

COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION BRIEFING NOTES

Prepared by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education

A grouping of voluntary and professional bodies committed to education development in the Commonwealth

No. 10 COMMONWEALTH STUDENT MOBILITY: TRENDS & ISSUES

Introduction

There is a centuries old tradition of students and scholars moving from one country to another, and this has continued into the modern age. At the founding Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford in 1959, the members saw the exchange of students between Commonwealth countries as of great importance because: "It will enrich each country of the Commonwealth by enabling an increasing number of its abler citizens to share the wide range of educational resources available throughout the Commonwealth and thus promote equality of education opportunity at the highest level."

Why do students study abroad?

Commonwealth ministers of education though conscious that student mobility may result in a brain drain have generally taken the view that student mobility strengthens higher education in both sending and receiving countries:

- by serving as a tool for professional development.
- by obviating the need in small countries to offer expensive specialist subjects before resources and student numbers can adequately sustain them.
- by opening up their education to new knowledge and ideas.
- by broadening domestic students' outlook in host countries through the presence of international students.
- by providing an underpinning of those studies and disciplines which are comparative and international.

Within the Commonwealth, many universities have common histories and roots. For example, several universities in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean were founded as constituent colleges of London University (or in southern Africa, of the University of South Africa, UNISA) and have now become independent: universities throughout the Commonwealth are linked through membership of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, founded in 1913. Similar academic structures, the shared use of English as the language of instruction in much higher and secondary education and use of Commonwealth external examiners all serve to bind the Commonwealth university community together. Student mobility is facilitated by these ties and in turn reinforces them.

At the 1959 Conference, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) was instituted. This is described in Briefing Note 3. It has developed over the last 45 years and has over 1,500 students in 14 Commonwealth countries, mostly at the postgraduate level. The Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC), started in 1993, supports direct links between institutions in 20 different Commonwealth countries for the exchange of undergraduate students.

Recent history of student mobility

Initially, fees charged to students from other countries, Commonwealth or not, were nominal and the same as those for domestic students. In the UK, fee differentiation was introduced in the late 1960s, culminating in 1980 with the decision that universities should charge overseas students the full cost of a course of study. This decision (which could not apply to students from the European Community) caused consternation to many members of the Commonwealth. Before long other Commonwealth countries - Australia, New Zealand and some parts of Canada - introduced differential fees for students from abroad.

In response, the Commonwealth set up a Standing Committee on Student Mobility under the Chairmanship of Sir Roy Marshall, the distinguished Barbadian scholar. This Committee monitored the changes in the numbers of Commonwealth students studying abroad and the considerable drop in the number of such students coming to the UK and made proposals for sustaining mobility in the face of fee increases. However on the central issue of the level of student fees, it obtained no concessions for Commonwealth students.

The monitoring of student mobility has more recently been taken up by the Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC) in partnership with UKCOSA, the Council for International Education. Their joint report in 2000 was followed by two updates by CEC in 2003 and 2006, both timed to coincide with Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers.

In recent years, providing higher education has come to be seen in more commercial terms. Thus the main English-speaking host countries calculate the direct economic benefit of international students to their own countries. The UK government estimated that international students contributed £5 billion to the British economy, IDP Education Australia suggested they provided Australian \$7.28 billion and the Institute of International Education estimated a gain of US \$13.29 billion to the United States.

International students also provide the clientele for a wide range of courses which would otherwise simply not run. This is particularly so at postgraduate taught level where a minimum number of students is needed for a course to run. In the UK, for example, one third of postgraduate students come from abroad - and an even higher proportion of research students.

Recent trends in the flow of Commonwealth and other international students

In the CEC-UKCOSA report in 2000 the countries sending students for study abroad were divided 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 – which have special access to UK higher education. Membership of the Commonwealth and the European Union are set at 1997 and 1996 respectively and the HDI is for 2003 for data in this note.

From data collected by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the total number of international students going to the 53 host countries for which data was available for the year 2003 was just over 2.2 million – with about one fifth coming from Commonwealth countries. 35% of the internationally mobile Commonwealth students studied in other Commonwealth countries, 39% went to the USA and 26% studied in another non-Commonwealth country. Commonwealth international students comprised 19.3% of the total in 1998 and 20.0% in 2003.

The total number of international students in the **United States of America** has increased from 453,788 in 1995-96 to 565,039 in 2004-05. There are slightly fewer undergraduate than graduate (both taught and research) students – though the proportions vary considerably among country-groups and from one sending country to another. There has been a doubling of numbers from medium-HDI Commonwealth countries (most importantly India). The numbers from high-HDI Commonwealth countries has been fairly constant over the ten years. There was a 42% increase from 132,841 to 189,028 in the total of Commonwealth students between 1995-96 and 2004-05 compared to an increase of 17% from 320,947 to 376,011 in non-Commonwealth students. Over the past two years however the total number has decreased.

The five top sending countries to the US in 2004-05 were India (80,466), China (62,523), South Korea (53,358), Japan (42,215) and Canada (28,140). A majority of students from India and China were at the graduate level, from Japan at the undergraduate level, and from South Korea and Canada about equally divided.

The **United Kingdom** is the next main host for

international students, both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth. The number of students and their origins by country HDI-group is summarised in Figure 1.

The number of Commonwealth students has increased from 44,898 in 1995-96 to 73,115 in 2004-05 and for 'Other' international students (not including European Union students) from 34,381 to 100,400 over the decade. The main sources of the big increase in the number of non-Commonwealth students are the medium-HDI 'Other' countries. The decrease in EU students is probably due to the increase in fees in British universities.

The table below indicates the different level of study of international students coming to the UK in 2004-05. (EU students were omitted from this table.)

Level	Nos. Commonwealth students	%	Nos. 'Other' students	%
Postgraduate research	6,345	9	12,855	13
Postgraduate taught	22,480	31	36,265	36
First degree	35,760	49	41,730	42
Other undergraduate	8,530	12	9,550	10
Total	73,115	100	100,400	100

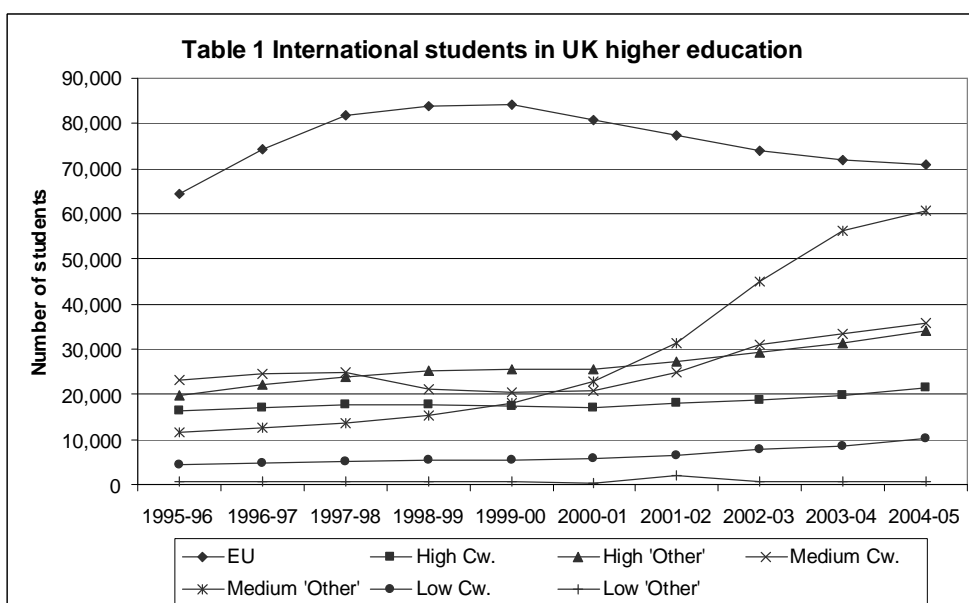
Proportionately, fewer Commonwealth students study at the postgraduate research and taught levels than non-Commonwealth 'Other' students, with nearly half doing first degree courses.

The five top sending countries to the UK in 2004-05 were China (42,070), Greece (EU) (13,575), US (12,355), India (11,540) and France (EU) (11,535). Only India is a Commonwealth country – and the next Commonwealth country was Malaysia in eighth place (with 8,360).

Australia is the Commonwealth country with the next largest intake of international and Commonwealth students. Figure 2, covering the last seven years, shows that the number of students coming to Australia increased rapidly with the total number rising from 60,914 in 1999 to 163,749 in 2005. The main increases have come from the medium-HDI groups of countries, both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth. The top four sending countries are China, India, Malaysia and Hong Kong. There have been major increases from the first two

while numbers from the other two have remained fairly constant. There are few students from low-HDI countries or the European Union.

Data for **Canadian** higher education is only available to 2001-02. The numbers of students from non-Commonwealth countries are increasing rapidly – at a much greater rate than from Commonwealth countries. The number from Commonwealth countries increased from 9,520 in 1997-98 to 10,880 in 2001-02 (14%), while the number from non-Commonwealth



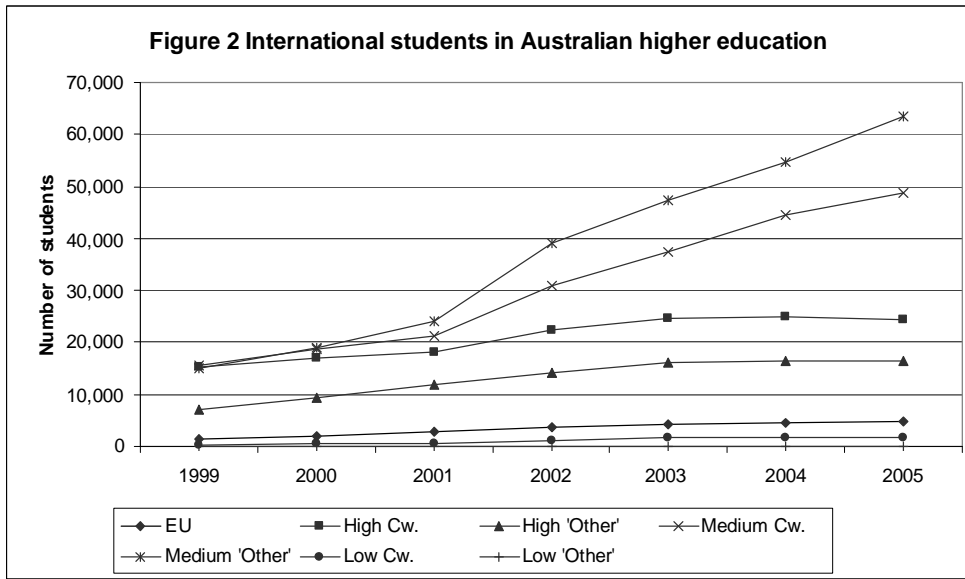
countries increased from 17,004 to 29,705 (74%) over the same period. Data from the immigration department which is more up to date but less detailed, showed an overall increase over a decade of 143% from 24,442 in 1996 to 59,272 in 2005.

Gender distribution of international students

Some, but not all, host countries record the number of women and men. 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. Where the big difference still

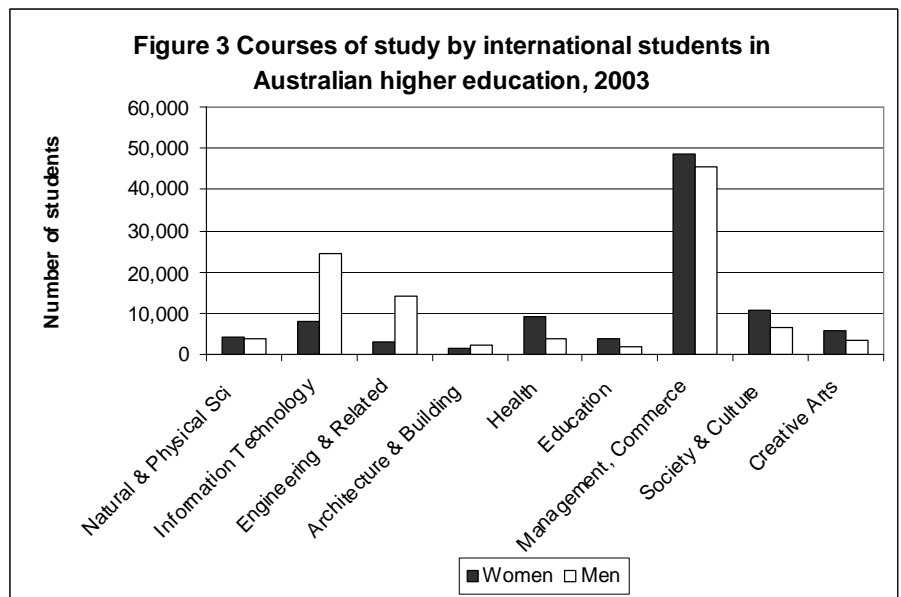
remains is in the subjects studied by women and men (see below).



The number of international students going to **New Zealand** is also increasing, though again the increase in the number of Commonwealth students is far less than those from non-Commonwealth 'Other' countries. Thus in 2000, there were 4,267 Commonwealth students which increased to 7,923 in 2004, nearly double the number. The number from non-Commonwealth countries increased from 7,991 in 2000 to 43,193 in 2004 –over five times as many. Most of the increase came from China – which was the source of 32,000 students in 2004.

In the 1990s, **Malaysia** sent a significant number of Commonwealth students to the US, the UK and Australia. Although this has continued, but at a lower and slowly decreasing level, Malaysia is now a significant Commonwealth host for international students. In 2003, it hosted 27,731. The increase came mainly from

medium-HDI countries. The number from medium-HDI Commonwealth countries rose from 808 to 4,989. However this increase is considerably less than that from 'Other' countries – from 2,256 to 21,206 - with China as the main source country followed by Indonesia. **South Africa** hosted 52,703 international students in 2005. The country sending the greatest number was Zimbabwe – no longer a Commonwealth member. The majority of the other main senders were Commonwealth countries from Africa. **India** a traditional receiving country welcomed 7,737 international students in 2003. It has however seen a decrease in international students from both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries. Other host countries include many European countries and a number of others including China and Japan. The proportion of Commonwealth students in these countries was quite low – comprising only about 7%. At the same time, they comprise over a quarter of all Commonwealth students studying abroad.



What subjects students study

Data from Australia and the UK show the range of subjects studied by international students distinguished by gender. Figure 3 illustrates the overall position for international students in Australia.

The most popular subject 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. The same 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.

How students pay for their study

Data on the source of fees paid by international students is available in detail for the UK. Although only part of the total cost, it is a very significant proportion, particularly in countries charging full-cost fees.

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 source 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 exceptions 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 authority awards for first degrees.

Conclusion

The first Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford in 1959 saw education as an opportunity to share – as its report expressed: “Each has something to learn from others; each has something to give.”

What this briefing note 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 by the recruitment of international students. Conversely, potential students see the immediate economic benefit of a course as the most important consideration. According to the statistics covered by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the proportion of international students who are from Commonwealth countries studying in Commonwealth countries has dropped in recent years. For example, between 1998-99 and 2002-03 inclusive, 24% more Commonwealth international students went to study in Commonwealth countries. Over the same period, the number of non-Commonwealth students going to Commonwealth countries (especially when EU students are excluded) increased by 95%. Over the five years between 1998-99 and 2002-03, Commonwealth international students increase by 46%, ‘Other’ non-Commonwealth students (excluding the EU) by 54% and EU students by 2%.

Another clear finding is that the number of international students who come from countries with low-HDIs – both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth – is small. Yet these tend to be the very countries which need to be able to take advantage of study in countries with a more developed education system. There are just over 190 international students per million population for low-HDI countries compared to 340 for high and medium-HDI countries.

Funding for international students is overwhelmingly found by the students themselves. Although there are some bursary schemes which will support particularly needy or worthy students, they are only a very small proportion of the total. This does not make these support schemes unimportant for either the individuals concerned or their future contribution to their communities and countries. It does mean that a large proportion of those who come to study can be said to constitute a private and unmanaged flow.

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It seems that with the demise of the Standing Committee, 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 CSFP. However the number of students under this and other such schemes are a tiny proportion of the total. Furthermore, the main host countries remain the developed countries. It is important that a wider range of countries should be hosting 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) who at present do not have significant numbers of international students on ways of recruiting them. These countries and their universities can 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 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 host governments that the Commonwealth element of this exchange needs support and encouragement.

More information

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