Factors Shaping International Student Mobility: An Overview

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Abstract: *This paper takes a broad overview of the factors shaping current trends in international student mobility in general and from the viewpoint of individual stakeholders like students, educational institutions in host nations and Governments in particular. International student mobility has been considered as the main driver of internationalization of higher education. Though the phenomenon of international student mobility is not a recent one, trends reveal that there has been an exponential rise in the number of students travelling abroad to pursue higher studies since the closing decades of the 20th century. Student mobility is observed to be driven by the interplay of various 'push' and 'pull' factors operating at the international level as also in specific national contexts. Developed countries are observed to be taking institutionalized efforts to promote internationalization through 'Study Abroad ' programs for their domestic students and aggressive marketing for attracting international students for reasons ranging from revenue-generation and local requirements for skilled immigrants to geo-political considerations. This paper argues that international student mobility has emerged as a far more institutionalized phenomenon in recent times as compared to the previously unstructured trends in the same. Thus, it may be argued that forces of internationalization are challenging traditional educational practices and creating an environment for comparison and thereafter competition between countries and its influence has engineered synthesis of knowledge systems beyond local and national configurations to be defined and determined in global contexts. The paper is organized in the following manner: Section I sets out the basic area of inquiry which the paper attempts to analyse. Section 2 places the phenomenon of international student mobility within a definite conceptual framework. Section 3 focuses on the factors governing student mobility in general and from the viewpoint of individual stakeholders in particular. Section 4 is in the nature of a brief conclusion.*
Keywords: higher education, internationalization of higher education, student mobility

1. Introduction:

International student mobility is the most visible manifestation of the process of internationalization of higher education and experts point out that of the latter's various forms, is in fact the one having the greatest impact on the academic environment of sending and receiving nations. Though evidences of international student mobility can be traced back to the ancient period, it has assumed significance as an institutionalized phenomenon since the closing decades of the 20th century. Student mobility across national borders is understood to have made a significant contribution to fostering social and political understanding, integration of cultures and knowledge-sharing at a global scale. Forces of internationalization are challenging traditional educational practices and creating an environment for comparison and thereafter competition between countries and its influence has engineered synthesis of knowledge systems beyond local and national configurations to be defined and determined in global contexts. Thus, as Lawton et al. (2013) rightly point out, international student mobility has been the main driver of internationalization of higher education."

According to estimates of the Institute of International Education (IIE), the number of international students has witnessed acceleration since the 1990s, rising from 1.3 million in 1990 to 2.1 million in 2000 and thereafter more than doubling to 4.3 million by 2012. Boehm et al. (2002) project this figure to stand at 7.2 million in 2025. OECD estimates show that between 2000-10 the number of international students has registered a phenomenal increase of 99% at an average annual growth rate of 7.1%. (OECD 2012) The rapidly changing scenario of international student mobility may be attributed to increasing impact of market forces on the educational process and the revolution in information and communication technology. Countries like the US, the UK, France, Germany and Australia have emerged as popular destinations for international students while China, India and South Korea are observed to be the most important sending countries. Therefore, current trends indicate that the direction of flow of international students is from the developing to the developed countries, though some developing countries like China, Malaysia and Singapore are making their presence felt on the international scene as emerging destinations. Developed countries are observed to be taking institutionalized efforts to promote internationalization through 'Study Abroad ' programs for their domestic students and aggressive marketing for attracting international students for reasons ranging from revenue-generation and local requirements for skilled immigrants to geo-political considerations. Internationalization has thus moved from an 'aid' to a pre-dominantly 'trade' model.

International student mobility is driven by the interplay of various 'push' and 'pull' factors operating in the sending and receiving countries. Important among these are the unprecedented increase in demand for higher education across the world, particularly in developing countries that have created supply-side shortages in institutional capacity and perceived value attached to a degree from a reputed foreign University for future employment prospects and social mobility. This paper focuses on the factors driving international student mobility in general and from the viewpoint of individual stakeholders like students, educational institutions and Governments of host nations.

It may be first useful to place the phenomenon of student mobility within a definite conceptual framework.

2.   Definition of 'International Students'

A broad literature survey of the definitions of the phrase 'international students' reveals that there is no consensus among international agencies compiling data on student mobility across borders on who constitutes an 'international student'. For instance, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics has defined international students as "those who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin". (UNESCO, 2011) It may be pertinent to note here that the UNESCO definition includes only those students who are enrolled in courses and programs of more than one year duration. Thus students enrolled in certificate courses of less than one year duration are excluded herein. Another important source of information on international student mobility, the Institute of International Education (IIE) does not apply the one year criteria in its data compilation and considers any student studying on a temporary visa that allows academic course work to be undertaken, as an international student. Student mobility may be broadly defined as any academic mobility which takes place within a student's program of study in

post-secondary education. The length of absence can range from a semester to the full program of study. Based on the length of the study, student mobility may be generally classified as vertical mobility in which the student is enrolled for a full program, also referred to as Diploma or degree mobility and horizontal mobility in which the student visits the host country for part of a program under a student exchange arrangement, also referred to as credit mobility. Further, student mobility can be observed to occur through organized programs as for instance under the European Union's Erasmus Mundas Program for faculty and student exchange ; or through collaborations among Universities in different countries ; or through free-movers who are mobile students not participating in any formal program of study in the host country. The terms 'mobile students', 'foreign students' and 'international students' are used interchangeably in the literature relating to student mobility. Consequently, the data reported at the international level becomes highly country/context specific and resembles little or no equivalence, thereby making it incomparable across countries.In sum, the term mobile students is nationally defined and each country reports data based on its own criteria.

3. Factors Driving International Student Mobility

Student mobility has emerged as a complex phenomenon, driven by an array of factors ranging from student aspirations for a diversified educational experience and the associated explicit and implicit benefits to policies adopted by educational institutions and Governments for recruitment of international students. It may be useful to understand the factors driving international student mobility in general and from the perspective of the individual stakeholders in the process of international academic exchange.

3.1 Factors Driving International Student Mobility: The Role of 'Push' and 'Pull' Factors

On the question of factors driving international student mobility, experts observe that a variety of pull and push factors operating at the global level as also in specific national contexts play a deterministic role in shaping trends and direction of student mobility (Cummings 1984; Altbach 2004; Li & Bray 2007; Mazzarol&Soutar 2002). Push factors may be defined as unfavourable conditions in the domestic higher education sector such as discriminatory policies or adverse socio-economic or political conditions that tacitly restrict access to certain individuals or groups of individuals. Inadequacy of physical infrastructure such as well-equipped laboratories, intellectual resources, inadequate access to quality higher education institutions in the home country, lack of diversity in educational programs, lack of advanced research facilities, poor quality of instruction, irrationally high entry level requirements and excessive competition in entrance examinations for admissions, political instability and limited opportunities for further education may be identified as some of these factors. Pull factors on the other hand may be defined as opportunities offered by international degrees including tangible benefits such as advanced research facilities, scholarships, incentives and better employment prospects ; as also intangible ones such as choice of education program, accessible admission policies, international exposure and the prestige associated with a degree from a foreign University. However, as pointed out by Davis (1995), "the impact of push and pull factors supplement each other, in that push factors create a generalized interest in overseas education while pull factors provide specific

directions to choice of destination and selection of education institutions and programs." (also see Lee & Bray 2007)

Commenting on the relative impact of pull and push factors in a student's decision-making, Mazzarol&Soutar (2002) note that recent trends reveal that pull factors exert a stronger influence on shaping students' perceptions about the proposition of international education, choice of location as also choice of program while the role of push factors is on the decline due to advancements in the higher education sector across the world, including in developing countries. . Elaborating further on the factors driving international student mobility, Li & Bray (2007) note that the standard push-pull model takes only external factors into consideration whereas the phenomenon of student mobility is far more complex and dynamic and to a considerable extent depends on personal characteristics such as socio-economic status, academic ability, gender, age, motivation and aspirations of the student in question. Zheng (2003) observes that both sending and receiving countries are characterized by negative push forces (that have the effect of driving students out) and positive forces (that have the effect of attracting and retaining students) and the ultimate decision of the student is the outcome of the interplay of these opposing forces. Thus, Zheng argues that the present push-pull model focuses exclusively on the educational, economic and political dimensions of sending and host countries and has underplayed the influence of social and cultural factors. Further, Chen (2007) observes that in recent times, positive pull factors rather than negative push factors are driving international student mobility. The above discussion brings out that though student mobility in general is driven by an interplay of pull and push factors, in more recent times pull factors appear to be playing a more deterministic role. (Snehi 2013)

It may also be useful to consider the factors driving international student mobility from the standpoint of individual stakeholders.

3.2 Students' perspective

Experts point out that exposure to international education plays an important role in shaping a student's overall outlook and also impacts the student's subsequent professional career and lifestyle. According to Li & Bray (2007) individual student's motivation to study abroad can be categorized as follows:

- Academic motives which include pursuit of qualifications and professional development;

- economic motives which include access to scholarships, estimated returns from study, and better employment prospects ;

- social and cultural factors which include the desire to obtain experience and understanding of other societies; and

- political motives which include such factors as commitment to society and enhancement of political status and power.

Thus, as Grönroos (1978, 1994) and Levitt (1980)point out, University offerings to international students need to be understood in terms of not only the core educational service, but also in conjunction with secondary/auxiliary offerings of tangible and intangible attributes

In a comprehensive overview of factors motivating international student mobility, Cubillo et al. (2006) have highlighted the role of non-educational factors including:

- the importance of university and program reputation

- the need of segmentation of prospective students and program suitability

- wide offer of courses, cost of attendance, financial aid

- teaching quality

- internship opportunities

Srikatanyoo and Gnoth (2002) have highlighted the role of the 'country image effect' in an international student's choice of tertiary education destination wherein they are observed to place this factor on par with educational institution image and programme evaluation. According to them the perceived image of a country directly influences a student's attitude towards the educational institutions in that country in a positive or negative way. Specifically, a favourable country image can generate positive sentiments about its academic institutions in general while a negative country image can damage the reputation of even its academically successful institutions. This view is supported by some empirical studies as well. For instance, in an elaborate investigation of factors shaping preferences of international students in Ireland and pre-departure students in Malaysia, Bourke (2000)found that educational reputation of a country emerged as a decisive factor in the choice of destination. This study testifies that students intending to travel abroad for higher studies first select a host country and then choose the institution. Another study by Binsardi and Ekwulugo in 2003,which focused on international students in the UK, reveals that both education and country-related factors are observed to enter into a student's decision function regarding choice of destination. However, Peng et al. (2000) have obtained contrary results in their study that sought to model the relative impact of country, corporate and brand image in the evaluation of educational services in which they found that brand image had the strongest effect in determining choice of destination.

Cost of pursuing the programme including the tuition fees, accommodation and overall cost of living has also been identified as an important factor shaping preference for one country over another. For instance, as noted by Verbik and Lasanowaski (2007), the rising cost of education for international students in traditional destinations like USA and UK is likely to give emerging destinations like Malaysia and Singapore a competitive edge in the international market for education since it is offered at a comparatively lower costs. In addition to education cost, the relatively higher cost of living in traditional destinations like US and UK are also emerging as important factors entering into a student's decision function. Varghese (2006) observes that Australia has emerged as a preferred destination for students from India, China and South Korea due to the lower cost of education and living as compared to countries like US and UK. Besides the cost consideration, international students are also observed to accord a high priority to a diversified educational experience in their choice of location since it entails intangible benefits such as increased confidence, maturity, linguistic competence and academic ability (in terms of internationally recognized qualifications)and exposure to other cultural surroundings (Altbach 2004) In sum, factors such as quality and reputation of the country's education system as a whole , its accessibility, affordability and the employability of the qualification obtained may be considered as important factors in the student's decision function.

Another important factor identified by experts is the growing hype surrounding world academic rankings that has signaled the appearance of a new global higher education area which is transforming the practices of higher education institutions, political decision-makers and students (Salmi 2009; Marginson& van der Wende 2009).

Visa and immigration policies that differ across countries have also been observed as important determinants of a student's choice of location. This is evident from the fact that countries that have linked immigration policies with studying in that country have witnessed a rise in inflow of international students. The Australian experience is relevant in this context. In 1998 Australia amended its points-based immigration system in which graduates from Australian Universities were accorded the benefit of additional points. By the beginning of 2002, 50% of immigration applications came from international students who had graduated from Australian Universities and simultaneously, Australia witnessed a 30% rise in enrolment of international students in tertiary education. (Hawthorne 2005 cited in Snehi 2013).

It may also be useful to note in this context that barriers to mobility of students across nations such as economic barriers, lack of information/motivation, non-recognition of academic merits gained abroad, and discrimination based on gender, age or cultural background may also play a crucial role in determining the choice of country to pursue international education.

Knight (2014) has pointed out another intriguing aspect in this context that student mobility has moved from the primarily 'brain drain and brain gain' model to the 'brain train' model. While traditionally it was considered that international students leaving their home country to study and work in some other country resulted in a loss of intellectual resources and skilled manpower to their home countries and a corresponding benefit to the receiving country, there seems to be a shift in this trend. It may be observed today that many students travel abroad only to train themselves in a cosmopolitan environment, acquire skills that make them globally employable and enhance their growth prospects in their home countries and after completing this 'training' process, they choose to return to the home country. For instance, a student from country A may study in country B and thereafter work in country C and after 8-12 years of international experience and exposure to global environment and practices may return to country A.

From the above discussion it may be argued that international students are seeking to enhance their personal and professional experience and explore widening horizons through the channel of international education.

3.3 Educational institutions' perspective:

From the viewpoint of educational institutions of host nations, besides the immediate benefits of recruiting international students like revenue generation to supplement shrinking public funding, there are more long-term and intangible benefits attached. Presence of international students on campus is seen by educational institutions as an indicator of the quality of their service provision. Therefore, institutions are interested in attracting international students to their campuses to elevate their profiles and visibility on the national and international scene. Also, since international students lend diversity to the campus and bring in a cross-cultural perspective, they make a noteworthy contribution to the overall quality of the learning experience on the campus. This has a somewhat juggernaut effect wherein institutions offering

quality programs are able to attract international students and the presence of international students in turn contributes to building a cosmopolitan environment and enriching the campus with diversity and widening cultural horizons. Besides, the presence of a large number of international students serves as an endorsement for the quality of academic life at the institution and therefore has a significant impact on the choice of institution for future aspirants of international education. This in effect paves the way for higher international student enrolments. Furthermore, since institutions are permitted to charge differential fees from international students, it emerges as a lucrative possibility from the revenue-generation point of view. This is particularly significant in the wake of shrinking public subsidies to the higher education sector in recent times in all the major education systems across the world. (see Healy 2008; Scott & Scott 2005) In order to augment these benefits from international student enrolments, it may be observed that institutions have shifted gears from accommodating international students as part of student-exchange programs to organized efforts at attracting them to the campus for long-duration programs.

Internationalization at an educational institutional level therefore mandates the adaptation of academic practices and environment of the institution to suit the requirements of international students with respect to curriculum and service provision to ensure that the knowledge and skills bestowed by the course remains relevant when the student returns to his/her home country.

3.4 Governments' perspective:

Experts observe that there has been a paradigm shift in the role played by Governments of sending and receiving countries in promoting international student mobility from being passive spectators to becoming proactive facilatators (Powar 2014; Knight 2014; Snehi 2013). Governments are offering logistical support to educational institutions to organize education fairs, branded marketing campaigns and exhibitions as also taking measures such as scholarships and putting effective quality assurance mechanisms in place. Specific measures taken by Governments to promote their education systems include establishment of international agencies to actively recruit students by countries like USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand. (American Council on Education 2006). Commenting on the utility of publicly funded academic exchange programs like the Erasmus Mundas, Erasmus and Sochretus, Erasmus Plus (launched in 2014) and other measures taken by the Governments of Brazil and Saudi Arabia to promote academic exchange. Altbach&Engberg (2014), observe that "These government-sponsored programs, though they form only a small part of the total flow of international students, are important because they send out a message of support."

From the point of view of developed countries, it has been pointed out that, attracting international students to their home campuses is increasingly becoming a strategy to support sustained economic growth. Various studies have revealed that students who studied abroad are more likelyto work abroad after the completion of their studies in comparison to other domiciled students (De Grip, Fourage, &Sauermann, 2009; Findlay, Stam, King, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2005; King, Ruiz-Gelices, & Findlay, 2004; Tremblay, 2002; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008). Student migration is construed as a form of knowledge migration also by industrialized countries which are changing their policies in order to become more attractive for students and highly skilled migrants.(see Hercog& De Laar 2012) Therefore, student mobility has evolved as a very

useful channel of skilled immigration, considering that the host country receives human capital which is well-adapted to its domestic labour markets. Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) have pointed out that 'chronic skills shortages are furthermore highlighting the importance of attracting international students, in terms of potential short- and long-term gains for institutions and countries'. Elaborating on this viewpoint, Snihi (2013) points out that Western economies are actively seeking to retain international students after graduation, with their industrial sector increasingly interested in recruiting overseas talent to compensate for local skilled workforce shortages and to remain competitive in an era of globalization. Similarly, Australia and Canada are also proactively recruiting international students to supplement their rapidly decreasing and ageing populations.Poear (2014) highlights in this context that Australia and Canada, that require skilled and knowledgeable manpower, see in the longer form of international student mobility a possible source of 'brain gain' through emigration. (also see OECD 2013; Sabharwal 2014) In sum, Governments of developed countries are interested in promoting inward international student mobility to augment their intellectual resources and skills In view of their ageing native population or supply-side shortages in the labour market. This may be seen as the motivation for Governments in some developed countries to simplify visa procedures. For instance, Snehi (2013) notes that countries like Australia are attempting to attract international students by relaxing visa and immigration policies; United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia are offering work permits on completion of academic programmes while countries like Germany are offering residency and employment visas. These measures also seem to be quite effective as the possibility of working in the host country on completion of the education programme serves as a major incentive to study abroad.

It may be noted here that economic considerations have not been the only and exclusive motivation for promoting international student exchange. For instance, during the Cold War, governments in the United States, USSR and the United Kingdom, used scholarships and funding regimes to attract foreign students to their Universities to further geo-political ends. (Healy 2008). For instance, based on a 1990 study of political leaders from 113 countries across the world, Spilimbergo (2006) reports that 57% of leaders studied had been educated abroad with 22% educated in the United States, United Kingdom and France. As noted by Van Damme (2001)"In the heights of the Cold War the higher education institutions of the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries attracted students from ideologically associated nations. And educational exchange between the US and Western Europe after 1945 was developed to foster democracy and developing the Atlantic community." Current trends also indicate that besides the explicit and quantifiable economic benefits, trade, cultural and political dimensions of international student exchange are important considerations of policy-makers in designing policies towards international students. This may be seen as the motivation behind designing programmes like the '100,000 Strong Initiative' of the US Government that sought to send one lac American students to China to pursue higher education programmesin Chinese Universities by 2014 and the British Council's 'Generation UK' programme that sought to provide subsidized education and internship positions to 15,000 British students in China. . Both these specific measures may be seen as attempts by Western countries to strengthen cultural, economic and political ties with China which has emerged as

a major force-to-reckon-with in the international political economy.

3.5 Attempts at multinational levels to promote student mobility

Besides Governmental initiatives, attempts are also being made to forge collaborations in higher education at a multinational level to deliberately popularize some geographical regions as more attractive destinations for international students. The most visible example of such an initiative is the 'The Bologna Process' which aims at harmonizing academic structures across countries in the European Union in order to attract international students. The initiative sought to make the EU 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010' and is claimed to have 'made Europe, overnight, a major competitor in the international student market' (NAFSA 2006). The American Council on Education (2006) notes that similar efforts are also underway among Asia-Pacific countries to create a regional higher education space similar to the one in Europe. The Council further notes that new competitors, such as Singapore and the Middle East, have also entered the market in the process of creating regional education hubs

The above discussion brings out that forces of internationalization are challenging traditional educational practices and creating an environment for comparison and thereafter competition between countries and its influence has engineered synthesis of knowledge systems beyond local and national configurations to be defined and determined in global contexts.

4. Conclusion:

The exponential rise in the number of international students, particularly   in the post 1990 period has drawn a lot of attention within the academic and policy circles. An understanding of the factors governing these trends can provide useful insights into determining appropriate policies for regulating inward and outward student mobility in accordance with national objectives and priorities. Current literature in this respect highlights the role of push and pull factors operating at the international level as also in specific national contexts though experts argue that positive pull factors are observed to be playing a more deterministic role as compared to negative push factors. While international students seek to enhance their personal and professional experience and explore widening horizons through the channel of international education, educational institutions are interested in recruiting international students to generate additional revenue and for enhancing their visibility at the national and international level. The role of Governments in this regard has undergone a paradigm shift from being passive observers to becoming proactive promoters of inward student mobility for reasons ranging from revenue generation, to further geo-political ends and in case of developed countries, for supplementing their local skilled labor force shortages. Attempts are also being made at the multinational level to foster international student mobility. From this discussion it may be argued that international student mobility has emerged as a far more institutionalized phenomenon in recent times as compared to the previously unstructured trends in the same.

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