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Unpacking The Complexity Of Student Mobility In A Broader Geopolitical Context For Institutions And Nations: From Revenue Source To Influence Building

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Abstract: Drawing on a discourse analysis of over 100 economic, media and educational policy texts from 2017-2019 on student mobility policy, targets and objectives, and informed by key sources such as UNESCO tertiary flow data and national censuses, this presentation unpacks the complex geopolitical contexts of student mobility patterns and policies for institutions and nations from both sending and receiving countries around the world. Findings reveal a wide continuum of institutional and national policies surrounding student mobility, from essential revenue sources, to investments in influence building. Academic research on student mobility (Bedenlier, Kondakci & Zawacki-Richter, 2018) or strategic enrolment management (SEM) (Aw and Levinson, 2012) has not generally taken into account wider geopolitical contexts. How can an understanding of wider geopolitical contexts inform institutional and national objectives? How can this understanding inform institutional SEM plans?

Paper:

Context

As an ever increasing number of universities implement a Strategic Enrolment Management (SEM) plan, more thought is being paid to "deciding[…] what kind of students and what kinds of programs… SEM [has] to be about setting long-term revenue goals and finding the right mix of domestic and foreign students" (Usher, 2011). SEM requires universities to be strategic, while simultaneously distributing and sharing responsibility for student success and access across an institution, including for international students. SEM must be data-driven (Thomas, 2015). However, institutional motivation for recruiting international students can be quite different from students' and their home country's motivation for choosing and promoting study abroad. An understanding of the complex, broader geopolitical context of sending and receiving countries must inform both institutional goal setting and policies, such as institutional SEM.

Theoretical Perspectives

Student mobility is far from a new phenomenon. Böhm, Davis, Meares and Pearce (2002) anticipated that international students worldwide would rise from 1.8 million to over 7 million between 2000 and

2025. In 2017, 4.2 million students studied abroad (Altbach and Reisberg, 2018). Internationalization through student mobility is important for intercultural awareness and preparing global citizens; yet, it is a significant economic enterprise, representing "AU $30 billion in export revenue in 2017" paid by overseas students in Australia (Birrell and Betts, 2018) and "$40 billion in annual revenue for the United States alone" (Altbach and Reisberg, 2018). Historical ties have been important in choosing destination countries, particularly as regards to educational traditions, as is the case of Indian students choosing British or Australian Universities (Ibid.). Trends are changing as sending countries diversify and some, notably China, also become important receiving countries. International political tensions between receiving and sending countries impact students' ability to pursue their studies, as evidenced in Canada in the Fall of 2018, when Saudi Arabia called back its scholarship students. Many institutions look to international student tuition fees to make up for cuts to education budgets at a state or national level (McKibben, 2018). However, if their SEM planning does not keep track of changes to national immigration and work visa policies or to changes in educational policy of sending countries, they may not foresee changes to applicant traditions or worse, may price themselves out of an important pool of international students. Further risk is incurred if SEM committees fail to consider and plan for the retention of international students. As such, SEM has to include international enrolment management, which plans from recruitment to graduation and re-entry (Aw and Levinson, 2012).

Methodology

This presentation is part of a larger qualitative (Creswell, 2007) study of popular discourse on international student mobility, focusing on both sending and receiving countries. The corpus includes more than 100 articles from newspapers and magazines (Australia, the UK, the US, Canada, India, Japan and China), as well as government releases and websites dedicated to international student mobility and magazines, collected between July 2017 and November 2019, with a focus on Pacific Asia sending countries (China Daily; Xinhua Net; etc). The articles selected from weekly newsletters (i.e. University World News), English language newspapers, newsfeeds and through alerts by keywords, were analysed using general inductive analysis and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2000), which focused on themes (Titscher, 2000). The article text was treated as discourse and coded for analysis (Liamputtong, 2009) with Nvivo (Bazeley, 2007). Coding was done at the phrase or sentence level (Saldaña, 2009), to capture the themes, where a sentence could be coded for several themes. The code book for the project is a living document, as themes emerge as the corpus grows. As such, articles are analyzed several times to account for code book updates and refinements. Codes include themes such as risk management, elasticity, influencers, geopolitics, mitigation strategies, postsecondary work options, post diploma work visas, etc.

Presentation

Our presentation explores intersections, similarities and differences between individual, institutional and national motivations for internationalization, focusing on studying abroad and recruitment of international students. Our analysis is informed by important contextual data such as national censuses and international mobility flows (Unesco, OECD), as well as national policies on education and immigration. We propose to go beyond a historical focused analysis to forward-looking projections that consider relevant research on international students' motivation for studying abroad and their experiences from recruitment to retention to professional insertion in the workplace.

As institutions plan their international recruitment and retention, they must look beyond their own institutional motivation and any relevant national policy on student mobility and immigration, to also consider their responsibility in addressing the alignment between the wide-ranging expectations and realities after graduation, for the different source countries where they plan to recruit. Furthermore, institutions must consider the diverse academic and poststudy needs of its international students (Sherry, Thomas and Chui, 2010). As such, they must be aware of the expected employability outcomes of international students and how they link to experiential learning opportunities while broad; international students access to and experience of the different experiential learning opportunities (coop, work-study, volunteering; on-campus; types of "employers"). They must also have a keen understanding on where their international students plan to work post-graduation; are there patterns regarding intention to return home, to stay in the receiving country or even move to a third country to pursue their employment opportunities. What support is provided to incoming international students to integrate the local or national as well disciplinary literacy practices? What is the institution's responsibility to prepare students for contextually situated work literacies and culture? What is the institution's responsibility to prepare international students for the reverse culture shock when they reintegrate their country of origin not as students, but as professionals?

Implications

This study is innovative in that it pushes the boundaries of questions addressed by institutional SEM teams when planning enrolment, so that they aren't caught off-guard by changing trends and expectations of potential international students. If the majority of international students have expectations around post-study work visa and immigration pathways in the host country, yet have difficulty finding work or a change in government policy limit access to visas and immigration pathways, how is recruitment in those markets going to last? If international students choose your institution based on access to cooperative education or other experiential learning programs, yet have lower actual placement rates than their 'national' colleagues, what impact can this have on recruitment efforts and retention? How can changes in another nation's immigration strategy impact the attractiveness your institution in certain markets? For international students looking for intercultural experiences and training, what is the institution's SEM responsibility for poststudy preparation of its students as regards to reverse culture shock and insertion in the home country work force?

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