

**International Student Mobility and Student Visas:  
A comparative study of the US, UK and Australia**

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**Abstract**

The number of students studying abroad has been consistently increasing. The issue of student immigration and visas is bound up with policies and politics about international immigration more generally, yet also constitute a sub-set within these wider immigration concerns. This article starts with the issue of international student mobility globally, and outlines the arguments in favour of and against student immigration. It then asks the question of how and why governments are dealing differently with student immigration issues. Three cases are considered and compared: The US, UK, and Australia. Although there are nuances to each case, it is argued that: In the United States, security concerns have had a strong influence on policy—both in terms of concerns about potential dissidents entering the country on “bogus” student visas, and also with regards to whether students studying in fields that have potential military applications should be embraced and integrated with post-study work visas. In the UK, student visas have been integrated into wider efforts to reduce immigration numbers overall. Disconnects within sectors of the government have led to political wrangling and a confused student immigration policy. Australia has a more clearly amenable approach to student visas, as students are seen as ‘low risk’.

**Introduction**

Issues of immigration continue to be politically salient, and the movement of people across borders is politically charged. International students constitute a group of international immigrants, but are also a sub-category within that group as most are only immigrating for a fixed period of time, and have a different impact on receiving cultures and societies.

**Defining Student Mobility**

The definition of an “international student” is not straightforward, and how individuals are classified raises issues in terms of data collection and reporting. The OECD defines

“International students” (or “mobile students”) as those who have moved from their country of origin for the purpose of study. “Foreign students” form a separate category, as those with citizenry of a country other than that of their study, but who may be long term residents of their study-country, or may have been born in that country (OECD 2013, 306). This paper refers primarily to those students who are “onshore enrolled”; that is, who are physically present to study at an institution that is not of their own citizenship.<sup>ii</sup>

Following on from the definitional complexities relating to “international student” is how to define “study”: study of what topic and at what sort of institution? This paper focuses on “tertiary” education, though this poses its own definition issues. The World Bank defines tertiary education as, “all secondary education, including but not limited to universities. Universities are clearly a key part of all tertiary systems, but the diverse and growing set of public and private tertiary institutions in every country—colleges, technical training institutes, community colleges, nursing schools, research laboratories, centres of excellence, distance learning centres, and many more—forms a network of institutions that support the production of the higher-order capacity necessary for development (World Bank 2013). Students onshore enrolled may therefore be undertaking degree-level study at universities (Higher Education Institutions), or other forms of study such as for Vocational Education Training (VET) or English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS). This focus of this paper on tertiary education is because most data-sources relied upon use this category.<sup>iii</sup>

The lack of a straightforward definition for “international students” and “higher education” creates complications in terms of comparing data sources. This paper primarily refers to the data available from the OECD (2013), though many other sources are available and occasionally referred to as well. The reliance on the OECD data is based on the desire to establish a common reference point with the numbers referred to in the analysis, using the definitions chosen as laid out above.

Further definitional points to make is that “source countries” refers to those countries sending students to study abroad (alternatively called “sending countries”), and “destination countries” are those receiving them (alternatively called “receiving countries”). “Bogus

students” (versus “genuine students”) refers mainly to people who get a student visa without ever having the intention to study (“...people seeking a migration outcome rather than an educational outcome” [Knight 2011, xi]), or else to those who get a student visa to study but then withdraw from study and don’t change their visa status but remain in the country anyway.<sup>[iii]</sup> This category may also include genuine students in certain “less desirable” disciplines who strategically apply to study in disciplines that are known to be more likely to gain a student visa (e.g. Science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—disciplines)(Parliamentary Briefing 2013).

### **Mapping Student Mobility Globally**

Students pursuing education outside of their country of origin has increased (in terms of raw numbers but also percentages) significantly in the last half-century.  
Graph 1 (reproduced from OECD 2013, 306) © OECD

The OECD reported that 4.3 million tertiary students were enrolled outside of their country of citizenship in 2011, which represented a fourfold increase from 0.8 million in 1975 (OECD 2013, 307).<sup>[iv]</sup> According to a briefing for the UK Parliament, the number of such students will reach 7 million worldwide by 2020 (2013, 1). During the period of 2000-2011, the number of foreign tertiary students worldwide more than doubled, with an annual growth rate of nearly 7% (OECD 2013, 305).

Although there are noteworthy trends for up-and coming sending countries (such as Vietnam, Brazil, Mexico and Saudi Arabia and also receiving countries (such as Brazil, again) (Choudaha & Chang 2012, 9), the data for the last few years indicate that the main trend is for Asian countries to be sending more students abroad, and European and North American countries to be the main receivers. In descending order, the countries with the highest percentage of international students in their tertiary enrolment in 2011 were: Australia, the UK, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Austria (OECD 2013, 305). The US receives the highest number of students in raw terms, but those students represent a lower number as part of their whole student body, overall. The main sending countries in 2011 were China, India and Korea (OECD 2013, 305).<sup>[v]</sup> Asian students represented 54% of the total number of tertiary

students studying abroad in 2011 (2013, 305). Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the US together receive more than 50% of all foreign students worldwide (OECD 2013, 306). The OECD recently reported that Europe was found to host 48% of all international students, and North America 21% (OECD 2013, 305).

Chart 1 reproduced from OECD 2013, 305 © OECD

The reasons for the upward trend in students going abroad for study are myriad, though some key factors include: a raised interest in cultural and academic exchange, reduced transportation costs, increased access to tertiary education abroad and the internationalisation of markets (which creates incentives amongst students to pursue international experience) (OECD 2013, 305).

### **International students: Pros and Cons**

The author of this paper is unabashed in the opinion that students should have the opportunity of mobility for both ethical and also practical reasons, which I defend and also qualify in the conclusion of this section. However, at the outset in this section I outline the arguments for and against student mobility, from the perspective of both sending and receiving countries, according to ongoing political and academic debates.

#### *Economics*

Arguments relating to student mobility range across many areas, yet the core factor cannot be denied: International students are big money for receiving countries—they represent a “lucrative” market, as stated by a recent UK Parliamentary Briefing (2013, 5). In many cases, international students pay fees that are higher than domestic students and therefore provide an important revenue stream to Higher Education Institutions, and these tuition fees may subsidise other expenses of the university. In other tertiary institutions (such as English language courses) foreign students provide the core source of income. The presence of international students benefits the rest of the receiving economy as well, in terms of the money they spend on food, accommodation, leisure, and travel (Knight 2011, ix). Students

are also unlikely to rely heavily (or long-term) on state funded infrastructures and programmes such as welfare, primary schools or subsidised health-care.

A counter argument relates to how universities are already increasingly over-crowded and under-funded, and that spaces should be prioritised for domestic students. Yet in many cases the number of domestic students that universities can afford to have is maximised, so more international students bring in higher fees that supplement the university's budget, without displacing any domestic students.<sup>[vii]</sup>

There is also the classic argument against many different types of immigrants that, "They're taking our jobs!" Most students are allowed to undertake a minimal level (20 hours per week in the UK) of paid work on their student visas. However there are two possibilities here: Firstly, that early-career students take low-skilled, low paid jobs—as bar workers, cleaners, or waitresses—which are often under-filled in the host country anyway. Secondly, more advanced students (for example PhD students) may fill highly skilled jobs—as researcher assistants, graduate teachers, or specialist technicians. In this case, although they may be "taking" the job of a local citizen, their specialist skills may benefit the economy overall, and there may also not be anyone with the same skills set available locally for a particular employment. In the US for example, the role of skilled students as "innovators" has been noted as important for the overall economy (Mobarak 2013).

Having students study abroad has economic implications for the sending country as well. Whilst some countries may not have tuition fees on certain programmes, for those that do students going to another country means a loss of the tuition and living fees for the sending country, had the student stayed in-country instead. As per the argument above regarding employment, sending countries may also lose workers, either unskilled or skilled, that would otherwise be in-country.

However sending students abroad may also have positive impacts for a local economy. If a student is working at the same time as studying, they may be sending home remittances. Also, if they return to their country of origin post-study, they will have obtained education

and skills that could benefit the local economy in the future. Even if students ultimately remain in their country of study (or go elsewhere), there may still be benefits for the sending country. As one such immigrant has written, “I, like many other first-generation immigrants, have continued contributing to the development of my country of birth, by combining the skills I acquired in the United States with my context-specific knowledge to pursue research and policies that address some of the key public health and development challenges in Bangladesh” (Mobarak 2013).

### *Cultural/ social*

Both the receiving and sending countries of international students benefit on a social and cultural level from having international students. For receiving countries, international students bring a diversity of culture and background, which enriches campus life for all students (Knight 2011, ix). Whilst this argument rests on the assumption that such diversity is *a priori* positive, a more hard economic benefit can also be articulated: because the business and labour environment is increasingly internationalised, it is good for both home and foreign students to be exposed to different cultures (UK Parliamentary Briefing 2013, 6). For students studying outside of their home country, in addition to learning about another country’s culture and business methods, they will also gain foreign language skills and “broaden [their] horizons” (OECD 2013, 304).

For some sending countries that value the purity of their own culture and feel threatened by globalisation’s influences, it may be bad to have students going abroad to learn and potentially bring back new cultural influences and beliefs. However, whilst not dismissing this argument entirely (and I discuss it further below in the section on “ethics”), it seems firstly naïve to believe that such influences may not impact upon a country in other ways anyway. And secondly, to deny students the ability to choose to study abroad if they want to is, in my opinion, a violation of an individual’s right to choose where to study.

### *Talent*

The issue of student “talent” is complicated and increasingly controversial. Concerns relate to the impact (for both sending and receiving countries) of having talented, educated and skilled students studying abroad, and particularly when they stay for a period of time (or even

eventually immigrate permanently) to their country of study. For many immigration-shy countries, authorities worry about whether a student is a “genuinely temporary entrant”; that is, they intend to come and study but return home afterwards (Knight 2011, x). It is viewed by some sectors of the government (responsible for controlling immigration) as a negative that some students may come to study but ultimately settle, whereas the preferred anti-immigration position is that they would complete their studies and then leave.

For sending countries, the concern is that if students seek to remain in their country of study, there is “brain drain”; that the most upwardly mobile and talented students will immigrate away from their home country. While there is some merit to this argument, counter-approaches are, as above, that those who migrate away may still have positive benefits for the sending country—in being able to apply their expertise to their home country (Mobarak 2013), in remittances, and in potentially creating business opportunities and networks that may later benefit the sending country. It is also noteworthy that the number of students who actually do immigrate permanently to their country of study are not that high: Taking the UK as an example, a 2013 Home Office Report found that of people entering the UK on a study visa in 2006, only 1% had gained settlement 5 years later, and 17% still had valid leave to remain—meaning that five years on, 82% of that cohort had expired leave to remain (the majority of which will have left the country)(pp8-9).

For the receiving country (and particularly in the US), even where the government and public has a strong anti-immigrant sentiment a relatively recent conundrum arises: if foreign students come to study and develop a particular talent or expertise, it may be a security risk to then deny them the ability to stay in-country, but instead require them to leave the country and return home where their talents may be put to (what the receiving government may perceive as) sinister uses. I personally find this concern to be grossly over-exaggerated and paranoid, but note it here as it is potentially impacting on policy changes and political discourse regarding foreign students. Particularly in the STEM fields, receiving governments may struggle with anti-immigrant posturing on one hand (which would see students leave post-study), and security concerns on the other.

Within specialist academic communities, the argument for encouraging students to stay post-study is focussed on the benefit that talented graduates bring to the host society and economy after graduation. Foreign students often contribute to innovation and research both during and post-study in a way that is valuable to the host country (Mobarak 2013).<sup>[viii]</sup>

### *Soft Power*

The power of what is taught in tertiary education, and the institutionalisation of students as part of this process, is a significant soft power source for receiving countries. Non-national students are voluntarily experiencing and learning the educational agenda of their chosen tertiary institution. Thus a country's higher education system may become a major source of "soft power" and influence in the world, with an impact on securing future economic and foreign policy objectives. Although this refers to the millions of students who study abroad and return to their country of origin to enter any range of professions, it may be particularly important for soft power when a foreign-educated student enters politics. For example, a UK Home Affairs Select Committee report published in March 2011 noted that 27 current foreign heads of state around the world had been educated in the UK (referenced in Parliamentary Briefing 2013, 8).

It may be argued that sending countries also benefit geopolitically from having their citizens study abroad. The friendships created across national boundaries may endure into the future, creating important inter-personal ties (Knight 2011, ix). Establishing such personal networks between countries may be a useful political tool for both sending and receiving countries, as well as potential business and professional links.

### *Ethical concerns*

My main ethical concern relates to the soft power issue raised above and is a critical theoretical approach: given that education is a powerful way to shape a person's worldview, should there be a concern that this gives significant benefit to receiving countries in terms of their ability to influence global discourses? That is, if there is no one single "best" way to educate people and no "obvious" truthful narrative to teach them (particularly in the social

sciences such as history and politics), then it may be that what emerges in a particular country in terms of their method of education is the result of myriad complicated processes, including the influence of more powerful actors and their understanding of what makes “good education.” For example, it could be argued that because academia has been traditionally dominated by men, that there is a patriarchal bias in what is seen as “good practice” and “relevant to study”.

This logic could be applied to international study, in that there may be an ethical concern that hegemonic discourses will be reinforced by the “globalization” of education through international study. This is particularly of concern given the asymmetry of ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries. The main countries that are student destinations are all wealthy, English-speaking countries. Also many students who are able to study abroad from poorer countries to wealthier ones are of their home country’s elite, and thus it could be that student mobility is contributing to consolidation of a global elite with similar education and knowledge, which could in turn reinforce certain hegemonic discourses globally.

Whilst this is a legitimate concern, I argue that an alternative ethical issue outweighs it, which is a person’s right to study and immigrate to where they choose. Also, it can be argued that foreign students in turn add their own perspective to the classrooms of receiving questions and thus potentially have a role in countering dominant beliefs and understandings of domestic students.

## **Method**

Three cases of receiving countries are now explored in depth: the US, the UK, and Australia. The purpose of exploring these case studies is to consider what the general approach is towards student immigration, and to analyse the reasons behind those approaches.<sup>[viii]</sup> Because specific student visa requirements and procedures are constantly changing in these three countries, the purpose is not to elaborate on the specifics of student visa applications, but rather consider key aspects of policy and discourse in each case, and what they reflect on the wider context of each country’s approach toward international students.

There are several reasons for selecting these three particular cases. The countries considered are three of the main ‘receiving’ countries of international students worldwide at present.<sup>[ix]</sup> The three countries chosen for comparison also have readily accessible data, which is available in English.

No primary data collection has been done for this paper, but rather the author has relied on the extensive data on student mobility already available. As mentioned previously, OECD (2013) data is primarily relied upon in order to have a common set of definitions and markers for comparison. However other sources are also utilised—though it should be acknowledged that some sources, such as the WEG, have a clear pro-student mobility approach.

### **USA: The securitisation of student visas**

This section outlines the US’s current situation with regards to international students and then argues that, compared to the other two cases, issues of security have had a noteworthy influence on recent policy changes. This securitisation of student visas is two-fold: Firstly, it relates to concerns and restrictions on student visas after high profile cases where people on student visas were involved in terrorist activities. Secondly it relates to the arguments about whether skilled students in particular areas of study (and particularly the STEM fields) should be “sent back home” post-study or allowed to remain in the country, for security (and also economic) reasons.

International students wishing to study in the US must do so in 2013 through the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Post study, students may apply for a one-year Optional Practical Training (OPT): a period during which undergraduate and graduate students may work in the US for at most one year on a student visa towards getting practical training to complement their field of studies.

The US is the number one receiving country in the world of international students, in terms of raw numbers. However, given the size of the US tertiary education system, this does not mean that the country has the highest percentage overall of foreign students, compared to others. In the first year that statistics were available from the Institute of International

Education (1948/49), there were 25,464 international students in the US out of 2,403,000 (making them 1.1% of the overall student body). By 2011/12, there were 764,495 out of 20,625,000 (making them 3.7% of the total)(IIE 2013).

However it is noteworthy from the graph above that after decades of steady increase in the percentage of international students in the US, numbers have stabilised and even declined since 2001. There are many reasons that may be attributed to this, including tuition costs and competition from other popular destinations (referenced in Choudaha & Chang 2012, 6). However I argue that a significant impact on international student enrolments relates to post 9/11 changes in the political discourse and visa policies of America, and moves towards securitising immigration policy generally.<sup>[xi]</sup> One of the 9/11 bombers was on a student visa for an English language programme based in California.<sup>[xii]</sup> Subsequent high profile news events further heightened concerns about student visas. In 2010 a “massive student visa fraud” operation was uncovered, in which people (mostly from the Middle East) were assisted in getting student visas from a man in California. Visa recipients were not found to have links to terrorism, but it served to raise public concerns (James 2010). Then in 2013 a man indirectly involved in the Boston Marathon bombings was found to be residing in the US on an expired student visa.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

As a practical consequence of the Boston Bomber event, changes were made to the SEVIS. In particular, US Customs are now responsible for verifying all student visas (BBC News 2013). However the deeper result, I argue, is that student visas have become increasingly securitized in the US.

This additional checking of students entering the US on a student visa is one reaction and outcome to the Boston Bomber’s event. However a deeper discussion and controversy relates to the issue of what to do about highly skilled students with expertise in particular fields: should the US seek to keep certain foreign students in the US post-study, for economic but also security reasons? In 2012 a Republican Bill was proposed that would have allocated 55,000 visas for legal permanent residency (green cards) annually to foreigners who had completed Master’s or doctoral degrees in the STEM fields. Keeping STEM students in the

US is also an economic issue: it is not desirable for STEM graduates to go home and work for competitor institutions, but rather keep them in America to contribute to the US economy.<sup>[xiii]</sup> However security concerns also featured in the the discussions—both regarding concerns that green cards allocated to STEM graduates may enable terrorists to stay in the country, and also that students specialised in STEM fields should be encouraged to stay in the country because their expertise could make them potentially useful to hostile groups and countries abroad. The bill failed due to partisan disagreement, but its introduction tells us something about the political climate in the US towards international students.

### **UK: “Maintaining public confidence in the immigration system”**

After an overview of UK international student numbers, I argue that compared to the other two cases, British policy on student visas is bound up in wider issues of immigration. The current ruling government is responding to voter demands to reduce UK immigration, and student visas are being targeted as an easy category in which to reduce numbers.

The UK is the second most popular destination for international study. In the year to June 2011 there were 242,000 international students in the UK (Cavanaugh & Matt 2012, 2). A recent Parliamentary Briefing stated that higher education exports (EU and non-EU) contributed £8 billion to the UK economy in 2009.<sup>[xiv]</sup> The same Briefing estimated that higher education exports could be worth £16.9 billion to the UK by 2025 (2013, 1).<sup>[xv]</sup> Some institutions in the UK have up to 50% international students (referenced in Choudaha & Chang 2012, 6).

Under the current system, students gain entry via a Points Based System<sup>[xvi]</sup>, in which the study institutions themselves are given responsibility for approving students to study in the UK, and also ensuring that students who arrived attended classes as “legitimate students”. When it was implemented, the new student visa system (“Tier 4”) was meant to instil “public confidence” as well as encourage “genuine” international students to come to the UK to study. Institutions achieve “Highly Trusted Status” from the Home Office to vet and invite foreign students to study, but in turn are under huge pressure to do what the Home Office would otherwise be tasked to do: prevent bogus students from entering or staying in the country. By the end of 2011, 474 institutions had lost their right to “approve” international

students (Choudaha & Chang 2012, 8)—some of which will likely have been “covers” for bogus students, and some of which will have been genuine institutions of further study.

Whereas in the US, the political discourse regarding student visas has become bound up in issues of security, in the UK student mobility policy is enmeshed with more general issues of immigration. The coalition (Conservative-Liberal Democrat) government that came to power in 2010 under Prime Minister David Cameron stated intent to reduce net migration to under 100,000 by the next general election in May 2015 (Cavanagh and Glennie 2012, 2). Net migration includes not only those coming in to the country long-term, but also those emigrating out long-term. It is highly controversial that international students are counted in net migration figures in the UK, unlike the US and Australia where they are not counted in figures regarding permanent migrants (Cavanagh and Glennie 2012, 2). Current numbers for net immigration in the UK are around 250,000, and students are the largest category of migrant (Cavanagh and Glennie 2012, 2), despite the fact that the majority leave on completion of their studies. Very few international students have the right to vote, and hence student visas have come to be seen as a soft target for the government to strive for its commitment to reducing overall immigrant numbers. The Migration Advisory Committee has calculated that the government would need to reduce non-EU student numbers by 87,600 over three years (2012–2015) in order to meet their targets (Parliamentary Briefing 2013, 5).

The government’s attempt to reduce student visa numbers has often put various UK institutions at odds with each other. Tertiary institutions maintain a desire to increase foreign student numbers, and higher education exports has been identified as a key sector in the government’s own industrial strategy (Parliamentary Briefing 2013)—whilst the Home Office are tasked with reducing them.<sup>lxviii</sup> As an example of the tension within government policy at the moment, Member of Parliament Vince Cable (Liberal Democrat, and hence part of the ruling coalition government) recently reassured that there will be no cap on international students, but also noted that the “desire to increase student immigration conflicts with the government’s initial ‘pledge’ to reduce migration by 2015” (quoted in Young 2013). A Public Accounts Committee Report reinforces the point: “International students contribute significant economic benefit to the UK and provide an important income stream for UK

education institutions. There is tension though between the twin goals of ensuring a flow of high quality students into the UK and ensuring and maintaining public confidence in the immigration system” (Committee Select Committee 2012)

The new system has led to significant costs for Higher Education institutions with ‘Highly Trusted’ status. A study by the Higher Education Better Regulation Group (HEBRG) found that UK universities spent £67m in 2012-13 to meet Home Office requirements. The HEBRG said confusion over what was required and "constant rule changes" had led to waste and overspending as universities sought to comply. <sup>[xviii]</sup>

A further major policy change was the scrapping of the ‘Post-study work visa’ in the UK, effective from April 2012. The post-study work visa gave students the ability to apply for a 2-year work visa post-graduation, but now they are required to leave after a short grace period. Although most students do not stay on to work in the UK after finishing their study, the possibility of being able to do so was a strong incentive for choosing the UK as a destination (Cavanagh and Glennie 2012, 4).

Political disputes over UK immigration in general have impacted that country’s policies on student visas, and are closely tied to voter interests in reducing immigration overall. However it is worth noting that, like the US, there are also some security concerns relating to foreign students, though not, I would argue, at the same level as the US. For example, students who are citizens of certain countries are required to register with the police upon their arrival in the UK. <sup>[xix]</sup> However the dominant issue for the UK remains overall immigration numbers and issues, which international students are included in.

### **Australia: Students as low risk migrants**

After introducing Australia’s situation with regards to international students, I argue in this section that Australia generally has a more open approach to international students. As with the UK, immigration is a key political issue in Australia; however (and as opposed to current UK policy) international students are considered as a distinct category. This has led to

Australia becoming a more desirable destination for international students, and perhaps even diverting student numbers to their country who may have otherwise studied in the US or UK. In 2009, Australia was listed as the third largest provider of international education services by percentage of international to domestic students, behind the US and the UK. Some Australian universities have up to 60% international students of their overall enrolment (referenced in WEF 2012, 6). In 2009 there were 491,565 international students enrolled on courses in Australia (2009 being the peak of international student enrolment), though this has since declined slightly (due to increased global competition and a rising Aussie dollar [Knight 2011, vii]).

As with the US and the UK, the student visa system in Australia has been recently overhauled. As with the UK, it operates a points based system for visa applications. In 2010 restrictions on students were tightened, but then relaxed again in 2011. Of particular note is that Australia has announced plans to introduce a post-study work visa (whereas the UK just scrapped theirs, and in the US it is ambiguous). In Australia this will allow graduates of bachelor, masters and PhDs to work in Australia for up to four years after they graduate. Additional changes include accepting a wider range of English language proficiency tests, relaxing some aspects relating to proof of funds for study, and offering increased flexibility regarding the work that people may do whilst on a student visa.

Whereas I have argued in the US student visa issues have become bound up with security concerns, and in the UK international students are part of wider political concerns and government pledges regarding immigrants more generally, Australia has a more pro-active approach to accepting international students and treating them as a separate category of migrant. This relates to an overall political discourse that tertiary students—and university students in particular—are relatively “low risk” from a migration integrity perspective (Knight 2011, vii).<sup>[xx]</sup>

Although issues of immigration are highly charged in Australia, the focus of the media and government is largely on asylum seekers and low-skilled immigrants, and not international students. Recent high profile media stories relating to ‘boat people’—those who attempt to

arrive in Australia for asylum by sailing to the island by boat—are indicative of where the Australian government and populous’ main concerns are with regards to immigration issues. This focus within the political discourse on low-skilled immigrants and asylum seekers who want long-term settlement feeds, I argue, into the main government and citizenry concerns regarding international students: their presence in the country in the first place is not particularly controversial, but there are heightened concerns about their defaulting on their students status and positioning themselves for long-term residence. Thus student visa policy is more relaxed than in the UK and the US at the moment, but there is a stronger focus on people who come to the country as “bogus” students for immigration purposes. A government Strategic Review of the Student Visa Programme (2011) suggested an assessment scale to determine “migration risk”, and that countries be assigned an Assessment Level relating to risk. For example, Level 3 includes: Turkey, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Croatia. Level 4: China and Bangladesh (Knight 2011). (This policy has not yet been adopted.)

### **Comparison and Analysis: Exploring similarities and differences**

The US, UK, and Australia were chosen as case studies in part given that they are three of the main receiving countries of international students. Given this commonality, the similarities and differences between them may shed light on wider issues regarding student mobility globally, and how governments are reacting to both the benefits and also risks of dealing with international students.

#### *Visa Fraud*

Across all three countries, the issue of visa fraud or “bogus students” was a concern, though the three governments used as case studies have contextualised this issue differently. The prevalence of people aiming to enter countries on “bogus” student visas clearly reflects a more general immigration issue in the countries considered: there are large numbers of people who desire to gain entry into the US, UK and Australia, and restrictions on immigrant numbers and “tough” immigration policies mean that people may resort to entering fraudulent student applications. However the ways in which such “bogus students” are politicised is nuanced between the three: in the US, concerns regarding bogus students has been

particularly related to issues of security; in the UK, such bogus students have been targeted as part of a wider ‘crackdown’ on immigration; in Australia bogus students are a concern, but seemingly of less importance with regards to what is seen as more pressing immigration issues, such as asylum seekers.

### *Post-study work*

In all countries there is also a debate as to what rights to remain in the country students should have after graduation. In the cases under comparison, current policies differ: in the US, students may obtain the OPT, giving them a year of work (under specific conditions); in the UK there is no such possibility of post study visa (as this was recently scrapped in 2012); in Australia there is the possibility of up to two years’ work visa, upon application. In the US, there have been arguments to make exceptions to the strict post-study work options available for STEM students, but these have thus far failed to be implemented.

Post-study work visas are a complicated political issue. Across all cases, it is accepted that international students, who have developed skills on their programme of study, may benefit the receiving country in post-study work by contributing their skills and innovation to that economy. However additional issues complicate individual government responses. In the US, there are concerns about both rejecting and also accepting students post-study due to their potential security and also economic impacts; in the UK post-study work visas were a ‘sacrifice’ to government pledges to reduce overall migration; in Australia post-study work visas are a useful incentive to attract highly skilled (versus ‘other’) migrants.

In the UK and Australia, one can see that there is also a concern about ‘temporary’ versus ‘long-term’ settlement. It is not that this issue does not come up at all in the US discourse, but it is more prominent with the other two cases. This relates back to the question of whether international students are ‘okay’ as long as they return home, or whether the possibility of their staying beyond study is an important concern.

### *Disconnection Between Relevant Actors*

Another similarity across the three cases relates to the tension between actors (government and otherwise) who may have competing remits, interests, and normative feelings about

international students. Different actors have different interests with regards to international students, and they often do not see eye-to-eye. In all three cases, there is a recognition by some agencies of the economic benefit of international students (and in fact the strong desire to increase their numbers), and those that want to constrain them (e.g. the security sector of governments, politicians representing voting public that wants to reduce immigration). This process plays out differently in each of the cases. Poor inter-agency coordination may lead to confusion and political wrangling.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the three cases and analysis done here, some general conclusions can be made. Firstly, although there are well-established arguments against student immigration, I firmly believe that the arguments in favour of student mobility are more convincing, for both sending and receiving countries. There are clearly economic benefits on both sides, though less measurable factors such as cultural impact and contentment of individual students are also strong reasons for encouraging student mobility.

Secondly, although international students are by definition immigrants, they should not be “lumped together” under government policy with other immigrant categories. Students are unique in that they are mostly short-term immigrants and the securitisation of student visas (as in the US) or targeting of them as part of wider immigration culls is bad practice.

Thirdly, governments need to improve institutional link up in addressing student migration. Whilst it is natural that different government agencies tasked with different responsibilities (such as controlling immigration, or monitoring security, or pressing for innovation, or pushing for economic growth) will have different priorities and interests, failure to convene on priorities can lead to confusing student visa systems, massive expense, and disgruntled students.

Although this study has focused on three case studies within the confines of data that is pre-existing, additional issues strike me as interesting for further research: Firstly, as the definition of an “international student” becomes more complicated, through improved

distance learning (because of the internet and e.g. free online courses) and through universities having “outpost” campuses in other countries, the current paradigm for understanding “student mobility” will change. There may be interesting topics to consider with regards to this development.

From a critical perspective: I noted that the dominant trend was for Asian students to be coming to Western institutions for study. Although I briefly addressed this in the ethics section (above) I feel that there is potential further analysis to be done on this trend, from a critical perspective (in terms of questioning how student mobility potentially allows for the reinforcement of dominant discourses established through education)

In this paper I have focussed on receiving countries as case studies, but it would also be interesting to assess the policies and political climate regarding student immigration from a set of countries that are primarily ‘senders’ of international students.

The mobility of students globally has been an upward trend in the last half century, and the interest and desire of students to study abroad will increase in the future. International students have benefits for both sending and receiving countries, and it is in the interest of governments therefore to relax, rather than restrict, student visas.

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<sup>11</sup> Categories of students who don't clearly fit in to one or the other above are common and complicated. Some universities now have branded external campuses abroad; for example the University of Liverpool in Suzhou (China). At such campuses students receive a degree from a university that has its primary base elsewhere, but the campus is in a different country—and students at the secondary campus are often largely from the country in

which the outpost campus is based. Thus it is unclear whether they should be classified as “international” students. Remote degree programmes have been around far longer than international campuses, but are similar for definitional issues in that degrees awarded to students are from a university based in a particular country (for example the University of London International Programmes) but students study for the degree remotely, often within their country of domicile. For this paper such students are not of primary consideration, but in the world of globalised education, such sub-categories may become increasingly relevant.

<sup>[li]</sup> However to reiterate, this does not therefore include students on “remote” programmes—that is, undertaking a degree with the University of London International Programme, via internet and post and studying in their home country—because they would not then be “onshore enrolled”.

<sup>[lii]</sup> Although I disagree with this categorisation, the UK Parliamentary Report also classified “bogus students” as those who chose to study topics that are more likely to gain a student visa.

<sup>[liv]</sup> According to UNESCO Institute of Statistics, the number of globally mobile students increased to 3.4 million in 2009, up from 2.1 million in 2002 (referenced in Choudaha & Chang 2012).

<sup>[v]</sup> Taking the UK as an example: domestic (EU) student numbers are capped, because they are entitled to student loans from the UK government and there’s a limited amount of funding available. International students, who pay their own way, are not capped, so universities can take as many as they like. Most UK HE institutions have business models in which international student fee income cross-subsidises their research and publicly funded (domestic) teaching. So clearly any threat to limit international student numbers through the visa system presents a huge financial threat to universities, and is hotly contested. The sector was very worried about the impact of the visa policy and government rhetoric around the issue given the drop off in international student numbers seen in the US when similar policies were introduced there. It’s an on-going concern and a highly charged political and economic issue.

<sup>[vii]</sup> For example, Stuen et al (2012) found that most engineering Ph.D.’s granted at American universities now go to people born abroad. Additionally, three of the five most recent Nobel laureates from Britain were not born in that country (Mobarak 2013). A CATO Institute study also recently found that more patents come from foreign students after graduation, which positively adds to the net contribution of government fiscal accounts (Hanson 2012, 26).

<sup>[viii]</sup> Whilst some specific aspects of student immigration policy within in each country are noted (such as recent changes, or post-study work opportunities), an in-depth description of student visa application processes (such as number of points required, how students must apply for a visa) is not possible or relevant within the current article. However sources references provide further detail for those interested.

<sup>[ix]</sup> Yale University associate professor A. Mushfiq Mobarak has said (2013) “Australian and British educators were overjoyed with the quality of their international student applicant pool when the United States instituted restrictions on student visas after 9/11.”

<sup>[xi]</sup> Initially it was reported that others involved in the plot also had student visas. However according to the 9/11 Commission Report and also the staff report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States, it was only Hani Hanjour from Saudi Arabia who was on a student visa. He piloted the plane that was flown into the Pentagon. Although he never attended his programme, his visa was not revoked and therefore was technically legitimate.

<sup>[xii]</sup> Azarmat Tazhayakov was not directly implicated in the bombings, but is accused of hiding evidence for one of the suspects. He had been a student from Kazakhstan on a student visa. His visa was no longer valid as he had been dismissed from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, but he was allowed to re-enter the US on that visa (BBC News 2013).

<sup>[xiii]</sup> More patents come from foreign students after graduation, which positively adds to the net contribution of government fiscal accounts (Hanson 2012, 26).

<sup>[xiv]</sup> Other sources place this figure at 7 billion. <http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/24/09/2012/politics-international-education> <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20120216105739999>

<sup>[xv]</sup> Other sources estimate this at 17 billion (Young 2013).

<sup>[xvi]</sup> Student visa reforms started under the previous (Labour) government. Between 2008 and 2010 a new Points Based System was gradually implemented.

<sup>[xviii]</sup> As a further, institution-specific example, Simeon Underwood, academic registrar and director of academic services at the London School of Economics, wrote in the Times Higher Education that the LSE is spending at least a quarter of a million pounds a year to deal with student visa issues, including things such as providing advice to students and fees to the UKBA (Underwood 2012).

<sup>[ix]</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/oct/02/international-students-queue-into-night-to-register-with-police>. An video filmed by the National Union of Students raised criticism of the UK government as it showed students at 6am having camped out over night in the rain in order to register (full story from Ratcliffe 2012).

<sup>[x]</sup> Beyond university-level students, there are strong arguments being made about how VET students (particularly from Asia and especially India) may also constitute a viable market (Knight 2011, vii).