Diversifying international student recruitment

International students bring a range of cultural, social and economic benefits to the UK, generating revenues that are reinvested into our world-leading education and research sectors and boosting economic growth in all regions of the country.

The reputation of our universities is an asset for the UK and in line with the Government’s International Education Strategy (IES) the sector is working hard to grow demand from new markets and reduce reliance on individual countries. The international students studying at UK universities are equivalent in export earnings to the whole of the UK automotive sector.

Progress in diversification is being made, with Russell Group universities increasing numbers of international students from key markets such as India, the UAE and Nigeria by more than 50% since 2017. However, competition for international students is fierce globally and delivering change is a long-term strategy that also requires support from government.

Reaching more prospective students

Demand from Chinese students for a place at a top UK university is currently high and likely to remain so as a growing cadre of wealthier families in China seek the best educational opportunities for their children. Acceptances to study mirror the increase in demand as this reflects that a disproportionately high number of Chinese applicants meet course entry criteria and can afford to live and study in the UK. This trend is echoed in the US and Australia, where Chinese students represent the single largest cohort of international students – for example, 70% of Chinese students in Australia enrol at one of the Australian Group of Eight universities.

Chinese students represent a smaller proportion of international students in the UK (24% of total international students) than the United States (35%) and Australia (37%) and our members understand the importance of a diverse international student intake. They all have a range of strategies and partnerships in place to grow market share in countries identified in the IES, and take advantage of opportunities in new Free Trade Agreements.

Actions taken by our universities include:

- Establishing new regional offices in countries including Pakistan, India, Malaysia and the USA.
- Reprofiling marketing spending to reflect a wider range of priority and high-potential markets
- Reforming international applications processes to ensure a level playing field for prospective students. For example, in some major African markets students receive exam results later in the year than applicants in China. The introduction of “application windows” for postgraduate courses ensure places remain available for a wider range of students.
- Creating scholarships for international students from new countries, including EU member states.

Recruitment trends

In the last 5 years universities across the Russell Group have seen strong growth in India (+68%); Saudi Arabia (+58%) and the UAE (+108%).
The most significant recruitment growth between 2019/20 and 2020/21 has come from India, with the number of students progressing to Russell Group universities increasing by 17%. This coincides with the reintroduction of the post-study work (graduate) visa, reversing a decline in applications following its removal in 2012.

Indian students represent 42.79% of the total number of applications for visas through the new graduate route up to June 2022. Nigerian students are the second largest group, representing 11.74% of total applicants, ahead of China at 9.97% and Pakistan at 5.52%.

Supporting high quality teaching and world-leading R&D

The resources generated by international students are critical in helping universities mitigate deficits in UK undergraduate teaching, which are predicted to grow to £4,000 per home student per year by 2024/25, and research where public funding only covers approximately 71% of the total cost of projects.

International students also support the creation of more places for UK students. This year saw a record number of UK 18-year-olds securing a place in HE or FE, which was helped by the contribution of international students. Some courses, in particular at Masters level, would not be viable without international students.

Ostensibly short-term actions, such as a recruitment cap in some international markets, could have a wide and long-lasting impact on universities and home students. At course level, this could include reductions in choice and would be particularly challenging in some postgraduate STEM courses where international students are highly represented.

This includes strategically important disciplines such as postgraduate mathematical sciences and engineering where international students make up around 50% of the student body across the Russell Group, with many of these highly skilled individuals remaining in the UK after completing their studies.

Accelerating diversification: opportunities for Government-sector collaboration

The Office for Students already considers overseas fee income when monitoring the financial sustainability of registered providers. Our universities are ready to work with the regulator - and its equivalents in the devolved administrations - to consider what additional steps they can take to diversify their international student cohorts further if this is an issue for financial sustainability.

Many of the barriers to diversification do not have quick solutions, with the limited pool of suitably qualified international applicants meaning students from one overseas market could not necessarily be replaced easily by other appropriate candidates. However, options that would complement sector efforts to create a more diverse cohort of international students include:

- Working with university networks and the British Council's Study UK campaign to promote the graduate route in key markets such as India and Nigeria.
- Benchmarking the post-study work offer against competitor nations, to ensure the UK retains a competitive edge. For example, temporary extensions to post-study work in Australia means some graduates at PhD, undergraduate and postgraduate level currently receive twice the amount of post-study leave than equivalent graduates in the UK.
- Coinvesting with universities in scholarships for students from target markets, overcoming barriers to affordability. Members identified two main barriers to diversification: the cost of studying and living in the UK and candidates not meeting academic entry criteria. While there will be no compromise on the academic integrity of courses to protect the quality of the UK’s offer, increased financial support could help overcome affordability challenges and increase the diversity of talent able to study here. Government could also expand the GREAT Scholarships scheme, targeting it at the International Education Strategy’s priority countries.

We also recognise it is important the sector works with the government to protect the integrity of the immigration system. The Russell Group supports targeted interventions focussed where there is evidence of potentially fraudulent visa applications, or abuses of the system.