



What are the key trends in international student mobility?

EDUCATION INDICATORS IN FOCUS

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- International student mobility has grown substantially in tertiary education, with the number of such students enrolled in OECD countries rising from 3.0 million in 2014 to more than 4.6 million by 2022. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, international student numbers still rose by 18% between 2018 and 2022, following a more rapid increase of 30% from 2014 to 2018.
- The top host and sending countries remained largely unchanged between 2018 and 2022, with few new emerging players. Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States continued to host nearly two-thirds of all international students in the OECD. At the same time, the People's Republic of China and India remained the biggest sources of internationally mobile students, together accounting for around 30% of the total in both years.
- Economic disparities shape international student mobility: two-thirds of international students in OECD countries come from high- or upper middle-income nations, while numbers of students from low-income countries remain comparatively modest.
- A common trend is that the fields science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) as well as doctoral programmes tend to be more popular among internationally mobile students than among domestic students.
- The countries that attract the most students are fairly diverse geographically. Affordability, along with factors such as reputation, language, cultural ties, research excellence, and employment prospects, plays a key role in attracting international students. Efforts to encourage academic mobility are not always matched by policies to retain international graduates after they finish their studies, as countries balance economic needs with ongoing migration debates.

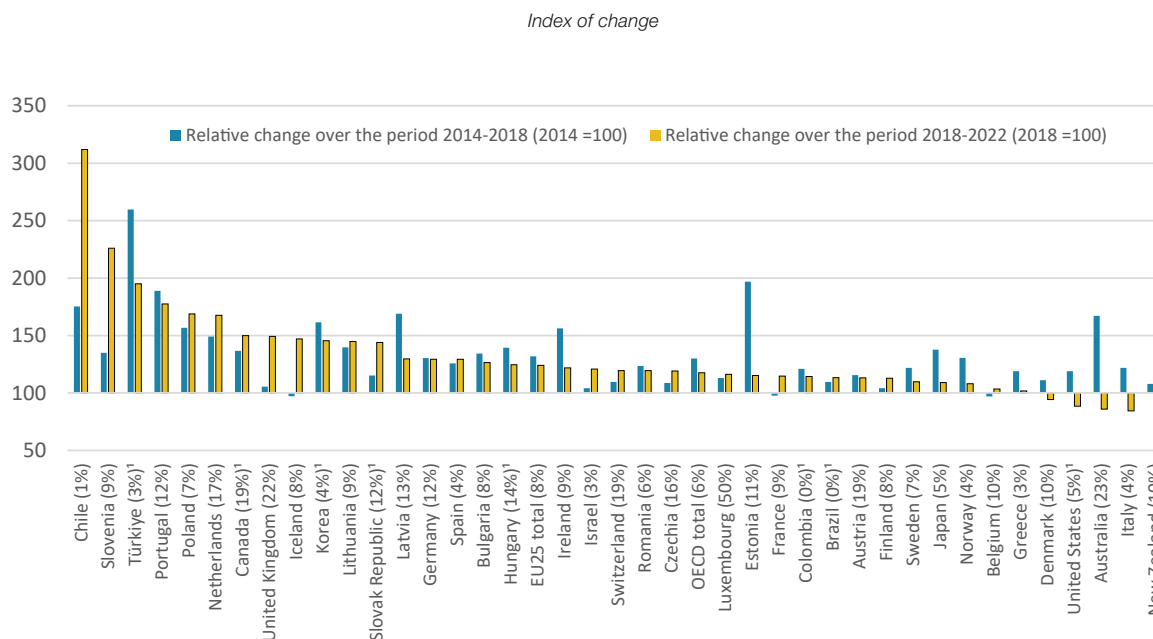
The COVID-19 pandemic did not stop the rise in international student mobility

Student mobility in tertiary education has continued to expand significantly in recent decades. The number of international students – those who are enrolled in tertiary education institutions outside their country of origin or who received their previous education in another country – increased by over 50% in recent years, from 3.0 million in the 38 OECD countries in 2014 to over 4.6 million in 2022. This increase can be attributed to factors such as the pursuit of high-quality or prestigious educational programmes, access to world-renowned institutions and better professional prospects in more developed economies. Additionally, the rising financial capacity of the middle classes in major sending countries—fuelled by economic growth in those countries—has further contributed to this trend (British council, 2024^[1]).

Despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the number of international students hosted by OECD countries rose by 18% between 2018 and 2022, although this was slower than the rise of over 30% seen between 2014 and 2018 (Figure 1). This resilience reflects universities' ability to adapt quickly to new challenges, including the rapid expansion of online and hybrid learning, as well as policies implemented during and after the pandemic to support international students, such as flexible visa regulations, extended work opportunities and targeted financial aid (OECD, 2021^[2]).

Only five countries saw the number of international students they hosted fall between 2018 and 2022: Australia, Denmark, Italy, New Zealand and the United States. This decline is due in part to migration and health restrictions implemented during the pandemic, which were particularly strict in Australia and New Zealand, and more restrictive student visa policies in the United States (OECD, 2021^[2]). In comparison, only Belgium, France and Iceland recorded a decline in numbers during the period 2014-18, and then only by small amounts. The biggest relative increases between 2018 and 2022 were seen in Chile and Slovenia, where the number of international students almost doubled (Figure 1). In Chile, this increase can be attributed to the rise of local universities in some international rankings and their growing attractiveness to Latin American students (Times Higher Education, 2022^[3]). However, it should be noted that international students still represent just 1% of all students in Chile. In Slovenia, policies encouraging student mobility and regional co-operation agreements have substantially contributed to this growth. For instance, the Public Scholarship, Development, Disability and Maintenance Fund of the Republic of Slovenia plays a central role in promoting international mobility through programmes like Ad futura scholarships, which support both incoming and outgoing students. (Public Scholarship, Development, Disability and Maintenance Fund of Slovenia, 2024^[4]).

Figure 1. Relative change in the number of international students enrolled in tertiary education in OECD countries (2022)



Note: The number in parentheses corresponds to the international or foreign student enrolment as a percentage of total tertiary enrolments in 2022. Year of reference differs from 2014 in few countries (2015 for Greece and Romania and 2016 for Colombia).

1. Number of foreign students instead of number of international students.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the change in number of foreign or international students between 2018 and 2022 (2018=100).

Source: Education at a Glance Database.

The most significant host and origin countries for internationally mobile students remained largely unchanged between 2018 and 2022

Hosting international students can strengthen tertiary education institutions by enhancing their diversity, academic reputation and economic contributions, while the number of national students travelling to study abroad reflects the appeal, real or perceived quality advantage and accessibility of foreign education systems and their pursuit of specific skills and experiences that come with it, such as language learning. Examining both trends helps assess how countries are attracting talent and how their own students are taking advantage of international study opportunities.

OECD member countries continue to be leading destinations for international students. In 2022, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New-Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States hosted nearly two-thirds of the 4.6 million international students studying in OECD countries in 2022, a trend that has remained consistent over recent years. These countries have long been seen as top choices due to their renowned universities, post-graduation work opportunities and strong international networks, although the origin of international students varies substantially across these international destinations. Japan, Korea, the Netherlands and the Republic of Türkiye together host a further 16% of the international student population hosted by OECD countries (Education at a Glance Database). Of these Korea and Türkiye stands out. The Study Korea 300K Project aims to attract 300,000 international students and establish the country as a global education hub. Meanwhile, Türkiye is emerging as a leading destination for students from the MENA and Central Asia regions, offering scholarships and actively promoting itself as a study destination. In contrast, recent policy shifts in the Netherlands have been geared towards reducing the number of international students (OECD INES special data collection on completion rates). The attractiveness of each education system to international students is driven by a complex mix of factors, including reputation, language, cultural ties, research strength, and employment prospects. Language, in particular, plays a key role, with smaller EU countries, for instance, increasingly drawing students by expanding their English-taught programmes (British Council, 2024^[5]).

As with host countries, the pattern for countries of origin has also remained largely stable over the last four years. The top ten “sending” countries together account for roughly half of all the international students hosted by OECD countries, highlighting the concentration of global student mobility among a few key nations (Table 1). However, this ranking is influenced by country size, as countries with large populations naturally send more students abroad, even if the share of students who travel abroad for tertiary education remains relatively low. This explains why China and India remain the main sources of internationally mobile students, accounting for around 30% of the total in both 2018 and 2022. Notably, over two-thirds of Chinese and Indian students studying abroad do so in just five countries: Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Table 1. Top ten nationalities of international tertiary students enrolled in OECD countries, 2018 and 2022

Number and share of all international tertiary students hosted by OECD countries

2018			2022		
	Number of students	Share of total international students (%)		Number of students	Share of total international students (%)
1- China	903 825	23.0	1- China	862 767	18.7
2- India	316 451	8.1	2- India	524 548	11.3
3- Germany	115 494	2.9	3- Viet Nam	128 471	2.8
4- Viet Nam	104 261	2.7	4- Germany	121 609	2.6
5- Korea	96 603	2.5	5- France	108 185	2.3
6- France	93 899	2.4	6- United States	93 195	2.0
7- Italy	69 848	1.8	7- Nigeria	85 764	1.9
8- Saudi Arabia	69 305	1.8	8- Korea	82 384	1.8
9- Nepal	68 675	1.7	9- Italy	79 574	1.7
10- United States	64 574	1.6	10- Nepal	79 051	1.7

Source: OECD Education at a Glance Database.

France, Germany and Italy are the three European OECD countries that consistently rank in the top ten of origin countries, in part because these countries have well established cultural and academic exchange traditions within Europe and beyond. However, limited access to top institutions and overcrowding in open-access universities—especially in Italy and France—also drive students abroad. Outside Europe, Korea and the United States remain key contributors to international student mobility, with students from these countries often enrolling in specialised programmes at leading global institutions.

The main shift in rankings during this period has been Nigeria replacing Saudi Arabia in the top ten (Table 1). Saudi student mobility declined as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program was scaled down in favour of more targeted scholarships (ICEF Monitor, 2022^[6]). Meanwhile, Nigeria experienced a surge in outbound mobility, driven by underfunded universities, frequent strikes and the pursuit of better career opportunities (Okunade and Awosusi, 2023^[7]). The United Kingdom remains the main destination for Nigerian students, followed by the United States, Canada, Germany and Australia, in descending order of importance. These destinations are attractive due to the quality of their educational institutions and, with the exception of Germany, their shared language, as well as, in the case of the United Kingdom, historical ties with Nigeria.

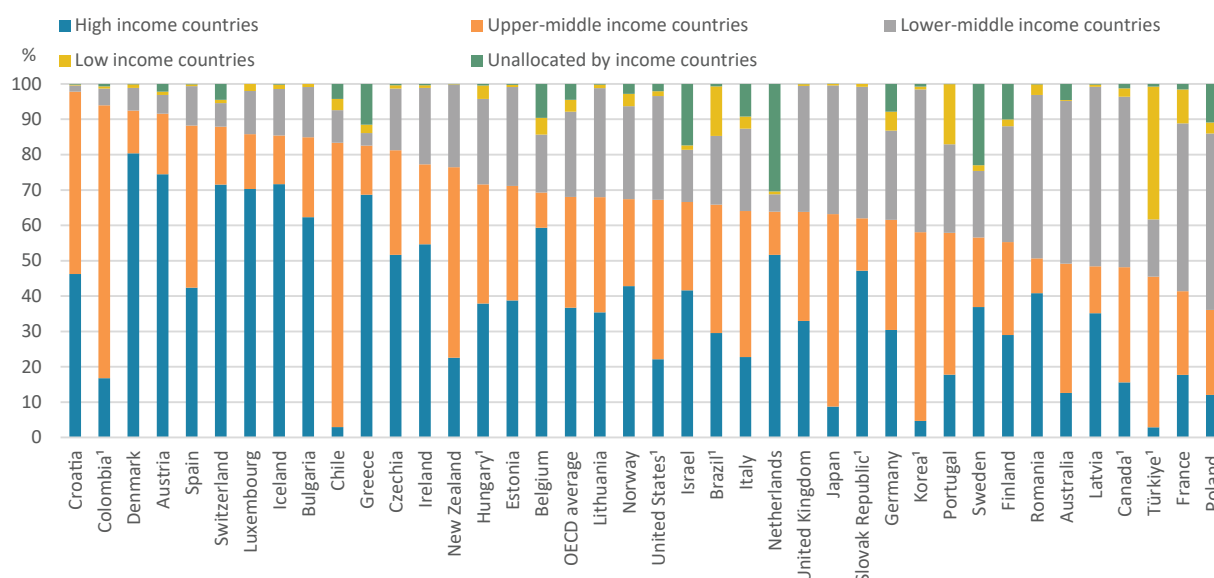
Economic disparities shape student mobility, limiting access from low-income countries

International student mobility is heavily influenced by economic factors, with two-thirds of internationally mobile students originating from high- or upper middle-income countries. In some countries, the share exceeds 90%, notably in Croatia, Colombia, Denmark, Austria, Spain and Switzerland. Only in Australia, Canada, France, Latvia, Poland and Türkiye does it fall below 50%, indicating a higher inflow of students from low-income countries into these countries (Figure 2).

This disproportionately low share of students from low-income countries is largely driven by the financial, administrative and structural barriers they face. However, some OECD and partner countries stand out as hosting a relatively larger share of students from low-income nations. In Brazil, France, Germany, Portugal and Türkiye, students from low-income countries make up more than 5% of the total

international student population (Figure 2). These countries often have policies that promote access to higher education for students from developing nations, such as lower tuition fees, dedicated scholarship programmes and partnerships with universities in particular regions of the world. For example, France and Germany offer subsidised tuition and extensive financial aid options, making their universities more accessible (OECD, 2024^[8], Chapters B4 and C5). France has also established numerous co-operation agreements with African countries, such as partnerships through Campus France (Campus France, 2024^[9]). Türkiye has actively expanded its scholarship offerings to students from Africa and Asia (Waruru, 2023^[10]), while Brazil has historically provided opportunities for students from Portuguese-speaking African nations. These results show how targeted policies can foster greater inclusion in international student mobility.

Figure 2. Distribution of incoming international students by origin countries' income level (2022)



Note: The World Bank assigns the world's economies to four income groups – low-income, lower middle-income, upper middle-income and high-income. The classifications are updated each year on 1 July and are based on gross national income per capita in current USD of the previous year.

1. Share of foreign rather than international students.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of international or foreign students from high- and upper middle-income countries.

Source: OECD Education at a Glance Database and World Bank country classifications by income level (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025>).

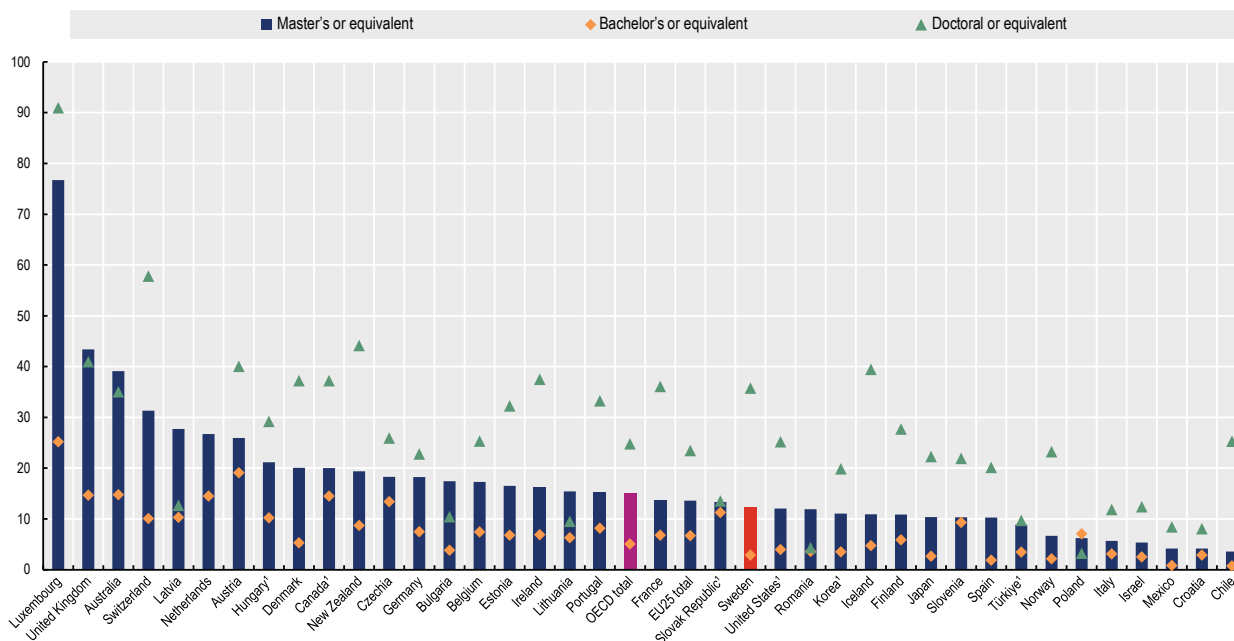
Doctoral programmes and STEM fields are more popular among international mobile students

Understanding international student mobility goes beyond examining where students come from and where they go – it is also crucial to consider what they study and at what level. The distribution of international students across different degree levels reflects both the demand for specialised expertise and the attractiveness of advanced academic and research opportunities. In particular, higher levels of education tend to attract a greater share of international students, as many seek postgraduate degrees to enhance their qualifications, access world-class research facilities or improve their career prospects. Across OECD countries, the proportion of international students increases with the level of higher education. On average, they account for 5% of bachelor's students, rising to 15% of master's students and 25% of those in doctoral programmes (Figure 3).

Austria, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have particularly high shares of international doctoral students – at least 40% of their total doctoral students – as their universities attract global talent through scholarships, research opportunities and strong academic networks. In some countries, the high proportion of international doctoral students also reflects declining interest in pursuing a PhD among domestic students. In France, for instance, factors such as long periods of study, uncertain career prospects and more attractive opportunities in the private sector have made doctoral studies less appealing for national candidates (Mérat, 2022^[11]). International recruitment can play a crucial role in maintaining research capacity and innovation in these countries.

Figure 3. Incoming student mobility in tertiary education, by level of study (2022)

Mobile student enrolment as a percentage of total enrolment in tertiary education, in per cent



Notes:

1. Share of foreign rather than international students.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of international or foreign students enrolled in master's or equivalent programmes in 2022.

Source: (OECD, 2024[8]), Table B4.3.

International students are more likely to enrol in STEM fields than their national counterparts, with 30% of mobile students choosing STEM programmes compared to just 19% of domestic students. This trend is particularly evident in countries like Denmark, Sweden and Türkiye, where over 40% of international students pursue studies in these disciplines. The global transferability of scientific and technical knowledge, supported by standardised curricula and a shared language of instruction, makes STEM an attractive option for international students. In contrast, internationally mobile students are less inclined to enrol in health and welfare fields, with only 11% of them choosing these areas, compared to 15% of national students. Regulatory barriers and challenges related to degree recognition often discourage international students from pursuing studies in these fields. Bulgaria and Romania stand out as the exceptions, with 40% of international students enrolled in health-related disciplines (OECD, 2024[8], Chapter B4).

Countries use varied strategies to retain international graduates, balancing economic needs and migration debates

It is also important to consider the opportunities available to internationally mobile students after graduation, as the ability to stay and work after completing their studies can play a crucial role in shaping their decisions. As well as influencing student mobility patterns, access to employment and long-term prospects can contribute to local economies by addressing skill shortages.

Policies to attract and retain international graduates vary significantly across countries, with some offering streamlined pathways to work and residency. For instance, Canada's Post-Graduation Work Permit, though recently restricted with the capping of international student enrolments, allowed graduates to stay and work for up to three years with options for permanent residency. Similarly, the United Kingdom's Graduate Route permits international students to remain for two years to gain work experience (British Council, 2025[12]), while Germany provides an 18-month period for non-EU graduates to seek employment (German Federal Government, 2025[13]). However, post-graduation pathways in other countries can be more complex and restrictive. In France, foreign graduates can apply for residence permits to work, but the process can be challenging (Campus France, 2025[14]). The United States imposes quotas and time limits on work visas, making access to the job market more difficult for international graduates (Times Higher Education, 2024[15]).



As well as visa and residency opportunities, many countries offer financial and structural support to help international students integrate into the workforce. Countries like Australia and New Zealand provide internships and co-op programmes to enhance graduates' employability, for instance (ApplyBoard, 2023^[16]). Several countries also implement targeted initiatives to attract graduates in high-demand fields such as health care, engineering and information technology (IT). Programmes like Germany's Blue Card and Denmark's fast-track visa schemes facilitate employment in sectors facing labour shortages, highlighting the valuable contributions of international graduates to local economies. These policies, shaped by ongoing debates on migration, continue to influence the opportunities and challenges faced by international students worldwide (OECD, 2024^[17] and OECD, 2022^[18]).

The bottom line

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, international student mobility continued to grow between 2018 and 2022. The composition of host and origin countries remained largely unchanged, with about two-thirds of students in OECD countries coming from high- and upper middle-income nations. International students are particularly concentrated in doctoral programmes and STEM fields. Policies to retain international graduates vary: some countries offer pathways to work and residency, while others impose restrictive visa and employment regulations. These policies, shaped by ongoing debates on migration, continue to affect the opportunities and challenges faced by international students globally.

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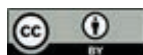
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