

**COORDINATION MEETING ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION**

Population Division

Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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**REPORT ON COLLECTION OF INTERNATIONAL  
MIGRATION DATA \***

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) \*\*

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\*\* UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Montreal, Canada. The views expressed in the paper do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of the United Nations Secretariat.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) collects through its annual survey the number of foreign students at tertiary level (ISCED 5 and 6)<sup>1</sup> by country of origin in public and private institutions.

These data are part of a broader data collection regarding all levels of schooling as well as data pertaining culture, science, technology and communication. The Institute's data collection activities respond to the ultimate objective of providing its Member States with a range of information which is cross-nationally comparable that can be used as a benchmark for decision-making and as a tool to develop as well as analyze the efficiency and effectiveness of their policies and programmes.

What is the purpose of collecting data on foreign students? During the last three decades, the world has moved towards an increasing internationalization of all of its processes. The promotion of international education has been at the core of this trend. As countries become more interdependent and the impact of borders diminishes, students feel attracted to go abroad to further their horizons and increase their future possibilities for development and growth. The study of foreign students, their numbers and their standards of living thus becomes a starting point for defining different strategies to foster greater understanding and respect for all peoples, their cultures, values and ways of life<sup>2</sup>. It also becomes relevant as countries experience a growing trend in international educational programmes and activities<sup>3</sup>.

Up to the present time, the UIS has disseminated the data on foreign students in different ways. First, the data has been published as tables in publications such as the *World Education Report*<sup>4</sup>, and the *Statistical Yearbook*<sup>5</sup>. In addition, the UIS receives requests from diverse users such as: university researchers, international and national organizations (i.e. diverse private foundations, Canadian Bureau of International Education, OECD, World Bank). Also, these data have been used in one of our most recent regional publications entitled "Good Neighbours: Caribbean Students at the Tertiary Level of Education". The study of this topic is of special interest in this region because of its history of inter-governmental co-operation to accommodate all tertiary level students in the Caribbean, that has led the countries in the region to adjust their higher educational systems to respond to the migration patterns in the region. In the near future, these data will continue to be available in regional and/or topical publications, an Education Statistics CD-Rom as well as in the UIS Website.

The study of foreign students presents definitional<sup>6</sup> as well as operational problems. For example, definitional problems include: what is a foreign student? A look at two definitions can explain the complexity of this task. The UIS defines a foreign student as a "person enrolled in an

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<sup>1</sup> ISCED stands for International Standard Classification of Education.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO. (1991). *World Education Report*

<sup>3</sup> Tremblay, K. (2001). *Student Mobility Between and Towards OECD countries: a comparative analysis*. OECD.

<sup>4</sup> The last publication of the *World Education Report* was in 2000. Foreign students data was published by regions: more developed, countries in transition, less developed and least developed.

<sup>5</sup> Published until 1999. In this publication foreign students data is available by country of origin.

<sup>6</sup> The UNESCO Institute for Statistics participates in the meetings of the INES technical group led by the OECD. During its last meeting in Quebec, Canada, March 2002, one of the topics was the Internationalization of Tertiary Education where diverse technical and policy issues regarding foreign students were broadly discussed.

educational programme in a country of which he is not a permanent resident”<sup>7</sup>. For the OECD “students are non-national or foreign students if they do not have the citizenship of the country for which the data are collected”<sup>8</sup>. The notion of citizenship and residence are two factors that have to be considered when defining foreign students. But, do countries reporting these data consider this? Can they actually differentiate between types of residency? Another issue relates to distance education: How can the impact of distance education be measured? How are students in different distance education programs reported? Are they indeed reported? And finally, regarding the different programs accepting foreign students, how are students counted? How different are foreign students enrolled in formal higher education programmes from those who migrate to study a second language for only a few months or those who travel on exchange programmes for a short period of time? These questions raise only a few of the critical issues involved in the study of foreign students and the wide range of different circumstances across countries help to explain some of the difficulties in gathering internationally comparable data in this regard.

The second type of problem encountered when gathering information on foreign students is related to the availability of the data. It is mainly the OECD countries which are in position to report the numbers of foreign students in their countries. Many countries in the developing world are unable to provide these data. This may occur because the data are not collected nationally or because it is not even available at the institution level.

As part of the UNESCO, the Institute for Statistics shares the commitment to foster peace and security among nations through education, science, culture and communications. So far, the only data related to international migration that the Institute collects is that of foreign students. However, there is no doubt that migration affects or is affected not only by educational processes but also by the different aspects of culture, science, technology and communications, all of which are core activities for the UIS. The Institute thus has identified future areas of work in this regard. As an example, the UIS is aware of the international discussion on the impact of the brain drain on sender countries or how this affects recipient countries in the long run as well. The UIS thus would be interested in exploring innovative ways to help in the study of these issues in the future. Likewise, other areas of particular importance are those related to the impact of foreign education on the cultural diversity and the reduction of poverty in both, the host and the sender countries. It would be interesting to track the cultural changes that foreign students experience and how this impacts on the societies where they settle either temporarily or permanently after their studies are finished.

For these reasons, future areas of work that the Institute proposes relating to international migration are as follows:

- collect data on foreign students by gender, field and length of study and if possible by recipient country;
- hold special sessions during the Institute’s education regional workshops to:
  - harmonize definitions and classification structures for the collection of foreign students data;
  - determine the impact of this harmonization on national data collection efforts;

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2001). Instruction Manual for Completing the Questionnaires on Education Statistics, Survey 2002, p. 15

<sup>8</sup> OECD. (2001). Definitions, explanations and Instructions UNESCO, OECD and EUROSTAT, p.33

- assist countries with statistical capacity building to improve the availability of such data, assist countries in analyzing data on foreign students and interpreting the data related to policy issues;
  - explore new topics of interest on this subject;
- take part in current international discussions on subjects relating to international migration regarding the effect of science and technology in both, the host and the sender countries; and on the possible ways to measure the impact of globalization on the transfer of knowledge through education.