ST. ANDREWS, Scotland — Isobel Oliphant felt she was making an offbeat choice when she graduated from Fox Lane High School in Bedford, N.Y., and enrolled at the ancient university in this quiet coastal town of stone ruins and verdant golf courses.

“I thought I was being original,” said Ms. Oliphant, now in her third year at the University of St. Andrews. “But my high school class president came here, too. And when I got here, it was all ‘Hi, I’m from Massachusetts,’ ‘Hi, I’m from New York.’ ”

St. Andrews has 1,230 Americans among its 7,200 students this year, compared with fewer than 200 a decade ago. The large American enrollment is no accident. St. Andrews has 10 recruiters making the rounds of American high schools, visiting hundreds of private schools and a smattering of public ones.

With higher education fast becoming a global commodity, universities worldwide — many of them in Canada and England — are competing for the same pool of affluent, well-qualified students, and more American students are heading overseas not just for a semester abroad, but for their full degree program. Ryan Ross of Annapolis, Md., applied only to St. Andrews; McGill University in Montreal; and Trinity College in Dublin. “I knew I wanted a different experience,” said Mr. Ross, now a freshman studying international relations at St. Andrews.

The international flow has benefits, and tradeoffs, for both sides.

For American students, a university like St. Andrews offers international experience and prestige, at a cost well below the tuition at a top private university in the United States. But it provides a narrower, more specialized course of studies, less individual attention from professors — and not much of an alumni network to smooth entry into the workplace when graduates return to the United States. For overseas universities, international students help diversify campuses in locations as remote as coastal Fife, home of St. Andrews.

Just as important, foreigners are cash cows. While students from Scotland and England and across the European Union pay little or no tuition at St. Andrews, Americans pay about what they would as out-of-state students at leading American public universities.

Although admission to St. Andrews is intensely competitive for European students, with at least 10 applications for each seat, many Americans who would be long-shot applicants at Ivy League schools can find a place at St. Andrews. “I applied to, and got into, some American liberal arts colleges, like Skidmore and Trinity,” said Savanna Cummin, a St. Andrews student who was not admitted to Brown or Harvard. “But I thought my time and my money would be better spent here, that I’d get more out of the experience, and it would be a better credential.”

Stephen Magee, the vice principal at St. Andrews, sees no problem with admitting Americans who may be marginally less qualified than the European students.

“Am I wrong to say I don’t care if they can’t get into Harvard?” Mr. Magee said. “If a Scottish parent asked why their very talented child did not get in to St. Andrews, when so many Americans did, I would tell them to ask the government, which encourages us to take international students, but caps the number of local students they will pay for.”

Mr. Magee emphasizes that Americans are not displacing homegrown students, since St. Andrews would not be allowed to admit additional applicants from Scotland or England if it cut back American
admissions. The Americans at St. Andrews cluster in a few departments: art history, English and, especially, international relations, where more than 100 of the 350 freshmen are American.

St. Andrews, its reputation burnished by Prince William’s recent attendance, is not the only ancient Scottish university with an influx of Americans. The University of Edinburgh has more than 1,250 American students, many drawn by the veterinary program, although they are less visible among its 25,000 students.

Expatriate education is expanding. This fall, at the National Association for College Admissions Counseling conference in Seattle, where admissions officers from American universities mingle with the counselors who help shape high school students’ college choices, there were representatives from the University of Waikato in New Zealand, Seoul National University in South Korea, Jacobs University Bremen in Germany, the University of Limerick in Ireland, as well as dozens more from Canada and Britain.

Scottish universities have a different approach from American institutions to education. Students apply to the department they wish to study in, and specialize from the beginning, with no requirement that they take courses in many different fields, as is generally the case in the United States.

For some Americans, the Scottish system represents a kind of happy medium, with early specialization, but some room to explore areas outside their major, and even change majors, during the first two years. English universities, with their three-year, entirely specialized programs, are a harder fit for Americans.

Some Americans leap at the chance to concentrate on what they love, and avoid subjects they dislike. Sam Dresser, a graduate of Hastings High School in Westchester County, N.Y., spent much of his high school career immersed in religion and philosophy — Nietzsche, Sartre, Schopenhauer, with a teacher or without — sometimes to the exclusion of other subjects.

“My math and science grades were not so good, and I’m not going to do anything with them when I’m out of school, so I loved the idea of only studying what I’m interested in,” said Mr. Dresser, now a freshman at the University of Edinburgh, taking courses in psychology, logic and introductory philosophy.

The Scottish admissions process is straightforward, mostly a matter of meeting numeric benchmarks. While requirements vary among departments, St. Andrews generally wants SATs of 1950 (out of a possible 2400) and a 3.3 grade-point average, and the University of Edinburgh looks for a 3.0 grade-point average and balanced SATs of 1800, as well as two Advanced Placement scores of 4 or 5, or scores of 600 or more on two subject tests.

Applicants write no essays on their most-admired public figure, or what they learned from their summer travels in Guatemala, or, as Mr. Dresser put it, “those hilarious American college-admissions essays on ‘If you were going to sing a song in a talent show, what would you sing and why?’ “

Students need not present themselves as the well-rounded package of perfection, as many feel they must to impress American admissions officers.

“The fluff is irrelevant,” said Rebecca Gaukroger, a recruiter for the University of Edinburgh. “It’s built into the U.K. system that students will have strengths and weaknesses, and if a student wants to study chemistry we don’t need to know if they’re good at history.”

Scottish universities do expect students to know where they are headed, and to be intellectually independent, recruiters and students said.

“Before I came to the University of Edinburgh, I went to Hamilton College in upstate New York,” said Lucea Spinelli, a second-year politics and philosophy student. “It was very beautiful, and very fun, almost like summer camp, with all kinds of extra help available. It’s like they hand-feed you everything. I had one teacher who gave my paper back for revisions until I got an A-plus. That wouldn’t happen here. There’s not that kind of hand-holding.”
Ms. Spinelli said she missed the close relationships she had with her American professors, but she and her roommates, fellow New Yorkers, all revel in the cosmopolitan feel of Edinburgh, the ease of travel around Europe, and the international friendships. “Last night, in our flat, I looked around, and in one room, there were some people speaking Swedish, others speaking Italian and others speaking English,” said one of the roommates, Lucy Lydon, “And I thought, this is wonderful.”

But other Americans say they have been less than impressed by a system in which there are few assignments, and there is almost no help from professors. “Feedback on essays ranged from very little to none,” said Ben Wilkofsky, a philosophy student at Edinburgh. “There is no feedback on exams.”

As a result, he said, it is something of a mystery how students are expected to improve their work.

Many Americans also say that, with the drinking age at 18, many of their classmates seem to be spending far less time in the library than in the pub, starting with Fresher’s Week, an orientation period that can seem like one long pub crawl.

There is a broad array of student clubs — serious (the Philosophy Society, the Humanist Society), hedonistic (ChocSoc, for chocolate lovers, or the Water of Life Society, devoted to whiskey tasting) or peculiarly Scottish (Edinburgh’s Highland Society and the St. Andrews University Tunnocks Caramel Wafer Appreciation Society) — many of them meeting at pubs.

For Scottish students, it does not go unnoticed that so many American students, and English ones, come from expensive private schools. “A lot of the people I grew up with associate St. Andrews with money and don’t come here because they don’t think they would be comfortable,” said Katy Alexander, a fourth-year Scottish student.

Last year, after two years in town, Ms. Alexander moved back to her parents’ home. “Part of the reason I moved home was that it feels like an English-American colony here,” she said. “I look at the architecture and think about the history, and sometimes I wish it was more Scottish. But it has broadened my views. I now know that they’re not all alike.”

For all their intellectual independence, some American students said their parents played a large part in their decision to go to Scotland. Mr. Dresser, for example, said his mother, poring over college information on the computer, was the one who proposed applying to Edinburgh.

“My mom got very, very into the college process,” Mr. Dresser said. “At the time I was, O.K., do we have to talk about college every night at dinner? But in retrospect, it was very helpful.”

American parents’ involvement in the college-admissions process — and the helicopter-parent phenomenon, with hovering parents keeping close watch on their children’s lives — has been a continuing revelation to Scottish admissions officials.

On a recent recruiting trip in New York City, as she talked to a reporter in an East Side coffee shop, Ms. Gaukroger was spotted by the mother of an Edinburgh freshman. (“Rebecca, is that you?” the woman said, delightedly. “I don’t want to interrupt, but I have to tell you how well things are going.”)

Ms. Gaukroger remembered her well: “I think I met her at a college fair, and she came to visit in Edinburgh, and we also had lunch once,” she said. “Scottish parents don’t get so involved in choosing a university. For better or for worse, when we’re recruiting American students, we involve the parents more. It makes sense that American parents are different, because they are investing a lot of money and sending their children far away.”