

# European Higher Education Fair (EHEF) 2014 Delhi – Bangalore - Calcutta

## *Feedback from the India Platform*

### **1. EHEF organization**

- The practical organization of the EHEF was very professional. In terms of the turnout, it certainly was a successful fair: an estimated 3000 visitors in Delhi; 3000 in Bangalore and 1000 in Calcutta visited the fair.
- The briefing in advance for exhibitors was excellent. All practical arrangements were clear and handed to us in advance. There were, on our side at least, no misunderstandings or last-minute problems.
- The official opening of the EHEF in Delhi, by the EU Ambassador to India (H.E. Mr. João Cravinho) and the Indian Minister of Human Resources and Development (H.E. Mrs. Smriti Irani), added a lot of weight to the event. Its importance should not be underestimated.
- Higher education in Europe in general has been brought to the attention of students and their parents in a positive way.
- The advertisements and logos were very visible and well designed. They definitely drew attention.
- Overall, one can conclude that, on these levels, the EHEF was a success in all three cities.
- In addition: The India Platform was very happy with the placement it had in the different cities of the EHEF (right at the entrance in all three cities). It was very prominent and visible, and we thank the organization for this.

### **2. General Evaluation**

This feedback was written by members of the India Platform who attended the fair as exhibitors. The first draft of the feedback was then reviewed by eight Indians who study or have studied in Europe. These Indians belong to the 'India Platform Ambassador' network - supporters of the India Platform with experience as an Indian in Europe or vice versa. Their remarks, observations and suggestions were then integrated into the feedback you now have in front of you.

The most striking aspect of our experience at the fair was the poor understanding Indian students have about the context of higher education in Europe. The questions raised by Indian students demonstrate this lack of understanding. Indian students seemed to approach the institutions and organisations represented at this fair very instrumentally. They (and their parents) ask us what we offer them, and they do not see what Europe in general will offer them. The most frequently asked questions by students illustrate this attitude:

- I am studying this, what can you offer me?
- How much does this course cost, and what scholarships are available?
- What are the living costs in this country?
- Is this the best university in Europe for this domain (e.g. mechanical engineering)?
- Will I find a job in this country, if I study this?
- Can I do a PhD course?

This would probably leave the participant institutions with the impression that Indian students lack integrity and are merely driven to seek advantage. However, these questions must be understood to arise from two contexts Indian students are familiar with: Indian private or high profile public universities/institutions and the US universities. Below, we highlight some basic points of contrast in the context of higher education in India and Europe. We believe that the organisers of the higher education fair need to build their strategies of communication while keeping this picture firmly in the background.

### **3. Higher Education in Europe and India contrasted**

Research culture:

- A self-evident feature of European higher education is its link to society: research results influence policies, for example, in a relatively organic way. The fact that this dynamic is not self-evident in India, has the direct implication that disseminating information about individual European institutions is of secondary importance. Far more crucial is telling the story of the links between education, research and society in Europe. This story should be told on a European level, and as explicitly as possible, otherwise the fair does not and cannot accomplish its goals among an Indian student population.
- Indian students have no idea what it means to be educated and/or do research in a research environment. Just to give one illustration of the conditions in which they are taught: many Indian professors teach the same course during their entire career, as they do not do research themselves. They reproduce what was taught to them. It is not surprising, for instance, to find that a professor might be someone with just a master's degree, teaching masters students. For Europeans, this manner of working is unthinkable. We do not always realise it, but this centuries old, self-evident research culture is very typically European and it is our greatest asset.

Quality:

- European university education is generally of high quality. One does not need to select amongst universities like one selects in India. What a student must select though, are specific sub-domains or courses that one university excels at. That is the message that should come across to Indian students: (1) it is their task to decide what sub-domain they want to explore and (2) it is their task to browse the course and curriculum offers at the different European universities. The attitude of 'I will adapt; what do you have to offer?', will often generate an opposite reaction in Europe (i.e. not being taken seriously), especially when looking for a PhD guide. While the overall picture in the social sciences differs to the extent that several factors must be considered before evaluating the quality of courses and departments, the general existence of a research culture will no doubt be extremely attractive for Indian students.
- In India, some so-called universities are fake or of very low quality, others are more or less OK, and some are excellent for specific (rather broad) domains, like mechanical or electrical engineering. Indians have no faith in a quality label of "higher education", or of the concept of "university" itself, because that concept is simply absent in India.

## Opportunities:

- Indian students will often ask which institute is most known to the best companies, and which of these companies recruit in the various universities. Yet, in Europe, companies usually do not recruit in universities or colleges, and there are usually no “placement cells” in the university, as is the habit in India. When it does happen, it is based on competences, and less on grades and marks. You have to be broadly educated, if you want to increase your chances on the labour market in Europe.

In Europe, it is capacities, learning results and competences that matter. In India, it is not clear what ‘competences’ are, because Indian institutes do not (yet) work with ‘learning results’ in terms of ‘competences’. This, also, is a message that needs to come across to Indian students: you will learn how to divide your own time between practical work and theoretical work; between free time and study time; between learning by heart and learning to reason. You will learn how research progresses, and how it is used visibly both in the courses and in companies (which, generally speaking, is not the case in India). You will learn how library searching tasks are different than the library ‘chores’ you get in Indian higher education, how to give substance to your own curriculum and research (the courses are only a starting point). Most of what you learn is in addition to the basic course: keeping track of innovations in scientific magazines, attending debates, writing papers, and so on, are an important aspect in your (postgraduate) education. These are the competences that you should demonstrate in a job interview, on the basis of which companies may hire you.

- Indian students may feel ‘entitled’ to a job after going to a specific university. That is because private universities and colleges in India compete with each other on the basis of the claim that they have the best nexus with Indian and international corporations. The questions from Indian students concerning their job prospects at a certain university need to be understood within this context of the Indian Higher Education system.

## 4. Recommendations

The European Higher Education Fair 2014 will not yield the desired results for the exhibitors and their institutions, namely to bring across the advantages of studying in Europe compared to studying in the US (which is, after all, one of the main questions the Indian audience has). If the European Commission intends to continue with organising these fairs, we have several recommendations to help make them more successful:

- The story of European higher education needs to be told differently. Indian alumni who have studied in Europe are an absolutely vital asset to tell this story. They know, better than anyone else, how to bring across what the value of European higher education is. The sessions in Delhi, Bangalore and Calcutta on the subject “Why Study in Europe – Quality, Diversity, Cost, Opportunity, Research and Scholarships and Life as a Student in Europe”, moderated by the India Platform members (resp. Prof. Jakob De Roover, Marianne Keppens and Nele De Gersem), made this issue very clear.
- The value of European research culture could also be told as follows: The emphasis on research and understanding over grades and learning by rote leads to students performing better in interviews and, more importantly, in a working environment once employment is

secured. Emphasis on this part of the story could help convince students to come study in Europe.

- The booths being the most emphasized aspect of the fair, exhibitors were expected to take the role of salesmen, trying to pitch each individual institution to the students. However, Europe (in contrast to the US), should not be trying to sell its educational institutions separately. Each European higher education institution can attract the best and brightest of the Indian students provided it attracts them on the basis of Europe's genuine Unique Selling Proposition: our higher education system, embedded in a tradition of centuries of research culture.
- With this approach, we should be able to attract the best Indian students because we have much more to offer than the US. There is no general research culture in the US, which is illustrated by the existence of 'research universities'. This is an absurd and senseless term for European academia, as universities are institutes where research is done. *(For a context about what is meant here, please see (1) the India Platform vision note and (2) the response of the India Platform to the European Commission concerning the EHEF concept note in January 2013. Both notes can be found on [www.india-platform.org](http://www.india-platform.org) > click on 'policy and vision').*
- The choice of cities was not apt. When one organizes a higher education fair in cities like these, one enters into direct competition with the US; one is fishing in the same student pool, so to speak. Our recommendation is not to go to the metropolitan cities. There are high quality students everywhere in India, also in second tier cities. Moreover these students often (1) have an extraordinary hunger for learning and (2) do not have access to information about studying abroad. This is the market that Europe should explore.