Fewer Indian students in the US: why totals and new enrolments differ

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Mains: GS-II: Education and migration
Prelims: concepts and statement-based practice



Original symbolic illustration: pcsmantra.com

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Why in the News

Open Doors 2026, released on 16 November 2026, counted 339,435 Indian international students in the United States in 2025/26, against 363,019 in the preceding academic year. India remained the largest place of origin despite the decline. The important question is not only how far the number fell, but also whom the report counts.

What do the figures show?

Total: The Indian count fell by about 6.5%. The institution's summary rounds this to 6%.

Graduate study: There were 116,609 Indian graduate students, about 34% fewer than a year earlier. Undergraduate numbers were 39,711, down about 1%.

Practical training: Another 182,201 Indians were participating in Optional Practical Training (OPT), a category that grew by about 27%. The total of 339,435 must therefore not be described as only students attending classes or as new admissions during that year.

Why distinguish totals, new enrolments and OPT?

The total measures the size of the population covered by the report, including its related categories. New enrolment measures international students entering US higher education for the first time. Across all places of origin, new international enrolment was 228,123, down about 18%. That is not the percentage decline for Indian students.

OPT is practical work experience related to a student's studies, not a separate university degree. Growth in OPT can partly cushion the overall fall even when a study category records a large decline.

Why does this matter for India?

Education and opportunity: Families need to assess costs, admission prospects and post-study opportunities separately. One aggregate figure cannot describe every programme.

Bilateral relations: Educational exchange supports research, skills and people-to-people ties. Changes in its direction deserve policy attention.

Domestic capacity: India should strengthen research facilities, postgraduate education and international collaboration. Fewer departures do not by themselves prove that domestic educational quality has improved.

Cautions and the way forward

Do not combine the annual 2025/26 report with a separate institutional survey for autumn 2026. Assessing causes requires separate evidence on visas, costs and student decisions. This total alone cannot establish that one policy caused the entire decline. Publishing new enrolments, enrolled students and OPT separately would support clearer policy analysis.

Prelims Practice Questions

Question 1. Consider the following statements with reference to Open Doors 2026:

Statement 1: The total for India includes OPT participants.

Statement 2: New international enrolment and the total international student count are identical concepts.

Statement 3: Indian graduate student numbers fell while Indian OPT participation increased.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 1 and 3 only

(c) 2 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

▼ **Answer and Explanation**

Correct answer: (b)

Statement 1 is correct. OPT is included in the total.

Statement 2 is incorrect. New enrolment is a flow; the total is a different measure.

Statement 3 is correct. Graduate numbers fell while OPT participation rose by about 27%.

Mains Practice Question

Why must international student mobility data distinguish totals, new enrolments and post-study practical training? Discuss with reference to India's higher education policy. (150 words) (10 marks)

Answer Outline

Introduction: Define the three measures

Main Body: use Open Doors as an example; avoid single-cause explanations and incompatible comparisons

Conclusion: suggest better research capacity, educational quality and reliable student support.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

The total Indian count declined, but includes a large OPT category. It is not simply the number of new university admissions.

Who released Open Doors 2026?

The Institute of International Education released its international student findings on 16 November 2026.

Did India remain the largest place of origin?

Yes. India ranked first with 339,435 in 2025/26.

Are all Indians in the total new entrants?

No. The total covers different academic levels and OPT participants.

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Sources

- opendoorsdata.org
- www.iie.org
- opendoorsdata.org