

Submission by King's College London & King's College London Students' Union to the International Students APPG Inquiry: A sustainable future for international students in the UK?

Educating international students, at a time of major change, is vital to a truly Global Britain

The UK higher education sector is world leading and does remain an attractive destination to international students, both those wishing to study onshore and offshore as distance learners. However in relative terms the UK has stood still while other countries have improved their ability to competitively attract talented students. The paramount need for the UK to strengthen its global economic connectivity in light of Brexit, it makes even more sense to bolster its long-term soft power by reducing barriers to the attractiveness of our higher education system to international students.

In this short submission, we provide some scene-setting context and then outline the key areas where change is needed in policy and positioning terms to address the issues that have developed since 2010.

At the outset we would acknowledge that educating international students does provide an important source of income for universities. There is no denying the fact that the fee and broader income from international students has provided a lever for investment in many universities around the country. However, we must stress that at King's the key rationale or intent for educating a greater number of international students over time is our goal to the world a better place, in line with our strategic vision.

Societies around the world benefit from rounded, well-educated inquisitive people with an understanding of the wider world. The knowledge exchange, friendships and connections our students from around the world forge with each other are hugely important over the course of their lifetimes not just to the individual graduate but to the societies they live in. Moreover, the global economy is becoming ever more interconnected and the opportunity to educate and mould the outlooks of future leaders, innovators and social change-makers, who'll go on to build brilliant careers around the world, aligns with the Government's Global Britain vision.

Home students also benefit significantly from studying alongside EU and non-EU students. Home students asked about this issue will often express the perspective that their learning experience and capacity to engage with a complex, changing world is stimulated by studying alongside, and forming friendships and connections with people from a wide variety of international backgrounds.

Key facts

The latest figures on international students at UK universities, and the economic impact that they have, come from research conducted by Oxford Economics for Universities UK. They found that in 2014-15:

- There were 437,000 international students registered at universities in the UK, representing 19 per cent of the total student population.
- 312,000 (70 per cent) of these international students came from outside the EU.
- International students were responsible for £10.8 billion of UK export earnings.

The Higher Education Policy Institute and Kaplan International Pathways estimate that the gross benefits – including tuition fees, other spending and economic knock-on effects – of international students amount to £22.6 billion. The public costs of hosting international students – including education, health and social security – total £2.3 billionⁱ

Therefore, the net impact (benefits minus costs) of hosting international students totals £20.3 billion or on average, £68,000 for each EU student and £95,000 for each non-EU studentⁱⁱ

Key challenges facing the UK's higher education export sector

The educational benefits of international students

International students play a hugely important role in making King's a dynamic, culturally vibrant and intellectually stimulating university to study and work at.

When you look around the world, the great universities in leading economies and rapidly emerging market economies have a key commonality – an increasing inclination to pro-actively recruit international students and staff to help drive continued improvement in the quality of education and research activity taking place.

International students bring a broader range of perspectives to bear in the learning environment. In an increasingly interconnected and competitive global economy, exposure to a multi-cultural university experience will typically be very beneficial to our home students, enriching their own university experience both academically and culturally.

At the heart of the King's College London Education Strategy is our aspiration to build a culture of lifelong learning based around collaboration and curiosity where a diversity of perspectives about the world is encouraged, where the beliefs and views of others are respected, and where students are prepared to succeed in what is increasingly a global labour market for talent.

We have an ambition that all our King's graduates will be distinguished not just by the content of the curriculum but by their wisdom, character, service ethic and global mindset.

In an increasingly globalised and interconnected economy, studying alongside international students helps provide home students with an invaluable multi-cultural university experience. Over three-quarters of UK students surveyed by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) agreed that studying alongside international students was a useful preparation for working in a global environment, and the same proportion (76%) said it gave them a better world view.

More generally, in our view existing and prospective home students tend to see the opportunity to study alongside a wide array of international students as a key plus point of gaining a place at King's College London.

Robert Liow, Vice President Welfare & Community at KCLSU and a Malaysian international student from Singapore added, *“My home student friends, whom I've met through a wide variety of activities, are keen to find out what Singapore and Malaysia are like, and I'm happy to help them learn more. This tallies with the NUS's own survey, in 2017ⁱⁱⁱ, on student perspectives on international students, which indicated that a majority of students believed that they would have less diverse cultural experiences on their course if half the number of international students on their course were removed.*

Cultural exchange between home and international students is valuable not only for the students, but for the university and the UK – this is where life-long bonds between future leaders in politics, academia and business are forged, bringing opportunities for international collaborations that boost King's public image and the UK's global connectivity.”

Furthermore, many international students study courses in science, technology and engineering which may not otherwise be viable in terms of course size and the interlinked financials required to sustain cutting edge learning resources. International students make an important contribution to the financial

health of the higher education sector, but their presence and the income it helps generate can also help ensure that home students have access to cutting edge equipment and learning facilities.

The education of international students in this country also helps make a very important contribution to the future development of a pipeline of world-class academic talent in this country. International students will often choose to undertake doctoral training here and build promising academic careers in the sphere of both education and research.

Many of our academic staff who aren't originally from the UK will typically have completed at least part of their prior student lifecycle at UK higher education institutions. They help to bring considerable international experience, knowledge and connections to bear in their academic endeavour to the betterment of our students and our society.

The social benefits and costs of international students

We would begin by acknowledging that of course educating a sizeable number of international students in-country here at King's brings with it some impacts in terms of NHS usage, availability of housing, transport capacity, and other types of community infrastructure.

We have seen no indications that NHS service providers in London regard non-UK students as a major resource load or 'drain' on NHS resources. The Higher Education Policy Institute estimated that the net public healthcare cost associated with international students per year is £729 per EU student or EU dependant, and £579 for a non-EU student or dependant^{iv}

Equally, while there are challenges in terms of the availability of affordable student accommodation in London, it is not in our view a corollary of the recruitment of international students, but instead a function of very high land prices in London that constrain increased capacity more generally.

International students positively contribute to the cultural enlivenment of their campuses and the communities and cities and towns they live in. Here in London, many international student societies will run cultural exchange-oriented events and take part in other volunteering programmes that can help bring to life the richness of their country's art and culture, language, history and cuisine in diversity related events and festivals in their local communities. The King's College London Students' Union runs One World Week which will typically have in excess of 40 different events each year, showcasing different cuisines and cultural exhibitions. Apart from exposing home students to the world, these interactions also build community cohesion.

At King's, the international student community has tended to play an active role in student democracy and student societies and many of our alumni form lasting connections to the university even after returning overseas.

International students at universities like King's are also typically highly inquisitive people who enjoy visiting theatres, art galleries, museums, and other cultural exhibitions and landmarks around London – they also introduce visiting friends and family members to such opportunities. This in turn can help to increase the financial sustainability of the institutions that help to underpin a town or city's social and cultural fabric. The role of international students in unlocking wider tourist spending in the UK is something we have encouraged the Migration Advisory Committee to build a clearer evidence picture around.

The UK's strong tradition of educating international students is also an important underpinning factor in terms of its considerable global soft power connectivity with influential public and private sector

leaders and change-makers across the globe, particularly in emerging economies like China and India. This not only unlocks opportunity for trade and investment to strengthen the UK's economic performance, but also can help create important scientific, educational and cultural connections that in turn helps generate increased social value over time as ideas are exchanged and funding is invested in cultural exchange activities.

Competition for international students is intensifying

Globally the international students landscape has expanded throughout the early 21st century, growing from 2.1 million students studying overseas in 2001 to 4.1 million in 2016. The UK has marginally grown its market share during this time, from 11 per cent to 12 per cent, maintaining its position as the second most popular destination for international students, behind the USA. Across all levels of study – undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research postgraduates – the UK is the most highly recommended destination for international students.^v

During this period, though, governments and universities in other key global higher education hubs have set ambitious growth targets accompanied by clear national strategies. Programmes taught in English are becoming increasingly common in competitor markets and the quality of programmes is also improving. In particular, China and Australia are seeking to significantly increase their international base of students.

India's growing population and economy makes it an important country market to recruit international students from. However, challenges relating to the recognition of Master's Degrees and undergraduate engineering degrees by the Indian government owing to the length of courses are a major barrier. While at King's our overall levels of recruitment of Indian students have not dipped in line with the trend in other parts of the sector, we believe the UK is missing out maximising this opportunity. The government should work with India on reigniting discussions of a bridging qualification for Indian students returning home and could also offer further discussion around the mutual recognition of educational qualifications between the two countries.

The overall recruitment of international students remains positive across the sector and in particular at King's. Notably, our international student body is diverse. While we have seen an increase in students from China – more than doubling from approximately 900 students to over 2000 in the past two years – our international students come from all over the world and Chinese students represent less than 20% of them.

The absence of a competitive post-study transition to work visa offer, and the perception that the UK visa system is increasingly designed to be hostile to international graduates, is also a particular disincentive to the attractiveness of the UK as a study destination for students from some emerging market economies. This is an issue that urgently needs to be addressed.

One positive development in this area is the Tier 4 visa pilot scheme for Masters students on courses of 13 months or less. This scheme allows students to submit fewer documents with their initial visa application, and allows them to remain in the UK for 6 months after graduating instead of the standard 4 months. The scheme is currently in place at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Bath, Imperial College London, and 23 other universities across the UK.^{vi} The government should explore making this scheme permanent, and in the interim expanding the pilot further to other universities.

This would facilitate the transition of international undergraduate students to postgraduate education and work, providing greater incentives to attract and retain international undergraduate students.

Mobility for international students is critical – and the same is true for staff

For international students, accessible higher education markets are desirable locations. Policies that incentivise international students to travel to a host nation are essential – the UK is unlikely to succeed by becoming isolationist in this respect. Beyond the considerable economic benefit international students bring the UK, they represent a significant vehicle for spreading UK soft power globally and enhancing home students' academic experience.

To fully realise the potential of the post-Brexit ambition of a Global Britain with a dynamic industrial strategy the UK Government needs to do more to help advance the international connectivity of universities with key export markets. International students are not just important to the UK economy, but to our standing in the world.

In addition to making it easier for international students enrolled at UK universities to take up study abroad opportunities during their courses, to further broaden their international understanding, we think it is vital that the immigration system takes into account that academic staff, particularly those who are research active in addition to teaching, need to be internationally mobile to be successful in their roles. The UK visa regime needs to reflect this.

Shaurya Vig, Vice President for Activities & Development at KCLSU, himself an international student from India, reflected his personal experience of this:

“Coming from an entrepreneurial family firm in India, I always had an interest in entrepreneurship. This led me to come to London - a centre for global entrepreneurship. However, after attending some workshops and conferences, I was informed that I would not be able to pursue any ventures as a student and would have to apply for an entrepreneur visa after I graduate despite having done a degree in Economics and Management at King's - one of the world's most prestigious Universities. This caused a major setback in my career ambitions and a loss to the UK of the employment opportunities my venture would have created.”

We need a bold national strategy for international education

Courses in strategic and costly to deliver subject areas including STEM are in some cases only financially viable to run because of the higher level of fee income paid by international students. This is not an experience unique to the UK – many Canadian and Australian universities are in a similar position.

The Government since 2010 has pursued contradictory agendas in this sphere. Successive Ministers of State for Universities have rightly banged the drum for universities to continue to readily build stronger international education and research connections. On the other hand, the Home Office and UKVI have utilised rhetoric and policies that serves to create a less hospitable climate for prospective and existing international students.

As the President of the King's College London Student Union for 2017-18, Momin Saqib, attests, London's success as world-class higher education destination in part rests on its global reputation for openness:

“While an international student can study computer science or business in any number of university cities around the world, London is the world's most diverse and vibrant university city and this creates opportunities to learn, interact and grow culturally that are in my view unrivalled.”

“As an international student myself, the opportunity to not only study in London, but contribute to my campus community and wider society as the first ever non-British and non-European elected Student Union President at King’s is a great privilege.

“When international students choose to study in the UK they are doing so because they see not only the vitality of the educational experience on offer, but the relative openness and vitality of British society, and overwhelmingly they want to help enhance that vitality.”

In 2013, the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) calculated that education is the fifth largest services export sector in the UK, ahead of both insurance services and computer and information services.^{vii}

Yet, the ONS does not measure or monitor higher education exports. Higher education is a ‘notable exception’ from the ONS’s annual International Trade in Services survey (ITIS).^{viii} Given that UK institutions are also centres of excellence in cutting-edge research, metrics for trade exports should also capture the amount of international funding (from public funding agencies and also from global companies) that universities bring to the UK.

Without higher education exports being afforded parity of esteem, the policy environment will not harness the growth potential of the sector and may struggle to even maintain its current market share.

We need a new, bold international education strategy. Certainly, the revision of 2013’s UK International Education Strategy would be welcome in light of our departure from the European Union and the competitive global higher education export market.^{ix}

Key measures could include the dedicated ministerial portfolio responsibility for international education, as previously recommended by the Policy Institute at King’s, and practical steps to liberalise the international student visa regime.

We should also learn from other country systems as we consider the potential for a dedicated national strategy. Australia’s first National Strategy for International Education launched in 2016 is a good example. It seeks to coordinate and advance the nation’s growth and market share. The past two decades have seen a rapid increase in overseas student numbers in Australia, contributing to the country’s economic growth in the face of skills shortages and an ageing population.

Student visa holders increased at an average annual rate of 13.9 per cent every year between 2001 and 2009, before then declining until around 2012. The fall in numbers was in part due to restrictions brought in by the government that were subsequently rapidly reversed in light of declining numbers of overseas students caused the value of Australia’s international education sector to fall from A\$16.4 billion in 2009-10 to A\$14.6 billion in 2012.

Hence in recent years, policy has reverted back to seeking to boost the number of overseas students, with faster processing of student visas, lower financial and English-language requirements, and post-study work visas that run for up to four years.

Our key recommendations

Remove students from the net migration target

- To capitalise on a growing market, the UK should exclude international students from the target of getting migration down to the tens of thousands, and instead follow the US, Australia and Canada in classing international students as temporary migrants.

Enhance post-study work (PSW) opportunities for international graduates

- The scrapping, in 2012, of the Tier 1 visa, which allowed overseas students two years' post-study access to the UK labour market, is likely to be a factor holding back the international education sector's growth.
- Two of the UK's key competitors in international higher education, Australia and Canada, have both adopted more generous PSW programmes. The UK's competitiveness as a student recruitment hub and a highly skilled economy could be improved by allowing overseas students in the UK six months or a year, rather than four months, to find work after graduating and switch from a Tier 4 student visa to a Tier 2 visa, while still ensuring they do not have recourse to public benefits.

Devise a comprehensive international education strategy

- The UK's International Education Strategy from 2013 offers a strong foundation on which to build, but it should be revised in light of recent political events and increased competition from other countries with strong higher education sectors.
- It should look to support universities in accessing TNE opportunities, help find more synergies in terms of collaborative activities to promote the benefits of studying in the UK, and it should also look at fresh measures to increase outward-bound student mobility.
- Ideally the Government should look to co-develop a dedicated sector deal with universities that encompasses support for both domestic and international-facing education and research activity.
- Creating a new role of Minister for International Education would both show commitment to, and help facilitate, the implementation of such a long-term plan.
- Facilitating the progression of international undergraduates to high skilled employment or postgraduate study by extending the Tier 4 visa pilot scheme.

For further information in relation to this inquiry submission, please contact Daniel Cremin, Director of Public Affairs & External Insight at King's via Daniel.Cremin@kcl.ac.uk.

Source references:

ⁱ [The costs and benefits of international students by parliamentary constituency](#). The Higher Education Policy Institute and Kaplan International Pathways. 2017.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ [Student perspectives on international students](#). National Union of Students. 2017.

^{iv} [The costs and benefits of international students by parliamentary constituency](#). The Higher Education Policy Institute and Kaplan International Pathways. 2017.

^v [The UK's Competitive Advantage](#). Universities UK. 2017.

^{vi} [Twenty three universities join student visa pilot](#). Government announcement in 2017.

^{vii} See: [International Education: Global Growth and Prosperity](#). Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. 2013.

^{viii} See: [Exports and imports statistics by country for UK trade in services: Quarter 2 \(April to June\)](#). Office for National Statistics. 2017.

^{ix} See: [International education strategy: global growth and prosperity](#). Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Department for Education. 2013.