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In Global Recession, Global Ed Still Growing

May 29, 2009

LOS ANGELES -- In discussing the impact of the financial crisis on international education, John K. Hudzik, vice president for global engagement and strategic projects at Michigan State University, started out with what he called "a very technical definition of how we're doing and a little bit of history."

"Five or six months ago, the definition of the economy's impact on student mobility was 'Aaaah!' " he said, throwing his hands in the air in mock desperation.

"Today the definition seems to be 'hmm...'"

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He elaborated. "I think the evidence, at least so far, is beginning to emerge that the impact is certainly not of the scale or the scope that everyone feared five or six months ago and I think there are some very important reasons for that. I think there are many drivers of student mobility ... and the economy is only one of them."

Hudzik, the current president of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, spoke Thursday during the group's annual conference, a mega-gathering of more than 7,000 professionals working in various international education fields, including study abroad and foreign student advising and recruiting.

"Many predict that by 2020, from a year 2000 base, global higher education demand for seats will double to 200 million. This suggests to me that we are in a growth market," Hudzik said. "We're at about 110 or 115 right now, there's a lot of growth and maybe we won't hit 200, but it's still growing."

In terms of economic conditions, both consumer confidence and disposable income have plunged during the global recession, potentially reducing families' inclination or ability to invest in big-ticket items like tuition, Hudzik said. Yet, worldwide, the middle class has expanded and private funding to support student mobility has grown rapidly in recent years, with 62 percent of international students in the United States now reporting that they are supported primarily by personal or family funds, according to [Institute of International Education data](#)

And, said Hudzik, the projection is that large, rapidly developing economies, like those of India and China -- the two biggest countries of origin for international students at American colleges -- will recover more quickly than that of the United States. In conclusions he's basing on a mix of anecdotal evidence and numbers -- "that means that you might want to listen to this but do so with a slightly jaded point of view" -- Hudzik said he's been hearing that anticipated numbers of incoming international students are largely up, while, for outgoing students (for study abroad) they're flat or slightly declining through summer, and then up again for fall.

Hudzik and a co-presenter, Hans de Wit, an international higher education consultant based in Amsterdam, both stressed that students are becoming more cost conscious in their choices as, Hudzik said, higher education increasingly becomes more of a globally traded commodity and increased competition puts downward pressure on costs. "Cost consciousness is very important and will be an increasingly important aspect of the decision students make," said de Wit, who otherwise stressed that it's still too early to foretell the fallout from the economic crisis.

In the meantime, de Wit asked, "Should we just wait and see or should we be much more proactive? I think we as international educators need to be much more proactive." He said professionals in the field should be thinking about such things as expanding online delivery, developing joint and dual degrees with institutions abroad, and creating global experiences close to home to supplement experiences abroad. "That combination of local and global and intercultural I think is one of the ways we can become much more creative without having the high cost of moving people around," he said.

Also, "Nontraditional international activities are just growing and growing and growing," said Richard Drobnick, director of the Center for International Business Education and Research at the University of Southern California and a visiting professor of global studies at National

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administrators at the Association of Pacific Rim Universities and, he said, the various institutions "have massive plans to bring in more international students, to have more of their courses taught in English, to bring faculty in from around the world."

In closing remarks, Hudzik suggested that colleges look beyond China to consider other countries, too, that are poised to play a bigger role in the global higher education scene in the future. "Growth in higher education is global," Hudzik said. "You can't manage well too many partners abroad, but thinking strategically about diversifying the countries with which your institution engages itself is probably a very good thing to think about right now."

— [Elizabeth Redden](#)

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