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Research Article

Reimagining India's International Higher Education Partnerships: The Role of India–Russia Academic Cooperation in Advancing Sustainability and South–South Cooperation

Alya Farooq

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Corresponding Author: *Alya Farooq

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Abstract

Internationalisation of Higher Education is a core part of global governance, knowledge diplomacy and sustainable development of the twenty-first century. Countries are looking for diversified academic cooperation beyond the traditional North-South cooperation as higher education is increasingly becoming a tool of soft power, innovation and international cooperation. In India, the vision of becoming a knowledge hub in the world has been laid out in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which calls for enhancing international cooperation, research excellence, student mobility, and institutional partnerships. In this changing paradigm, India–Russia academic partnership is unique with its historical trust, scientific cooperation and mutual values of multipolarity and South–South cooperation. This paper explores how Indian–Russian higher education cooperation can contribute to sustainability and to the trending South–South cooperation. It suggests that although educational cooperation between the two countries has historically been based on technical education, medical studies, defence research, and scientific exchange, a more comprehensive and institutionalised cooperation framework should be developed to address the current geopolitical and technological landscape, which requires cooperation in the field of sustainability research, digital education, artificial intelligence, clean energy, public health, and innovation ecosystems. The paper examines the vision of internationalisation of higher education in India as outlined in NEP 2020, the past trajectory and current status of academic cooperation between India and Russia and the possibility of its contribution to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the field of quality education (SDG 4) and international partnerships (SDG 17). The paper employs qualitative analysis using policy documents, governmental reports, scholarly literature and institutional initiatives to show how India–Russia educational cooperation can be a useful platform for pushing forward innovation in research, transfer of knowledge, faculty mobility and capacity development among emerging economies. It argues that enhancing bilateral and multilateral academic networks, such as those of the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and other Global South-oriented institutions, may assist in the creation of a more inclusive, sustainable and fairer international higher education system. This cooperation can transform the concept of educational diplomacy, and strengthen both nations' visions of strategic autonomy and multipolar world order.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are key players in diplomacy, innovation and sustainable development, and their role in international cooperation has changed significantly in a globalised world. Higher education is no longer limited to teaching and research, but is also becoming a tool of soft power, knowledge diplomacy, economic competitiveness and international cooperation. Today, national foreign policy and development agendas are defined by the mobility of students, faculty exchanges, joint research programmes, transnational education and institutional partnerships. As a result, countries are increasingly turning to multi-stakeholder academic collaborations for learning and not just for scientific and academic quality. As a result, countries are increasingly looking to diversified academic partnerships that serve not only educational purposes, but also other geopolitical and development ones.

The North–South partnerships have been the predominant feature of international higher education for decades, with the North having universities as the main hosts for students and research collaboration. While such partnerships have made a major contribution to the production of knowledge around the world, they have also fostered structural inequalities in funding for research, academic mobility and access to technology, and in the production of knowledge. In reaction to this, emerging economies are increasingly advocating South–South cooperation as an alternative approach which is based on mutual benefits, a shared developmental agenda and an equal sharing of knowledge.

India has also captured this new paradigm by adoption of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which aims to position India as a global knowledge hub with enhanced cooperation with international academic communities, multidisciplinary research, student and faculty mobility, and a greater influx of world-class institutions. The policy acknowledges that internationalisation has a crucial role in improving the quality of research, innovation, employability and competitiveness of the University of Aberdeen. India is not just looking to traditional Western academic linkages, but is trying to expand and diversify its international academic ties with Asian, African, Latin American and Eurasian countries.

Among the broader strategy, Russia has a unique place. India has been a part of Russia's strategic partnership for a long time, and both countries are trusted and stable politically and scientifically, as well as collaborating on technology. Educational ties between the two nations can be traced back to the Cold War era, when thousands of Indian students studied in Soviet universities, especially medical, engineering and science and technical institutes. In addition, Soviet academic institutions have also contributed to the industrialisation and scientific development of India through scholarships, technical assistance and joint research.

This partnership can be extended beyond its traditional spheres in the current geopolitical context. The development of new technologies like artificial intelligence, digital education, biotechnology, renewable energy, climate science, cyber security, and public health needs will require international collaborative research between nations that have complementary scientific expertise. At the same time, there are global issues like climate change, pandemics, food security, and sustainable development that require collective solutions which are above the borders.

It is suggested that India–Russia academic cooperation can help to build a foundation for India's internationalisation strategy through sustainable development and deepening South–South cooperation. Both countries have great potential to strengthen the global higher education system by promoting a more inclusive and multipolar system of higher education through deeper cooperation in institutions, joint research, faculty mobility, digital learning platforms and multilateral educational cooperation initiatives under the umbrella of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

India's Internationalisation Strategy under NEP 2020 and the Changing Global Higher Education Landscape

The internationalisation of higher education systems is one of the key features that characterise higher education systems in the world today. The competition among universities for international students, research funding, global rankings, patents and innovation partnerships is growing. Governments also see higher education as a strategic tool in the fields of economic development, technologisation and diplomacy (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

The National Education Policy, 2020 (NEP) is another paradigm shift in India's higher education policy. NEP 2020 differs from the previous policies, which emphasised only domestic reforms, by incorporating internationalisation into the overall transformation of education. The policy NEP 2020 is broader in scope, with internationalisation as part of the overall transformation of education, compared to the previous policies that were mainly concerned with domestic reform. The policy aims to build world-class universities and motivate Indian Universities to engage in international research collaborations and exchanges (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The following provisions in NEP 2020 are very much in favour of international cooperation. This comprises the creation of multidisciplinary research universities, credit transfer, joint degree programs, faculty exchange, inviting the best universities abroad to set up their campuses in India, and boosting international research collaboration. The policy also focuses on areas such as digital learning, innovation, entrepreneurship and interdisciplinary research as key ingredients of higher education. Significantly, the focus of educational reforms in NEP 2020 is linked to the larger foreign policy goal of India, such as the Act East Policy, neighbourhood diplomacy, leadership of the Global South and

strategic autonomy. Educational diplomacy has, therefore, become a growing part of India's foreign policy (ibid).

At the same time, the higher education world is in a state of dramatic change globally. Digital learning, virtual exchanges, research collaboration via the Internet, and international knowledge networks are on the rise, hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Priority areas for international academic cooperation include the potential of artificial intelligence, data science, renewable energy technologies, and digital innovation. Meanwhile, geopolitical rivalry and technological nationalism have fueled a push by many nations to diversify their educational alliances. Emerging economies, on the other hand, are building inter-regional and multilateral links, in addition to relying heavily on Western universities (de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015)

In this new context, South–South cooperation has become more relevant. South–South cooperation in the field of education emphasises equality, mutual learning, capacity building, technology transfer and joint problem-solving in contrast to traditional donor-recipient relationships. In India, one of the top countries in the Global South, educational collaboration is increasingly pursued through scholarships, digital platforms, research collaboration and institutional networks. India's growing presence in the regions of BRICS, SCO, ASEAN, and Africa is part of this policy of diversification of education (BRICS Network University, 2023). One of the most significant partners in this context is Russia, given its long history of scientific cooperation and education with India and its sophisticated scientific infrastructure (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation [UNOSSC], 2022).

India–Russia Academic Cooperation: Historical Evolution and Emerging Opportunities for Sustainability

The cooperation in the field of education is rooted in the unique history between India and Russia. In Soviet times, higher education started playing a major role in bilateral relations. Thousands of students were sent to Soviet Universities to study medicine, engineering, aerospace, agriculture, mathematics, physics and other technical subjects. A number of universities in Moscow, including Moscow State University, Peoples' Friendship University (RUDN), Bauman Moscow State Technical University, and some medical universities gained popularity among Indians. Soviet scientific institutes also engaged in co-operation with Indian Universities and scientific institutes in the areas of Nuclear Science, Space Technology, Defence Research, Metallurgy and Industrial Development.

Educational cooperation did slow down temporarily following the collapse of the Soviet Union because of economic changes and shifting geopolitical priorities. But bilateral relations began to slowly revive with the signing of strategic partnership agreements and the growing cooperation in science, technology, innovation and higher education. A few years ago, there has been a resurgence in efforts to enhance academic

exchanges. Cooperation between universities, scholarship programmes, language training, shared conferences and research projects has increased educational cooperation. The cooperation has grown to encompass subjects like information technology, digital innovation, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, energy studies, environmental sciences and public health in addition to the traditional subjects of technical education.

There is a great opportunity for further growth in the sustainability agenda. Interdisciplinary research between universities of different countries is required for climate change, renewable energy, water management, food security, biodiversity conservation, disaster management and sustainable urbanisation. India has rich experience in the deployment of renewable energy, digital governance, affordable healthcare and sustainable development policies. Russia brings a high level of scientific research, engineering expertise, Arctic studies, environmental monitoring, nuclear technology and space sciences. The synergy of these complementary strengths can create novel solutions to the world's sustainability problems.

Research and development institutes that work together on climate sciences, green technologies, hydrogen energy, circular economy, sustainable agriculture and environmental governance may be important new bases for long-term cooperation. Additional opportunities for strengthening institutional partnerships include: collaborative doctoral programmes, dual degrees, shared laboratories, and virtual research networks. Another area of potential promise is digital education. Online education has grown at a fast pace since the onset of COVID-19, and thus has become a crucial avenue for learning that relies on technology. Joint development of digital courses, virtual labs, multilingual educational learning materials and AI-enabled learning platforms for students in the Global South by India and Russia. These could directly impact SDG4 on improving equitable access to quality education and also support SDG9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG13 (Climate Action) and SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation [UNOSSC], 2022).

India–Russia Academic Cooperation as a Framework for South–South Collaboration and Global Knowledge Partnerships

It is not only bilateral relations that benefit from India–Russia educational cooperation, but it serves the two nations at large. It can play a role in contributing to the overall shift and transformation of global higher education by fostering a more equitable international knowledge order and strengthening South–South collaboration. International Higher Education has traditionally been marked by unequal research relationships, brain drain, reliance on funding bodies from the West and a few countries for publications. Asymmetries have thus limited the

involvement of developing countries in global knowledge production (Pant, 2019).

An alternative approach is the one of South–South cooperation, which is based on reciprocity, common ownership and joint capacity-building. Although the two economies are different, these two countries share similar interests in promoting multipolarity, strategic autonomy, technological sovereignty and reform of global governance institutions. Academic cooperation can be institutionalised through multilateral organisations. BRICS has already developed a number of educational modalities such as BRICS Network University, academic forums, research cooperation, youth exchange and innovation partnerships. These projects enable joint research on energy, economics, ecology, computer science, water resources and sustainable development. Likewise, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation fosters exchanges and language programmes, youth cooperation and scientific cooperation between member countries. These frameworks open the opening avenues for strengthening India–Russia educational programs in a wider framework of regional and Global South ones (BRICS Network University, 2023).

These possibilities are further expanded with emerging technologies. The fields of artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber security, biotechnology, digital governance, and space technology call for international cooperation among universities, governments, industry, and research institutions. Innovation ecosystems between startups, incubator centres, technology parks and research centres have the potential to create solutions of use to tackle development challenges in emerging economies. Another key aspect is faculty mobility. Institutional capacity would be enhanced, and knowledge would be transferred through long-term visiting professorships, co-supervision of doctoral students, shared curriculum development and collaborative research fellowships. This exchange also helps to promote intercultural understanding and people-to-people diplomacy and supports bilateral relations (Stobdan, 2016).

There should also be more emphasis on the study of language. Increase communication flow by increasing Russian language programmes in Indian Universities and Hindi studies at Russian Universities. Cultural diplomacy goes hand-in-hand with educational cooperation, contributing to the understanding of and the long-term partnerships between different cultures (Altbach, Reisberg, & de Wit, 2015).

Many obstacles must be overcome, but it has great promise. Restrictions on educational exchanges remain, including with respect to the bureaucratic process, visa requirements, lack of knowledge about educational exchanges among students, lack of financial support, language barriers and lack of coordination among institutions. However, such barriers need to be overcome, and for this, the government must be committed to the task, provide more resources, establish more efficient

administrative processes and foster more partnerships between universities. The synergy of Russian modernisation of higher education with India's NEP 2020 can form a long-term cooperation roadmap. Dedicated India–Russia Centres for Sustainable Development, Innovation, and Digital Education may further institutionalise collaborative initiatives. In conclusion, enhancing academic cooperation between India and Russia not only fosters bilateral ties but also plays a role in shaping a more equitable global higher education system aligned with the aspirations of the Global South (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The dimension of higher education has become more and more significant in the field of international relations, and an instrument of knowledge diplomacy, innovation, sustainable development, and strategic partnership. South–South cooperation provides a new opportunity for the development of more equitable, inclusive and global knowledge systems, while countries look towards a new way to diversify their educational cooperation beyond the traditional Western model. This new vision has been reflected in India's National Education Policy 2020, which places internationalisation as a key strategic thrust for higher education reform. In this context, India–Russia academic ties are a historical tie that has reached a new level of engagement that can contribute to the advancement of research excellence, technological innovation, faculty mobility, digital education, and sustainable development. The base of collaboration in education between India and Russia is solid, and the cooperation can be extended to new fields like AI, Renewable Energy, Biotechnology, Climate Sciences, Public Health, Cyber Security and Digital Learning etc. These sectors play a direct role in the Sustainable Development Goals, namely SDG 4 and SDG 17. Moreover, bilateral academic cooperation is a catalyst for bringing larger academic cooperation between two countries in the context of multilateral organisations like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. India and Russia can play a pivotal role in the future reshaping of the international higher education system, in the form of joint research, institutional networking, innovation ecosystems, and knowledge sharing. The future of India–Russia educational cooperation is not just in greater exchange of students, but also in establishing more in-depth knowledge partnerships to solve the problems facing the world and to support the dreams of the emerging economies. This collaboration contributes to deepening the understanding of the importance of strategic autonomy, sustainable development and a more democratic international knowledge order in both countries. In the 21st century, India and Russia have an opportunity to make a strong contribution in promoting educational diplomacy and building a resilient structure for global cooperation through enhanced academic cooperation.

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About the Author

Alya Farooq is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India. Her academic work focuses on political science, governance, international relations, public policy, and contemporary political issues. She is actively engaged in research, academic discussions, and scholarly activities within political science and related interdisciplinary fields.