INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND IMMIGRATION: THE NETHERLANDS CASE IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In a context of economic crisis and increased anti-immigration politics, international students and skilled immigration are high on the political and educational agenda in the Netherlands as well as other European countries. There is an increasing tension between short term anti-immigrant tendencies and budget cuts for research and development on the one hand, and the long term need for skilled immigration to stay competitive in the global knowledge economy on the other. In the past, rationales for attracting international students were either trade, aid or cooperation. Global competition for highly skilled manpower has become a strong new pull factor in international student circulation, and policies have been developed by the Netherlands and other European countries to stay competitive.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of international students and skilled immigration is a key issue in European and Dutch politics. Debates on issues such as multiculturalism, immigration and financial crises have a direct link to the needs of international students and skilled migrants. In Ireland, the 2010-2015 international education strategy to make Ireland "internationally recognised and ranked as a world leader in the delivery of high quality international education" by increasing the present number of international students in the coming 5 years by 50%, is under pressure as a result of the budgetary crisis.[1] In the UK, the current government's plans to introduce restrictions on immigration and raise national student fees will have an impact on the number of international students from both outside and inside the EU/EFTA countries as well as the potential emigration of UK students resulting in higher fees for outsiders and lower fees in neighbouring countries. In Germany, when prime minister Andrea Merkel declared the collapse of the multicultural society and a push for stricter immigration laws arose, the minister of Economic Affairs, the business sector and the higher education sector were quick to warn the rest of Germany that there was a danger of losing skilled labour. In Switzerland, there is much concern that recent anti-immigration referendum results will have a negative impact on skilled immigration and make the country less attractive to international students. And in the Netherlands, Sweden and Italy, similar fears exist due to the rise of anti-immigrant nationalist politics. There is an increasing tension in Europe, including the Netherlands, between short term anti-immigrant tendencies and budget cuts for research and development, and the long term need for skilled immigration to stay competitive in the global knowledge economy. Forecasts for the EU indicate that where the percentage of low skilled workers will decline in 2020 from 28% to 19%, medium skilled workers will increase from 48% to 50%, and high skilled labour will increase from 26% to 31%.[2] At the same time in Europe, the age group between 16 and 29 will drop from 90 to 81 million in the next 12 years. Restrictions on immigration and greater barriers for access to higher education for national and foreign students will make Europe less attractive for international students.

THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Higher education in Europe in the first decade after the Second World War was not very international. Following the Great Depression and the Second World War, Europe's primary focus was on rebuilding its countries. Internationally, there was a pattern of circulation that saw elite degree seeking students from the developing countries seeking higher education in the colonial and imperialist powers such as the UK, France, Germany and to a lesser extent countries like Belgium and the Netherlands.

In the sixties another international dimension in higher education emerged; technical assistance, or development aid. The changing relationships between the former colonial powers and the developing world required a different approach. In addition to the traditional circulation of the elites, scholarship schemes provided wider opportunities for students from developing countries to study in Europe, primarily in the countries they have had traditional cultural and linguistic ties with (Germany, France and the United Kingdom which over all these years up until now have continued to be the main receivers of international students after the United States of America) and/or political links (Soviet Union). At the same time, capacity and institution-building programs offered academic expertise and material support to the higher education sector in the developing countries. This trend was quite widespread, the Netherlands being a prominent example of this focus on aid.

In the 1980s, one can observe in Western Europe two different shifts. The "benevolent laissez-faire" policy[3], and the "humanitarianism and internationalism"[4] that characterised the previous decades, did not completely disappear but were bypassed by new policies. In continental Europe, a shift took place towards more controlled reception of degree seeking international students and to cooperation and exchange (student and staff mobility), and in the United Kingdom, a shift to active recruitment of fee-paying international students.

The decision in 1979 by the British government to introduce full cost fees for foreign students (a move from aid to trade) resulted in a more competitive higher education sector in that country. In continental Europe, the introduction of full-cost fees and higher education as an export commodity at that time remained an anathema. On the continent, a different move took place, from aid to cooperation and exchange. Under the impetus of the European Commission, programs were designed to stimulate cooperation in Research & Development and in education. From the early 1970s in Sweden, Germany and later elsewhere, programs were developed to stimulate cooperation and exchange and most countries had international academic agreements and were involved in the Fulbright Program with the US.

During the 1970s, the European Commission started to stimulate R&D cooperation, and also introduced a pilot program, the 'Joint Study Programmes Scheme' (1976), to stimulate academic mobility, but the impact of these programs was marginal. In the 1980s, these initiatives at the national and European level contributed to the creation of the so-called Framework Programs for R&D (1984) and the 'European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students' (1987), better known as ERASMUS. Driving rationales behind these initiatives were: Europeanization and strengthening of Europe's position in the global economy.

Although the UK, as a member of the European Union was involved in these developments, its participation in the educational programmes has been marginal. There was and remains a tension between the more competitive approach to recruitment of fee-paying students (a focus on degree seeking student circulation) and the subsidised programmes of the European Commission, based on the principle of exchange (a focus on mobility as part of the home degree). The reputation of British higher education, its extended network of Commonwealth countries, the dominance of English as first or second language, and the financial necessity to recruit full-cost students from abroad, placed British higher education in a position to be a competitive player in the international student market, as well as in the cross-border delivery of education, just behind the United States of America.

By the end of the 1990's, first in the Netherlands and Scandinavia and later in Germany and France, a shift to higher education as an export commodity began to emerge. Although several countries – Ireland, Slovakia, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden– have introduced full-cost fees for non-EU international students in recent years, the main drive has not been income generation, as was the case in the United Kingdom.

Most countries of Europe, in particular the larger economies of Germany, France, Italy and Spain as well as Scandinavia, have zero or low tuition fees for domestic students and, with the exception of the countries mentioned above, do not differentiate between EU-students and other international students. At the national and European levels, increasing competitiveness of higher education in the global knowledge economy and establishing a national/European brand and status of higher education, society and economy in the world, have been the driving rationales.

More recently, global competition for highly skilled manpower has become a strong pull factor in international student circulation. The greying societies of Europe compete globally for top talents who need to fill the gaps in their knowledge economies. Skilled migration, circulation of the highly skilled, the global competition for talent, are terms that are at present becoming more dominant as rationales for international competition in higher education. At the institutional level, rationales such as international class rooms, intercultural and global competences, recruitment of top talent students and scholars, and institutional profile and status, are setting the scene.

In 2002-2003, there were 1.1 million foreign students enrolled in higher education in the so-called EURODATA region (comprising the 27 EU nations, the four European

Free Trade Agreement members Switzerland, Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway, as well Turkey. Of these 46% are nationals from with this group of 32 countries, compared to 54% from outside. More than 60% of them study in the three main countries: United Kingdom, Germany and France. France is a different destination country than the others, as only 28% are European and 51% are African students. As far as outward mobility is concerned, only 575,000 students, or 3% were studying abroad in 2002-2003, of which 81% in another EURODATA country, and 13% in the United States.[5]

More recent data indicate that in 2006-2007, there were 1.5 million international students in these 32 countries, a growth of 36.6% and compared to 1998-1999 of 49.9%. The percentage of international students compared to national students has increased from 4.5% in 1998-1999 via 5.8% in 2002-2003 to 6.9% in 2006-2007. At the same time, the percentage of the students from within the 32 European countries increased to 50.9%, plus 3.6% from other European countries.

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 and the Lisbon Agenda of 2001 are the manifestations of the need to reform higher education in Europe into the direction of a more competitive player in the global knowledge economy. Although there is an increasing emphasis on economic rationales and competition, it would be too simple to state that the changing landscape of internationalization is developing in similar ways everywhere in higher education in Europe. There are different accents and approaches. Internationalization strategies are filtered and contextualized by the specific internal context of the university and their national embeddedness. But it is also a fact that the recent emphasis on competition for talents, as well as the reforms undertaken by the Bologna Process have brought continental Europe and the United Kingdom closer in their approaches than before. The Netherlands is a clear example of a mixed policy of cooperation and competition with regard to international students and immigration.

THE NETHERLANDS

As mentioned above, the Netherlands has moved from a focus on aid via a cooperation and exchange priority to a more competitive approach with respect to international students and immigration. This mixed policy with shifting emphasis is the result of external factors in combination with local changes in higher education and immigration policies.

The number of international students in Dutch higher education has increased over the past years in absolute numbers, although in percentage of overall students, has stabilised at 7.4%. The increase over the past five years has been particularly in research universities, 6.3% to 9.3% (an increase of 9,000 international students) and less in the universities of applied sciences, 5.8% to 6.4% (an increase of 5.000 international students). The main country of origin in 2009-10 was Germany (42.5% of all international students) at a substantial distance, followed by China (10%), Belgium (5%), Spain (3.9%) and France (3.6%). In that year, 64.4% of the international students came from other EU and EFTA countries, compared to 35.6% from the rest of the world. The Netherlands is the host country with most German students, before the United Kingdom with 17% of outbound German student mobility.[6]

Three quarters of the international students are enrolled in bachelor's degree programmes, although in research universities the focus is increasingly on master and PhD programmes. As far as fields of study are concerned, economics is for the research universities the most popular study, with agriculture having the strongest presence of international students compared to Dutch students. For applied sciences universities, economics also has the strongest presence of international students while art and culture maintain a strong ratio of international versus Dutch students. Maastricht University, one of the 13 research universities in the Netherlands and on the border with Germany and Belgium, is the leading university in number of international students, followed by four universities of applied sciences (also all four close to Germany) and then Delft University of Technology. The market share of the Netherlands is 1.3% of the global market in 2007, an increase of 0.6% compared to 2000. As far as outbound mobility is concerned, 2.5% (15,000) of the Dutch students were studying abroad in 2006-07 and the trend is a gradual increase each year.[7]

It is still unclear what the impact of the introduction of full cost fees for non-EU/EFTA students will mean for the inflow of international students to the Netherlands. Given that two thirds of the international students in the Netherlands come from EU/EFTA countries, the impact will not be as negative as it was in Denmark. A member of Dutch Parliament recently even suggested to make recruitment of international students a means to increase income for universities, a rather naive suggestion in the current global competition for international students and the high tuition fees.

There are no concrete data on international PhD students and researchers in the Netherlands. A recent guess is that one third of the PhD students in the Netherlands is foreign, a rapid growth over the past 15 years, primarily from Western Europe and Asia. OECD data indicate that half of the foreign knowledge workers in the Netherlands come from Europe, and the other half primarily from South and East Asia, followed by North America.

Since 2007, it has been possible for international students to stay in the country for a year after completion of their studies in order to find a job, and since 2009, highly qualified foreigners can apply for a residence permit for a maximum of one year to find a job or to start a business. There are also tax incentives for knowledge immigrants and returning expats in areas where there is lack of Dutch candidates. And migration policies are adapted to make immigration for lower skilled immigrants more difficult and for highly skilled immigrants easier. However, some studies indicate that the Netherlands is not attractive enough for international and returning Dutch researchers. Other studies conclude, though, that the Netherlands is still more attractive than other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Denmark and Belgium, because of the relatively good salaries, career prospects and knowledge infrastructure. It is still too early to tell what the implications will be of migration and higher education plans of the new conservative government that came into power in 2010. In combination with the economic crisis, one cannot be optimistic that these plans will result in a more consistent and attractive climate for international students and skilled immigration.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Investing in Global Relations. Ireland's International Education Strategy 2010-15. Report of the High-level Group on International Education to the Tánaiste and Minister of Education, September 2010, Dublin, p. 12.

[2] Sean McDonagh. Aspects of Future Sills. Director, Skills Initiative Unit, Department of Education and Science, Dublin, Ireland. Note for the 2009 Hague Conference of the Universities of Applied Sciences.

[3] Barron, Britta. 1993. "The Politics of Academic Mobility in Western Europe." *Higher Education Policy* 6 (3): 50-54. p. 50

[4] Chandler, Alice. 1989. *Obligation or Opportunity: Foreign Student Policy in Six Major Receiving Countries*. IIE Research Report N° 18, Institute for International Education, New York. p.viii

[5] De Wit, 2008. International Student Circulation in the Context of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy." In *The Dynamics of International Student Circulation in a Global Context*, ed. P. Agarwal, M. E. Said, M. Sehoole, M. Sirozi, and H. de Wit. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers. p. 184-193

[6] Nuffic. 2010. *Mapping Mobility 2010: International Mobility in Dutch Higher Education. Nuffic. The Hague.*

[7] Nuffic, 2010.

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