

# **310 No Country for Young Engineers: student migration from India to Germany as a second chance at success**

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## **Research Domains**

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

## **Abstract**

The number of Indians studying in Germany has sharply risen between 2015-2016 and 2020-2021 and the majority are enrolled on engineering postgraduate courses. Drawing on interviews with 45 Indians who were applying to, currently pursuing, or had recently graduated from engineering Master's degrees in Germany, this paper discusses how the affordable cost of study in Germany had made overseas study an accessible escape from the unfavourable job market for engineers in India. I argue that the reason my interlocutors sought to study in Germany was not because they believed a German degree would give them a positional advantage in the Indian job market. Rather, what they sought to acquire through study in Germany was work experience at a German engineering company. The paper draws attention to alternative place-based markers of distinction beyond institutional prestige which motivate these student flows, and joins scholarship exploring socio-economic diversification among internationally-mobile students.

## **Full paper**

### **Introduction**

The number of Indians studying in Germany has more than doubled between 2015-2016 and 2021-22 (DAAD 2021, DAAD 2022), making India the second largest source country of international students in Germany (DAAD 2022). The majority of Indians studying in Germany are enrolled on postgraduate programmes in engineering. In contrast to the 'traditional' study destinations for Indian students, such as the US, the UK, Australia, and Canada, Germany is a relatively accessible international study destination in the Global North. German public universities – which constitute the majority of the provision of higher education in the country – charge low to no tuition fees, even for international students and, in recent years, have been offering a growing number of English-taught postgraduate courses.

In this paper I will explore the aspirations underpinning the student migration of Indian engineers to Germany, and consider how Master's degrees from Germany were valued by these students. I will illustrate how the vast majority of the Indian engineering students in Germany I interviewed had struggled to find desirable employment in India upon graduating from their engineering Bachelor's degrees. In this context, postgraduate study in Germany had come to be experienced as an accessible and attractive escape from unemployment and unhappy employment and an opportunity for professional advancement. Following this, I will offer an analysis of my interlocutors' post-study aspirations and how study in Germany was perceived as contributing to the realisation of these aspirations.

### **Methods**

This paper will draw on interviews I conducted with 45 Indians; the vast majority (37) were current students in German universities (studying at a total of 17 universities across the country), 3 had recently graduated from German universities, and 5 were in the process of applying to study in Germany. All had engineering Bachelor's degrees from India and were pursuing, planning to pursue, or had graduated from engineering Master's programmes in Germany. The interviews explored my interviewees' reasons for wanting to do a Master's degree in Germany and how they had or were navigating the process of going to Germany for study. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants. All interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed in full. I analysed the interview transcripts using ATLAS.ti, drawing on both inductive and deductive approaches.

### **Contributions**

The paper will intervene in two bodies of scholarship. Firstly, it will challenge a dominant perspective in existing scholarship on international student migration: that international students seek to study abroad in order to acquire overseas education credentials, which are portable and will improve their career prospects back home (Waters and Brooks 2021; Beech 2019). In contrast, this paper will illustrate how the Indian students in my study sought to pursue a Master's degree in Germany primarily in order to acquire work experience in their fields of specialisation at a German company. It was such work experience, rather than education credentials from German universities, that my interlocutors believed would be portable and valued by employers in India and elsewhere, thereby enabling them to advance in their careers. Moreover, I will discuss how imaginings of Germany as an engineering superpower underpinned the value associated with gaining engineering work experience in the country. In so doing, the paper will contribute to research that has examined alternative markers of distinction linked to place of study — rather than to education quality and/or institutional prestige — which might be driving some international student flows (Prazeres et al 2017). The paper will also raise a broader question about the importance of relevant international work experience for international students to get a return on their investment in study abroad.

Secondly, while a long-standing assumption in the scholarship on international student migration has been that international students are privileged actors seeking to reproduce their class status, this paper will join an emerging body of scholarship that has documented how this type of educational mobility is also becoming a strategy for less privileged groups to acquire capital they perceive themselves as lacking (Waters and Brooks 2021; Sancho 2017; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014). The paper will explore how affordable English-taught postgraduate courses in Germany have expanded the space across which, and the ways in which, a new demographic of Indians — who had previously not viewed study abroad as part of their trajectories — seek to navigate university-to-work transitions. The article will thus also contribute to scholarship on international student migration from India, which has so far largely focused on those students who study in Anglophone countries with highly marketized higher education systems.

## References

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