



Comparing global international student data sources

A growing number of international student destinations are publicly reporting data on the number of international students they host each year. However, comparison of such data sources is confounded by different countries definitions of an international student. For example, the first data column in Table 1 below shows the latest incoming international student data reported by some of the world’s major student destinations. When portrayed in this way, the data suggests that Australia hosts more students than the UK. However, this is largely because the UK only reports on its international higher education students, while Australia reports on international students in all its education sectors.

Probably the most consistent globally-comparable data is produced by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS)¹. The advantage of UIS data is that all reporting countries comply with standard definitions, although achieving this results in substantial reporting lags. For the selected countries in Table 1, at the time of writing, the UIS had only released 2016 data for Australia, Canada and China and had no 2017 data for any of these countries. Hence, at the time of writing, the latest comprehensive UIS dataset is for 2015.

Table 1: Comparison of different data sources counting incoming international students for select countries²

International students	Latest data reported by country ³	Reporting period	% growth on previous year	Data reported by country in 2015	UIS data & rank ² order in 2015
USA	1,078,822	2016-17	3%	974,926	907,251 (1)
Australia	624,001	2017	13%	497,159	294,438 (3)
Canada	494,525	2017	20%	353,000	171,603 (7)
China	442,773	2016	11%	397,635	123,127 (9)
UK	442,375	2016-17	1%	436,485	430,687 (2)
Germany	358,895	2017	6%	321,569	228,756 (5)
Japan	267,042	2017	13%	208,379	131,980 (8)

However, Table 1 demonstrates that the 2015 UIS data for the countries in Table 1 are substantially different than data self-reported by those countries in 2015. This means that caution is required in comparing self-reported data from different countries, albeit such data are accurate with respect to how each country chooses to report its data. For these reasons, the 2015 UIS data is the basis for Australia’s claim of being the world’s third most popular study destination.

Nonetheless, different countries’ self-reported data can provide important insights into their international education sectors. For example, the UIS 2015 count for Australia represents only 59% of the count self-reported by Australia in 2015, as a consequence of Australia hosting many international students who do not fit the UIS definition of tertiary student, notably certificate-level VET students, as well as English language, non-award and school students. Canada uses a similar approach to Australia, in reporting all study permit holders across all its education sectors, such that only 49% of those were reported in the 2015 UIS data. China’s self-reported data incorporates a high proportion of non-award students (54% in 2015³) such that only 31% of its self-reported numbers are captured in the 2015 UIS data. Conversely, the UK’s self-reported data (primarily higher education award students only) represents a close match to 2015 UIS data.

Different countries’ self-reported data also gives the most current view of the global market. A comparison of the latest available growth rates shown in Table 1 indicate that Canada, Australia and China have had recent double-digit growth, while growth in the UK and USA has been relatively lower. Consideration of the relative growth rates of the major hosting countries in the years since 2015, suggests Australia is likely to remain the world’s third most popular study destination, when a comprehensive 2016 UIS data set becomes available⁴. It has been suggested⁵ that Australia may overtake the United Kingdom as the world’s second most popular study destination, when the 2018 UIS data set becomes available.

1. UIS student mobility data from 2011 onwards is available at: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. The latest UIS data also underlies the [Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students](#) visualisation tool.

2. These selected countries were among the top 10 countries in UIS 2015 data. No data later than 2015 was found for the other top 10 UIS-ranked countries, being France (4th with 239,409), Russia (6th with 226,431) and Malaysia (10th with 111,443).

3. USA <https://www.iese.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Fact-Sheets-and-Infographics/Fast-Facts>; UK: <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Research-Policy/Statistics/International-student-statistics-UK-higher-education>; Australia: <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/DataVisualisations/Pages/Student-number.aspx>; Canada (all years): http://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_M_TRStudy_0009_E.xls; China 2016: [Google translated page](#); China (2015): [Google translated page](#); Germany (2017) http://www.wissenschaftweltoffen.de/kompakt/wwo2018_kompakt_de.pdf; Germany (2015): http://www.wissenschaftweltoffen.de/kompakt/wwo2016_kompakt_en.pdf; Japan (2017): https://www.jasso.go.jp/en/about/statistics/intl_student/data2017.html; Japan (2015): https://www.jasso.go.jp/en/about/statistics/intl_student/data2015.html

4. A comprehensive 2016 data set is not expected from the UIS much before release of the OECD Education at a Glance report in September 2018.

5. <https://thepinews.com/news/uk-likely-overtaken-australia-cghe/>