

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN THE  
COMMONWEALTH**

**2006 UPDATE**

EDITION PREPARED FOR THE  
SIXTEENTH CONFERENCE OF COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION  
MINISTERS

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Or

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# INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY IN THE COMMONWEALTH

## 2006 UPDATE

### **Executive Summary**

The first Commonwealth Education Conference in 1959 saw the movement of higher education students as important for personal and national development. In the 1980s, the Commonwealth Secretariat was given the responsibility of tracking the number of students studying in other Commonwealth countries. This was taken up by the Council for Education in the Commonwealth and UKCOSA, the Council for International Education, in 2000, with up-dates (this is the second) under the auspices of the CEC. This up-date also has a section on international further education students.

The USA is the main host country for international students including those from the Commonwealth, followed by the UK and then Australia. In 2002-03, 45% of all Commonwealth students (just over 190,000) went to study in the USA, 38% went to study in Commonwealth countries (just over 160,000) and the rest (16%) went to other non-Commonwealth countries (just over 69,000). The total number of Commonwealth students rose from 288,000 in 1998-99 (18% of all international students) to 420,000 in 2002-03 (19%).

This update follows the 2000 study by dividing the sending countries of the students into seven groups. Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth (identified as 'Other') countries were each subdivided into high, medium and low Human Development Index (HDI) countries. This index has been developed by the UN Development Programme as a composite of indices of health, education and average personal income. The seventh group consists of the European Union (EU) countries, all high-HDI countries – which have special access to UK higher education. Membership of the Commonwealth and the European Union is as it was at 1997 and 1996 respectively and for data in this study the HDI is for 2003.

There are slightly more graduate international students going to the USA than first degree students. The largest group come from medium- and high-HDI 'Other' countries with the next largest group being medium-HDI Commonwealth students. There has been a slight reduction in the number of students going to the USA in the last two or three years, particularly at the first degree level. The top four source countries for the USA are India, China, South Korea and Japan.

The UK is the next major host country. Overall there has been a fairly rapid but steady increase in numbers of international students. However the mix has changed over the last ten years. The number from the European Union, after peaking in 1999-2000, has steadily dropped while the numbers of students from medium-HDI non-Commonwealth 'Other' countries has increased very rapidly – with a particularly large increase from China. The number from Commonwealth countries, particularly from medium-HDI countries such as India, has increased over the last five years.

Australia is the other major Commonwealth host country – with the number of international students from all groups increasing very rapidly over the last seven years. China and India are the two main sources of students. Data from Canada is less up to date – but overall figures show a steady increase in the number of international students.

Data from India, New Zealand, Malaysia (a rapidly developing Commonwealth host for international students) and South Africa all show, to different degrees, the increase in the number of Commonwealth and international students. A brief summary of the number of international students in other host countries, mainly Europe but a few such as Japan and China shows that there is a considerable movement of students between countries world-wide. However Commonwealth students tend to go to other Commonwealth countries with the exception of the USA.

More data was available for the UK – so a more detailed analysis of the numbers of students at the four levels of study (postgraduate research, postgraduate taught, first degree and “other undergraduate”), detailing the proportion of women students, the subjects of study and the source of funds for study. Overall more international students (including those from the Commonwealth) are men. However this varies with the level of study, the state of development of the sending country, the subject studied by the student and over time. The higher the level of study, the lower the proportion of women, with the highest proportion of men at the research level, reducing at the postgraduate taught level. The proportions are nearly equal at the first degree level. At the non-degree level, there are generally more women than men studying abroad. The proportion of women international students has increased over time from almost all countries until, in some cases, approximately equal proportions have been reached or even surpassed. This pattern is also found in data from Australia and from New Zealand.

Data from Australia and the UK show the range of subjects studied by international students distinguished by gender. The most popular subject in Australia is Management and Commerce – where women slightly outnumber men. Information Technology and Engineering & Related are the next most popular subject areas – and here men greatly outnumber women. In Health, Society & Culture, and Creative Arts, the fourth, fifth and sixth most popular subjects, women outnumber men. A similar pattern is found among international students in the UK (including the gender distribution) – with Business & Administration followed by Engineering & Technology being the most popular subjects at almost all levels other than research, where Engineering & Technology is the top subject. What is clear from the British data is the fairly wide variation between the country groups and the individual countries in the popularity of a particular study area.

UK data gives the source of funds for the payment of fees, a very significant proportion of the costs of international study. By far the largest source of funds – for both women and men – is the category reported by the universities as “no award or financial backing”. Thus they are self-funding. There are no real differences between the sources of funds for men or women and there have not been large changes over the past few years in funding. There are differences between the different levels of study: at the research level, there is a significant proportion of Commonwealth students with British government scholarships of one kind or another – more than for

other international students – and the lowest proportion of self-funding students. At the postgraduate taught and the first degree level, the proportion of self-funding students is overwhelming – well over two thirds. The data at the “other undergraduate” level is not clear. The only group which has a different pattern to the above are European Union students who, due to their special status, pay home level of fees at all levels and are able to get UK local education council awards for first degrees.

What this study has shown is that in the last forty five years, international education has come to be seen by the providers more and more as a commodity. Thus the Commonwealth is only considered as relevant if it will make a direct financial contribution through the recruitment of international students. Conversely, potential students see the immediate economic benefit of a course as the most important consideration.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has been allowed to abandon all interest in student mobility – relegating monitoring to voluntary organisations such as the CEC and UKCOSA. The only area that it continues to support – and that at arms length – is the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships Plan. However the number of students under this and other such schemes is a tiny proportion of the total. Furthermore, the main host countries remain the developed countries. It is important that a wider range of countries begin to host students. The Commonwealth Secretariat should again be given the responsibility and the resources to monitor the flows of students within the Commonwealth. In addition, it should also be assisting Commonwealth countries (possibly through the Association of Commonwealth Universities) which at present do not have significant numbers of international students recruit them. These countries and their universities could then benefit from receiving as well as sending students.

The importance of students travelling to other countries to study and the benefit to themselves and also to the institutions and countries where they study – quite apart from the finance they bring in – cannot be over emphasised. This study shows that there is a great deal of really worthwhile exchange taking place. What is also needed is a recognition by Commonwealth governments that the Commonwealth element of this exchange needs support and encouragement.