

International Student Futures: developing a world class experience from application to onward career

*Report to the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission from the
International Students Sub-commission, January 2022*

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International Student Futures

A report on behalf of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission

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Introduction

International students are a vital part of UK Higher Education. They bring different perspectives and understanding to our classrooms and they help us all grow in understanding of the diverse world we live in. They enrich our communities and develop great friendships. They take these connections back to their countries along with a deeper understanding of our society which helps foster greater understanding in the world. They support Global Britain through soft power, with 57 current world leaders educated at a UK university.[i] They also contribute £28.8 billion to the UK economy.[ii]

The pandemic has been challenging for all students but for international students, who travelled amidst the global pandemic and then lived in the UK, so far away from home at this very difficult time, the disruption and isolation caused has been especially acute.

As co-Chairs of the International Student Futures sub-commission we wanted to express our thanks to all the sub-commission members for their support and contributions:

- Ruth Arnold, Consultant, Co-Founder, “We are International” campaign
- James Avison, Vice-President Education, Bangor University
- Rajkumar Chintakayala, Vice-President Postgraduate, Northumbria University
- Margarita Damai, Student Union Officer, London Metropolitan University
- Anne-Marie Graham, Chief Executive, UKCISA
- David Hawkins, Founder, The University Guys
- Louise Nicol, Founder, Asia Careers Group
- Obinna Okereke, Vice-President Education, Coventry University
- Liz Shutt, Director of Policy, University of Lincoln and the Greater Lincolnshire LEP
- Vivienne Stern, Director, Universities UK International
- Erez Van-Ham, Apply Board, Canada
- Toby Wilkinson, Vice Chancellor, Fiji National University

We would particularly like to thank the international students who informed our thinking and to the Sabbatical Officers who organised the student focus groups which enabled us to hear first-hand from students who were studying at a UK University.

We listened to what international students and sabbatical officers told us about their experience of the UK environment and what their hopes and expectations of study would bring them in the future. This report sets out their views and along with colleagues who work professionally with international students, it suggests ways that UK HE could enhance the experience of international students in the UK and how the sector, government and sector bodies can ensure that international students get the most from their time here to ensure that they can achieve their ambitions in the future.

The recommendations are direct and to the point, and we hope that this report will spark further improvements in provision for our international students in the future.

Mary Stuart and Amina Akugri

Enhancing the post-pandemic experience

The UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission

The UPP Foundation – a charity that aims to tackle the biggest issues facing the higher education sector across the UK – established the Student Futures Commission at the beginning of 2021. The Commission has three objectives:

1. To ensure students are best supported after the pandemic by contributing to a generous and collaborative effort in the sector to ensure their successful futures.
2. To make practical recommendations to universities, government and others for the academic year 2021-2022 and onwards.
3. To curate ideas, insights and learnings from all stakeholders in higher education that can be widely disseminated and used to enhance the post-pandemic student experience.

International Student Futures: the sub-commission

As one of the commissioners, Professor Mary Stuart took on a sub-commission to review the experience of international students. She invited Amina Akugri, Vice-President International at the University of Lincoln Students Union, to co-chair the group. The sub-commissioners included a wealth of expertise and representation from international students as well as key groups such as UKCISA, UUKi, the Asia Careers Group, and the “We are International” campaign. Our aim was very much to listen to international students and therefore strong student involvement was core to the work through membership of the sub-commission and focus groups.

The sub-commission has focussed on two questions:

- A. How do we maximise the opportunity of a relatively supportive policy environment for international students to deliver a world-leading experience for international students?
- B. What are the similarities and differences in experience for someone studying in the UK who comes from a different country?

Three sessions were held through the Summer and early Autumn of 2021 alongside a series of focus groups involving over 60 international students from 7 different universities. The focus groups took a deep dive approach to explore the student experience in relation to three stages: pre-arrival, at university and post-graduation. The findings of these discussions are outlined in this report alongside supporting evidence from various reports and surveys. In particular, the 2021 QS International Student Survey, the world’s largest survey of pre-enrolled international students is referenced. The 2021 iteration featured the responses of 105,083 prospective students from 191 countries and territories around the world.[iii] The recently published Universities UK International (UUKi) report on supporting international graduate

employability is also referred to throughout our submission given the steer from the focus groups and the sub-commissioners to particularly look at the issue of employability. The UUKi report included results from a survey of 43 institutions mainly completed by career and employability professionals. [iv]

Of course there are a plethora of issues that a report such as this could cover, as exemplified by the UKCISA resource bank[v] and years of work by professionals in this area to develop internationalisation[vi] across UK universities. This report comes at a juncture post-pandemic set against a highly supportive policy environment. Within this context, the sub-commission agreed to concentrate on where the focus groups led us and on where we could add value. As such, this report seeks to build on previous work and identify some potential leapfrog opportunities to develop a world-class international student experience.

Summary of findings

Cross cutting theme: employability

Overall, there is a huge emphasis on careers support throughout the international student journey: as a key driver behind decisions and concerns pre-arrival, in relation to part-time work and placements during study, and opportunities through the new Graduate route as well as for those students choosing to return home post-study. Several recommendations are included towards this end, but our overriding proposal is that this should all be pulled together into a coordinated national campaign.

This theme builds on previous reports that have also found gaps in the employability support provided for international students. Most recently, *Paying more for less? Careers and employability support for international students at UK universities*, published by HEPI, found that 82% of international students thought the careers support offered was either 'important' or 'very important' when choosing a university. However, just over half (52%) thought that their university was doing well in this area. Our report underscores these findings. In our view the case for taking a serious look at the provision in this area is undeniable. Employment support, both during and after study, is a huge opportunity area and the UK sector should seek to develop this as a flagship pillar of the UK international student experience.

Ambitions for a world-leading international experience

Based on feedback from our focus groups and input from the sub-commissioners, this report sets out three high level ambitions - or leapfrog opportunities - for the experience of international students in the UK:

1. International Students seeking to study in the UK will feel welcomed, supported and reassured from day one of the application process.
2. International students will benefit from the full university experience, in its widest sense, with tailored support where appropriate to recognise the additional challenges of studying in a different country.
3. The Graduate route will be backed up by a rich array of options for international students with pro-active and ongoing support as their early career develops.

Pre-arrival: findings and recommendations

International students told us that:

- Anxiety has a significant impact on all aspects of the experience pre-arrival.
- Communications need to be more attuned to this, more responsive and more tailored

Components of a world-leading pre-arrival experience for international students:

1. A responsive communications culture attuned to individual concerns and anxiety.
2. Careers and employability support that starts pre-arrival.
3. A 'no surprises' approach on the likely financial pressures and a national scholarship brand.

Universities can support this by:

1. Reviewing their pre-arrival support and communication from the student perspective.
2. Considering how technology may help to increase responsiveness throughout the process.
3. Identifying dedicated customer service officers within the institution to support students with more complex enquiries and concerns.
4. Including employability information in pre-application communications.
5. Including clear information about all the costs involved in studying alongside support available in pre-application communications.

Government can help by:

- A. Fulfilling its commitment to streamline the applications process from application to graduation in consultation with the sector, including by using digital technology.
- B. Working with the sector to develop a campaign highlighting the UK's whole student journey employability offer once it is further developed.
- C. Working with other countries to pursue government to government approaches to co-fund scholarships.

Supporting organisations can help by:

- A. Continuing to support the sharing of good practice in relation to employability support, building on the UUKi International Graduate Employability project, the work of UKCISA's Student Employability Group and AGCAS's Internationalisation Task Group.
- B. Drawing together key partners to develop a National Scholarship Brand.
- C. UCAS can continue to work with government and universities as their efforts to streamline and improve the application process for international students progresses.

University: findings and recommendations

International students told us that:

- They need more careers and employability support while they are at university.
- Social interaction is a core part of the experience, without it they can feel unsupported and alone.
- They need help to access the right kind of student support and to understand what is available.

Components of a world-leading university experience for international students:

1. Work experience and internships are integral.
2. Social and cultural interaction and exchange are actively supported.
3. International students can access the full range of support available to domestic students, with additional targeted support where appropriate.

Universities can support this by:

- A. Providing dedicated international placement officers who work with local and national companies to coordinate existing opportunities including Knowledge Exchange Partnerships as well finding new opportunities for international students.
- B. Considering what specific support international students need to be able to take advantage of placement opportunities and find work while they study.
- C. Considering internationalisation afresh post-Covid and reviewing opportunities for home and international students to interact and integrate.
- D. Supporting Students' Unions to increase engagement with international students.
- E. Reviewing the wrap around student support provided and considering whether mainstream or tailored support is appropriate.

Government can help by:

- A. Developing a coordinated approach to regional trade support that will also enable placement opportunities for international students and considering how further roll out of initiatives such as the Sheffield China Gateway Scheme could be supported.
- B. Working with universities on a campaign aimed at increasing the number of employers providing placements for international students.

Supporting organisations can help by:

- A. Continuing to support the sharing of good practice in relation to employability support, building on the UUKi International Graduate Employability project, the work of UKCISA's Student Employability Group and AGCAS's Internationalisation Task Group.
- B. The NUS could revisit and refresh its 2011 toolkit.
- C. Supporting the development of good practice in relation to student support for international students. The work of UKCISA to develop an international student charter (due to launch in summer 2022) will help develop good practice, setting targets for providers to sign up to.

Post-study: findings and recommendations

International students told us that:

- They want more support on graduate employment.
- UK employers, especially those listed on the sponsored list, need to be educated about the skilled visa and graduate route.
- They want more support to find graduate opportunities back home.

Components of a world-leading university experience for international students:

1. An increased range of UK graduate employment opportunities.
2. Detailed knowledge of international graduate destinations and career trajectories.
3. Sector collaboration to provide insight on labour markets in regions and sectors across the world.

Universities can support this by:

- A. Continuing to provide dedicated employability support as international graduates enter the early stages of their careers, whether that is within the UK or abroad.
- B. Working collaboratively to increase the level of support provided for graduates seeking employment back home.

Government can help by:

- A. Developing a pro-active and sector specific campaign targeting employers as part of the UK International Education Strategy.
- B. Continuing to monitor the Graduate route offer in relation to key competitors ensuring all universities have access to robust representative international graduate outcomes data either through HESA's Graduate Outcomes or alternative sources.
- C. Working with the universities and sector bodies to develop a national level resource that supports international graduates wishing to return home and find employment.

Supporting organisations can help by:

- A. Building partnerships with business led organisations, such as the CBI and Chambers of Commerce, to help increase the number of graduate opportunities for international students.
- B. Coordinating a national level resource for international graduates seeking employment back home.
- C. Continuing to support the sharing of good practice in relation to employability support, building on the UUKi International Graduate Employability project and through UKCISA's Student Employability Group.
- D. HESA and others should closely monitor the impact of the decision to cease calling non-EU international graduates for their graduate outcomes survey.

There is no doubt that many of these recommendations mean that a redirection of resources is needed. If we want to expand our market share then we need to invest, not just in marketing but in the whole experience. International students make a major contribution to UK teaching, facilities and research but this is not always reflected in the provision of adequate numbers of dedicated staff to support pre-arrival and transition questions and issues, or to provide careers and progression guidance tailored to the culture and context of the students themselves. This needs to be addressed and should be highlighted at the recruitment stage and flagged throughout the student journey.

The current environment

International student recruitment in the UK

The UK is the second most popular study destination in the world for international students. In 2019-20 there were 557,000 international students studying at UK higher education institutions, making up 22% of the total student population.[vii] In 2018-19 the top five sending countries for international students were China, India, the UK, Hong Kong and Malaysia.[viii] The sector has long made the case as to the economic and social value of international students to the UK,[ix] which the Government has also now recognised through its International Education Strategy.[x]

Global competition

International student recruitment is becoming increasingly competitive and although the UK was still ranked the second most popular study destination globally in 2018, its position has become vulnerable. The UK only has a small lead on Australia, which ranked third, and it lost market share in 16 out of the 21 top sending countries and territories between 2010 and 2018. The UK's international student numbers showed slowed growth of under 1% between 2014 and 2017 and only 3.8% in 2018, while other countries, such as Australia, Canada and Germany have demonstrated steady year-on-year growth. Meanwhile, other study destinations have been growing in popularity including in Africa (e.g. Ghana) and Asia (especially Malaysia) due to stronger regional mobility.[xi]

Best UK policy environment for years

The International Education Strategy, published in 2019 and updated in 2021, sets out a series of Government interventions which add up to the most supportive policy environment for international student recruitment that the UK has experienced for some time. This support aligns to the Government's overall objective to develop opportunities for a Global Britain.

Policies include:

- a target to grow international student numbers to at least 600,000 by 2030;
- a keener focus on the experience of international students, including employability;
- support to increase the diversity of regions that UK universities recruit from;
- the introduction of the new student immigration route in 2020, which improves on the previous Tier 4 route by extending the window in which prospective students can make immigration applications from outside of the UK, removing study time limits at postgraduate level and allowing students at all levels to apply for further leave as a student or move into another immigration route from within the UK; and
- the introduction of a new Graduate route in 2021, allowing eligible students to stay in the UK to work, or look for work, for 2 years (3 years if studying at PhD level) after they have completed a degree in the UK.[xii]

The sub-commission is drawing on this environment to ask: where are the leapfrog opportunities to build world-leading international student experience that capitalises on current government support?

Pandemic

In many ways Coronavirus has exacerbated existing issues for international students, shining a brighter light on concerns that have been raised and looked at previously such as anxiety around visas and immigration, financial support and feelings of isolation. At the same time, it can be seen to have had a levelling effect between international and home students as home students have been exposed to the disorientation that has always been part of the territory for international students. For example, the interim Student Futures Commission report highlighted the extent to which incoming home students have experienced gaps in their learning alongside the unease and uncertainty that many students might feel as they seek to re-engage with the full student experience, including extracurricular activities.[xiii] A poll of current Year 13 students on The Student Room forum found that 90% of respondents felt they needed more help getting ready for university and 58% of students felt they had missed out as a result of not being able to attend face to face open days this year.[xiv]

Typical concerns of international students contacting the OfS during the course of the pandemic have included: concerns about whether their immigration status could be extended to allow them to stay in or return to the UK to complete components of their course that could not be delivered remotely (such as laboratory work), and how changes to assessment and course design could affect their visas.[xvi] This mirrors discussions in our focus groups in which some (although not all) students questioned whether the experience was worthwhile as a result of COVID, especially given the additional costs. Overall there was acknowledgement that the situation had been constantly changing but still a feeling that more could have been done to communicate with international students as they had felt that they didn't know what was happening at times. The UKCISA, Universities UK international and the British Universities' International Liaison Association's #WeAreTogether social media campaign has sought to help with some of these issues by creating a positive online community, sharing messages of solidarity, support and gratitude. The international element focussed on providing reassurance and support for international students to help point them in the right direction to get support.[xvii]

Hybrid learning and academic transition

The feedback in relation to online or hybrid learning mirrors that of home students. Again, this is overlaid on the existing experience of international students transitioning to study in a different country. International students told us that the switch to online learning raised a lot of issues with understanding of course content without having the opportunity of face-to-face conversations with tutors after sessions. Some students felt that the university was implementing blended learning and keeping aspects of online learning because it was cheaper than face-to-face, a concern that was also highlighted in the Student Futures Commission interim report. However, it was also suggested that online/blended learning provided a better structure for some courses than how they were delivered pre-pandemic. For example, in one university pre-pandemic, there had been condensed block teaching of one week of lectures and one week of support sessions before independent study. This was a lot for international students to cover in a short space of time. International students reported that online delivery had allowed them to study more at their own pace.

This is interesting given the findings of the Brilliant Club research, conducted for the Student Futures Commission. Their research raised the importance of not overwhelming students during the induction period, and instead adapting induction delivery so that it is spread out over a longer period of time - and repeated where necessary.[xviii] This would seem to be particularly beneficial for international students as they adapt to UK academic practices. The subject of academic transition for international students has significant focus of previous work considering the international student experience including issues such as culturally different teaching and learning practices, writing in academic English, subject related English language preparation, and assessment.[xix] These issues did surface during our focus group discussions and clearly remain important. However, they were not the central focus of discussions and are therefore not a central theme for this report.

Pre-arrival: communication and responsiveness

International Students seeking to study in the UK will feel welcomed, supported and reassured from day one of the application process.

International students told us that...

Anxiety has a significant impact on all aspects of the experience pre-arrival

Anxiety throughout the process was often discussed – of getting a student visa, restricted social connections, financial difficulties, homesickness and loneliness, identifying suitable accommodation, making the necessary adjustments and adaptation into the UK environment and missing the presence of family and friends back home. Some students said that they had been concerned prior to arrival in the UK due to perceived political views and the potential for stigmatisation and stereotypes about international students.

“For me the most stressful thing was the application process itself, it took a long time to receive an unconditional letter, there was also much paperwork. I still didn't know if I made the right choice.”[xx]

There was also a significant focus on what careers support would be available, centred on concerns around getting a job (“getting the degree alone is not enough”[xi]), visa issues in relation to finding a job in the UK (cost of extension, finding a sponsor), and also finding a job that supported longer term career aspirations.

The QS International Student Survey found differences in the common concerns of students from different countries. For example, cost of living was the main driver of concern for Indian candidates alongside getting a job. Students from Indonesia had similar concerns about the cost of living and wanted to know more about the availability of scholarships. Student safety was also a significant concern for many of these students. Cost of living and quality of life was raised by Nigerian students, whereas safety and finding accommodation were a significantly greater source of concern for Saudi Arabian candidates than for those from other countries. Vietnamese students shared concerns about finances and safety and were particularly keen to know if they would be made to feel welcome. South Korean students also shared concerns about safety and cost of living, but concerns about academic pressures and achieving the grades expected of them were particularly significant.[xii]

Communications need to be more attuned to this, more responsive and more tailored

Slow communications were raised in many of the discussions, often adding to the anxiety described above. This finding chimes with feedback the sub-commission has received from ApplyBoard, that the processes in UK universities take comparatively longer than at universities in other countries. This could disadvantage UK competitiveness given that many students appear to go with their first offer. Significant delays in receiving Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) cards were also reported, with knock on impacts for students (e.g. issues opening UK bank account, securing part-time work, etc).

Examples were given of International Offices missing their own timelines for responses to Visa documentation (financial document approval) with significant knock-on effects for students,

rescheduled visa appointments and delays in visa process. One student applied for deferral due to the covid situation at home, and didn't get a response for 2-3 months (just before they were due to start). Some students fed back that university communications were usually generic and loaded with too much information, making it difficult to spot the part of the correspondence that was relevant.

That said, many examples of good practice were also shared including: support to make sure students knew how to navigate the immigration processes from both universities and UK visa application centres; the use of student volunteers to contact prospective students to check on their preparations and support with any challenges; familiarisation, such as through the use of WhatsApp groups.

"[The university's] social media and online presence is always so active that helps a lot of students to actually have a sigh of relief and an idea of what they are going to get themselves into in the coming years so, and the consultants in my country have developed their base so much that they have a solution for every small problem that a student faces in the application process." - Focus Group Participant [xxiii]

The QS International Student Survey looked in detail at the type and frequency of communications preferred by international applicants. They found that:

- Email, WhatsApp and phone calls are the most popular channels for prospective students to get in contact with a university. In China, 63% of students had a preference for WeChat.
- Of the utmost importance to prospective students is that their enquiries are responded to in a timely and efficient manner.
- 39% of prospective students expect their application to take up to one month to be processed.
- 62% expect at least weekly communication with a university after they have submitted an enquiry.

Overall, QS concluded that "prospective students have low expectations of universities to deliver on what is an important subject to them. In order to raise expectations of prospective students and meet their demands more effectively, universities need to invest more in this area." [xxiv]

Components of a world-leading pre-arrival experience for international students

1. A responsive communications culture attuned to individual concerns and anxiety

Post-Covid, international students are naturally more concerned that previously reliable processes, especially in relation to international travel, may be disrupted. Any lack of clarity and delay in communications, now more than previously, may be read as a sign that something is amiss and risks loss of confidence in a study destination choice. In addition, overseas students may be from a culture in which a period of quiet while an issue is being addressed is more alarming, due to fears around complex initial processes or simply how officials engage with those asking questions. A key message is to over - rather than under - communicate. Let students know that a decision is being considered and provide regular

reassurance even if there is no further detail available. Awareness of the different concerns of students from different countries is helpful but anxiety is personal and the approach to communications should be too. For example, the Making Transitions Personal Project at the University of Edinburgh allows the Visiting Student Office to identify concerns of EU and non-EU students prior to arrival, thus allowing the office to tailor their formal welcome talk to address those concerns.[xxv] The Government commitment to streamline the applications process from application to graduation, including consideration of the use of digital systems to create better user experiences, is welcomed. [xxvi] The sector needs to work with Government and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) as this develops.

2. Careers and employability support starts pre-arrival

The introduction of the new Graduate route for international students is a huge opportunity to increase the UK's global market share, which reduced following the removal of the post-study work visa in 2012.[xxvii] Post-study options are one of the four main factors influencing international student decisions about where to study,[xxviii] with immigration policy acting as a key determinant of attractiveness mainly through the ease and speed of visa administration, the opportunities for work during studies and the possibilities of employment thereafter.[xxix] We can build on the Graduate route to develop a world-leading employability offer with significantly more information available ahead of application about what international students can expect, including on: student jobs, internships, work experience and graduate opportunities, as well as advice about how to make the most out of the UK university experience, building social (who you know) and cultural (what you know) capital [xxx], in order to take full advantage of the Graduate route.

3. A 'no surprises' approach on the likely financial pressures and a national scholarship brand

The UUKi "Why aren't we second?" report found that the UK is comparatively more expensive in terms of tuition fees, student visa fees and health surcharge than other competitors. They also found that compared to other national study campaigns, the Study UK campaign does not provide detailed and prominent information on the different UK nations, or offer a scholarship search tool.[xxxi] IDP Connect found that that students and parents, when considering the UK alongside the US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, ranked the UK fourth (just before the US) in terms of affordability.[xxxii] We need to do more to help students understand the day-to-day experience and costs related to living and studying in the UK, developing a 'no surprises' approach. Information should include the financial support available as well as the likely income from working alongside study. In addition, Government support could help the UK to build its competitive advantage in relation to visa costs, scholarship availability and international student loans. This could include a national scholarship brand which could be used to promote existing scholarships, as well as pursuing innovative government-to-government partner models for co-funding scholarships.[xxxiii]

Recommendations

Universities can support this by:

- A. Reviewing their pre-arrival support and communication from the student perspective.
- B. Considering how technology may help to increase responsiveness throughout the process.
- C. Identifying dedicated customer service officers within the institution to support students with more complex enquiries and concerns.

- D. Including employability information in pre-application communications.
- E. Including clear information about all the costs involved in studying alongside support available in pre-application communications.

Government can help by:

- A. Fulfilling its commitment to streamline the applications process from application to graduation in consultation with the sector, including by using digital technology.
- B. Working with the sector to develop a campaign highlighting the UK's whole student journey employability offer once it is further developed.
- C. Working with other countries to pursue government to government approaches to co-fund scholarships.

Supporting organisations can help by:

- A. Continuing to support the sharing of good practice in relation to employability support, building on the UUKi International Graduate Employability project, the work of UKCISA's Student Employability Group and AGCAS's Internationalisation Task Group.
- B. Drawing together key partners to develop a National Scholarship Brand.
- C. UCAS can continue to work with government and universities as their work to streamline and improve the application process for international students progresses.

University: the wrap-around experience

International students will benefit from the full university experience, in its widest sense, with tailored support where appropriate to recognise the additional challenges of studying in a different country.

International students told us that...

They need more careers and employability support while they are at university

A common reflection was that they felt they were provided with less careers support than home students. That said, a number of students had made use of the support available such as career counselling, CV and interview preparation, portfolio support, alerts for job opportunities and skills / employability events, and universities creating links with employers and setting up internships and support with the post-graduate work visa. More support was requested towards finding internships and temporary / part-time jobs with a Tier 4 visa.

“Despite the benefits of obtaining the visa and that it allows to work part time, the reality is that the UK has a high cost of living and, alongside that, many companies do not have either interest or knowledge in hiring international students.”- Focus Group participant [xxxiv]

The focus group findings are backed up by the UUKi Supporting International Graduate Employability research, which surveyed institutions about their careers and employability support for international students. The research identified that demand from international students for this support was fairly or very high and nearly half felt that they were currently unable to meet this demand. 70% of respondents anticipated enhanced expectations of gaining UK work experience from international students as a result of the new Graduate route. [xxv] 61% of respondents perceived international students' appetite for UK work experience to be either much greater (19%) or slightly greater (42%) than UK-domiciled students.[xxvi]

Social interaction is a core part of the experience, without it they can feel unsupported and alone

Many contributors saw social engagement as a core part of the experience and thus Covid caused significant issues. The need to show international students that they were not alone was a key theme running through all of the discussions. Experiences of racism and isolated experiences of veiled discrimination outside and inside the university were also reported. Previous research has found that international students in general experience more anxiety, stress, homesickness and loneliness, and have less social support, than domestic students. Friendships with home students positively affect adjustment, but may be difficult to form.[xxvii]

The importance of extracurricular activities has been emphasised by their absence during the pandemic. For international students this has impacted their cultural experience of life in the UK, including language skills and confidence in ability to succeed in the UK work environment. Aside from the pandemic, students fed-back that many of the social events on offer were not appealing to international students. It was also suggested that international student societies, which were easier to find and access, as well as the wider student body could help do more to

support international students adjust to life in the UK. One group reflected that the SU was always happy to introduce new societies but that many international students weren't aware of this, which was a shame given the significant benefit students could gain from being actively involved in societies or clubs.

That said, students also reported that while there had been experiences of isolation initially, the university had helped them to transition and adapt to life in the UK. Suggestions for supporting greater integration and tackling loneliness included: a module to help integrate local and international students; text books that had been translated into various languages for students to use during their first semester as they built their confidence; activities to strengthen bonds between students studying in the same fields; and a regular series of check-ins with international students to see how they were settling in.

They need help to access the right kind of student support and to understand what is available

It was suggested that more information could be provided about what services would be available, and which services would best for which situation, including which ones were best equipped to deal with international students. It was suggested that it could be made easier to access all services with clear contact details and faster response times.

Some students experienced major issues when trying to access welfare support. They were signposted to the university counselling and mental health service only to be told "it's for home and EU students only"[xxxviii] and to get in touch with the International Office. But students didn't perceive that they got the same kind of specialised support from the International Office that they could through the mainstream counselling and mental health services. Aligned to this, it was suggested that there should be stronger representation for international students, which would help to increase the support available to them and to resolve some of the issues raised.

Components of a world-leading university experience for international students

1. Work experience and internships are integral

Despite the opportunities provided by the new Graduate route for international students to gain work experience while they study, there is a lack of UK work experience opportunities available (including graduate jobs, internships and placements), and due to intense competition, those which do exist are hard for international students to obtain. For example, the website Student Circus has advertised 8,000 positions since 2017 but 30,000 international students have registered to use the site over the same period.[xxxix] Research undertaken by the University of Bournemouth found the following barriers for international students seeking to gain work experience in the UK: [xl]

- Lack of understanding of the UK job market, recruitment processes and practices.
- English language difficulties.
- Unrealistic expectations of the university placement process.
- Lack of understanding of the amount of effort required to be successful in gaining work experience in the UK.
- Lack of understanding of the value of transferrable employability skills gained from non-course specific work experiences.

These issues can be exacerbated for students undertaking one-year postgraduate programmes, as there is less time to gain work experience. International students make up 36% of postgraduate students in the UK. In a focus group carried out with international students from across the world studying the same MSc course, five out of the six students had opted to pay an additional sum to study a degree with embedded professional experience. All students cited the opportunity to get work experience in the UK as one of their top three reasons for choosing the institution and the UK to study.[xli]

There are also barriers from the perspective of employers. For example, a survey of SMEs in 2019 found that:

- Employers are more likely to recruit international students for short-term, project-based placements than for casual part-time work or graduate jobs.
- They weren't considering international students for casual intern roles due to a belief that they would need more time to develop an understanding of what the business and the industry involved, as well as to adapt to UK business culture.[xlii]

It is clear that the new Graduate route has removed just one of the barriers for international students seeking to access work experience to improve their employability prospects. Universities, employers and government need to work together to develop opportunities that benefit both international students and UK businesses. For example, internship opportunities can be developed that link international students to UK businesses seeking to build global exports and connections. The Sheffield China Gateway Scheme has done just this and offers excellent opportunities for businesses to access talent that can help them as well as enabling the University's Chinese speaking students to acquire knowledge of UK business, improve their employability, and develop UK contacts for their future careers.[xliii] Increased join-up has the potential to create a number of benefits including in relation to the Government's levelling up agenda. For example, internships could be developed that tie into local clusters around specific sectors[xliv] along with the development of the Department for International Trade's High Potential Opportunities.[xlv] Added to this, initiatives such as Knowledge Transfer Partnerships[xlvi] could be rolled into the provision for international students to create a really unique and compelling UK offer.

2. Social and cultural interaction and exchange are actively supported

The 21st Century has seen the dual phenomenon of an opening up of society and, at the same time, increasingly fixed identities and factionalism. The advent of social media has helped us to access an increased diversity of people and views. On the other hand, we are seeing a retreat towards older social norms and beliefs in search of security. Despite access to more voices than ever before, there is a danger of narrowing rather than broadening one's gaze. Because universities can create environments for global and local perspectives to be debated, they can, if they engage, develop greater understanding where truths can be tested and explored and view-points safely exchanged to enhance useful knowledge.[xlvii]

Within this context the issue of social interaction and overcoming the potential for isolation amongst international students is critical. Supporting this across university activities will support all students as they prepare to engage with a complex and often fraught global society. Work in this area can build on previous endeavours to internationalise universities, supported in previous years by the Prime Minister's Initiative, which had two iterations. For example, the National Union of Students (NUS) developed a toolkit in 2011 focussed on

increasing the opportunities for international and home students to engage with each other.[xlvi] These initiatives should be revisited and refreshed.

3. International students can access the full range of support available to domestic students, with additional targeted support where appropriate

Careful consideration needs to be given as to when mainstream support or tailored support for international students is appropriate. This may need to take into account the capacity and speciality available within international offices, for example in relation to mental health support and counselling. Research from UCAS found that in the last decade, the number of applicants disclosing that they have a mental health condition in their application has risen 450% and the 2021 National Student Survey found that only 42% of students felt their institution had taken appropriate steps to support their mental wellbeing.[xlix] Mental health support for domestic students has been a growing focus for the sector in recent years.[i] We need to consider the growing knowledge base of best practice in this area in relation to the needs of international students. The appropriate allocation of resources is obviously an important part of this discussion.

Recommendations

Universities can support this by:

- A. Providing dedicated international placement officers who work with local and national companies to coordinate existing opportunities, including Knowledge Exchange Partnerships as well finding new opportunities for international students.
- B. Considering what specific support international students need to be able to take advantage of placement opportunities and find work while they study.
- C. Considering internationalisation afresh post-Covid and reviewing opportunities for home and international students to interact and integrate.
- D. Supporting Students' Unions to increase engagement with international students.
- E. Reviewing the wrap around student support provided and considering whether mainstream or tailored support is appropriate.

Government can help by:

- A. Developing a co-ordinated approach to regional trade support that will also enable placement opportunities for international students and considering how further roll out of initiatives such as the Sheffield China Gateway Scheme could be supported.
- B. Working with universities on a campaign aimed at increasing the number of employers providing placements for international students.

Supporting organisations can help by:

- A. Continuing to support the sharing of good practice in relation to employability support, building on the UUKi International Graduate Employability project, the work of UKCISA's Student Employability Group and AGCAS's Internationalisation Task Group.
- B. The NUS could revisit and refresh its 2011 toolkit.
- C. Supporting the development of good practice in relation to student support for international students, the work of UKCISA to develop an international student charter (due to launch in summer 2022) will help develop good practice, setting targets for providers to sign up to.

Post-study: careers and onward opportunities

The Graduate route is backed up by a rich array of options for international students with pro-active and ongoing support as their early career develops.

International students told us that..

They want more support on graduate employment

A common theme was around the need for more proactive employment support for graduates until they had a job, including regular contact. Students wanted more information on the different options after graduation including graduate employment programmes. It was suggested that employment workshops should be provided that were targeted at international students who wanted to stay in the UK for a year or two before going back as well as internationally focused workshops, for those looking to gain work back in their home countries. Company conferences, mentorship and support to develop key skills were also suggested. Some of the discussions backed up previous research^[li] that the definition of graduate success can be quite narrowly framed amongst international students, suggesting that support focussed on a broader range of opportunities as well as educating students on the value of these could be helpful.

“The biggest concerns are about getting on with life, finding a decent job, a place to live, visas or another kind of residence permit. I think that many students don’t feel fully secure as they head towards graduation.” - Focus Group participant^[lii]

“Getting a job in the core sector seems to be the biggest concern for me. We all want to get jobs in the field we are studying.” - Focus Group participant^[liii]

The UUKi research on support for international graduate employability found that 47% of institutions provided tailored careers advice and guidance to international students. However, the majority (56%) of institutions had no specialist staff to support international student and graduate employability and 44% do not provide specific Careers, Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) to international students, but instead sought to ensure that existing services were inclusive to international students. Indeed, the 2019 International Graduate outcomes report highlighted that just 2% of international students reported that the university careers service had helped them to find a job.^[liv] Aligned to this is the finding that, in general, careers services had not routinely received specific increases in funding in line with an increase in international student numbers.^[lv]

UK employers, especially those listed on the sponsored list, need to be educated about the skilled visa and graduate route

It was recommended that the Government should also improve communication about the skilled visa and Graduate route information to companies, especially those companies listed on the sponsored list. It was reported that a lot of students had used this list to look for

companies where they could apply but had found that some staff within these organisations did not know much about the student visa or sponsorship. It was felt that this gap needed a lot of attention.

“There is no point in the visa if there aren’t opportunities to work”[lvi] – Focus Group participant

Aside from educating employers about visa regulations, it was felt that more should be done to educate employers about the benefits of employing international students. It was also suggested that regional links and discussions with local employers should be developed to encourage more of these employers to recruit international students.

The UUKi international graduate employability research also flagged concerns about the lack of awareness among employers regarding visas and international graduates amongst careers and employability professionals. Only 9% of services that responded undertook initiatives to help UK employers recruit international students. Many said that they would like to do more to encourage UK employers to recruit international students, but that they had found it difficult due to resource constraints, employer engagement not being in their remit, or being uncertain about how best to support UK employers to recruit international students.[lvii]

“We are the intermediary between students wishing to remain in the UK after graduation and a limited number of available opportunities. So many will engage with us in the hope we can have an impact on that situation – and express their frustration to us about a reality over which we obviously have no control.” Careers and employability professional[lviii]

They want more support to find graduate opportunities back home

It was agreed that links to employers back home were also critical for those students seeking to return home. It was suggested that fairs could be organised on campus. The sub-commission reflected that sector-level collaboration may be an important part of being able to deliver the tailored support needed given the in-depth knowledge required to deliver sufficient support in relation to the range of regions and contexts that international students could be returning to.

“The most important phase for an international student starts when they actually complete their course, it’s the decision making time where they have to decide to stay back or go back to the home country” –Focus Group participant[lix]

Most international graduates return to their home countries for graduate work or go elsewhere overseas,[lx] and yet there is much more that could be done to support them. The UUKi international graduate employability research found that most services (84%) helped their students to understand overseas labour markets, with priority regions defined by student demand, locations with high proportions of alumni and countries where overseas campuses are based. There is clearly space to think creatively and collaboratively about how to provide more nuanced support, covering a broader range of destinations.

Components of a world-leading university experience for international students

1. An increased range of UK graduate employment opportunities

The UK has a relatively low level of unemployment with particular opportunities in areas of skills shortages, which in turn create economic benefit, local prosperity and jobs. However, there is a lack of understanding about the benefits to employers of recruiting international graduates and the opportunities provided by the new Graduate route for international student visas. Universities UK, with Fragomen LLP, has sought to help this through the publication of guidance that helps employers to navigate the immigration system^[ixi] and are working to develop a range of other activities in support of the success of the Graduate route as it beds in.^[ixii] Following the input of our international student focus groups, we suggest that future activities to lever the new Graduate route towards its maximum potential could include:

- A pro-active and sector specific campaign targeting employers as part of the UK International Education Strategy. This should be strongly allied to the UK economic growth/levelling up agenda. It should be developed in partnership with the CBI and Chambers of Commerce and should seek to use employer voices in order to highlight the benefits of employing international students.
- A linked campaign focussed on international students themselves to highlight the range of opportunities available and the policies that support this to include: in-study work experience and the value of this for future careers, graduate opportunities in a variety of business types, including SMEs, skills shortage areas, links between academic field of study and the full range of employment opportunities that these can lead to, opportunities across the UK's regions, student start-ups. This should also be developed in collaboration with the CBI and Chambers of Commerce.
- Ongoing Government assessment of the Graduate route offer in relation to key competitors. If, in the future, there is the desire to further improve the Graduate route, the UK could consider extending its duration and counting part of it towards indefinite leave to remain, as Canada and New Zealand do.^[ixiii]

2. Detailed knowledge of international graduate destinations and career trajectories

A core message from the sub-commission was that the UK will not be able to improve outcomes for international graduates unless we know where they are going. We need to understand where in the world they are heading, who they are working for, what they are doing and if they are setting up on their own. The sub-commission recognises that this is not an easy task given the scale of the exercise required to connect with and collate information from international students residing all over the globe. However, new technology means there are increasingly more cost-effective routes to collating such information. UKCISA has set up an employability group which is looking at how the evidence base can be improved and Government, the Office for Students. Given the central importance of evidence base to our proposals, the sub-commission is very concerned about the recent announcement that HESA will cease phoning international students to complete their Graduate Outcomes survey. They will instead rely on email and SMS contact with these graduates only able to complete the survey online.^[ixiv]

The Government, HESA and others need to monitor the impact of this decision closely and ensure that robust and representative data continues to be available. This is a critical part of shaping a world leading UK experience and aligns with Action 5 in the International Education Strategy, which sets out the Government’s plan to “work with the sector to enhance the evidence base on international graduate outcomes and to monitor the UK’s comparative position with respect to international student recruitment and the international student experience”.^[lxv]

3. Sector collaboration to provide insight on labour markets in regions and sectors across the world

Given that the majority of international students return home after graduation^[lxvi] we need to ensure that they can access careers advice which genuinely reflects the nature of employment opportunities overseas. There are also exciting opportunities available for UK students to seek their first graduate roles overseas as a talented, globally-confident workforce. Using a collaborative approach to provide better international Labour Market Intelligence (LMI) was also recommended in the UUKi Supporting international graduate employability report.^[lxvii]

In country platforms already exist to pool intelligence and resources at country level – for example Lockin China which is used by over 500,000 students and 20,000 employers.^[lxviii] There is also some existing collaboration across universities to support international graduate employability, including on joint careers fairs, either in the UK or overseas, through interest groups and regional forums, developing shared resources and joint webinars as well as collaborative employer visits.^[lxix] Developing a national level resource could elevate this significantly and increase the attractiveness of the UK as a study destination from which all institutions would benefit. Government support for such an endeavour would align with the goals of International Education and could include Department for International Trade assistance to develop links with employers in other countries.

Recommendations

Universities can support this by:

- A. Continuing to provide dedicated employability support as international graduates enter the early stages of their careers whether that is within the UK or abroad.
- B. Working collaboratively to increase the level of support provided for graduates seeking employment back home.

Government can help by:

- A. Developing a pro-active and sector specific campaign targeting employers as part of the UK International Education Strategy.
- B. Continuing to monitor the Graduate route offer in relation to key competitors.
- C. Ensuring all universities have access to robust representative international graduate outcomes data either through HESA’s Graduate Outcomes or alternative sources.
- D. Working with the universities and sector bodies to develop a national level resource that supports international graduate wishing to return home and find employment.

Supporting organisations can help by:

- A. Building partnerships with business led organisations such as the CBI and Chambers of Commerce to help increase the number of graduate opportunities for international students.
- B. Coordinating a national level resource for international graduates seeking employment back home.
- C. Continuing to support the sharing of good practice in relation to employability support, building on the UUKi International Graduate Employability project and through UKCISA's Student Employability Group.
- D. HESA and others should closely monitor the impact of the decision to cease calling non-EU international graduates for their graduate outcomes survey.

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