

Students all over the world are increasingly seeking higher education in foreign countries and many nations are pursuing them, but U.S. policy continues to be less engaged.

By Alan Dessoff

GOING MOBILE

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ITH MORE STUDENTS THAN EVER leaving their homelands to attend colleges and universities in other countries, the institutions that both send and receive them are weighing the impacts on their campuses while governments of the sending and receiving countries consider the economic, political, and cultural implications of changing patterns of global student mobility.

Worldwide, there were more than 2.9 million international students in 2006, a 3 percent increase over the previous year, and almost 8 million students are projected to be studying outside their home countries by 2025, according to a presentation at NAFSA's 2009 Annual Conference in Los Angeles by Rajika Bhandari, deputy vice president for research and evaluation at the Institute of International Education. She reported that the United States hosted 20 percent of international students worldwide in 2007, followed by the United Kingdom (13 percent), France and Germany (8 percent each), Australia and China (7 percent each), Canada (5 percent), Japan (4 percent), with other countries together hosting the remaining 28 percent.

International education experts say the leading countries in receiving international students are expected to continue to remain in the forefront and compete aggressively for as many as they can get. But they agree that global student mobility patterns are changing, with more countries and institutions seeking students and more countries having growing pools of students to send.

Simon Marginson, professor of higher education in the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, cites a "dramatic increase" over the last decade of students from developing and emerging countries traveling to developed countries for their educations. Even with the development and improvement of education systems in China and India, the flow of students from those countries is increasing, Marginson says. "If they get their first degree at home, they are more likely to go off-shore for graduate education," he says.

"I think we're going to see developing countries sending more and more students into the international market," agrees John Aubrey Douglass, senior research fellow in the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley.

Action in Asia

The outflow of students from Asian countries is driven essentially by “the growth of the middle classes, the business, professional, and governmental classes,” says Marginson. To a lesser extent, it’s also happening in South Africa and Latin America, he adds. “It’s the sense that social mobility now often takes the form of off-shore education,” and particularly in Asia, “the desire for a foreign education seems to have increased markedly,” Marginson says.

“It’s principally from Asia to the big English-speaking academic systems and that is largely going to continue,” adds Philip G. Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. But he also points to movement by some Asian countries, notably South Korea, to become destinations themselves for students from other countries as well as their own. China and Japan also have increased the numbers of foreign students in their countries. Further, the growth of “top quality” institutions in China, Korea, and Japan and getting underway in Taiwan “is keeping some of the best students in those countries at home,” Altbach asserts.

In her presentation to NAFSA last year, Bhandari said expanded capacity in home country higher education sectors of major sending countries like China and India is one factor likely to affect enrollment shifts. China, she said, has grown into a major study destination with the numbers of international students and scholars in the country rising steadily over the past decade. China has been considered a huge student market since the 1980s but now also is the fifth largest provider of education and training opportunities of its own, says Alan Ruby, a senior fellow in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

According to the China Scholarship Council, more than 195,000 international students were in the country in 2007–2008, with a third of them coming from South Korea, followed by Japan, the United States, Vietnam, Thailand, Russia, India, Indonesia, France, and Pakistan. In the same year, 144,000 Chinese students were studying abroad, mostly in the United States, followed by Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, New Zealand, Canada, France, South Korea, and Macao.

Bhandari says a key factor for rapidly growing economies like China and India is how to balance the goal of attracting more international students against the need to provide sufficient access to high-quality higher education for domestic students.

While China is emerging as a major destination for and source of foreign students, India is “the big unknown,” says Altbach. “They still have an under-resourced and not very good higher education system. Indians who want to get the highest

levels of education go abroad.” Douglass agrees that “there is more growth potential out of India.”

There is an “expanding pool” of qualified, talented Indian students who are seeking a place to start or continue their studies because “there is not enough capacity” in India itself, says Robert White, senior policy analyst at the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. “So everyone is tapping into that talent to bolster their international student numbers,” he says.

Canada is doing some of the tapping. White says India is a target of a move Quebec Premier Jean

Charest made in February to bring more international students to his province. He announced that foreign students who graduated with a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree from any Quebec university would get a “certificate of selection” that would put them on a fast track for Canadian citizenship. “Without a doubt, (that) is a recruitment tool,” says White. India, now ranking behind China, the United States, and France as source countries for students at Canadian universities, is a “priority” focus of Charest’s initiative, White said.

But international security concerns also impact international education. The Indian subcontinent, along with Arab and Muslim countries, appeared to be the principal targets of new rules the British government announced in February that could restrict the numbers of students from those countries entering the UK.

“While we fully support immigration controls that prevent abuse of the student visa system, it is essential that the UK remains welcoming to genuine international students. If we don’t, they will go elsewhere,” Martin Davidson, chief executive of the British Council, responded in a statement.

Mobility in Europe

Global student mobility patterns also are changing in Europe, where the “absolute success” of the Bologna process has brought about the consolidation of European higher education, says Ruby. “Europe functions almost like a single country now, with a high level of intranational mobility,” says Marginson.

“One of the reasons the Europeans created the Bologna process was to provide a counterweight to the anglophile countries as destinations,” says Ruby. Now, some European countries are trying to become student destinations themselves, “even to the point of offering English language programs in their countries for people from other parts of the world,” Ruby says. He cites Germany as an example.

In itself, Bologna will have no direct impact on international student mobility in Europe, counters Hans de Wit, professor in internationalization of higher education in the School of Economics and Management at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, University of Applied Sciences. He suggests the impact will come from tuition fees, scholarship ar-



rangements like Erasmus Mundus, and policies for skilled migration, linked more to the Lisbon Agenda to increase the “knowledge economy” in Europe.

“There has been a lot more mobility within the European countries, although less than some people had hoped,” adds Altbach. He says European countries are especially active in trying to lure students from Latin America.

The United States Lags Behind

Meanwhile, as other countries compete aggressively for foreign students, some international educators suggest the United States is falling behind and needs an aggressive policy of its own to start catching up. “The Americans don’t have a clear, national strategy because the responsibility for higher education as an export commodity is completely dispersed within the government,” declares Ruby.

“I would call the U.S. policy ‘laissez faire,’ banking on our laurels and our world reputation, which has been unsurpassed until recently. But now our market competitors are becoming more significant out there,” adds John Aubrey Douglass, senior research fellow in the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley.

Many U.S. colleges and universities have acted on their own to recruit foreign students not only to their campuses in the United States but also to branch campuses they have established in other countries from Senegal to Singapore, Qatar to France. The Middle East in particular has grown in the last five years to become a regional campus destination for the U.S. institutions and for students from Middle Eastern and other countries seeking a Western education, Ruby says.

He and other international educators say the U.S. government could act more firmly to both bring in more foreign students and send more U.S. students abroad. Bhandari reported to NAFSA last year that the 623,805 international students in the United States in 2007 comprised just 3.5 percent of the total U.S. higher education enrollment compared to 21.1 percent in Australia, 15.8 percent in the UK, 12.4 percent in Germany, and 11.2 percent in France.

“The undergraduate level (in the U.S.) could take a lot more people. You see empty places in some second- and third-tier institutions. But they still are attractive destinations for people from other parts of the world,” says Ruby.

He also points to a need for Congress to finally enact legislation establishing the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation, with goals that include sending at least one million U.S. undergraduates to study abroad annually within 10 years; expanding education abroad opportunities for students currently underrepresented; and increasing the number of students who study abroad in nontraditional destinations. The goals are “very achievable and could be achieved a lot faster with thoughtful interventions by federal and state au-

thorities and by institutions and industry,” Ruby says. The United States needs “a more thoughtful, more systematic strategy” that includes enactment of the Simon bill, he says. “We all wish it would pass,” adds Altbach.

Money Drives Mobility

International educators agree that the principal factor driving global student mobility just about everywhere is money. “It’s a large industry in some countries, with significant movement of people and capital,” says Marginson. “It’s big bucks,” declares Altbach. He notes that higher education is the second largest export in Australia—larger than tourism, adds Marginson. “The UK and Australia have become used to the money that international students spend on tuition and other things in their countries to help balance their higher education budgets,” Altbach says. International students often pay the highest tuition rates and fees on the campuses they attend, adds Bhandari.

The \$6.5 billion (Canadian) that 178,000 international students spent in Canada last year was greater than the values of the export of coal and coniferous lumber, two of the country’s traditionally largest export sectors, according to a report by the country’s Trade Minister. The presence of international students at Canadian institutions provided employment for more than 83,000 Canadians and generated more than \$291 million (Canadian) in government revenue.

“The money that international students bring in is of interest to us, to be sure, and we recognize it’s of interest to the government and builds the case for doing more recruitment. But it is only one of many rationales that we view as important to support our efforts at recruiting international students,” says White. Diplomatic, strategic, and political considerations also underscore the importance of international education and drive changing patterns of global student mobility, says Marginson.

A key rationale that White cites is that Canadian universities “want to become more globally oriented” and recognize that bringing international students to their campus is “a valuable exercise, and important part of their international strategies.” International students bring with them “a global perspective that has a positive effect on the learning and research environments of our universities,” White explains.

Canadian universities “definitely are becoming more active as part of their internationalization strategies and part of that is recruiting more international students,” says White. That contributed to the Quebec Premier’s move, he says.

Altbach calls government immigration policies like that “a double-edged sword.” He has problems, he says, with “the rich countries stealing the brains of the poor countries by offering students who come from abroad to study easy ways of staying in the country. In many ways, especially for Africa and some of the poor Southeast Asian countries, it would be much better if



their graduates went home.” The rich countries—he cites Europe “very actively,” North America “pretty actively,” and Australia “to some extent”—“make it easier for them not to go home, for their own selfish reasons. And that does not contribute to development in the students’ home countries. I think we have a responsibility to try to get folks to go back home.”

Altbach points to another driver of student mobility. “We are a globalized world and talent flows, and rich countries continue to see brains largely from Asia but from the developing world in general as providing more high-level labor power,” he says. A number of countries, including Britain, Germany, Canada, and the United States, to some extent, are “opening their immigration doors to these kinds of people simply because they need them,” Altbach says.

“And of course, there’s the idealistic reason,” he adds. “As students learn about other parts of the world, they contribute to global development, international trade, and better relations.” Marginson agrees. “Students tend to go into positions of importance in their own countries, in business, government, or the professions, and their foreign experience is a significant influence on their careers. It affects their outlook, especially in international relations, so it has an influence on the world,” he says. Foreign students in the United States play “a major role” in relations between their countries and the United States, he adds.

In his response to the British government’s changes to entry criteria for non-EU students coming to study in the UK, Davidson stated: “Bone fide international students bring immense value to the UK. Not only do they enhance our institutions financially, academically, and culturally, but often they become lifelong friends and advocates of the UK when they return home.”

As *The New York Times* reported, the primary focus of the new rules in the UK appeared likely to be the Indian subcontinent and countries in the Arab and Muslim world, both because of the large numbers of allegedly fake applicants who originate there and because of concerns about combating terrorism by Islamic extremists. The paper said the controls “appeared to have been drawn up, in part, to meet American pressure for a tougher British approach to combating terrorist threats.” The *Times* pointed out that announcement of the new controls came six weeks after the failed attempt last Christmas Day to bomb a U.S. airliner approaching Detroit on a trans-Atlantic flight and that the Nigerian charged in that attack spent three years in Britain as an engineering student.

According to British authorities, the 240,000 student visas issued in 2008–2009 were for a third of all migrants to the country. The new restrictions apply to applicants from the United States and other countries outside the EU and also require that students seeking to enter the UK speak English well enough to pass British



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high school exams, not just the “beginner’s English” previously required.

Davidson expressed concern that “the need for students to speak a good standard of English before coming here to learn English will block genuine non-EU students from coming to the UK’s many excellent language schools and preparing for future study here.” The solution, he said, must be that accredited language course providers are able to continue to sponsor student visas for long-stay students at lower levels of English.

Enhancing Student Mobility

International education authorities point to steps that national governments and higher education institutions in their countries can and should take to increase the flow and quality of international students to their countries and campuses. For one thing, governments can subsidize marketing of their universities, underwriting the cost of brand promotion, as Britain, Australia, and New Zealand do, says Ruby.

Douglass suggests that a U.S. national strategy for international students include financial aid, particularly for undergraduates, like Australia and “other competitors” offer. The United States also should think about beefing up its marketing, he continues. “We have a tremendous market advantage but it needs to be portrayed that we are a friendly place” for international students, Douglass says.



Other countries have “structural approaches to attract students, in frameworks like ‘come to the Netherlands’ or ‘come to the UK,’” Douglass says. Because the United States is “so large” and states are the “real organizers” of higher education within their borders, “it’s a different kind of dynamic here,” he says.

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In the United States and elsewhere, colleges and universities that have not already done so should “think very systematically about being global, both in whom they serve and where their kids study,” Ruby continues. They also should add international faculty “to diversify the experiences available to all their students,” he states.

Bhandari cites another challenge for institutions where international students account for a significant proportion of overall enrollments—“so much so that the operation of a given department or the entire institution depends on high enrollments.” In those cases, she says, registrars as well as admissions and international officers will need to “effectively balance their international student quotas with domestic enrollments and understand the institutional, academic, cultural, and political implications of this balancing act.”

The United States and other countries also must pay attention to easing the experience for foreign students when they arrive in their countries, says Altbach. “They face many difficulties when they move across borders to a strange country,” sometimes including emotional and psychological issues when they are cut off from their families, a need to make friends in a new environment, and lack of knowledge of local institutions and systems. “They go through a difficult period of transition and the receiving countries need to be aware of the difficulties they face and provide for them,” Altbach says. The receiving

institutions in particular “have a responsibility to assist their students, and mostly they carry out that responsibility well,” he declares.

Douglass says countries should look beyond the current major providers of international students to other parts of the world, including South America and Africa. “We should be thinking of how it can fit into our foreign policy to nurture Africa, which will be growing over time in terms of the number of people there who will be looking for higher education,” he says.

“That’s a long-term look,” maybe over 10–20 years as markets shift, he acknowledges. But the United States should be more “cognizant” of markets like Africa and “thinking of how these markets fit into our foreign policy and our position in the world,” he says.

de Wit says there will be a stronger focus on attracting international master’s degree and PhD students than undergraduates in Europe, North America and, to a lesser extent, in Australia and New Zealand. “Doctoral students are prized by many countries. Good quality doctoral students coming from developing and emerging countries are very bright and have significant contributions to make to the countries where they go,” says Altbach.

They make those contributions in the United States and other countries as graduate teaching assistants or research assistants, or later as graduates who can contribute “in an important way” to the knowledge and economy of the countries that receive them—



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“sometimes extremely important if they do research,” Marginson says. “So these are valuable young people and countries compete for them.”

European countries are increasing their intake of high-quality foreign doctoral students and depend on them in many ways, particularly in engineering and the technologies, fields in which the majority of graduate students in many universities come from China and India, Marginson says. But in Europe and the United States, immigration plays a key role in whether those students come or not. “That can be inhibiting for students. If immigration is too slow in its handling of that incoming population, some could be lost to other countries,” Marginson says.

“Immigration policy and educational policy need to strike a balance between legitimate international security concerns and the need to provide a welcome mat to these high-quality foreign students,” Marginson asserts.

What “International” Means

Bhandari says governments that are articulating wide-reaching internationalization policies and setting international enrollment targets—which is particularly true, she says, for emerging host destinations in Southeast Asia—stand to benefit from a coordinated national approach. She suggests their policies might include streamlining of visa review procedures, allocating funding for targeted national scholarships, or promoting study-work options and long-term work opportunities in the host country.

As the higher education sector expands not only in the United States but in emerging and developed countries alike, it is important, says Bhandari, to “highlight and understand student mobility as a growing facet of higher education.” The international education market is “wide open,” she says, with both institutions and national governments increasingly promoting higher education mobility and internationalization on their campuses, “hoping to attract the best and brightest.”

At the national level, Bhandari says, governments will have to consider the “rapidly increasing options” for their own students and for those they wish to welcome into their institutions as international students, given that “more students will have greater flexibility and cost-effective options around the world” to pursue their higher educations.

An international education, she says, is no longer defined only by a short-term education abroad experience or a degree program pursued in another country. New forms of mobility, from branch and satellite campuses to joint and dual degrees, distance learning, and open educational resource models all will require institutional administrators and government policymakers to “rethink what an ‘international student’ really means” and the extent to which “international” is increasingly a factor that contributes to “the excellence of higher education.”

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ALAN DESSOFF is an independent journalist in Bethesda, Maryland. His last article for *IE* was “The Rise of International Officers” in the January/February 2010 issue.