



Research article

Indian Students' Migration and Integration in Europe: A Case Study on Naples City (Italy)

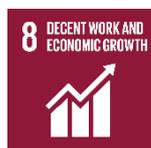
Davide Cava  

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean (DAAM), L'Orientale University, Naples, Italy

Abstract

This article explores the migration and integration experiences of Indian students in Europe, with a particular focus on the city of Naples, Italy. Drawing on official quantitative data and qualitative field evidence from the Neapolitan academic context, the article explores how India's equity-driven educational policies resonate within Europe's emerging mobility framework. It examines how structural inequalities in India, despite formal rights to education, shape student mobility, and how linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers affect integration processes in host countries and cities. Drawing from official statistics and qualitative interviews, the study sheds light on both the aspirations and the challenges faced by Indian students as they navigate academic life abroad. Far from being a homogeneous group, these students display diverse strategies of adaptation and cultural negotiation, often oscillating between community-based comfort zones and efforts to engage with the local context. Naples, with its vibrant yet complex social fabric, serves as a significant case study, highlighting the ambivalence of urban receptivity and the shortcomings of institutional support. The article argues that integration should not be understood as unilateral assimilation, but rather as a dynamic process of reciprocal transformation – where students are not merely learners, but also agents of social and cultural change. In doing so, it advocates for more inclusive and proactive models of intercultural mediation within European universities, capable of valuing diversity not simply as presence, but as active participation.

Keywords: Intercultural mediation, Migration and linguistic barriers, India-EU, India and Italy, Indian students in Naples.



Contact: Davide Cava, PhD Research Scholar, Department of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean (DAAM), L'Orientale University, Naples. Email: d.cava@unior.it

Article History: Received: 12 Jul 2025. Accepted: 24 October 2025. Published: 06 November 2025

Copyright: © 2025 by the *author/s*. License Pine Press, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Citation: Cava, David. (2025). Indian Students' Migration and Integration in Europe: A Case Study on Naples City (Italy). *Journal of South Asian Exchanges* 2.2 < <https://saexchanges.com/v2n2/v2n209.pdf> >

Introduction

As stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to education is a fundamental component of human growth (UNESCO, 2020). Although education is affirmed as a fundamental right in India as per Article 21A of the Constitution, its reach in the globalized world transcends national boundaries. Access to international education, particularly through university cooperation, offers students transformative experiences that enhance academic and professional prospects. This article examines the dynamics of Indian university cooperation with the European Union (henceforth EU), highlighting opportunities, challenges, and implications for Indian students' rights to global education, with a particular focus on Naples' universities.

Europe is increasingly becoming an attractive destination for Indian students, challenging the traditional dominance of the "Big Four" countries, namely the US, UK, Canada, and Australia (Nair, 2024). Key factors influencing this shift include affordability, favourable immigration policies, and scholarship opportunities, particularly in countries like Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Italy. Particularly after *Brexit*, Indian students and the cooperation with UK universities changed a lot, either in advantageous or disadvantageous ways, which are underlined in a recent article on SWEC (2024).

According to the report of the External Ministry of the Indian Government, over 50,000 Indian students studied in Europe in 2022, with Germany in first place. European institutions leverage English-taught programs and robust internationalization efforts to attract Indian talent, not only for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) disciplines, which remain the preferred ones, chosen by 70% of the students, but also for fields like Business and Management (Sharma, 2024). Plus, programs such as *Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters* (henceforth EMJM) and research collaborations have strengthened Europe's appeal. Germany has emerged as a top choice, thanks to tuition-free education and a welcoming labour market for international graduates. The ambassador of the European Union to India, after having recognized the record of over 80,000 Indian students studying in Europe, has stated:

The fact that India ranks as the top recipient of Erasmus+ scholarship since its inception, despite its competitive nature, speaks volumes about the caliber of Indian students. This is the start of an enriching and transformative experience for them. As they are about to study and live a unique experience in an EU country, they will also become ambassadors of the partnership between the EU and India. I wish them every success. (EEAS, 2024).

This openness in the field of the right to education in India prompts further reflections. Given that India annually sends many brilliant minds to Europe to pursue advanced studies through doctoral or master's programs, the focus of this article is on how this truly involves less socially advantaged students, and how, essentially, merit translates into concrete actions to encourage education outside India, particularly in Europe.

It should not be forgotten that India is a federal republic divided into 28 states and 7

Union Territories, where at least 121 "majority" languages are spoken¹, meaning by more than ten thousand people (Census of India, 2011, pp. 4-5). Multiple customs, habits, and religious traditions coexist, easily changing depending on the state-region in question.

Considering these facts, it is worth mentioning Brass's idea that India is not only a multicultural and multilingual country, but even a "multinational" one (Brass, 1974, p. 9) to the extent that states have the autonomy to distance themselves on specific political issues (including economic, linguistic-cultural reforms, and natural resource management) from the central government. For these reasons, recognizing the intrinsic plurality of ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities and how they influence India's political and social dynamics, it will be necessary to further problematize the issue of intercultural mediation. If every individual in India carries a linguistic-cultural heritage likely very different from that of his/her compatriots, then it will be necessary to propose a more nuanced approach to addressing intercultural mediations with India's communities.

This article examines the dynamics of Indian students' presence in Europe and Italy, also highlighting opportunities, challenges, and the implications for students' rights to global education with a focus on Schedule Castes and Other Backward Classes (henceforth SC and OBC)². A case study will focus on the city of Naples, and it will include real data shared by major Neapolitan universities.

Importance of Indian Students' Presence in Europe

India's higher education sector, the third largest globally, faces significant challenges: insufficient resources, uneven quality, and limited research opportunities (Ministry of Education, 2020). International collaboration offers a pathway to address these gaps. The EU, through initiatives like *Erasmus+* and *Horizon Europe*, has emerged as a key partner for India, fostering academic exchanges and joint research projects (European

¹ This number has been further narrowed down thanks to the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. A fundamental component of Part XVII of the Constitution, which addresses the linguistic question, the Schedule lists 22 languages officially recognized at the national level. These languages were included to represent the country's linguistic diversity and to safeguard the rights of linguistic communities across different regions of India. Each language listed in the Eighth Schedule is granted special status and associated rights. For instance, the central government is required to provide services in these languages and to allow their use in legal proceedings. Notably, English is not included in this list (available at: <https://rajbhasha.gov.in/en/languages-included-eighth-schedule-indian-constitution>), although it continues to hold the status of "second official language" alongside Hindi, the official language of the Union.

² SC comprise communities historically subjected to severe social discrimination and untouchability. The Constitution of India includes provisions to uplift these groups, ensuring their representation and access to opportunities. Article 15(4) of the Indian Constitution permits the State to make special provisions for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, including the Scheduled Castes. OBC refers to communities identified as socially and educationally disadvantaged, though not as marginalized as SC or Scheduled Tribes (ST). Article 340 of the Constitution empowers the President to appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of backward classes and recommend measures for their advancement.

Commission, 2022). The importance of such cooperation lies not only in academic enrichment but also in fostering cross-cultural understanding and global citizenship. For instance, between 2015 and 2020, *Erasmus+* supported over 6,000 Indian students and staff to study or train in Europe since its opening to international students in 2004 (EEAS, 2024). Simultaneously, European universities have benefited from the diverse perspectives of Indian students, enriching their academic environments.

Scholarships such as the EMJM provide financial support, making international education more accessible. For example, in 2022, 149 Indian students received EMJM scholarships, the highest number from a single non-EU country (European Commission, 2022). Moreover, such exchanges enhance employability. Studies show that students with international experience are 15% more likely to secure employment within six months of graduation (OECD, 2019). Additionally, exposure to diverse cultures nurtures adaptability and soft skills essential in today's global job market.

India's commitment to pursuing academic relations with Europe can also be traced to an important document dating back to 2020: the *New Education Policy* (henceforth NEP). Through this set of educational procedures, India aims to become a "global knowledge superpower" (NEP, 2020, p. 6) and, with this intent, it "aims to achieve SDGs³ by 2030 by providing equitable, inclusive and quality education to all" (Thakur *et al.*, 2023, p. 76). It is also worth mentioning that NEP 2020 focuses on numerous minorities. In addition to linguistic and tribal ones, its good intent includes addressing the issue of gender inclusivity and accessibility for disabled individuals. Girls, women, transgender people, disadvantaged classes, and disabled people should have easy access to education without facing any delays or obstacles. Although this policy also refers to the scholar system, it is worth wondering how inclusion is effectively guaranteed in universities as well, both in the national and international context.

According to the British Council (2024), the number of Indian students enrolled for higher education in 2024 is 43.3 million, so we witness an increase of 6.7 million students from 2020. We are seeing an encouraging increase in the number of female students, which has gone up to 20.7 million in 2021-22, with an addition of 600,000 female students in one year. While male students make up a slight majority overall, with around 52 % of total enrolment, the Gender Parity Index is 1.01, indicating a slightly higher gross enrolment rate among female students (British Council, 2024). We should also keep in mind that those individuals enrolled in "skilling institutions" are more than 110 million (Press Information Bureau 2024, henceforth PIB). It will be of great interest to briefly analyze the *Year-End Review* (2024) published by the Indian Government on December 19th, with a specific focus on the University and scholarships. The Post-Matric Scholarship program has reached 4.1 million beneficiaries with funding of approximately €596.4 million (\approx ₹49.65 billion). This represents one of the largest financial allocations in the higher education sector. Such numbers reflect the Indian Government's growing focus on equitable access and inclusion, and they

³ SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) are the 17 global goals set by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For more information, see <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

indicate how expanding domestic higher education and scholarship schemes may influence patterns of student mobility and aspirations for international education.

It may be useful to add some reflections about SHREYAS (Scholarships for Higher Education for Young Achievers Scheme)⁴, which operates through multiple channels:

- 1) Free coaching services for SC and OBC students
- 2) Higher education support
- 3) International scholarship opportunities

The PIB (2024) data show that 4,563 SC students received funding of approximately ₹93.7 crore (≈ €10.4 million) through the Top-Class Scholarship programme. For doctoral studies, the National Fellowship for SC Students has provided about ₹197 crore (≈ €22 million) to 4,132 PhD scholars. Additionally, according to publicly available beneficiary lists of the National Overseas Scholarship Scheme (NOS) for 2025–26, hundreds of SC and OBC students have been admitted to leading institutions in Europe and beyond — including Denmark, England, Australia, Singapore, and the United States. Although aggregate country-wise statistics are not always officially compiled, such records represent India's concrete steps towards integrating social inclusion with international academic mobility, in line with the NEP 2020 vision of building a "global knowledge superpower". Also, from an economic point of view, Indian students make an impact on the financial health of European universities, while their spending stimulates local economies.⁵ Additionally, many students engage in part-time occupations, filling labour gaps and contributing to the host country's workforce. These activities create a ripple effect, boosting local businesses and strengthening economic growth (Meshram and Pal, 2024, p. 32).

The latest governmental data available from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to trace the fluctuations in Indian students' mobility across European and non-European countries is updated to 2024. It reports that the total number of Indian students pursuing higher education in universities and other tertiary institutions abroad amounted to 1.33 million as of January 2024. While confirming the hegemony of the so-called 'Big Four' destinations (Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia), Germany ranks fifth, and Italy seventeenth among the 101 destination countries listed.⁶ Such heterogeneity of reporting suggests that Europe's comparative appeal is rising but still system-fragmented, reinforcing the need for a more coordinated EU-level offer. If Europe harbours the ambition to steadily surpass the 'Big

⁴ From 2014 to 2024, India has operated two main SHREYAS scholarship schemes for higher education. The first one, for Scheduled Castes (SCs), has supported 97,928 students with €325 million. The second, for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Economically Backward Classes (EBCs), has helped 38,011 students with €70.2 million. The program includes several key components: scholarships for SC students to study at 266 top Indian institutions, overseas scholarships for 125 students annually at QS-ranked universities, 2,000 yearly PhD fellowships, and free coaching for 3,500 economically disadvantaged SC and OBC students to prepare for competitive examinations.

⁵ To delve into the benefits of Indian and other international students for European countries' economy, see, as an example, the impact on the UK (HEPI 2023, pp. 19-26) and Germany (Knight, 2025)

⁶ For every detail, see the following document <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/LU-894-26-07-2024-en-1.pdf>

Four', it must transform its current plurality of national systems into a collective vision capable of making the continent not merely an alternative, but an attractive and sustainable academic ecosystem for Indian students.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite the opportunities, financial constraints remain a primary concern for Indian students studying abroad, as even with scholarships, living expenses in European countries can be prohibitive (European Commission, 2022). Indian students studying in EU countries face a range of challenges that test their resilience and adaptability. One of the primary hurdles is cultural adjustment, as students often find it difficult to adapt to new standards and social practices, which can lead to feelings of 'homesickness'⁷ and isolation. Language barriers, particularly in non-English-speaking (or "less-English-speaking") countries, add another layer of difficulty, affecting both communication and academic performance. This remains true despite the efforts of many Indian students who take language courses before or during their contact with the new environment (Mahajan, 2024).

Financial constraints are a significant concern, with high tuition fees and living expenses compounded by unfavourable currency exchange rates. On top of that, differences in educational systems and teaching methodologies require students to quickly adapt to unfamiliar academic expectations. Employment opportunities, such as part-time jobs or internships, can also be limited due to visa restrictions or language requirements, making it tougher for students to gain practical experience or financial stability.

Bureaucratic challenges, such as visa delays and complex application processes, and the cost of living in European cities, which is quite different from that of Indian cities, further complicate the challenge for young students. When we think about challenges and barriers, we cannot overlook the status of disabled students. Government initiatives, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), have mandated barrier-free environments, reserved seats in educational institutions, and the integration of disability studies into higher education *curricula*. Innovative measures by institutions, such as accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and tailored support services, have facilitated access for students with both physical and intellectual disabilities (Narayan and Gathoo, 2023), even though still a lot to be done about erasing the stigma and providing financial help to disabled students' families.

⁷ The web is full of advice, information, forums, blogs, and YouTube videos aimed at Indians – mostly students and researchers – living in Europe and experiencing homesickness. Those experiencing and talking about this condition are mostly non-residents who have come to Germany (among the most interesting examples from Germany, see <https://www.acadfly.com/blogs/homesickness-indian-students-germany>).

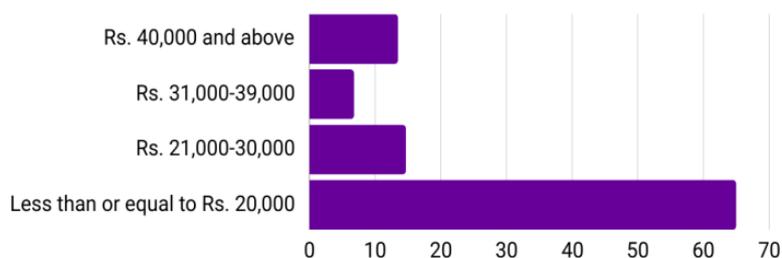


FIG. 3. MONTHLY INCOME OF THE FAMILIES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Figure 1: Monthly income of disabled students' families, from a NCPEDP study (March 2024)

The right to education for disabled people in India is a huge matter that suggests we take a breath on the national level, leaving for a moment the international one that should be safeguarded from the *National Overseas Scholarship for Students with Disabilities*; nevertheless, we have no information or reliable data on how many disabled students from India study in Europe.

The *National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People* (henceforth NCPEDP) explores the systemic barriers, socio-economic challenges, and policy inadequacies affecting students with disabilities in Indian higher education. A recent study of the NCPEDP (March 2024) highlights that students with disabilities remain vastly underrepresented in higher education, constituting only 0.19–0.22% of total enrolments from 2017–2022, as per AISHE data. This is despite constitutional safeguards like the *Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016* and the progressive NEP 2020, which emphasize inclusion and equity (p. 7).

The Nepolitan Context

It seems appropriate to start from the ISTAT data,⁸ updated as of January 1, 2024, according to which the number of non-EU foreign citizens legally residing in Campania is 7,757, accounting for 5.7% of the total Indian citizens holding residence permits in Italy (ISTAT, Table 24.1.2). From this figure, we will attempt to derive an approximate number of individuals residing in Campania for academic purposes (study or research). We know that the presence of the Indian community in Italian universities is significant and growing, and it is worth analysing its impact over at least the last eight years.

As early as 2017, the Indian student community represented a significant component of the Italian university landscape, with steadily increasing enrolment numbers. Italy is becoming an increasingly attractive destination for Indian students due to its high-level academic offerings, especially in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines and the economic-financial sector. Data published by Uni-Italia (2017) indicate that the main Italian universities with significant Indian student

⁸ ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) is the Italian National Institute of Statistics, a public research body that collects and analyses official data on the country's economy, population, and society. For further information, see <https://www.istat.it/listituto/organizzazione/>

populations are the Politecnico of Milan, Sapienza University of Rome, and the Politecnico of Turin – institutions renowned for their programs in engineering and technology. Engineering is indeed the most popular field among Indian students, followed by economics and finance, sciences, and medicine.

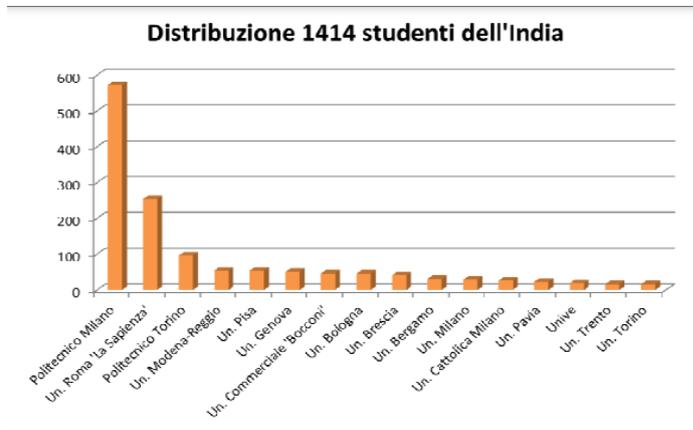


Tabella XIII

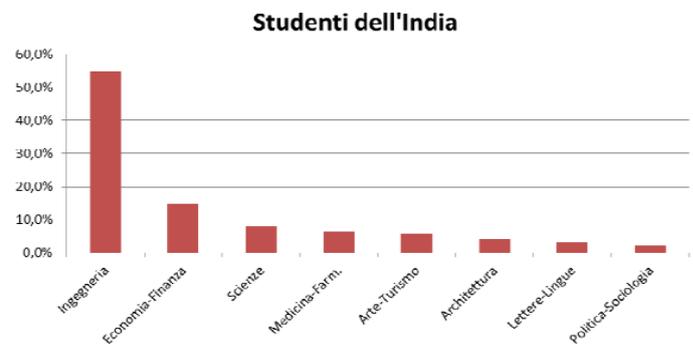


Tabella XIV

Figure 2: distribution of Indian students in Italian universities – image created by Uni-Italia, 2017.

The growing interest in Italy as a study destination is also attributable to international academic collaborations, scholarship programs, and bilateral agreements between Italian and Indian universities. The geographical distribution of Indian students shows a clear concentration in major northern cities and university centres specializing in scientific and economic fields, while it is less prevalent in other regions and in the humanities. In the academic year 2021-22, the number of Indian students enrolled in Italian universities was 5,260, representing 6% of the non-EU academic population. This figure ranks the Indian community as the third largest among non-EU

groups in Italian universities. Furthermore, there was a 5.3% increase compared to the previous year, consistent with the general growth of students from third countries (Rapporto Comunità Indiana in Italia, 2022, p. 12).

The most significant limitation of this research is the lack of updated data from the Campania Region or the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) regarding the participation of the Indian community in Neapolitan university life. Consequently, with the kind support of certain Neapolitan universities, we were able to ascertain specific numbers and confirm trends in study and research choices among Indian students, notably highlighting an anticipated lack of interest in the humanities. Three universities were analysed. The choice was based on the wide variety of their educational offerings and their international standing. They are (in alphabetical order) Federico II University, L'Orientale University, and Parthenope University.

Data obtained from the academic services of Federico II University of Naples reveal that the number of Indian students enrolled in various study programs for the academic year 2024-25 is considerable, amounting precisely to 258 individuals. Specifically, two-year master's degrees represent the largest group, with the highest

enrolment in engineering (61 students) and Data Science (64 students), followed by international relations (30 students), architecture (22 students), biology (14 students), biotechnology (10 students), economics (6 students), and agricultural sciences (4 students). Indian students enrolled in doctoral programs total 23, while those enrolled in the single-cycle Medicine and Surgery program taught in English number two. Additionally, there are 7 students enrolled in undergraduate programs and 15 in first- and second-level master's courses, demonstrating active participation also in postgraduate educational paths.

Data from the academic services of L'Orientale University of Naples indicate that, for the academic year 2024-25, no Indian nationals are enrolled. This finding is particularly noteworthy and suggests (or confirms) a general disinterest in language studies, archaeology, and humanities, fields in which L'Orientale University is highly dedicated. It can be hypothesized that the disinterest in language learning stems from endemic conditions in India: from childhood, most individuals are exposed to multilingual micro and macro environments, often resulting in systemic individual bilingualism. It is plausible, therefore, that the younger generations, particularly from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds, do not perceive a need to learn another (European or otherwise) language, having already identified English as a universal passkey for mobility both within and outside India.

Data obtained from the academic services of the University of Naples Parthenope reveal that the number of Indian students enrolled in various study programs for the academic year 2024-25 is 52. Specifically, two-year master's degrees represent the largest group, with the highest enrolment in Marketing and International Management (17 students), followed by Fashion, Art and Food Management (8 students), Management Engineering (3 students), and Applied Informatics with a focus on Machine Learning and Big Data (2 students). Doctoral programs also exhibit participation, with 4 Indian students enrolled, specifically in Energy Science and Engineering (2 students), Economics, Statistics and Sustainability (1 student), and Environment, Resources and Sustainable Development (1 student). Additionally, undergraduate programs account for 17 students, with the vast majority enrolled in Business Administration (15 students), and one each in Computer Engineering, Biomedical and Telecommunications, as well as Engineering and Information Sciences for Cybersecurity. Lastly, one student is enrolled in a single-course program, reflecting varied academic engagements among Indian students at the institution.

In Naples, a spontaneous collective named "Indian Friends in Napoli" was recently formed, aiming to involve Indian residents in a context of fruitful exchange and human interaction. Informal meetings will be organized to foster interaction, followed by data collection through questionnaires and interviews, paying special attention to online socialization spaces. The goal is to create a network enabling intercultural mediation practices with students (as well as workers or aspiring workers) from India and assisting them in overcoming, at least partly, the 'homesickness' commonly experienced by students and workers living abroad, thus facilitating integration.

Integration is often misunderstood as a unidirectional effort by migrants towards the host community. However, as Zanfrini (2016, p. 195) notes, integration today is no longer described as a unilateral process achieved by migrants adopting the host society's culture; rather, it involves the host society's capacity and willingness to offer integration opportunities to migrants.

This drive towards engagement with the Indian community in Naples should serve as inspiration for anyone wishing to contribute to encounters and interactions with "the other" in their city. Grassroots initiatives designed to foster community organizing practices should be considered as efforts that broaden experiences of intercultural and social mediation, steering them towards community development. These initiatives adapt and implement, in context-sensitive ways, practices that respect diversity, effectively address inequalities, or at the very least acknowledge and engage with them, and advocate social change, thus shaping the foundations of our collective future (Guerzoni, 2021, p. 60).

The discussion would lack substance if the sociological analysis of the condition of Indian students in Naples did not also include even a little space for their own expression. For this reason, I have chosen to include three interviews, reproduced here with gratitude and with the consent of the speakers, from Federico II University. The three experiences reported here are not intended to have general or universal validity. These three voices, however, echo a shared sentiment among Indian students in Italy, and specifically in the city of Naples. They were considered and reported here for their interesting diversity. Three young people – a young woman, an Indian student proficient in Italian, and a researcher – who have different skills, dreams, and ways of interacting. The first experience I decided to report is from Ms. Sakshi Sindgi, who is an MA student in Design for the Built Environment.

The Indian student community in Naples primarily networks with other Indians rather than integrating deeply with the local Italian population. This is mainly due to several factors. First, the language barrier plays a significant role. Italians are more comfortable speaking Italian, and since many Indian students may not be fluent, this creates a natural divide in communication and social interactions.

Second, there is a comfort in shared culture. Indians relate to each other through humor, food, traditions, and common experiences. These shared cultural elements make it easier to form close bonds with fellow Indians rather than with locals who might not understand or connect with these aspects.

Third, social circles are often shaped by familiarity. While inclusivity is an important concept, in reality, people tend to associate with those who share similar backgrounds. Just as Italians mostly socialize with other Italians due to shared language and customs, Indians find it easier to connect within their own community.

Lastly, differences in social norms also contribute to this dynamic. The way friendships are formed, humour is understood, and social interactions take place can differ significantly between Indians and Italians. These cultural differences sometimes make it harder for Indian students to feel fully integrated into local

social groups.

However, there are exceptions. Some Indian students who put in the effort—learning the language, participating in local events, and embracing Italian culture—do manage to build strong friendships with Italians. But overall, the majority tend to stay within their own circles due to these factors.

The second experience I decided to report is from Mr. Pankaj Pandey:

As I am working as a researcher here in UNINA [Federico II n.d.r], I am very less in contact with Indian students because I don't study courses or go to classes. I am more in touch with our Italian neighbours and colleagues in the lab. But I don't know Italian, so it's difficult for me to communicate effectively. As far as other indian fellows, I came to know, most of them are mostly in touch with the Indian community. They want to connect with locals, but maybe they don't know Italian very well, or they are in a learning phase. I feel that if they learn Italian as soon as possible, that would be easier for them to make more local friends. They have a few Italian friends from their classroom or campus.

These first two insightful accounts underscore a fundamental truth about the Indian student experience in Naples: while cultural affinity and language barriers naturally encourage strong intra-community bonds, bridging the gap with the local population requires active, sustained effort. Both Ms. Sindgi and Mr. Pandey highlight that language proficiency is crucial, not merely as a tool for basic communication, but as a key to deeper cultural integration and meaningful relationships (as we'll see in the next witness) and, for this reason, it can also be one of the main barriers between the Indian student and the local community, eventually resulting in a reinforcement of the self-segregation of the immigrant student group.

Therefore, the integration of Indian and Italian communities presents inherent systemic difficulties and challenges, which can be traced back to a certain tendency toward self-segregation, a term that is sometimes complex to use, but which does not inherently carry any negative connotation. Self-segregation can be thought of not only as the result of a potential "interethnic prejudice" (Doff, 2007, p. 3), but also as a natural tendency to retreat into psychologically comfortable spaces – physical or ethereal, such as social media – or as a result of language barriers. Italy ranks third-to-last among European countries for English proficiency, with Naples scoring second-to-last among the twelve Italian cities surveyed – only Catania performs worse (EF EPI, 2024). This data should not be underestimated, as it significantly influences the integration trajectories of international students, particularly those who rely on English as a medium of academic and social interaction. Low levels of English proficiency in the local population may hinder mutual communication, limit institutional responsiveness, and reinforce the students' reliance on ethno-linguistic enclaves, thereby shaping the quality and depth of their intercultural engagement.

What happens, and what are the implications for integration if an Indian student is reasonably proficient in Italian? To answer this question, I interviewed Mr. Pradeep Kumar, who holds a Master's degree in Italian language and culture from the University

of New Delhi and is currently in Naples pursuing a second MA in political science at Federico II. He stated:

I had prior exposure to Italian culture through events at the Italian Cultural Center in New Delhi, including film screenings, theatrical performances, and culinary workshops. This background significantly eased my transition to life in Naples, allowing me to communicate effectively with locals, secure accommodation, and navigate daily interactions without difficulty. In contrast, many Indian students who arrive in Italy without prior knowledge of the language face considerable challenges. Simple tasks such as house hunting, grocery shopping, or seeking administrative assistance become daunting due to the language barrier. As a result, they often rely on fellow Indian students for support, limiting their social circles to the Indian community. This linguistic constraint discourages meaningful interactions with native Italians, reinforcing a segregated network.

My fluency in Italian, however, has enabled me to form close friendships with Italians, including you! Language acts as a bridge, fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Additionally, I have observed certain similarities between Naples and Delhi – both cities are vibrant, chaotic, and deeply rooted in tradition, which made me feel at home despite the geographical distance.

I'd say that, while the Indian student community in Naples tends to remain insular due to language limitations, those proficient in Italian integrate more seamlessly. My linguistic skills have not only facilitated practical aspects of living abroad but also enriched my academic and social experiences, proving that language is a crucial factor in cross-cultural integration. One example that struck me is the Neapolitan interjection "uà!", which reminds me of the Hindi word "Accha!" Both expressions are incredibly versatile and can convey a wide range of emotions – surprise, concern, curiosity, happiness – depending on the intonation used. Discovering these kinds of cross-cultural echoes has made my integration both easier and more meaningful.

The experiences reported above also show that when Indian students embrace Italian culture and language proactively, richer interactions and genuine friendships can indeed flourish. This highlights a dual responsibility: Indian students can benefit greatly from taking proactive steps toward integration, but equally, local communities can facilitate this process by embracing intercultural openness. Fostering mutual curiosity and understanding on both sides emerges as the most powerful pathway to an enriching and inclusive international educational experience.

What emerges, then, is a need to reframe the idea of integration not as mere inclusion, but as reciprocal transformation. Students are not passive recipients of the host culture, nor should they be expected to conform entirely to it. Rather, they contribute actively to reshaping the social fabric, bringing new rhythms, symbols, and meanings. The challenge is to cultivate spaces – both physical and symbolic – where these contributions can be heard, seen, and valued. Only through this mutual recognition can the university, and the city more broadly, become truly international in practice, and not only in statistics.

Lens on the Future

To fully capitalize on the potential of Indian student migration, policymakers must focus on reducing barriers and enhancing integration opportunities. By creating favourable visa policies and promoting post-graduation work options, Europe can retain talented individuals, ensuring mutual economic and cultural enrichment. To maximize the potential of India-EU cooperation, several measures are essential:

1. Policy Harmonization: Align academic calendars and accreditation systems to facilitate smoother exchanges (Ministry of Education, 2020).
2. Enhanced Funding: Expand scholarship programs and create joint funding mechanisms to support living expenses (European Commission, 2022).
3. Strengthening digital cooperation between EU-India universities: utilize virtual exchange programs to complement physical mobility, with a special focus on disabled students' accessibility.
4. Free courses of language on a weekly or bi-weekly basis for all Indian students in the EU
5. Targeted intercultural mediation and community-making interventions

Especially point 4 could be very interesting to explore and would have more than one benefit. First, the EU could hire young language tutors and offer the Indian student a path of approach to the language of the country in which he is living for academic reasons through an obviously non-mandatory online platform. At the same time, with this platform, the Indian learner will be able to feel part of a path in which he is not alone, but in the awareness of being accompanied and supported by the European Union in his stay within its borders. This could be an effective method to alleviate *homesickness* and increase the motivation of the Indian student.

The concept of motivation plays a pivotal role in disciplines such as social psychology or language education, highlighting its impact on learning outcomes and overall performance. In the context of higher education, motivation is often seen as the driving force that determines a student's level of engagement, persistence, and success. Deci and Ryan's *Self-Determination Theory* (1985) emphasizes that intrinsic motivation, fuelled by autonomy, competence, and relatedness, is an important key to sustained learning. In this sense, the idea of offering language courses to Indian students could directly enhance these motivational factors and act as a strategic way to empower their academic paths in many ways. Innovations of this kind could be carried forward by specific bodies (including voluntary ones) such as the Generation EU-India project⁹, which aims to find passionate figures in the relations between India and Europe and individuals versed in various fields of knowledge. The opening by the Union to issues – albeit of extreme importance and undeniably urgent – that go beyond geopolitics or the green revolution, and that touch the sphere of knowledge and academia in a movement of approach to the communities of Indian students in Europe, would be an

⁹ Generation EU-India (GenEU-India) was conceived in 2024 by four young individuals – Manisha Bieber, Patrizia Cogo, Matías Díaz Roqueta, and Aditi Mukund – who collaborated throughout the year to develop and launch this initiative. Its primary aim is to foster deeper understanding between the EU and India by empowering and engaging youth, providing a platform for young Europeans and Indians to voice their perspectives and influence policymaking in EU-India relations.

interesting step towards (inter)cultural mediation and collaboration.

The concept of mediation is intrinsically polysemic, open to multiple interpretations depending on the perspective adopted and the elements one chooses to emphasise. A concise yet effective definition describes mediation as a *procedure of rapprochement* through which the mediator seeks to create a “third space”: a zone of non-conflict where conscious or unconscious misunderstandings and distrust—often arising from linguistic and cultural distances – can be acknowledged, contained, and constructively addressed (Favaro, 2004, p. 40).

Intercultural mediation, however, represents a further evolution of this process. It is not merely the resolution of misunderstandings, but rather a fundamentally communicative practice—both verbal and non-verbal – that positions itself as an interdisciplinary science. As Lazzarini argues, it offers a point of equilibrium between diverse analytical perspectives and traverses disciplinary boundaries, rediscovering and interrogating the very nature of human beings and, consequently, our relationships with others (Lazzarini, 2017, p. 46). This suggests that intercultural mediation not only resolves conflicts but also provides a lens through which to understand human interaction at its deepest epistemological level.

Although such definitions may initially appear abstract or impractical, it is useful to reframe intercultural competence not as a static body of knowledge to be acquired, but rather as a lifelong path – one that ideally begins in primary education and is continuously shaped through the study of foreign languages. Language learning, in this context, serves as both a tool and a metaphor: a means of navigating cultural difference and of recognising cultures as “variants of a shared anthropological reality” (Pavan, 2020, p. 59). Intercultural mediation thus becomes an educational and relational process that enhances reflexivity and fosters what Byram (1997) calls *critical cultural awareness*, a key element of democratic citizenship in multicultural societies.

No less complex is the notion of *culture* itself. Its interpretation within the framework of mediation aligns with the dynamic perspective proposed by Robinson, who views culture as “a creative, historical system of symbols and meaning” capable of filling theoretical gaps left by behaviourist, functionalist, and cognitive paradigms (Robinson, 1988, p. 11). In this light, culture is neither a static heritage nor a closed container of norms, but rather a living continuum – fluid, evolving, and constantly open to new configurations (Katan and Taibi, 2021, p. 39). This dynamic view helps reframe cultural encounters not as clashes of fixed worldviews but as opportunities for mutual reinterpretation and transformation.

Consequently, intercultural mediation can be more precisely understood as an iterative and dialogic process in which cultural differences are not merely encountered but continuously renegotiated. Its core lies in the co-construction of a “third space”, not to dissolve into one another, but to generate new hybrid meanings. In this sense, mediation is not only a bridge between identities but a creative act of co-authorship, where cultural signifiers are redefined in the immediacy of the encounter.

Culture, as such, is never fixed; it emerges from a continuous process of individual and collective meaning-making. Mediation, therefore, is not simply a practice of translation

between separate worlds, but an arena for symbolic reconstruction – a space where new grammars of relationship, understanding, and reciprocity can be cultivated. It is precisely in this transformative potential that intercultural mediation finds its most profound academic and social relevance today.

Conclusion

As India emerges as a global knowledge superpower and Europe strengthens its role as a hub for international education, their partnership holds immense promise. By addressing barriers and fostering innovation, this collaboration can not only empower students but also drive socio-economic and cultural transformation on a global scale. The future of higher education lies in such visionary partnerships, which are instrumental in shaping a more equitable and educated world.

The analysis conducted in this article, enriched by the direct experiences of Indian students in Naples, reveals a complex reality of cultural encounters that requires mutual and conscious commitment. While it is true that linguistic and cultural barriers can initially lead to forms of self-segregation, it becomes clear that integration is possible and even desirable when both parties act with openness and determination. Therefore, local initiatives and university policies must facilitate language learning, promote authentic opportunities for intercultural exchange, and encourage Indian students' involvement in city life. Viewing international students as bridges between cultures, and not simply as recipients of educational services, can radically transform the university experience, making Naples – and Europe more broadly – not just a prestigious academic destination, but a genuine place of human growth, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue.

We should also keep in mind that the flow of students is not unidirectional. European students increasingly explore India for its unique academic offerings in the Indic studies' area (Study in India Initiative, 2023). Programs such as the Study in India initiative aim to attract international students, but their scale and impact remain limited compared to EU programs. Strengthening this reciprocal exchange can yield mutual benefits. European students gain insights into a rapidly growing economy and a rich cultural heritage, while Indian universities enhance their global visibility (Study in India Initiative, 2023).

Acknowledgement

The author sincerely thanks the administrative offices of the universities Federico II, L'Orientale, and Parthenope for their efficient and generous response to data requests. Gratitude is also extended to all the friends of "Indian Friends in Napoli" for their understanding, curiosity, and willingness to take part in the interviews, particularly Ms. Sakshi Sindgi and Mrs. Pankaj Pandey, and Pradeep Kumar.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest: The author declares no potential conflicts of interest or disclosures with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding Disclosure: The author has received no funding either for the research work or for the publication of this research article.

References

- Brass, P. (1974). *Language, religion, and politics in North India*. Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd.
- British Council. (2024). Higher Education Statistics for India. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from www.britishcouncil.org
- Constitution of India. (n.d.). *The Constitution of India*. Government of India. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour*. Springer.
- Doff, W. (2007). Involuntary isolation: Ethnic preferences and residential segregation. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 29(3), 289–309.
- EEAS. (2024). *EU-India cooperation in higher education*. European External Action Service. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from eeas.europa.eu
- EF Education First. (2024). EF English Proficiency Index Fact Sheet: Italy. Retrieved July 7, 2025, from <https://www.ef.com/assetscdn/WIBIwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/fact-sheets/2024/ef-epi-fact-sheet-italy-italian.pdf>
- European Commission. (2022). Erasmus+ annual report 2022. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from ec.europa.eu
- Favaro, G., & Fumagalli, M. (2004). *Capirsi diversi: Idee e pratiche di mediazione interculturale*. Carocci Editore.
- Guerzoni, G. (2021). Dalla mediazione interculturale alla mediazione sociale, alla community organizing. In *La mediazione interculturale. Strumento per le politiche di inclusione e di contrasto alle disuguaglianze* (pp. 51–61). Bononia University Press.
- HEPI. (2023). The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy. London Economics. Retrieved September 15, 2025, from <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Full-Report-Benefits-and-costs-of-international-students.pdf>
- Katan, D., & Taibi, M. (2021). *Translating cultures: An introduction for translators, interpreters and mediators* (3rd ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Knight, B. (2025, March 24). International students bring billions to Germany. DW. Retrieved September 15, 2025, from <https://www.dw.com/en/international-students-bring-billions-to-germany/a-72018202>
- Lazzarini, G., Stobbione, T., et al. (2017). *Mediare tra culture: Il ruolo del mediatore interculturale tra inclusione sociale e promozione delle diversità*. Franco Angeli Editore.
- Mahajan, K. (2024). *Cultural adaptation of Indian students in Europe*. Academic Publishing House.
- Meshram, P., & Pal, S. (2024). Economic contributions of Indian students in Europe. *Journal of Global Education*, 12(3), 32–48.
- Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali. (2022). Rapporto Comunità indiana in Italia 2022. Retrieved July 10, 2025, from lavoro.gov.it/documenti-e-norme/studi-e-statistiche/rapporto-annuale-sulla-presenza-dei-migranti-2022-india
- Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from education.gov.in
- Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2022). Details of Indian students studying abroad, country-wise. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/lu3820-1-mar-25-22.pdf
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2024). Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 894: Indian students studying abroad. Government of India. Retrieved October 16, 2025, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl%2F38014%2FQUESTION+No894+INDIAN+STUDENTS+STUDYING+ABROAD>

- Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. (2025, July 1). Result of National Overseas Scholarship (NOS) for SC, etc. candidates for First Round of the Selection Year 2025-26. Retrieved October 15, 2025, from <https://socialjustice.gov.in/search>
- Narayan, S., & Gathoo, V. (2023). Challenges faced by disabled students in higher education in India. *Indian Journal of Disability Studies, 9*(2), 7–15.
- Nair, R. (2024). Shifting destinations: Indian students opting for Europe. *Journal of International Migration and Education, 15*(1), 45–62.
- National Institute of Statistics. (n.d.). Demography in Figures. Retrieved June 07, 2025, from demo.istat.it
- NCPEDP. (2024). Inclusion and accessibility in higher education for disabled students. National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People.
- OECD. (2019). *Education at a glance 2019: Indicators of international mobility*. OECD Publishing.
- Pavan, E. (2020). *Dalla didattica della cultura all'educazione linguistica interculturale*. Libreriauniversitaria.it Edizioni.
- Press Information Bureau (PIB). (2024). *Year-end review: Indian education statistics*. Press Information Bureau, Government of India. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from pib.gov.in
- Robinson, G. (1988). *Cross-cultural understanding*. Prentice Hall International.
- Study in India Initiative. (2023). *Annual report*. Retrieved December 22, 2024, from studyinindia.gov.in
- Thakur, A., et al. (2023). National Education Policy 2020 and its impact on minority education. *Indian Educational Review, 19*(4), 76–88.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Zanfrini, L. (2016). *Introduzione alla sociologia delle migrazioni*. Laterza.

Davide Cava is a PhD Candidate in Hindi at the University of Naples "L'Orientale." His research primarily focuses on innovative methodologies for teaching Hindi as a second language in Italy and Europe, with particular attention to aligning Hindi language competencies with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Dedicated to strengthening cultural ties between Italy and India, he actively participates in intercultural and linguistic mediation initiatives and has delivered seminars on mediation with Indian communities in Italy. He is a member of the Generation EU-India association.
