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What we stand to lose when foreign students are seen as a threat

By Maia Chankseliani

International students enrich university communities and strengthen civic life. We must defend their place in global education.

At many leading study destinations in Western countries, the climate for international students is cooling. In the United Kingdom, most students are now barred from bringing family members. Canada has enforced a cap on study permits, restricted work eligibility after graduation and doubled the financial threshold for students to prove self-sufficiency. In the United States, border officials have been empowered to revoke student visas on national-security grounds, and proposed budget cuts would slash funding for exchange programmes by 90%.

As someone who was once a foreign student and who now researches how higher education can drive social and civic transformation, I worry that this shift in attitude will have consequences far beyond university campuses.

International students are not simply add-ons to national research systems; they help to drive them. They expand the intellectual terrain of universities, challenge familiar assumptions and enrich the learning of their domestic peers. In a survey by the UK government, 76% of students said that having international classmates helped to broaden their outlook, and 85% said it meant they felt better prepared for a global workplace.

When laboratories welcome the rest of the world, innovation multiplies. Economists have shown that a 10% increase in international graduate-student enrolment at US universities is associated with a 4.5% rise in patent applications and a 6.8% rise in university patent grants — gains not matched by domestic growth. A 2024 study that examined US start-up firms founded between 1999 and 2020 revealed that increasing the share of foreign master's students in a cohort by ten percentage points yielded around 0.4 extra start-ups, nearly half of which were co-founded with classmates born in the United States.

Moreover, host nations gain diplomatic links. In the 2024 Soft-Power Index — an annual analysis of the number of serving world leaders who went to university abroad — 70 current heads of state or government had been educated in the United States and 58 in the United Kingdom.

And countries that send their students abroad benefit, too. Graduates bring back not only

skills and knowledge, but also fresh ways of thinking, organizing and acting, with consequences for policy, civic participation and public welfare. A 2024 study of 43 low- and middle-income countries found that, over 15 years, high student mobility correlated with decreases in poverty: a gradual but enduring effect.

Returning graduates educated in democratic countries are also likely to promote democratic changes at home. An analysis of US-hosted exchange programmes linked people's experience of US civic life to measurable gains in civil liberties and human-rights practices in home nations.

My work involving more than 700 interviews with people from 70 countries has shown how graduates with global experience can reframe debates on social rights and embed inclusive norms — from gender equity to improved accessibility for people with disabilities — into everyday practice (<https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/project/international-student-mobility-and-world-development/>). As one participant put it, international study is about “learning to see from other windows”. Its value lies not only in what students learn, but also in who they become and what they help others to see.

These outcomes are not guaranteed. They depend on people's abilities to adapt their gained knowledge to local realities and to find footholds in places where stakeholders are suspicious of those educated elsewhere.

Two steps would ensure that cross-border flows of students continue to benefit institutions, policies and everyday life.

First, governments should decouple international education from migration-reduction strategies. According to the United Nations, anyone who stays abroad for more than 12 months is considered a long-term migrant, a classification that most countries follow. But including students in this classification conflates academic mobility and population control. A distinction would restore policy coherence, relieve pressure on universities and affirm that crossing borders to study is not a loophole to be closed, but a practice that serves society.

Second, the UN cultural and educational organization UNESCO or the UN Human Rights Council should forge a treaty on student mobility rights so that cross-border study is recognized as a protected norm, not seen as a discretionary favour. Although UNESCO has established a global standard for recognizing qualifications earned abroad, it does not address access to study opportunities. A new treaty could fill this gap. Even if only a few countries join it, it would raise expectations and provide a basis for further advocacy and reform.

Achieving these shifts will require coalitions of universities, governments, scholarship funders and alumni who are willing to promote and defend mobility. Those who can speak

must do so. In today's climate, choosing to stay present and hold ground is not optional. It is a civic act — and a defence of openness itself.