

Equity, Inclusion and Innovation: a sustainable international student policy

Foreword

The UK is a world leader in attracting international students, with its diverse study locations and a vibrant and multicultural society, and its education sector's commitment to providing a high-quality international student experience.

Much is made of the economic impact of international students, but the wider benefits they bring to our society are even more significant. UKCISA and our members understand how international students contribute to UK education in our universities, colleges, pathway providers and schools. We note how they enhance the academic experience of home students by internationalising the curriculum across all subject areas and ensuring that many courses remain financially viable. We gain new cultural perspectives from the international students who live, study, work and volunteer in our communities. Post graduation, the UK's extensive global alumni community continues to demonstrate how international education is a force for good, making a difference in their careers worldwide.

While these contributions are consistent, the recent context for UK education policy has been less so. Some changes – notably the global pandemic and Brexit – have been extremely challenging. Others have been more positive, such as an International Education Strategy, which is committed to enhancing the international student experience, and regional strategies from devolved administrations that promote global study mobility. The sector welcomed a progressive new post-study work offer in 2021, with a flexible Graduate route to complement the Skilled Worker route and open up more flexible employment opportunities in regions and sectors. The new Graduate route helped the UK government meet its target to recruit 600,000 international students ahead of schedule.

Alongside national policy initiatives, UKCISA is proud to have introduced the #WeAreInternational Student Charter, developed by international students in consultation with our members. This framework is guiding sustainable change in the UK sector, helping providers to engage meaningfully with and provide for their international students. The Charter and its principles help to ensure an equitable and welcoming experience for international students at all levels of study.

Despite this, inconsistencies, inequities and uncertainties combine to challenge the UK's ability to achieve sustainable growth in international education and the economy. International students and their advisers infer a less-welcoming message from the current policy environment, implicit in changes to the dependant policy for postgraduate taught students, increases in immigration fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge, a review of the Graduate route visa and changes to the skilled worker salary thresholds.

UKCISA's surveys of current student sentiment show that students are increasingly less likely to recommend the UK to family and friends as they fear further turbulence during the application process or the duration of their course.

International students recognise that education is a life-changing investment in their future. However, regular fee increases and cost-of-living pressures may prevent them from pursuing further study or other postgraduate opportunities. Ephemeral immigration policies and high-level political messaging will deter many prospective students and undermine the experience of those who are already here.

We cannot secure a positive international student experience without sustainable immigration policy. Now is the time for UK policymakers to commit to a suite of evidence-informed policies that promote international study mobility and celebrate the UK education sector's position as a leader in international education. These policies must consider the likely impact on other policy areas, including the UK economy, labour market and public services. To ensure this, future international education strategy must be developed across all relevant departments, including the Home Office, that demonstrates an unwavering commitment to placing the student experience at the heart of its implementation and evaluation of its success.

To maintain its status as a leading global study destination – attracting talented, ambitious international students – the UK must ensure that opportunity does not discriminate on the basis of background, level of study, or provider location. Instead, the policy environment should embrace diverse educational pathways that promote the breadth of the UK education sector. Academic engagement policy should ensure that international students can benefit, alongside home students, from pedagogical developments, including any advances in the remote delivery of course content. Most importantly, it should provide equal access to careers and employability opportunities and include a renewed commitment to our post-study work offer to enable our international graduates to build on their academic experience in the workplace.

The UK education sector is committed to ensuring a high-quality experience for its international students. UKCISA calls for a policy environment that facilitates and supports its work to do so. In this paper, we set out five recommendations for governments to shape immigration and other policy related to the international student experience to ensure that the UK's global image remains positive and welcoming to international students, and supports the continued success of the whole education sector.

Recommendations

1. Promote the UK as a welcoming and inclusive country to study in, using positive language in cross-government policy and campaigns, which acknowledges the strength and contributions of international students and their dependants to their communities.

- 1.1 Develop a new cross-government international education strategy with clear targets for a positive international student experience alongside ambitions for student recruitment, research and global partnerships. Targets should consider the whole sector ecosystem, including further education institutions and pathway providers, and have clear benchmarks for evaluating success.
- 1.2 Develop strategic ambitions collaboratively across government, with the full support of the Home Office and the devolved administrations.
- 1.3 Use the #WeAreInternational Student Charter to measure the progress of strategic ambitions in international student experience.
- 1.4 Acknowledge the contributions of international students coming to the UK, using positive and welcoming language towards them and their dependants.

2. Implement central data collection mechanisms to build a comprehensive evidence base of migration data for international students and their dependants.

- 2.1 Coordinate data and evidence across government and related agencies to inform immigration policy and migration targets. All government departments and related agencies should collaborate to collect data specific to international students across all levels of study, similar to competitor countries such as Australia and Canada. This should include entry and exit data, as well as breakdowns for the English regions and the four UK nations.
- 2.2 Use central datasets to enhance national and regional policymaking and resource planning, enabling departments to set targets based on evidence and coordinate policy objectives across government departments, devolved administrations and student sponsors.
- 2.3 Facilitate effective communication between governments, local councils and providers on visa approval data for international students and dependants to manage requirements for accommodation and public services.

3. Develop fair and equitable immigration policies for international students across the UK education sector.

- 3.1 Embed a transparent funding model for visa and other immigration fees, such as the Immigration Health Surcharge, so that students and their dependants are clear about the fee levels they will pay for the duration of their course and enabling them to plan their budgets for the duration of their student or graduate visa.
- 3.2 Ensure that the immigration rules recognise advances in pedagogy and allow international students to study alongside domestic students on remote and hybrid-delivery modules with no impact on their immigration status.
- 3.3 Allow more flexibility for students to extend their immigration permission in the UK for the purpose of continued or further study by empowering student sponsors to make informed decisions based on the circumstances of individual students, while mitigating the financial and environmental burden of international travel.
- 3.4 Extend the wrap-up period of courses lasting 12 months or longer from four to six months to avoid placing unnecessary burdens on providers or students when there are unforeseen circumstances affecting the timely award of academic results.
- 3.5 Remove the Immigration Skills Charge to switch from a Graduate to a Skilled Worker visa, to align with the Student visa.
- 3.6 Allow students to apply for the Graduate route from outside the UK, where they have returned overseas to complete the course or await results, and introduce flexibility for dependants to apply from overseas to join someone with Graduate route permission.

4. Transform digital tools for immigration to enhance the customer experience for international students and education sponsors.

- 4.1 Implement processes to enable fair and equitable immigration policies that do not penalise students or their sponsors.
- 4.2 Invest income from visa fees in digital enhancements to improve application times, reduce process errors, facilitate meaningful data sharing and minimise the need for costly administrative reviews.
- 4.3 Develop and improve the current IT systems, across sponsorship and applications, including the facility for Graduate route entry clearance applications.
- 4.4 Protect the status of students and ensure clear communications with educational institutions as the digitalisation process proceeds.

5. Support careers and employability opportunities, recognising their intrinsic value to the UK's global education offer for international students and graduates.

- 5.1 Commission sector agencies to review the central data collection model for international graduate outcomes and improve the response rate from graduates who are working outside the UK, to inform careers advice for current students and marketing strategies for prospective students.
- 5.2 Collect data related to international graduates' different visa routes to inform targeted careers guidance and improve guidance for employers.
- 5.3 Retain the Graduate route as an essential part of the UK's post-study work offer to international students, enabling them to gain experience working in the UK post-graduation and benefitting employers across the UK for whom employer sponsorship is not an option.
- 5.4 Ensure clear communication of all post-study work routes to employers through government channels, highlighting distinctions between the routes.
- 5.5 Standardise working rights to permit all international students sponsored at higher education level to work 20 hours per week during their studies.

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