

## **Mobility of Chinese and Indian Undergraduate Students—Pros and Cons**

**RAHUL CHOUDAHA**

Rahul Choudaha is director of Research and Advisory Services at World Education Services, New York. E-mail: [rchoudah@wes.org](mailto:rchoudah@wes.org).

The recent recession is redefining the funding model of public higher education. Top three destinations for international students—the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia—have all experienced budget cuts and stronger emphasis on cost justification and self-sufficiency.

In these times of financial stress and search for additional streams of revenue, undergraduate international students are emerging as saviors. Undergraduate students are less dependent on financial aid, as they are more likely to be funded by families and offer a longer stream of revenue (four years) as compared to master's degree programs (two years). This is where large-source countries, like China and India, have become critical for recruiting undergraduate international students.

### **SCALE AND CONTRASTING PATTERNS**

With more than 700,000 Chinese and Indian students enrolled in global higher education institutions, every third globally mobile student is from these two countries. In the United States, international student enrollment increased by

nearly 175,000, between 2000/01 and 2010/11, and Chinese and Indian students contributed to nearly 84 percent of this growth. These procedures indicate the scale and role of these two countries, in global student mobility.

In my earlier article, “Drivers of Mobility of Chinese and Indian Students” (*IHE*, no. 62, 2011), I argued that Chinese and Indian student mobility was increasing due to a combination of demand and supply factors. On the supply side, the ability has expanded to afford foreign education and rapid expansion of the education pipeline. On the demand side, aggressive outreach efforts by universities and adoption of a wider range of recruitment options are supporting the mobility of Chinese and Indian students.

However, the similarities between China and India on size and factors have ended now, and contrasting patterns of mobility emerge. A major difference is that China has a much stronger growth momentum, at the undergraduate level, than India. The contrasting pattern is clear when juxtaposing the 8 percent decline of Indian undergraduate students to the 43 percent increase of Chinese students in the United States. This translates to an increase of 17,055 Chinese students, compared to a decrease of 1,188 Indian undergraduate students. For every one Indian student, there are four Chinese undergraduate students.

This dissimilar pattern becomes extremely important given the economic woes, faced by public institutions and their search for international undergraduate students with limited budgets. However, are these trends for Chinese and Indian undergraduate students sustainable and what are the future directions?

## REVERSAL OF TRENDS FOR 2015?

I estimate that beginning in 2015, growth directions of the undergraduate market for China and India will experience a reversal in trends. This is the time when India would surface as a major growth country for undergraduate student recruitment, while China would start losing its growth momentum. However, in terms of absolute numbers of undergraduate enrollment, China will continue to outpace India. An estimate for reversal of the trend is based on four interrelated factors.

*Demographic shifts.* The Chinese population in the 15–19-age bracket is projected to decline by 17 percent between 2010 and 2015, translating into 18 million less college-going youth, according to the US census data. In contrast, India’s college-going population is projected to increase by 5 million, or 5 percent, in the same period. This means that in 2015, India would have nearly 20 million more college-going people in the 15–19-age group than China. Thus, demographic patterns in China and India will influence the supply of potential undergraduate students.

*“Self-financed” students.* China already surpasses India in terms of wealth and size of the middle class, which can fund foreign undergraduate education. For example, China had 535,000 individuals with investable assets of US\$1 million or more; India had 153,000 in 2010. Furthermore, the single-child policy in China has allowed family resources to concentrate on one child. However, children of wealthy middle-class Indian parents who started working in new-age industries, like information technology, in the mid-late 1990s will start graduating from 2015 onwards. This segment of “self-financed” students will

expect quality and have an ability to afford international undergraduate education.

*Pace of education reforms.* Both China and India have their share of problems in balancing quality and access. Given China's track record of aggressively expanding the system and welcoming foreign institutions, it is more likely to successfully enforce quality. This reform will offer more quality choices to Chinese students at home. In contrast, pace of reforms in India has been very slow and embroiled with politics rather than policy. It is unlikely that Indian higher education would keep pace with the demand for quality education. This inability to absorb demand will increase "self-financed" Indian students and fuel their demand for foreign education.

*Campus concerns.* Given the overreliance on Chinese undergraduate students, concerns are growing about campus diversity and the role of agents in driving this growth. A recent story in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The China Conundrum," referred to the large number of Chinese students on some campuses as "what seems at first glance a boon for colleges and students alike is, on closer inspection, a tricky fit for both." In reference to agents, it added, "Though the agents act as universities' representatives, marketing them at college fairs and soliciting applications, that's no guarantee that colleges know the origin of the applications, or the veracity of their grades and scores." Campus concerns, such as diversity and potential threat to integrity of the admissions process due to fraudulent agent behavior, may induce less dependency on the Chinese students.

## CONCLUSION

Public higher education in leading destinations for international students is clearly shifting toward self-sufficiency, resulting in pressure to recruit more international undergraduate students as an additional source of revenue. China and India are large source countries for international undergraduate students, which are expected to show different trends, beginning in 2015. Given that undergraduate recruitment requires a significant amount of seeding and relationship-building, institutions should start preparing for these shifting patterns. However, institutions should not let fiscal urgency and quest for numbers make them lose focus on the quality of students recruited, integrity of admissions process, and campus diversity.