

University World News

Universities look south to recruit international students

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Latin America and the Caribbean appear to be the new go-to regions for many international recruitment officers at United States colleges and universities, more than three-quarters of whom said they are rethinking overseas strategies in light of recent enrolment shortfalls, a new survey finds.

They're also beefing up their social media strategy, turning to commercial agents and looking to US high schools, where more than 80,000 international students are pursuing their secondary education.

More than half of 139 responding universities said they did not meet their international enrolment goals last year, and 71% cited the "political environment in the United States" as the primary factor. The second and third most commonly cited factors for lower-than-expected enrolments were increased visa delays or denials (60%), and student concern about securing a job or a work visa (52%). Rising US tuition costs was cited as a negative factor by 45% of respondents.

While no survey question specifically mentioned US President Donald Trump, his presence loomed large in the discussion of [findings](#), released on 18 June by World Education Services (WES), a non-profit organisation supporting international enrolment management.

"The 2016 election of US President Donald Trump changes the global recruitment landscape for higher education institutions ... nowhere more than in the nation that elected him," begins the report, based on an online survey conducted from 31 January to 19 February.

Yet despite the Trump administration's "extremely defensive posture on immigration", the report cautioned, "the more pressing, longer-term challenge for US institutions" is the growing competition with other countries for students. Many of them, including Australia and New Zealand, are leveraging spiralling US tuition costs and fears about safety in the United States to boost their own enrolments.

Tuition, even for international students, is generally free in Germany's public universities, for example, and they collectively offer more than 1,900 degree programmes in English. The number of European bachelor degree programmes taught

in English sprang to nearly 3,000 in 2017 from nearly zero in 2009, according to *ICEF Monitor*.

In Canada, several universities, led by the University of Toronto, have eliminated international student fees. The Canadian government also has developed visa policies that allow international students to gain work experience upon graduation. International competition was cited as a negative factor by 51% of survey respondents.

Findings echo sentiments expressed in similar kinds of recent surveys. In an annual survey conducted earlier this year by *Inside Higher Ed*, 69% of US college and university presidents agreed that Trump's rhetoric "has made it more difficult for my college to recruit international students".

More than four out of five institutions observed that Indians on their campuses were concerned with "physical safety" and two out of five said students from the Middle East felt unwelcome, according to a survey released last November by the New York-based Institute of International Education.

Declines reported by WES disproportionately affected specific regions of the United States. Of institutions located in the West and Southwest, 70% and 86% respectively reported decreases in applications, while just 36% of universities in the Northeast reported a decrease. In the Midwest and Southeast, decreases were reported by about half of institutions. Results did not suggest a correlation based on state outcomes of the 2016 presidential election, the report noted.

Despite the overall downward trend, slightly more respondents (51%) reported being optimistic about international enrolments in the autumn than reported being pessimistic (49%). More than a third (35%) predicted an increase in international enrolments this autumn, while 28% reported a year-over-year increase in applications between 2016 and 2017.

Philip Altbach, founding director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, said the institutions most likely to feel the pain are "mid-range publics and less-prestige privates, which really need the enrolments". Highly selective US universities, such as Stanford or Yale, "don't have much to worry about," he said.

Impact of rise of nationalism

The rise of nationalism and populism and its impact on global student mobility were among topics addressed at a three-day conference last week in Boston, co-sponsored by the Center for International Higher Education and WES.

Of particular concern was how to make international higher education more innovative and inclusive at a time when the political climate is uncertain and budgets are tight. Betty Leask, professor of internationalisation and pro vice-chancellor of teaching and learning at Australia's La Trobe University, set the tone, suggesting a "new paradigm" for internationalisation of the curriculum that emphasises inclusiveness through

intentionality and integration.

Sixteen graduate students, most of them international students at US universities, offered a glimpse of how emerging scholars are approaching inequity and innovation. Presentations focused on a range of topics, including financial stresses, online alternatives to study abroad, brain drain and virtual internationalisation.

The goal of the WES study was to understand how universities are responding and to help them "weather an ongoing storm", said WES Research Manager Paul Schulmann. Nearly three out of four respondents said they have already altered or are planning to alter their approach – in most cases without a budget increase. Budgets for the upcoming cycle increased for 20% of respondents and decreased for 26%.

Among those planning changes, the most common strategies were to boost social media engagement (78%) and develop partnerships with US high schools and community colleges that enrol international students (72%).

Relying on international alumni and upgrading marketing technology each were cited by 66% of respondents. Just over half said they would use agents, a controversial practice that the US government won't allow in the recruitment of domestic students.

The attention to recruitment in Latin America and the Caribbean indicates that some institutions are diversifying their targets, the report said.

Nearly three out of four said they plan to change their target countries or regions. China and India were listed as top priorities. Just 27% said they would prioritise the Middle East and North Africa, where applications overall dropped for 50% of surveyed institutions.

Some universities sought to allay fears that began to surface even before Donald Trump was elected in November 2016.

One respondent, for example, urged universities to "respond quickly and warmly to inquiries" from overseas and to make clear that "the current political climate is NOT how the university feels".

Another respondent also offered encouraging words. "A student who begins as a new freshman next fall will graduate after the current president's term ends," one respondent said. Next year, "there will also be mid-term elections, so there's potential for the landscape to change significantly."

But in the months since the survey was taken, most signs have pointed toward deepening entrenchment regarding international students. Comments from the bench by key Supreme Court justices in April indicate Trump's travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries appears likely to be upheld when the decision is announced later this month.

In May, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services released a draft proposal that would expand the definition of what constitutes "unlawful presence" for student-visa holders. The policy would go into effect in August.

"Mr Trump is going to be with us for a while, maybe two terms, and these things will sort of take hold even more over time," Altbach said. "I do not think this is a blip."

COMMENT

Unfortunately, Latin America and Caribbean students do not have the education dollars that US universities need.

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