# U.S. Higher Education's Euro-Asian Student Mobility Equation

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Received: November 29, 2010 Accepted: December 17, 2010 doi:10.5539/ass.v7n6p29

#### Abstract

U.S. higher education has been an international focal point of attention and inspiration since the end of World War II. The iconic dimension of U.S. academic and research excellence has been a magnet for international students, the source of the U.S. competitive advantage, but arguably also the tree hiding the global forest. This article analyzes the strategic implications of the discrepancy in nature, quantity, and quality between student mobility to and from the United States between 2000 and 2010 and makes the case that signs of a potential erosion of the U.S. competitive advantage are emerging. The focus is on incoming foreign Asian students and outgoing American students to Europe. The argument is that a mobility imbalance is putting the United States at a competitive disadvantage in a market environment where reciprocity is a minimum acceptable standard in intersystemic transactions.

Keywords: Asian students, American students, Higher education competition, Higher education policy

#### 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Thesis

The iconic dimension of U.S. higher education and its long-undisputed international competitive advantage have, to some degree, insulated U.S. higher education policy from the pressures of globalization and encouraged the construction of transnational issues in domestic terms. Among such issues is the U.S. focus on the problematic of Asian American students, a most legitimate policy issue from an interior standpoint but also, for lack of international awareness, a domestic tree hiding the global forest. The burning strategic implications involving foreign Asian students in the U.S. remained a backburner issue in a context of complacent readings of international student mobility figures such as those compiled annually by the International Institute of Higher Education (IIE). The literature significantly abounds in studies on Asian American students but includes comparatively few works on the growing strategic importance of foreign Asian students in the U.S.

#### 1.2 Literature review

Significant research has been conducted over the past decade pertaining to the relationships between the Asian American community and U.S. higher education policy. Woo's 2000 Glass Ceilings and Asian Americans: The New Face of Workplace Barriers focused on the interactions between ethnicity and labor markets and argued that Asian Americans were largely misunderstood because of success stereotypes when they were in reality subjected to multiple glass ceilings (Woo, 2000). In 2002, Working with Asian American College Students: New Directions for Student Services provided more specific insights in the model minority myth to call for more careful consideration of the racial identity and racial consciousness of Asian American students (McEwen et al., 2002). Museus's 2009 Conducting Research on Asian Americans in Higher Education: New Directions for Institutional Research aimed to deconstruct recurrent misconceptions that allegedly led to the invisibility of Asian Americans in higher education research and suggested future directions for research (Museus, 2009). A useful list of bibliographical resources relevant to the various aspects API (Asian Pacific Islander) college student development and API professionals was compiled in 2010 by the NASPA Foundation (NASPA, 2010). The literature, however, has primarily focused on Asian American students and largely overlooked the strategic implications of the increasing numbers of foreign Asian students in the United States. Chinese students did receive specific treatment in the 1980s with A Relationship Restored: Trends in U.S.-China Educational Exchanges, 1978-1984 (Orleans, 1986) and Chinese Students in America: Policies, Issues, and Numbers (CSCPRC, NAS, 1988) but the strategic dimensions pertaining to the foreign Asian community in the U.S.

higher education system have lacked systemic analysis. The issue has been tackled by the news press -with articles and releases such as "Asian Students Looking to Enter U.S. Graduate Schools Start Early" in *The Wall Street Journal* (Voigt, 2003); "Study debunks theory Asian students are top notchers in US" (AFP, 2008); "Australia faces tough contest with US for Asian students" (Gallagher, 2010); "More Chinese students studying in US" (Matheson, 2010)- but has received comparatively little attention as matter for academic research.

## 2. Asian students in the U.S.

## 2.1 Student flows

The 2010 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange (IIE, 2010 / "International Students: Leading Places of Origin") confirmed the prevalence of Asian students in the percentage of international students in the United States that had already been observed in previous years. During academic year 2009-2010, students from Asian countries (China; South Korea; Taiwan; Japan; Vietnam; Nepal; Thailand; Hong Kong; Indonesia; Malaysia) accounted for 305,351 (44.2%) of the 690,923 international students in the United States. China alone accounted for 18.5%. Students from the top five places of origins comprised 52% of all international students in the United States; three of those places were Asian countries. This is overall good news for the United States. With the U.S. Department of Commerce reporting that international students contribute nearly \$20 billion to the U.S. economy through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses (IIE, 2010 / "Economic Impact of International Students"), being the top destination worldwide for international students does come with indisputable market value. In addition, beyond strictly economic considerations, the U.S. sees potential political advantage in training the future leaders of Asia. As underlined by Gallagher, "Asia will be the world's economic powerhouse this century and US universities want Asia's leaders as their alumni" (Gallagher, 2010). But this is arguably also where the problem lies: those international students are Asian students, not Asian American students, and they are very likely to return home. A 2009 report published by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation revealed that of the 1,224 people questioned in the survey in the three ethnic groups represented (Chinese, Indian and European) 13% of Chinese, 16% of Indians and 12% of Europeans would like to stay in the United States for 6 to 10 years (Walker, 2009). The market value attached to international students in the United States is therefore volatile and, as this paper argues, politically ambivalent.

## 2.2 Levels and fields of study

Asian students in the United States primarily seek graduate and research training although there has been a recent increase in undergraduate enrollment. Academic year 2009-2010 saw 54,803 international students registered in non-degree programs (7.93%), 274,341 in undergraduate programs (39.71%), and 293,884 in graduate programs (42.53%). The proportion of graduate students reached 46.3% in the case of all Asian students, 52.1% in the case of Chinese students (IIE, 2010 / "International Students: By Academic Level and Place of Origin"). The top five fields of study of international students in the United States in 2009-2010 were: business and management (21.1%); engineering (18.4%); physical and life sciences (8.9%); math and computer science (8.8%); social sciences (8.7%) (IIE, 2010 / "International Students: Field of Study"). Even though they do not refer to U.S. citizens or permanent residents, those figures still come with some degree of satisfaction in the wake of the concerns voiced in 2006 by the U.S. National Academies regarding the declining state of highly strategic STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in the United States. In 2010, 28% of respondents to an IIE survey reported an increase in international student enrollments in STEM fields, 10.9% reported a decline, and 61.1% reported no change at all. Increases were also observed in MBA programs, with 25.6% of the respondents reporting increases in international enrollments, 18.2% reporting declines, 28.7% reporting no change, and 27% indicating their institution does not offer an MBA (IIE, 2010 / "Fall 2010 International Student Enrollment Survey"). These are indeed comforting signs for at least two reasons. International students constitute an adjustment variable in economic terms, with a \$20 billion contribution to the U.S. economy in 2009-2010, but also in academic terms, compensating for enrollment declines in certain areas of study. This is reminiscent of what Australia was able to achieve in the by enrolling thousands of full-fee paying Asian students, especially from China (Gallagher, 2010).

#### 2.3 The strategic ambivalence of mobility figures

The signs are comforting from an interior standpoint. The status of Asian American students in U.S. higher education has considerably improved over the years, and much effort has been made in that direction. Rightly so. A 2008 report entitled *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Facts, Not Fiction: Setting the Record Straight*, published by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) and the College Board, debunked the so-called fiction that AAPI students were taking over U.S. higher education by opposing it with facts: the increasing presence of AAPI students parallels similar increases that other student

populations have experienced; the AAPI student population is concentrated in a small percentage of institutions, giving the false impression of high enrollment in higher education overall; AAPIs have a wide range of academic interests including the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education as opposed to just STEM fields (CARE, College Board, 2008). It is however mistaken to use the same tools to assess the status of Asian American students and the status of foreign Asian students in the United States. Statistics such as those provided by the IIE are not valid for Asian American students and arguments such as those developed in the above mentioned CARE and College Board report cannot apply to foreign Asian students. In a global market environment, the true measure of the competitiveness U.S. higher education in the face of incoming foreign Asian students would be some minimal degree of competitive reciprocity in destinations, levels and fields of study.

# 3. U.S. Students in Europe

## 3.1 Discrepancies in destinations, levels and fields of study

The United States is the top destination for students from China, Japan, and South Korea, but none of these countries is the top destination for U.S students (IIE, 2009 / Atlas of Student Mobility). China ranks 5th, Japan ranks 11th, South Korea ranks 25th among the international destinations of students from the United States. The leading destinations of the 260,327 U.S. students abroad in 2008-2009 were the United Kingdom (31,342 students / 12%), Italy (27,362 students / 10.5%), Spain (24,169 students / 9.3%), France (16,910 students / 6.5%), and China (13,674 students / 5.3%) (IIE 2010 / "U.S. Study Abroad: Leading Destinations"). All in all, 8.3% of U.S. students went to Asia in 2008-2009 (5.3% to China; 2.2% to Japan; 0.8% to South Korea) when 42.51% of Asian students were studying in the United States that same year. The reciprocity is at best imbalanced in terms of student flows. U.S. students are primarily attracted to Europe. The top five fields of study of U.S. students abroad in 2008-2009 were: social sciences (20.7%), business and management (19.5%), humanities (12.3%), fine or applied arts (7.3%), physical or life sciences (7.3%). Engineering, 2<sup>nd</sup> with Asian students in the U.S., ranked 9<sup>th</sup> with outgoing American students (3.2%); math and computer science, 4<sup>th</sup> with Asian students in the U.S., ranked 10<sup>th</sup> with outgoing American students (1.6%) (IIE, 2010 / "U.S. Study Abroad: Fields of Study"). There is no symmetry to speak of in the choice of study areas as U.S. students abroad appear less attracted to highly strategic R&D fields than Asian students are. Finally, while Asian students in the United States primarily seek graduate and research training, the profiles of U.S. students abroad in 2008-2009 were primarily undergraduate (83.6%), with only 16.3% of graduate students, including 0.4% of doctoral students (IIE, 2010 / "U.S. Study Abroad: Student Profile").

## 3.2 U.S. mobility and the Grand Tour tradition

What these statistics reveal is a geopolitics of higher education systems that do not actually speak the same strategic language and whose international exchange cannot achieve efficient transactional status. The exchange is at best transitional. In terms of mobility Asia is looking towards the United States with its own set of objectives, and the United States is looking towards Europe with another set of objectives. Another cause of concern should lie in the fact that European students, who have a long tradition of looking towards the United States, are now increasingly looking towards Asia. A global loop may be in the process of being looped but with a difficult strategic Euro-Asian equation for U.S. higher education policy to solve. There is every reason to applaud the fact that the U.S. is a magnet for international students, which, beyond economic considerations, does promote international outlooks on U.S. campuses. And there is also every reason to applaud the fact that U.S. students are travelling overseas more than they used to. What statistics tell us about U.S. student mobility, however, is that mobility ("study abroad") tends to be regarded as an eye and mind-opening experience rather than as a strategic move with possible returns on investments. U.S. students seeking strategic paths will tend to stay in the U.S. while Asian students will seek to study in strategic places overseas. The characteristics of U.S. international mobility in terms of destinations, fields and levels of study are largely reminiscent of the tradition of the Grand Tour of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when young British elites would travel around Europe for a period of time extending from a few months to a couple of years in what was an educational eye and mind-opening rite of passage. The ideal is laudable but such mobility of international students lacks a decisive strategic component in an increasingly transactional, rather than transitional higher education market.

# 3.3 Colliding v. articulated agendas

The international mobility of U.S students bears quite a few resemblances with intra-European mobility under the Erasmus program (undergraduate cohorts; study abroad stays viewed as eye and-mind opening experiences; uncoordinated study paths in the social and human sciences; etc.). Erasmus is immensely successful among European students, as it should be, but can hardly be regarded as an achievement in strictly academic terms. It cannot be in strategic terms either. Erasmus is least likely to help European higher education systems or the

European Higher Education Area gain market shares in the knowledge-based economy. Yet there is a virtue to the Erasmus plan, and that virtue is political: the bringing together of the youths of the different member states of the European Union to foster a European identity. No comparable virtue can be argued to motivate the mobility of U.S. students abroad. In terms of international student mobility, therefore, the U.S. remains faced with a Euro-Asian equation because of the structural discrepancy between its incoming and outgoing mobility. Asian countries seem to have more large-scale strategic visions and are currently developing parallel models in terms of student mobility, with an Asian version of Erasmus, the Asian Erasmus Plan (AEP) that would implement a new regional higher education framework with better policy coherence involving the three countries of Northeast Asia (Japan, China and South Korea) as well as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries. A two-tiered approach is therefore being developed, with intra-Asian political objectives on the one hand and the global dynamics of Asian mobility towards global higher education systems and institutions. There is talk of involving Australia, New Zealand and India, which are already members of the East Asia Summit, and significantly even the United States "given its long history of educational exchanges with the Asian region and moreover, its strong influence in many other policy circles" (Kuroda, 2007). Such an extension/inclusion, if confirmed, will mark a displacement of the historical gravity center of global higher education towards Asia.

## 4. Discussion and suggestions for further research

The stakes are high in terms of policy transfer for the United States. Interest in how the United States developed a successful mass higher education system sparked reform and adjustment policies across the world. U.S. higher education still enjoys a competitive advantage, as shown by the rankings of U.S. universities in the Academic Ranking of World Universities, but because it had no other system to look up to, and also because of a characteristic isolationist slant, that dominant position has narrowed the focus of U.S. higher education policy on domestic issues rather than it has opened it to transnational issues. The consequence is that the reform impetus now lies with now-rival international higher education systems. Asian countries are a case in point. The Chinese government, for example, is investing massively to create world-class universities. New combinations of homegrown and international models and more competitive approaches to international mobility and partnerships are likely to change the higher education market, i.e. the transactions for talent as well as their destinations in the near future.

#### 5. Conclusion

The National Science Board revealed in 2010 that U.S. dominance in NS&E (Natural Sciences and Engineering) had slipped over the past decade and that R&D intensity had grown considerably in Asia while it had remained steady in the United States. In some Asian countries, R&D growth rate is now two, three, even four, times that of the U.S. (NSB, 2010 / Jan.15 Press Release). The U.S. student mobility equation should no longer be underestimated. Cultural dominance is volatile in the face of global geopolitical strategies. U.S. leadership in the proportion of young college graduates enrollment has eroded down to a 10<sup>th</sup> rank in the 2008 percentage of adults (25–34) holding an Associate's Degree or higher (NCPPHE, 2008: 6). Most of the post-2002 increase in U.S. NS&E doctorate production reflects degrees awarded to temporary and permanent visa holders, who in 2007 earned about 11,600 of 22,500 U.S. NS&E doctorates. Foreign nationals have earned more than half of U.S. NS&E doctorates since 2006. Half of these students are from East Asia, mostly from China (31%), India (14%), and South Korea (7%) (NSB 2010 / "Global Higher Education and Workforce Trends").

In a context of declining homegrown research, turning a blind eye to the U.S. Euro-Asian mobility equation may have serious long-term consequences. From a market perspective, a logical strategy for U.S. graduate schools would be to seek to attract the most talented Asian students to have them contribute to research efforts in the United States and, once trained, to facilitate their permanent residence status in the United States. Graduate student retainment was precisely the motive behind the proposed 2009 *Staple Act*, also known as the *Stopping Trained in America PhDs from Leaving the Economy Act*, which aimed to exempt international holders of PhDs in the sciences, technology, mathematics and engineering from resident limits under the *Immigration and Nationality Act*. The text was introduced on March 30, 2009 by Representative Jeff Flake (R) of Arizona but was to die in the Congressional Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law. The impetus is now on the side of Asian countries, with geostrategic questions raised as to the mobility, or lack of the same, of U.S. students and to the attractiveness and future world-class status of U.S. higher education in the face of Asian countries.

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