

The new tuition fees regime is radically transforming patterns of student mobility within Higher Education

It is now the case that for UK students only Australia, Canada and the US are more expensive places than England to pursue a degree. [Rachel Brooks](#) explores the ramifications this is having for patterns of student mobility within higher education, demonstrating that they are more complex than many might initially assume.



As research on the international mobility of UK students has shown, it is difficult to arrive at a precise number of those who [choose to pursue a degree abroad](#). Nevertheless, plenty of evidence has emerged over the last year to suggest that increasing numbers of English students are giving serious thought to moving overseas for an undergraduate degree and that they are being pursued more vigorously than ever before by universities outside the UK.

Studying overseas now offers clear financial benefits to English students, when compared with enrolling at a domestic university. Indeed, English tuition fees are currently the [highest in the European Union](#). Recent research which has calculated the cost of both tuition fees and living expenses has suggested that, for UK students, only Australia, Canada and the US are [more expensive places than England in which to pursue a degree](#). This study indicates that, in 2012/13, the average cost of studying in England is likely to be £15,586 (for both tuition fees and living costs) – broadly comparable to the £15,670 it would cost to study in Canada (a sum which includes flights from the UK). Within this increasingly competitive international market, many European universities appear to offer particularly good value for money: in Ireland, students from the European Union are required to pay only a small contribution towards the cost of their degree (around £1760 per annum), while in the Netherlands the costs are even lower (often about £1330 per annum). It is not, however, only financial concerns which may cause English students to look abroad. It has been suggested that for those students who fall short of the AAB threshold (at which universities are able to offer as many places as they like) but are keen to study at a high-status university, overseas universities may seem [more accessible than their Russell Group counterparts](#).

The available data suggest that English students are indeed becoming more sensitive to these changes within the higher education market and, as a result, the choices of some, at least, are being made on an increasingly wide geographical scale. During 2012, Irish universities benefitted from a considerable increase in applications from the UK: those to Trinity College Dublin increased by 20 per cent, to 2000, while those at University College Dublin increased by 37 per cent, to around 1000. Similar increases have been reported by various universities in mainland Europe. The University of Groningen in the Netherlands has reported a [quadrupling of applications](#) from UK students over the past two years, while Swedish universities have also reported [considerable increases](#). Mobility is not, however, confined to Europe. Indeed, the Fulbright Commission has suggested that the number of students moving to the US for their higher education may well increase substantially. It has seen a significant increase in the number of students attending its 'USA College Day', in which UK students can find out more about studying in the US and meet representatives from a range of US institutions: 4500 students attended this event in September 2012, compared to around 2000 in 2010.

UK students are also being targeted more directly by overseas universities: the number of American institutions exhibiting at the 'USA College Day' has increased by over 80 per cent over the last three years; many more European universities are offering courses taught entirely in English; and the marketing strategies of overseas institutions often focus specifically on fee differentials. The University of Maastricht, for example, has a webpage for UK students which emphasises that its fees are significantly lower than those students could expect to pay in England. There is also evidence that other

actors – not just overseas universities – are encouraging young people to consider studying abroad. The educational charity, The Sutton Trust, recently launched a new initiative to encourage more students from less privileged backgrounds to think about studying in the US, which includes a fully-funded summer school at Yale University. It appears that some schools in the UK are also encouraging their students to consider pursuing a degree abroad. While this has been something elite private schools [have done for several years](#), some state schools are now [actively promoting overseas universities as well](#).

Nevertheless, despite the data reported above, our evidence base in this area is partial, to say the least. There remain significant gaps in our knowledge – about the exact numbers of students who are choosing to study abroad, the nations and institutions they are choosing, and the social characteristics of those who do move. Extant research in this area would suggest that those students who are internationally mobile, even if motivated by financial concerns, are [likely to come from more affluent families](#). Moreover, previous studies of UK students who cross borders in pursuit of a higher education (at either undergraduate or postgraduate level) indicate that they are [typically privileged in terms of their access to cultural, if not economic, capital \(see also\)](#). This work has shown how familiarity with other cultures and prior experience of travel can often help to minimise the perceived risks of studying overseas. Recently published data on entry to UK higher education institutions in autumn 2012 have indicated that – contrary to expectations – the largest declines in application rates, both proportionally and in percentage points, were from those from the most advantaged backgrounds, while high-status universities (such as those in the Russell Group) have found it [harder to recruit students than many of their lower-status counterparts](#). It is possible that these patterns may be explained, at least to some extent, by a shift towards studying overseas by young people from more privileged social groups. This would suggest that it is those who are most able to afford a higher level of fee at home who are most likely to be able to move across geographical borders, to follow a (potentially cheaper) degree elsewhere.

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