International Student Enrollment: Evidence-Driven Strategies

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Interest in recruiting international students is growing among many institutions, for reasons ranging from reputational to financial. However, strategies translating intent into action are often devoid of research and insights. This lack of thorough examination before designing strategies often results in inefficient, expensive, and unsustainable enrollment strategies.

Consider the case of the United States, which is the world's leading destination for international students. However, these students are concentrated in a small number of institutions; only 200 out of nearly 4,500 American postsecondary institutions enroll approximately 70 percent of all international students.

This concentration of students shows that most of the institutions outside these 200 would face significant difficulties in attracting international students. The situation is further accentuated by the issues of resource constraints, location disadvantages, and rankings.

While these challenges are difficult, they are not insurmountable. Often, institutions underestimate the importance of research in facilitating the understanding of international student decision-making processes in informing their strategies. The key is to know more about international students throughout their enrollment—who they are, how they choose institution, and how are their experiences.

Every year, there are numerous updates from various sources on how the number of international students is changing; however, little is discussed about the specific drivers of change, or about how student needs, experiences, and profiles are shifting. Most importantly, there has been little focus on how these changes apply at the campus level.

Some institutions make the mistake of extrapolating national or regional trends, which may or may not apply in the context of their campuses. In other cases, school allows anecdotal evidence and stereotypical views on international students' needs and behavior to drive the strategies. Finally, the strategy sometimes boils down to "outsourcing" to a third-party commission-based recruiter.

All of these approaches to strategy formulation are not only likely to be misaligned with the institutional strengths, resources, and capacities, but they also may result in enrollment of an international student body lacking in the diversity and academic quality to which the institution aspires.

RESEARCH TO BRIDGE THE GAP

Institutions can better inform their strategies if each one intentionally assesses needs, behaviors, and profiles of international students in its unique context. While there is national data on student enrollment available, there has been little research available on applying it to campus contexts.

For example, while the number of undergraduate international students in the United States increased between 2008/2009 to 2012/2013 bringing issues challenges and complexities for enrollment management professionals, however, the research has not kept pace with this. A search of the keyword "international" in the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, which has been in publication for the last 15 years, yields only four articles.

A recent research report—*Bridging the Gap: Recruitment and Retention to Improve Student Experiences*—produced by World Educational Services and released by NAFSA, aimed at addressing this need. It investigated an increasingly important yet complex issue for practitioners in an evidence-driven manner (nafsa.org/retentionresearch).

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The report also illustrated the gap between students and institutions. For example, according to the report, international education professionals reported academic difficulties and inadequate English-language skills as the third and fourth most important reasons why international students may leave institutions, but they were not among the top five for students.

Likewise, an upcoming report from World Education Services, *Bridge the Digital Divide: Segmenting and Recruiting International Millennial Students*, shows a similar disconnect. Based on the segmentation framework of different types of international students, the report analyzes nearly 5,000 17-to-36-year-old international Millennial students'

penchant for technology and the psychographic characteristics that fundamentally influence their information-seeking behavior.

It shows that universities may be underutilizing technology and some of their other most important assets in recruiting international students. For example, more than two-fifths of the respondents (42%) stated that either one of the university network (community members)—including faculty, admission officers, current students, and alumni—had the largest influence on their application decisions. In contrast, only 11 percent of the respondents indicated that "educational consultants" had an impact.

Another challenge is due to the limited national data on international students. The available data is not only outdated but also suffers from definitional issues, making it difficult to project forecasts for new source countries in the next three to five years. This is especially detrimental, as it takes several years of developing and building relationships to recruit international students from new source countries.

In my previous article in *IHE*, *Preparing for Emerging Markets*, I argued that instead of intentionally looking into key source countries to engage within the next several years, institutions are responding to short-term student demand, and are missing the opportunity to cultivate the best-fit opportunities (http://bit.ly/EmergingRecruit).

CONCLUSION

Expanding international student populations on university campuses while maintaining the goals of cost, quality, and diversity is a complex optimization problem. It requires assessment of institutional goals, priorities, and capacities; investigation of student needs, profiles, and experiences; and, finally, mapping institutional and individual needs through a comprehensive strategy.

In a postrecession environment, an increasing number of higher education institutions are interested in attracting the next wave of international students. However, institutions must recognize the complexity and volatility of international student decision-making processes, and should invest in developing evidence-driven enrollment strategies. The quick-fix international student enrollment strategies are neither informed nor sustainable. In sum, it is important to "zoom-out" to look into big picture megatrends, but then to "zoom-in" as well, to see the applicability and relevance of these trends at the institutional level.

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Kazakhstan's Bolashak Scholarship Program

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Emerging economies have increasingly realized the connection between human capital investment and economic prosperity. They are looking at more advanced countries for best practices to reform the tertiary education system at home. Among the approaches is sending students to study abroad on government-sponsored scholarships. This practice, which often entails a considerable financial investment by the home nation, is expected to accelerate the development of human capital.

Kazakhstan's Bolashak Scholarship is one example of a long-standing government-sponsored international scholarship program. In 1993, the Kazakhstan government launched Bolashak (Kazakh for "future") Scholarships to send students to attend colleges and universities abroad. About 100 students received the scholarships annually until 2005, when the number increased over time to average 800 per year.

In an effort to maximize program effectiveness, program administrators have made various changes in the design over the past 20 years. Based on our review of program characteristics and outcomes, we identify five lessons for how this government-sponsored scholarship program has accomplished its goal for promoting human capital development.

SPECIFYING STRATEGIC PRIORITY AREAS

Wise investment of limited government funds for maximum return has always been a challenge in scholarship design. One approach is to match the educational priorities of the sending country, with the academic programs available overseas. A recent examination of international scholarship programs shows that 45 percent of 183 government sponsored scholarship programs in 196 countries with specific academic priority areas.

Prior to 1997, when Bolashak had no guidelines on the areas of study, scholarship recipients were concentrated in humanities and social sciences, and the number of recipients in science and engineering remained extremely low.

The Kazakhstan government responded by creating a list of priority areas of study in 1997, giving weight to applicants in the majors identified as highly relevant to the