

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY: A HISTORIAN'S IMPRESSIONS

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People have long travelled in order to study, in Asia as well as in Europe. The field would be “advanced,” if not, as we would call it from late 20th century usage, “tertiary.” That presumes an existing level of education and a desire to further it.

What are the motives for furthering education? Curiosity or what we would call “self-development” and the 19th-century German’s *Bildung* are not ruled out. Nor are these incompatible with what was more common in medieval Europe, when universities focused on the “professions” of the day, medicine, theology, law, etc. Some students were clearly attracted by the reputations of great and/or iconoclastic teachers and might follow them into the fens. Students were, as Charles Haskins put it, “singularly mobile and singularly international.... Bologna has its English archdeacons and German civilians, Paris its clerks from Sweden and Hungary” (as cited in Bevis & Lucas, 2007, p. 19).

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 “Western” states and “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 – the year after its victory over Russia – Japan hosted 15,000 Chinese students, 8,000 of them on scholarships (Wang, 1966, p. 55).

The winning of independent statehood was a further spur, though it also expanded domestic provision. Globalisation, which may be seen as an intensification of the 19th-century changes but is certainly novel in scale, 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. Now tens of thousands went abroad to study though provision at home rose very rapidly.

Globalisation introduced what may be regarded as a new element though possibly a transient one. It promoted a demand for facility in English, in many respects its *lingua franca*. Hitherto, students had not travelled to learn a language, except, say, well-off and well-educated Britons and Americans who might polish their French in France, or a foreign or colonial service might despatch a junior to learn an exotic language

in an exotic country. My old supervisor, Victor Purcell, recounted that, as a Cadet in the Malayan Civil Service, he volunteered to learn Chinese and join the Chinese protectorate and was sent off to Canton. “Do you realize what you have done, Purcell?” asked Arthur Jelf, the Under-Secretary. “You-have-ruined-your-career! You will never become a governor, or even a resident. You will be merely a specialist!” (Purcell, 1965, p. 96). Mass pursuit of a widely-dispersed language was then a novelty far in the future.

Globalisation – wealth and curiosity, too – promoted a desire within highly developed countries to study abroad for part of a course. Not that this was entirely new. The reputation of German universities attracted students from other parts of Europe and the world in the 19th century. Americans enjoyed an affinity with French culture. Just as French artists and composers had gone to Italy, so Americans studied in Paris.

Motivation must, however, be seen from another angle as well: that of the “providers” (another neologism) as well as the students. There are pull as well as push factors, and it is important to assess how they come together – and whether either predominates – particularly in terms of current policy-making.

Medieval European universities certainly accepted students from other parts of Europe, even those outside the Holy Roman Empire, as Haskins says. They were divided into “nations,” though, again, the word was not used in our sense: they were guilds. No doubt one motive of universities was the desire to advance scholarship, and probably, too, they had pride in achievements both individual and institutional (still a powerful motive). Was there also a monetary motive? Universities had a pay-at-the-door approach, though the sums were not large. Nor were they driven by the need for buildings and equipment, though universities recognised the disadvantages as well as the advantages of having a powerful patron.

Another motivating force from the late 19th century was a sense of imperial obligation and a desire for “efficiency.” Students from other parts of the empire – not merely the self-governing Dominions – were welcomed in Britain, though they were a relatively small number even in the then rather small university system. “Queen’s Scholarships,” for example, started in 1885, sent two boys per annum from the Straits Settlements to complete their studies in Britain, and the Education Commission of 1902 favoured continuing the scholarships while considering that there was no need for a university in British Malaya (Chai, 1964, pp. 260-261).

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 in the absence of other means. The concept of “development aid” – in which education found a place – expanded from its origins in the West Indies in the inter-war period.

More generally, aid was seen as promoting “stability” in the post-1945 world and 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. Implementation began in Burma and was amplified by the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which allowed students to be brought to the States (Bevis & Lucas, 2007, pp. 104-106). The Colombo Plan of 1950 was an assemblage of bilateral arrangements. It is perhaps remembered above all for its provision of scholarships, a feature of this period, though that was not initially its chief purpose.

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 end of the Cold War and the expansion of electronic communication promoted an international market in education, particularly at the tertiary level. The movement of students was associated with and contributed to both the concept of education as a “commodity” to be bought and sold and traded in a market and an ideology that stressed or over-stressed that at tertiary level education was a “private” good more than a “public” one.

The impact of student mobility, like its origins, must be considered from two perspectives. What effect does learning overseas have on the student? on his/her country, should they return to it and be welcomed or perhaps resented? on their attitude to the host country, whether it offered a scholarship or exacted a fee? And what effect does it have on the host? Is it merely economic? Does it enhance understanding more widely? Does it have an impact on the institutions involved? Does it or should it change the methods of teaching? Does it make the provision of disciplines more or less utilitarian? Does it promote a vigorous campus community?

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. The French pressed the Japanese government to harass Vietnamese students in Tokyo after the Franco-Japanese agreement of 1907 (Tran, 2005, pp. 55-67). The Thai Minister in Paris in the 1920s, Prince Charoon, thought the secretary of the Legation, Luang Vihitr Vadakarn, had fanned the unrest of the students there and ought to be kept under observation. “Pridi [Banomyong] is also dangerous” (Batson, 1984, p. 80). Not much research seems yet 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. In a speech on February 21, 1985, Tim Renton (1985), Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the Thatcher government, listed other examples: the Nehrus, Hastings Banda, and Robert Mugabe. Evidence so far is anecdotal, and the topic is worth further investigation, as a matter of curiosity and, perhaps, as a matter of policy.

Amidst the generalities of this form of globalisation, the particularities are sometimes neglected. University administrators will, however, be familiar with some of them. For example, while there are large numbers of international students, they are distributed very 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 on numbers and dollars. Even the well-meaning attempts designed to introduce students to different approaches to learning with a view to enhancing their chances of success may be partly astray, too disposed, perhaps, to dismiss other traditions of learning; too ready, too, to forget that the search for authority is a common desire of the youthful, whether in Asia or the West, even as they want also to challenge convention; too anxious, perhaps, to deny any validity to rote-learning.

My research in the British archives was mainly focused on the decision to implement full-cost fees. Initially, I concluded, decisions were made more on the basis of pragmatism than ideology. 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.

The systems were essentially public rather than private. They were sustained by substantial grants from the Treasury/Exchequer delivered through the University Grants Committee or by local education authorities, who, with some support from central government but otherwise out of the rates (local property taxes), provided Further Education and paid maintenance and tuition grants for students at universities who did not gain a state scholarship. 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 and far greater source of aid was indirect. Private students could also enrol, and, until 1967, they paid the domestic fee, which covered only a relatively small proportion of the full cost of tuition. By 1966 fees produced only about 7% of university income. Students from developed as well as developing countries benefited from a subsidy that, even in respect of the latter, could not be formally presented as aid. It was primarily in order to make budget savings that the Wilson government introduced a differential fee in 1967: overseas students would pay GBP 250, as against an average domestic fee of GBP70. Overseas students would still be “heavily subsidised” (Chairman of Ad Hoc Group, 1966).

The move, however, was seen as “discrimination” and attracted so much criticism that any future move became even more difficult to discuss, let alone introduce, even though student numbers, which initially fell, climbed back again. The GBP250 was raised once or twice in subsequent years, but not by as much as inflation. But Labour, in power again after Heath’s defeat early in 1974, was to face a major economic crisis and by 1976 was looking for loans that were unlikely to be forthcoming unless the UK met the kind of conditions that the IMF imposed. 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 GBP 100, further diminished, of course, by the decline in the value of the pound (Williams, 1981, pp. 35-36).

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. Then, in November, it promulgated its full-fee policy (White Paper, 1979). Continuing students, domestic and overseas, had

their fees raised by 24%. New overseas students – but not EEC students, would pay the full cost of their courses from the start of the 1980/81 year. At the same time, the grants to institutions were reduced, making it necessary for them to seek to recruit overseas students at the new fee levels. Through this, institutions 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” (Smith, de Panafieu, & Jarousse, 1981, p. 173). Trends in the US, they thought, might point the way: there private institutions survived by taking increased numbers of fee-paying foreign students. Ideology seemed to play no more than a supporting role. Perhaps, indeed, the success of the policy of selling places to foreign students was thought to support the “market” ideology that Thatcher propounded in the 1980s.

I have also studied the policies adopted in New Zealand. There the universities (colleges of the University of New Zealand till 1961) first began to receive overseas students after the Second World War, as a result of a government decision. The students were on government scholarships that covered subsistence and not merely the limited fees that students then had to pay. That practice had a precedent, perhaps, in New Zealand’s obligations to Niue, Samoa, and the Cook Islands. In particular, however, it was a result of its acceptance of international obligations, above all its participation in the Colombo Plan of 1950, which itself represented a step by the “Free World” to counter the advance of Communism in Asia. But it also represented a sense among New Zealanders that they owed others less fortunate a chance to share in some of their own advantages, one of which was a university system, of which they could become increasingly proud. Many aided students, however, went into other institutions and into government departments rather than universities. Language teaching was not involved except in a subsidiary way, for example, at the English Language Institute at Victoria.

Alongside the scholarship programme, New Zealand accepted private students from the Colombo Plan area as well as the South Pacific. Such students did not receive scholarships or subsistence, but, paying the low domestic fee, they were in effect subsidised by the taxpayer though not formally counted as aided. While they came from a number of countries and entered a range of disciplines, the largest group of students came from Malaysia and did 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, the number of overseas students had grown, passing 5 or 6% of the then relatively small university rolls, and vice-chancellors were expressing concern. Were qualified New Zealanders being turned away from Engineering, a numerically limited faculty? Was government funding – then provided on a quinquennial basis through the University Grants Committee – keeping up with the growth both of foreign and domestic students? The universities and the government accepted a proposal from the UGC to set up the Overseas Students Admissions Committee, which would allocate private overseas students according to quotas specified by the universities. The new committee began operations with the 1971 intake. The New Zealand government – though its institutions

bore some resemblance to those in the UK – thus took a different course 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 Muldoon government followed a different course. It imposed a special fee of \$1,500 on private overseas students. Its initial objective, influenced by UK precedents as well as its own necessities, was again to cut expenditure. \$1,500 was not the full cost of a year at university, but it was about half, depending on the faculty. The prime minister spoke of the earnings it would bring. In fact, it further reduced numbers, but that, after all, saved money. As its critics said, many of the kinds of student that had been attracted to New Zealand could not afford a fee hike from \$120 to \$1,500.

The reduction in numbers by these two measures, coupled with the slow growth in domestic numbers in the later 1970s, prompted some ministers, however, 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. New Zealand would benefit more by winning friends and influence than by trying to profit. 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 Parliament in mid-1984.

The new Labour government was Janus-like. During the public outcry, it had committed itself to abolish the \$1,500, and that it finally did. It did not, however, regard itself as committed not to consider or even introduce a full-cost system. Indeed, much influenced by a report from the Market Development Board, it finally went for broke: the whole education system, even at primary level, was opened up to private full-fee paying students, and private entrepreneurs were encouraged to enter the field. The alternative view – that New Zealand should provide niches in what it did best rather than compete with larger countries over the general field – was not supported, though it was put forward.

What happened was not quite what the progenitors of the new legislation expected. The private entrepreneurs focused on teaching English language and found a market, not only among the Japanese, as had been expected, but also among the Chinese. The take-up of university courses was slow to get going. During the contentious passage of the legislation, it had been made very clear that the taxpayer was not to subsidise the venture even in the sense that places could be offered at marginal cost; as a result, very few places were made available. Indeed, it may be argued that it was not until Chinese students were encouraged and permitted to come in large numbers that the full-cost venture showed its financial possibilities; however, that came with a concern lest New Zealand was drawing too much on one country. It came with other concerns, too. Was the venture too emphatically commercial? Was New Zealand offering even in those terms good quality? Was it serious about internationalisation or merely greedy?

Malaysia, the third country I have studied, was, of course, for many years almost entirely on the sending not the receiving end. “In Britain you give education away. In Malaya we eagerly grasp it,” one student at Brinsford Lodge, which the Malayan government maintained in the English Midlands for the training of teachers in the 1950s

and early 1960s, was reported as saying in 1961 (as cited in Times, 1961). Malaysia was seventh on the list of countries that had more than 1,000 students in Britain in 1964/65, second in 1969/70, and at the top in 1974/75 and 1978/79 (Williams, 1981, p. 31), and thus in a sense a factor in the change in Britain's fees policy. The imposition of full fees, not surprisingly, contributed to Dr. Mahathir's "Buy British Last" campaign. "On the one hand, EEC students can study in Britain at the fees paid by British students," he observed. "But people from the South, where the colonies used to be, must pay an inflated fee. Take it out of the EEC. Surely they can afford it much more than we can" (as cited in Khoo, 1995, p. 90 n.).

The numbers of Malaysian students overseas had, of course, been boosted by the ethnic quotas imposed in its universities under the New Economic Policy (Lee, 2004, p. 227). Malaysian students made up about half the foreign students in New Zealand in 1974, and they formed 86% of the Asian students in the country. The centralised quota system made it possible, however, for the government in Wellington to prescribe in 1976 that no more than 40% of overseas students should come from any one country. This decision above all affected Malaysians. It was indeed intended to do so; and, while there had been some concern in New Zealand that an undue number of students were coming from one country, the main reason for the change seems to have been the attitude the Malaysian government had taken. It wanted to reduce, not maintain, the dominance of Chinese Malaysians in professional fields. Following a visit by Tun Razak in 1975, the New Zealand Prime Minister announced that, "noting the increasing numbers of Malaysian and other foreign students seeking opportunities for higher study in New Zealand," his government had decided "to give urgent consideration to ways of ensuring the most equitable allocation to overseas students of the places available" (as cited in Tarling, 2004, p. 60).

The effect of the change was not only to reduce the number of Malaysians in New Zealand universities, but to reduce the number of overseas students overall, since no effective steps were taken to find other sources, even if they existed. The reduction was, however, in keeping with Government policy in the late 1970s: its aim was to reduce government expenditure, and here was a small but effective way of doing so. The step did not go without public criticism. Members of the public had no sympathy with the Malaysian government's policy, and the national students' association (NZUSA) strongly supported the cause of the Malaysian students.

The emulation of British policy in the Antipodes and the recession of the mid-1980s encouraged the development of "twinning" arrangements between private colleges in Malaysia and overseas universities. Those arrangements, "the diversity of languages and religions current in Malaysia," as Machi Sato put it (2007, p. 17), and its moderate cost of living attracted international students to Malaysia. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 made Malaysia more attractive – within three years "there was a more than 10-fold increase in international students studying in Malaysia" (Tan, 2002, p. 180) – and the government opened promotion centres in other Asian cities early in the new century. At the same time, maybe in part as a reaction, the public universities in Malaysia sought to build on their international standing by encouraging postgraduate work and by advancing internationalisation.

What will become of the movement of students in general? Perhaps you will be surprised that a historian asks the question, and he would be surprised himself if he could answer it. After all few people, if any, predicted the vast political changes in international politics after the late 1980s, which were associated with and cleared the way for the new measure of globalisation. And few seem to have been prepared for the global financial crisis after 2008. Prediction is essential but problematical. One must look at possible political options and distrust economic extrapolations.

International student mobility will in a measure depend on the outcome of such major changes. It will also be related to the development in education of electronic options, though these options may supplement rather than supplant traditional education. It is hard, indeed, to envisage any future other than one of continued long-term growth. But growth may not be at the same pace; it may change in character; and it may be subject to short-term factors.

Could there be a shift in student focus, so that the emphasis is less on the acquisition of English and on a narrow range of undergraduate studies? The former seems to be conditioned on provision in the home country. Will students continue to travel to learn English, or will it become, as once in Europe, more a matter of a “finishing-school” or “polishing” approach? Will the acquisition of English become even more closely related to the wish to continue into tertiary study? The latter change, expanding the range of undergraduate studies, seems unlikely to take place, at least for some time. But it is surely in the interests of receiving countries and in particular of institutions both to diversify the disciplines that undergraduates take up and to put more emphasis on graduate study and research.

The consideration of such factors should help countries and institutions to shape their policies and determine their objectives, even if prediction can only be uncertain. The element of unpredictability is not an argument for a merely ad hoc or reactive policy, which could be quite damaging. Rather it suggests the need for an overall strategy and for flexibility and institutional autonomy within it.

I want to conclude not by a forecast but by the expression of a hope. What European universities achieved over many centuries and after much struggle was what is sometimes called “academic freedom.” It comprehended a search for knowledge and a sharing of both the process and the outcome. There have been great achievements in more recent times, increasing participation within countries and across them. But it would be a sadly missed opportunity if that were to lead to a narrow education and a more heavily managerial system that squeezed out of university education the values that are at risk because they cannot be readily quantified.

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