

Prevalence and Factors Influencing Pursuit of Higher Education Abroad Among Medical Interns in India: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Background: Every year thousands of medical graduates go abroad to pursue higher education after completing MBBS in India. This consistent rush of medical graduates abroad can negatively impact India's health care. This study is conducted to find the prevalence of intention among medical interns to pursue higher education abroad and to identify the factors influencing the pursuit of higher education abroad.

Methods: **Ethical Clearance:** Institutional ethical clearance was given on May 11, 2023, vide letter no. SGRD/IEC/2023-190. **Study Design:** Cross-sectional study. **Study Population:** MBBS Interns of medical colleges in India. **Study Tool -** Predesigned and Pretested questionnaire. **Data Collection Procedure:** The questionnaire was shared through Google Forms in specific social WhatsApp groups. **Data Collection Duration:** Google forms were circulated on 1st June 2023, and closed on 1st July 2023. A total of 417 interns who gave consent were able to access the questionnaire and fill in their answers. **Statistical Analysis:** Relevant descriptive and inferential statistics were used to arrive at valid conclusions.

Conclusion: Lower educational costs, greater stipends, less competition for admission, better healthcare facilities, opportunities for personal improvement, and better career option emerged as major influencing factors for the pursuit of higher education abroad.

Keywords: Factors Influencing Decision, Medical Graduates, Pursuit of Higher Education Abroad.

Introduction

To provide high-quality healthcare, the World Health Organization (WHO) has established specific standards. The well-being of a country's population heavily relies on healthcare professionals, particularly doctors. For many years, the issue of the movement of

medical professionals from developing to developed nations has persisted.¹ Though in India, the doctor-to-patient ratio is 1:834, which is significantly better as compared to the WHO guidelines of 1:1000.^{2,3} Still the difference in availability of doctors at rural and urban health care facilities is growing. According to a study, 80% of the doctors are located in Urban areas.⁴

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Though every year approximately 90,000 MBBS graduates appear for post-graduation examination after clearing MBBS, most of them would prefer to go abroad hence causing clustering of trained manpower, especially physicians in developed countries.^{5,6} As a result, donor countries have to face understaffing, diminished healthcare delivery, and loss of educational investment.^{7,8} An analysis done in 2023 showed that almost 75,000 Indian-trained doctors were working abroad.⁹

Therefore, the present study is undertaken to find out the influencing factors perceived by medical interns for going abroad for higher education.

Aims and Objectives:

1. To find the prevalence of intention among medical interns to pursue higher education abroad.
2. To identify the factors influencing the pursuit of higher education abroad.

Material and Methods

The present study was a cross-sectional study, conducted on MBBS interns from medical colleges across India. Institutional Ethical Clearance was given on May 11, 2023, vide letter number SGRD/IEC/2023-190. To gather data, a pre-designed and pretested questionnaire was used as a study tool which included the questions related to socio-demographic profile and the factors influencing interns' intent to go abroad.

The questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms in specific social WhatsApp groups. The students who gave consent were able to access the questionnaire and fill in their answers. The data collection phase ran from June 1, 2023, to July 1, 2023, during which the Google forms were circulated. In total, 417 students who completed the forms were included in our study. For analysis, we used a mix of relevant descriptive and inferential statistics to draw valid conclusions.

Results and Discussion

A total of 417 interns were enrolled with a mean age of 23.7 ± 1.4 years. Among the study population, 217(52.1%) were females, while 200 (47.9%) were males.

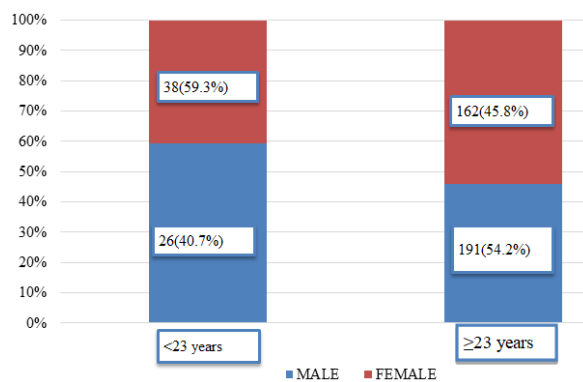


Figure 1: Distribution of study subjects according to age and gender Most of the study participants were 23 years old and above.

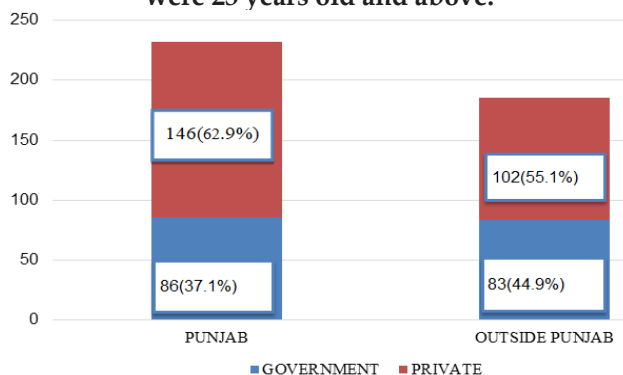


Figure 2: Distribution of study subjects according to state and type of college

Region-wise, 232 (55.6%) were studying in Punjab, and the remaining 185 (44.4%) were from various other parts of India. Among the total participants, 356(85.3%) were doing internships in the same college from which they completed their MBBS, while 61(24.7%) were pursuing externships elsewhere. Looking at the type of college these interns were in, 248(59.5%) attended private medical colleges, while 169(40.5%) were in government colleges as shown in Figure 2.

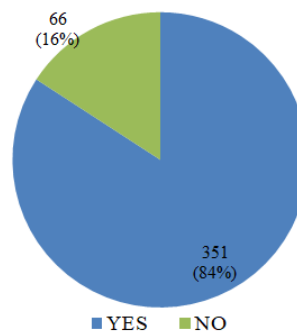


Figure 3: Distribution of Study Subjects According to their intention of going abroad.

Out of a total of 417, 351(84%) students expressed their intention to go abroad for higher education.

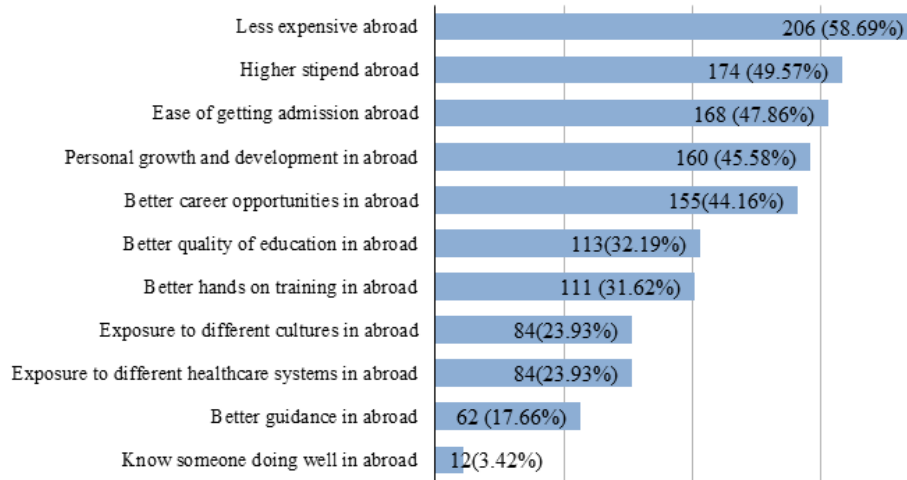


Figure 4: Factors influencing the pursuit of higher education abroad among medical interns in India(n=351)

The most common factor influencing the intention to pursue higher education abroad, was the affordability of education overseas, with 206

respondents (58%). This was followed by the desire for a higher stipend, cited by 174 respondents (49.57%).

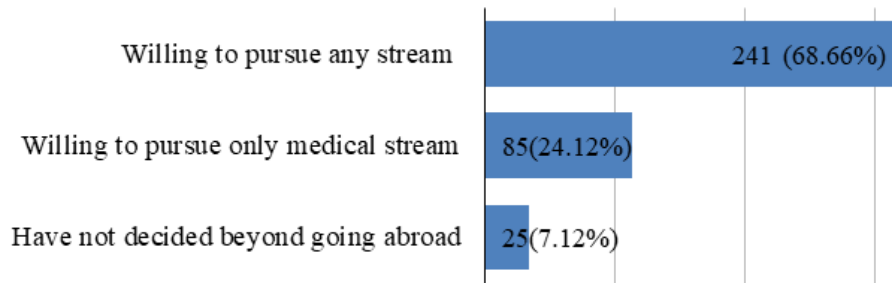


Figure 5: Distribution of study participants according to intended stream for pursuit of higher education abroad. (n=351)

Maximum interns were willing to pursue any stream.

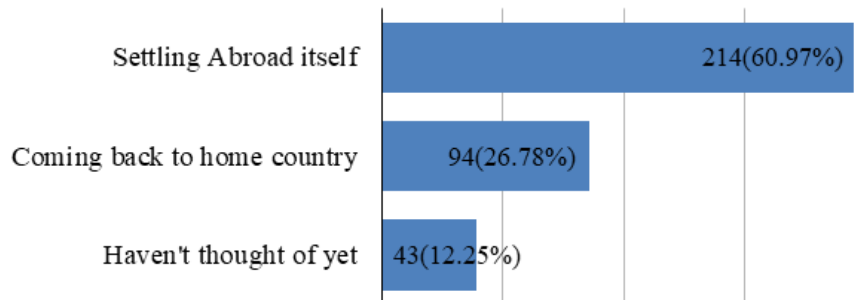


Figure 6: Distribution of study subjects according to their intended career path post-completion of higher education abroad (n=351)

A maximum number of students 214 (60.97%) were willing to settle abroad.

This study revealed that the prevalence of the intention to pursue higher education abroad is 84%, while a separate study conducted in 2023 reported a

prevalence of 45%.¹⁰ Additionally, a study conducted in India found that 59% of medical students had plans to undergo training overseas.¹¹

According to research, medical students prefer multiple sources, and technology, and study for hours ranging from 3 to 4 hours per day.¹² Preferred mode for study among our study participants was online 178 (50.71%). The expected extra hours of study required to pursue higher education abroad ranged from 3-6 hours to >12 hours.

Regarding the anticipated expenditure perceived by the students for higher education abroad, ranging from under 25 lakhs to above 75 lakhs, a maximum of 166 (47.29%) mentioned 26-50 lacs.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the primary factor influencing the intention to pursue higher education abroad, among 206 respondents (58%) out of 351 interns, was the affordability of education overseas, followed by getting a higher stipend (49.57%). In a study conducted in 2023, 76.3% of respondents expressed a favorable perception of a higher stipend as a factor influencing the plans of undergraduates to go abroad.^{11,13} Another study conducted in Bangladesh revealed that 51% of participants aimed to go abroad based on personal interest and the anticipation of a wide range of job opportunities.¹⁴ Another study revealed that even Indian parents are interested in sending their children abroad taking into account better job opportunities.¹⁵ Additionally, a study among Lithuanian medical and paramedical personnel found that socio-demographic, organizational, social, and economic variables were significant factors in their decision-making processes.¹⁶ Another study showed that limited resources in the home country can also be a reason for migrating abroad.¹⁷ A study also showed that less competition for admission also plays a crucial role.¹⁸

Figure 5 shows the path of intended pursuit of higher education abroad in which 241 (68.6%) were willing to pursue any stream, 85 (24.12%) were willing to pursue only the medical stream, and 25 (7.12%) had not decided beyond going abroad. In a similar study, 50% of the interns wanted to go abroad no matter what.¹⁰

Our study showed the most preferred country by medical graduates was the USA 196(55.84%), followed

by the United Kingdom 76(21.65%). Similarly, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) claims that around one million applications are received annually in contrast to 22,000 seats in medical colleges in the United States.¹⁹

Figure 6 depicts the career paths chosen by doctors after completing higher education abroad. The majority of students viz., 60.97%, expressed a willingness to settle abroad, while 26.78% had plans to return to India. The remaining 12.25% of participants had not yet decided on their plans. Another study reported that 51% of the doctors had the desire to settle abroad, 36% had the intention of coming back to India, and the rest 13% were indecisive.¹⁰

Conclusion

Research indicates that lower educational costs, greater stipends, less competition for admission, better healthcare facilities, opportunities for personal improvement, and better career options are the major influencing factors for the intention of pursuing higher education abroad. These findings are concerning for policymakers as well as for scholars examining the problem of brain drain among Indian physicians.

Ethical Clearance: Institutional Ethical Clearance was given on May 11, 2023, vide letter number SGRD/IEC/2023-190.

Conflict Of Interest: Nil

Source Of Funding: Nil

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