The Third Wave of International Student Mobility and Global Competitiveness Of Asia Universities

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The new political context is shifting the future growth directions of internationally mobile students. On the one hand, the top two leading destinations — the US and the UK — are facing uncertainty in maintaining attractiveness for international students due to an unwelcoming anti-immigrant rhetoric; on the other hand, several Asian countries are building open policy frameworks and aligning institutional strategies to attract international students. How is the future of student mobility likely to shift?

To understand the future trends, let us look back at the recent history of mobility. In my article, "Three Waves of International Student Mobility" published in *Studies in Higher Education*, I analyse the trends through the lens of three overlapping waves shaped by key events impacting future trends. While many variables influence mobility, this framework provides a bigger picture of how mobility has changed over time from the perspective of competing destinations.

WAVE I: IMPACT OF TERRORIST ATTACKS (1999-2006)

Wave I of international students has its origin in the increasing demand for high-skilled talent especially in the fields related to science, technology, and engineering at master's and doctoral level. During this wave, many institutions were motivated to attract international students for research and reputation and were willing and able to provide funding and scholarships to attract global talent.

However, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 changed the dynamics and the tightened visa requirements, which made it more difficult for students to study in the US. Around the same time, the Bologna Process of 1999 and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) launched in 2000 started taking shape to create more comparable and coherent systems of higher education to foster student mobility within Europe.

Also, some of the countries in Asia started building ambitions of attracting international students. For example, the number of international students in Japan more than doubled in four years between 1999 and 2003 to reach nearly 110,000. Likewise, post-9/11 Malaysia created more opportunities for its domestic students to earn foreign degrees at home through branch campuses, and capitalised on attracting international students from the Middle East and the Arab world who were finding it difficult to study in the US.

In sum, towards the end of Wave I, several European and Asian countries started growing international student enrolment at the expense of the US.

WAVE II: IMPACT OF GLOBAL FINANCIAL RECESSION (2006-2013)

Wave II has its origins in the global financial crisis of 2007-08, which started in the US. The cascading effect of the crisis resulted in severe budget cuts in the higher education sector in many countries around the world. This compelled institutions to start thinking of alternative sources of revenue. One of the sources was to recruit full fee-paying international students. According to the OECD, there was a "greater interest in recruiting foreign students as tertiary institutions increasingly rely on revenues from foreign tuition fees which are often higher than for national students."

The narrative of Wave I of "attracting global talent" changed to "recruiting international students" in Wave II. This time, neither universities nor governments in many destination countries had the resources to offer financial support to international students. This was also the time when interest in recruiting for undergraduate degrees with longer revenue potential started gaining traction.

The growth of China's middle-class provided the much-needed enrolment momentum to many countries around the world with the US as the most significant beneficiaries. Between 2006 and 2013, the number of international students in the US universities increased by 200,000. China drove much of the growth in global mobility, with 307,000 additional globally mobile Chinese students in 2013 as compared to 2006.

In sum, Wave II was defined with the growth momentum of international enrolment for the US with China as the biggest contributors.

WAVE III: IMPACT OF NEW POLITICAL ORDER (2013-)

Wave III is shaped by the uncertainties triggered by new political order with nationalistic overtones, which are intensifying global competition for international students. The UK's referendum on its EU membership and the US presidential elections triggered anti-immigrant rhetoric and unwelcoming policies that prompted many prospective international students to consider alternatives to study the UK and the US.

At the same time, demographic changes and economic priorities are accelerating competition from English-taught programmes in Asia and continental Europe, which are continuing to improve quality and offer better value for money.

For example, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan are all facing a steep decline in college-aged students, which in turn can result in closure and consolidation of many institutions. Consequently, both government and university efforts are coming together to attract and retain international students. China has been investing in building world-class universities, and more recently India announced its ambitious goal of attracting international students.

Overall, Wave III is expanding choices for international students and compelling universities to innovate and offer new modes of programmes through partnerships, and transnational and online education to attract and retain international students. There are many factors that influence students' decision-making process to study abroad, and one of the key factors for a clear majority of students is the ability get a return on their investments. Hence, institutions need to do more in terms of supporting student success.

CONCLUSION

Wave III is characterised by a trend towards increasing competition to attract international students, which would result in a slower pace of growth of international enrolment in the traditional destinations like the US and the UK. The future growth directions of internationally mobile students in Wave III will be towards emerging destinations that align government policies and institutional strategies to attract and retain them. Many Asian universities that are aiming to increase their appeal for international students and future skilled talent must pivot to a goal of not only attracting the best-fit international students but also delivering on the promise of value for money.

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