

## STUDENTS OF MIGRATION: INDIAN OVERSEAS STUDENTS AND THE QUESTION OF PERMANENT RESIDENCY

### Michiel Baas

*This article explores the motives of students from India who have enrolled in Australian universities as overseas students. It shows that their main objective is to obtain a permanent residence visa in Australia and that they tailor their choice of course and university with this end in mind. As a consequence most have chosen to study at the relatively low cost metropolitan campuses of Australia's regional universities. The article also explores the difficulties Indian students are encountering in obtaining a permanent residence visa.*

### INTRODUCTION

Recent studies of the propensity of overseas students to seek permanent residence (PR) in Australia after completing their studies show that this propensity is now very high. Of those international students who completed their course in 2003, 33 per cent obtained a permanent residence visa under the on-shore overseas student visa subclasses. The countries of origin with the highest PR rates were all South Asian: Pakistan (67 per cent), Bangladesh (71 per cent), India (73 per cent) and Nepal (77 per cent).<sup>1</sup> This means that in the case of, for example, international students from India, nearly three quarters of those who finished their course in 2003 obtained a PR visa under the overseas student visa subclasses during 2003-04.

These findings are important in the light of my own research on Indian overseas students, a project which found its origins in earlier research, which I conducted among Indian information technology (IT) professionals in India itself. During the first half of 2003 I did anthropological fieldwork among IT professionals of the South Indian city of Bangalore, often referred to as the Silicon Valley of the East. It was a good time to be in Bangalore. Most IT companies were busy climbing out of the slump they had been in after the IT bubble had burst in

the US, and the city was buzzing with stories of well-known Indian IT companies such as Wipro and Infosys hiring again, and of other (often foreign) multinationals setting up shop in the city or increasing the massive investments that they already had there.

While talking to IT professionals in Bangalore and discussing the universities they had been to, and the choices they made in that regard, I would often also hear stories about younger cousins and friends who were planning to study abroad. I would hear about how fathers and mothers had studied abroad in the past, and how younger brothers or sisters were now applying for student visas. My respondents would tell me how they had had plans to do their MBAs abroad themselves at some point or how friends were looking into these options now. Often these plans and stories were about the US and the UK, long time favourites among Indian students. But I also heard about another destination, one which was new and thus did not have a long history of hosting Indian students to go there: Australia.<sup>2</sup> Initially I assumed that doing a degree in Australia was just another 'study abroad' option, an alternative to longer established destinations such as the US or the UK.<sup>3</sup> But the more I heard about it, the more it seemed that, in the case of Australia, it was about something

else as well. While talking to Indians interested in studying in Australia it soon became clear that they were actually interested in something else, namely migration. Online discussion groups and other information sources only confirmed this: studying in Australia was seen as a way to migrate there.

#### **FIELDWORK IN MELBOURNE**

From January till December 2005 I conducted anthropological fieldwork among Indian overseas students in Melbourne. The research was based on three central questions: why do Indian students come to Australia, what are the practicalities of their lives when they are there, and what plans do they have for their future? Although I had already learned the short answer to the first question while doing research in India, I wanted to gain deeper knowledge of the reasons these students have for wanting to migrate to Australia. The case of Indian students is particularly interesting, as they have no clear economic or social reasons for coming to Australia. The Indian economy is growing rapidly, many jobs are actually being outsourced to India (including Australian jobs), and the country is generally considered to be one of the next big global players.<sup>4</sup> While many multinationals are in the process of moving parts of their businesses to India, these students are exploring ways to migrate out of India: why is that?

For the fieldwork I conducted in 2005 I gathered data on 230 people; 130 of them were Indian overseas students in Australia, the others were in one way or another involved in, or connected to, these students' lives. This second group includes ex-overseas students, education and migration agents, directors of programs, CEOs of certain educational institutions, tutors, lecturers, professors, social

workers, student advisors, counsellors, student union members and leaders, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) and IDP<sup>5</sup> personnel, psychologists, marketing personnel, market analysts, international student recruiters, and Indian community members and leaders. The students I interviewed were all enrolled in Melbourne-based universities and other institutions, ranging from the University of Melbourne to the University of Ballarat, and from William Angliss Institute of TAFE (Technical and Further Education) to the Brighton Institute of Technology.

On average interviews lasted at least two hours. Many students were met more than once, and I often stayed in touch with them afterwards. This provided the opportunity to follow things over a longer period of time. In many cases this approach led to a sort of life-story, which gave a fuller view of all sorts of factors which had played a part in their decision to study in, and eventually migrate to, Australia. The non-students who participated in the research complemented these stories and eventually provided a detailed picture of how the Australian education industry works.

As I am an anthropologist I prefer spending time with my research population in an informal way. This meant taking part in activities organised by Indian student organisations, visiting them at home, hanging out with them or even just going for a drink with them. This way I got to see all sorts of aspects of an international (Indian) student's life in Melbourne, which would have otherwise remained hidden.

Those interviewed do not constitute a systematic sample of overseas students from India who are studying in Melbourne. However, the combination of the over 200 interviews, as well as the

examination of other sources of data (online discussion platforms, newspaper articles and information from student advisors and others involved in the overseas education industry) makes me confident that this study provides an accurate account of the Indian student situation.

This article is about Indian overseas students and their interests in obtaining PR after graduation. I will argue that the most important reason why they come to Australia is not because they rank Australian universities very highly but much more because they are attracted by the option of applying for PR after graduation. If they are under thirty years of age, complete two years of higher education in Australia, and graduate in a field leading to what DIMA defines as a sixty-point occupation, or especially if it is designated as a 'Migrant Occupation in Demand' (MODL), overseas students stand a fair chance of gaining residency status when they have finished their studies. For Indian students this is often the plan from the start; even before coming to Australia they will have figured out which courses will provide the easiest way to PR and will base the course they enrol in on this. Although these people are students in name, in practice such behaviour actually makes them migrants.

#### **THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION INDUSTRY**

In 2004 a record number of 164,535 international students were enrolled in Australian educational institutions, studying onshore in Australia. The vast majority were enrolled in courses in the higher education sector: at the undergraduate and Masters level. By far the biggest group of international students was Chinese (68,857), originally from the People's Republic of China. Indian students with a presence of 20,749 in

Australia, however, came in at fourth place, closely after number two South Korea (23,810) and Hong Kong (22,970).<sup>6</sup>

The growth figures of 2003-04 tell a slightly different tale. While the Chinese market still witnessed a healthy growth of 17.6 per cent, and the Korean market 7.5 per cent. There was a decline of 3.8 per cent in students coming to Australia from Hong Kong. Other traditional markets such as Singapore and Malaysia all saw stabilising or declining numbers. These figures were, however, in stark contrast to the number of Indian students in Australia, as their numbers increased by 44.6 per cent compared to 2003.<sup>7</sup>

In general, Indian overseas students were enrolled in masters by coursework programs.<sup>8</sup> Most popular were Information Technology courses, followed by Management and Commerce (in particular Accounting), and Engineering and Related Technologies courses.

By far the highest number of students was studying at the Central Queensland University (1914 in total, among whom 461 were enrolled in the Melbourne-based campus) and the University of Ballarat (1513 in total, of whom 412 were enrolled in the Melbourne-based campus called 'Melbourne Institute of Technology'). Other universities with a high number of Indian students were University of Southern Queensland (675), Victoria University (663) and RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) (584).

#### **STUDENTS AS MIGRANTS**

When it comes to finding answers to question such as 'why do Indian students come to Australia' and 'why are they so interested in PR' the answers are diverse. Still, among all the personal stories that were gathered for this research, certain categories could be formed under which certain students could be grouped.

First of all there is a group of Indian overseas students who did not initially want PR but slowly came to long for it, so to speak. They had come to Australia in order to complete their higher education abroad. Australia was often not their first choice though. Many had actually tried to go to the US first but had seen their student visa applications denied. Australia was often a second or even a third choice for them, after also having 'given up' on the UK, a destination which many found to be too expensive for what was being offered. They had not come to Australia to get PR, and often had no idea about it or what it stood for. But then they noticed how everybody else was getting it, that it was a topic of conversation among other Indian students, and that it was almost something that was expected of them after graduation. Of course there are also those who just want to stay on in Australia because they had come to like it here, because they had come to appreciate all sorts of thing not available (or at least in limited supply) at home, but most of all one should take into account that many international students end up in a culture of migration when they come to Australia, and this has a strong impact on their behaviour.

As many students I interviewed would explain it: 'Everybody is always talking about PR so whether you like it or not you are going to get exposed to that'. This want or longing for a PR is often fuelled by feelings of disappointment about the quality of education they received in Australia. Having invested a lot of money in their education, and often having taken out large loans to finance their dreams, they came to Australia with high expectations. Sometimes these expectations were not realistic; in other instances they had every right to be

disappointed about what they received.<sup>9</sup> A PR for them is a form of compensation for something they feel they have not received (a sound education) but for which they paid a lot of money.

A second group of Indian students I came across differs from the first group in the sense that they had wanted residency from the start, or at least wanted it in some form, like a work permit for a couple of years. This had a lot to do with the huge investments they were about to make in their futures. Most Indian students were able to come to Australia by taking out a student loan. Such a loan is often necessary to show DIMA that the student has sufficient funds to support himself in Australia, and that he will be able to pay his fees with those funds. Students generally take out loans of between fifteen and fifty-five thousand Australian dollars. For many Indian students it is important that they stay on in Australia after graduation to make this money back. Paying back such a loan in India would simply take too long and weigh too heavily on the family's financial situation. Knowing this from the start, the students will have had to take all available options into account.

Often they were not informed properly when they were planning on coming to Australia though. Some of them had immigration and/or education agents back home who just did not know what they were talking about, other agents were too busy selling education and cashing the commissions they got for every enrolled student in an Australian university to really care about the student's welfare or future. Other students had heard from too many of their peers how easy it was to get PR and had come to believe this. And again others knew exactly how the immigration rules worked but then the rules changed. Although this second group

is very focussed on PR they are also serious about their studies. But doing what they are good at, or following the course they are really interested in, is not always possible as they have to take Australia's immigration criteria into account.<sup>10</sup>

And then finally there is a group who came to Australia for PR, and for PR only. This is a huge group and one that seems to still be growing rapidly. The people in this group are consumers who know what they are buying by investing in an education in Australia but who, at the same time, do not always know whether the product they have bought will actually do what have they bought it for. These are often the students who are enrolled in universities or colleges with highly competitive fees and, of course, courses which directly correspond with the latest MODL occupations.

Students who can be found in groups one and two are often enrolled in universities generally considered to have good international reputations, more than adequate facilities, and highly qualified staff and personnel. Those who fall into the third group, though, often have little or no interest in the quality of the college or university they are studying at. Indian students who were either enrolled in such colleges or universities themselves, or who had friends studying there, would often refer to these institutions as 'PR factories'. These PR factories were considered to be places that had little to do with education and much to do with migration.

#### **THE PR FACTORY**

As argued before, the majority of Indian overseas students are actually migrants. Their concerns, motivations, hopes and ideas about the future are focussed on the goal of migration. They are students but with the worries and responsibilities of migrants. When discussing their lives and

lifestyles it would often come to the fore how little their studies actually mattered. When it came to results and having passed certain subjects, the general opinion was that it was better not to fail a subject, as it would mean paying the fees again. Yet at the same time spending time on a subject would have to be juggled against other responsibilities and obligations, most of all taking care of their part-time jobs. These jobs were supposed to generate at least enough money to cover living expenses but with a bit of luck also part, if not all, of their college fees. Some would also explain that an Australian degree was actually not worth much in India. They added that Indian companies often did not know the university or simply had no faith in the value of the degree. And this was something they had already known before ending up on Australian shores, which again made clear what the point of it all was.

As indicated, the Indian students interviewed often referred to those institutes which enrolled the highest numbers of Indian students as PR factories. With this they implied that these institutions were fully aware of what was going on and had tuned in to the trend. This means, for example, that the institutions would have let the MODL list influence what sort of courses they promoted overseas and what courses would no longer be offered.<sup>11</sup> Interviews with directors of programs and CEOs from various institutions enrolling a high number of South Asian students (of which the vast majority were Indian) certainly acknowledged this. They freely admitted that they kept close track of changes in the MODL list in order to predict which new courses would be in demand in the coming semester.

From many discussions with recruiters and marketing people and others active in

the education industry it became clear that almost everybody is aware of what the Indian student market is about. This perspective applies not just to the regional universities with campuses in Melbourne but also to the major universities located in Melbourne that enroll the highest number of Indian students in Australia. Managers at these universities all were aware that the market was 'highly PR-dominated', as they often described it. They knew about the importance of PR to Indian students and would often wonder how they could possibly compete with the regional universities with campuses in Melbourne whose fee levels were much lower yet offered the same PR outcome. Some managers also wanted their universities to play a more active role in immigration.

One university recruiter explained that, in India, students were scarcely interested in course content; they just want to know about PR. But among such recruiters there was often a lot of confusion about whether or not you could actually give students migration advice.<sup>12</sup> Some frankly admitted that they referred more detailed questions to immigration agents whom they had business relations with, others simply kept a close track of the latest developments themselves. Generally managers involved with recruitment agreed that the topic was unavoidable and, if you wanted to stay active in the education industry, you simply had to know what you were selling.

In order to get a better understanding of who these Indian students are and what their reasons for coming to Australia are, I will now present the cases of three different Indian students, one from each of the three categories outlined above. This will give a better understanding of why these students are so focussed on eventually becoming a migrant in

Australia, while at the same time showing the kind of world they have ended up in when they decided to pursue further education in Australia.

### **Meet student I: Ashish Gupta**

Ashish is twenty-four years old and originally from Mumbai. When he was doing his bachelors degree he knew he wanted to study abroad. In particular: he wanted to study in the US. Many of his friends were planning for the same future and they had done extensive research together to find a proper university there. The choice had fallen on a mid-range university in Texas, relatively affordable and with a relatively good reputation.

Ashish graduated in July 2003, having completed a bachelor degree in information technology with Bombay University. He had already started preparing for the US, taking the required tests and preparing the necessary documents. The university in Texas had sent him an acceptance letter and, with a bank statement from his parents for 35,000 US dollars, he had made an appointment with the US consulate to apply for a student visa. When the day came, somewhere late in July 2003, he had to go for the interview. He left at four in the morning, only to find himself among many others standing in line outside the consulate. By the end of the morning his number came up and he was called to the counter. There he had an interview, which lasted about forty-five seconds and consisted of one question: why do you want to study in the US? Although at the time he had no intention of settling in the US, the officer was not convinced by his answer and his student visa application was refused on the grounds of his being a 'potential immigrant'.

Now it must be added that all this happened after the terrorist attacks of

nine-eleven 2001 and many students could tell similar stories. It seems that after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York it became increasingly hard for many Indian students to get students visas for the US. Those who saw their visas refused were often unable to give a clear reason why this was. The grounds on which they were refused often come down to having been labeled a 'P.I.' (potential immigrant) as Indian students refer to it, or because some fault had been found with the documents stating their financial situation. Yet at the same time these students said the answers they gave during the interview, or the documents they presented to show that they were financially capable of studying in the US, were no different to those presented by others who had in fact managed to get a student visa for the US. One student who had been refused twice referred to the process as a lottery, and another even said that the officer at the American consulate had simply flipped a coin in the air and made his decision based on that.

For half a year Ashish kept a low profile; his dream of going to the US was shattered and he had no clear alternative plans. He briefly considered doing a postgraduate course in India but his final semester results had not been very good, as a result of having spent too much time preparing documents for his US visa application, and so he knew that would be pointless, as he would not be able to get into one of the better Indian universities.

After a couple of months he learned about IDP and studying in Australia from a friend. Going to Australia had certain advantages over the US, he learned. For one, the course fees were much lower, in addition the cost of living was more affordable. Plus it was supposed to be a

safer country to live in than the UK or the US. It also turned out be fairly easy to get a student loan for studying in Australia, which meant that less of his parents' savings would have to be reserved for his dream to study abroad.

Ashish took out a bank loan of 12-lakh rupees, which roughly converts to A\$35,000. Although the family house was worth far more than this amount, the family still had to submit the papers relating to the house to the bank as a guarantee that the money would be repaid no matter what. Apart from this, IDP had taken care of most of the work and suddenly he found himself waiting for his flight at Mumbai airport.

The first few months being abroad and seeing new things in Australia were exciting, but soon this excitement turned to disappointment. For one, Australia was not the US. The images he had consumed of the US all his life did not match with what he saw in Melbourne, a city that goes to bed early and where the suburbs can feel quite dead at times, particularly if you have lived in Mumbai all your life. Slowly this disappointment translated into feelings of wanting to get more out of his sojourn, into the feeling that he was not getting enough out of his studies and his stay in Melbourne. In addition he started to realise how much of his parents' money he had actually spent on his dream of studying abroad.

His friends all say the same, he says. They all expected more. He shares a house with three others, one who is also at RMIT, but he is not particularly close to any of them. When they all get together, conversations are usually about DIMA, how to beat the rules that come with a student visa (especially how to circumvent the rule of the maximum of twenty hours paid work per week, which overseas students are allowed to work

during semesters), and most all about what is required to get a PR after graduation. All this has started to bore him.

When Ashish came to Australia he had had no intention of applying for PR. He had been under the impression that he would probably be able to stay to work for a while after graduation, just like he would have been able to in the US. Otherwise, he reasoned, he could probably find a company to sponsor him. The plan was simple: he would just stay in Australia a couple of years, make some extra money (needed to quickly pay off his student loan) and then return to India.

But now, he thinks differently. All his friends Down Under have already told him that, without a PR, he will never get a job after graduation and thus a PR has become necessary. And there is also something else that is nagging him: everybody else seems to be getting PR and he does not want to be left out. Ashish, as has become clear, now wants to stay in Australia. It is not that he likes it here so much. He is not even sure how long he would want to stay Down Under but he feels that residency should be his at least. He should be able to return to Australia if and when he wants to, he says. For him it is on the one hand compensation for the fact that he is not very happy with what his money is buying him in terms of education, and on the other hand, it is something he feels he should have because 'everybody else' seems to be getting it.

#### **Meet student II: Karthik Iyengar**

Karthik, a twenty-three year old well-dressed Brahmin student from Trichy, a famous temple town in Tamil Nadu, arrived in Australia in July 2004. In many ways his story is similar to that of Ashish, with one marked difference. Karthik

came to Australia specifically with the idea in mind that he wanted to apply for PR after graduation.

Karthik did his bachelors degree in a college in Coimbatore, a regional industrial town in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where he lived in a student hostel for three years. Although the college he attended was good, and his grades were good too, his record would not be enough to get him into one of the better universities in India. He had done a number of entrance exams and although he had scored quite decently, he had been out-competed by others who had scored higher. All this had not really bothered him that much. While studying in Coimbatore he had learned of a number of older students who had gone to Australia and who were now PR holders there. This seemed to him the ultimate solution to something he had been struggling with for a while now: what to do with his future?

While talking about his reasons for coming to Australia he explained that, although his grades were okay, he knew he did not exactly belong to that group who would easily find an IT job with one of the more reputable companies such as Infosys and Wipro in India's IT capital, Bangalore. This had worried him. He had seen many cousins and others join start-up companies but all they seemed to do was work incredibly hard, never having any time to spend the hard-earned rupees they had made. True the salaries in the Indian IT industry were quite good, but what use were they if you never got to spend any of it?

His parents liked the idea that he would study abroad. His father had always been a little disappointed that his son had never made it into REC Trichy, one of the better colleges in India, and thought that a degree abroad could



compensate for this. His father was a surgeon in a local hospital, his mother an English language teacher who had completed a masters in English literature when she was young. His oldest brother had a medical degree, and the other brother was doing his doctorate in Chennai. In a way, Karthik had quite a bit to live up to.

So when I met Karthik in Melbourne, slowly a much more complicated story unfolded. For one, even though he had come to Australia with the idea in mind to migrate here, he knew quite well that he would not make the criteria for PR right away. Whether one is eligible for PR in Australia depends on how many points one scores on DIMA's points test. If an international student wishes to apply in Australia he will have to score a minimum of 120 points. Karthik, however, just scored 115 points and thus needed another five points.

While discussing how to deal with this problem, Karthik summed up a number of available options as if it concerned a grocery list. Among the most common ways of getting five points extra is by showing work experience in a skilled occupation. For Karthik this had been the plan from early on, to find exactly such a job so that he would meet the requirements later on. But soon he had found himself in a situation where he needed a job to meet some other requirement first, namely buying groceries and paying the rent. The money his father had given him to meet his living expenses for the first couple of months quickly ran out. He had to pay rent, buy a monthly public transport card and meet other recurring monthly costs, so he had given up his search for the appropriate job and accepted one in a petrol station where he was working behind the counter. He had continued to look for a better job but now

that the end of his course was coming in sight he was forced to draw the conclusion that this had not worked out for him the way as planned.

The other options for obtaining the additional five points available were too unrealistic to even consider, he explained. One such option entails investing a hundred thousand dollars in a property in Australia, or depositing it in a fixed bank account for at least a year, but his family simply could not afford this. Another well-known option, often mentioned by Indian students and frowned upon just as much as it was fantasised about, was marrying a local (Australian) girl. That would be something, he had said. His parents had already announced some time ago that they had found him a bride. She was from Trichy and waiting to come to Australia as soon as he was done with his studies, and had got his residency here

At this point something else became clear. His parents had no idea about what he had got himself into. When he had sought their permission to study abroad, he had painted a much rosier picture for them than he should have. He had told them that he would make the loan money back by working and living in Australia. They had the utmost faith in their son and they had given him their blessings and waved him off at the airport.

Karthik had never expected to end up in this situation. He was now in serious trouble, realising that his time and his options were running out. Still the problem of the loan was there and returning to India was hardly something he was willing to consider. Maybe the education agent should have better prepared him for this, he sighed. He is like many others: on the one hand very ambitious, full of big plans — and on the other hand a dreamer, poorly informed and in a way not quite prepared for all this. He is a student, busy

learning about the many traps and loopholes of migrating, and on the other hand already a migrant, not only having made the decision to migrate but now also facing the situation that he no longer has a choice. Soon the first instalment of the loan will have to be paid back and already his brothers back home have to contribute to pay the interest. Paying back the loan in India would be nearly impossible. It would take him far too long and not only that, returning to India would make him the laughing stock of town. He would be the guy who had not been able to make it; the guy heavily in debt. In other words, he would be known as a failure and that would also harm the family's reputation.

### **Meet student III: Ganesh Naidu**

The case could not be more different with Ganesh Naidu, twenty-four years old and living in a Melbourne suburb called Footscray with three other friends since he arrived in July 2005. Ganesh is here for PR; at least that is what he says himself. He adds that he is also here for 'the money' but as he had learned in India for that he needs a PR first, otherwise he will never get a job in Australia.

After having completed his bachelors degree in physics in Hyderabad, he had joined the family business, which he and his brother were slowly taking over from their father who wanted to retire. His family was active in the packing industry and the business was expanding rapidly, riding the waves of increased economic activity in Hyderabad and the rest of India. As a consequence the family was doing well; studying abroad had become a real option. And this was the buzz among many of his friends as well: studying abroad. They all came from similar new middle class business families and, although studying was not

exactly common in their families, everybody knew what the right college degree could do for your career and your home business. It would be even better if such a degree could come with a residency somewhere else as well.

Ganesh had never bothered to do a whole lot of research on the topic. The moment he learned of the opportunities Australia had to offer he had grabbed them with both hands. He found an education agent who doubled as an immigration agent and whom he asked to figure out what course would suit him best. The agent came up with CQU, and the course would be Masters of Accounting. With a background in physics he hardly seemed ready for a postgraduate course in accounting but, according to his agent, this would not be a problem. Many others were doing the same and CQU would be more than happy to admit him.

When I first met Ganesh he had just finished his first semester at CQU's Melbourne campus and had neatly passed all his exams without much trouble. It had taken him some time to get used to doing accounting but fortunately he had received a lot of help from his friends who were all in more or less the same situation. In addition it had turned out to be hardly necessary to attend all the lectures, which had left him plenty of time for his part-time job. The money that this job generated was quite important, as he had come here rather empty-handed. Studying Down Under was his own idea and his father had demanded that he find a way to pay for it himself. His father had paid for the first semester, arranged something with the bank to satisfy 'the visa people', and had given his son some extra pocket money, but that's where the family help ended. After that money had run out, in about a month or two after arrival, he had become a taxi driver and by

working weekends and holidays he had been able to manage most of his living expenses and part of his fees as well. These fees were about four thousand dollars lower per semester compared to universities such as RMIT or Monash so in a way he started out with a much smaller problem than had Karthik or Ashish.

Why then a PR? For Ganesh it was quite simple. The family wanted to expand their business and, without a person with some kind of passport to travel the world, this would have been hard. Ganesh will get a PR at the end of his stay here and this means that the family has an entrée into the Australian market. Even if that fails, and the family never expands to Australia, the PR will certainly be of great value. Ganesh plans on staying here a number of years so that he can apply for citizenship as well. Perhaps he will bring his parents here one day, or maybe one of his brothers. But no matter what, the family will get a return on their investment.

#### **THE FIVE POINTS ISSUE**

The cases of Ashish, Karthik and Ganesh largely correspond to the three groups mentioned earlier. It has already been hinted at that Ashish and Karthik had a problem, in that neither would immediately qualify for PR after graduation. This turns out to be a common problem among many Indian students. DIMA increased the pass mark for the Skilled Independent Overseas Student visa subclass from 115 to 120 for students applying after May 2005. The visa application can be lodged onshore; the student does not actually have to return home to do so (something which in the past caused many to reconsider and often cancel their plans of settling down in Australia). Getting these 120 points is fairly straightforward and easy as long as,

of course, one meets the criteria. Generally this works as follows: if you, as a student, are below thirty when applying you will receive thirty points for age. Another twenty points can be gained by successfully passing the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test at level 6. Most Indian students meet both requirements easily. As they have completed their two years of full-time education in Australia they can collect another five points.<sup>13</sup> The real problem comes with the skills category they fall under. The skilled migration program is divided into three different categories, worth each 40, 50 and 60 points. Professions such as IT, accounting and engineering are included under the sixty points category (while being an MBA graduate will only give you fifty points). Ashish, as an IT graduate will be able to claim sixty points but was still only able to accumulate 115 points. A couple of years ago the situation would have been different, since the pass mark was then 115.<sup>14</sup>

Ashish is faced with another problem though. The duration of his course is only one and a half years and, in order to claim the five points for having completed his degree in Australia, he will have to complete at least two years of education. This means he will have to find a way to extend his course so that he can show DIMA that he has studied full-time in Australia for the duration of two years. One option is to do a specialisation in a field connected to his current studies. Although RMIT has certain options in this direction he has also consulted certain cheaper institutions, which are more in tune with immigration problems, in order to gain the extra six months study time.

While talking to Indian students it became clear that many of them who arrived since 2004 face similar problems to those of Ashish. Many are enrolled in

courses which do not meet the two-year requirement or which do not fetch enough points. A reason for this is that many were simply not aware of the changed PR regulations. This is either because they had not informed themselves properly or because others (migration/education agents, or even friends and family) had either not been aware of the latest changes or had painted a much rosier picture of the reality than they should have. Certain others, on the other hand, had just ignored the warning signs and thought that they would be able to figure things out once they were in the country.

Karthik was one such student. PR had definitely been on his mind when he made the decision to study in Australia but he had thought far too lightly about how he would deal with falling short of these crucial final five points. As mentioned before, he had considered getting relevant work experience in a relevant field so that he could claim points for that. But while the list of skilled occupations for such work experience is long, it is also quite specific, and getting the work experience is quite hard.

Although many Indian students come to Australia with the idea that this is a serious option, many in the end fail to get the work experience they need for these extra points. There are basically two reasons for this. First, international students are not allowed to work full time year-round (they are only allowed to work twenty hours per week during the semesters). This makes them of less value for employers recruiting people for such jobs. The other reason has to do with a lack of time and money. Many Indian students have to make at least their living expenses by working part-time in Australia. This means that they usually find themselves more or less forced to just accept whatever job comes their way.

But there are also other options to gain the five points as was mentioned earlier. One of these options comes down to becoming a certified translator in one of the major Indian languages. If an international student manages to get a NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) accreditation in, for instance, Hindi, he gains another five points which will often be enough to make him eligible for PR. Karthik, like many others, was seriously considering this option. Here it is also interesting to see how the problem of the five points has created a new opportunity for educational institutions. For example, the Melbourne Institute of Technology (MIT) is now offering an Advanced Diploma of Translating (NAATI Professional level). Those who follow the sixteen week course, with a course fee of A\$5,000, and achieve a minimum of 70 per cent or above in the final examination are eligible to be recommended to NAATI for a professional translator accreditation. Current languages on offer are Bengali, Chinese and Hindi.

Another option often discussed among Indian students is investing a A\$100,000 dollars, either by buying property here or parking the money in a fixed deposit account for at least a year. For many, Karthik included, this is simply not a real option. Karthik explained that although he was from a highly educated middle class family, they had always been public servants and, in contrast to Indian middle class business families, they did not have the financial muscle and flexibility of these families. Interviews with students who came from such business families had shown that they were often not able to do this either, although this had nothing to do with a lack of money. The way the Indian economy and government works, and the way business is done,

such families are often confronted with the problem that a large chunk of their money is actually what one could call 'black money' which cannot be simply moved out of the country. According to many immigration agents this is one of the prime reasons why this option is not explored more often. Some agents do, however, render certain services to deal with the problem. But naturally such services come with a particular price.

One other option Karthik was considering now was a Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) visa, something that he had learned more about from the migration agent he had consulted recently. Many other Indian students I met in Melbourne were considering this option as well. The SIR visa is a provisional visa that is currently marketed as something which international students can apply for when they don't meet the normal criteria for PR. It involves working and living in a regional area for a number of years, after which they can consider applying for PR if they meet the requirements. In order to attract more people to the state of Victoria, and in particular to its more regional areas, the Victorian State Government recently launched a website called 'Living in Victoria'<sup>15</sup> to make it easier and more interesting for potential migrants to migrate to Victoria. The website was launched at RMIT and by doing this the State Government made it perfectly clear who they saw as potential candidates for the SIR visa.

When I asked Karthik if he could picture himself in regional Victoria he said that he did not really have a choice. He was seriously considering this option though was still hoping for another way. The most common worry about committing yourself to a life in the countryside is that, besides the fact that it might be hard to get a job there, it also means living an

isolated life in a state of uncertainty about when one will be considered a real resident in Australia with full rights (and benefits). Students who already feel disappointed by the education they received in Australia are especially likely to see moving to the countryside as an extra slap in the face. Preliminary data from DIMA also suggest that, so far, the number of applications for SIR visas has been limited.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

When the MODL list was updated on 15 December 2005 it did not take long for the changes to be commonly known among almost all Indian students. Within a couple of days there was not an Indian student to be found in Australia who had not heard the (good) news. Five computer professions had been added to the list, ranging from E-commerce Security (non-programming) to SAP. Immediately the changes were a hot topic and lively debates were taking place, not only on campus but also on the Internet in discussion forums among those who were still in India and those who were already in Australia. What were the consequences of the changes? Would it be easier to get PR now? Did it make sense to go for IT studies now? What did the stipulation that you could only apply if you could show 'evidence of substantial skills and experience' mean? Ashish and Karthik, for instance, are busy at the moment trying to figure out a way around the requirement that you need to show the accrediting agency, the Australian Computer Society, that you have at least one year of full-time work experience to qualify for the 75 points for an IT skill mentioned on the MODL list. Already there are immigration lawyers active in Melbourne known to Indian students who claim that they can take care of such problems for

you. This implies that they know ways of showing work experience on paper which may not necessarily exist.

The reasons Indian students have for wanting to migrate to Australia are diverse. That some are willing to go so far as to take up courses which they aren't really interested in, or study at a low ranking university, only shows how much they need residency status. At the moment high numbers of Indian students are enrolled in the metropolitan campuses of Australian regional universities whose academic status is relatively low. According to a ranking provided by the website of the Australian Education Network, based on a quantitative survey conducted by the Melbourne Institute into the international standing of Australian Universities, of the 38 Australian universities Central Queensland University came in 32nd place, University of Ballarat ranked 35th, University of Southern Queensland 34th and Victoria University 29th.<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly these are also universities with comparatively low tuition fees. This shows once again what the Indian student market is about. The Indian students interviewed were extremely price conscious, and when they fall into the third group of students who are here first and foremost for PR, they won't be very interested in the reputation of the university either. Lecturers, tutors and others who are active in the education industry are fully aware of this and admit that they take this into account when they are dealing with these students.

Ashish and Karthik were quite serious about the quality of education they received when they came here. They had their reasons for wanting to migrate here. Ashish initially did not intend to migrate here, but currently sees PR as compensation for other things he feels he

should have had (a US student visa or education in Australia of a higher quality). Karthik, on the other hand, knew from the start that he wanted Australian residency. Faced with mounting pressure and competition from peers who were all flocking towards the Indian IT industry in cities such as Bangalore and Hyderabad, he could not picture himself turning that into a success himself and thus reasoned his chances might be better abroad. In a sense this makes him an almost classic migrant, one who is seeking for better opportunities overseas. But studying abroad has also made it necessary for him to stay abroad as he doesn't think he will be able to pay back his loan in India.

Ganesh, however, falls in a different category altogether. When he came to Australia he was interested in one thing only, which was PR. He falls in the third category, one that is growing rapidly according to all figures available. Already by far the biggest group of Indian students can be included under this third category. But when talking about why it is that these students wanted to migrate to Australia, and also how they see their futures, they are often the ones who are the least clear about their answers to these questions. Generally the idea of going abroad appealed to them, and their families. But at the same time these families do not have a tradition of studying abroad or actually migrating to some other country. Many claim to have come to Australia for 'a better lifestyle', which refers both to basic things like clean air, good infrastructure, a safer society and better public facilities, as well as to better opportunities on the job front and generally more money. Interestingly though, it is also this third group which often seems to end up in jobs such as taxi driver, security guard or petrol pump attendant.

India, a country with high economic

growth and seen by many multinationals as the place to be at the moment, is perceived by these students as a place they wanted to get out of and stay out of, simply because they could not see themselves ever profiting from these new opportunities at home. These are usually students who graduated with rather average marks, who have studied at mid-ranging colleges, and who know that in the Indian job market they will probably have to compete with students who have studied at better-known colleges and who have scored higher marks. Still, they belong to what Indians often refer to as the middle middle-class. Their families often have money, money that in a way is fairly new as their parents often had to start from scratch when they were young. These families are upwardly mobile but often seem to think that their mobility is too limited in India itself. The next step, as is often reasoned, is better taken outside India. Having a family member abroad will not only generate more money but will also increase the family's reputation.

The money the students will make, even as taxi drivers or security guards in a local shopping mall, will always be more than what they saw themselves making in India. In this sense they have got exactly what they wanted. The only thing they needed to do for this was to become a student in Australia, in a field which

guarantees that they will qualify for PR in the end. Agents (education or immigration agents — it is often unclear which role they play) both in India and Australia, and institutes, colleges and universities are all fully aware of this strategy. A market now exists and a product has been created to fill it that looks like it is about education but is actually about migration.

The Australian education industry expects many more Indian students in the coming years. According to the IDP projections, the demand for university places on the part of Indian students may grow to 80,000 by the year 2025.<sup>18</sup> Although many people have their doubts about this projection, one thing is perfectly clear: when making these forecasts they were not able to take the attractiveness of Australia as a potential country to migrate to into account, simply because nobody knows what decisions DIMA will make in the future. Whether or not there will be that many Indian students studying in Australia will largely depend on what Australia has to offer in return. This offering may in some instances be a quality education but, as the case of the Indian overseas students makes perfectly clear, this offering is not necessarily what the market is interested in.

#### **Note**

The students' names used here are pseudonyms.

#### **References**

- <sup>1</sup> B. Birrell, *Immigration Rules and the Overseas Student Market in Australia*, IDP Education Australia Limited, 2005
- <sup>2</sup> Up until 1991, when the Indian economy was liberalised, only 378 Indian overseas students could be found in Australia. See, M. Gillan, B. Damachis and J. McGuire, 'Australia in India: Commodification and Internationalisation of Higher Education', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 April 2003, pp. 1395-1403.
- <sup>3</sup> As Amar Kumar Singh shows in *Indian Students in Britain: A Survey of Their Adjustment and Attitudes*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963, from the 1870s onwards small numbers of Indian students found their way to Oxford and Cambridge. This was largely because the British had opened up their examinations for the Indian Civil Services.
- <sup>4</sup> It is generally believed that the Indian economy managed a growth rate of eight per cent in the year 2003-04. For 2004-05, advance estimates produce figures of around 6.9 per cent. Some sources claim growth figures of eight per cent although it is not always clear what this is based on. The Indian economy is expected to be about 60 per cent the size of the American one by 2025 and is generally seen as an upcoming economic

superpower. See for instance: <<http://www.economywatch.com/indianeconomy/indian-economy-overview.html> or: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4484146.stm>>.

<sup>5</sup> IDP is the biggest recruiter for Australian universities, a not-for-profit company owned by all the Australian universities together.

<sup>6</sup> This information is available on the DEST website: <<http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/MIP/Statistics/StudentEnrolmentAndVisaStatistics/Default.htm>>

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Birrell, *op. cit.*, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly it was often the students studying at the more prestigious universities, such as Monash University and RMIT, who seemed disappointed about the education they had received in Australia. These universities had marketed themselves as quality institutions and often there had been a (higher) price attached to that. For that money, they would often explain, they had expected more. They had often been in touch with other Indian students, who were studying at less prestigious, and often more affordable universities and colleges, and there did not seem much difference between the programs that were offered, or in the quality of the teachers and the contents of the assignments.

<sup>10</sup> In some cases students change courses during their studies simply to meet the PR requirements. I have, for instance, met students who were doing a masters in Banking & Finance but who then changed to Accounting because that way they would be able to claim MODL (Migration Occupations in Demand for Australia) points on the points test. They had no particular interest in the new course but felt that it was the only way to reach their goal of becoming Australian residents.

<sup>11</sup> A director of programs at an institute in the centre of Melbourne explained that, of the more than 300 Indian students they enrolled, none were interested in the IT course the institute offered. They were simply not interested in these courses as they did not generate enough points. All the students were into hospitality and cookery related courses, which feature prominently on the MODL list. The computer lab had thus been dismantled and the institution was not sure if they would continue offering the course.

<sup>12</sup> The ESOS (Education for Overseas Students) Act was found to need an update in this regard when the ESOS Evaluation was made public recently. More about this can be found here: <[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/international\\_education/policy\\_issues\\_reviews/reviews/evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_esos\\_act\\_2000/#What%20Happens%20Next?](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/international_education/policy_issues_reviews/reviews/evaluation_of_the_esos_act_2000/#What%20Happens%20Next?)>

<sup>13</sup> It must be added here that students who study in so-called regional areas of Australia, can claim another five points for this. Popular regional places where many Indian students can be found are Adelaide and Tasmania. But sometimes city-based universities have campuses which fall under this regional category as well, such as the Gippsland campus of Monash University for instance.

<sup>14</sup> In May 2002 this was increased to 115. The rule that students applying for PR need to score 120 points came into effect from April 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See <<http://www.liveinvictoria.vic.gov.au/>>.

<sup>16</sup> Data received from DIMA in October 2005 show that over the period 2004-05 so far only six SIR visas had been granted to Indians, besides four invalid applications and four more which were still on hand. In the case of Chinese applicants the situation was not much different: 22 granted SIR visas, 2 invalid, 1 refused, 5 withdrawn and 10 still on hand.

<sup>17</sup> See <<http://www.australian-universities.com/rankings>>. According to the website the Melbourne Institute examined a number of variables to determine this standardised ranking, including the international standing of staff, graduate programs, undergrad intake, undergrad programs, resources, and the views of Deans and CEOs.

<sup>18</sup> See the IDP website for more on this <<http://www.idp.com/mediacentre/2005/may/article1261.as>>.