

International Student Mobility: Patterns and Trends*

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Introduction

Over the past 10-15 years international student mobility has become an increasingly important part of the global higher education landscape. The total number of mobile tertiary education students was estimated to have reached more than 2.7 million in 2005¹, a nearly 61 per cent increase since 1999². Significant changes in the infrastructures and capacity of higher education systems across the world partially explain why there has been such growth in such a short time. The large majority of national governments have been allocating more funds to higher education to improve the quantity and quality of tertiary education being offered within their borders. Even so, capacity is insufficient to meet demand in the major source countries. At the same time, with higher household levels of wealth and rising gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, more students from across the world are able to participate in higher education abroad, especially those from countries with rapidly growing economies. The total number of worldwide tertiary enrolments is 40 per cent higher than it was seven years ago, with more people participating in higher education than ever before.

Traditionally, more than 90 per cent of international students have enrolled in institutions in countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with the main destinations (the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Australia) recruiting over 70 per cent of them. Interestingly, however, developments over the past five to six years demonstrate that international student

demand might not continue to focus on what have been the main destinations in the past. The US, the UK and Australia have all experienced either a decline in enrolments or a 'slump' in the growth experienced in previous years. Many European countries, which traditionally have maintained significant and stable recruitment numbers from a range of nations with which they share historical or linguistic connection have stepped up their marketing efforts. Meanwhile, new players in Asia and the Middle East have entered the market with declared ambitions to become regional education centres by attracting as many as several hundred thousand international students to their countries.

Importantly, Western economies are increasingly seeking to both recruit international students and retain them after graduation because in an era of globalisation, international students hold several short and long term gains for institutions and countries. In the first instance, with public per student funding for higher education decreasing in many countries, universities and colleges are looking to diversify their generated income and the revenue earned from overseas student tuition has become one important way of doing so. In the long term, and in the wider socio-economic context, developed countries are looking to attract foreign skilled labour to supplement their rapidly decreasing and ageing populations. According to national immigration authorities, Australia will have 200,000 more jobs than people to fill them in five years' time. With one of the lowest birth rates in the OECD, Canada is expected to become increasingly reliant on skilled immigration to the country to boost the labour force. Close to 20 per cent of current Canadian citizens were born abroad, an indication that the country is arguably already reliant on the skills of the more than 130,000 international students who annually enrol there. For these reasons, concerns over enrolment trends have warranted the attention of national governments in countries such as the US and the UK, because not only do these countries want overseas students, they actually need them for economic development.

Recruitment

Given increasing competition in the market and changes in mobility patterns, many countries have started to consider how they might implement or strengthen their strategic approaches to international recruitment. Importantly, there are various elements to which countries seem to be paying increasing attention in an effort to retain or increase their competitiveness, with international student and graduate visa schemes, for example, being increasingly used as integral parts of recruitment strategies in accordance with their perceived importance and strategic value. The

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importance of migration opportunities for overseas students is arguably reflected by the statistics produced through a 2006 survey undertaken by Australia's Monash University. According to the findings, 75 per cent of Indian students who completed a university education in Australia in 2003 applied for and were granted permanent residency visas. The author of the study, Michiel Baas, suggests that the most important reason Indian students chose to come to study in Australia was not the academic reputation of the universities but the opportunity to gain permanent residency visas³.

In light of this realisation, institutions and countries appear to be increasingly cognisant of the importance of satisfied international graduates, and are thus looking to ensure that recruitment is not only as 'user-friendly' a procedure as possible, but that foreign students receive the education and overall student experience they were promised during the recruitment process. From this perspective, especially since 'word of mouth' and information widely disseminated via the internet have become efficient marketing tools, the little 'perks and privileges' afforded students, in addition to employment and residency rights, could go a long way in today's competitive market.

Cost, moreover, is increasingly likely to motivate students to apply for study to particular destinations, and to deter them from applying to others, not least because it can be a determining factor in the quality of the overall 'student experience'. The usually high value of certain currencies, the UK pound (£) and US dollar (\$) most prominent amongst

them, could arguably dissuade students even further from going to high-cost nations, since unfavourable exchange rates exacerbate the already considerable financial concerns of foreign students, especially those from Africa and Southeast Asia.

Indeed, a report recently published by New Zealand's Ministry of Education and Education New Zealand, an umbrella organisation promoting the export of the country's education services, found that the cost of higher education was amongst the top factors influencing the decision to study in the country (Ministry of Education, 2007). For Chinese students in particular, traditionally New Zealand's largest overseas student population, cost was the key factor in the decision about where to study abroad, with 51.3 per cent of students surveyed for research pertaining to the experiences of Chinese students in the country having responded that the comparably low cost of an overseas education in New Zealand was a motivational factor in their choice (Ho et al., 2007). According to Robert Stevens, Chief Executive of Education New Zealand, "the fact that quality and value are the key influences in deciding where to study come as no surprise" (Education New Zealand, 2007), and for this reason, in addition to New Zealand, countries such as Japan and Canada might do well to highlight their affordable provision, and emerging destinations such as Malaysia, Singapore and China, their low living costs to prospective students.

Conclusion

The growing number and diversification of players in the international student market partly explains why countries are seeking innovative strategies to attract higher numbers of students. Yet because the current generation of 'savvy student customers' are more knowledgeable about the opportunities available in certain countries, prospective hosts arguably have little choice but to offer targeted advantages. Research undertaken suggests that visa schemes and immigration procedures will play an increasingly important role in the decision-making process, with students not only seeking employment upon graduation, but perhaps (at least temporary) residency in their country of choice. Countries which facilitate the arrival and integration of overseas students through employment and immigration initiatives are likely to be more competitive in the market.

Institutions and countries are furthermore striving to meet, if not exceed, the expectations of prospective overseas students, because the 'student experience' and the costs associated with an overseas education, including tuition fees and accommodation are becoming significant motivational factors for application to one country over another. Given the rising fees of study abroad, the comparative cost of higher education in particular is likely to give certain countries a competitive edge in the coming years. In light of recent, and perhaps unexpected, trends in

international student mobility, however, institutional and national recruitment strategies will almost certainly consider a growing number of indicators to compete in a rapidly changing industry.

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*Note:

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Endnotes:

1. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), there were 2,455,250 students studying in a country other than their own in 2004. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) claims, however, that more than 2.7 million students were enrolled in higher education outside their country of citizenship in 2005, representing a five per cent increase in the reported foreign student intake total. See:

UNESCO. (2006). *Global education digest 2006*, Institute of Statistics (UIS). Canada: Montreal. Retrieved 15 May 2007 from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/ged/2006/GED2006.pdf>

The OECD. (2007). *Education at a glance 2007: OECD indicators*, p. 299. France: Paris. Retrieved 26 September 2007 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/55/39313286.pdf>

2. In 1999, according to UNESCO, there were 1.68 million "internationally mobile students", a figure which refers to those students who have crossed a national border for the purposes of education, and who are enrolled outside their own country of origins. For more information, see:

UNESCO. (2006). *Global education digest 2006*, Institute of Statistics (UIS), p. 3. Canada: Montreal. Retrieved 15 May 2007 from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/ged/2006/GED2006.pdf>

3. Universities being used as immigration factories. (2006, March 30). *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved 6 March 2007 from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/unis-used-as-immigrationfactories/2006/03/29/1143441215915.html>