

UK Council
for International
Student Affairs

UKCISA



Delivering a world-class international student experience: how Government can create the conditions for success

A policy position paper

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FOREWORD



The UK Government's 2019 [International Education Strategy](#) (IES) marked a welcome step-change in the national approach to international education, setting a numerical target for growth in the number of international students coming to the UK, appointing an International Education Champion, and taking steps to enhance the competitiveness of the UK's offer, in particular on post-study work rights.

The Coronavirus, coupled with the impact of the UK's departure from the European Union, represents a significant challenge to delivering on the aspirations of the IES. However, it also creates an imperative to scale up our collective ambition to offer a world-class international student experience, in an increasingly competitive environment, and ensure that government policy supports its commitment to attract international students.

Building on the many welcome concessions the UK Government has already made to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on students and institutions, our shared objectives should be:

- To position the UK as the most welcoming and attractive destination for study in the world
- To ensure international students who choose the UK feel safe, part of a community, and empowered to make the most of their experience
- To create a system which fosters and enables a lifelong connection with the UK

Achieving this will require a collaborative approach from Government, Devolved Administrations, educational providers and international students, as well as the newly recruited International Education Champion, working together through a refreshed IES.

It will require a deeper understanding of students' experiences at every stage of the international student journey, from the first moment they consider applying to study in the UK through to post-graduation – and a stronger voice for international students at institutional, regional and national level.

It will also depend on continued recognition, from Government and the Devolved Administrations, of the contribution international students make to academic life, local communities and the economy – as well as the synergies which exist between strong and sustainable higher education, further education, schools and English language sectors.

UKCISA is a membership body for all institutions, students' unions and organisations working with international students – we also provide information and advice directly to students around the world.¹

As such, we are uniquely positioned to act as a bridge between Government, education providers at every level and international students, in support of the ambition to deliver a world-class student experience. By mobilising our networks, UKCISA can play a vital role in building a richer evidence base for policy development, by ensuring a stronger student voice in key international education initiatives and bringing a cross-sectoral perspective to influencing key policy issues.

What follows provides an overview of UKCISA's policy priorities at every stage of the international student journey, designed to inform the coming refresh of the IES and identify further action Government can take to create the conditions for success.

Anne Marie Graham
UKCISA Chief Executive

HOW GOVERNMENT CAN CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

SUMMARY OF KEY ASKS

POSITIONING THE UK AS AN ATTRACTIVE DESTINATION FOR STUDY

- 1 Extend and expand Covid-related concessions and flexibility in the visa and immigration system
- 2 Review the implementation of new immigration rules for EU/EEA/Swiss students from January 2021
- 3 Ensure any new immigration system delivers an improved 'customer journey' for international students
- 4 Invest in a coordinated global promotional campaign for UK education, including a focus on student safety from a public health perspective
- 5 Communicate existing sources of scholarship and financial support more effectively, and explore ways to support widening international student access in the future

DELIVERING A WORLD-CLASS STUDENT EXPERIENCE

- 6 Maintain and build the public and political consensus on the contribution made by international students to local communities, regions and the UK as a whole
- 7 Communicate a clear message of welcome to all international students in the UK, at every level of study
- 8 Build a better picture of current international students' experiences and expectations through systematic student engagement in order to drive future policy

- 9 Identify the development of an International Student Charter as a key action in a refreshed IES
- 10 Put in place sustainable cross-Government structures to recognise and respond in a coordinated fashion to international student crises
- 11 Support a coherent UK alumni offer and an international graduate employability strategy

MAINTAINING A LIFELONG CONNECTION AND OFFERING A SPRINGBOARD FOR THE FUTURE

- 12 Support the development of a stronger evidence base on international student outcomes and educational pathways
- 13 Leverage synergies between educational providers' employability efforts and Government's global networks, including in the context of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)
- 14 Invest in a pilot for a 'Graduate Export Placement Scheme', which would support international students to contribute to the Global Britain agenda, and wider efforts to encourage UK employers to engage with global talent
- 15 Prioritise the international recognition of qualifications in government-to-government dialogue and future FTAs

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POSITIONING THE UK AS AN ATTRACTIVE DESTINATION FOR STUDY

- The UK is the second most popular destination in the world for international students. However, in the context of increased global competition, the impact of the pandemic and the UK's departure from the European Union, the future is uncertain.
- The Government has implemented a series of concessions as a response to the Coronavirus, which have contributed to reassuring current students and stabilising student demand for the next academic year.
- However, it is important that further reassurances, flexibility and clarifications are provided to international students affected by these exceptional circumstances.
- Alongside, this, delivering an improved 'customer journey' through the visa system and projecting clear and consistent messages about UK education – including measures taken to prioritise student safety – remain central to positioning the UK as an attractive destination for study.

VISAS AND IMMIGRATION

1 Extend and expand Covid-related concessions and flexibility in the visa and immigration system

- a) Allow prospective international students who are outside the UK to submit visa applications at the nearest open Visa Application Centre (VAC), should they be impacted by closures
- b) Ensure that upon reopening VACs have the additional capacity necessary to process the backlog of applications – and commit to prioritising international student applications, as France has done²
- c) Allow all providers with a track record of compliance to assess English language ability, expanding current concessions beyond only those institutions offering pre-sessional English
- d) Extend the application window for Tier 4 from three to nine months and allow changes to the arrival date after a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) is issued
- e) Enable short-term students below degree level or on English language courses to extend the validity of their six- or eleven-month visa where their course start dates have been postponed
- f) Allow applications for the Doctorate Extension Scheme to be made from outside the UK, recognising that the travel restrictions currently in place may have impacted the ability for such students to return to the UK to make their application – or, failing that, provide clear guidance as to how these students should proceed
- g) Allow those who previously had Tier 4 leave, but had to leave the UK because of Coronavirus, to benefit from the same 'lighter touch' requirements for Tier 2 that they would have benefitted from if they were applying for Tier 2 from inside the UK
- h) Consider extending current extensions (in place until 31 July 2020) until the end of 2020 – to support providers in clearly communicating with students
- i) Confirm that periods of absence from the UK due to Covid-19 will not negatively impact future visa, and nationality, applications – building on the welcome announcement that students on blended learning courses will still be eligible for the Graduate Route, provided they are in the UK by 6 April 2021
- j) Ensure that the 6 April 2021 deadline for Graduate Route eligibility does not negatively impact students on placement

VISAS AND IMMIGRATION (cont'd)

- k) Delay the implementation of the planned increase to the NHS Immigration Health Surcharge for international students (currently scheduled for 1 October) in order to minimise disruption for students, recognising that this may result in students being financially penalised if they delay their study plans due to Covid-19, and that those from under-represented groups are likely to be disproportionately impacted. This will also avoid the complexity associated with a change in the rules at a time when providers are offering flexible start dates

2 Review the implementation of new immigration rules for EU/EEA/Swiss students from January 2021

- a) Monitor the evolving public health situation closely with a view to ensuring that no EU/EEA/Swiss students unable to travel to the UK before 31 December 2020 for Coronavirus-related reasons are prevented from applying for pre-settled status
- b) Recognising the exceptional circumstances presented by the pandemic, extend current transition arrangements for EU/EEA/Swiss nationals to January 2022 to minimise disruption at a time of crisis

3 Ensure any new immigration system delivers an improved 'customer journey' for international students

Application

- a) Offer clear messages, and a user-friendly journey, for international student applicants
- b) Remove credibility interviews, apart from in clearly defined exceptional circumstances, and issue guidance to increase transparency and accountability in the decision-making process in such circumstances
- c) Make possible in-country applications in all cases of course change and transition to work or further study, regardless of level of education
- d) Invest additional resource in the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) process, maximising efficiency at a time when there will be more applications as a result of EU nationals falling under immigration rules
- e) Remove academic progression requirements, recognising that they do not adequately account for diverse individual circumstances

Experience in the UK

- f) Remove the requirement for students to register with the police, which duplicates many of the checks already in place as part of the application process and undermines students' perceptions of the UK as a welcoming destination
- g) Enable all students aged 18 or over, regardless of their level of study, to benefit from part-time work rights
- h) Review immigration-related barriers which prevent international students from accessing internships and graduate schemes, with a view to identifying solutions which ensure parity of experience and opportunity for all students
- i) Ensure student engagement and attendance monitoring places the requisite trust in sponsors, allows for diversity across courses and levels of study, and minimises the differential treatment of international students

Minimise the compliance burden on providers

- k) Reform the sponsor management system, with a view to making it viable for institutions of all sizes, including removing annual sponsor CAS allocations
- l) Remove the 10% cap on visa refusals, thereby reducing the risk for small and specialist institutions with small numbers of international students
- m) Ensure sponsor reporting requirements are proportionate and transparent

Maximise the competitiveness of the UK's visa and immigration offer

- n) Consider where Coronavirus-related flexibility and concessions can be made permanent
- o) Prioritise international student applications at all levels, as proof of the value that the UK places on these applicants
- p) Implement the Graduate Route, and communicate further details to eligible current and prospective students as soon as possible, ensuring the costs associated are fair and proportionate
- q) Mitigate the adverse impact of a change in status for EU nationals, for example by negotiating:
 - A bilateral agreement relating to EU-UK reciprocal student mobility, without visas
 - Continued participation in the Erasmus+ programme

- Enabling ID card travel and/or group travel permits for EU minors coming to the UK to pursue English language or short courses
- r) Facilitate international student travel to the greatest possible extent, including by allowing six month visitors to study for as much or as little time as they choose and by establishing a light-touch, flexible, short-term study visa for periods up to a year
- b) Explore with financial institutions the potential for UK Government-backed tuition fee loans to encourage a broader cross-section of international applicants, including those from under-represented countries or groups
- c) Increase UK Government investment in scholarships for international students, including prioritising new scholarships for EU students and ensuring the availability of scholarships for students from low and middle income countries are not impacted by DFID's integration with the FCO

GLOBAL PROMOTION AND ACCESS

4 Invest in a coordinated global promotional campaign for UK education, including on student safety from a public health perspective

- a) Building on Action 2 of the 2019 IES, offer increased investment to existing promotional campaigns (British Council, Study UK, GREAT campaign), increasing coordination and complementarity, and, critically, broadening the scope to reflect the diversity of providers in the UK
- b) Enable greater involvement from key education sector organisations at all levels, as well as students and alumni, in the development of messaging, the success of which should be systematically monitored
- c) Building on the [welcome joint letter from Ministers to prospective international students](#) on 22 June 2020, invest as a priority in further efforts to more effectively communicate the existing public health situation, quarantine requirements and Coronavirus-compliance measures being undertaken by education providers
- d) Ensure the structures are in place to communicate the detail of changes to the rules which will impact international students swiftly and clearly
- e) Alongside this, support and reinforce wider positive messages relating to the new Graduate Route, and the UK labour market

5 Communicate existing sources of scholarship and financial support more effectively, and explore ways to support widening international student access in the future

- a) Support the creation of a 'one stop shop', which brings together existing sources of scholarship support, ranging from flagship UK Government programmes to those offered by individual countries, foundations, charities and institutions

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DELIVERING A WORLD-CLASS STUDENT EXPERIENCE

- Delivering a world-class student experience to current students is at the heart of ensuring the UK retains its global reputation for education. International students who choose to study in the UK should feel safe, part of a community and empowered to make the most of their experience.
- Supporting this agenda means building a culture of openness and inclusivity; developing a richer understanding of current international students' experiences, at institutional and national level; and ensuring that student feedback is recognised and reflected in future policy and practice.

6 Maintain and build the public and political consensus on the contribution made by international students to local communities, regions and the UK as a whole

- a) Support and encourage strong public statements from Government and elected representatives at the highest levels regarding the contribution of international students to academic life, local communities and the economy, particularly in the context of a post-Covid recovery
- b) Coordinate these messages, which will be nuanced on the basis of national and regional economic realities and trade and investment strategies, through the IES
- c) Support additional research and case studies illustrating the contributions which international students at all levels of education make to the UK

7 Communicate a clear message of welcome to all international students in the UK, at every level of study

- a) Complement strong public messages of welcome with a digital welcome message from the Education and International Trade Secretaries to all international students on arrival
- b) Through IES governance structures, monitor and condemn in the strongest possible terms racist or xenophobic behaviour suffered by international students

8 Build a better picture of current international students' experiences and expectations through systematic student engagement in order to drive future policy

- a) Commission a UKCISA-led research project to better understand international student experiences and expectations in the UK, including how these have been impacted by the pandemic. This process could draw on UKCISA's [#We Are International Ambassadors](#), to identify current practice, and potential policy solutions, relating to key areas, e.g. health, safety and wellbeing; accommodation, financial hardship and student protection; and community, inclusivity and belonging
- b) Ensure this process shapes future policy development, and the student voice is integrated more effectively into IES governance, by nominating a UKCISA representative to the Education Advisory Board

9 Identify the development of an International Student Charter as a key action in a refreshed IES

- a) Support a voluntary, non-prescriptive International Student Charter to encourage education providers to prioritise the international student experience, in line with the ambitions of the IES³
- b) This Charter could be co-developed by students and the staff who support them, convened by UKCISA, working with the International Education Champion

- c) It would celebrate excellence in international student support across a range of providers; provide a vehicle to share good practice and identify shared challenges; and act as a statement of intent, aimed at prospective and current international students

10 Put in place sustainable cross-government structures to recognise and respond in a coordinated fashion to international student crises

- a) Establish an effective forum, along the lines of the Responding to International Student Crises (RISC) group, which brings together education stakeholders, students and relevant government departments on an 'as needs' basis, where crises were negatively impacting international students. This would build on the success of current coordination efforts in response to Coronavirus, while recognising the need for a sustainable structure that lasts beyond the pandemic
- b) To ensure connectivity with the wider IES, such a group could be chaired by the UK's International Education Champion. It could also usefully maintain a close link with the [London Education and Research Network \(LEARN\)](#) of Education Attaches in London-based overseas embassies

3

MAINTAINING A LIFELONG CONNECTION AND OFFERING A SPRINGBOARD FOR THE FUTURE

- At its best, a UK education offers a lifelong connection to the UK and a springboard for the future, whether a student is planning to continue studying or to enter the job market in the UK or further afield.
- For the UK, student and alumni networks represent a huge source of untapped potential as the country seeks to further the 'Global Britain' agenda, and develop new diplomatic, academic and business links worldwide.
- The establishment of a Graduate Route, allowing graduates to stay in the UK to find work for two years after graduation (three years for PhDs) from summer 2021 onward, has the potential to be transformative. What follows provides an overview of priorities in further developing this agenda, in line with Action 3 of the 2019 IES.

11 Support a coherent UK alumni offer and an international graduate employability strategy

- a) Building on the British Council's existing alumni activity in the higher education space, invest in a coherent alumni offer, which includes alumni from all levels of education, and makes better use of digital technology
- b) Ensure coordination and complementarity with a global promotional campaign (see Priority 4) and an international graduate employability strategy
- c) Provide seed-funding to support the development of a sector-owned international graduate employability strategy to convene diverse educational providers to share good practice, connect students and employers locally and globally, and inform Government policy priorities
- d) This could build on the report '[Supporting International Graduate Employability: Making Good on the Promise](#)', a collaboration between Universities UK International (UUKi), UKCISA, The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and the University of Coventry, commissioned in response to Action 5 of the 2019 IES
- e) Delivery could make use of existing structures, including the AGCAS Internationalisation Group and the UKCISA advisory group on International Student Employability

12 Support the development of a stronger evidence base on international student outcomes, and educational pathways

- a) Support research in the following areas, as recommended in the report 'Supporting International Graduate Employability: Making Good on the Promise':
 - Understanding the specific employability needs of international students and the effect of employability interventions on eventual graduate outcomes.
 - Identifying best practice in monitoring the outcomes of UK-educated international graduates, and how we measure the quality of international student/graduate employability support
 - Identifying lessons learnt from overseas approaches to this area, in particular the approaches taken by competitor countries (namely Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA)
- b) Commission research into student pathways (including across different levels/sectors), and the factors which influence student decision-making at critical transition points, recognising that many international students continue studying

13 Leverage synergies between educational providers' employability efforts and Government's global networks, including in the context of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)

- a) Using the platform provided by a graduate employability strategy, enable and encourage greater connectivity between educational providers and Government's global networks, particularly those of the Department for International Trade (DIT) and the FCO
- b) Ensure that education providers can fully benefit from activities (e.g. trade missions) associated with future FTAs

14 Invest in a pilot for a 'Graduate Export Placement Scheme', which would support international students to contribute to the Global Britain agenda, and wider efforts to encourage employers to engage with global talent

- a) Support a pilot 'Graduate Export Placement Scheme', which would build on existing initiatives at institutional level, enable international students to gain valuable work experience and support companies to grow their exports, at the same time as mitigating the risks associated with implementing the Graduate Route at a time of economic uncertainty⁴
- b) Alongside this, support employers to better understand and access the pool of international student and graduate talent, and the immigration routes available

15 Prioritise the international recognition of qualifications in government to government dialogue and future FTAs

- a) Ensure no UK student is disadvantaged by the decision to move online in Spring 2020, and the likely blended learning approach in the 2020/21 academic year, as a result of obstacles to recognition for online and/or blended learning in key markets
- b) Continue to address wider obstacles to recognition, such as the recognition of the One Year Masters in India, making use of the International Education Champion's ambassadorial potential and the opportunity presented by future FTA negotiations (in line with Action 1 of the 2019 IES)
- c) Work collaboratively through the IES to ensure that educational providers and students' experiences can inform and guide this process

Endnotes

1. <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Research--Policy/Resource-bank/resources/199/UKCISA-strategic-plan-2020-23>
2. https://www.campusfrance.org/system/files/medias/documents/2020-06/2020_06_12_communique_de_m._le_drian_et_de_m._castaner_cle8eea45.pdf
3. An International Student Charter could be modelled on the [University Mental Health Charter](#) developed by Student Minds, and follows similar initiatives in other countries, such as [France](#)
4. This idea has been written about elsewhere, most recently in [Times Higher Education](#), and builds on existing institutional initiatives, for example the [Sheffield China Gateway Scheme](#).

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