

International mobility in higher education

This brief describes a set of policy questions to consider when developing an international mobility strategy for higher education.

Target and purpose

Also referred to as cross-border higher education, international mobility in higher education applies to people (students and faculty), and, more recently, to educational programmes and institutions. International mobility serves several purposes:

- To participate in international knowledge flows, be exposed to new ideas or technologies, including the tacit knowledge associated to their use.
- To improve teaching and administrative practices of higher education institutions by giving them international benchmarks (*e.g.* the feedback of international students).
- To attract and keep, even temporarily, some talents for the economy and research system of the host country.
- To generate revenue for the economy and the higher education sector.
- To help developing and emerging countries build capacity.

Practice

- An initial step involves the strategic objectives and scope of the internationalisation strategy. This strategic vision is best developed in consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders.
- A first consideration is for countries/institutions to think about *both* their sending and receiving policy. Countries often overlook the potential benefits of importing education (sending their students abroad and receiving foreign programmes and institutions in their country).
- A second important consideration is to review some basic questions depending on the different segments of mobility they want to stimulate, namely:
 - i) Student mobility
 - a) Inbound mobility: Are the previous study and diplomas of international students easily recognised? If not, are there procedures in place to ease this recognition? Can they easily and quickly get a visa? Should they pay differential fees? Should they have access to domestic public subsidies? Should they be allowed to work while studying? Can they easily access information on accredited domestic

institutions and programmes? Are there agreements for their health insurance etc. with their country of origin? Are there mechanisms in place to facilitate their success (linguistic tutoring, student housing facilities, etc.)? Should they be proactively recruited?

- b) Outbound mobility: Are studies or credits gained abroad easily recognised? Do students have access to mobility scholarships? Are their domestic scholarships, if any, portable abroad? Are their social benefits, if any, portable abroad?

ii) Faculty mobility

- a) Inbound mobility: do institutions have discretionary budget or special positions allowing the temporary funding of foreign faculty? Do they have spare offices? Are there some possibilities of teaching for them?
- b) Outbound mobility: does the structure of the academic calendar facilitate short stays abroad? Are mobility scholarships available? Is it possible to take sabbaticals? Is social coverage and rights to pension portable or continue while on sabbatical?

iii) Programme and institution mobility:

- a) Inbound mobility: can foreign programmes/institutions operate in the country? Is there a licensure, registration or invitation system? Are partnerships mandatory? Can students enrolled in foreign programmes get public funding? Can foreign programmes/institutions apply for public funding (for example for research)? Do they contribute to the country's capacity development priorities? Are the degrees they deliver recognised by public authorities? If not mandatory, can these programmes/institutions be accredited and quality assured under the domestic system if they wish?
- b) Outbound mobility: can domestic programmes operate abroad? If yes, under what conditions? Are they committed to delivering the same quality abroad and domestically? Are they covered by national quality assurance and accreditation arrangements? Can they use public money for this purpose?

- Some major policy instruments to stimulate inward and outward mobility lie in:

1. Mobility scholarships: Outward mobility scholarships should be means-tested, and their amount sufficient not to discourage mobility of less affluent students. Merit-based scholarships should be targeted to inward mobility, especially whenever there is an underlying migration agenda.
2. Transparency on the domestic accredited offering of programmes through a centralised portal, and efforts towards the development of better information on teaching quality and learning outcomes in an internationally comparable fashion.
3. Ease and speed of visa application.

4. Reliable and accessible information on scholarship sources and on conditions of living.
 5. Establishment of an agency representing the domestic higher education sector in international fairs and providing a central access point to most information related to mobility.
 6. Incentives for tertiary education institutions to implement the mobility strategy.
 7. Participation of higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and other bodies, in relevant international networks.
- An important consideration lies in the necessary co-ordination between different policies. A good internationalisation policy will typically be whole-of-government as it requires an alignment between higher education policy and certain dimensions of immigration policy (student and faculty visas and conditions of stay after studying), trade policy (coherence with commitments on education services in bilateral and multilateral agreements), development policy (consistency of aid development policy in higher education), labour market policy (co-ordination between professional bodies and higher education institutions, notably for regulated professions).

Appropriateness and feasibility

It is always feasible to encourage outward student and faculty mobility: the main limitation lies in the high cost of a scholarship policy. Being part of mutual agreements for student or faculty exchanges helps contain this cost. Inbound mobility is not as feasible to all countries though. It partly depends on dimensions which are difficult to change quickly such as the overall reputation and attractiveness of the receiving country (*e.g.* presence of world-famous higher education institutions, weather, touristic attractions, language). There is not always external demand for the outbound mobility of a country's programmes and institutions. Conversely, there can be some political challenges to the internationalisation of the system through inbound mobility, for example as a result of xenophobic feelings in the population, of the feelings of displacement of domestic students or of excessive subsidisation of foreigners.

Success factors

- Explicit internationalisation strategy, with clear understanding of main objectives and stakeholder incentives.
- Recognition and quality assurance arrangements covering cross-border higher education under all its forms, and explicit and visible commitment to quality (both for international students received in the country and for programmes and institutions operating abroad).
- Information and support system for international students (administrative, linguistic, social, educational).
- Reputation of the country's higher education system, climate, touristic and economic attractiveness of the country.

Risk factors

- Internationalisation increases information costs to potential students and can give room for disreputable providers or unscrupulous behaviours or reputable institutions: this can put at risk the reputation and future internationalisation prospects of the country's higher education system.
- Foreign provision may not meet the objectives of the importing country.
- Foreign provision may subsequently lead to brain drain rather than brain circulation or to a reduction in development aid to developing countries.
- Internationalisation may exacerbate inequity within domestic tertiary education systems and creates new inequities.

Evaluation

The evaluation of cross-border higher education should focus on several major potential impacts: quality and capacity building in specific subject areas; spillovers in the innovation system; internationalisation of research; related economic activity; retention and subsequent migration of highly trained workers; displacement of domestic students; equity of access to mobility, impact on higher education finances. While indicators on student mobility are now well developed and regularly published, countries need to put more effort on developing indicators about programme and institution mobility. Longitudinal databases should also collect information about international students and domestic students going abroad to improve knowledge about the impacts of international mobility for mobile people themselves.



Further resources

OECD (1999), *Quality and Internationalisation in Higher Education*
www.oecd.org/bookshop?pub=9789264170490

OECD (2004), *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education*
www.oecd.org/bookshop?pub=9789264015043

OECD (2004), *Quality and Recognition in Higher Education: The Cross-Border Challenge*
www.oecd.org/bookshop?pub=9789264015081

OECD (2005), *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*.
www.oecd.org/dataoecd/27/51/35779480.pdf

OECD (2007), *Cross-border Tertiary Education: A Way towards Capacity Development*
www.oecd.org/document/20/0,3343,en_2649_35845581_39169364_1_1_1_1,00.html

OECD (2008), *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society*
www.oecd.org/document/35/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_36021283_1_1_1_1,00.html

OECD (2008), *The Global Competition for Talent: Mobility of the Highly Skilled*
www.oecd.org/document/42/0,3343,en_2649_34269_41361685_1_1_1_37417,00.html

OECD (2009), *Higher Education to 2030, Volume 2: Globalisation*
www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en_2649_35845581_43908242_1_1_1_1,00.html