

Studying abroad: Look before you leap

Going to a foreign country for studies can be a pain if one is taken for a ride. Things to watch out for before one takes the plunge

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Does going abroad for higher education sound exciting? If you have heard about the shutdown of institutes like the Tri-Valley University in the US, TASMAC (Training and Advanced Studies in Management and Communications) in London and the Herguan University in the US that has been accused of visa fraud, you will think twice before taking any decision to go abroad. However, not all universities are the same, and there are a few techniques to identify institutes that can cause you immense trouble.

Indian students going abroad have been stranded as a result of the recent episodes of visa fraud that have led to the closure of several institutes across the globe. Though overseas education consultants believe it is the student who is to blame for getting duped, they recommend certain basic points that a student aspiring to study abroad should keep in mind.

Naveen Chopra, chairman, The Chopras, an overseas education consultancy, said, "The main issue is that some students want to go overseas on fraudulent documents. Genuine students would never seek private, uncertified, low-grade institutes."

The most important thing to keep in mind

Consultants are of the view that the first thing to check while choosing an institute is to verify the accreditation of the institute concerned. Mansoor Ameen, director of Chennai-based consultancy Linking Overseas, said if one wanted to go to the UK, the website of the UK Border Agency (UKBA) would be the best place to view the accreditations of the institutes. "If one is planning to go to Canada, Australia or Singapore, one can visit the government website of the countries concerned to get details of the university accreditation," he said.

Chopra added that alternatively, one could also contact the embassy concerned if one had some doubts about any institute. Further, he said



Columbia University campus in New York

the respective city councils of the country could also be contacted to get some inputs on a particular university.

In the United States, educational accreditation is provided by private non-profit membership associations. This is validated through recognition by the United States Department of Education (USDE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or both.

Vinayak Kamat of GeeBee Education also informed that a student should not apply to private institutes in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. "Here, US is an exception. In the US, old and reputed private universities like Harvard, MIT and Cornell are good," he said.

Naresh Gulati, CEO, Oceanic Consultants, said a student should first visit the official website of the government concerned to get details of the visa requirement. He explained that the student should then check if the institute also requires these prerequisites for a visa. "If an institute or its officials tell you that you need not have all the visa requirements, it is

IMPORTANT TIPS

- Check the accreditation of the institute. Cross check with the authorities
- Do not get lured by low fees
- There are no other ways to get a visa other than the official route. Do not forge documents and do not let agents indulge in it
- Try to get a local relative/friend to check the genuineness of the institute
- Check how many local students the institute hosts. If the institute caters mostly to foreign students, there might be something amiss

Source: Overseas education consultants

better to avoid them," said Gulati.

These consultants agreed that it was safer to go a government-funded public institute, rather than a private, unaided institute. This is because, according to it is difficult to get detailed information about such institutions.

Stay away from fraudulent agents

Agents are the most important cause

for dashing the hopes of those aspiring to study abroad. Believe in what the consultants say. Before taking into confidence the agents, students should find out that the overseas education 'agents' have been in the business for long and represents a fair number of reputed institutions abroad, Gulati said.

"Students should learn to distinguish between an agent and a professional consultant. While an agent will try to push students to join a particular institute to earn a commission, consultants bring out suitable institutes for the students to choose from," said Chopra.

Chopra added that students should stay away from agents who promise them to get them through the institute even if they did not pass standard tests like TOEFL or did not qualify for the visa.

Experts said due to lack of penalties for fraudulent agents and a big market for such services, such businesses continue.

Ameen said students mostly from places like Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat were found to be deceived by agents, as there was a big market for these products. Though a new law, which makes it mandatory for all

education agents to get registered with the Indian government or face fines or jail terms, was proposed last year, there has been no progress on this front.

Look out for warning signs

Consultants opines there are warning signs that reflect that the institute is a fraudulent one. Chopra said if a university was taking in all the candidates who have applied, there should be certainly something wrong with it. He added that one should exercise caution when they come to know that an institute is hiding information about accreditation or it is less than two-years old.

Kamat said a student should not take shortcuts, and avoid applying to an institute where normal entry criteria like GRE and TOEFL are waived.

Ameen said if an institute was offering a course at throwaway fees or courses were of very long duration, students should be alarmed. "In the UK, for example, average fees for a course would be around £10,000. If an institute offers the same for £4000, then there is certainly something wrong," he said.

Gulati of Oceanic Consultants said a student should check whether there are adequate local students at a particular institute or not. "If an institute targets only international students, this means it just wants to be a gateway for foreigners to enter their country; and in the process make a quick buck out of it," Gulati informed.

It is not all that bad

While consultants believe students should take all the precautions to ensure that they do not end up in a mess, they felt students need not get unnecessarily stressed. As Gulati puts it, "The number of frauds will decrease in the coming years, owing to strict regulations by the authorities concerned. These countries are also equally careful about getting the right number of students who have the necessary quality to be a part of their knowledge community."

The experts believe it all depends on the students on how they deal with the situation. "It is fine as long as students are alert and are not seeking 'fraudulent' means to go abroad," concluded Chopra.