With 3.3 million students currently studying outside their own country, global student mobility, or the migration of students across borders for a higher education, is a burgeoning phenomenon that affects countries and their academic systems. This number represents a 65 percent increase since 2000, and the greatest surge in international student enrollments in recent decades. The magnitude of this migration is so significant that in the United States alone higher education is the fifth largest service export sector, with in-bound international students contributing US$17.7 billion to the economy each year (Bhandari and Chow 2009). Similarly, a recent report by the industry body Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry in India (ASSOCHAM) found that about 450,000 Indian students migrate overseas and spend US$13 billion each year on acquiring a higher education abroad, often because of the lack of capacity in domestic institutions. But although the rapid growth of mobility is relatively recent, the desire to acquire a higher education beyond national borders is itself not new: students and scholars have always sought learning at the best higher education institutions around the world as a way to broaden their educational and cultural horizons. What have changed, however, are the drivers of student mobility and the new modalities through which this migration occurs. More recently, not only has the number of internationally mobile students grown, but the overall context of global mobility—in terms of
both who is going where, and the mix of host and sending countries—has also changed significantly. While Anglophone and Western European countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Germany have historically attracted the largest number of international students, other countries have boosted their internationalization strategies in recent years to attract more students, build university linkages, and develop joint research programs. Most countries now view international academic mobility and educational exchanges as critical components for sharing knowledge, building intellectual capital, and remaining competitive in a globalizing world. It is also a way to foster mutual understanding and cooperation, especially in a climate of increased security and political concerns.

The rising number of mobile students is perhaps partly an outcome of the worldwide growth in higher education. Globally, domestic higher education enrollment in 2007 increased to 152.5 million students, up from 68 million in 1991, with countries in Asia and the Pacific seeing the largest growth (UNESCO 2009). Some rapidly growing Asian countries such as Malaysia and China have recently almost doubled their higher education enrollments. At the same time, these burgeoning higher education populations have put enormous pressure on the higher education systems of many developing countries, especially at the postgraduate level, leading large numbers of their students to seek higher education outside of their home country. India is one such example where the growth of the college-age population has outpaced the capacity of the country’s existing higher education institutions. There remains, thus, an enormous unmet and growing demand for international education and a huge capacity worldwide to absorb more international students. In addition, increasing numbers of students have come to realize that study abroad will enhance their career options as they enter a marketplace that requires knowledge and skills beyond those available at home. Finally, there are growing numbers of programs through which students can combine study abroad with study in their home country, often leading to dual degrees or international qualifications by foreign providers.

In this current book we set out to capture these and other dynamics of the rapidly shifting field of higher education migration and mobility, a landscape that looks very different today than in the previous century when only a handful of countries sent or received significant numbers of students and when the acquisition of a foreign degree was limited to the elite. Now the pursuit of knowledge knows no boundaries, physical or virtual, and it is this exciting growth that we seek to analyze.

This opening chapter provides a broad overview of the field, covering key trends as well as new developments in global student mobility. The first section of the chapter examines the current status of data on student