

The Changing Landscape of International Student Mobility

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International student mobility remains a major aspect of international higher education. But mobility patterns are shifting. While the South–North movement remains primary at the world level, new patterns and modes are emerging. This article addresses the macro-level drivers, economic and financial considerations, soft power, and cultural influences as well as demographic changes, labor market shifts, and migration factors that impact those changing patterns.

In its many diverse forms (including degree study, credit earning, branch campuses, and others), mobility remains a major aspect of international higher education. But mobility patterns are shifting. While the South–North movement remains primary at the world level, new patterns and modes are emerging.

Notably, student and scholar mobility has become a mass enterprise, with, according to UNESCO, more than six million students studying outside their countries in 2021. Although global student mobility is a significant factor and at the core of internationalization efforts, it is limited to a small and mainly elite sector of the student population. Six million global students represent a small proportion of the 254 million students pursuing higher education worldwide. Nevertheless, the mobility of learners, teachers, and scholars has always been a key dimension of higher education.

The term “internationally mobile students” often refers to degree-mobile students who move to a foreign country for educational purposes and receive a *foreign tertiary/higher education degree* on a student visa. The predominant pattern of degree mobility at the world level has been from the Global South to the Global North, although there is also significant degree mobility in the Global North—in particular within Europe and from the US to Europe (as well as the reverse). Initially, the South-to-North flow mainly consisted of small numbers of elites from colonies to the imperial countries. This movement increased significantly after independence (e.g., students traveling to the UK and France). This kind of mobility also extended to other key Anglophone countries, including Australia, Canada, and the US, which have maintained dominant destination positions. On the supply side, the fastest growth in outgoing students has been from Global South countries. From 1995 to 2010, the main sending countries worldwide were China, India, and Malaysia.

Shifting Mobility Patterns

While South-to-North and, to some extent, North-to-North mobility remain numerically dominant, there is a trend

toward [multipolarity and intraregional student mobility](#). The past 15 years have witnessed a challenge to the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon and Western countries, with new educational hubs gaining prominence. A more diverse set of countries now exerts greater relative influence in the overall student mobility network.

In particular, intraregional mobility is growing in the South, from low- toward middle-income countries. For China, the top senders are neighbors South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan. For Russia, the top senders are nearby Kazakhstan, China, and Uzbekistan. Likewise, South Korea and Japan have become top study destinations for students from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. For Argentina, all the top sending countries are also from South America: Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Interestingly, some of the sending countries present themselves as new destinations (e.g., Kazakhstan and Vietnam). What drives these changes?

Macro-Level Drivers of International Mobility

In the dynamic landscape of international higher education, macro-level factors—beyond the control of individual countries, higher education institutions, and students—wield significant influence in changing mobility patterns. In many sending countries, the enhancement in higher education quality, along with economic development, plays an important role. For example, in East Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea, the national higher education systems have now achieved excellent quality and become attractive study destinations for international students. Other countries follow.

Economic and Financial Considerations

Another global factor shaping the mobility landscape is the increasing commodification of education. Anglophone high-income countries have particularly benefited financially from this market. For example, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, in the academic year 2022–2023, over one million international students at US colleges and

universities contributed more than \$40 billion to the US economy and supported more than 368,000 jobs. For the UK, according to a joint report published by the Higher Education Policy Institute, the figure for the total economic contribution was £41.9 billion in the 2021–2022 academic year.

At the same time, high living and tuition costs, coupled with increased xenophobia and visa and other restrictions in the Global North, have driven many students from the South to pursue education in non-Western nations where tuition and living costs are less expensive. These economic pull factors make the emerging study destinations attractive to many international students, especially those from middle-income and lower-income families.

Soft Power and Cultural Influences

Many countries and institutions prioritize international student recruitment as a key target in their strategies for the internationalization of higher education because of the value they place on securing soft power, cross-border cultural influence, and improved university rankings. At the national level, countries utilize strategic policies and national agencies to promote international student recruitment and subsidize inbound mobility. Activities and initiatives involve various national actors that aim to build a comprehensive ecosystem in supporting immigration regulation, university cooperation, language training, and scholarships. Examples include the Indian government, which launched the Study in India flagship project in 2018 in collaboration with various government departments to enhance its global identity through international education initiatives. Similarly, the Education Plan in China's Belt and Road Initiative showcases the political and diplomatic motivations behind its internationalization strategy and international student recruitment.

Demographic Change, Labor Market Influences, and Migration

For many countries in the Global North, significant demographic decline and the need for skilled labor have made it challenging to find sufficient talent domestically. Attracting talented international students, faculty, and professionals, as well as encouraging student retention, is often a crucial strategy for higher education in high-income and middle-income countries.

Important in the abovementioned factors are the many ways in which migration and student mobility cross over. Education functions as a significant migration doorway for a large minority of students moving from the Global South to the Anglophone countries. Tensions and controversies arise regarding international students' post-study options, labor market needs, and immigration policies.

A Complex and Multilayered Landscape

International student mobility is complex and multilayered. It is influenced by a variety of changing contexts and related push and pull factors. There is no such archetype as “the international student,” as there are different forms of students, stakeholder roles, and motivations for mobility. In degree mobility, one can observe a gradual shift from a predominantly South–North movement toward a more diverse movement, with dominant sending countries, particularly in Asia, increasingly becoming receiving countries.

Revenue generation remains a dominant pull factor in the Anglophone higher education sector. Another key consideration is increasing the stay rate of international students so as to better meet skilled labor needs. At the same time, geopolitical tensions, national security concerns, and nationalist anti-immigration sentiments and policies are becoming important obstacles to international student mobility. While international students and the revenues they generate are important in a few countries, perhaps more important to the global economy as a whole are patterns of high-skilled immigration related to student mobility. These patterns contribute to inequalities, impact remittances, influence scientific collaboration, and affect many other factors in numerous countries.

As countries navigate these complex dynamics, the strategic management of international student flows and integration of skilled graduates into the labor market will be crucial for maximizing the benefits of global education and fostering international collaboration. Ultimately, understanding the evolving nature of international student mobility is essential for policymakers and educators who seek to enhance the internationalization of higher education and address the broader challenges and opportunities it presents.

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