

Declining Perception of US Institutions Among International Students? A Look at Potential Trends

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According to an article in the Washington Post, there was a clear and drastic decrease in international students in the 2020-2021 academic year.¹ Some education experts, such as Allan Goodman, head of the Institute of International Education, believe that this is an isolated phenomenon that will pass with the pandemic.² However, the fact that new enrollments of international students in the United States have been falling since 2015 suggests that this might be more than just another casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic. Are international students perceiving the United States less favorably as a destination for higher education?

The United States has enjoyed tremendous popularity as a destination for higher education over the past few decades, consistently attracting the greatest number of international students. In recent years, however, there has been a steady decrease in the number of new enrollments of international students, at the undergraduate and graduate level, which suggests US institutions might not have the allure they once did. This stands in stark contrast with similar “competitor” countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia which have seen spikes in enrollment over the same period.

This article will review some of the data publicly available, theoretical models of decision-making that international students may be utilizing, as well as discuss potential reasons for the decline.

Decreasing Enrollment of New International Students

There was a 43 percent decrease in new enrollments of international students in the United States during the 2020-21 academic year, from the 2019-20 academic year.³ Part of the decline is certainly a direct result of the pandemic, as more than 40,000 students have deferred their enrollment to enroll in a future term.

However, enrollment of new international students in the United States has been decreasing since 2016, after more than a decade of healthy growth. In the fall of 2017, there was a 6.6 percent decrease in new student enrollment, though that decrease stabilized at 0.9 percent for 2018 and 2019.⁴

1 Miriam Berger, “The Pandemic has damaged the appeal of studying in the United States for some international students,” The Washington Post, July 23, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/07/23/coronavirus-international-students-united-states-enrollment-reputation/>.

2 Kavitha Cardoza, “Enrollment By International Students in U.S. Colleges Plummets,” NPR, December 2, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/02/912669406/enrollment-by-international-students-in-u-s-colleges-plummets>.

3 Julie Baer and Mirka Martel, “Fall 2020 International Student Enrollment Snapshot Survey,” Institute Of International Education, 2020.

4 Jodi Sanger and Julie Baer, “Fall 2019 International Student Enrollment Snapshot Survey,” Institute of International Education, 2019.



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Nonetheless, it must be understood that enrollment is not necessarily a direct or best reflection of the perception of US institutions. Decreasing enrollment could stem from fewer applications (which might suggest declining perception), but from US colleges accepting international students. Unfortunately, that data is not as publicly available, as it would require individual institutions to divulge their application data. It could also reflect the overall number of international students decreasing, though that does not seem to be the case, as currently available data shows a steady increase in the number of international students globally each year.⁵

Decision-Making Models

There are three main types of models used to explain students' decision-making regarding their choice of institution of higher education.⁶ This includes economic models, sociological models, and information processing models of student choice. Each of these models can be applied to international education. Furthermore, this analysis will highlight a model that was designed specifically for international students.

Economic Models of Student Choice

The basis of the economic models is a cost-benefit analysis. These models suggest that students are using the costs related to their studies (both real costs and opportunity costs) and weighing them against the benefits of the degree. Such costs would include, but are not limited to, tuition, as well as visa application, travel, and other expenses associated with living in a foreign country. Benefits would include future job prospects and expected earnings.⁷

The tuition costs of a four-year degree at an American university, both public and private, has more than doubled in the past 20 years, significantly outpacing inflation.⁸ Given that many institutions have strict restrictions on the amount of financial aid international students can receive, this means that they often bear the full brunt of such costs.

The focus on future employment also means that international students are increasingly drawn towards programs that promise work-study opportunities such as internships. Even factors like graduation date, which can affect the student's place in line for work visa applications, can play a big role in their ultimate decision.⁹

Sociological Models of Student Choice

Sociological models consider the students' background in making the choice for higher education. This includes aspects such as family background (socioeconomic status), academic ability, school counsellors, self fulfilment, motivation, and personal goals. The model also takes into account the influence of friends and families on the student's choices during the decision-making process, which has been empirically proven to be a crucial factor for international students.¹⁰

As mentioned above, the costs of studying in an international institute are hefty. The application process itself can also be complex, with each school having their own set of

5 "International Students," Migration Data Portal, 2020, <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/international-students>.

6 Jonathan Peter Ivy, "Choosing Futures: Influence Of Ethnic Origin In University Choice", *International Journal Of Educational Management* 24, no. 5 (2010), doi:10.1108/09513541080000449.

7 Richard Chapman, "Toward a Theory of College Choice: A Model of College Search and Choice Behavior", University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, 1984.

8 Briana Boyington and Emma Kerr, "20 Years of Tuition Growth at National Universities", *US News*, 2020. <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/2017-09-20/see-20-years-of-tuition-growth-at-national-universities>.

9 Aisha Labi, "What do International Students Want? Jobs", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 21, 2010, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-do-international-students-want-jobs/>.

10 Anil Tan. "College Choice Behaviors of International Students.", *SAGE Open*, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015618995>.

requirements. As a result, international students must have the resources to navigate the systems, whether through their personal relationships or their schools before they can even apply.

Information Processing Models of Student Choice

The information processing models combine both the economic and sociological models to attempt to replicate the application process that international students go through. This includes the choice of going to university, going to university overseas, and then selecting a program or institution. One model proposed the decision-making be conceptualized as a five-stage process which starts with the identification of a problem which needs a solution, followed by the search for information, an evaluation of alternatives, selecting an institution and finally evaluating the institution.¹¹ Interestingly, studies have found that students of different national origin go through different stages of the decision-making process, or experience them in a different order.¹²

An information processing model proposed by Cubilo, Sanchez, and Cervino (2006), was designed specifically for international education. One of the major factors they considered was the image of the destination country. They drew upon marketing research, as higher education is often studied as a service provided. In the process of product evaluation, country image is assumed to be the first source that consumers consider, since the attitude of consumers towards the products or services are related to their stereotypes about the country of origin. This is supported by studies that show that country image influences the evaluation of a product or service much more than other variables.¹³

The Importance of International Students

Why does it matter if international students think less of the United States as a study destination? As it turns out, it matters quite a bit.

Diversity on College Campuses

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, students must develop global cultural skills to succeed. International students provide different perspectives and cultures to the college campus, both inside and outside the classroom. A study from Duke University found that the presence of international students on campus provided domestic students the opportunity to encounter new ideas and perspectives that were sharply different from their own.¹⁴ The study concluded that interaction with their international peers correlated positively with acquisition of general education, leadership skills, and intellectual development, in part due to increased willingness to question and challenge their existing beliefs. The study also found that cohorts that had higher levels of international student enrollment had significantly higher levels of interaction with them, which led to greater development of the three personal attributes mentioned before. While the study stresses that the presence of international students on campus alone is not enough to bring about interaction between domestic and international students, it is an important prerequisite in increasing diversity on the college campus.

As colleges increasingly realize how important diversity is to the central mission of their institutions, they, and every other entity interested in improving the college experience,

11 Felix Maringe and Steve Carter, "International students' motivations for studying in UK HE: Insights into the choice and decision making of African students", *International Journal of Educational Management* 21, no. 6 (2007), doi:10.1108/09513540710780000.

12 Suh Li Phang, "Factors influencing international students' study destination decision abroad", University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2013.

13 José María Cubillo, Joaquín Sánchez, and Julio Cerviño, "International Students' Decision-Making Process," *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20, no. 2, (2006).

14 Jiali Luo and David Jamieson-Drake, "Examining the Educational Benefits of Interacting with International Students", *Journal of International Students* 3, no. 2, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v3i2.503>.

should invest more in attracting international students.

Cultivating Top Global Talents

It would be a sham to host a US tournament with only US teams and call its victors the World Champions. Similarly, for US colleges and universities to be able to legitimately call themselves world class institutions, they must attract and cultivate talent from all over the world. This means ensuring that their student body represents a diverse range of countries.

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A successful global knowledge economy hinges on its attractiveness to global talent. Indeed, one study found that the competition for global talent should begin during higher education, particularly when it comes to international education.¹⁵

Contributions to the Economy

International students studying at American universities and colleges contribute significantly to the national economy. According to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, international students at U.S. colleges and universities during the 2019-2020 academic year contributed \$38.7 billion to the U.S. economy. This comes from various sources, including, tuition fees, rent, and other living expenses. It also includes the scientific and technical research they help support, the jobs they create, and myriad other avenues.

International students are particularly important to the STEM industries. International students make up a disproportionate amount of the full-time graduate students in electrical engineering (81 percent), computer science (79 percent), and civil engineering (59 percent).¹⁶

The United States relies on such engineers and scientists to remain on the cutting edge of innovation. This is one of the reasons the Obama administration decided to implement a 24-month extension of OPT for students graduating with a STEM degree that makes it easier for them to stay in the United States to work.¹⁷

Projection of Soft Power

Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye, was a form of non-coercive power that a state could leverage to “get others to do what they otherwise would not”. He suggested that it would consist of cultural, ideological, and institutional power.¹⁸ As a popular destination for higher education, the United States has the opportunity to shape and influence the next generation from other countries and is implicitly setting the norms across the globe. International students act as informal diplomats, developing trust with their host country, which can also lead to future visits and business interactions.

15 Jeanine Hermans, “High Potentials: A CEO Perspective”, Journal of Studies in International Education, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307304187>.

16 Cardoza, cit.

17 Brendan O'Malley, “International students key to US lead in innovation”, University World News, October 14, 2017, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20171014060817300>.

18 Eric Li, “The Rise and Fall of Soft Power”, Foreign Policy, August 20, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/20/the-rise-and-fall-of-soft-power/>.

The United States leads in another measure of soft power; the number of current world leaders (heads of governments and heads of states) who chose to be educated in another country. The United States can claim a total of 62 world leaders educated in the United States, giving it a narrow lead over the United Kingdom, which has educated 59 world leaders.¹⁹ This is important because studies have shown that personal contact with the United States shapes individuals' dispositions toward it.²⁰ By having more world leaders, and not just leaders in the political sphere, who have influence and power, sympathetic to the United States due to their personal experiences, is certainly beneficial.

Discussion and Future Research

There appears to be a downward trend in the reputation of US universities and colleges among international students. However, according to the most recent data, the claim cannot be decisively proven. Future research should investigate application data from US schools to establish if there is a trend of international students being rejected at a higher rate from US institutions. Polling data among prospective international students, as well as international students already in the United States would also be an important avenue for enhancing the picture. Finally, future research should also aim to delineate the trends of undergraduate and graduate students, as each demographic has vastly different needs and serves different purposes to the institutions, as well as to the United States as a whole. It is important to carry out this research and identify potential pitfalls in the current system, to avoid losing out on the benefits that international students bring with them, as global competitors ramp up their recruitment efforts.

19 Martin Armstrong, "Where World Leaders Were Educated", Statista, September 5, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/chart/19249/soft-power-where-leaders-educated/>.

20 Nathan Urban and Ariel C. Armony, "How the US benefits when it educates future world leaders", The Conversation, May 31, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/how-the-us-benefits-when-it-educates-future-world-leaders-95999>.