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GLOBAL: The future of international student mobility

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International student mobility in the first decade of the 21st century has been transformed by two major external events, 9/11 and the recession of 2008. Today the rationale for international student recruitment has shifted from attracting talent to make the student body more diverse, to seeking an additional source of revenue.

Recruitment practices have been evolving and responding to this new competitive landscape, as can be seen in the increasing number of commercial entities offering recruitment services ranging from agents to websites.

How is this transformation going to shape the future of student mobility?

The US was an undisputed leader in global higher education until 9/11, which forced it to tighten visa requirements for students. Australia and the UK cashed in on this opportunity and were successful in absorbing most of the growth in international students.

International student enrollment in higher education in Australia and the UK grew by 81% and 47% respectively between 2002 and 2009, as compared to 18% in the US. In absolute terms, Australia, the UK and US each added nearly 100,000 students over the same period.


This translates into comparatively slow growth for the US, given that the size of the American higher education system is 17 times that of Australia and eight times that of the UK.

In the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, a recurring theme was how unattractive the US was for international students and the success of Australia and the UK was widely celebrated. In fact, the US hit its lowest point in 2005-06 when international student enrollment declined by 21,500 compared to 2002-03 figures.

In contrast, enrollment increased by 85,000 for Australia and the UK. A lot of this growth was attributed to commission-based recruitment models, which were seen as the best practice for recruiting international students.


Growth in international student enrollment in Australia and the UK would have continued, but the recession of 2008 changed things. It exposed two important issues for international student enrollment in the two countries - the high proportion of international students compared to home students and issues of quality raised by the use of aggressive recruitment practices.

In 2009, international students represented 21.5% and 15.3% of higher education enrollment in Australia and the UK, compared to less than 4% in the US, according to the OECD. This clearly shows that Australia and the UK were



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Floods in Thailand have cost 500 lives, hit 2,600 educational institutions including universities, caused millions of dollars of damage and affected an estimated 10,000 students. Many universities have postponed the second semester and admissions exams are behind schedule. See the News section.

over-dependent on international students.

This situation of overdependence was the result of aggressive recruitment practices using agents who paid little attention to quality assurance. There were multiple incidents where fraudulent documents were used by people who were more keen on immigration than education.

A Reuters article in 2009 noted that Australia's international student sector "could be more at risk from within, with education agents and colleges ripping off students, than from recent attacks on Indian students". Likewise, *The Telegraph* in 2009 "...exposed a host of scams offered to foreign nationals desperate to come to Britain as bogus students".

These problems led to a tightening of visa controls by Australia and the UK. Recent visa data from the two countries already shows a steep decline in the numbers of international students. For example, student visa allocation for the UK declined by 6% in 2010. In Australia, the offshore granting of visas, an indicator of new international student enrollment, declined by 20% in 2010-11.

While the US economy struggles to revive, it may be the time for America to redouble its efforts to attract international student. There are three main reasons why.

First, the tightening of visa requirements by Australia and the UK is making them less attractive destinations for students as they see lower prospects for future jobs and immigration. Second, budget cuts in US public institutions are prompting them to recruit international students more actively as an additional source of revenue.

Finally, even the US government is getting more serious about attracting international students, as seen by the [latest website](#) launched by the Department of Homeland Security to provide information to international students.

Some of the early reports for autumn 2011 show a significant increase in international student enrollment at US universities.

For example, at the University of Iowa first-time freshmen international student enrolment reached record levels of 484 this year, compared to 388 last year. Likewise, at Arkansas State University international student enrollment for autumn 2011 passed 1,000 students for the first time. Last year 780 international students enrolled.

The number of internationally mobile students grew by 1.6 million between 2000 and 2009, according to the OECD.

This trend will continue to be driven by the increasing ability of prospective students in countries like China and India to afford foreign higher education. At the same time, their local higher education systems are expanding at a fast rate, but at the expense of quality. This will result in a large number of quality-hungry students who have an ability to pay for their higher education.

However, a complex interplay of variables will make it difficult to predict where this growth will go.

As we have seen, the influence of unpredictable events like 9/11 and the recession on student mobility is far-reaching and global. In addition, government policies related to visa requirements, specifically those concerning financial requirements and post-education work opportunities, will have a big influence on student mobility.

Competitive pressures will also help alternative models of student recruitment like agents and pathways programmes to grow. However, the adoption of these models will not be without risks, pitfalls and conflict. For example, the agent model continues to raise questions about the integrity of admissions processes, especially with relation to document fraud.

It is ironic that the agency model, which facilitated numerous visa frauds in Australia and the UK and prompted their governments to act to restrict student mobility, is now being viewed positively in the US. These models will certainly help to increase student mobility, but they will bring greater risk for institutions and nations.

International student mobility is a source of enrichment and advancement for institutions, students and nations. The future outlook looks positive for increased numbers of international students, but competition will also become more fierce, which will make the picture less predictable.

Institutions and nations that can adapt to the changing environment will be best placed to make the most of the opportunities and uncertainties involved.

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experience in international education. Email: rchoudah@wes.org

Comment:

While I agree with some of the facts mentioned in the article, I disagree that events like 11th September and the global recession transformed international student mobility.

International student mobility has followed closely developments in the domestic higher education systems. Over the past decades, internationally mobile students have been on average 1.8% of the students enrolled at home (irrespective of the two events mentioned above).

Countries with comprehensive international education strategies (UK, Germany, France, Australia) have been more successful than countries without. It is naive to attribute country's success to attracting international students down to usage of education agents.

This is certainly evidenced by most of the European countries like Germany, France and others. While good education agents can assist recruitment in certain markets, they have limited role in others, however, this would vary across individual institutions. The British Council, alongside other agencies in Australia, Canada, Ireland New Zealand and others are working on issues around Integrity of Higher Education, which also includes an International Code for Agents.

Janet Ilieva, Head of Research for *Education Intelligence*, British Council

Thank you, Dr Choudaha, for the insightful article. Perhaps "transformed" is a bit of an overstatement, but certainly 9.11 and the global recession has "impacted" on international student mobility in the various ways Dr Choudaha has mentioned. Here in Japan, we have yet to see the impact of the earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima on international student mobility, but preliminary reports have shown a large decreases in enrolment in the language schools that serve as preparation for university admission. The persistently high yen has also been disadvantages to foreign students.

I would be very interested in reading empirical research reports about the use of agents in countries and the effect on increasing international students numbers.

James Lassegard

Dr Choudaha makes his argument very well. However, his emphasis on fraudulent operations may be just a little misleading in explaining recent developments in the UK and Australia.

In both countries, the concept of the bogus college has served as something of a smokescreen for a long period of insufficient Government attention and oversight followed by a crack-down on student visas as part of national immigration policy. It is instructive that Australia has now changed policy direction as it licks the wounds which it has inflicted upon itself in recent years.

The British Government has yet to understand fully the damage which its years of neglect, followed by hyper-activity dressed up as an attack on bogus colleges, has already caused, and will continue to cause, to Britain's reputation amongst prospective international students.

The British Accreditation Council has played a very significant role over 27 years in exposing fraudulent practice but recognises that Britain stands in danger of throwing the genuine international student baby out with the bogus college bathwater. I shall be speaking on this topic at the UK NARIC Conference on 3 November 2011 in London.

Professor Steve Bristow

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Yojana Sharma interviewed Bertil Andersson, president of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, as he headed off to the QS-APPLE conference in Manila. He spoke of the city-state's attractions as a higher education hub and why his university has shot up the world rankings.



Hong Kong design student Jonathan Mak's silhouette of Steve Jobs' profile went viral, but was not lauded at home. But now Asian countries are working to encourage creativity and design to help them move up the manufacturing value chain. See the Features section.



I Elaine Allen, co-director of the Babson Survey Research Group which publishes surveys of online education in the US, writes in Commentary about how online higher education continues to grow in America and academics attitudes towards it are

gradually changing.

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