



Metatrends in Mobility: Education Hubs and the New Multipolar Structure of International Student Mobility

Chris R. Glass and Natalie I. Cruz

Abstract

A network analysis of UNESCO student mobility data from 210 countries over a 20-year period (2000–2019) indicates long-term structural shifts in the shape of international student mobility, with a more diverse set of core countries exerting influence.

The number of internationally mobile students experienced an almost three-fold increase from 2 million in 1999 to 6 million in 2019. In 2020, international student mobility ground to a halt with the COVID-19 pandemic, creating much uncertainty about the future of cross-border mobility. The best indicators of the shape of international student mobility to come may lie, not in the disruptions of the pandemic, but in the long-term shifts that occurred in the 20 years prior to it. These long-term trends indicate a new multipolar structure for international student mobility, as new education hubs begin to exert greater influence.

Our network analysis of 20 years of UNESCO student mobility data from 210 countries suggests that the *structure*, not simply the size, of international student mobility marks a fundamental shift. While core-periphery dynamics in international student mobility persist, over 20 countries joined the core set of countries, which is now composed of a larger and more geographically diverse subset of destinations, as education hubs exert ever-increasing influence. The new multipolar structure marks a fundamental shift away from traditional East-West patterns that existed for decades. The new core-periphery structure has significant implications for the future of international student mobility.

A Denser Network

Our network analysis indicates that not only has the number of international students tripled; it became three times as dense. While only 14 percent of all possible country-to-country links existed in 1999–2000, by 2018–2019, the number of actual country-to-country links was almost one-half, 48 percent, of all possible country-to-country links. A denser network means that there are not just more international students, but that more countries are exchanging more students with more destinations at more even rates. International student mobility is more evenly distributed than it has ever been anytime in its history, as inbound mobility to new destinations has increased at a faster rate relative to growth in traditional destinations. For example, while sending countries like China, Russia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates received few or no inbound students in 1999, each received more than 150,000 inbound students in 2019.

A Larger and More Multipolar Core

Influence is also more widely and evenly distributed among a larger number of core countries within the network. Core-periphery dynamics remain, but the composition of the core countries has both expanded and diversified. In 1999, five countries composed the set of core countries in the network (the United States in North America; France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in Europe; and Australia), accounting for over 50 percent of the total number of mobile students. Our analysis indicates that a more multipolar network structure emerged in the past 20 years, with new educational hubs exerting increasing influence in the network in Africa (e.g., South Africa), Asia (e.g., China, Japan, and South Korea), Eurasia (e.g., Russia and Ukraine), Latin America (e.g., Argentina and Brazil), the Middle East (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates), and North America (e.g., Canada). Although the top destinations still dominate, their relative influence within the core has waned, as influence is more evenly dispersed among a larger set of

Core-periphery dynamics remain, but the composition of the core countries has both expanded and diversified.

countries. Twenty countries are major inbound destinations for three-quarters of the total number of mobile students.

Implications for the Next 10 Years

At the current rate, the number of internationally mobile students is projected to reach 12 million by 2030. We believe that the most important shift shaping the future of international student mobility is not its size, but its structure. What are the implications of a more multipolar network structure for the future of international student mobility?

- ▶ Options abound. More countries will become destinations due to increased capacity, national infrastructure, and regional and cultural proximity to international students. International students will continue to have more options to choose from, and all signs suggest that they will take advantage of them. Affordability and postgraduate work opportunities are driving the decisions of new generations of middle-class international students more willing to consider alternative destinations. Traditional destinations that are expensive without clear labor immigration policies will be the most impacted, especially as students have more options in geographically and culturally proximate destinations. The expanded set of core countries and a denser network indicate that countries will exchange more students at more even rates in the years ahead.
- ▶ Education capacity-building has come of age. Many countries, like South Korea, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, have invested significant capital to build educational capacity and establish themselves as attractive destinations for international students. Our analysis indicates that government investment to build educational hubs (e.g., Education City in Qatar, Incheon Global Campus in South Korea, EduCity in Malaysia) as part of a national economic development strategy has resulted in restructuring traditional patterns of mobility. The attractiveness of these destinations will only be heightened by their cultural, linguistic, and geographic proximity, as well as a growing number of internationally ranked universities. The growth and diversification of the core countries in the network will coincide with an expansion of planned educational hubs, while the doubling of global student mobility every ten years will result in greater intra- and cross-regional exchange.
- ▶ Going forward, delivery may matter as much as destination. The growth of remote and online learning will necessitate a broader definition of who counts as an “international student.” It also requires better definitions and data practices so that data can be disaggregated and compared. UNESCO defines international students as “students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin.” However, this definition fails to capture the increase in virtual student mobility during and after the pandemic. It undercounts the influence of countries that have few degree-seeking international students but have significant international enrollment in credit-based online courses or short-term exchange programs.

Even with the pandemic grinding international mobility to a temporary halt, there is no reason to believe that international student enrollment will not continue to increase in traditional destinations. However, our analysis indicates that a significant shift is underway, in which planned and emerging hubs exert greater influence in a more multipolar network structure. ▲

Chris R. Glass is a professor of the practice in the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education, and serves as an affiliated faculty member in the Center for International Higher Education (CIHE), Boston College, US. Email: glassch@bc.edu.

Natalie I. Cruz is assistant director of global strategies and initiatives at Emory University, US. Email: natalie.cruz@emory.edu.