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Shifting Trends in International Student Mobility: Embracing Diversity and Responding to Change

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Moving globally for international education experiences has increased significantly in recent decades. Over five million students studied in degree programs outside their home countries in 2017 and it is estimated that this figure will reach 8 million by 2025 (UNESCO 2018).

Current trends suggest that student mobility has become multi-directional. Students from the East (and those from generally lower-income countries in what is often referred to as the “Global South”) are no longer *only* traveling to the West (and higher-income countries in the “Global North”). Instead, these students now also often travel to other countries in the East. Perhaps it is time to reflect on the shifting trends in student mobility, the key factors influencing these shifts such as degree saturation and geopolitics, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on the universities, and how universities and international educators can respond in order to retain the top position in the international student market. While these trends are global, this article will focus on the shift of student mobility within East and West contexts, with specific examples from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (U.S.), and China.

We must acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically affected international student mobility in 2020. The downturn in international enrollments that has followed has contributed to financial challenges for some western universities that rely heavily on income from international student fees. For instance, U.S. higher education institutions reported losing nearly \$700 million from decreased international student enrolments (NAFSA 2020). Similarly, the British Council (2020) suggests that 39% of Chinese students who were considering studying in the UK are unsure about whether to cancel their study plans. The profound effect of the pandemic has raised fundamental questions about education internationalization and what universities can do.

Changing Trends of International Educational Mobility

Historically, much of international educational mobility referred to both mobility for students from the East to the West as well as student mobility between countries in the West. Yet, there is little consideration of student mobility from the West to the East or mobility among students within the East. The push-pull model has been used widely to explain the rationale behind westward mobility, where students are: ‘pushed’ out of

their home countries due to poor economies, inadequate educational resources, lack of employment opportunities, and political instability; and are 'pulled' to access quality education, diverse culture, English language provision, and economic and social dynamics in higher-income countries (Lee 2017). This model considers national economic and social resources, yet overlooks the influence of individual students' academic ability, gender, age, as well as hopes, aspirations, and desires for studying abroad.

However, the value and prestige of western degrees have been diminishing in the East, most notably in China. There is no guarantee that an international degree holder will find a desirable job in China, especially when the number of returnees have more than doubled since 2011 to total 580,300 in 2019 (Shuo 2020) and 80% of returnees' salaries are far below their expectation (CCG 2018). These challenges contribute to the notion among some Chinese students that studying abroad is not necessarily a good investment.

Geopolitics also significantly influences international students' preference of where to study. China is the largest country of origin for international students in the world, with 622,100 Chinese students studying abroad in 2018 (Textor 2020). A recent survey reveals that the UK has now surpassed the United States as the preferred overseas study destination due to tense Sino-U.S. relations and reopening of the UK's Post Study Work Visa (Shuo 2020). Given Brexit in the UK and a new presidential administration in the United States, the subsequent impacts on the financial stability and cultural diversity of the UK and U.S. higher education sectors remain to be seen.

Increasing Eastward Mobility

Current trends show international students' increasing eastward mobility. China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan are competitively recruiting increasing numbers of international students from all over the world. Since 2016, China has become the world's third largest receiving destination for international students, with 492,185 international students in 2018 (Global Ability Executive 2020). The strongest growth of enrolment is at the postgraduate and doctorate levels (UNESCO 2018). The majority of these students are from the countries along the former Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road trading routes, closely related to the "One Belt, One Road" initiative adopted by the Chinese government to promote a global infrastructure development. This trend fits China's economic and political goals to strengthen the country's soft power and international competitiveness.

Inbound mobility to China is different from outward mobility with regard to state and financial support. The Chinese government has instituted a national strategy to provide support to international students from all over the world by providing public funds to subsidize free tuition and generous scholarships, promote Chinese language skills, and increase the quality of curricula and programs (Stacey 2019). This has led to increased numbers of international students from not only the East but also the West to pursue degrees in China.

The generous financial support to international students studying at Chinese universities contrasts with practices adopted by some western universities that tend to focus on financial benefits of hosting international students. This difference suggests distinct benefits are being prioritized in the marketization of higher education.

Embracing Diversity in International Educational Mobility

Western universities must acknowledge the shifting trend of international educational mobility and embrace the reality of increased competition and diversity in the global student market. There are different approaches to consider that expand beyond economic benefits. One approach is to understand and respond to international students' concern of 'value for money' and demonstrate that the universities are providing an attractive offer in the competitive global market. Another approach is to develop a culture of kindness in order to provide all students truly international experiences on campus.

Demonstrating value for money

Student demands for 'value for money' will drive the future of international student mobility, as there will be more students who look to gain global experiences, while minimizing the cost. Universities could appeal to students from a wider range of countries by demonstrating the strength of their programs-illustrating student satisfaction levels, quality teaching, fair assessment and feedback practices, excellent learning resources, and friendly and inclusive learning environments. Students tend to choose (and their parents tend to support) programs that offer a strong promise of employability and career development, so demonstrated access to industry connections and work opportunities will boost students' confidence in programs.

New modes of study could also help universities attract international students. For example, the UK Government is promoting two-year degrees to meet students' diverse needs. Universities' approaches to marketing these degrees and communicating their values to international students will be vitally important for their success. Universities will also need to work with their government closely to maximize value for money for international students.

Developing a culture of kindness

A previous study (Cheng et al. 2018) reveals that many western universities provide little training to faculty and staff to help them consider the interests and challenges faced by international students. This identified gap suggests that if western universities want to continue or regain the prestige of their degrees, the sector should re-examine its internationalization practices. Working to foster a culture of kindness to develop a truly international and inclusive learning environment for all students could offer a solution.

Kindness here means "selfless acts performed by a person wishing to either help or positively affect the emotional state (mood) of another person" (Passmore & Oades 2015, 90). A culture of kindness would involve academics, staff, and domestic students who consider the interests and challenges faced by international students, treat them as equals, show interest in their work, and care about their wellbeing. It relates to acts that make students feel cared for emotionally, and is often demonstrated by knowing student names, treating students as equals, being interested in their work, and caring about their wellbeing. Acts of kindness are effective

in creating a positive impact on student learning and wellbeing as students relate their own engagement to the enthusiasm and approachability of teaching staff (Clegg and Rowland 2010). For example, Chinese students regard kindness as a quality pertinent to maintaining interpersonal relationships, as kind-heartedness by teachers is a central value in China.

Developing a culture of kindness on campus could increase positive interactions and intercultural awareness among students and staff. Implementing such a culture will not be a straightforward process. Rather, it needs to be a shared project among students, teaching faculty, and administrative staff to unlock the tremendous potential of the students and improve their learning and social experiences.

Responding to Change and Adapting Our Work

Higher education institutions and international educators will need to maintain levels of international student enrolment and provide valuable international experiences for all students in order to respond positively to the change of international educational mobility. There are five proposed approaches. The first two approaches address more straightforward economic concerns, while the remaining approaches address concerns about the added “value” of attending these universities. Implementing these approaches will help international students feel that their interests, needs, and wellbeing are considered, and that they are treated equal to domestic students.

Firstly, as demand for overseas education is stagnating or declining in the contexts of a pandemic, a change in tuition policy could make enrolment sustainable. For example, charging international students the same tuition fees as domestic students could help attract international students, especially those driven primarily by budget constraints. This is also a good gesture to welcome international students and show them kindness, especially when there is increasing competition from countries offering either generous financial support for international students (like China) or free programs for all students (like Norway and some other European countries).

Secondly, employability is a key driver for international students to study abroad. Universities that allocate resources and prepare staff to support international students’ employability, especially those at the masters’ level who have been largely otherwise ignored, will demonstrate a higher value for the investment. Universities can encourage faculty and staff to internationalize curricula, increase international perspectives in course content, and create opportunities for students to incorporate work experiences during their study.

Thirdly, promote kind acts in teaching, learning, and service support on campus. This could be achieved through intercultural training that encourages an increased responsiveness to student needs by faculty and staff and increases support that enhance students’ language and social skills for positive interactions. This differs from customer service in that it encourages good learning experiences and involves student engagement, not just general support from faculty and universities.

Fourthly, increase positive interpersonal interactions with domestic students to create a friendly and supportive learning culture. The lack of interaction between domestic students and international students from Asian backgrounds has been raised as a persistent issue in western universities. Universities need to enhance support to staff and students to enable them to develop their intercultural awareness and competence in order to increase positive interactions. Encouraging international

students to engage with local community service and voluntary work, within visa restrictions, will also enrich their learning and social experiences.

Finally, diversify social activities and promote multicultural activities both on and off campus to encourage students from different cultural backgrounds to participate. This will enrich their international experiences and reinforce the value of their choice to study abroad.

Conclusion

The increasing trend of Eastward international educational mobility has critical implications for western universities. It challenges the prestige of western education and the assumption that student mobility is mainly from the East to the West and between countries in the West. It also recognizes increased competition in the global student market and the increased diversity in international education mobility.

Western universities that respond to changes and adapt their practices to provide students with truly valuable international experiences will be more successful. In doing so, they will solidify their role in the competitive global market and advance a culture of kindness to increase positive interactions and intercultural awareness among students and staff on campus.

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Bio

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