

International student mobility

Most of what is written on the mobility of international students focuses on two particular topics: the means by which 'providers' access the 'market' and assure themselves a flow of paying clients; and the ways in which they may or may not be encouraged to accommodate themselves to what may be different styles of learning. Nicholas Tarling believes these topics would surely be better tackled in a wider context, and there are many others also worthy of research. One possible approach, he argues, is historical.

Nicholas Tarling

PEOPLE HAVE LONG TRAVELLED in order to pursue advanced study, in Asia as well as in Europe, for personal or professional reasons or both. Students in medieval Europe were, as Charles Haskins put it, 'singularly mobile and singularly international'¹

With the major changes of the 19th century – the creation of nation-states and the advent of the industrial revolution – universities took on a wider range of disciplines and obligations. The 19th century also expanded the gap between the 'Western' states and the 'traditional' states in Asia and Africa, and many of the latter fell under colonial or pseudo-colonial control. Gaining the 'knowledge' that appeared to have contributed to that outcome was a motive among non-Europeans for securing a western university education, which initially at least could be done only by travelling, though not only to the West: Chinese and Vietnamese went to Japan, which, starting to modernise, had itself sent students to Europe and the US. In 1906, Japan was the host of 15,000 Chinese students, 8,000 of them on scholarships.²

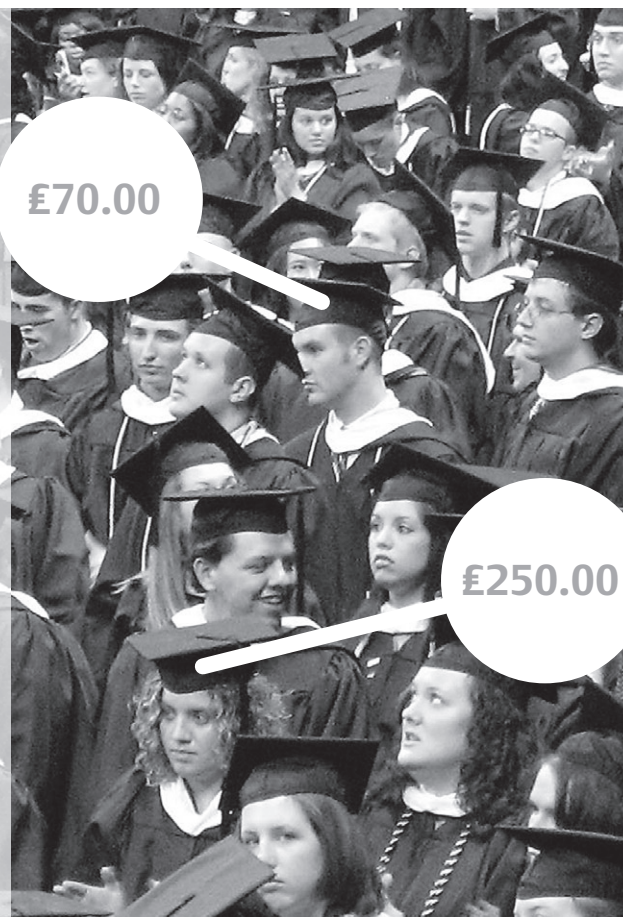
Globalisation – which may be seen as an intensification of the 19th century changes – promoted a dramatic expansion of demand in the last third of the 20th century, and right at its close from the most populous country of all, China, when it adopted more of a capitalist and individualist road to modernisation. In 1979-80 1,000 Chinese students studied in the US, 20 years later, 60,000.³

A 'pay-at-the-door' approach

Motivation must, however, be seen from another angle as well, that of the 'providers'. Medieval European universities certainly accepted students from other parts of Europe, even those outside the Holy Roman Empire, as Haskins says, dividing them into 'nations' or guilds. No doubt one motive was the desire to advance scholarship, and probably, too, pride in achievements both individual and institutional (still a powerful motive). Was there also a monetary motive? There was a pay-at-the-door approach, though the sums were not large, nor driven by the need for buildings and equipment.

A sense of imperial obligation was something of a motivating force from the late 19th century. Students from other parts of the Empire were welcomed in Britain, though they were a relatively small number even in the then rather small university system. With the breaking-down of such formal structures as the Empire had, and the emergence of more and more independent member states, education seemed to be both a means of helping the new countries get on their feet and a means of holding the new Commonwealth together.

More generally, aid was seen as promoting 'stability' in the post-1945 world and also of fighting the Cold War that developed from 1946 onwards. In 1945, Senator William Fulbright introduced his famous bill in Congress: countries would be allowed to retain surplus US war equipment and buildings in exchange for contributing to a local educational programme. It began in Burma, and was amplified by the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which allowed for bringing students to the States.⁴ The Colombo Plan of 1950 is perhaps remembered above all for its provision of scholarships, a feature of this period, though that was not initially its chief purpose.



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By the end of the 20th century, scholarships played only a small part in the international mobility of students. Elements in 'developing' countries were sufficiently wealthy to pay for or 'purchase' education overseas, and 'developed' countries saw reasons for selling it to them. The movement was associated with the concept of education as a 'commodity' to be bought, sold and traded in a market and with an ideology that (over) stressed that at tertiary level it became a 'private' good more than a 'public' one. But how did these associations develop?

Two countries have so far been the focus of research at the New Zealand Asia Institute. One is the UK. Our present conclusion is that decisions were made more on the basis of pragmatism than theory. The university and further education systems came under pressure from increasing demand at home and abroad at a time when Britain was in economic decline. Something had to give.

Public rather than private

The systems were essentially public rather than private, sustained by substantial grants from the Treasury, delivered through the University Grants Committee, or by local education authorities. Foreign students from developing countries were aided by full scholarships, under the Colombo Plan or otherwise, or by tuition fee scholarships administered by the British Council. But another, far greater source of aid, was indirect. Private students could also enrol, and, until 1967, they paid the domestic fee. And that covered only a relatively small proportion of the full cost of tuition. It was primarily in order to make savings that the Wilson government introduced a differential fee in 1967: overseas students would pay £250, as against an average domestic fee of £70. They would still be 'heavily subsidised'.⁵

The move, however, was seen as 'discrimination', and attracted much criticism. The £250 was raised once or twice in subsequent years, but not by as much as inflation. But the Labour government that had taken over in February 1974 was to face a major economic crisis. By 1976 the Government's search for savings covered spending departments like education, and a very substantial increase in the fees for overseas students ensued. The fees for domestic students increased even more substantially, however, so that the differential was reduced to £100, further diminished by the decline in the value of the pound.⁶

The Conservative government under Mrs Thatcher, elected in May 1979, decided as part of urgent cuts in expenditure, to increase overseas fees for 1979/80 by 20% on top of a 9% increase Labour had announced.⁷ Then, in November, it promulgated its full-fee policy.⁸ New overseas students – but not EEC students – would pay the full cost of their courses from the start of the 1980/1 year. At the same time, the grants to institutions were reduced, making it necessary for them to recruit overseas students at the new fee levels. It was through this that they were drawn into the 'market'.

The full-fee policy was initially a regulative measure, the aim of which seemed to be to curb the influx, but it quite quickly became one, as Alan Smith and others put it, 'of even encouraging the influx provided that the students concerned pay'.⁹ Ideology seemed to play no more than a supporting role.

The other country NZAI has investigated is, of course, New Zealand.¹⁰ Alongside those on Colombo and other scholarship programmes, it accepted private students from the Colombo Plan area as well as the South Pacific, paying the low domestic fee, and so, like those in the UK, in effect subsidised by the taxpayer. The largest group came from Malaysia to study commerce and engineering. Predominant among them were Chinese Malaysians, deprived by ethnic quotas in their homeland of the opportunity it was deemed necessary to offer Malays.

By the late 1960s, their numbers had grown, passing 5 or 6% of the then relatively small university rolls. The New Zealand University Grants Committee set up the Overseas Students Admissions Committee, to allocate private overseas students according to quotas specified by the universities, starting with the 1971 intake. The New Zealand government thus took a different course to the UK on this matter: a smaller system made it easier to introduce centrally-administered quotas.

In the late 1970s, affected by economic and budgetary crises, the government changed course. It imposed a special fee of NZ\$1500 on private overseas students. Its initial objective – influenced by UK precedents as well as its own necessities – was again to cut expenditure. NZ\$1500 was not the full cost of a year at the university, but it was about half, depending on the faculty. Prime minister, Robert Muldoon, spoke of the earnings it would bring. In fact, it further reduced numbers, but that, after all, saved money.

The reduction in numbers by these two measures, coupled with the slow growth in domestic numbers in the later 1970s, prompted some ministers to consider a further step, not unlike the British, the sale of 'spare' places at full-cost to students more or less from any country. That notion met a great deal of opposition. Education, it was argued, was not for sale. Within government and among bureaucrats the idea was contentious, and the necessary legislation had not been passed when the prime minister sought the dissolution of mid-1984.

The Labour government of the later 1980s first abolished the NZ\$1500 fee, and then, influenced by free-market ideology, opened up the whole education system to private full-fee paying students, and encouraged private entrepreneurs to enter the field. But it was not until at the end of the 1990s, when Chinese students came in large numbers, that the full-cost venture showed its financial possibilities.

The other issue that attracts the Institute's interest relates not to origins but to impact. What effect does the movement have on the countries from which the students come, and on the institutions that receive them? In the past, returning students had – as some governments had feared – a major impact: they provided a source of revolutionaries in French Indo-China, in Netherlands India, in Siam/Thailand. Not much research seems to have been undertaken on the impact of the far larger number of students who studied overseas after the Second World War and returned home, a few notorious political cases aside, the Khmer Rouge leaders, for example.

Within institutions, while there are often large numbers of international students, they are distributed unevenly across the traditional faculties, the prime focus being on business and information technology. That may further emphasise the increasingly utilitarian nature of university study. It may also add to the difficulties of sustaining a university community, and enabling it to benefit from an internationalisation more genuine and generous than one focused surely too narrowly on numbers and dollars.

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5. Note by Chairman of Ad Hoc Group, 12.12.66, and attached papers. ED 188/4, National Archives, Kew.
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TOP: King's College, Cambridge University.
BOTTOM: Clock tower of University of Auckland.