender	Study stream	Enrolment level	Home country
P1	21	F	Commerce	Undergraduate	Eritrea
P2	27	M	Commerce	Post-graduate	Afghanistan
P3	25	M	Commerce	Post-graduate	Afghanistan
P4	23	M	Business Management	Undergraduate	Turkmenistan
P5	22	F	Business Management	Post-graduate	Nepal
P6	26	M	Law	Post-graduate	Kenya
P7	31	M	Commerce	Undergraduate	Liberia
P8	27	M	Statistics	Doctoral	Iraq
P9	27	M	Chemistry	Doctoral	Ethiopia
P10	25	M	Chemistry	Doctoral	Tanzania
P11	26	M	Commerce	Doctoral	Iraq
P12	28	M	Zoology	Doctoral	Iraq
P13	24	M	Arts	Post-graduate	Bangladesh
P14	28	M	Environment	Doctoral	Afghanistan
P15	22	F	Business Management	Post-graduate	Nepal
P16	24	M	Engineering	Undergraduate	Bangladesh

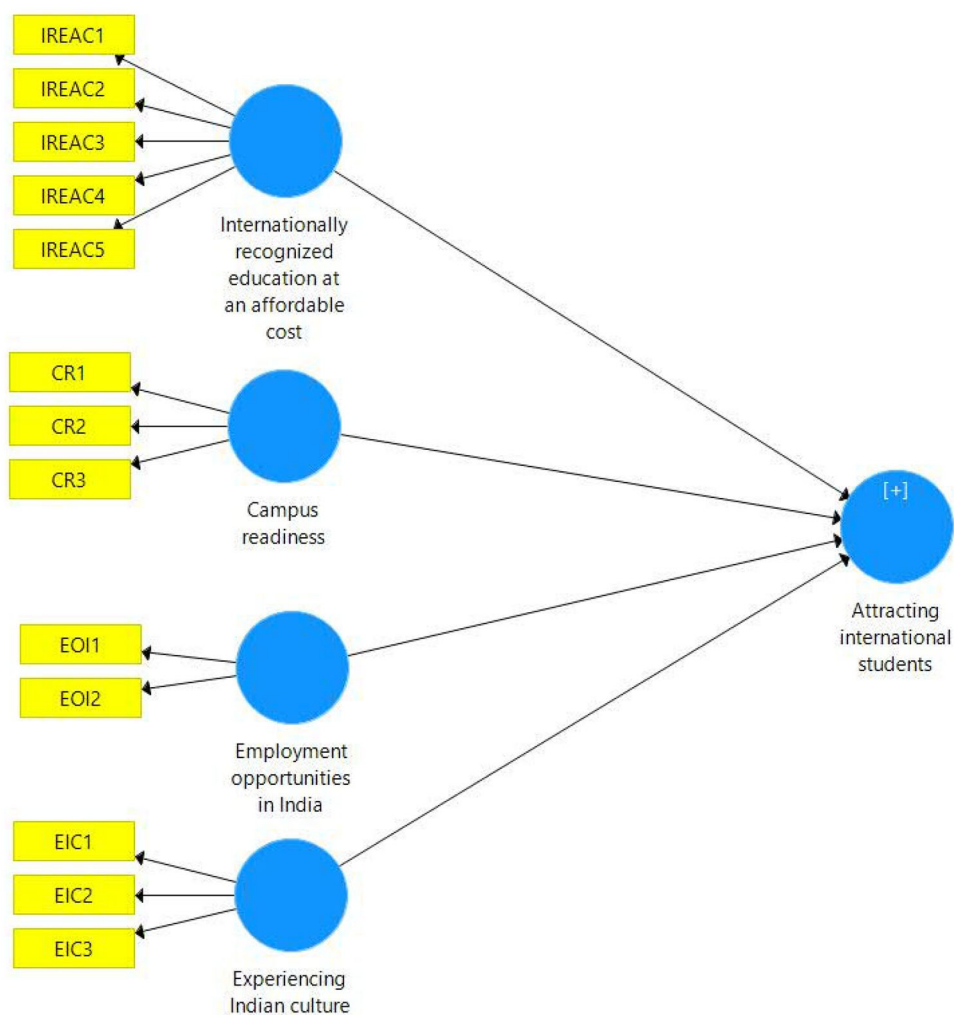
All interviews were in English and semi-structured, consisting of open-ended questions. Participants were asked about what attracted them to Indian education, how India could enroll more international students and become a global education hub, and their perceptions of quality and affordability. Follow-up questions were asked as necessary to seek out additional pertinent information. The interviews ended when no new substantive information emerged. With the participants' consent, all interviews were digitally recorded. A descriptive content analysis involving inductive coding techniques was employed (Seidman, 2006). Reading and listening to the interview audio recordings multiple times helped identify meaningful qualitative units (Chenail, 2011). The transcripts were read line by line, but the analysis focused on identifying meaningful whole units (Chenail, 2012). Responses were categorised and subcategorised into thematic groups to allow data interpretation. Both researchers colluded to finalise the items. Subsequently, the themes under consideration were included under a broader cohesive structure. Table 3 presents the 27 items generated from the qualitative interviews arranged alphabetically. Furthermore, excerpts from the interviews with international students have been used to discuss the findings of this study.

### 3.2. Quantitative method

To empirically test the proposed model (Figure 1), we conducted a quantitative paper-based survey by measuring the factors the presently enrolled international students perceived as crucial in India becoming a favoured study destination and a prominent host country for international students. Driven by the research question and the variables identified through the preceding qualitative study, the questionnaire initially sought demographic information about the respondents. Section two featured the 27 items for analysis. International students were asked to specify the extent of significance they assigned to the 27 listed measurement items for Indian HE to focus upon for India to attract more international students and become a global education hub. We used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important and 7 = extremely important) for all items in unit 2 of the questionnaire. The help of the international office administrators and relevant staff at the respective institutions was sought to administer the questionnaire to the respondents. A purposive sampling of presently enrolled international students was practised to ensure diversity in student nationalities, study streams and program levels, generating 172 responses. Six questionnaires were not considered for analysis on account of being incomplete, resulting in a final sample size of 166.

**Table 3.** Items derived from the interviews.

<i>n</i>	Items generated
1	Academic research opportunities and encouragement
2	Choice of food at the campus
3	Cultural programs and networking opportunities at the campus
4	Diplomatic relations with the International Student home country
5	Employment opportunities for International Students in the home country after study
6	Employment opportunities for International Students in the host country after study
7	English as the language of formal communication
8	Global ranking of its universities
9	Host city and university campus readiness
10	Internship opportunities during the study program
11	International Students as family
12	Internationalisation at the Institute
13	International recognition of Indian education and qualifications
14	Knowledge and skills of the Teacher
15	Opinion of the Family of the International Student on enrolment choice
16	Part-time work opportunities for students during the duration of their study
17	Quality of life on campus
18	Range of study programs on offer
19	Recreation facilities at the campus
20	Reputation of the University
21	Safety and well-being of the International Student
22	Scholarships to International Students
23	Showcasing Indian culture
24	Study programs to know Indian languages
25	Technology infrastructure at the campus
26	Tuition fees and/or cost of living
27	Visa policies



**Figure 1.** A conceptual model for attracting international students to India.

**Table 4.** Sample profile ( $n = 166$ ).

Parameter		$n$	%
Gender	Male	98	59
	Female	68	41
Age (in years)	18–21	77	46.4
	22–25	64	38.6
	26–30	16	9.6
	30 or older	9	5.4
Level of enrolment	Undergraduate	135	81.3
	Postgraduate or Doctoral	31	18.7
Study stream	Business Management	59	35.5
	Arts and Humanities	40	24.1
	Science	21	12.7
	Engineering	20	12.1
	Commerce	17	10.2
	Computer Science	9	5.4
Country of origin ( $n = 36$ )	Nepal	57	34.3
	Afghanistan	15	9
	The Gambia	9	5.4
	Sri Lanka	7	4.2
	Bangladesh	6	3.6
	Bhutan	6	3.6
	Botswana	6	3.6
	Nigeria	5	3
	Other countries ( $n = 28$ )	55	33.1



### 3.3. Sample profile

Table 4 presents the demographic profile of questionnaire respondents. More respondents were male and in the 18–21 age group. The respondents were enrolled in diverse study streams and at different enrollment levels. The respondents were of 36 different nationalities. Similar to the nature of the representation of international student nationalities seen in Indian HE, the largest representation in this sample set came from Nepal, followed by Afghanistan. One hundred nine students were from Asian countries, and 55 were from Africa, one each from Europe and North America.

### 3.4. Analysis and findings

#### 3.4.1. Exploratory factor analysis

We steered an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in IBM SPSS-23 and SmartPLS3, respectively, to test the hypotheses and inspect the constructs' reliability and validity. We first used EFA to estimate the items' validity and the constructs' adequacy. There were 27 items on the scale; eleven items were removed from the scale because of a low factor loading (less than 0.60). The EFA identified seven factors with Initial Eigenvalues of more than 1 with a total cumulative variance % of 67.933. The factors were named: one, internationally recognised education at an affordable cost; two, campus readiness; three, employment opportunities in India; and four, experiencing Indian culture. Campus readiness in the context of this study entails integrating international students with local and campus communities. It also encompasses the host country's capacities in terms of academic programs on offer and the available infrastructure for international student recreational activities. Factors five, six and seven had a single item-to-component ratio and were excluded from final consideration. The items in these Factors were – diplomatic relations with the international student's home country, the visa policy, and employment opportunities for international students in the home country after study. Finally, 13 items remained on the scale to estimate four factors (Table 5). Smart PLS was used to develop a theoretical model to measure attracting international students as a multidimensional construct.

Next, a CFA was performed to confirm and test the hypotheses on whether the observed variables significantly affect the latent variables. Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), a second-generation multivariate technique, was used for its ability to model and estimate complex relationships between the independent and the dependent variables simultaneously (Hair et al., 2021). Also, PLS is a causal-predictive approach to SEM that explains the variance in the models' dependent variables (Chin, 1998). It allows the measurement of both reflective and formative constructs in one model itself.

Four hypotheses were proposed as per the conceptual model depicted in Figure 1.

H1. Internationally recognised education at an affordable cost has a significant relationship with attracting international students to India.

**Table 5.** EFA by rotated component matrix.

	Components			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Cronbach's $\alpha$	.841	.736	.775	.714
Eigenvalue	10.132	1.938	1.619	1.375
IREAC1. English as a language for formal communication	.683			
IREAC2. International recognition of Indian education and qualifications	.726			
IREAC3. Safety and well-being of the international student	.641			
IREAC4. Scholarships to international students	.741			
IREAC5. Tuition fees and or cost of living	.682			
CR1. Host city and university campus readiness		.605		
CR2. Range of study programs on offer		.760		
CR3. Recreation facilities at the campus		.726		
EOI1. Employment opportunities for international students in the host country after study			.753	
EOI2. Part-time work opportunities for students during the duration of the study			.799	
EIC1. Networking opportunities at the campus				.663
EIC2. Showcasing Indian culture				.763
EIC3. Study programs to know Indian languages				.710

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy .882. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Approx. Chi-Square 1842.453. Df 351. Sig. .000.

H2. Campus readiness has a significant relationship with attracting international students to India.

H3. Employment opportunities in India have a significant relationship with attracting international students to India.

H4. Experiencing Indian culture has a significant relationship with attracting international students to India.

### 3.5. Common method bias

Before running the measurement model, common method bias was checked in PLS-SEM through a full collinearity assessment approach. All the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were less than the threshold value of 3.3 (Hair et al., 2021). Table 6 indicates that the model is free from common method bias.

### 3.6. Assessment of the measurement model

Subsequently, the measurement model was assessed to test its reliability and validity (Table 7). The item loadings exceed 0.7 and hence are consistent with the criteria suggested by Hair et al. (2010).

Next, a test for convergent validity was carried out, which showed Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and the expected average variance (Table 8). This test revealed that the composite reliability ranged from 0.843 to 0.897. This is consistent with the studies in the literature (Hair et al., 2010). The average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.594 to 0.813, which was acceptable (Hair et al., 2010).

After finalising the convergent validity, the next step was to measure the discriminant validity. Discriminant validity was measured by the test used by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Table 9 shows significant or sufficient discriminant validity.

The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations suggested by Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015) is an alternative approach to measuring discriminant validity. This method's HTMT values of less than the threshold value of 0.85 were deemed acceptable (Kline, 2015). The result of the HTMT test presented in Table 10 shows that the values passed the acceptable threshold of less than 0.85. It is hence inferred that the measurement model has enough discriminant validity. Figure 2 shows the software output of the validated model.

### 3.7. Assessment of the structural model

After the measurement model was found reliable and valid, the structural model was assessed for relationships between the constructs and the model's predictive power. Path coefficients and their t-values were calculated using bootstrapping. The Path Modelling procedure shows the outcome of the four hypothesised paths and indicates a significant relationship between the constructs (Table 11). The results reveal that the path coefficients are positive and significant (\*\* $p < .01$ ).

Finally, the  $Q^2$  value was measured to know the predictive relevance of the model. This test was conducted by using the blindfolding approach in PLS-SEM. A greater than zero value was obtained, indicating that the model has predictive relevance (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

## 4. Discussion of findings

This section discusses the findings of the quantitative analysis. Furthermore, insights gained from interviews with international students explain international student perspectives on the various items.

The first factor to observe entails that the qualifications imparted by Indian HE are recognised in countries outside India. The recognition was particularly sought regarding an Indian degree being

**Table 6.** VIF lateral collinearity.

Factors	Attracting international students
Internationally recognised education at an affordable cost	1.885
Campus readiness	1.660
Employment opportunities in India	1.344
Experiencing Indian culture	1.501



**Table 7.** Construct loadings of the measurement model.

	Component			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
IREAC1.	0.713			
IREAC2.	0.790			
IREAC3.	0.793			
IREAC4.	0.826			
IREAC5.	0.724			
CR1.		0.811		
CR2.		0.835		
CR3.		0.784		
EOI1.			0.912	
EOI2.			0.892	
EIC1.				0.814
EIC2.				0.805
EIC3.				0.783

**Table 8.** Results of convergent validity.

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
IREAC	0.828	0.879	0.594
CR	0.738	0.852	0.657
EOI	0.771	0.897	0.813
EIC	0.722	0.843	0.642

**Table 9.** Results of discriminant validity.

	CR	EOI	EIC	IREAC
CR	0.810			
EOI	0.400	0.902		
EIC	0.456	0.398	0.801	
IREAC	0.599	0.454	0.531	0.770

**Table 10.** Discriminant validity – HTMT.

	CR	EOI	EIC	IREAC
CR				
EOI	0.532			
EIC	0.622	0.521		
IREAC	0.761	0.565	0.681	

'appreciated by big companies' in the home country [P15] and its 'global acceptance' for employment if the student chooses to work in another country [P16]. Recognition of Indian qualifications across countries may also enable more job and academic opportunities internationally. Several participants found that the perceived opportunity to learn English at Indian universities positively influenced their decision to select India as their study-abroad destination. Participants noted that international students expect the Lecturers at Indian universities to communicate exclusively in English. Against the aforementioned perceived gains of enrolling in Indian universities, the consumer sacrifice (Zeithaml, 1988) is expressed in the safety, well-being, and monetary cost of studying abroad (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Many students mentioned India's ICCR scholarships as significant in attracting students. Several participants termed education in India as 'affordable' in terms of the tuition fees and the living cost compared to the European countries for which 'you need to have the right amount of money' [P10]. Another student perceived that the cost of living in India is lesser compared to Malaysia, Russia and Turkey, where his friends study [P8]. However, participants expressed that international students not being allowed to work in India made it 'economically challenging for self-financed students' [P7]. Overall, the composition of the first component that this study identifies primarily aligns with the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar (2001) and previous research in Asian destinations that identify essential pull elements in host country choice. More recently and in an emerging Asian host country context (China), it was found that the quality of the learning environment, cost-related aspects, acquiring an international qualification and learning the Mandarin language influence destination choice (Ahmad & Shah, 2018).

The second component to observe is the readiness to host international students. This involves the people at the host location being aware and appreciative of the presence of international students at

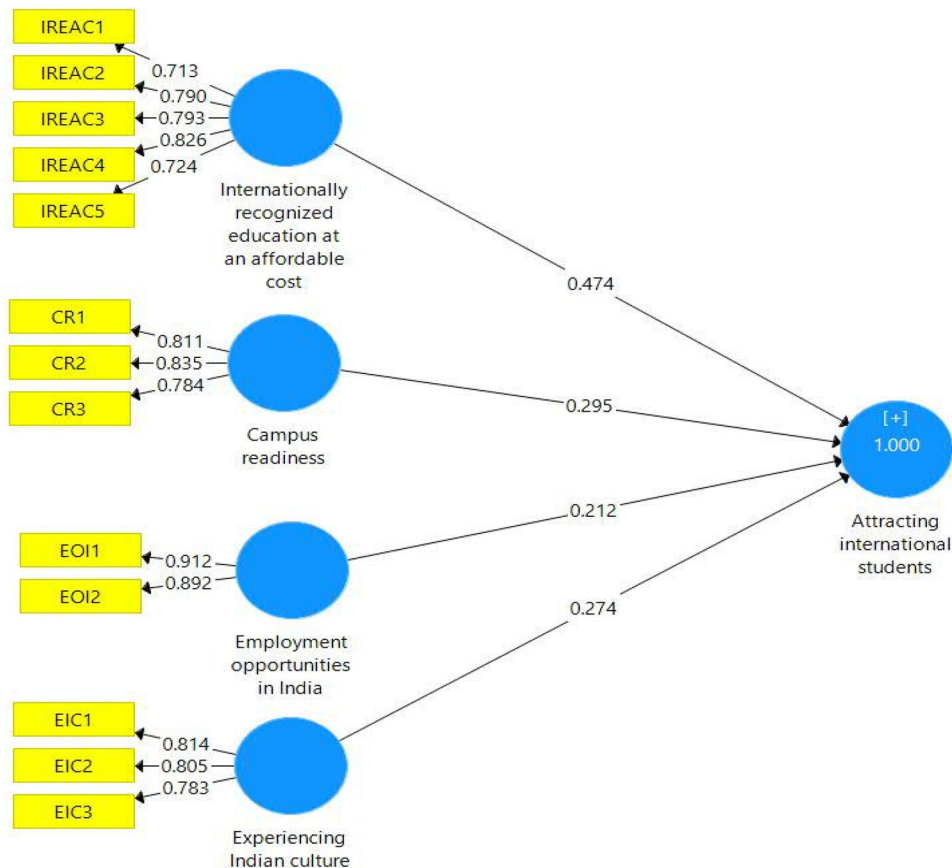


Figure 2. The validated model.

Table 11. Path model of hypothesised relationships.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	t-Stat	p-Value	Result
H1 IREAC → Attracting international students	0.474**	19.358	.000	Supported
H2 CR → Attracting international students	0.295**	17.489	.000	Supported
H3 EOI → Attracting international students	0.212**	10.086	.000	Supported
H4 EIC → Attracting international students	0.274**	14.247	.000	Supported

the host location (Pawar, Vispute, Wasswa, 2020) or the investments needed to integrate international students with local students and other campus communities (Choudaha, 2016). A participant suggested that for India to attract more international students, the staff and people at the university should be trained on 'how to deal with international students. This student explained that because international students come from 'different cultures', the university staff should take 'high care' of them as they face many challenges, such as correctly knowing the visa registration process [P10]. Another participant noted the friendliness, kindness and welcoming nature of the people in the host city and the Professors at the university that he experienced as an element of attraction [P8]. Next, the range and study programs to choose from, noted by Shanka et al. (2006) as an influence on institution choice, was also found to be a noteworthy pull element. Recreational facilities at the campus were found to be an essential expectation. A participant expressed that international students' expectation of Indian HE before coming to India is that of 'very sophisticated universities' that are 'top-notch'; however, the infrastructure and facilities do not meet these expectations, particularly in government universities [P06]. In marketing research, the basic assumption of such instances leads to consumer dissatisfaction.

Findings reveal the need for Indian policymakers to permit employment in India upon graduation to attract more international students. Unlike the traditional host nations, international students, apart from those from Nepal, are not offered internships during study or allowed employment in India through a work visa after completing their study tenure. Policy changes are recommended on both counts. This is because, first, for the student, a more global employment engagement adds to the value of overseas

study and helps in acquiring skills imperative to become competitive in the international employment scenario (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012); second, part-time work opportunities in India may positively influence enrollment decision-making of students by diminishing the perceived monetary sacrifice, also referred to in component one. In this regard, a participant expressed that without scholarships or work opportunities during the study tenure, the cost of studying in India becomes comparable to studying in the developed traditional host countries. It was perceived so because students thought overseas students in the USA or Australia would get an 'opportunity to work', which would cover the 'tuition fees and living expenses' [P13].

Component four is about knowing and networking in India's multi-cultural and multi-lingual surroundings. Such a strategy would provide a much-needed distinctiveness in the Asian host countries' appeal relative to the English-speaking Western destinations. Also unique is the dual language learning opportunity that Indian HE offers overseas students; in this, students acquire English proficiency with its use as a formal medium of communication at Indian universities and also the opportunity to gain knowledge of the Indian language. In experiencing Indian culture, the provision of networking opportunities that involve students from other countries is suggested. A student from Nepal revealed that cultural similarity with India enabled her to 'easily adapt to the environment' [P15]. This study suggests that the NEP 2020 goal of promoting Indian subjects such as Yoga, Indian arts and music and the Sanskrit language should be promoted aggressively to help create a distinct appeal overseas. A participant termed these subjects as a 'unique' [P14] education offering also suited to attract students from developed countries and narrated an observation about a student from Germany perceiving India as the best place to study Yoga.

Overall, we agree with Khanh and Ngoc (2022) that attracting international students should begin with characteristics such as the country's language and culture. Component four evidences a platform for Indian HE to deliver distinct value. This differentiation, along with the ability of Indian HE to deliver 'affordable' education when positioned well, lends a sustainable competitive advantage. However, it has to be remembered that internationally recognised education, campus readiness and employment opportunities in India are the core value attributes.

## **5. Implications**

### **5.1. Theoretical implications**

This research will enrich the available literature on strategies to attract international students in aspiring Asian and emerging HE host countries. Theoretically, this research proposes and measures the construct of attracting international students from a consumer perception perspective. Notably, this research contributes to the standing literature by conceptualising the construct of attracting international students to an emerging Asian HE destination, offering a new classification of 13 pull elements to observe, identifying items under each of the four factors, and empirically testing its validity and reliability. Overall, the results provide evidence of a scale's dimensionality, reliability and validity for future IMHE research.

### **5.2. Practical implications**

This research lends market intelligence to government policymakers and international HE leaders. By studying international students' perceptions and identifying decisive pull factors, this study identifies the areas to observe for India to attract more international students to its campuses. University marketers may benefit from the 'scale' that this study proposes by understanding international students in a south-south mobility setting. It may eventually assist them in shaping a differentiation-driven enrollment strategy to face the increasingly global and competitive international student market. Policymakers and marketers can use the proposed model to determine policies to engage with prospective international students from Asia and Africa. For example, policy reforms such as offering internships to international students and operationalising initiatives to do with the recognition and acceptability of Indian qualifications in several HE systems and industries.

## 6. Conclusions

The strengthening of international student flows within the global south has caught the attention of HE policymakers, university marketers and academic researchers alike. Accordingly, this study was conducted to advance the understanding of factors that help attract overseas students to Indian HE and offer market intelligence inputs to the Indian HE policymakers. Four critical factors containing multiple items were identified. These are, internationally recognised education at an affordable cost, campus readiness, employment opportunities in India, and the experience of Indian culture. Findings signal the prospect of India competing on differentiation to attract students from other developing countries.

Although this study generates insights into the exciting and timely phenomenon of attracting international students to emerging Asian education destinations, it is not free of limitations. For instance, we collected data from international students at three Indian universities. Hence, the results cannot be generalised across host country HE system contexts. However, this limitation can act as a new research direction for scholars. Future researchers may test this scale among international students in other emerging host countries and identify immediate competitor groups. The methodology that this study incorporates can provide valuable guidelines for scholars of the IMHE field to develop and validate new constructs. Future studies may examine international students from particular emerging source regions, such as the Arab states or Sub-Saharan Africa.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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