Chapter 5

Institutional Asymmetry Regarding Inbound and Outbound Student Migration: Assumptions, Implications, and Policy

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ABSTRACT

During the last twenty years there has been a dramatic growth in international student mobility. These students face multiple challenges in adapting to their new country, its culture, and its educational system. To some extent, these experiences are faced by all international students whether they are participating in short-term study abroad experiences (outbound), or in extended sojourns in a foreign country (inbound). However, whereas outbound students usually receive institutional guidance and support, inbound students often receive little or none. The asymmetric institutional awareness of, and response to, international students adversely impacts those who are inbound. Asymmetric ways of understanding and recognizing international students also limit colleges in optimizing the potentials of international study and constrain their efforts in becoming comprehensively internationalized institutions. This chapter explores the negative consequences of asymmetrical understandings of international student migration and recommends ways in which they might be mitigated.

INTRODUCTION

The number of students engaged in international education has grown exponentially over the last two decades. Some will remain abroad for a few months, others for years (British Council, 2014). Generally, migrant students seek educational experiences that they consider more advantageous than those which can be obtained in their home countries, but their specific motivations differ. For some, the key factor is the recognition of globally expanded higher education systems. For others, it is a passionate interest in new educational opportunities, cultural diversity, and foreign language acquisition. Yet others are
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Driven by a spirit of globalization, the recognition of increased learning opportunities, or the possibilities of professional mobility after graduation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008). All of these considerations have contributed to the rapid expansion in international education, with OECD countries alone experiencing an increase in international student populations from 1.3 million, in 1990, to more than 4.3 million in 2011 (OECD, 2013).

International education and international student mobility are complex issues, presenting significant challenges and opportunities for the countries involved, their institutions of higher education, and of course for migrant students. Faced with such complexity it is understandable that many researchers and policy makers have focused exclusively on single issues. For example, at the national level that narrow focus is often on the added economic value that is associated with student migration (Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2013a, 2013b; Raghuram, 2013). At this level of analysis, the emphasis is on the physical movement of students from one country to another and on the directionality of migrant flows. Using a flow-centered logic, and based on the reference point of the individual country, students are classified as either outbound or inbound (British Council, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). The concern for flow patterns and directionality mirrors the dynamics of international trade, with notions of inbound/outbound paralleling those of export/import. Many countries, their analysts, and their higher education systems understand international education primarily, and sometimes exclusively, in terms of commercial export.

At an institutional level, however, there are problems with adopting a restricted flow-logic that necessitates a bifurcation of international student migration into separate inbound and outbound streams (Knight, 2012). Splitting international student migration in terms of directionality creates the illusion that outbound and inbound students are intrinsically different and that their experiences are different. It is the splitting of a common migration experience that leads to institutions of higher education developing an asymmetric understanding of the international student. The inbound or outbound distinction might have pragmatic utility, but a more useful and constructive understanding focuses “on their interdependence rather than on their role as separate components of the internationalization process” (Knight, 2008, p. 36).

This chapter argues that the separation of international student migration in terms of flow and directionality obscures the common features of the migrant student experience. The journey of any international student is an extension of self; a personal venture into cultural and educational difference. From this perspective, all educational migration – whether it takes to form of a short-term study abroad, or a four-year sojourn in order to obtain a degree – is an outbound journey into areas of social, educational, and cultural difference. For international students, talk of inbound and outbound mobility makes little sense because the inferred directionality is with reference to external factors such as countries and educational institutions, not with the students themselves.

This chapter begins by providing a brief background of international education with a particular focus on American higher education. This section explores the reasons for asymmetric understandings of outbound and inbound migrations and considers their consequences. Having identified the problems, the second section looks at ways of understanding student mobility in more balanced, holistic, and productive ways. Recommendations and suggestions are provided that might be useful in reorienting institutional understandings, policies, and practices. The third section highlights areas of research that might better inform institutional strategies in meeting the challenges and opportunities of international education, while the final section summarizes the main issues presented in the chapter and provides a focused way forward in responding to contemporary higher education in our increasingly globalized and internationalized world.