Nationalist style politics will trigger a new wave of international mobility

Rahul Choudaha
Times Higher Education
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/nationalist-style-politics-will-trigger-new-wave-international-mobility

The new political order has started impacting the mobility choices, patterns and directions of international students. On the one hand, the top two leading destinations – the US and the UK – are facing uncertainty in maintaining attractiveness for international students; while on the other hand, countries such as Canada, Germany, Australia and the Netherlands are all experiencing an increase in enrolments. How is the future of student mobility likely to shift?

To understand the future trends, let us look back at the recent history of mobility. In my article, Three Waves of International Student Mobility, I analyse the trends from the lens of three overlapping waves shaped by key events impacting future trends. While many variables influence mobility, this framework provides a bigger picture of how mobility has changed over time from the perspective of competing destinations.

Wave I: Impact of Terrorist Attacks

Wave I of international students has its origin in the increasing demand for high-skilled talent, especially in STEM subjects at master’s and doctoral level. During this wave, many institutions were motivated to attract international students for research and reputation – and were willing and able to provide funding and scholarships to lure global talent.

However, the events of 11 September 2001 changed the dynamics – and the tightened visa requirements made it more difficult for students to study in the US. Around the same time, the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area started taking shape to create more comparable and coherent systems of higher education to foster student mobility within Europe. Towards the end of Wave I, several countries including the UK, Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland gained at the expense of the US.
Wave II: Impact of Global Financial Recession

Wave II has its origins in the global financial recession that started in the US. The cascading effect of the crisis resulted in severe budget cuts in the higher education sector in many countries around the world. This compelled institutions to start looking for alternative sources of revenue. One of the sources was to recruit full fee-paying international students. According to OECD, there was a “greater interest in recruiting foreign students as tertiary institutions increasingly rely on revenues from foreign tuition fees which are often higher than for national students”.

The narrative of Wave I of “attracting global talent” changed to “recruiting international students” in Wave II. This time, neither universities nor governments in many destination countries had the resources to offer financial support to international students. The growth of China’s middle class provided the much-needed enrolment momentum to many countries around the world, with the leading English-speaking countries including the US and the UK as the most significant beneficiaries.

Wave III: Impact of New Political Order

Wave III is shaped by the uncertainties triggered by a new political order with nationalistic overtones. The outcome of UK’s referendum on membership of the European Union and the result of the US presidential election surprised many – both positively and negatively. However, nationalism was on the rise even before that. Gideon Rachman noted in The Economist “The resurgence of the nationalist style in politics became evident in 2014...A widespread disillusion with political and business elites, after years of disappointing economic growth, is a common factor that underpins resurgent nationalism across the globe.”

Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies triggered concerns of finding post-graduation career opportunities among many prospective international students considering study in the UK and the US. In contrast, countries such as Canada and Australia pursued policies to enable pathways for finding work and career advancement opportunities.

At the same time, competition from English-taught programmes in Asia and continental Europe have been gaining traction as they continue to improve in quality and gain from some students turning away from the US and the UK. For example, Germany has already surpassed its national targets of enrolling 350,000
international students by 2020 because of high-quality education with free to low tuition fees and up to 18-month residence permits to find work opportunities.

The institutional driver in the third wave will be to innovate and offer new modes of programmes through partnerships, transnational, online and continuing education to attract and retain international students. At the same time, institutions must prepare to support increasing expectations of career and employability outcomes among international students.

The third wave also indicates a trend towards increasing competition to attract international students, which would result in a slower pace of growth of international enrolment in the US and the UK. There are many factors that influence students’ decision-making process to study abroad and one of the key factors for a clear majority of students is the ability get a return on their investments. Higher education institutions that aim to be globally competitive in attracting international students must pivot to a goal of innovating to attract the best-fit international students and delivering on the promise of value for money.

References