

Visitors or Immigrants? International Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Even though international students are officially temporary migrants, many eventually become immigrants to the United States. Despite the large number of students who adjust their status, little is known about their migration intentions and decisions. We used a questionnaire sent to international students at the University of Minnesota to investigate these migration intentions. Here we report the factors that students consider in deciding whether to stay in the US or return to their home country on completion of their studies, and how these factors vary by nationality or other characteristics, such as gender or field of study. We also investigate whether international students see their stay in the US as temporary or as a springboard towards permanent immigration. Our findings suggest that few students arrive in the US with the intention of immigrating permanently. Instead, a wide variety of professional, societal and personal factors influence students in an ongoing decision-making process. Broadly speaking, economic and professional factors typically act as strong incentives to stay in the US, while personal and societal factors tend to draw students back to their home countries. In the long run, a natural progression of professional and personal decisions leads many to become permanent immigrants. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States has been a major recipient of international students since the 1960s, and numbers have grown rapidly in the intervening years. In 1971, the State Department issued only 65,000 student visas; in 2000 this number had reached 315,000 (Borjas, 2002). By 2003, there were an estimated 586,323 international students¹ in the US, representing a 17-fold increase since the mid-1950s (Open Doors, 2004a) (Fig. 1). This number is equivalent to 4.6% of all students in the US, although at the graduate level international students make up well over 10% of the total student body, and this proportion is significantly higher for certain disciplines and professional fields, such as engineering and computer science (Open Doors, 2004a). The proportion of the student body represented by international students has also steadily increased until very recently (Fig. 2). It has been estimated that in the early years of this decade foreign students received 49% of doctorates in engineering, 35% in the physical sciences (Borjas, 2002), and almost half of those awarded in economics (Baker and Finn, 2003). These large numbers not only have far-reaching implications for the American education system, but also for immigration, since many international students choose to remain in the US after completing their degrees. International students are usually admitted to the US on temporary visas, but

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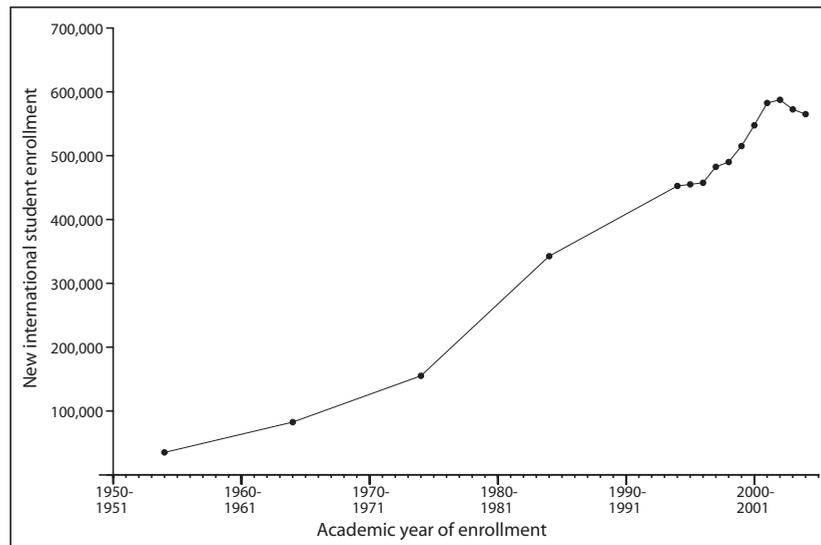


Figure 1. New international student enrolment at US institutions, 1954–2005.
Source: Open Doors (2005a).

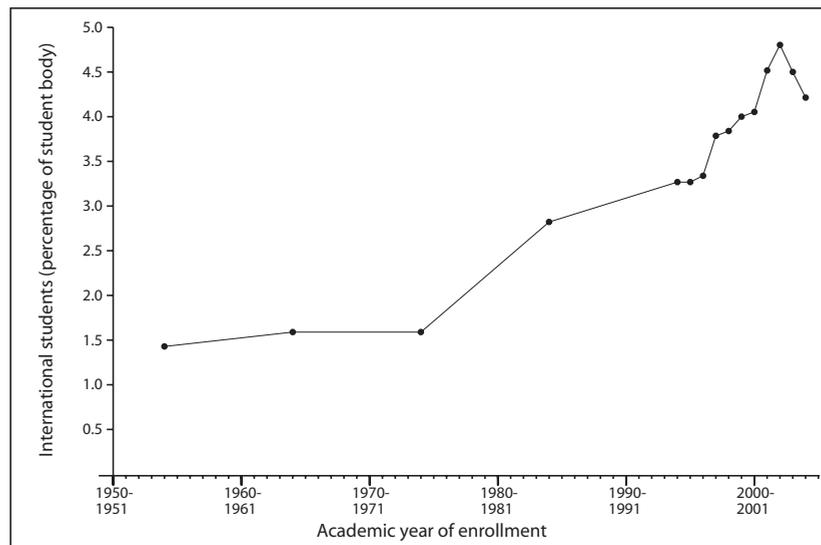


Figure 2. International student enrolment at US institutions, 1954–2005, as a proportion of total student enrolment.
Source: Open Doors (2005a).

owing to their desirable skills and the contacts they make during their stay, opportunities exist for many to adjust their status from visitors to immigrants once they have completed their degrees.

In this study, we investigate international students' intentions regarding whether or not to return to their home country on completion of

their degree, and how these intentions change over time. We consider four main questions. Firstly, what initially attracts international students to the US? Secondly, do international students see their stay in the US as temporary or as a springboard towards permanent immigration, and does this intention change over time? Thirdly, what factors do students consider in the

decision of whether to return to their home countries on the completion of their degrees? Finally, do these factors, or the weight assigned to each of them, vary by nationality or other characteristics, such as gender, family status, or field of study?

Despite an increasing interest in migrations of the highly skilled since the 1990s, the literature on these types of migrations remains limited (Iredale, 2001). In particular, most studies ignore migrants coming from high-income countries, like Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany or Japan, despite the fact that these countries are major sources of professional migrants to the US (Cheng and Yang, 1998). Furthermore, the vast majority of studies focus on professional migrants who enter the US on H1B or other work visas, rather than those who adjust their status from an F-1 student visa (c.f. Agarwal and Winkler, 1984). As Li *et al.* (1996) pointed out, there is a particular lack of attention to students in migration research. Much of the information that does refer specifically to international students deals with adjustment to the host country and a new education system (e.g. Bystydzienski and Resnick, 1994; McNamara and Harris, 1997; Ghosh and Wang, 2003; Scheyvens *et al.*, 2003), rather than with migration patterns. The few studies that focus on students as migrants tend to be limited by country of origin or discipline (e.g. Butcher (2004) considered East Asian students; Zweig and Changgui (1995) looked at Chinese students; Baker and Finn (2003) assessed stay rates among economics students). One of the few international student studies that compares migrants from different countries is provided by Rao (1979), but is now somewhat dated.

Other authors have examined international student mobility within the European Union (EU) (e.g. King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Baláž and Williams, 2004). However, the open-border policy within the EU means that findings cannot easily be applied to the US context where international students face visa restrictions. The visa situation in the US has received increasing attention since the events of 11 September 2001. International student numbers in the US have steadily declined over the past four years (Fig. 1), partly in response to 'real and perceived difficulties in obtaining student visas (especially in scientific and technical fields)' (Open Doors, 2005b: 1). Some students are now subject to background

checks and being tracked within the US, and all students experience more stringent regulations regarding travel (*The Economist*, 2001, 2005; Dollag, 2004). In addition, several unrelated factors have also gained importance over the same period, including 'rising US tuition costs, vigorous recruitment activities by other English-speaking nations, and perceptions abroad that it is more difficult for international students to come to the United States' (Open Doors, 2005b: 1). Some authors argue that these restrictions have not only altered the number of students coming to the US in the first place, but have also led to a higher percentage returning to their home countries – a trend that has been further strengthened by significant improvements in the job markets of some of the major sending countries and economic contraction in the US (Baum, 1994; Yatsko, 1997; Mooney and Neelakantan, 2004). Some recent reports have suggested that this decline may now be levelling off (e.g. Open Doors, 2005b), and efforts are being made by institutions and the US government to reverse this trend. For instance, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, Dina H. Powell, recently made a statement that efforts were being made to 'streamline visa processes' and to reassure parents, students, and educators that 'foreign students are welcome to study in the United States' (Dina H. Powell, quoted in McCormack, 2005). At the same time many universities have stepped up their recruitment procedures (Goldstein, 2005). It is still unclear what effect, if any, these measures will have on international student enrolment.

The return of international students has received even less scholarly attention than their initial migration, although it is widely agreed that many students stay in the US permanently (despite the assumption of US visa-issuing authorities that international students will return home on completion of the degree). Very few studies give *actual* return rates owing to the challenge of obtaining the relevant data (Finn's 2003 study, which used tax returns to calculate return rates, provides one exception); instead, most studies report return *intentions* (Johnson and Regets, 1998). Even though students' migration intentions are an imperfect measure of the number of students who actually return (Baker and Finn, 2003), they are a useful indicator of future migration decisions (Li *et al.*, 1996). More

importantly, they provide insights into the factors that students take into account in making their decision. The return migration of international students has been identified as one of the most significant gaps in the literature on highly skilled migrants (Baláz and Williams, 2004).

METHODS

As international students ourselves, we frequently discussed whether to return to our home countries on completion of our doctoral programmes. This insider's perspective on the decision-making process provided some background for developing a survey questionnaire on the topic. However, generating a questionnaire solely from our own experiences would have introduced biases associated with our particular demographic situation and perspectives. We therefore conducted six focus groups and a number of informal conversations with international students from a variety of disciplines and countries in order to gain further insights into the factors considered by students in their decision-making processes. These focus groups took place at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities during the 2003/4 academic year. Each focus group was with students of just one nationality (Chinese, Dutch, Greek, Indian, Japanese and Tanzanian), but was mixed in terms of gender and academic discipline. We recruited participants largely by word of mouth within international student networks such as national student associations (see Alberts and Hazen, 2005, for further details). These focus groups yielded not only important results in terms of how individuals go about the decision-making process, but also generated the raw material from which to build our questionnaire (as suggested by Gibbs, 1997).

There are a number of strengths to a multiple-method approach, such as this. In particular, multiple-method approaches facilitate the checking of information obtained through one method of data collection with that generated in a different way (Philip, 1998). Furthermore, some scholars have argued that a combination of qualitative and quantitative data is particularly beneficial as it allows the researcher to place very specific information about individuals within a more general context (e.g. McLafferty, 1995;

Morgan, 1996; McKendrick, 1999). In our case, the focus group interviews gave us detailed insights into the thoughts and feelings of particular individuals on specific topics, while the questionnaires allowed us to investigate statistically the extent to which these views were held across the international student community of the University of Minnesota. We also referred to the focus group transcripts to try to explain unexpected results that emerged in the questionnaire analysis.

However, it is also important to acknowledge limits of the study. In particular, this study focuses on student decision-making as a key factor in student migrations, but this is only one facet that helps to explain migration patterns. Clearly, other factors such as bureaucratic barriers or legal restrictions on migration and institutional incentives also have a part to play in explaining migration patterns, but these issues are beyond the purview of this study. The *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, published annually by the Institute of International Education, is the most extensive data-set available on actual student numbers in the US, and therefore provides an important complementary source of information on student migrations. However, it does not provide information about return migrations or the motivations behind these migrations.

We designed the questionnaire to be as straightforward as possible, bearing in mind that the vast majority of our respondents would not be native English-speakers. We asked for some general background information, such as nationality, age, gender, and degree sought, as well as characteristics of the students' migration (for example, year of arrival in the US and whether the student had originally arrived on an academic exchange programme). We then moved on to investigate motivations for the respondents' migration decisions. From the focus group transcripts we compiled a list of all the reasons that participants had mentioned as influences on their decision-making process, and then grouped these into multiple-choice answers for the questionnaire. We asked respondents to indicate from these lists all the factors that applied to their own decision-making process. They also had the opportunity of adding an additional reason or providing further information in an 'other' cate-

Table 1. Summary of multiple choice options offered in the questionnaire.

(1) Reasons to come to the US initially

1. Better educational opportunities in the US
2. Better funding opportunities in the US
3. More academic freedom
4. Expectation that a US degree would improve job opportunities in home country.
5. Desire to experience a new culture
6. Came with other family members who were motivated to move to the US
7. Other

(2) Motivations to stay in the US or return to the home country**(a) Incentives to stay in the US**

1. Better job/career opportunities in US
2. Academic freedom in US
3. Higher economic standard of living in US
4. Higher 'quality of life' in US
5. Ties to friends/family in the US
6. Unwillingness of a partner to leave US
7. Opportunities for your children in the US
8. Political situation in US
9. Other

(c) Incentives to return to home country

1. Friends and family in home country
2. Family members with you in the US who want to return to home country
3. Better professional opportunities in home country than in the US
4. Feeling more comfortable in your home culture
5. Higher economic standard of living in home country
6. Better 'quality of life' in home country
7. Political situation in home country
8. Other

(b) Disincentives to return to home country

1. Poorer job opportunities in home country
2. Restrictive or hierarchical career structure in home country
3. Restrictive cultural practices, e.g. strong gender roles, in home country
4. Family expectations
5. Poorer economic standard of living in home country
6. Poorer 'quality of life' in home country
7. Political situation in home country
8. Other

(d) Disincentives to stay in the US

1. Feelings of alienation from US culture
2. Different understanding of friendship in US
3. Different priorities in US (e.g. family vs. career)
4. Racist attitudes encountered in US
5. Poorer working conditions in US (long hours, few vacation days, etc.)
6. Poorer economic standard of living/low wages in US
7. Poorer 'quality of life' in US
8. Political situation in US
9. Other

gory. We list the multiple-choice responses offered in the questionnaire in Table 1.

After testing several pilot versions, we sent the questionnaire by e-mail to a random sample of 950 of the 3294 international students enrolled at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities for the 2003–4 academic year. We obtained 185 responses; with a response rate of just 19% we had to investigate concerns about differences between respondents and non-respondents. However, we found the responses to have come from a broad cross-section of the international student body, with no systematic biases by sex, continent of origin, degree level or discipline evident among the respondents (Table 2). We

therefore concluded that the responses we obtained were reasonably representative of students at the University of Minnesota. International students at the University of Minnesota cannot be said to be representative of all international students in the US, however, owing to differences among schools and regions. As a large public university in the Midwest, we would suggest that the results we obtained could be extended to other similar institutions, but may not be representative of student motivations at smaller, private colleges, and particularly those outside the Midwest. Indeed, when it comes to decisions about migration, the region where the school is located may be particularly influential

Table 2. Comparison of characteristics of questionnaire respondents (sample) and all international students at the University of Minnesota (population).

Category	Proportion of respondents (%) ^a	
	Sample	Population
Continent of origin:		
Africa	6	4
Asia	56	70
Australasia	<1	<1
Europe	20	16
Latin America	10	6
North America	7	4
No response	2	–
Discipline:		
Arts	3	3
Business/Economics	10	10
Engineering	20	26
Humanities	9	9
Professional schools	11	19
Physical sciences	28	17
Social sciences	17	15
Other/undeclared	2	1
Sex:		
Female	51	42
Male	49	58
Degree level:		
Bachelor's	18	17
Masters	28	26
PhD	52	50
Professional	2	1
Non-degree seeking	<1	5

^a Responses may not add up to 100%, owing to rounding.
Source: Data from authors and Open Doors (2004b).

– the number of respondents who mentioned the Minnesota winter as a disincentive to staying in the US is a testament to this.

In analysing our results, we looked first at the proportion of respondents who listed each response as motivating their migration decisions. We then turned to hypothesis testing in order to assess whether or not particular questionnaire responses were related to specific demographic categories (such as home region or gender). For instance, were women more likely than men to cite 'restrictive cultural practices' as a disadvantage of the home country? We generated these hypotheses from the findings of our focus groups. We tested these hypothesised associa-

tions using chi-square tests, and report significance at the 95% level. Owing to small numbers of respondents in some subcategories, we were unable to test certain hypotheses that could have proved interesting; some of these hypotheses are listed below as having potential for future research.

In the analysis of our focus group results, we identified three broadly defined categories of motivating factors: professional, societal and personal. 'Professional reasons' include any factors concerned with wages, work conditions and facilities, and opportunities for professional advancement. We define 'societal factors' very broadly as those connected with how comfortable the student feels in a particular social, political or cultural environment, while 'personal reasons' relate to interactions with friends and family. From the focus groups we found that, broadly speaking, professional factors usually encourage students to stay in the US, while societal and personal factors typically encourage a return home. We were interested to see whether these generalisations were borne out by a wider sample of international students, and what exceptions to this pattern might emerge.

REASONS FOR COMING TO THE US TO STUDY

Original Intentions

Before addressing migration intentions at the end of the course of study, it is important to understand why students initially came to the US² as a baseline from which to assess how decisions change over time. As in the focus groups, professional justifications for coming to the US proved to be important for the largest number of students responding to our questionnaire, with almost three-quarters of respondents reporting that 'better educational opportunities in the US' had influenced their decision to come – well ahead of all other reasons (Table 3). Those seeking doctoral degrees were significantly more likely than those at the masters and bachelors level to list quality of education as important ($P = 0.008$). A further 43% of students felt that a US degree would improve their job opportunities back home. We hypothesised that these two factors vary by country of origin, as education systems and job markets differ among regions.

Table 3. Initial motivations for coming to the US to study: proportion of respondents who stated each reason (%).

	All respondents	Africans	Asians	Europeans	North Americans	Latin Americans
Better educational opportunities in US	72	82	79	61	31	78
Desire to experience a new culture	47	27	54	47	8	44
Improve job opportunities back home	43	73	46	31	8	56
Funding opportunities in US	29	36	21	39	42	33
Greater academic freedom in US	28	36	34	31	8	6
Came with other family members	5	0	6	0	8	11

Although we lacked sufficient responses to test this hypothesis at the level of individual countries, we were able to cross-tabulate our responses by region and did, indeed, find a strong association. Citing 'better educational opportunities in the US' differed significantly among home regions ($P = 0.003$),³ with approximately 80% of Africans, Asians and Latin Americans marking this reason, compared with 61% of Europeans and 31% of North Americans (i.e. Canadians). This suggests that the level of affluence of the home region may be critical. We therefore tested for a relationship between citing 'better education' and the level of affluence of the home country, and found that those from low-income countries⁴ reported educational opportunities as a motivating factor at a significantly higher rate than those from middle- or high-income countries ($P = 0.001$). Whether or not study in the US was deemed to improve job opportunities back home was also significantly associated with particular regions ($P = 0.006$), with 73% of Africans, 56% of Latin Americans, 46% of Asians, 31% of Europeans and 8% of North Americans citing this as a reason for coming to the US.

Other motivations related directly to the US academic system. The attraction of funding opportunities in the US was cited by 29% of respondents, and was associated strongly with type of degree ($P = 0.002$) – those taking doctoral degrees were most likely to mark this reason, and those taking bachelor's least likely. This relationship is not surprising as the US education system is set up to provide generous funding at the post-

graduate level but very little at the undergraduate level. A further 28% of respondents stated that 'greater academic freedom in the US' was an important motivating factor. We hypothesised that regional differences might exist in this respect as our focus group results suggested that academic freedom in the US is a particular draw to Asian students. However, we found no significant relationship.

Overall, professional and academic motivations proved to be the most important motivators for students to come to the US, particularly for those from low-income countries. However, personal reasons were also evident. Indeed, the second most commonly cited reason overall was the 'desire to experience a new culture', which was selected by nearly half of all respondents. This reason was popular across the board, with no significant association with region, gender or level of study.

A small minority of students listed 'other' reasons for coming to the US. Three students mentioned their desire to play on a sports team or to use high-quality US sports facilities for training. Three students stated that a sponsor paid for their studies in the US, and three students mentioned specific academic reasons for coming, such as the desire to work with a particular professor or the fact that their course of study is not offered in their home country.

In summary, career-related and educational reasons to migrate dominated in the decision to come to the US, particularly among those from low-income countries, indicating that international students do fit the label of 'professional

migrants'. However, an additional factor of importance is that many international students have little or no first-hand experience of the US before arriving to start a course of study. Most must therefore rely on widely reported characteristics of the US in making their decision to move there. Characteristics of US society that students can become familiar with from second-hand reports, such as economic factors and the educational system, are therefore typically more important in initiating a move to the US than are personal factors. A student's perception of these characteristics must have been favourable (at least in the short-term) to explain why the initial migration was made. However, these professional factors do not provide the whole explanation, as about half of all students also noted the personal desire to experience a new culture.

Changing Intentions

One of our main interests with this study was uncovering whether international students initially saw their stay in the US as temporary or as a springboard towards a permanent stay from the outset. In our focus groups, students reported a wide variety of intentions concerning proposed length of stay in the US on their arrival, although most students intended to return home at some point. Some students intended to return immediately after completing their degrees, a small minority planned a permanent stay, while most believed that several years of work experience in the US would be desirable, even though they intended to return home eventually.

Our questionnaire responses closely mirrored this pattern. Among questionnaire respondents, very few (7.5%) believed on arrival in the US that they would stay permanently (Table 4). The majority of our respondents (67%) stated that they had originally intended to return to their home countries after the completion of their degrees, although many now wanted to get a few years work experience in the US before returning. Most thought that they would return home within a couple of years of graduating, with only a small minority anticipating that they would still be in the US more than five years beyond graduation. There were no significant differences among home regions or between genders in terms of these initial intentions. The idea that international students come to the US with the

Table 4. Initial intentions regarding length of stay.

Initial intention	Proportion of responses (%)
Return home . . .	
... immediately on completion of degree	28.0
... 1–2 years after completion of degree	22.0
... 3–5 years after completion of degree	11.0
... more than 5 years after completion of degree	6.0
Stay permanently in US	7.5
No specific ideas in mind	25.5

intention to immigrate permanently therefore seems to be the exception rather than the rule, although many students do want to stay several years longer than their student visas officially allow. From our focus groups it became apparent that an extended stay was usually seen as a way to gain valuable work experience, as well as to earn some money as a start-up fund or safety net for the return home.

Since a large proportion of international students adjust their status to permanent immigrants after graduation, and yet very few initially arrive in the US with the intention of staying permanently, it is clear that many students change their minds during their stay in the US. Our survey results confirmed this. Of those students who had indicated a clear idea of length of stay at the outset, 36% stated that they had changed their minds since their initial arrival in the US. Of these, more than half had decided to try to lengthen their stay, while about a quarter had sought to shorten it. The remaining students stated that the length of their stay now depended on 'other' factors. These other factors focused on career and family concerns: 61% stated that their return would depend on what opportunities arose in terms of jobs or career prospects; and 28% of respondents noted that family or relationship issues would influence their future decisions. A few respondents mentioned financial issues or the demands of a sponsor. It is obvious that students are reassessing their decisions at key points in their migration experience. So, what factors are involved in making the

decision of whether or not to return to the home country?

MOTIVATIONS TO STAY OR RETURN

For the return decision the student typically has more information to weigh than for the initial decision to move to the US, as (s)he now has first-hand knowledge of both the home country and the US. From our focus groups it quickly became clear that students perceived the decision to return in terms of weighing the advantages and disadvantages of life in the home country with the advantages and disadvantages of life in the US. In designing the questionnaire we followed this format by providing participants with a list of seven or eight potential influencing factors in each case (Table 1). This format is somewhat repetitive, as respondents considering good job opportunities in the US as an important factor may also cite poor job opportunities in the home country as a reason to stay in the US. We see this as a strength, however, as it allows us to double-check many of the associations that we hypothesise.

Incentives to Stay in the US

Advantages of the US

As predicted by our focus groups, the most commonly cited incentive to stay in the US was 'better job/career opportunities in the US', selected by 64% of respondents (Table 5). Whether or not this reason was cited was associated strongly with home region ($P < 0.0001$). We had hypothesised that this would be the case, assuming that those from low-income countries would have fewer career alternatives back home

and would therefore be most attracted by job opportunities in the US. The results were counter-intuitive, however; students from Asia and Africa were actually least likely to state that job opportunities would keep them in the US. We can only speculate why this might be so – perhaps it relates to the challenges of finding a job in a country that views the student as a minority, as suggested by one Korean questionnaire respondent, who noted the existence of a 'glass ceiling' for non-whites in his experience of the US. In addition, students arriving from Africa and Asia may be more 'elite' than those from Europe and North America, and therefore have higher status and better career options available to them at home. Both these ideas are supported by a statement from one of our Tanzanian focus group respondents:

'In some situations we [Tanzanians] are competed out [in the US], and we think we can fairly compete back home, and even with more advantage – you know, an added advantage with the wealth of experience and exposures from this country. And so we see more opportunities if we go home to Tanzania than here. For example, a person with a doctorate in [the US] is an average person (. . .) but in some other cultures . . . in some other economies, like in my economy, the lifestyle of a person with post-secondary education is very different.' (Male graduate student, Tanzania)

Latin Americans followed the European and North American pattern in this respect, with the majority (89%) suggesting that good job opportunities in the US encourage them to stay. Further investigation is needed before these findings can be explained satisfactorily.

Table 5. Advantages of the US: proportion of respondents who stated each reason (% of that group).

Feature of US	All respondents	Africans	Asians	Europeans	North Americans	Latin Americans
Better job/career opportunities	64	27	55	81	83	89
Higher standard of living	33	0	35	34	33	50
Greater academic freedom	29	9	35	37	8	11
Higher quality of life	28	0	39	17	33	5
Family/friends in US	15	0	13	17	33	17
Partner's unwillingness to leave	10	9	7	11	25	17
Opportunities for children	8	9	25	17	17	0
Political situation	8	9	9	8	0	11

Having 'a higher standard of living in the US' was also a relatively popular response, chosen by a third of respondents. We postulated that this response might be associated with the income level of the home country, but we found no significant relationship, probably again because those coming to study in the US from the poorer countries are often the rich elite, complicating the relationship. Indeed, as emerged from our focus groups, many students from low-income countries consider their economic standard of living to be higher back home than as students in the US.

The concept of higher quality of life⁵ in the US was also commonly mentioned (28% of respondents). This was an important finding as our focus group discussions more often focused on higher quality of life in the *home country* than in the US. The notion of quality of life emerged from the focus group discussions, where students frequently brought up non-economic, often intangible, characteristics of society that were described simply as improving 'quality of life'. Although different students included slightly different things when defining quality of life, they all shared a common interpretation of what the overall concept meant. An exchange in the Greek students' focus group illustrates this:

Facilitator: Can you explain what attracts you about the Greek lifestyle?

Student 1: Less materialistic . . .

Student 2: . . . much less, actually.

Student 3: People are less ambitious with regards to their professional life, and social accomplishments count more.

Student 4: The quality of food is the quality of life . . .

Student 5: . . . the weather . . .

Student 2: The quality of life – that includes the weather . . . the people.

A final issue mentioned by a minority of students (8%) was the current political situation in the US. In our focus groups and informal interviews, the US political situation was most often brought up as a disadvantage, except among those from countries with restrictive or unstable governments, such as China and Serbia. We therefore hypothesised that those questionnaire respondents listing the US as having a positive political atmosphere might also be from countries with oppressive or unstable political regimes. However, no obvious pattern was found, with 15 students from 13 diverse countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, the Congo, Indonesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Turkey, the UK and Venezuela) listing this reason.

Disadvantages of the Home Country

Once again, job opportunities came out top of the list, with half of all respondents stating that poor job opportunities back home encouraged them to stay in the US (Table 6). The regional pattern with respect to job opportunities that we identified above was reconfirmed, with those in Latin America, North America and Europe listing poor job opportunities in their home countries at much higher rates (83%, 67% and 64%, respectively) than those from Asia and Africa (38% and 36%, respectively). Again, we can speculate that students from Asia and Africa are probably among the elite and can relatively easily obtain jobs back home, while potentially experiencing racial barriers to employment in the US. About 30% of our respondents noted concerns with restrictive or hierarchical career structures back

Table 6. Disadvantages of the home country: proportion of respondents who stated each reason (% of that group).

Feature of home country	All respondents	Africans	Asians	Europeans	North Americans	Latin Americans
Poorer job opportunities	50	36	38	64	67	83
Restrictive career structures	30	9	37	31	0	22
Poorer standard of living	21	18	20	20	0	44
Political situation	20	9	25	11	8	28
Poorer quality of life	18	0	21	19	17	11
Restrictive cultural practices	14	0	18	8	8	11
Family expectations	7	9	8	6	0	11

home. These two findings clearly reinforce our focus group findings that professional reasons are usually the most influential factors encouraging a stay in the US.

The next three most commonly cited factors all related to structural characteristics of the home country: poorer economic standard of living (21%), the political situation (20%), and poorer quality of life (18%). We found the marking of these factors to co-occur at significant levels among individuals, but they showed little association with particular regions.

A minority of students listed societal reasons not to return to the home country. This is somewhat counter-intuitive as differences in the characteristics of the home and host society are usually assumed to alienate the migrant from the host country. However, just over 13% of respondents selected 'restrictive cultural practices in the home country' as a disincentive to return. In our focus groups these practices were usually brought up by women and were gender-specific (for instance, restrictions on employment opportunities for women). We therefore hypothesised that this factor would be a stronger disincentive to women, but found no significant difference between the number of males and females who cited this reason, nor any significant regional differences.⁶

In a similar vein, 7% of respondents listed family expectations as a disadvantage of returning to the home country. As one focus group participant explained:

'The last time I was in India, I realized that what I wanted, my family was totally incapable of giving me because they don't know any other way to be. I have a completely different world view now. It's like having two lenses at a slightly different angle. I know what

I want, and I have changed, but the people back home have not changed.' (Female graduate student, India)

About 7% of respondents listed 'other' disadvantages of the home country. Structural issues were important to several students, including an unfavourable academic atmosphere, high taxes, cumbersome bureaucracy and corruption. One Japanese student was concerned that her non-Japanese partner would have few career opportunities in Japan, while another Japanese respondent simply stated, 'the Japanese work too much'. For others, personal issues were important. An Icelandic student stated that her desire for further new experiences would discourage a return to Iceland. For two other students, the feeling of having lost touch with the home culture was an incentive to stay in the US; in the words of one Bulgarian student: 'I have become so acculturated in the US that I no longer fit in my home country'.

Incentives to Return to the Home Country

Advantages of the Home Country

Friends and family back home proved to be by far the most common incentive to return to the home country, mentioned by 78% of respondents (Table 7). This response seemed popular across the board, with no significant associations with gender, nationality or marital status. The next most common response was feeling more comfortable in the home culture, which 44% of respondents marked. We expected that this response might be more common among Asian and African students, who expressed the greatest levels of cultural alienation in our focus groups, but this did not prove to be the case. Indeed, we found no significant association between this

Table 7. Advantages of the home country: proportion of respondents who stated each reason (% of that group).

Features of home country	All respondents	Africans	Asians	Europeans	North Americans	Latin Americans
Friends/family	78	81	77	69	83	89
Feeling comfortable	44	55	47	36	28	44
Better quality of life	39	73	28	50	42	56
Better professional opportunities	18	55	21	8	17	6
Higher standard of living	13	18	14	9	17	11
Political situation	8	0	4	11	42	6

factor and home region. 'Better quality of life in home country' was also commonly cited (39% of respondents). The frequency with which these three factors were reported reinforce strongly the findings of our focus groups, which suggested that personal and cultural factors are most important in motivating a student to return home.

Some noted professional factors as a reason to return, however, with 18% of questionnaire respondents feeling that they had better professional opportunities in their home countries than in the US. Once again, a strong association exists with region ($P = 0.006$), and again African and Asian students noted professional opportunities back home at the highest rates.

Societal reasons were clearly less important than personal issues for most students, but they were still in evidence. About 13% of respondents felt that their standard of living would be higher back home, and nearly 8% of respondents were encouraged to go back by the favourable political situation in their home countries. Whether or not the political situation in the home country acted as a draw was strongly associated with region ($P < 0.0001$), with almost all the respondents who indicated this response coming from Europe or Canada. As one Eastern European respondent noted: 'At least I'd be dealing with my own political shortcomings, rather than Bush *et al.*'

One additional category that we should have added to our list of choices was the idea of going home through a feeling of responsibility to return skills to the home country, which seven respondents noted in the 'other' category. This equates

to 4% of all respondents independently coming up with this reason, so had this been an official option it is likely that it would have been selected by a far larger proportion of respondents. Students also provided a variety of other reasons to return home in the 'other' category. Three respondents mentioned the requirements of a sponsor to return, and two listed better social services back home as an important motivation. Two students specifically mentioned food as a reason to return, consistent with the emphasis which was placed on the psychological importance of familiar foods that we noted in several focus groups.

Disadvantages of the US

It was in this category that we got by far the largest number of additional comments clarifying students' feelings. These comments provide a wealth of qualitative information on strength of feeling. From our focus group discussions and personal experience, we suggest that feelings of discontent (sometimes even depression) associated with the challenges of an international move are often projected on to the host country, whether or not it is shortcomings of the host country that have caused these feelings. The fact that disadvantages of the US brought out the most visceral responses from our respondents is therefore not surprising.

'Feelings of alienation from US culture' was the most common choice as a disadvantage of staying in the US, with just over half of the respondents stating that this encourages them to return to their home countries (Table 8). As one

Table 8. Disadvantages of the US: proportion of respondents who stated each reason (% of that group).

Feature	All respondents	Africans	Asians	Europeans	North Americans	Latin Americans
Alienation from US culture	51	45	63	31	42	33
Different understandings of friendship in the US	31	36	33	25	8	50
Different priorities in the US	28	27	22	33	17	56
Racism in the US	27	45	32	11	25	17
US politics	21	9	16	28	67	17
Poorer quality of life in the US	21	36	14	28	42	33
Poorer working conditions in the US	16	27	12	28	17	6
Poorer standard of living in the US	6	0	7	3	8	6

Peruvian respondent stated: '[We have] different understandings of life, I guess'. We found a significant association between listing this reason and home region ($P = 0.005$), with Asians and Africans reporting alienation most frequently (63% and 45% of respondents respectively), although approximately 30 to 40% of respondents from the other three regions also reported such feelings. Indeed, even among our Canadian respondents, five out of twelve claimed that they felt alienated from US culture; as one of them noted, 'as weird as it seems because most people think Canadians/Americans are the same'.

Continuing the theme of cultural and personal issues, 31% of students reported different understandings of friendship in the US, and 28% different priorities in the US, such as the importance given to family versus career. These two responses were popular across the board, with no significant differences between students from different regions or between the sexes. One student noted 'consumerism' in particular as a disadvantage of US society, reflecting discussions in our focus groups which had focused on individualism, materialism and competitiveness as downsides of US culture.

Racism in the US was noted as a disadvantage by about a quarter of respondents. Surprisingly, no significant relationship was found between home region and students citing 'racism' as an issue, with students from a wide variety of countries selecting this response (information on the race of individual respondents was not collected, which might have provided a clearer correlation). As one Northern Irish student noted, 'America is not an easy place to live as a foreigner – xenophobia, narrow-mindedness, prejudice . . .'. The political situation in the US was connected to issues of race and nationality for many. One student, who did not disclose her nationality, described the political situation as 'very hostile to foreigners', while a Mexican student stated that she does not like 'US international policy and the American way of living'. A Canadian student went so far as to suggest that the political situation could be a deciding factor for him, stating 'If political or religious extremism continues, I may reconsider staying here'. In all, 21% of respondents indicated that the current political situation in the US concerned them. Results from analysis of the focus group transcripts suggest that political concerns for most are tied to

increasing conservatism in the US and changing attitudes towards foreigners following the terrorist attacks of 2001. Here again, an association was noted with region, with those from North America and Europe most frequently expressing concerns about US politics. Why this should be the case is open to question. Perhaps these students feel more comfortable in airing their political opinions, or maybe students from other parts of the world are more likely to have experienced corrupt or oppressive regimes, compared with which the US appears in a positive light.

The final category of responses relates to standard of living and quality of life. Poor working conditions and the general category of poor quality of life in the US received the most votes – 16% and 21% respectively. Poorer economic standard of living in the US was reported by less than 6% of respondents. In summary, we find once again that most students are better off in the US economically, and it is rather the intangible issue of 'quality of life' that many international students feel is better in their home countries than in the US.

About 10% of the respondents listed 'other' issues. Three students mentioned a language barrier; one Japanese student noted that this barrier was still there for him 'even after seven years in the US'. Three students noted a lack of family members in the US as a disadvantage of the country, as well as family members back home as an advantage of returning, doubly reinforcing the importance of family as a motivating factor. Other students noted 'homesickness' and 'few friends in the US' as reasons to leave. The remainder reported structural factors. One Bulgarian highlighted 'poor social security' as a reason to leave, while a Taiwanese noted a 'messed up healthcare system', and a student from Kazakhstan suggested that 'unsustainable economic policies create uncertainty'. A Tanzanian student summed up his concerns by saying simply: 'Life is very stressful in the US compared to my home country'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

One of our main conclusions from our focus group interviews was that economic and professional factors typically dominate among incentives to stay in the US, while personal and societal factors tend to draw the students back to

their home countries. Our survey results support this hypothesis, with students of both sexes, from all disciplines, and of all nationalities conforming to this general pattern. Another pattern that held true across the board was that for most students a wide variety of different factors contribute to the decision-making process, with students indicating that an average of eight factors had influenced their decisions, although several students noted nearly 20 as important.

Our results go deeper than these broad generalisations, however. We noted in our discussion of our focus group results (Alberts and Hazen, 2005) that decision-making appears to be a layered process, with some factors operating at the level of the social, political or cultural environment (structural factors), while others are unique to each individual (individual factors). Our analysis of the questionnaire survey supports this. On the structural level, differences in job markets, economic opportunities and political systems are pronounced between countries and greatly influence the decision-making process. On an individual level, students' family connections, personal circumstances, and even personalities, account for much of the variation between students. Students often describe these individual factors in a more emotional manner, for instance, through feelings of alienation or homesickness. There are, of course, complex interconnections between structural and individual factors. For instance, an individual's personal background may condition his/her experiences and influence how (s)he reacts to structural factors such as the political situation or professional opportunities. In the opposite direction, the experience of a personal emotion, such as homesickness, can be projected on to the host society, confusing the student's own perception of the distinction between individual and structural issues.

Overall, structural factors provide a context which constrains the degree to which individual factors can be taken into account. Structural factors, such as political, educational and economic differences between the US and the home country, set up a framework that is common to most students from that country. Onto this framework is layered a host of factors specific to the individual, including both characteristics of the student's personal situation and past experiences.

The relative emphasis given to structural versus individual reasons not only varies from person to person, but is also fluid over time. The initial decision to come to the US to study, and the decision whether or not to return on completion of the degree, are fundamentally different as most students have little first-hand experience of the US when they arrive. In deciding to come to the US, therefore, most students rely on a cost-benefit analysis of second-hand information, based on widely reported structural factors of the US, such as economic and educational characteristics. Professional and educational reasons are therefore given great importance among original motivations for the move. For the return decision, by contrast, the student has the benefit of first-hand experience of the US, and so the decision-making shifts towards reasons that are more individual; structural reasons still form a framework in the background, but individual reasons now influence them more heavily.

Regardless of their initial intentions, many international students inevitably change their minds over time. This appears to work in both directions, with some students anticipating a longer stay after time studying in the US, and others a shorter one. Only a small minority of students come to the US with the intention of using student status as a springboard to a more permanent stay, and of these, over a third subsequently change their minds (most deciding to leave immediately). The idea of international students coming to the US with the intent to adjust their status and immigrate permanently therefore seems to be the exception rather than the rule. However, for many individuals a natural progression of career and family decisions will lead to permanent immigration in the long run.

NOTES

- (1) International students are defined by Open Doors (2004c) as 'anyone who is enrolled in courses at institutions of higher education in the United States who is not a US citizen, an immigrant (permanent resident) or a refugee'.
- (2) We present the discussion here in terms of students' opinions about and reactions to the US, rather than Minnesota or the Midwest, as most students in the focus groups discussed their feelings at the national scale rather than relating them

to smaller geographical units. This is not to suggest that the US is a homogeneous entity, and we believe that repeating the study outside the Midwest could reveal some interesting differences.

- (3) We excluded Australasia from our cross-tabulation analyses, as we had only one respondent from this region.
- (4) We define 'low', 'middle' and 'high' income countries according to the World Bank.
- (5) Although 'quality of life' is a somewhat intangible concept, and therefore potentially problematic for a self-administered questionnaire survey, our pilot study suggested that respondents found the concept meaningful.
- (6) The diversity of cultural practices that exist at a continental level may confound patterns that might be found at the country level in this respect.

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