

Giving the UK a competitive edge in the international student market 2020/21

The UK's higher education sector is world-leading, attracting students from around the globe. Around three in 10 students at Russell Group universities are from outside of the UK. After choosing to study here, international students bring huge benefits to the country – culturally and socially, in terms of new ideas and skills, financially through their tuition fees, and in terms of soft power and networks that are absolutely vital to our future international relations, trade and investment potential.

The impact of Covid-19 is wide-ranging but will inevitably see fewer students studying abroad, and the global competition for those students will be fierce. Safety will be a factor on the minds of many, so it is critical that the Government works overseas, and in collaboration with the sector, to highlight the UK as a safe destination for international students. To protect Britain's hard-won reputation as one of the best places to study a degree or undertake a postgraduate course, the Russell Group is also proposing three actions that the Government could prioritise as the country starts to come out of lockdown:

- 1. To develop and deliver a joint international marketing campaign to show that the UK and its world-class universities are open for business**
- 2. Continuing, and where possible enhancing, visa reforms to ensure Britain remains a globally attractive destination for students**
- 3. Seeking global consensus on the recognition of online courses**

1. Develop and deliver a joint international marketing campaign to show the UK and its universities are open for business

Universities are key players in marketing Britain around the world and showing it is an attractive destination for study, work and investment. Polling of prospective international students shows that our hard-won reputation is at risk, with perceptions of the UK's response to Covid-19 falling behind Australia, Canada and New Zealand.¹ A new campaign involving universities, the British Council, DfE and the Department for International Trade is needed to identify key target markets and tackle those perceptions. It will be important for this campaign to engage positively with appropriate social media influencers in target locations.

Key messages could include:

- UK universities are leading the development and trial of Covid-19 vaccinations.
- UK universities and government have supported international students during Covid-19 with teaching and assessment approaches to minimise risk, health and well-being support, accommodation and visa flexibilities.
- Our amazing NHS has taken care of people from around the world during this crisis and will continue to do so
- A reiteration of the UK as a safe place to study message.

¹ IDP connects survey of 6,900 international students demonstrated potential reputation damage https://resources.idp-connect.com/hubfs/IDP-Connect_Student-Survey_2020_infographic_FINAL.pdf

2. Continuing reforms to ensure Britain remains a globally attractive destination for students

The Government's proposal for a new 2-year post-study work visa was very warmly welcomed by the sector and brings us in line with many of our international competitors.

However, the proposal has yet to be confirmed in immigration rules and is creating uncertainty for students concerned about eligibility and deliverability. It is also leading to a lack of awareness of its benefits, which could result in fewer students choosing the UK as a study destination.

We propose a series of steps to address this issue, to strengthen the UK's position as an open and welcoming place to study, and to help streamline the immigration process to prevent a bottleneck of students seeking to come to the UK²:

- Government considers prioritising incoming international students in the visa system once travel restrictions ease, as competitor nations such as Australia have committed to.³
- Government passes the 2-year post study work visa through emergency immigration rules (secondary legislation) immediately. Universities can then promote it in international student marketing campaigns.
- Government considers increasing the visa to 30 months, to give universities an edge over international competitors in the post Covid-19 market.
- Students are able to apply for a visa six months before their actual course start date rather than three months. With universities considering starting courses remotely in September 2020 with a return to campus as soon as possible thereafter, students face the prospect of having to apply for visas that could be refused after they have actually started their course (e.g. if international travel restrictions continue until January and students cannot attend physically until then).
- Continuation of concessions for students dealing with disruption caused by Covid-19. For example, those forced to extend visas should have further visa fees waived.
- Compliance policies are reviewed to ensure international students feel welcome. Currently students are required to register physically with their local police and meet stringent attendance monitoring requirements. Relaxing these would positively enhance the reputation of our universities, and the reputation of the UK more widely, as the welcoming nation it is for students and their families.
- The immigration status of EU nationals starting courses remotely before 2021 and switching to physical courses after 2021 needs clarification. To help ensure a continued flow of talented EU students in the short-term, we invite Government to consider allowing those students to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme.
- Allow universities with a strong track record of compliance to carry out the language tests required for pre-degree courses to reduce the possibility of bottlenecks in the system.

3. Seeking global consensus on recognition of online courses

Currently, many overseas Governments do not recognise degrees which are comprised of significant amounts of distance learning. This lack of recognition could deter students from studying in the UK where they fear their qualifications will not be recognised, should online provision prove to be necessary for the start of courses beginning in 2020/21.

To address this, we recommend the UK works with other governments to agree reciprocal recognition agreements over online courses which may be delivered partly online during and in the aftermath of Covid-19. This work, building on work concessions reached with China, can be informed by the sector identifying priority markets in countries that do not currently recognise distance learning. This is a key issue for international students who return to their home countries for work after graduation.

² Further detail can be found in the annex

³ <https://thepienews.com/news/australia-to-consider-july-entry-for-international-students/>

Annex

Building on the short-term concessions the Home Office has issued, further flexibility could be built into the student visa system to ensure the UK is attractive and prevents a bottleneck of applicants:

- **Ensuring there is an increase in capacity at UKVI** to match demand for student visas.
- **Enabling students to apply for a visa 6 months before their physical course start date.** Universities may have to start courses remotely in September, with a January 2021 physical start date. Current immigration rules mean students would not be able to apply for a visa until 4 months before their course start date, in this case October 2020. This would be a month after students had started their courses remotely. Their visa application could then be denied, having already started their course. This uncertainty could act as a deterrent to international students thinking of starting in the coming academic year, and universities may have to refund students for the term they started online. Details of a new 'study route', which will be operational by Jan 2021, have not been released, adding further uncertainty as to whether students would likely have a future visa application accepted.
- **Reviewing policies that make international students feel unwelcome on campus**, including the need for international students to physically register with their local police force, and current attendance monitoring practices. Positive reform of these policies can enhance the international reputation of UK HE.
- **Reopening the ATAS certification programme** and ensuring there is additional capacity here to process new applications. Certificates previously issued should be automatically extended to ease the bureaucratic burden and recognise that circumstances are unlikely to have changed.
- To ensure there is not a backlog of students waiting for a Secure English Language Test (SELT), **universities and other higher education providers with a strong track record of compliance should be able to assess the English Language level of students entering for pre-degree courses.** Courses such as Foundation degrees are an essential pipeline to many STEM undergraduate courses. Allowing students to take either a SELT or be assessed by universities will generate additional capacity to assess prospective students swiftly.
- **Removing the requirement to enrol Biometric Resident Permits** for the 2020/21 cohort of international students from countries listed in Appendix H will help universities remain agile in these uncertain times. Biometrics could be submitted when in the UK.
- **Further relaxing academic progression requirements** will help our universities retain those students who want to switch degrees. For example, currently students are unable to switch in-country if 'downgrading' degrees, for example those switching from a PhD to a research Masters. Asking these students to submit an entirely new application from their home country could mean students merely cancel their existing studies and choose a different international destination.
- **Waiving an additional immigration health surcharge payment for those having to extend their visas as a result of Covid-19.** It would be particularly unfair if students who have travelled home must pay an additional immigration health surcharge.
- **Considering the future status of EU students not able to study physically in the UK before 2021.** Universities would like EU student demand stabilized during this crisis. Postgraduate research courses comprise disproportionate numbers of EU students. If a physical start date is not possible before January 2021, current guidance implies EU students would have to apply for a visa and pay the relevant immigration fees. This could act as a significant deterrent to EU students considering UK HE for the coming academic year. We invite Government to consider whether students starting remote learning of degree-level courses during transition could be eligible for the EU settlement scheme.
- **Consider increasing the validity of Tier 4 entry clearance to 6 months.** Currently entry clearance is valid for 30 days. Allowing students to enter the UK and have their clearance valid for 6 months would help to stagger demand for visa services and reassure students about their future status in the UK.