First Generation International Students and the 4Ds Shaping the Future of Global Student Mobility: A Comparative Report Analysis

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If we are to understand the future of global higher education, we must begin to study first generation *international* students who embody the future of student global mobility. Traditional paradigms of global student mobility narrowly focus on a small subset of the global student population (de Wit & Jones, 2017). However, first-generation students are the growing edge of university enrollments worldwide (Schulmann & Le, 2018; World Bank, 2018), and their future depends on ensuring that access to higher education translates to economic opportunity and social mobility (Glass, Gesing, Hales, & Cong, 2017). The livelihoods of the next generation of students are being shaped by rapid urbanization, automation of the global workforce, and the rise of economic and political nationalism in traditional host countries (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018). The coming wave of global student mobility will be shaped by what we term the 4Ds: new demographics, new drivers, new directions, and new forms of delivery. We briefly describe how each of these dimensions, including findings from our analysis of the National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG, 2015) to illustrate these trends, particularly as they relate to access and equity for first generation international students.

Demographics

The *demographics* of globally mobile students are shifting. International enrollment growth is being driven by students from low- and middle-income countries, where demand is outpacing the capacity to supply higher education (Choudaha, 2011; Ortiz, Chang, & Fang, 2015). Growth in degree attainment worldwide is being driven by older, non-traditional students, students from emerging economies, and students from fast-growing urban populations (Schulmann & Le, 2018). Meanwhile, the shrinking domestic college student population in host countries like the US has heightened the need to recruit international students (Bound, Braga, Khanna, & Turner, 2016; Hussar & Bailey, 2017). Although the US global share of international students has decreased from about 25 percent in 2008 to 15 percent in 2018, the proportion of the total US international student enrollment has grown from three to five percent in the same time period (UNESCO, 2018). China and India make up nearly 50 percent of the international student population in the US, yet there is concern that Chinese student enrollment may be on the decline (IIE, 2017). In our analysis of 2015 NSCG data, 43 percent of students from China were the first in their family to attend college; whereas, only 20 percent of students from India were first generation. In addition, first generation international students come from Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Mexico, all countries where fast-growing planned or emergent regional educational hubs are reshaping the patterns of global student mobility (British Council, 2018; Kondakci, Bedenlier, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018).

Directions

The *directions* of globally mobile students are also shifting. As traditional host countries lose market share, the appeal of regional education hubs has broadened for a new generation of glocal students, i.e., international students who seek career advancement from an international education while staying in their home region (Choudaha, 2013). For example, there are three times as many Malaysian students in branch campuses of UK universities in Malaysia than those going to the UK universities in the UK (Choudaha, 2016). Planned education hubs that combine national universities and international branch campuses, such as United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Singapore, and Hong Kong are part of coordinated strategies for national and regional economic development (Kondakci et al. 2018). Social network analysis has identified emergent regional hubs, including South Korea, South Africa, Turkey, Brazil, and Mexico where, without formal coordination, cultural, geographical and historical factors are attracting glocal students to study at world-class institutions (Kondakci et al. 2018). It is estimated that by 2030, 75 percent of global STEM graduates will graduate from universities in emerging hubs like Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China, and South Africa, compared with eight percent and four percent from the US and European universities respectively (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018; OECD, 2015). Geographical and cultural proximity make these emerging regional hubs attractive destinations for the new generation of international students. Moreover, the relative ease of visa procedures and transportation to-and-from home countries make emerging regional hubs affordable alternatives to cost conscious international students. Although the number of first generation students at regional hubs is not known, the implications of these trends suggest that these regions will become increasingly attractive and affordable intraregional destinations for first-generation international students.

Meanwhile, the pathways to college degree attainment continue to shift. Enrollment in community colleges and their global counterparts has increased worldwide to meet workforce demands (Raby & Valeau, 2018). Moreover, since the US travel ban, international student enrollment at US higher education institutions has varied depending on the type of institution, with the steepest declines at US master's colleges and universities (AACRAO, 2018; IIE, 2017). In our analysis of the NSCG data, first generation international students are just as likely to attend a research (29 percent) or comprehensive university (29 percent), whereas non-first-generation students are about twice as likely to attend a research university (38 percent) than a comprehensive university (22 percent). First generation international students in the US are also twice as likely to attend a US community college (five percent) as their non-first generation peers (two percent).

Drivers

The economic, sociocultural, and political *drivers* of global mobility are shifting. Economic and employment opportunities continue to drive global student mobility, but today's international students are more price sensitive and career-minded (Loo, 2016). Changes to UK post-study work visa policy have reduced the number of international students from Africa and Asia. Increasingly, many international students opt to study in host countries where tuition is affordable and pathways to work opportunities are supported by national immigration policies (Barnett et al. 2016). The financial benefits of an education abroad may not be equal for first generation students. Our analysis of the NSCG data identified a gap in the post-college earnings of first-generation international students in the US. After controlling for age and graduation year, first generation international students who stayed in the US after earning their bachelor's degree earned $61,730 per year on average, compared with $67,342 for international students with one parent with a college degree, and $78,540 for international students from households where both parents hold college degrees.

Sociocultural factors also shape perceptions that drive global student mobility. Where personal safety used to rank among the bottom of concerns of prospective students, personal safety now ranks at the top of concerns that international students express about study abroad, surpassing employment and affordable tuition (British Council, 2017). There has been a spike in reports of hate crimes on college campuses in the US since the election of President Trump (Dreid & Najmadadi, 2016), adding to concerns about neoracism and gun violence that impact students' choice of institution and host country. Traditional host countries, like the US and UK, have erected barriers for mobility, where viewpoints about the value of international students is divided across party lines (Esipova, Ray, & Pugliese, 2018). Prospective students are experiencing an increase in student visa denials at US embassies and consulates in China and India, along with a general perception that the US is less welcoming to international students (AACRAO, 2017). These prospective students are also concerned that the Trump administration's travel ban could be expanded to additional countries, and that further visa restrictions could impact family members' ability to visit them, impede re-entry if they travel home, and create barriers to post-education employment pathways in the US. These impediments are in evidence with international students who graduated and are in the US workforce seeing greater challenges in maintaining temporary work visas due to longer processing times and increased costs (Hudzik, Streitweiser, & Marmolejo, 2018). Finally, geopolitical upheavals including regional conflicts, economic crises, and pandemics also drive global student mobility, with the 22.5 million refugees who have fled their home countries posing another challenge for higher education internationalization (Hudzik, Streitweiser, & Marmolejo, 2018).

Delivery

The modes of *delivery* of global higher education are also impacting global student mobility (British Council, 2017). The number of globally mobile students exploded from 2000 to 2010, then leveled off after 2010, as regional hubs, branch campuses, joint degree programs, and online programs became increasingly affordable alternatives to study abroad. As regional provision of higher education expands, all signs point to a precipitous slowdown in the number of outbound international students (British Council, 2018). Thirteen million students are enrolled in cross-border, online programs, three times the total number of globally mobile students (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018). New online, blended forms of transnational education are on the rise, and more universities are developing cross-border English programs in emerging economies. Students' methods for financing their education are also changing and can affect their mobility decisions. In our analysis of the NSCG data, 75 percent of non-first generation students receive financial assistance for college from their parents, spouse, or other relatives, whereas first generation students are 50 percent more likely to rely on prior earnings from employment. Because of the change in this demographic, online programs and other forms of more regional, affordable delivery of higher education will impact the next wave of global student mobility.

Conclusion

First generation international students are a harbinger for the coming wave of global student mobility that must be addressed. As we look into the future: international enrollment growth will be driven by first generation students from low- and middle-income countries (demographics); more likely to study at emerging regional hubs with more geographical and cultural proximity (directions); with more career-minded and employment-focused goals for short-term migration (drivers); and engaged in new forms of hybrid and online education programs (delivery). The data from the National Survey of College Graduates suggest that it is critical for researchers to examine this fast-growing population of international students to ensure short-term mobility leads to upward social and economic mobility.

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