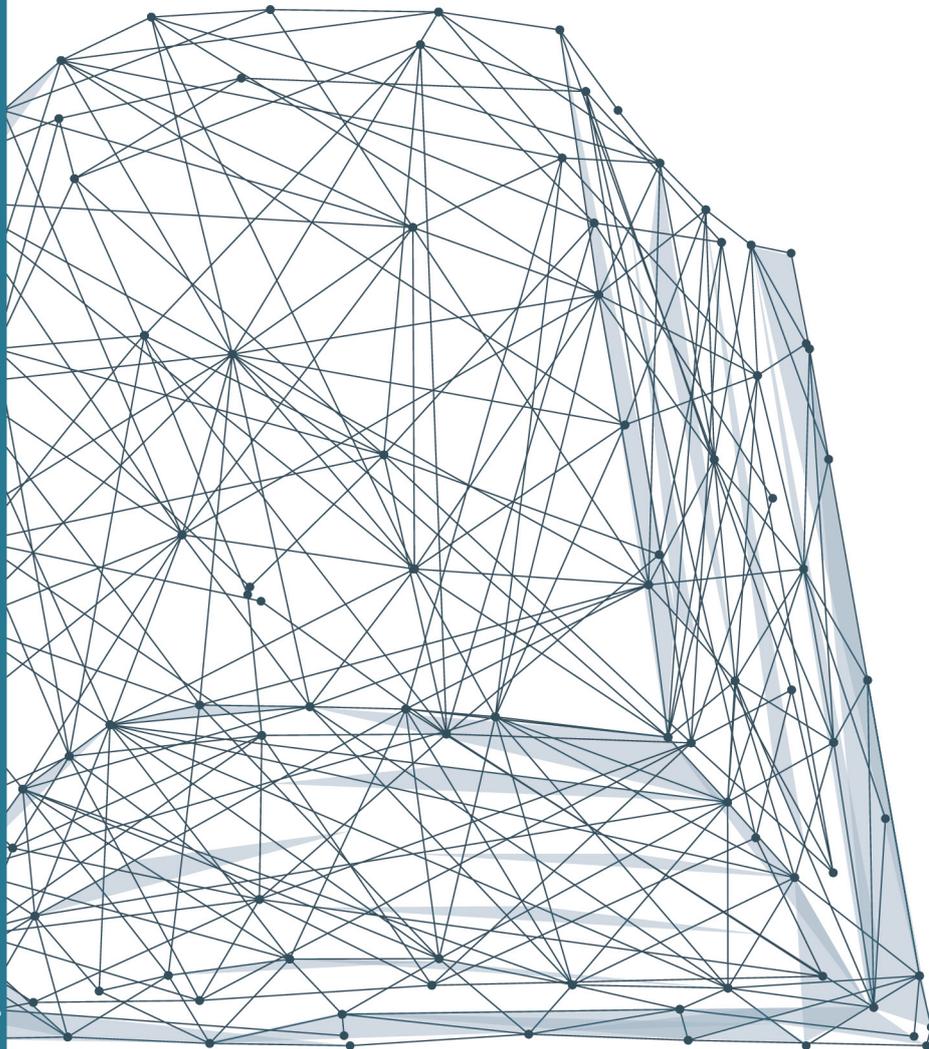


GLOBAL COMPETITION FOR TALENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The scale and volume with which postsecondary students are crossing international borders is unprecedented, and never before have so many countries vied to attract these global aspirants to their shores. At the start of the third decade of the twenty-first century, this student demand for a global education appears to be matched by a potential supply of college seats, with several countries having announced campaigns or set numerical targets to attract the approximately five million students—or “migrants with mortarboards”¹—who are currently mobile. Whether viewed as an export industry that yields significant revenue for a country or as a means of building a talent pool to fill skill gaps and offset a declining domestic population, attracting international students has become a key feature of national-level policies in higher education. The global flow of students—and hence knowledge and talent—plays a central role in broader global debates about the role of skilled migrants; nations as winners and losers and the competing forces of brain-drain, brain-gain and brain circulation; the centrality of borderless knowledge flows to the science and innovation enterprise; and the enduring need for cultural understanding and diplomacy, especially with the recent rise of nationalism and the potential threat of isolationism.

Student demand for a high-quality tertiary education—whether domestic or global—is only expected to grow in the coming years, but what has given new shape to student flows are the many initiatives competing to attract global talent. While Anglophone countries are among the largest hosts of international students and with just five traditional host countries accounting for 50 percent of the world's international student enrollment at the postsecondary level, the past few years have seen a rise in the numbers of countries launching ambitious schemes to attract global talent from around the world, often at lower cost. With the expanding scale of knowledge-based and innovation-driven economies worldwide, countries are turning to international students to provide a pool of global talent and often from which to recruit highly skilled job applicants. These include efforts by non-Anglophone countries in the West, such as France and Germany, but also emerging economies and destinations such as China, Malaysia, and Russia that have initiated policies to not only bolster the enrollment of international students, but to retain them in their labor markets (Knight-Grofe & Rauh, 2016; Hemmadi, 2016; ICEF, 2017; Liu-Farrer, 2009; Nafie, 2017).



¹This term was coined by the Economist in 2013.

With its offer of subsidized degree programs, career incentives, and more English-taught graduate programs, Germany's higher education sector is becoming increasingly attractive. The country surpassed its goal to increase international student enrollment to 350,000 by 2020 in 2017, three years before the target date (Kennedy, 2017; Nafie, 2017). Additionally, international graduates from non-EU countries have 18 months to find employment in Germany and a large number take advantage of this policy. In China, which aspires to host half-a-million international students by 2020 (and is close to reaching that goal), international students are benefiting from new opportunities to undertake internships, smoothed pathways to residency permits, and a variety of programs which enable graduates to stay in-country to work. Several cities – including Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen – have policies to address local skills gaps and create opportunities for international students in high-technology and e-commerce programs to transition easily into the workforce (Sharma, 2018). These efforts go beyond individual countries: long-standing exchange programs, such as Erasmus in Europe, have also recognized the growing demand for employability skills, with internships and apprenticeships comprising recent offerings.

But these efforts to attract more international students do not take place in a vacuum. Paralleling the strong interest in attracting international students, one of the most significant developments in recent years has been the rise of nationalism around the world, and what is perceived as a turning inward of many traditional host destinations that have typically attracted large numbers of students and scholars from around the world. The first such development was the Brexit referendum in the U.K. in 2016, which will likely have far-reaching consequences on student mobility into and out of the U.K., especially the mobility between the U.K. and continental Europe. Similarly, political shifts in the United States and proposed policies restricting immigration and visa issuance have raised many questions about whether the United States might become a less attractive destination for postsecondary international students (QS Survey, 2018) despite a focused effort and commitment by the U.S. Department of State to continue expanding international student enrollments in the United States. While drawing precise conclusions about how student flows are responding to international political changes will require time and new sets of enrollment data, there are early signs that these policy changes are having an impact both on those host countries whose policies might now be viewed as less welcoming as well as those hosts that are seeing increased interest as a result of the redirection of student interest. A case in point is Canada which has seen a significant uptick in international enrollments both due to the liberalization of its own revamped internationalization policies, but also due to students choosing Canada over other destinations.

Given the highly dynamic and shifting current landscape of international student and global talent recruitment, this report takes an in-depth look at the current national-level strategies of various established and emerging host destinations; the relative success of these strategies; as well as what conclusions can be drawn, and projections offered on future demand and supply of international education. The analysis for the report draws upon IIE's Project Atlas network of 25 global international education agencies; various countries' policy documents pertaining to international student recruitment; as well as the vast research literature in the field. Launched in 2001 by representatives from key national bodies and non-governmental organizations involved in international educational exchanges and mobility and now having grown to 25 countries, Project Atlas offers a shared framework for measuring and understanding international mobility and includes data obtained directly from partner agencies around the world. As such, some of the country-level data contained in this report as well as the relative order of top hosts of international students varies from the widely-used UNESCO and OECD mobility statistics.²

Overview of the report and its assumptions

The current report and its analysis is grounded in the following key assumptions:

- **First**, the focus of this report is on one aspect of internationalization—student mobility and countries' efforts to recruit international students. Nonetheless, even though student mobility is still widely regarded as a fundamental pillar of any internationalization effort, other internationalization efforts that focus on scholar mobility and research collaboration,

cross-border education, and internationalization at home are equally critical in developing a comprehensive approach toward the internationalization of higher education (Helms, 2015; Helms & Rumbley, 2016).

- **Second**, because of the report's emphasis on attracting global talent, strategies designed to attract in-bound or international students are the focus of the current analysis, as opposed to strategies or initiatives that countries have adopted to send their own students abroad (although the two are often connected and part of a broader internationalization strategy).

- **Third**, given its focus on national-level policies and wider strategies, institutional-level efforts are not the focus of this report. However, it is important to mention that many national-level strategies—particularly ones that are developed in an inclusive way—encompass and engage the higher education sector and flow down to institutions. Further, national-level policies are often connected or exist side-by-side with state- or provincial-level policies. State-level policies that have focused on international recruitment are noted where relevant (such as in the case of Canada and Australia), but are not the focus of the current analysis.

- **Fourth**, it is not possible in a report of this nature to cover every country and its strategies. Thus, the selection of regions and countries herein is based on criteria such as the status of certain countries as established host destinations as evidenced by their international student numbers, as well as the stated ambitions and well-documented efforts of certain emerging economies and countries.

²See the Project Atlas website for further details: www.iie.org/projectatlas.

- **Fifth**, the forthcoming analysis in the report makes clear that policies to recruit international students are often situated within broader national strategies and efforts related to trade, human capital development, and skills development. While the focus of the report remains on international student recruitment strategies, it is important to note this link.

Finally, as student mobility continues to grow, so do countries' efforts to attract these global aspirants, with new targets and financial investments announced almost on a weekly basis. It is not possible to document all these shifts as they are happening; hence this report includes countries' strategies and approaches in place as of May, 2019. It is possible that new strategies will have been introduced, or others revised by the time this report is released in November, 2019.

The report begins with an in-depth review (Chapter 1) of the growing competition for global talent, situating this phenomenon first and foremost in what the current flows of globally mobile students look like, and followed by a discussion of the key motivations for countries to attract global talent as well as the types of strategies currently in place that embody these motivations and aspirations. Chapter 2 of the report presents brief case studies of seven traditional or established host countries and their student recruitment strategies, marketing campaigns and targets (if any), while also including trends of international student enrollment for each country; Chapter 3 provides a similar analysis of selected emerging destinations.

Chapter 4 situates these national-level efforts in relation to current socio-demographic and political factors that are having an effect on the student mobility landscape, including the rising importance of policies that encourage skilled migration, or the flow of highly-educated and skilled migrants from their home country to another destination primarily to pursue better employment opportunities. This concluding chapter also assesses future prospects for international student growth and identifies ten key takeaways from the current analysis and report.

