



Education Mecca

Will New England Continue to Attract the World's Students?

PHILIP G. ALTBACH

New England is known worldwide as a center of educational excellence. It has attracted “the best and brightest” from across the United States and around the world for more than a century—since higher education became an international enterprise at the end of the 19th century with the rise of research universities. Now, in the early 21st century, as the most powerful higher education magnet in the world, New England attracts many of the best students and faculty to its academic and research institutions. The region enrolls more than 45,000 international students who contribute more than \$1.2 billion to the economy. A recent ranking by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in the United Kingdom listed eight New England institutions among the world's top 200.

New England lures foreign students and scholars because of the quality of its academic institutions and programs, research infrastructure, research-based industries (e.g., biotechnology and medical technology and services) and the links among these elements. The social, cultural and other historical qualities of the region are also attractive.

Does the region face challenges to its international academic and research leadership? Yes and no. The strength that New England has built up over the years is not going away. The “academic and research capital” that the region has developed will continue to pay dividends.

Harvard, Yale, and MIT have, of course, long prevailed as international leaders. A significant number of other key New England institutions have built remarkable prestige in the past half century. Boston College, Boston University, Brandeis, Dartmouth, and Tufts have become world-renowned relatively recently. The University of Massachusetts has improved its standing significantly, and Northeastern University is currently trying to transform itself into a nationally ranked institution. These examples indicate the strength of the higher education industry in the region.

International trends

Significant changes underway in higher education worldwide will inevitably affect New England's interna-

tional role. The latter half of the 20th century saw the worldwide “massification” of higher education, as enrollments expanded and access was made available to ever growing numbers of students worldwide. The stress was providing places at the “bottom end” of higher education systems. Now, the major expanded systems are upgrading the quality of their premier universities. China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and other countries that have been the major providers of foreign students to the United States are now building research-focused universities and devoting considerable resources to this task. They have more capacity for graduate study at home, and the academic quality of their institutions is improving. Some students who at one time would have sought overseas degrees will choose to remain at home.

Meanwhile, New England's major overseas competitors for foreign student enrollments—especially the United Kingdom and Australia, but also Canada, New Zealand, Japan and a few others—look to foreign students to produce income for cash-strapped universities. Indeed, Australia has a national policy of helping to pay for domestic higher education from income produced by foreign enrollments. All these countries have competitively recruited foreign students, which has increased their foreign enrollments significantly. Australia, for example, now enrolls more than 70,000 international students—more than doubling its numbers in a decade.

A wild card in the equation is the European Union. The “Bologna Agreement,” signed in 1999 by the EU countries, focuses on harmonizing the very diverse European academic systems with the aim of permitting European students to study anywhere in the EU. What Bologna will mean for European students and staff coming to the United States is not yet clear. Another question is whether harmonization will build barriers to students from outside of Europe—Asians, Africans and Latin Americans as well as those from the United States.

Clearly, there are major changes taking place in the international student marketplace worldwide. How these changes will affect the United States—and New England—remains somewhat murky, but it is clear that global competition will increase, as new providers of international education services enter an expanding market: one Australian study estimated that the current worldwide number of foreign students will increase from the current 2 million to 8 million in two decades.

9/11 Realities

Largely due to security concerns raised by 9/11, it is much more difficult for foreign students and academic staff to enter the United States. While it seems to be the case that most legitimate students who apply for U.S. visas eventually obtain them, the application process has become more difficult, and many see it as demeaning. Stories abound of long waits, disrespectful treatment by overseas U.S. officials, and other problems. High-profile cases such as rejection of Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan's visa after his appointment to a professorship at Notre Dame, and worldwide web-based complaints have deterred many people from applying to U.S. universities.

Much attention has been focused on these difficulties, which are affecting the numbers of foreign students coming to the United States. For the first time in several decades, foreign student numbers were down in 2004. Whether this is part of a long-term trend is unclear, but it is a serious problem. Significantly fewer foreign students are taking entrance examinations such as the SAT, the GMAT, and others, which means that at least for the coming year or so, declines will continue.

The U.S. State Department has downplayed the obstacles facing foreign students while claiming to be improving the situation. It remains to be seen whether

the United States has permanently made entry into the country difficult and degrading.

What It All Means

What do these complex trends and realities mean for New England? The good news is that the basic strength of the universities in New England will continue to function as an international lure. Foreign students, especially from Asia, are highly brand-conscious and will choose the most prestigious university available. New England's top institutions should be able to retain their foreign enrollments as long as students can obtain visas and gain entry to the country. But the total number of foreign applicants to New England institutions may also decline. Universities a bit lower on the pecking order may find it difficult to attract the desired numbers of foreign students.

Moreover, the academic world is becoming more multipolar. New England's colleges and universities will find themselves competing not only with one another, but also with top-quality academic institutions in China, Australia and other emerging academic powers.

Philip G. Altbach is Monan professor of higher education and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.

**1/2 Page Ad
Page 22
Middlesex Community College
BW**