

# India, Nigeria, Ukraine: War Puts International Medical Students in A Stalemate

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## Abstract

In early 2022, international students were exiting Ukraine en masse due to the war. This exodus resulted in academic stalemate. Problems with coursework, degree recognition, and enrollment in medical programs in their home countries or the EU caught many of them by surprise. Some international students opted to return to the war-torn Ukraine in order to complete their medical degrees. Ukraine is a low-cost academic destination, especially when it comes to medical degrees. Students from Asian and African countries, including India and Nigeria, attended medical universities in Ukraine. Now they face problems of displacement, degree recognition, mismatch in national standards, restricted access to medical education, low quality training, protectionism, corruption, on-going military aggression, and financial and legal problems.

**Keywords:** Conflict; Corruption; International Medical Students; India; Nigeria; Ukraine; War.

## 1. The exodus

Well over two years ago, in early spring 2022, international students were leaving Ukraine in draws, escaping the unfolding tragedy of war (Niazi and Sawahel, 2022). They were caught in a crossfire, but also in limbo. First, they could not leave the country at war, while staying in cold and uninhabitable basements under continuous bombardment. Second, when they finally managed to cross the border and escape from Ukraine's war, they could not continue their studies. Instead, they soon found out that unlike their run from the war, their academic journey came to a full stop. The exodus of international students from Ukraine ended in academic stalemate.

## 2. Academic stalemate

The result of this exodus is that international medical students found themselves in a stalemate. On the one hand, they cannot continue their education outside Ukraine. On the other hand, it may still be too dangerous for them to return to Ukraine. Some international medical students reached their home countries, while others stopped in the EU countries, trying to figure out what to do next and how to continue their education. However, problems with coursework and degree recognition, as well as enrollment in medical programs outside Ukraine caught many of them by surprise.

The Parents' Association of Ukraine MBBS Students (PAUMS) estimates that of the 18,000 medical students who returned to India in 2022, anywhere from 5,000 to 7,000 have either transferred to universities in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Moldova Russia, Serbia, and Uzbekistan, or were in the process of seeking a transfer to those destinations. At the same time, 60 to 70 percent of them are

continuing to study online, says director of Mediseats Abroad, a Chennai-based medical education consulting firm (Umarji, 2023).

International students who escaped the war in Ukraine face many difficulties and could not be educationally accommodated even in their home countries. These problems are so serious that some international students opt to return to the war-torn Ukraine in order to complete their medical degrees. What are the underlying causes of this stalemate? Is this just the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine or is this also something within Ukraine's education system?

### **3. On-line medical degrees?**

Ukrainian medical schools started offering an on-line mode of instruction in order to make it possible for international students to complete their studies and obtain medical degrees. This was done in response to the challenges presented by the on-going war, including faculty displacement and international students' evacuation. Ukrainian medical schools attempted to preserve international students and thus the hard currency revenue stream that comes from these international students.

This move was noticed by major stakeholders, including the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria. The Council stated that it is aware about medical students carrying out online medical training organized by medical schools in Ukraine, China, and other countries, and that any medical degrees awarded and certificates issued at the end of online medical training will not be recognized in Nigeria (Alagbe, 2022).

Similarly, the National Medical Commission (NMC) in India can accept online classes only for theory, while hands-on clinical training is still necessary (Niazi, 2022). Furthermore, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has told Indian Supreme Court that the standards of medical education would be seriously impeded if these students were accommodated in Indian medical schools. Students, especially fourth-year onwards, would desperately need practical classes (Umarji, 2023).

### **4. Ukraine as a low-cost destination**

The standard procedure, as outlined by the Ukrainian State Center for International Education, includes only four steps for becoming a student at a university in Ukraine: choose your program of study, file application, apply for visa, prepare for departure. As easy as that. No rigorous selection process of tough competition is mentioned by the state educational agency. Easy access due to the low cost of educational programs, not the quality, is the major consideration when it comes to pursuing medical degrees in Ukraine. Given the high cost of medical education in other countries and the bureaucratic hardship or indeed impossibility to enroll in medical universities in their home country, Indian students return to Ukraine despite war escalating (Niazi, 2022).

Transfer of international students, including students from India, Nigeria, and other developing countries, to medical schools outside of Ukraine, would imply much higher costs. Even in some formerly socialist countries and post-Soviet republics, the cost of medical education may be much higher than in Ukraine. For those who are thinking of moving for their medical studies to Georgia, the program would cost anywhere from \$5,500 to \$6,000 per annum, while the cost in Ukraine was \$4,500. The student dormitory fee in Georgia is also higher: \$250-\$400 per month compared to only \$100 per month in Ukraine (Umarji, 2023). India, Nigeria, and many other Asian and African countries are low-income countries, and so such differences in tuition and fees and room and board are significant for their medical students.

### **5. International medical students in Ukraine**

The most comprehensive and official statistics on international student intake in Ukraine is offered by the Ukrainian State Center for International Education that functions

under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. According to the data presented by the Center, Ukraine claims total of close to 80 thousand international students from 155 countries. To be specific, there were 76,548 international students attending degree programs in almost 394 of Ukraine's higher education institutions during the 2020-2021 academic year that preceded the war (USCIE, 2023). They all come from the global South. India—world's most populous country—is the single largest supplier of students to Ukraine's higher education institutions. Nigeria is the number one country of origin for international students from Africa (WENR, March 7, 2017). The largest number of international students come to Ukraine for medical education.

Of the top ten Ukrainian universities that enroll most international students, all but two are medical universities. Kharkiv National Medical University hosts 4,215 international students, followed by Bohomolets National Medical University in Kyiv, 3,061, Odessa National Medical University, 2,935, Zaporizhzhia State Medical University, 2,860, Pirogov Memorial National Medical University in Vinnytsia, 2,771, Dnipro State Medical University, 2,573, Horbachevsky Ternopil State Medical University, 2,433, and Bukovina State Medical University, 2,095. For comparison, Ukraine's flagship higher education institution, Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University, hosts only 1,838 international students. Karazin Kharkiv National University hosts 4,277 international students—more than any other university in the country. However, the university has a school of fundamental medicine, which enrolls a lot of international students. The coursework in this university is available in English. Transfer of international students to Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, and Uzbekistan can only be considered as a partial solution to the relocation problem. International students who had to leave Ukraine due to the war consider other options since they find these formerly socialist countries risky both in terms of personal safety and security and in terms of the quality of their programs and the acceptability of their degrees abroad.

## **6. Corruption scandals**

Problems with degree recognition and enrollment in medical programs outside Ukraine highlight a set of issues and their complexity. There are issues of allegedly low quality, mismatch in national standards, protectionism, restricted access to medical education, corruption, on-going military aggression, displacement of faculty, students, and entire universities, financial and legal problems, all stressed in a certain timeframe of expected academic terms, deadlines, and graduation.

While around half of all international students in Ukraine study medicine, their respective countries of origin and medical professional bodies express concerns regarding the quality of education they receive. These concerns are not entirely baseless. Ukraine's higher education sector is well-known for high levels of corruption. The country's medical universities are no exception in this sense, being considered as notoriously corrupt for decades. Corruption scandals that characterize medical universities in Ukraine involve top university leaders (Osipian, 2018a). Bohomolets National Medical University in Kyiv and Odessa National Medical University, so popular among international students, also have their leaders marred in corruption scandals (Osipian, 2018b). It is hard—if not impossible—to receive a high quality medical education in a corrupt university, be it Ukraine or any other destination.

## **7. Low morale and campus violence**

Corruption breeds low morale and is usually combined with conflicts and violence. About a decade ago, there was a mass brawl between the medical students that took place in the lecture hall of Odessa National

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Medical University during the class. Over a dozen international students, presumably students from Iraq, burst into the classroom and started a fight. As a result, a female student and a faculty member were injured (Liga.net, November 23, 2012). This incident was allegedly preceded by another fight the day before, which took place at the university's main entrance. The police told the media that they are unaware of any such happening, even after they conducted a preliminary investigation. This statement is ever more surprising, given that the video of the brawl is available through the media (YouTube, November 23, 2012), and the university's administration acknowledged the fight and promised to expel the perpetrators (Dosye, November 21, 2012).

According to an interview given by one of the witnesses, the university administration is trying in every possible way to hide the incident. Students filming a fight in the classroom on mobile phones were summoned to the dean's office and, under threat of expulsion, were forced to erase all video files. A commission from the Ministry has already arrived at the university in connection with the incident. Just one month earlier, a major clash between students was prevented by the police. These were groups of students from Azerbaijan and one of the Central Asian republics attending Odessa pedagogical university and Odessa medical university.

Some of Indian medical students, relocated from Ukraine due to the on-going war, decided not to apply to medical colleges in Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, or Kazakhstan precisely for safety reasons. Personal security was their concern. The recent unfortunate events in Kyrgyzstan proved the validity of such concerns. Several Indian medical students attending universities in Kyrgyzstan were reportedly injured in an outburst of mob violence in the country's capital, Bishkek (Misra, 2024). Indian students in Kyrgyzstan witnessed terror as the angered locals launched a manhunt against foreigners, including international students. Many had to flee the country immediately.

## **8. Bribes for medical licensure**

In Ukraine, the low cost of medical education comes with the equally low quality. Corruption further deteriorates the quality of the offered education and qualifications of medical graduates. It is true that pursuing medical degrees in Ukraine may be relatively inexpensive and affordable, but graduation does not guarantee medical placement and professional career in other countries, even poor and developing ones. A recent case of bribery in a medical university in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, confirms this low cost—low quality corrupt environment. This is a case for selling positive results on state medical examinations leading to medical licensure.

In April 2023, Kyiv City Prosecutor's Office reports (2023) that a faculty member at a medical university in Kyiv offered students to resolve the issue with exams for US\$1,500. Under the procedural leadership of the Shevchenkivsky District Prosecutor's Office in Kyiv, the assistant professor was notified of the suspicion of an attempt to take possession of someone else's property by deception (fraud), committed repeatedly (Part 2 of Article 15, Part 1, Part 2 of Article 190 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine). According to the investigation materials, the alleged perpetrator, assistant professor at one of Kyiv's medical universities, was presenting himself as a person related to the Testing Center of the Unified State Qualification Examination and in particular the test component, known as KROK. He sent SMS messages to students who failed on this state medical qualifying examination through the Telegram messenger (Rbc.ua, April 10, 2023). He offered them to solve their examination problems in exchange for a monetary reward. The cost of the offered service was set at US\$1,500 per student.

The perpetrator has been placed under the house arrest. During the pre-trial investigation, measures are taken by Kyiv City Prosecutor's Office to establish other possible episodes of illegal activity of the person involved and his possible accomplices. The pre-trial investigation is carried out by the investigations department of the Shevchenkivsky district State Police in Kyiv with the operational support from the

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State Security Services (SBU). Press service of the Kyiv City Prosecutor's Office (2023) reminds that in accordance with Article 62 of the Constitution of Ukraine, a person is considered innocent of committing a crime and cannot be subjected to criminal punishment until his guilt is proven in a legal manner and established by a court verdict.

At the same time, Kyiv City Prosecutor's Office emphasizes that the alleged perpetrator objectively could not and did not intend to fulfill his promises to students. This may be because fraud usually carries a much less severe punishment, then do extortion or bribery. Fraud anticipates a fine instead of imprisonment. The question remain about how the alleged perpetrator was going to deal with defrauded clients, given that he is a known figure with official employment in a medical university. Perhaps he had accomplices in the testing center and was just a middleman attracting clients, but the Prosecutor's Office is not interested in such development of the bribery case.

## 9. The return

Indian students return to Ukraine despite war escalating. The continuous presence of Indian students in Ukraine is undeniable. Indian medical students attending medical schools in Ukraine greeted Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi during his visit to the country in August 2024 (The Times of India, August 23, 2024). Nigerian students may follow their path, and this will not be surprising. The competition for publicly funded places in medical universities in Nigeria is rife, restricting access to medical profession. Meanwhile, tuition and fees in some of Nigeria's universities demonstrate an increase of up to 200 percent (Bolaji, 2023a), which makes higher education even more inaccessible for poor youth, including those aspiring for medical degrees.

Some universities in eastern parts of Ukraine have been completely ravaged by the war, so students have no chance of going back to these institutions. Some of these universities transferred their students to functioning colleges in western Ukraine. For instance, Kharkiv National Medical University moved its students to Ivano-Frankivsk National Medical University. Recently, small contingents of students from India have also travelled to Ukraine via Poland to continue their education at medical schools in western parts of the country, including Lviv National Medical University, Bukovyna State Medical University, Ternopil National Medical University, and Uzhhorod National University.

There is a strong tradition of hosting international students, including medical students, in western parts of Ukraine. The close proximity to the European Union makes this region relatively safe and attractive. Before the war, in 2021, Chernivtsi, a city in western Ukraine, hosted the largest number of Indian students in Ukraine. There were around two thousand international students from 26 countries attending Bukovyna State Medical University in Chernivtsi, of which 1,743 came from India (Kobilyuk, 2021).

## 10. Unclear prospects

The problems with the quality of medical training and corruption persist. Nigerian graduates from Ukrainian medical schools, along with other graduates, take national medical examinations in order to be admitted to practice in their home country. Many of them fail these examinations, blaming the prejudice of the Nigerian medical board and curricular mismatches (Punch, August 28, 2022). Others have to retake the examinations several times before they succeed (Bolaji, 2023b).

In 2024, Bukovyna State Medical University in Chernivtsi reports that the school enrolls 5,750 students, including more than 2,416 international students. The university claims the largest Indian student community in Ukraine. According to the university administration, the excellent level of international students' preparation is evident in passing the MCI examination. Specifically, BSMU demonstrates the highest level of success in taking Medical Council of India (MCI) examinations among Indian students

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graduating from Ukrainian medical schools (BSMU, 2024). However, it is not clear whether this data is updated or comes from the pre-war 2021.

The serious concerns regarding the quality of medical graduates that come from Ukraine have a history, and these concerns are unlikely to vanish any time soon. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other oil-rich countries can afford better trained physicians and high-quality medical services for their citizens. Thus, they are no longer interested in Ukraine educated medical specialists. Other—less prosperous—nations, continue to send their students to Ukraine. The question is, for how long? The war and the quality concerns may soon reverse this trend.

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