



India as a Regional Hub for Higher Education -A Destination for International Students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. An Exploratory Study of the Role of a Private Indian University

Smriti Ahuja


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An often-asked question in interviews and discussions is, "Who is your role model?" This question often leaves me momentarily blank—not because I lack role models, but because I have so many. In the multidimensionality of human life, a single role model seems inadequate. Some inspire my values, others fuel my ambition and practicality, and still others embody joie de vivre worth aspiring to. Below, I acknowledge and thank my diverse role models who through their example, have shaped my values, ambitions, and outlook on life.

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## Abstract

This qualitative research examines one part of the potential for India to become a regional hub for higher education. It explores India's relationship with its neighbours to establish the pragmatism of such a scheme. Policies and aspirations gain traction, through the support of the nodes that actually live and play out those aspirations. Universities are one such node. The role of individual universities in contributing to the attractiveness of India as a higher education destination is indispensable particularly in the context of central government policies that are still in development.

The research gathers perceptions from students currently enrolled at a private university in India (the study uses the pseudonym 'BTS' for this university), from the sub region of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Their academic, social and residential experiences are explored. The study assumes that positive student experiences are one factor that can boost the inflow of international students from these neighbouring countries.

Additionally, the study incorporates insights from an interview with a senior university official to enable a comparison between student perceptions and the university's actual success in attracting international students from the above-mentioned countries. This integrated analysis helps in suggesting the factors that support or hinder India's reputation and viability as a higher education destination in these regions, though the study of a single institution is not sufficient to achieve a full national picture.

The findings reveal that despite positive student experiences in relation to all of the academic, residential, and social aspects, there has not been a corresponding increase in international student numbers from Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal at the university. It is counterintuitive to consider student satisfaction and student growth not moving along the same trend line. This suggests that broader causative factors are at play and highlights the need for a large-scale study that includes different regions and types of institutions to deepen our understanding. The study suggests that a lack of employment opportunities, both during their studies and after graduation, as well as the inability to stay long-term in India to work or pursue citizenship are identified as primary deterrents for international student, even though visa-free regimes exist for Bhutan and Nepal. Another important insight from the study is that there is a

disjunction between student satisfaction and the likelihood of students recommending the institution. Student surveys should not only assess satisfaction levels but also evaluate the likelihood of favourable recommendations. That broader approach would offer more comprehensive feedback, enabling institutions to better understand and address the factors that drive student enrolment and its growth.

This research contributes to the literature by offering insights into the factors that determine the study choices of international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, the strategic implications for private universities aiming to attract students from these countries, and the implications for India as an emerging regional higher education destination. This study also serves as an "evaluation study [that] supports the planning and management of interventions to promote internationalisation" (UGC, 2021, p. 19), as outlined in the guidelines for the internationalisation of higher education issued by India's regulatory body in higher education (HE).

*Key words:* India, higher education, regional educational hub, student mobility determinants

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## List of Acronyms

BBIN	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India Nepal
BBN	Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal
BTech	Bachelor of Technology
BTS	BTS is a moniker for the university under study
CCM	Constant Comparative Method
CSE	Computer Science and Engineering
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GOI	Government of India
HE	Higher Education
HEI's	Higher Education Institutions
ISM	International Student Mobility
NEP	National Education Policy
NIRF	National Institutional Ranking Framework
NPM	New Public Management
NPS	Net Promoter Score
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PG	Postgraduate
RQ	Research Questions
RMS	Relationship Management System
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
UG	Undergraduate
UGC	University Grants Commission

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the past two decades the world has seen a massification of education. The worldwide count of students enrolled in tertiary education increased from 100 million to 222 million (World Bank, 2024), more than doubling in the past twenty years. The increase did not necessarily follow the trend line of economic growth, or rather, did not fully mirror it; instead, it stemmed from the expansion of family needs for social prestige and betterment, which have grown faster than economic capacity (Marginson, 2017). This enormous and growing demand has also enhanced the attractiveness of cross border education as an attractive option for students pursuing higher or tertiary education, as not all family aspirations for education are satisfied within national systems. UNESCO data indicates that in 2019 close to half of the world's international mobile students were hosted in countries in North America and Western Europe. By 2021, there were 6.4 million (IOM, 2024.) tertiary international mobile students worldwide, with 50% of these students concentrated in just four countries: the USA, the UK, Australia, and Germany (IOM, 2024.)

It would be detrimental to ignore in any form or fashion the world system of codified knowledge in research and science or to deny that higher education (HE) has global convergence in several aspects (Cantwell, 2012). However, when local knowledge is sidestepped, being seen as 'inferior', and local and regional scholars are disregarded, it becomes disempowering for the nation. The global ranking system having become a majoritarian reference point for HE destinations furthers this marginalisation. "Most global rankings embody the norms and practices of the leading Anglo-American research universities" (Marginson, 2017, p. 237). Global university rankings allocate a large weighting to research, which is reasonable in that it gives a push to new thought and innovation. On a closer look though, it is unjust in its inclusion criteria with only the research output which is produced in English and listed and published in data banks such as Web of Science and Scopus being considered. The norms of prestige and superiority become further reinforced in favour of the Global North.

Transmitting knowledge, regardless of its origins, is hopefully the liberal vision to be followed. There is great value in regionalisation of education for reasons of shared culture, shared context, a shared idiom, possibly a shared language, and the likelihood of home currency purchase parity going further. For this reason, there are several successful instances of strong and growing regionalisation of HE, Erasmus in Europe being the most celebrated. The regionalisation of education in the Global South, however, goes beyond shared culture to encompass something more profound. It is a means to elevate local knowledge, an epistemic counterbalance to the knowledge hegemony of Anglophone countries. Regionalisation is a vehicle to build curriculums and platforms, recognising and including the knowledge local to the region while equally leaning on the best practices of the Global North. In effect, regionalisation is potentially a powerful vehicle of decolonisation.

Regionalisation in the Global South, besides elevating local context and paradigms, is also a means to level up a nation's balance of payments in the education sector. With the explosive growth in international student mobility (ISM) higher education has become a viable export industry. The global market size of international students is expected to grow to USD 433 billion (Brothers & Blakemore, 2023). 60% of this market is centred in just five countries of the global North (OECD, 2023). Among all international students in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in 2021, 57 per cent were from Asia, with China and India, making up the bulk (IOM, 2024.). The continued growth of international students is anticipated to come from the Global South. Citing the World Bank report, the global tertiary gross enrolment ratio, (GER) stands at 42% in 2022. North America is at or above 80% GER, and China is above 72%. The regions below the global GER average are the Arab states, Sub-Saharan Africa, South, West and Central Asia. The next wave of massification is anticipated to come from these regions (World Bank, 2024.). In the context of the future massification of tertiary education in South Asia, Regionalisation offers a means for India of at least partly offsetting the trade imbalance. India's bill for its students going abroad to pursue higher education is estimated at USD 47 billion (ICEF Monitor, n.d.) and growing. Bangladesh and Nepal also have many outgoing students. This provides an economic motivation for countries in the region to band together to reduce the costs of overseas education for their citizens and economies.

At issue is the ability of Indian institutions to attract students from the region, specifically from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal (BBN). This thesis helps to address that gap by investigating how a particular university succeeds or fails in growing these international student cohorts and whether student satisfaction levels are a strong driver of such success. The study aims to highlight the role of the local (i.e., the university) in realising the vision of the national (i.e., India). This interconnectedness and interplay between multiple agencies in HE has been well theorised by Marginson and Rhoades as “glonacal” = global+national+local (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002).

The study begins with a generic review of internationalisation of education and includes a discussion of its resultant offshoots, student mobility and regionalisation. It goes on to present India's stated position on internationalisation of HE. Thereafter, the paper presents the study's methodology, followed by the findings, leading to the discussion and recommendations section. The paper concludes with a summary of the key takeaway, noting the study's limitations and suggesting areas for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Internationalisation of higher education**

The concept of internationalisation of education and the ensuing student mobility is not a recent development. Its roots can be traced back centuries to the time when scholars travelled to renowned centres of learning such as Alexandria, Athens, Cordoba and Nalanda (Shields, 2013). These early forms of mobility were driven by the pursuit of knowledge and cultural exchange (Marginson, 2022a). The mediaeval European tradition of scholars travelling to reputed centres of learning such as Bologna, Paris, and Oxford continued the practice of cross border learning (Haskins, 2013). During the colonial era, this tradition of scholars and students crossing borders became increasingly intertwined with imperial ambitions. Colonised regions sent students to metropolitan centres for education, resulting in a flow of knowledge and soft power that served imperial interests (Altbach & Kelly, 1978). Through the centuries the university one way or the other retained its 'inter-national' character (Altbach, 1998), although other types of tertiary education institutions were less touched by international mobility.

The internationalisation of HE has evolved from its traditional role of facilitating knowledge and cultural exchange to its modern role in shaping the global knowledge economy (Altbach et al., 2010). Over the years, various terms have been used to describe this phenomenon. They have been derived from the basis of the curriculum ("international studies," "global studies,"), mobility ("study abroad," "education abroad," ) or to convey the spatiality of delivery ("education across border", "borderless education" ) (de Wit et al., 2008). Buckner conceptualises internationalisation as "...emphas[ising] international students, student and scholarly mobility, and curricular change" (Buckner & Stein, 2020, p. 151). Teichler (Teichler, 2004), Knight (Knight, 2008), and Altbach (Altbach & Forest 2006.), among others, delve into the intricate dynamics between globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education.

Marginson refers to this as "cross-border relations,... flows and systems in higher education and knowledge that extend beyond the nation-state" (Marginson, 2022b, p.

429). This is a departure from the previously widely accepted definition of internationalisation as a: “ process of integrating an international and intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, function or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 1). This definition has been challenged due to the evolving landscape of international higher education in the past two decades. Ninnes and Hellsten faulted it for failing to incorporate the export of education (Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005). Ravinder Sidhu points out that “Its weaknesses lie in its inherent generality and ambiguity....It is unclear what constitutes an international / intercultural dimension, which is as likely to include the trite and superficial as the profound and complex”(Sidhu, 2006, p.3). The new understanding moves from the emphasis on process (integration of activities) to a wider embracing of the overall system of cross border education.

In 1994, the completion of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) brought national education laws and regulations under the scope of an international trade framework (Scherrer, 2005). The General Agreement on Trade in Services breaks down the components of cross border education into four distinct modes:

1. Cross-Border Supply: “corresponds to the normal form of trade in goods: only the service itself crosses the border” (Larsen et al., 2002, p. 851). This refers to access to education through different modes of distance learning.
2. Consumption Abroad: This refers to students crossing borders for education in a host country, in other words student mobility (Larsen et al., 2002).
3. Commercial Presence: In this mode the provider sets up an international branch \ campus in the home country of the student. Popularly also known as “institutional mobility” (Tilak, 2011, p. 9).
4. Presence of Natural Persons: Here teachers or researchers temporarily travel abroad to provide educational services, also known as “staff mobility” (Tilak, 2011, p. 9).

Internationalisation of HE in this study refers primarily to consumption abroad, emphasising student mobility. Trade in higher education, arising from this mode, generates billions of dollars serving as an important source of income for governments and higher education institutions (HEI's). Additionally, this student movement enhances soft power and provides access to global talent for the host nation. The

section below takes a closer look at international student mobility (ISM) by examining host countries, numbers, revenues and the gradual growth of regionalisation.

## **2.2 International student mobility (ISM)**

From an international migration and population dynamics perspective, the movement of students across borders has gained attention since 2000. The beginning of detailed references to ISM are seen in a 2001 OECD report (OECD, 2001) with student mobility characterised as students crossing borders with the “objective to participate in educational activities” (UNESCO, n.d. p. 1). The surge in ISM was driven by political and social factors, such as geopolitical changes and the demographics trends, with ageing nations filling their talent shortages through absorption of international students into the workforce, driving increased mobility (Wit, 2008). At the same time, countries with growing populations and rising demand for tertiary education sought out international universities due to limitations in their own educational capacities. Technological advancements, along with demographic, massification, and globalisation-related factors, have significantly buoyed the internationalisation of higher education. On the supply side, factors such as the commercialization of international education, the positioning of Anglophone education as a status and career asset, and the development of Erasmus and European mobility programs for regional integration have played a crucial role. On the demand side, the growth of the middle class and the appeal of global employment opportunities driven by economic globalisation have further fuelled this trend. This has led to the establishment of academic networks, satellite campuses abroad (Zhan & Marginson, 2023), and collaborations between institutions worldwide (Marginson, 2022c) all contributing to the explosive growth in student mobility.

The reasons for pursuing education across borders vary amongst students. These motivations range from seeking better quality education and personal growth (King & Sondhi, 2018) to achieving social, economic and residential mobility (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). The factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad can be categorised into "push" and "pull" factors. "Push" factors are conditions in the home country that drive students to seek education elsewhere, such as limited access to

quality higher education, political instability, or economic challenges. Conversely, "pull" factors are attributes of the host country that attract students, such as the reputation of educational institutions, quality of education, availability of specific programs, cultural ties, and the promise of better career opportunities. Mazzarol and Soutar's study on "push" and "pull" factors provides a thrifty explanation: “ "Push" factors operate within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study. "Pull" factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students. Some of these factors are inherent in the source country, some in the host country and others in the students themselves” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82). This framework helps in understanding the multifaceted motivations behind students' decisions to pursue higher education abroad.

In the 21st century, ISM has reached unprecedented levels following closely the arc of globalised communications. In the year 2000, international student mobility was already on an upward trajectory, with UNESCO reporting approximately 2 million students studying abroad. By 2021, despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of international students had risen to over 6.4 million representing a significant increase over two decades (IOM, 2024.). International students and their direct spend on education pre covid was USD 196 billion. This spend size is expected to grow to USD 433 Billion by the end of this decade (Brothers & Blakemore, 2023). In their detailed research on education spends and flow of international students, Holon provides interesting insights and predicates their estimations on overall demand for post-secondary education. They predict an additional one billion students by 2050 riding on the aspiration of education that has been unflagging for the past 15 years or so.

Holon's analysis indicates that 37% of the international student market is dominated by the big four: Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA. The income generated from this market share for these four countries is detailed below.

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HEPI UK. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/16/international-students-boost-uk-economy-by-41-9-billion/>

NAFSA: Association of International Educators. <https://www.nafsa.org/about/about-nafsa>

The sum total of this is the prestige and revenues that the host nations gain, a realisation that has dawned on several nations, leading to a number of countries joining or aspiring to join this league. This is reflected in the shift of HE destination countries. The share of international students dropped from 40% in 2022 (Dyvik, 2023) to 37% for the big four. These countries now face increased competition from emerging educational hubs like China (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012) and maturing regional hubs.

Programs such as the European Union's Erasmus significantly contributed to this trend within Europe, promoting intra-continental mobility. In 2022 alone Erasmus supported the mobility of 246,000 students in HE (European Commission & Directorate-General for Education, 2023). The Erasmus program was initiated by the European Union in 1987, to foster enhanced collaboration among universities and higher education institutions (HEI's) throughout Europe. "Within Europe, international student mobility has been given a massive boost by the EU-financed Erasmus and Socrates programmes" (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003, p. 232). Europe's emphasis on regional priorities has played a crucial role in inspiring similar regionalisation initiatives around the globe. The forthcoming paragraphs discuss several successful regional hubs and their conceptualisation.

### **2.3 Regionalisation\ Regionalism**

A significant shift in the internationalisation of higher education over the past two decades has been the growing focus on collaborative efforts and reform initiatives at the regional level (Knight, 2008). The emergence of regional blocs, and global civil

society has been described as a key development in the shift towards a multiplex, multipolar world order (Acharya, 2017). There is an academic distinction between regionalism and regionalisation, though the terms are often used interchangeably. Regionalism denotes the “process that leads to patterns of cooperation, integration, complementarity and convergence within a particular cross-national geographical space....Regionalism in this particular sense is usually associated with a programme and strategy and may lead to formal institution-building” (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000, p. 457). Regionalisation on the other hand is “the process of building closer collaboration and alignment among...actors and systems within a defined area or framework called a region” (Knight, 2012, p. 19, as cited in Hawkins et al., 2019). It is “driven by private actors often supported and reinforced by states” (Robertson et al., 2016, p. 4).

The Bologna process and Lisbon strategy in Europe are the clearest examples of regional engagement in the field of HE, with the Bologna process drawing more than 40 countries into a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Dakowska & Velarde, 2018). The central purpose of EHEA was to “increase the employment prospects and geographical mobility of European citizens; and enhance the reputation of European Higher Education globally” (Campanini, 2015, p. 741). As evident, regionalisation of education is arising as much from the need of prestige and soft power as from economic and political compulsions. In the same fashion that the UNESCO-Bologna Accords gave rise to the EHEA, the UNESCO-International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean gave rise to IESALC, whose mission is “to contribute to the development of higher education in the Latin American and Caribbean region and its national HEI's and systems” (IESALC, 2023).

There are several examples of growing regionalisation of HE, a few of which are cited herein. Corresponding to EHEA, is the Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Area (ENLACES) created under the aegis of IESALC in November 2008 (IESALC, 2023). Africa has a similar regionalisation effort aimed at regionalising higher education in Africa (Knight, 2014). Asia has its own: ASEAN University Network (AUN, n.d.) which is comprised of 50 top universities in Southeast Asia. The Southeast Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) set up the Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (RIHED) or the higher education common area directly referencing EHEA (SEAMEO, 2009). “Within the broader Asian region, research

collaboration and exchanges between Japan, China and South Korea have also increased in recent decades. Along with a rise in informal 'bottom-up' cooperation, there have also been efforts made by the governments of the three countries to establish formalised programmes for collaborative regional research and exchange" (Hammond, 2020, p. 105, in Marginson & Xu, 2022). Separate from the Southeast Asia University Network (AUN), there is a similar network for South Asian countries, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), their flagship project in regionalising HE is expressed in its 2010 founding of South Asian University (South Asian University, n.d.). In South America there is The Federal University of Latin American Integration (UNILA) funded by the Federal Government of Brazil. The faculty, students, and educational curriculum are all directed towards establishing a perspective of the world that is "Latin American" and "Latin American regional," as opposed to a Global North perspective (Motter & Gandin, 2016).

The cases cited above demonstrate a growing demand for education systems that are more attuned to local needs and identities, enhancing student engagement and cultural pride. While the customisation of educational curricula to meet local needs can lead to disparities in educational standards and content between regions, it offers the powerful advantage of creating more germane and engaging learning experiences for students. Outside of regionalism and its supporting networks the regions themselves are thriving entities. "The rise of East Asia is apparent not only in political economy but in higher education, research and science" (Marginson & Xu, 2022, p. 4). Region, regionalism, and regionalisation have evolved successfully, with numerous success stories for India to follow.

In SAARC, India holds the pole position as the largest economy and exerts a strong cultural and social influence. This positions India well to assume regional leadership in higher education. A more detailed understanding of SAARC as a region is provided next.

### 2.3.1 SAARC - South Asia regionalisation

A collective of eight South Asian countries make up the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This is a regional intergovernmental forum aimed at promoting regional cooperation and development in South Asia. SAARC was established in 1985 and provides a platform for member countries to address various regional issues, including economic cooperation, trade, cultural exchanges, and more. The eight countries that make up SAARC are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (SAARC, n.d.). As a founding member of SAARC and the largest country in the region India plays a significant political, economic, and strategic role. India's contributions span from swift relief operations for natural disasters (Karki, 2022) to preferential trade agreements (PIB, 2022) and connectivity projects among SAARC nations (SASEC n.d.). More recently India played a pivotal role in supplying COVID-19 vaccines to SAARC countries, (B. Singh et al., 2023) at a time when wealthy countries securing large quantities of COVID-19 vaccines early in the pandemic raised concerns about vaccine inequality.

Marginson's comment on East Asia, noting the absence of "a consensual regional identity and machinery of intergovernmental cooperation," (Marginson & Xu, 2022, p. 5), rings as true for SAARC. India's relationship with its fellow SAARC members has been characterised by both cooperation and unevenness. Additionally, there is the matter of Afghanistan. Security challenges, including internal conflicts and terrorism, have led to its absence from summits (Bhattacharjee, 2021). India's relationship with Pakistan is the other prominent example of such unevenness, leading to occasional gridlocks (Shukla, 2020). With issues of security and distrust dogging India's relationship with Afghanistan and Pakistan, the sub regional ties are stronger and more meaningful than the ties with the composite regional bloc (Poudel, 2022). This has led to the establishment of a subregional grouping, BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India). The subregional grouping is the focus of this study in the context of the regionalisation of higher education in South Asia.

India and Nepal share deep-rooted historical, cultural, and religious connections. They have an open border, and people-to-people contacts are extensive due to a shared history and common languages. India is Nepal's largest trading partner (OEC, n.d.),

“largest source of foreign investments, besides providing transit for almost entire third country trade of Nepal” (Embassy of India, n.d.). In recognition of their long standing ties, the two countries have signed a friendship and peace treaty that amongst other privileges accords “nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature” (Treaty of Peace, 1950, Article 7). The visa free privileges between the countries is a boon for student mobility.

India's relationship with Bhutan parallels that with Nepal in many ways. The mutually beneficial economic ties between Bhutan and India are a cornerstone of their bilateral relationship. India remains not only Bhutan's primary development partner but also its foremost trade partner (India Bhutan Treaties, 2006). Similar to Nepal, India has a friendship treaty with Bhutan, that declares “perpetual peace and friendship” (India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, 2007, p. 1) between the two nations, and allowing visa free privileges (Bhutan Visa, 2024) between the two countries.

Just as India maintains close and cooperative relationships with Nepal and Bhutan, it also shares a strategic partnership with Bangladesh. This partnership is strengthened by their extensive shared border and geographic proximity, abetting trade, and connectivity (Pattanaik, 2012). India's role in Bangladesh's war for independence (Haider, 2009) has led to a high trust relationship, and the two countries “are regarded as a role model in the world regarding relations among neighbouring countries” (Huq, 2023, p. 10). Unlike Bhutan and Nepal, there is a visa requirement for Bangladeshi citizens to travel or work in India. However, one concession is that Bangladeshi passport holders are exempt (IVAC, n.d.) from paying a visa fee when applying for an Indian visa.

Naturally, India faces several contentious issues with each of these countries (Huq, 2023). Despite these challenges, the respective national governments have demonstrated a commitment to resolving disputes through dialogue and strengthening ties in various domains.

In the context of the overall beneficial and productive relationships and considering the leadership role India plays in the BBIN subregion, this study now examines the

level of higher educational mobility from these countries to India. Table 2 provides the total number of students from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal (BBN) who go abroad to study. Table 3 lists the percentage of inbound students to India as a percentage of the total outbound tertiary students from BBN.

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The figure was sourced at UNESCO (2024) <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=3804>

Table 3 data reveals that inbound numbers from BBN countries have either experienced minimal growth from a small base, as seen with Bangladesh, or have shown an overall decline from the base year of 2017, as observed with Bhutan and Nepal. This prompts the question of why interest in India as a higher education destination remains sluggish.

Numerous factors, ranging from personal and institutional to national and global, influence the trends in ISM. Government policies in both home and host countries significantly affect international student mobility. In China, where there has been a sharp increase in inbound international students, government policy has a hand in shaping this inflow. "It is fair to suggest that Beijing is actively, if not aggressively, using its ISM policy to widen and strengthen its influence among a long list of developing

countries, particularly those from Africa” (Chan & Wu, 2020, p. 527). China’s Belt and Road initiative too serves as a ‘major instrument in its overarching empire building goal ...’ (Jain, 2020, p. 551). The Canadian government has also played an active role in attracting international students through deliberate policy making and a path to residency for students (Dafri & Braun, 2022). In this context the next section explores the Indian government's stated position and efforts.

## **2.4 India: The imperative to internationalise higher education**

Currently, 43.3 million students (AISHE, 2022) are enrolled in higher education in India, and inbound students constitute 0.1% of the total student population. Table 4 lists the number of inbound students to India over the past six years.

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The figure was sourced at AISHE. (2022). All India Survey of Higher Education. Ministry of Education, India. <https://aishe.gov.in/>

When comparing the inbound student numbers between 2017 and 2022, we observe that, over the past six years, the number of inbound students has not increased but has, in fact, decreased. The infinitesimal uptick in the years 2020 and 2021 could be attributed to COVID disruptions, with travel being far easier to a neighbouring country than to distant destinations. As per Brookings institute, the year-on-year growth of students from neighbouring countries entering India has declined from 30% in 2011-2012 to 9% in 2018-2019 (Xavier et al., 2020). This decreasing trend is similarly reflected in the number of incoming students from BBN to India. Refer Table 5.

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The figure was sourced at AISHE. (2022). All India Survey of Higher Education. Ministry of Education, India. <https://aishe.gov.in/>

While the number of inbound students to India in 2022 is 46,878 (refer Table 4), the number of outbound students from India is thirty times higher, at 1.3 million (MEA, n.d.). Unlike China, which faces a similar imbalance of inbound and outbound students, Indian government policies on HE remained inward-looking. The stark imbalance between outbound and inbound international students leads to significant brain drain. There is also the matter of capital drain. The expenditure incurred by Indian students studying abroad in 2022 was \$47 billion, which is estimated to grow to \$70 billion by 2025 (ISMR, n.d.). These issues highlight the urgent need for a strategic shift in India's approach to internationalisation of its HE system. For a lower middle income country like India (World Bank, 2023), losing capital and talent on such a scale is a compelling reason to make the internationalisation of HE an imperative. The quality of education is a fundamental precondition for successful internationalisation. Internationalisation can act as a catalyst for enhancing the quality of higher education domestically. It can help reduce the number of students leaving the country while simultaneously increasing the number of inbound international students. Agarwal avers, "international student recruitment in the Indian context needs to be seen as a strategy to promote the quality of its own system...." (Agarwal, 2009, P.13).

Higher education has become a force for prosperity, both by increasing the nation's human capital and serving as a source for export income. The success of China and the emergence of non-Anglophone regional hubs have prompted central policymakers to revisit India's slow progress on internationalisation. Some early initiatives included the launch of GIAN (MOE, 2015-a) in 2015, followed by SWAYAM in 2017 (MOE, 2024-b), and SPARC (SPARC, 2024) in 2018, among others.

GIAN (Global Initiative for Academic Network) is a program funded by the Ministry of Education, Government of India (GOI). This program aims to leverage the international talent pool of distinguished faculty members, scientists, and entrepreneurs, fostering their collaboration with Indian HEI's. The goal is to enhance the country's academic resources and elevate India's scientific and technological capabilities to a global standard of excellence. It has so far attracted about 800 scholars from 56 countries to offer courses in Indian HEI's (Varghese, 2020b).

Building on the collaborative framework established by GIAN, another significant initiative is SPARC (Scheme for Promotion of Academic Research and Collaboration). SPARC fosters research partnerships between highly regarded international institutions and Indian institutions. These collaborations augment the academic credibility of domestic institutions and improve the quality of the curriculum by incorporating research-led inputs.

In parallel with these initiatives, SWAYAM (Study Web of Active Young Aspiring Minds), a MOOC platform launched in 2017, serves as another channel for internationalisation much like the open universities in the UK. SWAYAM includes courses designed by the top technology institutes of the country in the fields of engineering and physical sciences, both at undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate levels (PG). The platform's international reach is evidenced by assessment centres located in Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Sri Lanka, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Salmiya (Bargavi & Shanmugam, 2024).

Additionally in 2016, the GOI set out to establish Institutes of Eminence, a scheme that supports identified HEI's to become "world class teaching and research institutions" (UGC, 2024, p. 1). This effort mirrors the global trend of countries investing in their higher education systems to create institutions that can compete on the world stage and drive national development (Yudkevich et al., 2023). These top-tier institutions are developed to compete globally through significant funding and support for research, and academic excellence, thus helping attract international students and faculty. India hopes to reap such benefits through these efforts. The New Education Policy (NEP 2020) has further emphasised the goal of the internationalisation of education in India, outlining a comprehensive plan. "This policy appreciates the critical need to promote India as a global study destination...." (UGC, 2021, p.8).

While several meaningful government initiatives have been taken towards empowering internationalisation there remains a significant gap between policy and practice, with most reviews asking “for more explicit implementation strategies to effectively translate policy provisions into action” (Dwivedi & Joshi, 2023, p. 4436). NEP mentions the research and innovation investment in India “at 0.69% of GDP as compared to 2.8% in the United States of America, 4.3% in Israel and 4.2% in South Korea.” (NEP, 2020, p. 45). The parliamentary bill establishing the national research fund as a measure to improve the research investment in India was passed (The Anusandhan National Research Foundation Bill, 2023) four years after its stated need, an indication of the slow pace of reforms.

Private HEI have played a crucial role in filling in these gaps, striving to build a quality reputation. “The massification of the [education] sector mainly relied on private institutions and non-state funding” (Panigra & Varghese, 2022, p. 5). Private HEIs in India have existed since the 1980’s. They sprang up as a result of deliberate state policy of privatisation to fulfil the need for skills and specialisation as demanded by a growing economy. These institutions were teaching colleges offering degrees at an undergraduate level. While the colleges were typically of low quality, that was not necessarily the case with the emergent private universities. “... most of the universities are established by corporate giants. They are not concerned... [with]... immediate returns. There is a difference in the attitude towards revenue generation....They are fighting to establish their legitimacy as academically oriented, research oriented, high-quality HEI's” (Varghese, 2024). One scholar commenting on this, notes, “A good number of them have been promoted to the global top 1000, perhaps the youngest universities in the world to achieve this status” (Panigra & Varghese, 2022, p. 5), consequently playing a leading role in attracting international students.

Given the significant role of the private sector in India's higher education system, and its accounting “for 78 percent of the higher education institutions... and more than two-thirds of total student enrolment in higher education” (Panigra & Varghese, 2022, p. 9), It is natural to want to explore its potential further, specifically in the area of

attracting international students through a closer look at one private university in the country.

## **2.5 Gap in literature**

There is a considerable body of work on the internationalisation of higher education in India (Altbach, 2018; Chattopadhyay et al., 2021; Khare, 2021; Joshi & Ahir, 2019; Mittal & Pani, 2020; Varghese, 2020a). These scholarly writings discuss the necessity of internationalising education both at home and through cross border student movement to India. They cover the initiatives taken by the GOI to support this vision and propose additional measures the government could take to further strengthen the achievement of this goal. An important point emphasised, by most, is the necessity of internationalisation at home, which is considered a crucial pre-emptive step to international student recruitment. This approach involves integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the curriculum, pedagogy, research, staffing, student body composition, and service functions of institutions, regardless of student mobility (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

Rising recognition of India's emergence as a regional education hub is explored in Mona Khare's paper (Khare, 2015). Other research studies on the regionalisation of HE consider India to be well positioned to assume "headship in cross border higher education in the South Asian Region" and contribute to capacity building in the region" (Yeravdekar & Tiwari, 2014, p. 377). The significant role of universities in attracting both domestic and international students has been extensively documented in numerous studies worldwide (Abubaker et al., 2010; Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2019; Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020).

However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the role of public or private universities in India on interregional student mobility choices. Pawar's study (Pawar & Dasgupta, 2024) on the factors international students consider when choosing India as a higher education destination, explores the perceptions of 16 students from Asia and Africa. It does not focus on students from neighbouring countries or cover student

satisfaction which this study aims to do. To date, no survey has been conducted to gauge the overall satisfaction of cross-border students from BBN with their educational experience at a private university in India. There was an annual survey on international students in India, conducted by Association of Indian universities (AIU), the last one of which took place in 2014-15 (Qamar & Bhalla, 2017). No further surveys from AIU have been published since. The 2014-15 survey report primarily covered the number of international students coming to India, their distribution across universities, programmes, subjects, gender, region and home countries they originate from.

The present research contributes to the literature by offering insights into the determining choice factors for international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, the strategic implications for private universities aiming to attract students from these countries, and the strategic implications for India as an emerging regional higher education destination.

Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the potential role of a private university in India, in driving increased international student inflow from BBN, based on the strength of its curriculum, infrastructure, and overall experience offered. Additionally, this study explores the relationship between student satisfaction and subsequent enrolment growth. It is hoped that with good practices, an individual private university in India can successfully increase its enrolments from BBN, even when there is an overall declining trend of students from these regions coming into India.

The themes of this thesis are relevant to India's current efforts to become a "global study destination" (NEP, 2020, p. 39) and to the discussions surrounding the various means of achieving this goal. Given this context, the next chapter outlines the thesis topic and research questions.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Research rationale and research questions**

The Indian government's efforts to attract inbound international students have shown room for improvement, especially when compared to the proactive measures taken by countries like China and Canada. Critics have highlighted that internationalisation has not been prioritised as a centralised policy agenda in Indian higher education, gaining visibility through individual institutional initiatives rather than being a focal point in policymakers' discussions. Dr Yeravdekar is unequivocal in her denunciation: "Internationalisation is neither channelled nor is it directed through central, nodal bodies; it does not benefit sufficiently from budget apportionments; it carries on in an unplanned ad-hoc manner, and often it does not find place in official documents and catalogues" (Yeravedakar, p. 364, as cited in Mittal & Pani, 2020). As a result, policy makers are exhorting Indian universities to support national goals by pursuing internationalisation through their own self-standing initiatives. Prof DP Singh the former chairman of UGC India, the apex body regulating higher education in the country entreats, "I call upon the Higher Education Institutions in India to come forward and take up various initiatives directed towards internationalisation of higher education in the larger interest of our students and enduring educational goals for our nation" (UGC, 2021, p. 5). Until the Indian government's policies on internationalisation, now enunciated in NEP 2020, takes hold, the responsibility for internationalisation has, to a certain degree, been transferred to universities.

My study titled "India as a Regional hub for Higher Education - A Destination for International Students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. An Exploratory Study of the Role of a Private Indian University" explores the role of a private university in attracting international students from neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal and provide insights that can inform further work in this area.

The core of the study is addressed by the two research questions detailed in Table 6.

Table 6: Research questions (RQ)

1. How do international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal perceive their academic journey and overall experience at BTS <sup>1</sup> ?
2. Has the university achieved year-on-year growth in the number of students from these three countries? If so, what factors have contributed to this growth? If not, what are the reasons for its inability to do so?

The first research question was designed with the premise that the lived experiences of students are a crucial factor that can influence the growth or decline of student numbers from these three countries. The second research question builds on the anticipated results of the first. If the majority of student experiences were positive, did this automatically lead to an increase in student inflow from these countries? If so, what lessons could be derived and used as a template for other universities? If not, what were the reasons behind this divergence? Did it suggest that the independent initiatives of a university only go so far and that there is a need for government support beyond a certain point or that there were other factors at play including the University's efforts at internationalisation?

The segment below outlines the research design developed to explore these questions.

### 3.2 Research design

Social research seeks to understand the world we inhabit by exploring people's behaviours and activities and striving to comprehend the rationale behind them (Clark et al., 2019). This field aims to illuminate various aspects of human life and society using either quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods research. While neither

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<sup>1</sup> BTS is the pseudonym for the university under study.

research type is strait jacketed by inviolable rules, they are identifiable by their most common usage and practices. Transitioning from these general concepts to the specifics of research design, it is important to recognize that numerous options and techniques are available throughout the research journey, and the choice of a particular tool or technique depends on how well it fits the nature of the research problem and research questions. Research design involves “the choice of a basic perspective on data production with a specification of what methods and techniques we want to use for selecting, collecting, and analysing such data that the project needs.” (Bukve, 2019, p. 74).

In my research, I aim to explore people's experiences and understand their perceptions resulting from those experiences. To achieve this, I have chosen a qualitative approach, employing a case study methodology. Qualitative research is known for providing “rich insight and understanding (interpretivism),” where the process involves initial data collection followed by the development of theories (induction)” (Clark et al., 2019, p. 16). Within this framework, a case study research design is particularly effective, offering a detailed examination of complex phenomena within their real-life context (Merriam & Merriam, 1998). The case study approach allows for the collection of data from multiple sources, being especially useful for addressing ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions (Yin, 2009). This enables capturing of diverse perspectives and providing a holistic view of the issue.

Stake (Stake, 1995), classifies a case study as either ‘intrinsic,’ focusing on its own interests, or ‘instrumental,’ providing an understanding of issues beyond the case itself. This research adopts an instrumental approach, seeking to gather diverse perspectives from multiple students across various countries. By doing so, it aims to uncover underlying patterns and broader implications related to international student experiences and mobility. The insights gained from these individual cases will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student inflow to Indian universities, thereby providing valuable information that can be applied to similar contexts and inform policy and practice on a larger scale.

A known limitation of a case study is that the scale of the research is often confined to smaller numbers (Channaveer & Baikady, 2022) because of its in-depth and time-intensive nature. This limitation arises from the need to collect and analyse detailed,

context-rich data, which can be laborious and time-consuming. However, this is a trade-off for the nuanced and comprehensive understanding that case studies provide. While large-scale studies may reveal broader patterns and trends, case studies offer a deep, granular insight into specific phenomena, capturing the complexity and richness of individual experiences that might be overlooked in more extensive research. Given the small size of the case study, with its focus on a single private university in India, the prudent identification of the specific university and the student participants to be interviewed was of great importance. This careful selection process was essential to ensure that the results and insights derived from the study are credible.

The following section on research procedures will elaborate on the participant identification, data collection and data analysis approach.

### **3.3 Research procedures**

The research procedures below delineate the process of selecting the university for the study, selecting student participants for interviews, and the modes of data collection and analysis.

#### **3.3.1 Selecting the university**

To undertake this research, there were several reasons why a certain kind of private university was selected. Each criterion was chosen to ensure that the university was representative of a high standard of education thereby making it a foundationally good choice for international students seeking to study in India, and hence an appropriate test of issues of the student experience and student satisfaction.

Below is an explanation of each criterion used in the process of identifying and selecting a suitable university:

1. **Private university:** The preference was for a private university as they often differ from public universities in terms of governance and funding. Importantly the private universities have much greater autonomy in their curriculum setting

and program offerings, making them a conducive environment for internationalisation.

2. **Listing in a global ranking system:** Inclusion in a global ranking system, such as Times Higher Education (Ross, 2017), was another criterion. This was to make certain that the university meets certain international standards of education quality, research output, and overall institutional performance. Even if the rank was not high, mere inclusion signifies a level of recognition and credibility on a global scale.
3. **Top 100 Listing in the Indian ranking framework:** The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF, n.d.) is a comprehensive ranking system in India that assesses universities on various parameters such as teaching, learning, research, and outreach. Being in the top 100 indicates that the university is among the best in the country, with a certain standard of education and institutional management.
4. **NAAC accreditation of A++ :** The National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India (NAAC, n.d.) provides accreditation to HEI's in India as a way of marking the quality status of the institution. An A++ grade is the highest possible rating given by NAAC. This criterion ensures that the university maintains rigorous academic standards and continual improvement.
5. **Relatively high student population from BBN :** This alignment is directly relevant to the focus of this thesis.
6. **Substantial experience in internationalisation:** Internationalisation refers to a university's efforts to engage globally through partnerships, exchange programs, and attracting international students and faculty. I sought universities with at least a decade of experience in internationalisation, as this duration suggests a sustained commitment to global engagement.
7. **Multidisciplinary:** Diversity in academic offerings enhances the university's ability to attract a broader range of students and does not impose intrinsic constraints on course choices and thereby on student volume.

After identifying potential universities, I emailed the head of the international student division at my top choice. I introduced myself as a student from Oxford University and explained the nature of my study. Fortunately, I received approval on my first attempt and did not need to contact other universities on my shortlist. This approval allowed

me to conduct research, including student interviews and meeting with a senior university official. Although I had hoped to access university documents on international student enrolment and admission criteria, their year-on-year growth, and the growth targets ahead, this request was denied as the data were considered competitive business information. This kind of data is not available in the public domain either. This was a challenge I could not overcome.

Being able to identify students from all the three countries within one university was extremely beneficial. It allowed me to complete the study on time and avoid the complications of coordinating with multiple universities.

By carefully selecting a university that meets all these criteria, the study aims to ensure that the insights and conclusions drawn are robust, credible and relevant to the research questions. The chosen university represents a microcosm of high-quality private higher education in India, making the findings relevant and valuable for stakeholders across the educational spectrum. For reasons of confidentiality, I am unable to provide additional information on its location, size, or any other feature that could lead readers to speculate about its identity.

### **3.3.2 Selecting student participants for interviews**

The selection of participants for interviews was guided by specific criteria, mirroring the careful approach used in choosing the university. These criteria were designed to align with the thesis topic and research questions, and ensure a diverse range of profiles, providing balanced and comprehensive data.

Firstly, participants were chosen from both UG and PG programs. This approach helped capture the experiences of students at different stages of their academic journey. By including both levels of study, the research would be able to account for the varying challenges and opportunities encountered by students at different academic stages.

Secondly, participants were selected from both genders. Gender diversity was crucial to avoid skewing the data towards a particular tendency and to capture the nuanced

experiences and perspectives that different genders might bring. This inclusion aimed to provide a more holistic view of the student experience.

Additionally, the selection included students from both STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and non-STEM disciplines. This criterion was essential to understand the differences and similarities in the academic and social experiences of students across diverse fields of study. It ensured that the research did not favour one academic stream over another and provided a balanced representation of the students' academic experiences.

A critical caveat in the selection process was that no participant should have just joined the university. This requirement helped verify that all participants had enough time and experience at the university to provide meaningful insights. New students might not have had sufficient exposure to the university's environment, programs, and culture, which could limit the depth and relevance of their contributions.

Furthermore, it was non-negotiable that participating students belong to one of the three countries within the BBN region (Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal), as the thesis aimed to examine the experiences of students from these specific countries. The participant size was set at 6-7 students from each country to ensure balanced representation and allow for a comparative analysis of their experiences. Additionally, this number was manageable within the narrow time window allocated for the thesis submission. By adhering to these carefully considered criteria, the selection process aimed to gather a diverse and representative sample of participants.

These criteria were shared with the university, which then sent out an email to their students introducing my work and inviting them to contact me voluntarily and directly if they wished to participate. One of the unalterable rules of the study was that all students must participate voluntarily. Voluntary participation was crucial for ethical reasons and to guarantee that the data collected was genuine and reflective of the students' true experiences and opinions.

Once a student expressed their willingness to participate in the study by sending me an email, I provided them with a participant information sheet (refer Appendix A). This document explained the nature of my research, assured confidentiality, outlined ethical considerations, and informed them of the recourse channels available for any

research-related grievances they might have. Table below presents the key profile characteristics of the students (n= 15) interviewed.

Table 7: Profile of students interviewed

Profile	Count	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	9	60%
Female	6	40%
<b>Region</b>		
Bangladesh	3	20%
Bhutan	6	40%
Nepal	6	40%
<b>Level of study</b>		
UG	10	67%
PG	5	33%
<b>Stream</b>		
STEM	13	87%
Non STEM	2	13%
<b>Scholarship</b>	15	
Full- 100% tuition fees boarding and lodging	11	73%
Partial- 50% Tuition fees only	4	27%

As the cohort is small, the characteristics of individuals have been kept broad to avoid identification, and some demographic details such as age and stream of study have been excluded.

### 3.3.3 Data collection

The research utilised both primary and secondary data sources.

Primary sources:

- Student interviews: These were the main source for uncovering students' academic and residential experiences at the university.
- University official interview: An in-depth discussion with one of the senior-most university officials, who was also the head of their international student division, provided primary data related to the issues faced by the university in growth of inbound students from BBN.

Secondary sources:

- Search engines: used in the university selection process. This involved reviewing various profiles, characteristics and rankings of Indian private universities to assess their suitability and make an informed selection for this study.
- BTS website: to understand its offerings, infrastructure, research, accreditations, and any published data that would enhance my knowledge of BTS.

#### Primary source: student interviews

With prior knowledge of the research topic and details, the university approached the student cohort from BBN regarding my research. Interested students were instructed to contact me directly. This approach helped maintain anonymity, ensuring that personal details were collected solely by me. Once the students contacted me, I responded with an email (Appendix B) introducing them to my research. Additionally, via the participant information sheet (Appendix A) I provided clear information on the voluntary nature of the research, their freedom to withdraw data if needed, and the mechanisms for raising a grievance if they were dissatisfied with the manner in which the research was conducted. Once they confirmed their willingness to participate, I scheduled an interview at a mutually convenient time.

The intent was to conduct all interviews online using the Microsoft Teams platform. However, for two students, it was a combination of MS Teams and a questionnaire. One student's poor network connectivity led to us settling for a questionnaire over email after two failed attempts on MS Teams. For the second student, scheduling constraints resulted in a hybrid approach, with a 33-minute online interview serving primarily for clarification. Additionally, two students preferred to respond purely over email due to scheduling issues; related clarifications were also exchanged through email. The majority of the students interviewed were identified through their direct emails to me, expressing their interest in participating. To address the shortfall in numbers, I employed snowball sampling by asking these initial participants to refer to other potential candidates. Subsequently, I contacted the students identified through snowball sampling directly. The table below provides a breakdown of the participant type and the mode of each interview.

Table 8: Break up of interview mode and participant source

	Source of student identification	Mode of interview- MS Teams	Mode of interview- MS Teams + email questionnaire	Mode of interview- email questionnaire
Direct mail to me	12	11	1	0
Snowball sampling	3	0	1	2
Total number of students	15	11	2	2

I had intended to interview 18 students, 6 from each of the three countries. However, I faced challenges in meeting the required participant size from Bangladesh. Despite repeated attempts and seeking referrals from students I had already interviewed, I fell short by 3 participants, all from Bangladesh. It was a shortfall I was unable to bridge. I discussed the same with my supervisor. He felt that though the situation was regrettable, a cohort size of 15 was acceptable for this study.

At the onset of each interview, I obtained verbal consent to record the session and sought permission to quote participants as needed, assuring them of anonymity. I prepared an interview guidance sheet containing a series of questions derived from the research question (Appendix C). From this guide, I selected specific questions to ask the respondents. The semi-structured interviews lasted between forty to fifty minutes, mostly within the promised 45-minute range as stated in their participant information sheet. The open ended nature of the majority of questions provided the necessary flexibility and control to the interviewee, helping to better balance the power dynamic in the interaction (Drever, 2003). Initially, I had considered piloting my interview questions with a few students but given the logistics of securing an adequate number of participants and the fact that April and May are examination months, it seemed more practical to proceed with the actual interviews and adjust the questions based on insights from the first couple of sessions. In the outcome, many useful questions emerged from the interaction with the interviewees and were subsequently incorporated into the interview set.

The interviews were conducted over an 8-week period. I approached 25 students, of whom 15 participated. Constant follow-up with the students for participation and dealing with no-shows at the appointed interview times was one of the expected challenges that I got past without too much disruption. All interviews were utilised in establishing the results and insights. The language used for both interviews and email interactions was exclusively English. Some of the participating students had questions about the application process at elite universities, including Oxford. I provided them with guidance and shared links to the relevant academic programs offered at the University of Oxford. After the interviews, I spent considerable time cleaning up the transcripts, as they were often inaccurate due to network issues, voice quality, or unfamiliar accents.

#### Primary source: official interview:

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this interview was to gain an understanding of the university's trajectory in attracting students from BBN and any fluctuations in their enrolment numbers. I initiated the exchange by sharing an information sheet, apprising the official of the nature of my research (Appendix D). It took repeated attempts to get the attention of the appropriate official to engage in this conversation.

Initially, the interview was to be conducted with a middle-level functionary, but it was later changed to a senior-level official. In hindsight I understand the reasons why. The university was understandably cautious about disclosing competitive information. To move things along, I sent a list of questions in advance (Appendix E), suggesting that responses could be in percentages or in generalisations to protect their data. This possibly helped.

The online interview was arranged by the university office on the Zoom platform. I took frantic notes feeling timid asking for recording consent, in light of their initial reluctance to participate. The scheduled 30 minute call extended to nearly an hour. The senior official was kind enough to respond to all the questions, though for some he requested that I keep the information to myself for my understanding alone and not publish it in the study. This explains why there may not be a complete match between the questions asked and the information reported.

### **3.3.4 Data analysis**

For data analysis, I opted for a manual approach. I chose to bypass computer-aided analysis to avoid the trap of quantifying findings at the expense of focusing on finer details that are a cornerstone of qualitative research (Harding, 2013). Additionally, this approach provided the flexibility to avoid the rigid and hierarchical coding structures required by some software packages. I was also concerned that my limited understanding of the comprehensive features in popular software like NVivo might hinder my ability to fully utilise my data set. Fortunately, given the small size of the data set, the manual approach was feasible and effective.

The guiding principle of research output is validity - “ The extent to which conclusions drawn from research provide an accurate description of what happened....” (Jupp, 2006, p. 311).

To ensure validity, I followed Harding's (Harding, 2013) advice in:

- Keeping my research questions at the forefront of any analysis
- Practising reflexivity

- Conducting thorough checks on the accuracy of my findings. This involved rereading the transcripts to verify the conclusions drawn, seeking out data that contradicted the established explanations to evaluate if alternative interpretations might be more valid (Silverman, 2006).

For the analysis, I started with a meticulous reading and re-reading of the transcripts. Next, I distilled the data from each interview into concise summaries, reducing the extensive data to the most relevant points for analysis. Each summary, which was mapped by questions and students, filtered the responses to capture those most relevant to the objective of each question, while eliminating duplications and rapport building content. This approach allowed for easy comparison between student summaries and helped validate some data points. For example, all students who were asked about medical facilities mentioned an onsite hospital.

My sheet had demographic details of each student to help analyse patterns that could emerge from any homogeneity of the respondents such as their country or the nature or level of academic program. Where required, these details have been anonymised for confidentiality and replaced by a simple student number.





The next step was to compare and contrast, to identify similarities and differences between responses, which as Barbour notes, is at the core of qualitative data analysis (R. Barbour, 2014). The approach I used for this was the “constant comparative method” (CCM) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) first advocated by Glaser & Strauss as part of their grounded theory methodology. The primary rationale for employing CCM, as identified by Dey, is that “comparison is the engine through which we can generate insights, by identifying patterns of similarity or difference within the data” (Dey, 2004, p. 88).

During the analysis and interpretation stages, I sometimes used basic counting or calculated the average number of occurrences of a similar response or where the content of the response was comparable. Counting to establish commonality or differences has been accepted by various scholars to be a needed part of qualitative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and an important component of CCM (R. S. Barbour, 2008). Howard Becker has supported the inclusion of what Becker called “quasi-statistics” (Becker, 1970); “Simple counts of things to make statements such as

“some,” “usually,” and “most” more precise”(Maxwell, 2010, p. 1). To determine the commonality of responses as ‘usually’, ‘most’ or majority, I set the threshold at two-thirds. For example, if 10 out of the 15 participants I interviewed gave similar responses to the same question, I considered it an agreement. To clarify further, not all students were asked the same questions, as some questions might not have been relevant to certain students. For instance, a student living off-campus was not asked about on-campus housing or food quality. Therefore, if only 10 students were asked the same question, it was considered that there was an agreement across the group if 7 of them gave similar responses.

To provide an overall sense of how each category fared, I have summarised the findings at the end of each category with a visual representation. This approach aims to help in the rapid identification of areas of action for the university. The legend for the visual representations can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Visual legend

	> 80% responses positive
	> 70% responses positive
	> 50% responses negative
	> 80% responses negative

Once the CCM approach was finalised, the next step was to identify main ideas within the data and distil them to an at-a-glance size. The purpose of this process was to capture the essence of the data through coding. “Coding involves attaching labels to data in a manner that captures the meaning while reducing the amount of content” (Harding, 2013, p. 107), helping in streamlining the data for thematic analysis. Coding aligns well with CCM as “a code draws attention to a commonality within a dataset” (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 130), thereby revealing differences as well. Few grounded theory researchers advocate line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014), but I opted for a more adaptive and practical approach. When sentences seemed inherently linked, I went ahead and applied a single code to larger sections of text to ensure proper

understanding. I omitted coding certain data if I felt it did not contribute to the analysis. Whenever possible, I aligned the codes closely with the words and phrases found in the original data. I kept a simple page on coding notes to refer back to for consistency of coding decisions.

The codes were organically grouped into clusters based on their roles or characteristics. This made it easier to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the participants' responses. The data were grouped into code families, which were then placed into a priori categories of research interest (Table 9).

**Important note** - *BTS is an anonymized moniker for the university under study*

Table 9: Categorising code families

Category	Code families
1 - Information	Learning about BTS Reasons for choosing BTS Scholarships
2 - Infrastructure	Housing Food Physical security and safety Medical facilities Administrative support
3 - Wellbeing	Making friends Counselling support Equal opportunity Grievance handling Religious freedom
4 - Academics	Curriculum Teaching Labs India degree credibility vs home country
5 - Overall	Satisfaction with BTS Recommending BTS BTS areas of improvement Other preferred HE destinations

Categories 1-4 were built into the interview questions as they aligned with the literature on pull and push factors influencing international student mobility. Category 5 was

developed to formulate recommendations for improvement and changes for BTS, based on student participant feedback. Leading from here patterns were discerned, and themes and relationships began to emerge. Thematic analysis has faced criticism for its tendency to focus on broad similarities and differences, often at the expense of finer details. This approach can result in descriptions that are somewhat detached from the unique experiences of individuals. However, this kind of analysis is a pragmatic way of representing multiple experiences (Gibson & Brown, 2009), easing its grasp for the reader. It is a functional tool in presenting qualitative research findings.

The data analysis and upcoming findings pertain to the information and meaning derived from the student interviews. The interview with the university official is relevant as it highlights the issues that limit BTS's ability to grow its international student population from BBN and provides a broad overview of student growth trends from these three countries. Together, these sources of information provide a holistic understanding of the factors influencing student satisfaction and mobility, and they help to contextualise the broader challenges faced by India in becoming a regional education hub.

As mentioned, as part of my study, I requested access to data from BTS, related to BBN's international student recruitment and marketing strategies, as well as trends in application numbers and BTS's policies on international student selection. Unfortunately, my request was not approved. Access to these documents would have allowed for a more comprehensive data analysis, potentially identifying correlations, if not causation, within the data. From the outset, I was aware that my request might be considered sensitive due to the competitive nature of the information. I was not particularly surprised when the request was denied.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethics are necessitated by the inequitable relationship between the researcher and those that are the subject of research (Manion et al., 2002). The benefits to the researcher are apparent, but those are not the same for the respondents. In actual fact there are risks for the respondent: risks of exposure, breach of confidentiality and impact on their emotional state depending on the nature of questions or the manner in which the research is conducted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). “Any research project that involves the collection of data directly from the people inevitably involves an element of cost to the participant” (Harding, 2013, p. 57). At the very least, the participants contribute their time. To ensure that I was sensitised to these and other related issues I successfully completed a research integrity training course.

To minimise risks and potential harm to the respondents, several considerations were employed and honoured. These began with informed consent and extended to assurance of anonymity and confidentiality (Appendix A). Careful attention was given to balancing the benefits of the research against any potential risks. These considerations have been documented in the submission to the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) of Oxford, for which I have received the approval. has been approved (Appendix F).

I aim to support both the respondents and the university with well-considered and sincere recommendations. My goal is to faithfully capture the concerns and issues expressed by the respondents so that the university can take note and make improvements for the benefit of everyone involved. Through this advocacy and other efforts mentioned above, I strive to fulfil my ethical responsibility.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### **4.1 Presentation of findings**

The boundary between data analysis and interpretation is often blurred, as these processes frequently overlap. Despite this intertwining, interpretation necessarily follows data analysis. Interpretation emerges distinctly from analysis when "the researcher transcends factual data and cautious analyses and begins to probe into what is to be made of them" (Wolcott, 1990, p. 36). This phase involves moving beyond simply understanding the data to exploring its deeper meanings and implications, in the light of the research questions, thus allowing the researcher to construct new insights and in some cases, theories, drawing on the analysed information.

For interpretations and findings, I adhered to a few simple guidelines. All conclusions had to be directly supported by the original data, with appropriate qualifications based on the robustness of the evidence. Any conclusions drawn were within the confines of the data; for example, avoiding making unspecified claims based on data from a single individual. Additionally, in the process of distilling raw data into broader insights, I aimed to preserve the student participants' original language as much as possible, in several instances incorporating their exact words into the final analysis. This approach additionally allows readers to evaluate the conclusions through the lens of those original quotes.

I believe the most effective way to present the findings is to organise them by category, addressing both similarities and differences within each segment and highlighting any variations at the country or academic program level. By juxtaposing similarities and differences within the same segment, readers will gain a comprehensive and balanced understanding of each category. I will present my findings using the same categories as those created and mentioned in Table 9, though not necessarily in the same order. The details of one category might be incorporated into another. For instance, the response to "How did you hear about BTS?" is coded under the "Information" category in Table 9. However, it is presented under the "Wellbeing" category in the findings chapter, as it coheres better with that category's content. This approach allows for a more fluid discussion of the interrelated aspects of the data.

For ease of reference, I have listed the categories again in Table 10.

Table 10: Categorising findings

Category
Information: reasons for choosing BTS
Infrastructure: quality and conveniences
Wellbeing: social, mental and religious
Academics: Curriculum, teaching support, degree credentials
Overall: satisfaction and recommending BTS

## 4.2 Category wise findings- students

### 4.2.1 Infrastructure related

(Housing, food, medical facilities, safety, software platforms, administrative support)

Frederick Herzberg, an American psychologist became an influential figure in the world of workforce motivation. Two factor theory was his seminal work in this area.

The Two-Factor Theory, also known as Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene developed in the late 1950s (Herzberg et al., 1959) posits that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction arise from two distinct sets of factors: motivators and hygiene factors. Hygiene factors are elements that can cause dissatisfaction if missing but do not necessarily motivate if increased or improved. These factors are critical in creating a conducive work environment, yet they are not the primary drivers of employee motivation. Motivators are factors intrinsic to the job that can lead to higher levels of motivation and job satisfaction. These factors are related to the nature of the work itself and the way employees perceive their job roles. Key motivators include, achievement, recognition, personal development, learning opportunities and opportunities to advance one's career.

This theory was set in the context of workforce management and aimed to provide strategies for effectively motivating employees. Herzberg's research sought to

understand what factors lead to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, ultimately distinguishing between the two types of factors, motivators and hygiene factors. Initially developed in the context of workforce management, the theory has transcended its original domain and found applications in various fields including education settings (DeShields et al., 2005; M. Singh & Bhattacharjee, 2020)

The safety, comfort, and supportiveness of the physical work environment, elements covered under infrastructure in this study, are considered hygiene factors under the Two-Factor Theory.

As expected, satisfaction with food was the lowest, with close to half the students polled expressing their discontent. This discontent stemmed from concerns related to quality, nutrition, and the menu being purely vegetarian. One student called it “devastating”(student 12). Students are not permitted to bring non-vegetarian food from outside or cook it in their accommodation. In fact, students are not expected to cook at all, as it is considered a discipline violation. The central dining hall, commonly referred to as the "mess" in Indian terminology, consistently received higher ratings than the hostel food. While students had the freedom to dine at either location, many opted for the hostel due to convenience and proximity. The food pricing was deemed reasonable, which contrasted with the students' opinions on housing costs. Although most students found the housing clean and well-maintained, several remarked that it was expensive, prompting some to seek accommodation off-campus (more on that later). Additionally, a few students noted that they had to procure mattresses themselves, which was highly inconvenient. Another aspect that students found problematic was the lack of administrative support during their first month of arrival and settling in. They faced challenges in procuring mobile SIM cards and opening bank accounts. One student mentioned his undergraduate experience at a different university, where students received help with these tasks, highlighting the contrast and the need for improved support at BTS.

Three elements that received high approval from the students were medical facilities, safety, and the Relationship Management System (RMS) for addressing concerns. The presence of an on-campus hospital and a 24/7 ambulance service were major contributors to the high approval of the medical facilities. Several students shared

personal experiences of receiving care during their illnesses, further underscoring the effectiveness of these services.

Student 4 - "there's a hospital within the campus itself. And in case of any emergency, we can call for an ambulance. The ambulance would arrive within 5 to 10 minutes, and it would carry us to the hospital....It's actually very good."

Student 3: "I had a personal experience last semester like, I was prone to dengue,.... I was also well taken care of."






The sentiments regarding the RMS and on campus safety were equally enthusiastic. RMS being considered "one of the great achievements of BTS" (student 2).

On safety within the campus here is what one student had to say: "You can find the security everywhere...we have only one entrance gate where you'll be thoroughly checked. You will be sniffed whether you are under any conditions. Right. So, inside the campus is like heaven, actually it's really good. That's why I prefer to stay inside the campus only" (student 2).

The "thorough checking" elicited one discomfited response of "privacy violation". I had expected to hear displeasure from more students on the aspect of " security everywhere," but instead I found them appreciating it and acknowledging its necessity. While campus safety received unanimous approval, with 100% of students feeling very safe within the campus regardless of their country of origin, the few students who lived off-campus expressed deep concern about safety issues outside the university grounds. One student gravely advised female students living off campus "not to step out of their rooms after 8 pm"(student 14). This issue is particularly troubling, as student data indicates that over 5,000 students reside off-campus in the vicinity of the university. Student 3 mentioned that she would not recommend BTS to other students, especially girls, if they have to stay off campus. The decision to stay on campus or off campus depended on whether the scholarship was full or partial and appeared to stem either from financial constraints or a desire for more freedom. Students are not allowed to smoke or drink on campus. In the interest of the safety of its students, the university should collaborate with local authorities to enhance law and order in that area. This recommendation is also listed further in the document.

On all of the above counts, there were no other noteworthy differences between countries, levels of education or academic programs.

Figure 2: Visual sum up - infrastructure

				
On campus safety, RMS, Medical support	Housing	Food	First month administrative support	Off campus safety

#### 4.2.2 Wellbeing

(Making friends, counselling support, equal opportunity, grievance handling, religious freedom)

The ease of making friends was rated highly, with near-unanimous approval from the students. Similar cultural backgrounds, as noted in the section on South Asian regionalisation, appear to be a significant facilitator in this regard. Many students echoed this sentiment in their comments, with one stating, “It doesn't feel like a different country”(student 7). Another added, “We were brought up and grew up watching Hindi serials and movies,... so we can speak Hindi fluently” (student 3).

However, one student felt less welcomed during his initial month, remarking, “We had to be friendly.” While most international students were comfortable with the local language, Hindi, two mentioned facing some challenges due to language barriers. In fact, local language support has come up as one of the suggestions by the students.

The international students found the atmosphere friendly, and the college welcoming. Despite that, students indicated that they tend to socialise more within their country groups. This cultural affinity is a researched phenomenon with International students often seeking out compatriots to navigate the challenges of acculturation, as these relationships provide emotional support and a familiar social framework (L. Brown & Holloway, 2008). BTS has taken steps towards integration by providing several opportunities for interactions outside the classroom through social events, projects and extracurricular activities. This effort was particularly acknowledged by most

participants, who appreciated the range of activities offered by BTS and the equal opportunity to access them. There was unanimous consensus on the latter point as there was on the provision of counselling support.

Student 6: “One thing about BTS, which is excellent, is extracurricular activities. It's like, full of opportunities. Somebody, if somebody has one quality and wants it to bloom, BTS is the place for it.”

Student 2: “It is [a] really good university. We have a lot of facilities for us....So I think not only the curriculum, but their events, organisation systems, their culture of calling alumni, their culture of calling great software engineers who are also good to learn [from].”

Student 7: “There is equal opportunity for each and every one whether you're international or national. There is not really any discrimination from the university side.”

One student, however, spoke of feeling discriminated against. His grouse was that “sometimes the teaching faculty mostly take care of the Indian students and give more marks compared to international students” (student 13). When asked if he had a chance to raise a grievance on this issue he shot back “No, worrying they would blacklist us.” His was one of the two instances out of eleven where participants felt that grievance handling was poor and had little confidence in it. The other nine found the grievance mechanism solid and trusted that the channel would maintain confidentiality. “They handle it [grievances] very effectively” (student 4).






On the sensitive topic of religious freedom, I was pleasantly surprised to hear a chorus of responses affirming freedom to observe and practise their religion. Of the 12 responses I received on this aspect, 10 of the participants expressed such a freedom, with expressions ranging from “no fear at all”(student 3) to “and everybody can pray in his own religion. There is no issue” (student 5).

The two dissenting opinions came from students from two different countries, which was heartening as it conveyed that no particular religious community felt targeted. The reasons behind the dissent was that prayers could not be conducted openly but had to be done in the privacy of the students' rooms. This regulation applied to all students.

Previously, students were allowed to pray in any private space on the campus, but after a complaint, that flexibility was rescinded, and a few students missed their ability to pray in open spaces on the campus.

On all of the above counts, there were no noteworthy differences between countries, levels of education or academic programs.

Figure 3: Visual sum up - wellbeing

				
Equal opportunities and access	Counselling support	Ease of making friends	Grievance handling	Religious freedom

These different aspects of well-being add up to a powerful narrative of non-discrimination which is fundamental for an inclusive and supportive academic environment. International students who perceive a lack of discrimination are more likely to feel valued and respected, which enhances their academic engagement and performance. Lee and Rice highlight the negative effects of perceived discrimination on international students' academic experiences and mental health. They go on to add “We find that not all of the issues international students face can be problematized as matters of adjustment, as much research does, but that some of the more serious challenges are due to inadequacies within the host society” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 381).

Overall, this category seems to be a strength of the university. It appears that BTS has addressed some of these matters at a broad level by building a strong culture of inclusivity and engagement for international students. This is further evidenced by the participants' responses regarding their decision to select BTS. Half of the students interviewed said that they heard of BTS through friends or family who had previously studied there and chose BTS based on their recommendation. This was particularly notable among students from Bhutan and somewhat explains the relatively larger percentage of incoming students from that country (Table 5).

### 4.2.3 Academics

Analysing the transcripts revealed that social and emotional wellbeing aspects score higher than satisfaction with academics.

The quality of the labs scored the lowest among all the questions in the interview set. The teaching style and curriculum quality did not achieve the near unanimity seen in the components of well-being, with notable country divisions in the Bachelor of Technology (BTech), Computer Science and Engineering (CSE) program. Six of the fifteen students interviewed were pursuing this program, with two each from the three countries. Two students from the same country expressed dissatisfaction with the program's curriculum depth.

Student 1: "The curriculum, ...[is] quite old and they don't update the curriculum quite frequently to the latest ones because technology is quite fast paced right now."

In contrast, the four students from the other two countries found the curriculum strong.

Student 5: "The curriculum structure, it was actually very good and every year they modify the curriculum based on the current trend. So, it actually helps us a lot."

The variation in feedback is possibly attributable to the differing existing knowledge bases of the students. This is speculative, as I didn't get a chance to probe the cause of the differences in any depth. The balance of nine respondents were distributed over nine different academic programs, of which seven felt that the curriculum had depth and fostered critical thinking. With one student vocalising it as "The University is focusing more on research and other innovative ideas such as patent filing in a way the university is providing room for critical thinking and new ideas"(student 11). Contrary to the majority, two students felt that adequate focus was not being given to research and practical experience. "The focus here is more on theoretical knowledge and research suffers"(student 8). Different academic programs may have varied emphases on research or curriculum depth resulting in this variation.

Regarding the quality of teaching, 11 out of the 15 respondents expressed favourable opinions about the teaching style and pace. Some of the feedback included: “communicate complex topics well...use case studies and practical examples”(student 8); “they provide clear explanations with live examples”(student 11); “the course here is very well structured”(student 10). Most of the objections came from students in the BTech CSE program. Their concerns encompassed various issues, including large class sizes, teachers switching between English and Hindi, and a perceived lack of teacher knowledge. One student noted, “Sometimes a good teacher is all we need in practical classes”(student 15).

The intermittent switching between languages was pointed out by other students too, with some advocating for their fellow students from Africa whose familiarity with Hindi language is negligible. This feedback gets us to reckon with internationalisation of teachers' education. The crux lies in the growing cultural divide between teachers and students, where teachers often lack shared cultural and historical context with their students (Marx & Moss, 2011). The relevant question here is how ““teachers who have had little personal and direct experience with ethnic and other differences learn to value and affirm the diversity of their students” (Rego, et al., 2000, p. 413). While NEP 2020 expects a minimum of 50 hours of professional development for school teachers (NEP, 2020), no such requirement is mentioned for the faculty at HEIs. The guidelines on internationalisation of HE published by UGC, suggest fostering “international competencies in our student, faculty and staffs”. (UGC, 2021, p. 18) This important area is highlighted in the recommendations.

The accessibility and support of teachers outside the classroom received positive feedback, with 13 out of 15 respondents echoing similar sentiments. Sample comments are shared below.






Student 12: “They remind the class that if you have a problem, you can come to my cabin.”

Student 5: “I like the attitude of the faculty, their teaching method, because they teach like their own child.”

Student 4: “ 99% of the teachers do actually help each and every student to understand all the topics.”

Another similarly positive aspect was the feedback on the recognition of Indian degrees compared to equivalent degrees from the respondents' home countries. With the exception of one student who perceived no significant difference between the degrees, the rest felt that an Indian degree held a higher value. The students believed that a degree from India, especially in tech-related fields, would enhance their employment prospects back home compared to a domestic degree. This is an important element of recognition as it becomes a crucial determining factor in the choice of, HE destination combined with a friendly, safe and inclusive environment for the incoming students.

Figure 4: Visual sum up - academics

				
Curriculum	Teaching quality	Teacher accessibility and support outside the classroom	Lab quality	India degree credibility higher vs home country

These findings follow the push and pull framework proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82). The perceived quality of education in the host country plays a key role in mobile students' choice of study destination just as much as the lack of quality education at home does: Pursuing education overseas offers an opportunity to obtain high-quality learning and gain skills that might not be available domestically (King & Sondhi, 2018). The interplay of these factors sheds light on various dimensions of student satisfaction, which we will discuss in the section below.

#### 4.2.4 Satisfaction and recommending BTS

Reflecting these dynamics, the majority of students expressed satisfaction experience at BTS. Fourteen of the fifteen students interviewed were overall satisfied with their experience at BTS. The dominant reasons were self-formative experience of international education, cultural diversity, a good overall environment and the numerous opportunities to participate in social and extracurricular events. This aligns with Marginson’s observation that international education is not just about learning but about self-formation. “All international students cross the border to become different, whether through learning, through graduating with a degree, through immersion in the linguistic setting, or simply through growing up. Often there is a kind of person they want to become, though none can fully imagine that person before the transformation” (Marginson, 2014, p. 6).

A logical next step from student satisfaction is whether they would recommend the university to others in their social and family circles. I had anticipated that those responses would reflect the overall satisfaction levels with BTS, but fewer than half of the students were willing to make such a recommendation. This prompted me to investigate if there was a pattern based on the students' academic level and program. The details are summarised in Table 11.

Table 11: Recommendation pattern

Level and Academic stream	Recommend BTS			Total
	Yes	No	Partially	
PG STEM	3	1	1	5
UG STEM	1	6	0	7
UG Non STEM	2	0	0	2
Total	6	7	1	14

I observed an insightful nuance: the students' dominant view of HE whether it be self-formation, scholarship, social, or economic opportunities influenced their recommendation of BTS. As Marginson notes “perceptions of what higher education



is vary according to beliefs about government and society, and the disciplinary or purposive lens used to view the sector....” (Marginson et al., 2023, p. 1). The students' willingness to recommend BTS was influenced by their perceptions of the purpose of their education. This was particularly evident among the undergraduate STEM students. The student who recommended BTS saw education as a path to personal growth, independence, and new cultural experiences. In contrast, the students who were unwilling to recommend BTS were primarily concerned with the lack of job opportunities in India as they were looking at an immediate return on investment from their education.

Student 6: “India is a liked destination over [my] home country. Problem is no [job] placement. Australia and the USA are preferred, since one can work part time there and look for employment post degree and residential status too.”

Student 1: “Earlier more students came to India. But as a few went overseas and saw the above benefits it influenced many others. Because it's like a landslide. If it starts, the whole mountain starts going down.”

All six students who were unwilling to recommend BTS cited the same reason: the lack of job opportunities. Some students felt this was due to insufficient efforts by BTS, while others blamed the reluctance of Indian employers. Further analysis showed that two of the PG STEM students who recommended BTS planned to return to their home countries and were not looking for jobs in India. The student who gave a partial recommendation was concerned about off-campus safety rather than employment prospects, as this student also did not intend to seek employment in India. Hence, it appears that all the students whose primary motivation in pursuing higher education was immediate employability outside their home countries were unwilling to recommend BTS as a higher education destination.

Figure 5: Visual sum up - overall

	
Overall satisfaction	NPS question- Would you recommend BTS?

Although the overall student experience at this private university in India is largely positive and degrees from Indian institutions are well-regarded, the main factor deterring students from recommending the university is the lack of job opportunities. As one student (Student 15) simply stated, “If placement opportunities got better, yes. Otherwise, no”.

This conclusion, however, contradicts the results of a recent study that aimed to understand the motivations of international students from Asia and Africa studying in India. The study’s findings indicate “a value proposition canvas consisting of teaching quality, university rankings, safety and availability of academic courses as its foremost constituents” (Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020, p. 158). While these aspects are reflected in the overall satisfaction of the students in this study, they do not influence their willingness to recommend the university.

### 4.3 Findings- university official

The results from the NPS question in this study correspond with the reduced student inflow from BBN to BTS over the past few years, as revealed in an interview with the university official. The official mentioned that BTS’s efforts to attract and recruit international students began in 2010-2011. Students and countries they approached expressed interest in what India had to offer and more specifically what BTS could provide. He noted that the number of international students grew encouragingly during the first 5-7 years and then gradually declined. One reason for this decline was the increased competition among Indian universities for international students. I pointed out that this should have resulted in an overall increase in the number of inbound international students to India, but in fact, the numbers had dropped for the country as a whole (refer Tables 4 and 5). He explained that many competing colleges lacked

standardised quality and were not required by regulation to achieve a certain level of accreditation before being allowed to recruit international students. This resulted in poor student experiences and contributed to a widespread perception of low-quality education in India, which negatively impacted the entire higher education sector. He elaborated by recounting a conversation with the education minister of a Southeast Asian country, who mentioned that his students had a difficult experience at an Indian college due to poor teaching and curriculum quality. As a result, the minister hesitated to recommend India as a higher education destination. One of the students interviewed shared a similar story, noting that his friend had experienced the same issues described by the education minister. In both cases, the students returned home midway through their education.

The university official also felt the government could support universities like theirs in brand building. He described a visit to China for a conference on international education just before Covid-19. At the conference he found multiple displays from multiple countries, but he was the only representative from India. He compared this to China, believing that the Chinese government played an active role in brand building helping China become “the third largest host in the world for international students.” (Wen & Hu, 2023, p. 4). He also attributed the decline in international students from BBN to currency fluctuations and the devaluation of the Indian rupee against the US dollar, which led to increased fees. He hoped the government would provide funding to subsidise this impact. Additionally, he shared some observations about inbound students from Africa, which have been excluded from this study as they are outside the scope of the research topic.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **5.1 Summary of findings**

This section summarises research findings based on interviews with 15 students from BBN and one senior university official.

#### **5.1.1 BBN students' academic and overall experience at BTS**

The first research question of this study was 'How do international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (BBN) perceive their academic journey and overall experience at BTS?'

Chapter 4 addresses this question by analysing the responses of 15 students regarding their experiences in the categories of infrastructure, physical and mental well-being, academics, and overall experiences. The students viewed their academic journey at BTS positively, considering it an improvement over the academic quality in their home countries. They believed that the academics at BTS would enhance their employability at home and prepare them for further education. They were highly satisfied with the accessibility and support of their teachers. However, some students, primarily from the BTech CSE program, were dissatisfied with the teaching style. This was one aspect with a notable difference in responses based on program type and level. There was moderate satisfaction with the curriculum depth, with some dissatisfaction stemming from outdated curriculum content and inadequate focus on research and practical experience. The greatest dissatisfaction was with the outdated laboratory facilities.

Regarding their overall experience, 14 out of 15 students reported overall satisfaction. Contributing factors included cultural diversity, an open and friendly campus environment, absence of discrimination, religious freedom, high exposure to social and extracurricular activities, campus safety, the availability of medical assistance, and responsiveness to grievances. Implicit in a few of these aspects is their growth as individuals and a sense of self-formation. An outcome they were deeply dissatisfied

with was the lack of opportunities for summer placements during their studies and job placement upon graduation. This dissatisfaction made them disinclined to recommend BTS as a HE destination to their friends and family.

### **5.1.2 Growth trends of BBN students at BTS and the underlying factors**

The second research question of this study was 'Has the university achieved year-on-year growth in the number of students from these three countries? If so, what factors have contributed to this growth? If not, what are the reasons for its inability to do so? This question was addressed through an interview with a senior official at BTS, as covered in Chapter 4. The straightforward response to the question is that BTS did not achieve year-on-year growth from the three countries. According to the university official, the foremost contributing factor was the lack of government support in key areas: quality regulation and accreditation of universities in India, brand building of India as a higher education destination, and providing financial support to universities by subsidising the fees of international students through scholarships and other means. In the discussion, all factors contributing to degrowth were externalized. Regardless of external factors, a university has a definitive agency in the quality of its offerings as a means to attract and grow students. Possibly, BTS could benefit from a more aggressive policy on internationalization at home. There are several missing elements that BTS has the opportunity to enhance, some of which are discussed under the section on New Public Management below.

## **5.2 Discussion of findings**

This section examines the research findings and discusses them in relation to existing literature.

### **5.2.1 "Push-pull" factors**

Mazzarol's study (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) on "push" and "pull" factors in student flows highlights the various motivations behind why students choose to study abroad.

These factors range from historical connections, geographic proximity, the presence of programs unavailable in the home country, cost of education, perceived quality of higher education, and the comparative sizes of the economies of the student's home country and the host country, among others. The influence of these push-pull factors is evident in the mobility of the 15 students from BBN to India. All these factors played a role to some degree in the decision making of these 15 students. The primary factor influencing these students' decisions, though, was the economic situation in their home countries. This aligns with Mazzarol and Soutar findings that economic and social forces within the home country serve to push students abroad, while the choice of host country is influenced by various pull factors.

The findings of this research while echoing the pull-push model suggest a hierarchy amongst pull factors that the pull- push model does not contain. The consistent central pull factor for these 15 students from BBN was the availability of financial assistance. All of the 15 students came on scholarships: 11 had full scholarships covering tuition, boarding, and lodging, while the remaining 4 had partial scholarships with a 50% tuition waiver. Here, the push from the home country is complemented by the pull of financial support from the host country. It is this pairing that has drawn these 15 students from BBN to India. The additional insight of this study is the critical importance of such a pairing, especially in cases where the independent elements of push and pull are not strong enough by themselves. This is evidenced in the students' unwillingness to recommend BTS as a HE destination, an indication that the pull element of BTS was not strong enough in itself to overcome cost concerns. Neither was the push strong enough. The students did not suggest that if they had not received a scholarship, they would have attempted to take a loan to come to India to study, despite acknowledging that India had a better quality of education than their respective home countries and a stronger economy. They were categorical in stating that without financial support, they would not have travelled abroad to pursue HE. It appears that there are primary pull factors, such as financial support, as in this instance, that drive the decision to study abroad, followed by secondary pull factors that help identify the specific country or the institution. A hierarchy of sorts, where without the presence of the primary pull the other pull factors get passed over. This claim is limited by the study's sample size; it suggests a direction for further research and corroboration.

## 5.2.2 New Public Management- NPM

NPM is a governance approach where strategies, methods, and principles from the private sector are applied to reform public and semi-public organisations; at its core it seeks stronger performance management and managerialization in the running of public services (HOOD, 1991). In light of a few of the performance gaps revealed by the findings, the applicability of NPM in the context of a university is revisited by following the "3Ms heuristic," (Ewan Ferlie, 2017) which embodies NPM's three key features of markets, management and measurement.

Markets: BTS has successfully marketed its offerings in several ways, starting with its website. It presents itself as a university with world-class infrastructure, multidisciplinary programs, and events. Its strong presence on search engines makes it easily discoverable by students and well-known to education consultants in BBN. However, BTS's market analytics appear underdeveloped. There is an incomplete understanding of why students select BTS (based on findings from the official interview), indicating a lack of detailed market feature analytics and insight into the decline in student numbers. This could lead to misapplying schemes and misdirecting attention from the actual needs and priorities.

Management: One of the most sizable challenges for BTS is internationalisation at home, a prerequisite almost, to becoming a preferred international HE destination. This necessitates change on a scale and skill that requires vigorous management. "There is evidence to suggest that some characteristics of NPM, such as the development of stronger managerial roles, are relevant specifically at the institutional level" (van Berckel Smit, 2023, p. 224), and are effective in accelerating such transformative change.

Feedback from students on inadequate focus on research, outdated curriculum, poor quality of laboratories, and the use of vernacular languages by teachers in class indicates that BTS still has some distance to cover in this regard.

Measurement: The reasons given by students and the university official for the decline in inbound students from BBN noticeably differed. While students cited the lack of job opportunities as a significant concern, this issue did not come up at all in discussions with the university official. This discrepancy hints at a disconnect in fully understanding the issues of grave importance to the students. It also indicates the absence of formalised student surveys, which was confirmed upon further probing. This is just one aspect of measurement missing at BTS, and a reasonably critical gap as BTS has been enrolling international students for over a decade now.

BTS would be well placed to be aware of the need to adopt strong NPM style marketing, managerial and measurement practices to be fully effective in its ability to attract and grow students from BBN.

### **5.2.3 Student satisfaction and student enrolment growth**

The international education market has become highly attractive to universities due to the financial and non-financial benefits it offers (Table 1). As a result, universities are focused on market share and see the quality of services provided to students as key variable in increasing their market share (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). Student surveys play a crucial role in providing data and analytics for assessing student satisfaction and have become a ubiquitous tool in HEIs. There are multiple models (Weerasinghe et al., 2017) and constructs of student surveys largely wrapped around variables such as education quality, inclusion, employment opportunities, technology, accommodation, safety, prestige, and image. These factors are considered significant predictors of student satisfaction and “positive antecedent” (Weerasinghe et al., 2017, p. 533) of student loyalty. My research findings suggested a similar predictive relationship between the responses to the survey variables and student satisfaction.

However, in this instance, the findings revealed that student satisfaction was not a positive predictor of student loyalty. Loyalty, in this context, is defined as willingness to recommend and endorse the institution to others, a term with a long history and proven utility in business for tracking customer purchasing behaviour and driving growth (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008). Borrowing from the business tradition, my study included a question asking whether the student participants would recommend BTS

to their friends and family. This question is commonly known as the Net Promoter Score (NPS) question, which is used to assess the participants' likelihood of endorsing the institution to others. To clarify, the NPS is a widely used metric that measures customer loyalty based on their willingness to recommend a product or service. To provide further context, here's a brief overview of NPS.

The Net Promoter Score (NPS) was introduced by Fred Reichheld in 2003, as a simple metric to gauge customer loyalty and predict business growth. (Reichheld, 2006). He discovered that the most effective question to predict growth wasn't about customer satisfaction; instead, it was about checking the customer's willingness to stand as a reference for the company and recommend the company or product to his network. NPS effectively demonstrated that a positive response to this *single* survey question, correlated with growth rates for the business. A similar question is now routinely used in most employee satisfaction surveys to establish employee loyalty and retention (M. I. Brown, 2020).

In my study, 14 of the 15 students were satisfied with their overall experiences at BTS. However less than half of them were willing to recommend the institution to others. This divergence leads to the insight that incorporating an NPS-style question in student satisfaction surveys may have some value for HEI's. Naturally, it will be necessary to test this over time to determine if it proves to be a reliable predictor of future enrolments, as it has been for business growth and employee retention. This study is just indicative of the possibility that it may.

### **5.3 Contributions**

Following the research insights and discussions above, this section highlights the contributions of the study.

One key finding is that push factors alone are sometimes insufficient to drive student mobility. These push factors, which compel students to leave their home country, need to be paired with effective pull factors from the host country to successfully attract students. This pairing is important for understanding the dynamics of student mobility and for designing effective strategies to attract international students.

Additionally, the study identifies a hierarchy among pull factors. Recognizing and understanding this hierarchy can help policymakers and educational institutions identify the most influential pull factors and design policies that effectively address them. Furthermore, there is a right pairing of push-pull that accelerates student mobility. For instance, if the push is economic the pull, then needs to somewhat address that. Were the primary push to be self-formation, then possibly the pull lies elsewhere. This deeper understanding can lead to more targeted and effective strategies for attracting international students.

The research also underscores the importance of adopting NPM to enhance the quality of education and services provided by universities. Implementing NPM practices can drive improvements in administrative efficiency, service delivery, and overall institutional performance, which are crucial for maintaining competitive advantage in the higher education sector and enhancing a university's ability to attract and grow student enrolment.

Lastly, the study suggests that student satisfaction, while paramount, may not necessarily lead to student enrolment growth. To address this, introducing a question to assess student loyalty in satisfaction surveys could prove helpful. Measuring loyalty, in addition to satisfaction, may serve as a more reliable predictor of future enrolments, similar to its proven effectiveness in predicting business growth and employee retention.

These contributions are specific to this study in relation to one private university, BTS, in India. However, once supported by further research, they could have broader implications for policymaking and university practices at large, potentially influencing strategies and policies across the higher education sector. Building on these insights and contributions, the following section outlines key recommendations for policymakers and university administrators in BTS to consider.

## 5.4 Recommendations

### 5.4.1 India as an undergraduate destination

The Indian laws regarding work, residence, and the path to citizenship are highly favourable for students from Bhutan and Nepal (Bhutan Visa, n.d.) (Nepal Visa, 2024). Despite this, the students from these two countries reported difficulty in finding employment in India. They also criticised the university for not providing sufficient assistance in securing jobs.

India is facing its own internal challenges related to youth unemployment. “The challenge of educated youth unemployment is increasing and becoming huge in India, with immense implications for societal balance and peace” (ILO, 2024, p. 6). This issue represents a macro-level constraint that universities are striving to address. However, it is a complex problem that will not be resolved in the near future. For developed countries with ageing demographics and falling birth rates, offering a graduate work visa is mutually beneficial. The overwhelming majority of students interviewed saw the work visa as a significant draw for their country's youth and identified it as a top priority when choosing an international higher education destination. As one student (Student 4) stated, “I'd say that the first priority is that they want the residential permit and work opportunities. Educational academic goals actually come second, and for some students, academic goals don't even matter.” This sentiment was reiterated in various ways by the other students. They candidly admitted that the youth from their home countries are looking to settle in the host country through the route of education. The significance of this facility to cross border students can be gathered from the notable drop in international student applications (Rigby, 2024), resulting from tightening of graduate work visa rules in the UK. India will find it tough to compete on the platform of work visas. It is not an easy route for India as the country is struggling to accommodate its unemployed and underemployed youth. India will have to prevail on the strength of the academic curriculum, preparing the international students for the job market in their home countries and potentially abroad, as well as equipping them for further studies in their chosen destinations.

Instead of being regarded as a potential workplace, especially by students from Bhutan and Nepal who do not require work visas, India could position itself as a high-

quality undergraduate education destination. This could be a hook for international students for three main reasons. Firstly, many students aiming to settle overseas in Anglophone countries recognize that pursuing a master's degree, rather than an undergraduate one, better positions them for job opportunities and pathways to residency in those countries. Completing their undergraduate studies in India, assuming India offers superior quality and a wider range of academic programs than their home countries, particularly in tech fields, would better prepare them educationally, culturally, and emotionally to venture further from home for their master's studies. Secondly, India provides a stellar opportunity to gain fluency in English, an important choice variable for students (Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020). Thirdly this advantage will come at an attractive comprehensive price in India compared to other countries. This was acknowledged, as much, in the student interviews as one of the reasons for preferring India as a HE destination.

This initiative would markedly advance the concept of internationalisation for India. The current system of HE in India is weighed heavily towards undergraduate programs. 80% of the domestic students are enrolled in undergraduate level courses (AISHE, 2021). Educationists in India contend that a “developing country like India, with limited financial and infrastructural resources, stands to benefit far more from internationalisation at home” (Yeravdekar, p. 367, as cited in Mittal & Pani, 2020). Focusing on UG programs for international student enrolments, will yield benefits for domestic students too. To achieve this, universities in India will need to upgrade their standards to provide high-quality education and burnish their global rankings (no escape from that). As Marginson pragmatically avers “ Institutional reputation is known, teaching quality mostly is not” (Marginson, 2006, p. 3). Additionally, regulatory support will be required to bar non-accredited universities from recruiting international students. By implementing these measures, India can potentially reverse the current trend of declining international student enrolment.

### **5.4.2 Job placements for international students**

The second strategic recommendation is on job placements.

The interaction with the students revealed that they would feel better served in having some exposure to the vast and dynamic Indian economy. Even if short, such an exposure is a source of excitement, as well as personal and professional growth for them. BTS has strong connections with recruiters from large corporations in the country. They already have a network that they can utilise for short-term placements for international students. Akin to most parts of the world, short term assignments in India are not compensated at a level that would notably impact the manpower budgeting of organisations by taking on a few summer trainees. From my interaction with the university official, it appeared that this was not something that they had considered or pursued. With visa free facilities available for students from Bhutan and Nepal, the university could attract many more students from these two countries if they had a clear strategy for student short term placement. The exposure will be valued by the students, and it will not come at the cost of permanent jobs for the Indian youth.

In the case of Bangladesh, the government would need to provide legal room to accommodate short-term placements. In an Oxford economics report (Harrison et al., 2024) Bangladesh is presented as a 'rising star' with regard to the anticipated increase in outbound students by 2030, providing a well-founded reason for making such a change. India currently has international students from 170 countries (AISHE, 2022), If successful, this strategy can thereafter be applied to students from other countries. Understandably this could have political ramifications and may take time.

### **5.4.3 Additional recommendations**

The student interviews yielded several suggestions to improve their experience at BTS, which I have documented in Appendix G. Additionally, I want to reinforce a few

recommendations drawn from my conversations with the students. Although these have been touched upon earlier in the relevant sections, I am listing them here again due to their critical importance to student safety and satisfaction, even at the risk of repetition.

- Review of safety of students who stay outside the campus.
- Appraisal of faculty preparedness to handle and promote internationalisation in their educational environment.
- Conduct international student surveys to gauge satisfaction and loyalty and identify areas of change.

With these recommendations in mind, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and explore areas for future research.

### **5.5 Limitations and future research**

In a study of this nature, there are bound to be several omissions and gaps. One of the limitations that I readily recognize is the restricted number of students I had for my interviews and the narrow focus on international students from BBN. These students, due to their proximity and familiarity as country neighbours, already have a head start in assimilating within the Indian milieu. To gain a deeper understanding of the unevenness in the internationalisation efforts of Indian HEI's, it would be useful to include student cohorts from other countries. This could also be the focus of future research on this topic. My inability to pilot my interview questions was a significant limitation, as it prevented me from foreseeing the need for additional probes and coupled with the restriction of interviewing students only once due to their busy examination schedules, it led the study to rely solely on the initial data gathered, potentially limiting the depth of insights obtained.

Another significant limitation of my study is that it focuses on only one university in an enormous country like India. While my research can highlight certain issues and

problems, it cannot claim to summarise the results as being representative of the broader problem. Expanding the coverage, in future research, could reveal meaningful best practices and facilitate shared learning experiences. Enhancing internationalisation efforts must necessarily involve a wider range of stakeholders beyond the two included in this study. Future research can address this limitation by incorporating perspectives from a broader array of stakeholders.

While this study has made a modest contribution to understanding the determinants of BBN students' choices of higher education destinations, much remains to be explored to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the internationalisation landscape within Indian higher education.

## **5.6 Concluding remarks**

Universities undeniably play a powerful role in internationalisation. However, it appears that this university may not have fully grasped the magnitude of their role or the various facets of internationalisation that require a distinct approach and management style. There are numerous actions they can take within their own sphere to enhance their contributory impact, some of which are listed in the recommendations section. Nonetheless, it cannot be a single stakeholder endeavour. The path to internationalisation has many intersections that could lead to less than exciting results. Bhutan's, \$1 billion failed education city (Lamsang, 2014) is a cautionary tale. Despite having McKinsey as advisors and the backing of the ruling monarch, both salubrious conditions, the project was shut down within 5 years of its launch, demonstrating that favourable conditions alone are not enough to guarantee success. For India, with its stated ambition to internationalise higher education and its intent to increase the number of incoming students fourfold to 0.2 million (Nanda, 2018) there is a substantial gap between policy statements and grassroots implementation. "Universities are "supply tools for policymakers," (Ciriaci, 2014, p. 1592) but their potential can only be fully realised with the right supportive environment. This includes national focus, appropriate regulations, and sufficient funding to foster internationalisation in HE.

India's HE regulatory body recognises this and admits that "initiatives are required to be taken both at institution and regulatory/government level. This synergy between national policy and institutional strategy will give a thrust to internationalisation of higher education" (UGC, 2021, p. 9). Assuredly, a more spirited and synergistic partnership among the government, universities, and industry—the triple helix (Etzkowitz & Leidesdorff, 2001)—will be needed to effectively realize the goal India has set for itself.

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## Appendices

### **Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet- Students**



Study Title: India as a regional hub for higher education -A destination for international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (BBN). An exploratory study of the role of a private Indian university.

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a research study. The decision to participate is entirely voluntary. To help you decide please read the information provided below and feel free to discuss it with others if you like. If anything is unclear or if you need further details, please don't hesitate to reach out to me.

The research is being conducted with the intent of understanding how universities in India can become an attractive and high quality destination for international students from neighbouring countries. A total of 18-21, undergraduate students, belonging to Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal will be interviewed for this research study.

Your perspective as a student from a neighbouring country is important in learning about the experiences of international students while studying in India. This research will give you an opportunity to convey your feedback to the university in a safe and non-threatening way. The information and data collected will be summarised into areas of improvement for the university. Your feedback could lead to improvements benefitting all international students now and in the future. Information and data collected during the interview will be anonymised before being presented to anyone outside the research team in any forum. You will not be identifiable.

Participating in this research study requires a time commitment of approx. 45 minutes. This will involve an interview designed to get your inputs on your academic and residential experiences at the university. The interview will be conducted virtually and can be scheduled as per your convenience any time between the months of April and May. You have the option of withdrawing all or part of your data from the research

any time before 1<sup>st</sup> July. It's as simple as dropping me an email with your request for withdrawal. In the event you choose to withdraw, your data and inputs will not be included in the research.

Oxford university upholds the highest standards of research ethics and integrity. Each research proposal is approved by the ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. This research proposal too has been approved by the ethics committee – Approval reference number: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_088

On completion of the research a copy of my thesis/ dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please write in to me and I will revert within three working days. If you are dissatisfied with the resolution you could write to the research supervisor [REDACTED]

You could also share your concerns with a member of the ethics committee- University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) at [rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk); Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB.

I look forward to your participation. In the event you decide not to participate, let me know so that I can identify alternate participants.

For any clarifications regarding this research, please reach out to me anytime

Best

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Dated: 15.04.2024



## Appendix B: Sample email to Student Participant

Dear [REDACTED]

I hope this mail finds you well.

I thank you for your interest and willingness to engage with my research project. Your inputs and insights are important to the research being undertaken, and I appreciate your readiness to contribute.

I am conducting a study on the role an Indian University plays in shaping India as a regional higher education destination for students from neighbouring countries. Your experience as a student in LPU will provide a crucial perspective to this study.

Brief details of the study, its benefits, the nature and duration of the interview are all mentioned in the attached participant information sheet. It is *important* that you go through this information sheet before the interview.

Please let me know if any of the dates and times below are convenient for your interview.

19th or 20th April - 6pm

or

24th or 25<sup>th</sup> or 30th April - 5 pm

Please rest assured that your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

Thank you once again for considering being a part of this research study.

Best

[REDACTED]

## Appendix C: Interview Questions- Students

### Demographic section

Gender:  Male       Female       Prefer not to say

Age( optional):      (In years)

Home Country:

Academic Program:

Program Year:

### Interview Questions

1. How did you hear about BTS?
  - What was the reason you selected this program and\ or this university?
  
2. Was the process of applying for a student visa simple?
  - Is the cost of the visa affordable?
  - Was it easy to get a student visa?
  
3. What is your satisfaction level with the infrastructure provided?
  - To what extent do the housing options meet your needs in terms of affordability, comfort, cleanliness and safety?
  - How satisfied are you with the dining options on campus (or in your area)? Nutrition, taste, hygiene and affordability? Do they meet your dietary needs and preferences?
  - Do you have easy access to laundry? Is the facility reliable and adequate?
  
4. What is your opinion on the safety on campus?
  - Do you have an overall sense of physical safety and security on campus?
  
5. Do you feel comfortable seeking help from the university's health services for physical health concerns (e.g., illnesses, injuries)?
  - Have you had any personal experiences with their responsiveness and effectiveness?

6. What resources does the university offer to support international students emotionally?
  - Does the university provide help if a student is going through any emotional or mental stress?
  
7. Can you share your experiences with feeling included or excluded in your stay here? What factors contributed to those feelings?
  - Were you able to make friends with local students? Were there any particular challenges or successes you faced?
  - What aspects of university life (e.g., classes, clubs, social events, sporting events) have been most successful in creating a sense of belonging for you?
  
8. Does the curriculum offer sufficient depth and complexity to challenge you intellectually and expand your knowledge base?
  - Are there opportunities to conduct independent research, explore diverse perspectives, and engage in critical thinking?
  - How well does it prepare you for your desired career or further studies?
  
9. Do the teachers effectively communicate course material?
  - Do they provide clear explanations, examples, and opportunities for questions?
  - Do you feel you have enough time to understand concepts before moving on?
  - Are there adequate resources such as textbooks, reference material, and relevant lab equipment available?
  - Are the instructors open to providing additional support? How accessible and helpful do you find your instructors?
  - Are there any challenges you face in understanding the language of instruction in class? If so, did the university provide support to overcome it?
  
10. Do you feel you have equal access to all the resources and opportunities that are offered in your study program and college life?
  - Have you felt discriminated against? If so, would you be comfortable sharing the experience ?
  
11. Can you practise your religion freely, with no fear?
  
12. Is there a formal channel or a designated person to whom you can raise complaints?
  - Do you feel comfortable reporting any of your concerns and complaints?
  - Do you feel they will be handled confidentially?
  - What is your experience, if any, with the support and response you received?
  
13. Is a degree from India well recognised in your country?

- Is a degree from India considered better than a local degree from your home country?
14. Do you feel satisfied with your academic and residential experience at BTS?
- Looking back on your time here , what are some areas where you feel you've grown the most or gained new skills in?
  - What can BTS do to improve the experience for international students?
  - What did you like the most and the least about your overall experience at BTS?
15. Did you get any financial assistance or scholarship to study in India\ BTS?
16. Would you like to work in India? If so, what support does the university provide to help you find a job?
17. Would you recommend BTS as a study destination to your friends and family? If yes, why? If not, why not?

## Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet- University Official



Study Title: India as a regional hub for higher education -A destination for international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (BBN). An exploratory study of the role of a private Indian university.

Dear Mr., Xxx,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study that aims to identify the factors that make India an attractive destination for higher education among students from neighbouring countries.

The involvement of universities is pivotal, as they represent the primary point of contact for international students. Your insights and experiences concerning your university's efforts to attract international students for higher education, will provide a crucial perspective to this study. Please be assured that the university's name will remain confidential and will only be described as 'a renowned institution in North India' within the study. All data shared with me will be included in my research report. Nonetheless, due to the anonymity of the university, there will be no direct attribution of the data to the specific institution. Should there be any data inadvertently shared with me that you consider unsuitable for publication in the research report, even in an anonymized form, please feel free to request its withdrawal by emailing me at any time before July 1st.

Participation in this research study will require approximately 2-3 hours of your time, including 2-3 interviews, each lasting about 45 minutes. These discussions will aim to gather your insights on the trajectory of enrolment numbers at your university from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The interviews will be conducted virtually and can be scheduled as per your convenience any time between the months of May and June.

Oxford university upholds the highest standards of research ethics and integrity. Each research proposal is approved by the ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. This research proposal too has been approved by the ethics committee – Approval reference number: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_088.

On completion of the research a copy of my thesis/ dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research.

The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please write in to me and I will revert within three working days. If you are dissatisfied with the resolution you could write to the research supervisor [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] You could also share your concerns with a member of the ethics committee- University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) at [rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk); Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB.

Thank you once again for being a part of this research study.

For any clarifications regarding this research, please reach out to me anytime

Best

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

## **Appendix E: Interview Questions- University Official**

1. What is the number of international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal (BBN) who have enrolled in your university over the past five years?
  - Do you observe a particular trend or pattern?
2. What is the reason that students from these countries are attracted to your university?
3. What is the University's admissions criteria for students from BBN? How are they selected?
4. What is the university's enrolment target from these countries over the next few years?
5. What are some of the regional and national policies and factors that support or hinder the inflow of students from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal (BBN)?
6. What are some of the reasons why BBN students are unable to secure job placements in India?
7. What are the results from the past international student satisfaction surveys?

## Appendix F: CUREC Approval

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES  
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education  
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY  
[student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk); [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk)



██████████  
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division  
University of Oxford

12 April 2024

Dear ██████████

### Research ethics approval

Research title: India as a regional hub for higher education – A destination for international students from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (BBN). An exploratory study of the role of an Indian university.

Research ethics reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_088

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) / [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) or [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely,



Robert Ward-Penny, DREC Member

cc: [REDACTED] Student CUREC

## Appendix G: Catalogue of Student Suggestions for BTS

Student Number	Most liked	Least liked	Suggestions for improvement
1.	<p>“Everything is good”. Infrastructure is good . Also there is a diversity of students which is good. Many opportunities to participate in extracurricular events.</p>	<p>Curriculum outdated.</p> <p>No job placement support.</p>	<p>Curriculum quality. Placement support. Field trips to industry for exposure.</p> <p>“This curriculum right now is limiting the minds of the students like they cannot be creative enough because most of the time is going in attending a class. In a week. they're like 32 hours of class, and then during the class itself, in my first two years it was so exhausting. And then we had to do 3 CA's ( class assignments) in a semester for each subject. There were around 8 subjects in a semester, so. These things really occupy, consumed our time and we cannot focus more outside.</p> <p>To open our mind, to be creative on our own. To overcome this they should limit and bring down the subjects only to the core and then reduce the class hours and also they should give projects like, which open up the creativity of a student. They can explore more ideas on how to implement the knowledge which they have got from the curriculum into a project. Like anything they can explore with their creativity. “</p>
2.	<p>“There was no misconceptions between what they have told and what I faced coming here. It is really good university. We have having lot of facilities for us”.</p> <p>“So I think the not not only the curriculum, but their events, organisation systems. their culture of calling alumni right, their culture of calling great software engineers who are also good and very beneficial for us to motivate, to learn and look at them”.</p> <p>Hackathons organised by the university.</p>	<p>Btech program class size too big.</p> <p>Teachers speak in Hindi.i</p> <p>Local class students speak in Hindi amongst themselves.</p>	<p>“we were not given opportunity to sit to sit for an internship or a placement here. But that devastated me after coming to India because I with one hope to be placed in India was one of my dreams. So I was not given that opportunity to sit for a placement here”.</p>
3.	<p>“BTS gives a lot of opportunities for students, given that the student is interested to participate”.</p> <p>In terms of studies and flexibility BTS met expectations.</p> <p>Whatever was learned here will help improve job performance.</p>	<p>The residential experience off campus. It is unsafe, more so for females.</p>	<p>Cost of rooms within the campus needs to be relooked at, they are expensive.</p> <p>First few days of transition require hand holding.</p> <p>There are issues related to opening a bank account, obtaining a phone sim card, and difficulty in recharging the phone.</p> <p>The college to provide bed mattresses or at least let students know beforehand that they need to procure their own.</p>
4.	<p>The professors were very helpful and provided extensive guidance.</p>	<p>Had some personal traumatic experiences not related to academics. He didn't want to talk about it and I didn't press it.</p>	<p>Can improve how they share information.</p> <p>“...actually the communication system is the, you</p>

	<p>Learned a lot, especially in the area of research.</p> <p>Prepares well for higher studies.</p> <p>"I am, in fact, overall satisfied with BTS; the most significant reason being the character development that I have gone through in the last few years".</p>	<p>The new faculty members are not qualified or equipped to provide proper guidance on projects.</p> <p>Very difficult to get a job after completing a degree.</p>	<p>know, it is very, very bad. because we dont get the information proper information. Because every semester the curriculum keeps changing. New and new criteria, get included. Some criteria get, some things that they get disbanded. The information do not reach us on time.</p> <p>And hence we cannot make proper use of all the opportunities that are actually available. Most students don't even know, are not even aware that BTS provides these opportunities. Most students are not even aware of that".</p> <p>Relook at attendance norms. It prevents students from participating in activities outside of academics. "Though a duty slip is provided for those events the system is not smooth and the student get the runaround".</p> <p>Security is intrusive for male students and can be improved on how it is done.</p>
5.	<p>Diversity of students and the resulting environment.</p> <p>Helpfulness and support of faculty.</p> <p>"I like that attitude of the faculty . They're teaching method because, they teach like their own child".</p> <p>The exposure to multiple aspects and events.</p> <p>"They prepare you for interviews and communication. There are lots of events like hackathons where you learn and feel you can adjust anywhere after this exposure".</p> <p>Gives me an edge for employment in home country.</p>	<p>Difficulty in getting a summer internship or a full time job.</p>	<p>To help with job placement.</p> <p>Provide non vegetarian food on campus.</p> <p>Construct prayer spaces for each religion, such as temples, mosques, and churches, within the campus to save students the time of going outside to pray.</p>
6.	<p>Good range of extracurricular activities and opportunities for self development.</p> <p>Prepares well for post graduate program in western countries.</p> <p>Good mentoring during the admission process</p>	<p>No job placements</p>	<p>Provide placement support.</p> <p>Provide a single point of contact who can speak the language of the parents of international students.</p> <p>To improve mentorship post admissions too.</p> <p>"Non technical teachers can be more updated in their knowledge".</p>
7.	<p>The infrastructure.</p> <p>The diversity of students.</p> <p>The range of opportunities for socialising and personal development .</p> <p>"You name it and they've really got everything in here as I already told you that you know , hospital, the</p>	<p>" ...like there is nothing unlikeable".</p>	<p>Placement support.</p> <p>"The Indian companies treat us as foreigners even though work visa is not needed".</p>

	<p>facilities are really, really good. And you know you can do anything. You want to pursue sports, there is whole sport complex. You want to do dance you want to do singing, you're want to anything they have it here. You want to join different clubs. You know the exposure and also networking”.</p>		
8.	<p>Well organised.</p> <p>Multidisciplinary and the diversity of student interactions across disciplines.</p> <p>Level of exposure.</p>	<p>“The placement is largely for indian students. Don't get any specific help from the university. They shrug it off by saying it depends on the company”.</p>	<p>Improve placements for international students. Provide assistance in understanding the employment environment and any associated regulations.</p> <p>Improve time and attention given to research work.</p> <p>Collaborate with other universities to open a study in India integrated counselling office in their respective countries.</p>
9.	<p>“The CAs (class assignments) are the great things: 3 CAs and all different ones. First CA is assignment, second is presentation and third one is test”. This prepares the student well and gives confidence.</p> <p>BTS offers a diverse range of courses.</p> <p>It has the “best infrastructure”.</p> <p>The studies at BTS have provided “ Deep knowledge in my chosen field of study, including both theoretical understanding and practical application”.</p> <p>Has helped to improve research skills as well as how to analyse data and present findings.</p> <p>Offer several soft skill training programs for personal development.</p>		<p>“Organise workshops or cultural exchange programs that promote understanding and appreciation of (home) country culture among local and international students.</p> <p>Provide Hindi language support services”.</p>
10.	<p>Is pleased with everything the university offers.</p> <p>“ I feel so fortunate to be here”.</p>		
11.	<p>Good support provided to students.</p> <p>“University is conducting numerous training for self development and to enhance your knowledge and skills”.</p>	<p>Absence of adequate fieldwork.</p>	<p>“Need to provide university facilities to organise home country culture and meetings for free”.</p> <p>Need to provide more field work.</p>
12	<p>Good overall environment.</p>	<p>Inadequate practical and field experience.</p>	<p>Have one hostel allocated only for all international students.</p> <p>House students of the same nationality within a flat. This helps “ shar[ing] since the international</p>

			<p>students from whichever country had similar issues or feelings”.</p> <p>Handhold the international students through the administrative hassles of the first few weeks such as bank account opening, obtaining a sim card etc.</p>
13.	<p>Library facilities are good.</p> <p>Participation in sporting events.</p> <p>Academic program content.</p> <p>Learning research skills.</p>	<p>“systems of BTS, very complicated....system should be improved little better for further attraction of international students. Eg: If I cite one example to pay the fees or any other relative administrative issue, they instruct us to go window number 1 then 2 and 3 so on where it can be done by the window number 1 itself where we waste lots of time waiting”.</p>	<p>Meetings with international students should be held at least once a month to understand and address any issues they may be facing.</p>
14.	<p>Is pleased with everything the university offers.</p> <p>“For students on campus There is nothing for students to complain”.</p>	<p>Absence of job placements.</p>	<p>Need to provide job placements. BTS needs to make effort in this direction as jobs are there.</p> <p>“BTS advertises on placements, job packages but none of it is relevant for international students. They rarely get a job offer through campus. His friends have managed off campus”</p>
15.	<p>Diversity of the student body.</p> <p>Exposure and all round development of communication and interpersonal skills.</p> <p>Opportunity for personal growth and building confidence through exposure to a diverse environment and participation in various activities and events.</p> <p>Prepares for further studies in other countries.</p>	<p>Inability of few teachers to teach in English.</p> <p>“The experience I hated the most was the teacher who was not able to speak good English in class. We had to focus on what he was saying rather than understanding the problem. That was a huge obstacle at that time. We had to endure the one hour class rather than study for attendance”.</p>	<p>Need to provide job placements.</p> <p>Improve the quality of teachers.</p>

End of Dissertation