Undercover experts: How new forms of education consultancy on social media mediate student migration from India to Germany

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper explores new forms of study-abroad expertise on social media and their role in mediating Indian student migration to Germany. It offers an analysis of how 'Study-in-Germany' mutual-support Facebook and WhatsApp groups—used by prospective international students in India to navigate the process of applying to German universities—have contributed to the emergence of new forms of education consultancy, offered by Indian international students in Germany, whom I call 'Student Guides'. It examines how these Student Guides emphatically distanced themselves from professional education consultants in India and contributed to the critical narratives about such 'traditional' consultants that circulated within the mutual-support groups. The paper shows how such anti-consultant narratives and the alternative sources of guidance available via the mutual-support groups had led to many group members choosing against seeking the services of an education consultant in India. The paper draws on a digital ethnography of 'Study-in-Germany' social media groups.

Full paper

Introduction

The number of Indians studying in Germany has more than doubled between the years 2015–2016 and 2021–2022 (DAAD & DZHW 2023). This paper examines the role of social media in mediating this migration. More specifically, it offers an analysis of how 'Study-in-Germany' mutual-support Facebook and WhatsApp groups—used by prospective international students in India to navigate the process of applying to German universities—have contributed to the emergence of new forms of education consultancy, offered by Indian international students in Germany, whom I call 'Student Guides' (SGs). Furthermore, it highlights how these new forms of education consultancy relate to and intersect with more traditional forms of consultancy.

Conceptually, the paper draws on Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) concept of 'migration infrastructure', which they use to describe the actors, institutions and technologies that mediate migration. They see this infrastructure as being composed of five interrelated dimensions: the social (migrant networks), the commercial (recruitment intermediaries), the technological (communication and transport), the regulatory (state apparatus), and the humanitarian (NGOs and international organisations). There has been a growing body of research focused on the pivotal role that social and commercial infrastructures

play in mediating international student mobility (Beech 2015; Thieme 2017). Less studied, however, are new infrastructures of mobility that have developed on social media and their implications for international student migration.

In this paper I will illustrate how developments in the technological infrastructure, namely increased access to and use of social media, have impacted both the social and commercial infrastructures mediating student migration from India. I will argue that understanding the evolving migration infrastructures facilitating international student migration is crucial for understanding contemporary student mobilities, particularly from the Global South.

Methods

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2020. The fieldwork began with digital ethnographic research in four 'Study-in-Germany' mutual-support Facebook groups and fifteen WhatsApp groups. After obtaining permission from group administrators and introducing my research to group members through a post detailing my project, I observed the daily activity in these spaces. In addition, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with six Student Guides (SGs), who operated within these mutual-support groups, providing prospective international students support with the process of applying to German universities, for a fee. My interviews with the SGs explored how they had navigated their own application journeys, how and why they had become interested in becoming an SG, and their activities as an SG thus far. I remained in contact with these SGs for the whole fieldwork period.

Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, drawing on both inductive and deductive approaches. The project was granted ethical approval by the German Academic Exchange Service.

Contributions

The paper makes two important contributions to the growing body of scholarship on education consultants. To begin with, it is the first to illuminate new spaces and forms of education consultancy and study-abroad expertise that have emerged on social media. It illustrates how 'Study-in-Germany' Facebook and WhatsApp groups may be seen as offering Student Guides (SGs) an unprecedented way and place in which to cultivate social capital and become embedded in networks of prospective international students. As Indian international students in Germany, SGs could openly join and participate in these networks, accumulating social capital through sharing information and guidance for free and getting to know and be known by others in these groups – which then allowed them to develop and carry out their commercial endeavours. It also highlights how the norms and practices of the Facebook and WhatsApp groups were strongly implicated in how they operated.

Secondly, the paper examines how 'traditional' education consultants in India were viewed and how study-abroad expertise was conceptualised by prospective international students, and with what implications. It demonstrates how SGs emphatically distanced themselves from education consultants in India and contributed to the critical narratives about such 'traditional' consultants that circulated within the mutual-support groups. Most prominently, SGs emphasised their insider knowledge of the German higher education system and their student identity, and constructed education consultants as lacking experiential knowledge of study in Germany and being profit-driven businesses, which manipulated and

exploited prospective international students. The paper shows how such anti-consultant narratives and the alternative sources of guidance available via the social media groups had led to many group members choosing against seeking the services of an education consultant in India. At the same time, it draws attention to a number of ways in which 'traditional' and social-media education consultancy had begun to intersect.

References

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