Comparison between the UK’s and Australia’s international education sectors

This snapshot looks at the available data on international higher education students from Australia and the UK. According to UNESCO, the UK is the second most popular study destination for international students after the USA, while Australia is the third most popular. The data used in the snapshot is for each country’s latest full academic year (2017-18 for the UK and 2018 for Australia). This analysis compares Australian higher education enrolments (only) with UK higher education student data.

In 2017-18, approximately 30 per cent of the UK’s international student population came from other European Union (EU) countries. Nonetheless, China was the UK’s largest single student source country, representing 33 per cent of international students coming from outside the EU and 23 per cent of total international students. Between, 2016-17 and 2017-18, the UK’s total international student numbers grew by four per cent, comprising four per cent growth in both EU and non-EU students. There was strong growth in students from India and China (19% and 12% respectively), while students from the USA grew by seven per cent in this period.

Australia had strong overall growth in international higher education enrolments between 2017 and 2018 (14%), which incorporated 14% growth from China and 33% growth from India. For other common student source countries like Malaysia and Hong Kong, the UK saw moderate declines from these countries, while Australia saw moderate growth from Hong Kong but also saw a decline from Malaysia. The UK had a substantial decline in student numbers from Nigeria (17%) in 2017-18. Although Nigeria is a small student source country for Australia, Nigerian enrolments grew by 18 per cent in 2018. Although numbers of Indian students studying in the UK have declined substantially over the last five years, the 19% growth in 2017-18 suggests a recovery may have commenced.

UK commentators have ascribed the UK’s decline in international student numbers in recent years to migration reforms, including student visa restrictions and changes in post-study work opportunities. Indian student numbers were particularly sensitive to these changes and the recent recovery has been ascribed to introduction of some new study and work opportunities in the UK. A number of commentators have predicted Australia will overtake the UK to become the world’s second most popular study destination, given Australia’s ongoing strong growth versus the UK’s flat growth prior to 2017-18. Should UK growth recover further in 2018-19 this predicted outcome may not eventuate.

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