



Supporting international education in the UK

June 2016

Executive summary

Background

- The UK is a world leader in international education, attracting over 500,000 students at any one time to study primary, secondary and tertiary education, and over 580,000 students to learn English.

The International Student Journey

- A significant advantage of the UK education system is the diversity and range of different study opportunities, which allow students to transition from one level and mode of study to the next with ease – from A Levels to pathway programmes, and from undergraduate degrees to postgraduate courses.
- Despite this advantage, the data available on how international students transition through different parts of the sector is limited. There is a serious challenge in understanding the composition of the sector due to limitations on available data, including where and at what level students study and how they transition from one part of the sector to another.
- The data which is available suggests transitions are vital. Pre-degree study routes have become critically important in boosting enrolments in higher education, primarily in universities. Student transitions, including those at the end of study into work and business, are essential to maximising the attractiveness of UK education.

The Value of International Students

- The economic contribution international students make to the UK is considerable and, although data is not always complete or comparable, is now well documented. Recent studies have looked at the total value of education exports, the value of students from the higher education sector, the independent schools sector, the further education sector, and the local impact of international students.
- If the sector continues to grow at a global rate of 8% per year, our analysis suggests that international students have the potential to support a further 80,000 jobs by 2019. Losing out on this type of contribution will constitute an irreparable loss to the UK economy.

Changes to International Education in the UK

- The overall number of international students in the UK has declined since 2011, and there has been significant movement between different types of provision within the sector.
- The small decrease in university enrolments may now be accelerating, following significant drops in the further education pipeline and a one-off shift away from independent colleges.

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- Pathway programmes designed to prepare international students for higher education have grown increasingly popular and are now an essential feeder route into UK universities.
 - The decline in student numbers has been accompanied both by a significant reduction in the number of institutions licensed to sponsor them and by a compliance system which those institutions remaining have found to be increasingly onerous and unpredictable.

The Cost of the Immigration Debate

- Our analysis estimates that a direct impact of the UK's immigration regime since academic year 2011/12 has been a cumulative loss of £1.1bn to gross domestic product (GDP), much of which has been in further education and other tertiary colleges.
- The UK economy has also paid a significant opportunity cost for not supporting the sector to keep pace with global rates of growth. Our analysis suggests that the total cost of declining international student numbers since 2011/12, including opportunity costs, is approximately £4.6 billion to GDP with the potential to rise to almost £8 billion by 2016/17.

Understanding the UK's Position Globally

- Globally, the international education market is showing strong growth. However, the UK is failing adequately to capitalise on this growing market, even in areas where it is currently leading, such as pathway programmes, school education and English language provision.
- Growth areas of recruitment in international education, such as foundation courses and vocational training, are among those which have been hardest hit by the UK's recent immigration policies.

Improving the UK's Offer to International Students

- In order to achieve the Government's ambition to increase education exports to £30 billion by 2020, the UK needs to develop a strong, consistent and well-defined 'offer' to international students.
- The UK should consider improving the national offer through an *International Education Quality Mark*, a new post-study work programme under the existing Tier 5 route, and a multi-year, multi-sponsor visa.

Summary of recommendations

- **Recommendation 1: Establish better data on international student numbers and transitions**
To better understand the economic, cultural and academic impact of international students, the Government should look to establish a central data set on enrolments across the sector.
- **Recommendation 2: Track international education exports**
Education, despite its importance to the UK economy, is not currently tracked by the Office for National Statistics and this represents a missed opportunity for better understanding how to improve the performance of education exports.
- **Recommendation 3: Develop better understanding of international students**
As part of any strategy to improve international education in the UK, the Government should undertake a systematic collection of data on international student decision-making and experience.
- **Recommendation 4: Promote student confidence in the visa system**
To ensure that students have confidence in the system and feel they understand clearly how to meet the requirements, the Government must increase transparency and minimise subjectivity in the visa system.
- **Recommendation 5: Increase continuity in the visa system**
Government should reduce the frequency and quantity of changes to the visa system and ensure that transitional arrangements are in place to protect students who are in the application stage with educational institutions.
- **Recommendation 6: Make it easier for students to progress through different levels of study**
The UK should follow the lead of other countries and explore a multi-course, multi-sponsor visa. The Government should also explore how to ease immigration and academic transitions for international students moving from school or pathway study into university, and from undergraduate study at independent colleges into postgraduate study.
- **Recommendation 7: Establish a more risk-assessed sponsor system**
Government should develop better risk profiling within the sponsor system and further reduce situations where licence revocation is the only action taken by developing a tiered system of penalties using individual sponsor risk profiles and not generalisations.



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Exporting Education UK is a broad-based group of UK representative bodies and organisations involved in education as an export (either educating international students in the UK or abroad) who have come together to promote the value of the sector to the UK and its contribution to our long term competitiveness in the global economy. The group is known as s UK for short, and currently has over 20 members, who span the full range of education from Pre-preps, Prep schools, High Schools, Sixth Form Colleges, Further Education, Higher Education, Professional Training and Education Publishing, all of whom are exemplars of UK education.