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US universities hold firm

Universities in the USA report healthy international student enrolments over the past year, although marketing plans for raising the profile of US higher education overseas remain muted.

International student interest in studying in higher education in the USA has always been high and while statistics show that international student numbers have been levelling off in recent years, many universities report that their international student populations have remained consistent over the past 12 months.

Julie Misa, Director of International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), IL, says that they have experienced a slow but steady growth in international enrolments in recent years. "From Fall 2005 to Fall 2006, the number of international students enrolled at UIUC grew by 4.1 per cent. The top five countries for 2006 were represented by South Korea [with] 24 per cent, China [with] 18 per cent, India [with] 12 per cent, Taiwan [with] eight per cent and Turkey [with] three per cent," she says. "This is consistent with the top five [nationality] ranking for the previous year with only slight variations in the percentages of the total international population."

Ivan Nikolov, Director of the Center for International Programs at Valdosta State University in Valdosta, GA, reports a similar story when he says that international enrolments have been "pretty stable". He continues, "On average, we have about 250 international students from 65-to-70 countries and we maintain an international diversity policy without leaning towards a focus student source country."

The latest *Open Doors* statistics for the 2005/2006 academic year show that international student numbers at US higher education institutions showed a slight decrease of 0.05 per cent on last year's figures. However, new international enrolments increased by eight per cent on 2004/2005, meaning that the outlook for the future is bright.

Viki Kimball from Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights, KY, says that international enrolments at the university are definitely on the increase. "Enrolments have dipped slightly over the past 12 months but applications for Fall 2007 have increased significantly over the last year," she says, citing the "rising cost of education" as well as "visa issues and increased competition from within the USA and abroad", as reasons for the previous decline.

Visa issues are a particularly important aspect of any analysis of the incoming student market in the USA and are continuing to have a detrimental effect, according to sources. Luzia Tartari from Ferris State University in Big Rapids, MI, whose largest international student markets are Canada, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Zambia and Japan, says that visa delays rather than denials are having the biggest effect on international students. "Now international applications have to be processed much earlier to give students a chance to study in the USA," she says. "Not many are being denied, but many miss entry deadlines."

However, some student nationalities have been finding it easier to get a visa in recent months, according to Tina Segismundo from Virginia International University in Fairfax, VA. "We currently have more students coming from Nepal and Mongolia," she explains. "In the last 12 months it seems that students are having a better chance of getting a visa to study in the USA."

Tartari, however, adds that continued visa problems in the future may well have an adverse effect on the industry as a whole. "Unless visa



procedures, immigration regulations and the general feeling against immigration in this country changes in the next few years, the number of international students will slowly decrease as students choose countries that have a more welcoming environment and a more reasonable cost of education," she says.

Despite rising tuition costs and continued visa problems, the USA currently attracts over twice as many international higher education students as its nearest rival, the UK, and its position as the most popular destination looks likely to continue for many years to come. Benefitting from such popularity, it is perhaps easy to see why for some universities in the USA, international marketing initiatives are not always a priority.

The University of Washington in Seattle, WA, for example, has seen international student numbers increase by 21 per cent since 2000. Yet Curt Devere, Director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at the university, points out, "The University of Washington doesn't recruit international students, at least not in the traditional sense of that term." However, he continues, "We consider ourselves a global university and I believe we successfully project a strong presence worldwide."

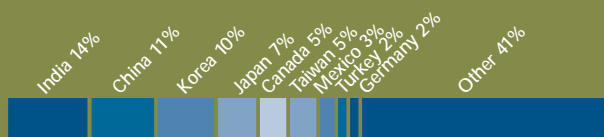
Other universities remain reluctant to use agents to recruit students due to regulations over paying commission as well as fears over the motives of some agencies. However, some have established satisfactory relationships with agent partners that benefit all involved. "Recruitment agents refer students to NKU and we have good relations with several, but we do not currently contract with agents," says Kimball, while Segismundo adds, "We definitely have agents from all over the world and I really think that they do help a lot in recruiting students."

Tartari says that Ferris State University also accepts international student enrolments from agents, although she adds, "We do not pay international recruitment agents any longer. We used to do it until three years ago but it was decided that it was not worth it. The quality of the student and the retention rates were not what was expected." International marketing efforts at the university now focus on advertising in international publications and improving their website.

However, a stable and varied international student population is the goal for most universities and increasing student numbers and nationalities remains key. Nikolov says, "We would like to increase the Asian and the Americas presence in a moderate way, maintaining the quality of education at the university and the individual attention to our students, domestic and international, that we are known for."

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International student enrolments in higher education in the USA by country, 2005/2006



Source: IIE Open Doors 2006