**A World of Opportunities**

Recruiting international students brings benefits to universities, along with new challenges



There are more internationally mobile students than ever before in the world today, and they are heading to the U.S. in ever greater numbers. In 2015-16, the most recent year for which figures are available, the number of international students at American universities exceeded one million for the first time, according to the Institute of International Education, which has tracked global student mobility for nearly a century.

International students face a dizzying array of choices as they decide where to pursue a higher education. More countries and universities are competing for them, while regional hubs and branch campuses are increasingly persuading them to remain near their home regions.

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For the growing number of institutions seeking to enroll these students, the opportunities--and challenges--are equally numerous. Universities have much to gain from boosting international enrollments, including increased income, greater campus diversity, and an enhanced global brand. At the same time, recruiting international students entails navigating a complicated, and often burdensome, path. Attracting students’ initial interest, persuading them to apply, shepherding them through that process, helping to guide them through any immigration hurdles they might face, and easing their transition to campus life are all steps that are potentially fraught with hurdles.

As recent political developments have underscored, the landscape of international student mobility is subject to a complex and ever-changing range of variables. Even as U.S. institutions celebrate the record numbers, they recognize that recruiting international students is a multifaceted exercise that requires constant vigilance and adaptability.

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John J. Wood is the senior associate vice provost for international education at the University at Buffalo [U.B.], which ranks among the top 20 U.S. institutions in terms of international student enrollment. “Like a lot of schools, we’ve seen continued growth at U.B.,” he says. The booming numbers of internationally mobile students mean that “the pie is growing,” he says. At the same time, the increased competition for these students among a growing number of institutions means that “the pie is being divided up into more parts over time,” he says.

The U.S. remains the leading destination for internationally mobile students, but its share of the market is diminishing. There is growing competition not just from traditional markets like Britain, Australia, and Canada, but also countries such as China, South Korea, Brazil, and Russia, as they increasingly focus on recruiting from abroad as a means of enhancing their own higher-education institutions. In addition to the record numbers of international students in the U.S., the most recent Open Doors figures also highlight a growing trend among internationally mobile students to choose to remain within their home regions. Among the factors driving this development is a growth in quality degree programs in Asia in English.

Shifting political winds, changes in national scholarship programs, currency fluctuations, and news headlines also drive student mobility and recruitment trends. Even the most popular destination institutions cannot rest on their laurels, but must be keenly attuned to relevant developments. Anecdotal evidence from university officials suggests that the uncompromising immigration stance of the new administration in Washington is already having a chilling effect on applications from abroad, and institutions are grappling with how this will affect their recruitment efforts.



Factors on the sending side can also have broad implications far beyond national borders. India, for example, sends more students to the U.S. than any country but China. In 2015-16, there were 165,918 Indian students in the U.S., representing an increase of nearly 25 percent over the previous year, the single largest increase for any country. That jump, says Rajika Bhandari, Director of the IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research, who oversees the annual Open Doors census on international student mobility, was due largely to a rebounding of the numbers after a few years in which they had flattened, prompting concerns among many that the U.S. was losing its attractiveness as a destination for Indian students. The recovery of the Indian rupee, which coincided with changes in immigration policy in Britain and Australia that dimmed their appeal spurred the arrival of more Indian students than ever in the U.S. Now India is grappling with another currency crisis, the demonetization of the rupee, which “will probably have a lot of repercussions for Indian students going forward,” says Ms. Bhandari. “We’re already hearing from some institutions that they may be seeing a drop.”

Institutions seeking to recruit students from India can do little to influence these factors, of course, but they must be sensitive to how such developments can drive students’ decisions. The strong U.S. dollar is already a potential deterrent for many students from abroad, notes Mr. Wood, and may ultimately prove even more powerful than headlines about changes in U.S. immigration policy.

One of the most noteworthy developments in the most recent set of Open Doors data, says Ms. Bhandari is the “tremendous amount of growth in international students pursuing OPT,” or optional practical training. “What this means is that international students clearly want the opportunity to get work experience immediately after their degrees and to be able to apply what they are learning to the workplace,” she says. This raises the stakes for universities, as students consider factors beyond the academic aspects of international study, and they must work to insure that these opportunities are accessible to the students they are seeking to attract.

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Amid the growing competition for internationally mobile students, there are tantalizing possibilities for institutions, as they are forced to think creatively and adjust to the rapidly shifting landscape. How well they rise to the challenges will depend largely on the strength and adaptability of their international office teams and the outside partners they work with to attract and enroll international students.

Effective recruitment involves “a lot of fine tuning and a lot of experimentation,” Mr. Wood notes. Institutions must be nimble in adjusting to the evolving demands of students, as well as an ever-shifting landscape of regulations. Ensuring clear lines of communication with students both before their arrival and during their stay in the U.S. are crucial and time-consuming activities. Administrators are increasingly turning to software solutions provided by firms such as [Terra Dotta](http://www.terradotta.com/isss.html?utm_source=sp_article&utm_campaign=chronicle_feb&utm_medium=email&utm_content=world_of_opps) to help automate that process and ease the burdens imposed by the ever-changing regulations.