

Beyond the visa: Why fewer Indian students are applying to British universities

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LSE's Will Breare-Hall puts the 20 per cent decline in postgraduate applications from India in context.

The statistics sound dramatic. At the same time that applications from overseas students have risen by up to 26 per cent at major UK universities, the [number of submissions from India has declined](#) significantly. At LSE, postgraduate applications from Indians have fallen by 20 per cent. This situation presents a challenge across the British higher education sector since India is the second-largest source of overseas students, after China. Many have [blamed this shift](#) on new, [stringent UK visa rules](#) for students.

The changing visa regime has become the *bête noire* of prospective students from India and other countries outside the European Union. UK Border Agency (UKBA) regulations have been perceived by many as the waging of a cold war on overseas students. Rule changes midway through the recruitment cycle and the introduction of new administrative hurdles have proven extremely problematic for applicants.

The new rules have also created the impression that the UK higher education sector is disinterested in, or actively hostile toward, international students. This perception is false: British universities are spending [millions of pounds](#) in an effort to navigate UKBA visa rules—in May, Simeon Underwood, the academic registrar at LSE, told a committee of MPs that the School was spending at least £250,000 annually trying to comply with the rules. But the tougher visa regime is not the only deterrent for Indian students considering the UK as a higher education destination.

To the above immigration issues can be added a number of economic factors in the UK, Europe and India. A sluggish recovery in the UK and weak growth and financial uncertainty in the European Union are juxtaposed against a still expanding Indian economy. Indian growth helps keep some students at home as they see that opportunities exist for them in-country, without the need to study overseas. At the same time, a weakening Indian rupee and resulting unfavourable exchange rates makes study abroad less feasible for some.

Moreover, this negative publicity – both about British immigration and its economy – has come at a time when several other countries are aggressively promoting themselves as study destinations. Prospective Indian students are increasingly looking toward Australia, Canada and the US, all of which have made an effort to appear more welcoming at a time when, for domestic political reasons, the UK is considered to be drawing up its bridges.

Whilst there is discontent with the UK immigration system and concern over the value of studying overseas, suitably qualified Indian students should keep these in perspective. India's best institutions remain heavily oversubscribed and a foreign education still carries a certain cachet among Indian employers. Those that join the School continue to benefit from the proven advantages of an LSE education—the School's graduates were rated number one for employability in the 2012 Sunday Times Good University Guide. As global economic forecasts improve, application numbers should as well.

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