

## International Student Mobility: Project Atlas

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At the turn of the millennium, all trends pointed toward increasing international student mobility with no sign of declines. However, the data that supported these trends could not adequately address the transnational movements behind them. While UNESCO collected and disseminated international student data annually, transnational comparisons were problematic because countries differ in their choice of data definitions and time frames; most of the data were obtained only from state-run institutions.

This was an example of what Todd M. Davis, former senior scholar at the Institute of International Education (IIE), called a “lack of global vision” about student mobility, stemming from the absence of “a global source of baseline data that [enabled] us to see this emerging global higher education space as more than just the sum of its national host country parts.” Underscoring this scenario was the absence of a consensus, among the private and public entities charged with the collection and dissemination of international student data, about how that global vision could be conceptualized and defined.

### *The Atlas of Student Mobility*

In 2003, the IIE, in partnership with the British Council and IDP Education Australia and with generous support from the Ford Foundation, produced *The Atlas of Student Mobility*, by Todd M. Davis (IIE Books, 2003). The *Atlas* was a first attempt at pulling together various sources of international student data from the perspective of the 21 main destination countries and 75 leading home countries, using publicly available data from the year 2000.

The *Atlas* was disseminated widely among NGOs, universities, and scholars. In response, several country representatives noted that the student numbers listed for their countries were incorrect, while acknowledging that the problem was due to the data upon which the creators of the *Atlas* had to rely. In this way, the publication served as a wake-up call and a reminder to those responsible for data collection that researchers and other important stakeholders were paying attention.

Ideally, this would serve as an incentive to improve the quality and timeliness of the data, but this would only be a first step. To truly facilitate a global analysis of student flows, countries would need to think collectively about how their data were collected and presented. This would

require a collaborative approach, because transnational data would need to reflect common classifications and definitions.

### *Global Consensus Building*

Approximately six months after the release of the *Atlas*, parties responsible for the publication initiated such collaboration, by hosting the first Project Atlas conference in France. Participants included policymakers who offered a broader perspective on the use of data for planning and development and individuals with hands-on experience in the intricacies of data collection. Over a short but very productive period of two and a half days, the group worked out agreements about several definitions and constructs. The following paragraphs explain some of the agreed-upon definitions.

*International students.* Should the definition be based on citizenship or some government-authorized mechanism for entering a country, such as visa status? Or, should this be based on where the student received his or her last qualification or degree? The group decided that the definition should fit different national contexts but at the same time concluded that the most useful and globally relevant definition should focus on “nonimmigrant, nonpermanent resident” status.

*International study.* Should this be defined based on whether a degree or qualification is issued? What about duration? Due to the rise in short-term courses (e.g., less than an American semester), it was agreed that data might be gathered to reflect differences in duration patterns: less than eight weeks, eight weeks to six months, more than six months. In addition, the group agreed that both full-time and part-time study be counted and that the course of study need not lead to a qualification or degree.

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### **What about higher educational institutions operating internationally?**

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*Who should be counted, and when.* Should the definition be limited to incoming students only? Or should the “snapshot” approach be followed? The group agreed that both counts would be valuable, if feasible, but that the latter was the most commonly employed and should be maintained. In addition, there was strong consensus that the head count, rather than a full-time equivalent or fee-paying status, serve as the criteria.

*International study in different contexts.* For example, what about higher education institutions operating internationally? These could include U.S. universities with their own campuses in Europe, privately owned

institutions recruiting internationally, public-private partnerships (for example, U.K. and Australian universities operating with local partners in Singapore and Malaysia and recruiting international students to those countries), and institutions operating across national borders and sometimes with multinational public-sector ownership. Here, the group agreed to keep to its original definition of an international student: a person who physically moves from his or her place of residence for the purposes of study, regardless of the “ownership” of that place of study.

#### *Next Steps*

Apart from a series of tangible outcomes of the conference—for example, a document outlining the various decisions about definitions and plans to expand participation and update the data via a website to be launched in late 2004—there was one less tangible but important outcome: the message that no single organization “owns” Project Atlas, that everyone has a vested interest in its success and that it is the product of a collaborative effort with many avenues for contribution. More than anything else, this message was foremost in the building of a collective enterprise of data collection and dissemination, vital for the development of a global understanding of international student mobility.

(Note: the *Atlas of Student Mobility* may be purchased through IIE Books for U.S.\$49; see [www.iiebooks.org](http://www.iiebooks.org)).

## Where Did All the International Students Go?

### **Liz Reisberg**

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By early 2004 it became apparent that the rate of international applications to graduate programs in the United States, Europe, and Canada had dropped alarmingly. International applications are down by 20 to 30 percent at most universities. The most precipitous decline has been in applications from China. Admissions officers had become complacent about the seemingly endless supply of talent from China and were stunned when the number of Chinese taking graduate admissions tests (both the GRE and GMAT) had dropped by half. Although speculation is widespread as to what caused this discouraging trend, no definitive answer has yet been found.

Changes in visa policy have created new impediments for individuals planning to study in the United States. The U.S. government now requires interviews for everyone applying for a U.S. visa, regardless of the purpose of the visit. Of course, without authorization for extended hours, additional staff, or budget increases, a backlog of requests for appointments was inevitable. The lack of training for interviewers means that the interview experience and outcome vary considerably. A new, nonrefundable \$100 price tag has been instated for a visa application and an additional \$100 fee for being registered in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) once a student visa is approved.

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The perception of many prospective students outside the United States is that they face a high probability of being rejected after all their trouble, although it is not clear whether this is actually the case or not. Rumors abound, but it seems that while the rejection rate may be higher for nondegree study (e.g., English as a Second Language programs), most students with admission to a degree program and a well-articulated plan for when they will still graduate seem to be getting visas. Certain countries may be the victims of political backlash. Students from Moslem countries will certainly have a tougher time getting visas to study in the United States.

It is not only U.S. visas that presents new challenges. Since last year when three Chinese students were charged with murder, the Japanese have denied 73 percent of the Chinese applicants for student visas. Visa applications to study in Europe and Canada have a better probability of being approved, but even there the process and screening are more elaborate and take longer. Students are obliged to enter the admissions cycle earlier, hoping for a prompt decision so that they can begin the visa process as soon as possible. Given the prolonged process, until orientation week universities may not know how many of their foreign students will succeed in obtaining visas.

The question being asked around the world is whether it is worth the trouble of applying to study abroad as well as enduring the indignities and costs of the visa process. For an increasing number of individuals the answer is now “no.” Furthermore, there are a growing number of alternatives at home.