

International student mobility in the Commonwealth



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Since the first conference of the Commonwealth Education Ministers in Oxford in 1959, the issue of student mobility between the member states of the Commonwealth has been seen as important. Young people in further or higher education can go on to have a significant influence on the future of their society – and if that education has partly taken place in a different country and a different culture, then this broadening of their education and experience can be of real benefit both personally and to his or her country as a whole.

In this period of globalisation, has higher education also become globalised? At least partially, the answer has to be yes – but this has been happening for some decades. Furthermore, since the introduction in the United Kingdom in 1980 of full cost (and therefore high) fees, the Commonwealth has studied the changes in flows of students with care. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Commonwealth had a Standing Committee on Student Mobility. In 2000, this was followed by a working group of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC) working with UKCOSA, the Council for International Education. That report has been updated twice by the Council for Education in the Commonwealth for the 15th and 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM).

In order to make sense of the mass of statistics, the countries sending students for study abroad were divided into seven groups. Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth (identified as 'Other') countries were then classified into high, medium and low Human Development Index (HDI) countries. This index has been developed by the UN Development Programme as a composite of indices of health, education and average personal income. The seventh group consists of the countries of the European Union which have special access to UK higher education. For the data presented in this short article, the dates for membership of the Commonwealth and the European Union are set at 1997 and 1996 respectively as changes come into effect slowly (as far as students are concerned) and the data is inevitably a little out of date. The HDI is for 2003.

Where do Commonwealth and other international students come from and go to? From data collected by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Institute of Statistics, the total number of international students going to the 53 host countries from which data was available for the year 2003 was just under 2.5 million, with about one third coming from Commonwealth countries. Of the Commonwealth

students, 35 per cent studied in Commonwealth countries, 39 per cent went to universities in the USA and 26 per cent studied in a European country other than the UK itself.

The main hosts

The main Commonwealth host countries for all international students are the United Kingdom, Australia, Malaysia, Canada and New Zealand. This article also briefly highlights the USA as the main overall host country for Commonwealth (and other) students. Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of students over the past 10 years who have studied in the USA.

The total number of international students in the USA has increased from 453,788 in 1995/96 to 565,039 in 2004/05. There are slightly fewer undergraduate than graduate (both taught and research) students, although the proportions vary considerably according to group and country. The numbers from high HDI Commonwealth countries has remained constant over the last ten years compared to those from medium HDI Commonwealth countries, where there has been a doubling of numbers.

Table 1 gives the numbers for the latest year from the top-five sending countries to the USA. From this it can be seen that the total of Indian students comprises over two thirds of the medium HDI Commonwealth students. Furthermore, India and China, both medium HDI countries, have sent far more students at the graduate level than undergraduate, compared to the next three high HDI countries. This pattern is generally repeated with other host countries.

After the USA, the United Kingdom is the main host for Commonwealth and other international students. The number of students and where they came from is summarised in Figure 2.

The number of Commonwealth students has increased from 44,898 in 1995/96 to 68,655 in 2004/05 and for 'Other' international students (not including European Union students) from 34,381 in 1995/96 to 100,409 at the end of the decade. The main sources of the big increase in the number of non-Commonwealth students are the medium HDI 'Other' countries, as is clearly shown in Figure 2.

Table 2 gives a snap shot of the number of students (plus gender) from the top sending countries. The predominance of China can be seen. What is also clear from Figure 2 is the drop in the number of students from the European Union over the past several years, though the rate of decline is dropping.

Figure 1 International students in higher education in the USA

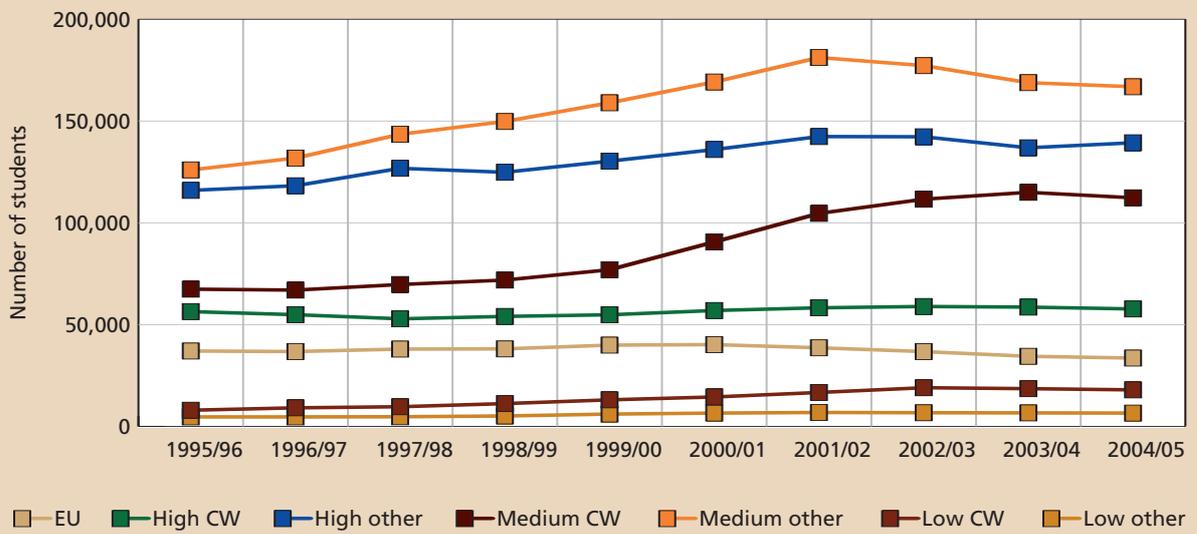


Table 1 Top sending countries to USA higher education

Place of Origin	HDI level	Undergraduate 2004/05	Graduate 2004/05	Total 2004/05
India	M	16,443	57,976	80,466
China	M	8,299	49,293	62,523
South Korea	H	23,432	24,122	53,358
Japan	H	28,708	8,497	42,215
Canada	H	13,710	13,087	28,140

Figure 2 International students in UK higher education

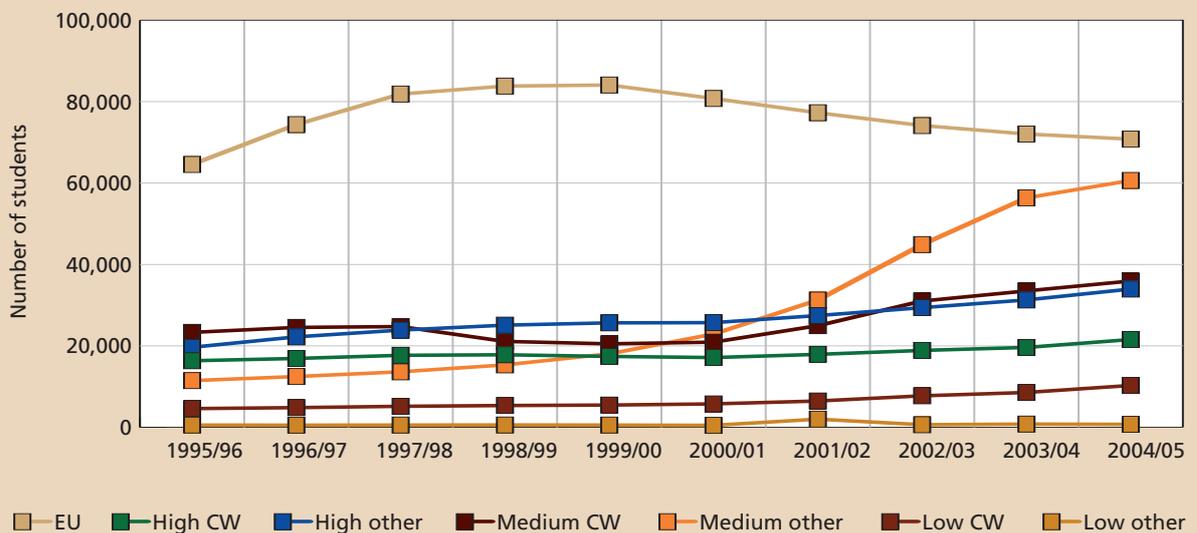




Table 2 International students in UK higher education during 2004/05

	HDI level	Women	Men	Total
China	M	22,476	19,593	42,069
Greece	H	5,404	8,170	13,574
United States of America	H	7,444	4,912	12,356
India	M	3,028	8,513	11,541
France	H	5,795	5,740	11,535
Germany	H	5,957	5,200	11,157
Ireland	H	6,027	4,273	10,300
Malaysia	M	3,894	4,465	8,359
Hong Kong	H	3,809	3,740	7,549
Spain	H	3,292	2,754	6,046
Nigeria	L	2,367	3,678	6,045
Japan	H	3,068	1,709	4,777

Table 3 Level of study of international students in the UK during 2004/05

Level	Number Commonwealth students	% *	Number 'Other' students	% *
Postgraduate research	6,345	9	12,855	13
Postgraduate taught	22,480	31	36,264	36
First degree	36,760	49	41,730	42
Other undergraduate	8,520	12	9,550	10

* Total percentage affected by rounding up

Figure 3 International students in Australian higher education

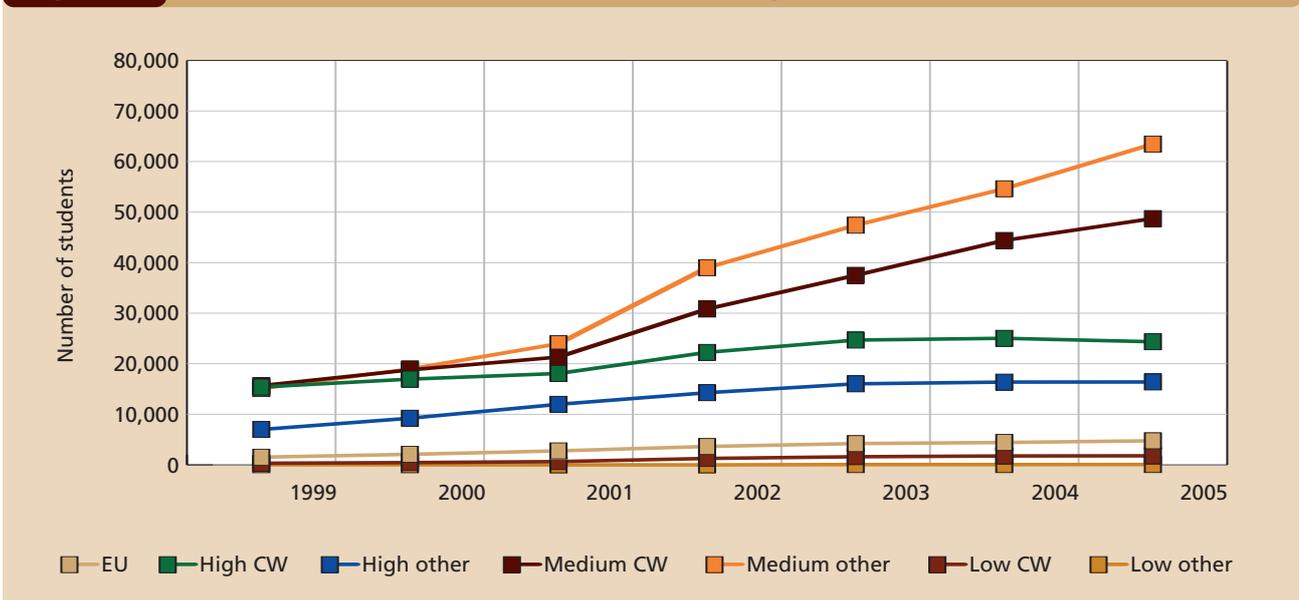


Table 3 demonstrates that just about half of the Commonwealth students are doing first degree courses – significantly greater than the proportion of students from ‘Other’ countries. Proportionately fewer Commonwealth students do postgraduate courses, either research or taught, compared to ‘Other’ international students.

Australia has the next largest intake of international and Commonwealth students. Figure 3, which covers the last seven years, shows that the number of students who came to Australia increased rapidly with the total number rising from 60,914 in 1999 to 163,749 in 2005.

The main increases have come from the medium HDI groups of countries, both Commonwealth and ‘Other’. The top four sending countries are China, India, Malaysia and Hong Kong. There have been major increases from the first two while numbers from the other two have remained quite stable.

Data for Canadian higher education is only available to 2001–02. The numbers of students from non-Commonwealth countries is increasing rapidly and at a much greater rate than from Commonwealth countries. Thus in 1997/98, there were 9,520 Commonwealth students in Canadian universities compared to 10,880 in 2001/02, an increase of a little over 1,000, while there were 17,064 non-Commonwealth students in 1997/98 compared to 29,705 in 2001/02, an increase of a little over 12,500.

The number of international students going to New Zealand is also increasing, though again the increase in the number of Commonwealth students is far less than those from ‘Other’ countries. Thus in 2000, there were 4,267 Commonwealth students increasing to 7,923 in 2004, nearly double the number. The number from non-Commonwealth countries increased from 7,991 in 2000 to 43,193 in 2004 – over five times as many. Most of the increase came from China which was the source of 32,000 students in 2004.

Malaysia was a significant source of Commonwealth students in the 1990s. Although this has continued, but at a lower and

slowly decreasing level, it is now a significant Commonwealth host for international students. With data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the rapid increase in international students can be seen in Figure 4.

The increase in Commonwealth students – mainly from medium HDI countries – is significant. They rose from 808 in 1998/99 to 4,989 in 2002. However this increase is less than that from ‘Other’ countries – from 2,256 to 21,206. Again, China is the main source country with Indonesia coming next.

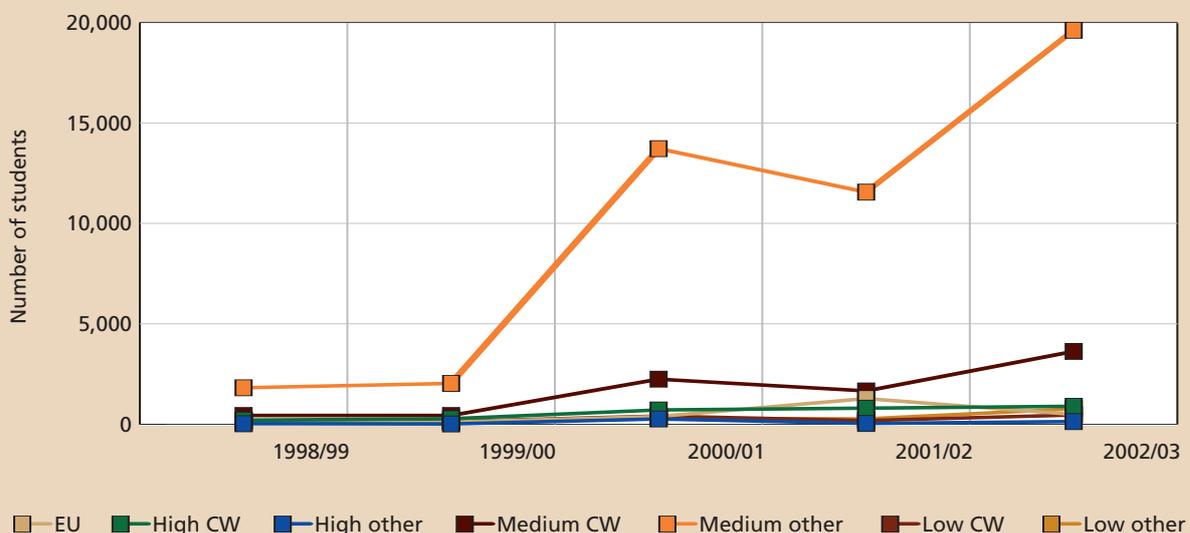
Another Commonwealth host country is South Africa with 52,703 international students in 2005. The country sending the greatest number was Zimbabwe – no longer a Commonwealth member. The majority of the others are African Commonwealth members. Other host countries include many European countries and a number of others including China and Japan.

Proportion of women and men students

Some of the host countries record the gender distribution. Overall more international students (including those from the Commonwealth) are men than women. However this varies with the level of study, the state of development of the sending country and the subject studied by the student. Furthermore, it has changed with time.

The higher the level of study, the lower the proportion of women, with more men than women at the research level. At the postgraduate taught level, the excess of men is not so great and the proportions are nearly equal at the first degree level. At the non-degree level, there are generally more women than men. The proportion of women international students has increased with time from almost all countries until, in some cases, approximately equal proportions have been reached. Where the big difference still remains is in the subjects of study by women and men. This can be seen in the discussion below of the subjects studied by international students.

Figure 4 International students in Malaysian higher education





What subjects students study

Data from Australia and the United Kingdom show the range of subjects studied by international students distinguished by gender. Figure 5 illustrates the overall position for international students in Australia.

The most popular subject is Management and Commerce, where women slightly outnumber men. Information Technology and Engineering & Related are the next most popular subject areas and men outnumber women quite considerably. In Health, Society & Culture, and Creative Arts, the fourth, fifth and sixth most popular subjects, women outnumber men. The pattern is found to be roughly the same in the study by international students in the United Kingdom (including the gender distribution). Business & Administration followed by Engineering & Technology are the most popular subjects at almost all levels other than research where Engineering & Technology is the top subject. What is clear from the British data is the fairly wide variations between the country groups (and so between the individual countries) in the popularity of a particular study area.

How students pay for their study

The final question is where the funds for the student to study come from. The only country for which significant data is available is for international students in the United Kingdom. Students are asked by universities for the source of funds for their course fees. Although this is only part of the total cost, it is a very significant proportion. Figure 6 indicates the sources reported by all international students at all levels.

By far the largest source of funds for both women and men is the category reported by the universities as 'no award or financial backing'. Thus most students bring the money for their fees with them and do not get it from other reported sources. In other

words, they are self funding. There are no real differences between the source of funds for men or women and, on the whole, there have not been significant changes over the past few years in funding. There are differences between the different levels of study, with the lowest proportion of self-funding students at the postgraduate research level. (At the non-degree level, there is a low proportion of self-funding students, but the source of funds of about a third is unknown.) At the research level, there is a significant proportion of Commonwealth students with British government scholarships of one kind or another – more than for other international students including those from the European Union. At the postgraduate taught and the first degree level, the proportion of self-funding students is overwhelming at well over two thirds. The only exceptions are European Union students who, due to their special status, are able to get UK local education authority awards for first degrees as well as pay the home level of fees. (The reduced fees apply, as far as European Union students are concerned, at all levels of study.) This has been a serious source of irritation to Commonwealth countries because there seems no reason that the same rule should not apply to them as well.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford in 1959 saw education as an opportunity to share, as the following quotation from its report expresses: 'Each has something to learn from others; each has something to give.' What this article has demonstrated is that, although this vision has not completely disappeared, it has been greatly overshadowed by the commodification of education. The vision still just shows through, for example, in a recent *Guardian* subheading: 'Postgraduate study abroad offers the twin benefit of a top qualification and the experience of a new culture. What more ... could a student want?' (*Guardian*, 9 September 2006)

Figure 5 International students in Australian higher education, 2003

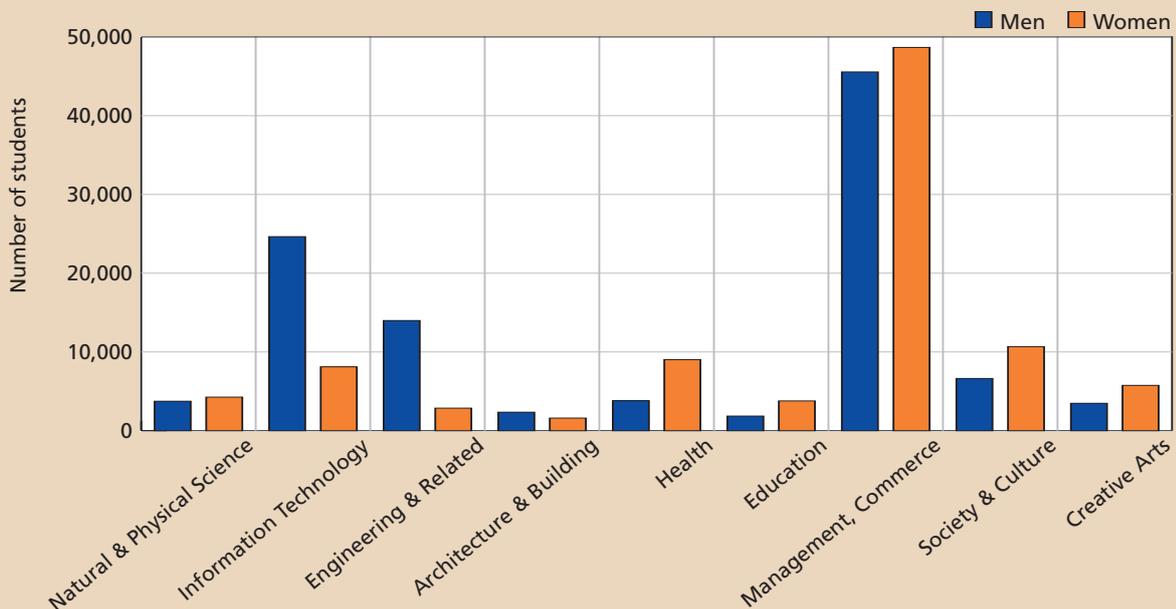
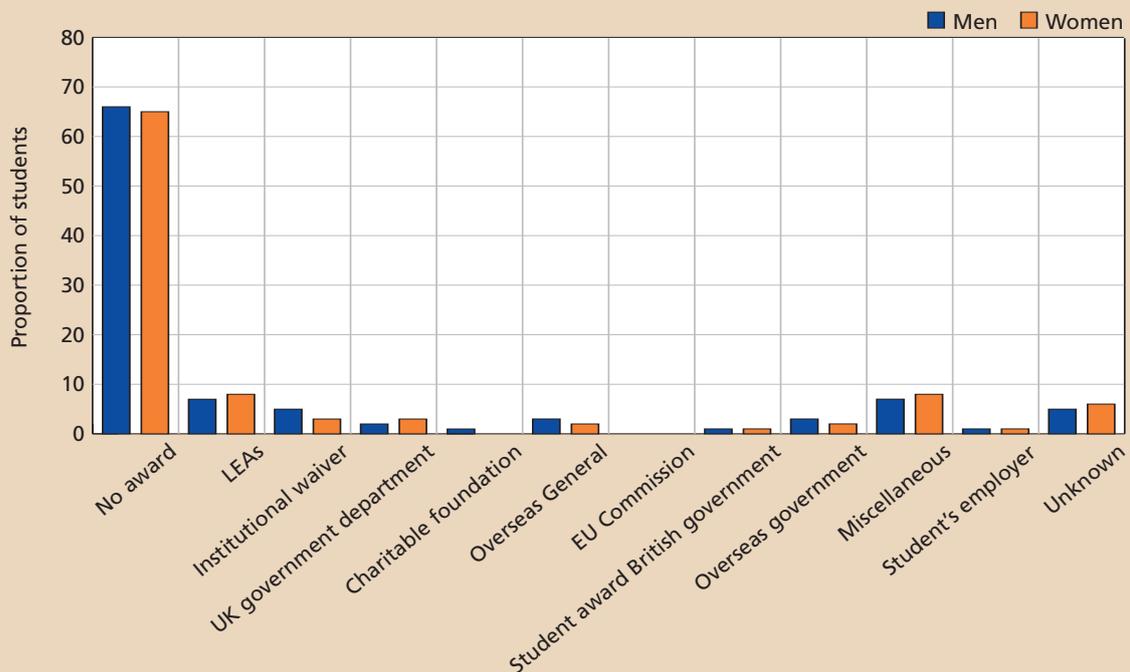



Figure 6 Funding of international students; UK higher education, 2004/05


The CEC/UKCOSA report in 2000 entitled 'Student Mobility on the Map' commented (para 3.29): 'Commercial considerations have now become dominant among the concerns of many host countries with the growing perception that there is a large and profitable market to be tapped.' This was the background to the new initiative launched by the UK prime minister in 1999 to increase the numbers of international students coming to the UK, basically because of the support these students gave to UK education both in fees but also in their presence on courses which might or, in many cases, certainly would not take place because of lack of students. It is relevant to note that in this initiative, the Commonwealth was not mentioned once.

What this brief article shows is that there has been an increase in the number of Commonwealth students who travel to study in other countries. Furthermore, there is a tendency for them to go to study in other Commonwealth countries. However, there are very few students from poor countries, with low Human Development Indices. There is a growth in the number of Commonwealth countries acting as hosts to both Commonwealth and other international students. Thus Malaysia and South Africa are examples of countries that are attracting international students. However what is also very clear is that the growth in international students from non-Commonwealth countries is growing very much faster. This is partly because of the growth in the numbers from one or two countries – China being a prime example – but it is also a more general trend.

The importance of students travelling to other countries than their own to study and the benefit to themselves and also to the institutions and countries where they study – apart from the finance they bring in – cannot be overemphasised. This article shows that there is a great deal of really worthwhile exchange taking place. What is also needed is recognition by host governments that this exchange needs support and encouragement.

Biographical notes

Kees Maxey has worked for 20 years as an industrial chemist, and served for 10 years as Director of the Africa Educational Trust, supporting African students in the United Kingdom. He has then worked for educational consultancies, mainly in Africa, and has served as Honorary Secretary of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, as well as Project Officer for the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa.