

## 7. International recruitment and transnational education

### Introduction and aim

The recruitment of international students wishing to study in the UK, international research collaborations and transnational education are all important aspects of international engagement in UK higher education. Each aspect involves opportunities and risk, and calls for effective leadership and governance.

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### 1. Effective governance

International recruitment and collaboration is an area in which academic and corporate governance come together. While academic matters are usually delegated to the senate (or equivalent) major decisions about international student recruitment or collaborations with an international partner will have resource implications and potentially reputational risks. These areas are of major concern to the Governing Body. If the two aspects of governance are not effectively aligned, problems can occur.

### 2. International strategy

The Governing Body should discuss and formally agree the provider's international strategy. The strategy should articulate the aims (intentions) and objectives (outcomes), how the strategy will be delivered and associated financial forecasts. The strategy should be subject to regular monitoring and, to enable an assessment of performance against planned outcomes, should include key performance indicators (KPIs) and associated targets.

### 3. Proposed new developments

The Governing Body should be made aware at an early stage of any new international developments, and be given sufficient time to satisfy itself that any proposal fits with the provider's strategic aims, can be successfully implemented, is accompanied by robust financial forecasts and does not lead to unacceptable reputational risks. Governing Bodies should avoid being rushed into making poorly informed or considered decisions.

### 4. Global growth of higher education

Over the last decade the number of students engaged in higher education across the globe has grown significantly. Demand has been fuelled by governments seeing higher education as a means of developing the country's future workforce, and individuals (and their parents) as a way to enhance their life chances and future earnings.



## 5. Growth of 'home' provision

Growing student demand has been met by expanding provision in the 'home' country, but also by a significant flow of students to study 'overseas', including with UK providers. Continuing investment by 'home' nations in their domestic education systems may in future lead to a reduction in the flow of students from some countries to the UK<sup>1</sup>.

## 6. International research partnerships

Research activity at the highest level has become global. Academic staff increasingly collaborate with peers working outside of the UK, and may spend time working at providers in different countries. Although research collaborations may arise from individual staff collaborating, some higher education providers have entered into international research partnerships with providers in other parts of world. The aim is to collaborate on multiple projects across different faculties<sup>2</sup>. The success of such partnerships depends on a number of factors, not least selecting an appropriate partner who offers a good 'fit' with the provider's work.

## 7. World rankings

One indicator of the increasingly global nature of higher education has been the emergence of international league tables, which give providers a world ranking. League tables play an important role in choice of provider by international students, as well as staff<sup>3</sup>.

## 8. International student recruitment

Many UK providers have responded to the growing international demand for higher education by developing strategies to increase the number of international students they, or partner organisations, recruit.

## 9. Fees for international students

A significant driver of international recruitment has been financial. UK providers have the freedom to set their own fees for non-EU ('international') students. Fees may be set to recover the 'full costs' of teaching international students and achieve a surplus. As a result international students pay significantly higher fees than those for Home students.

## 10. Provider strategies

The options for providers when recruiting international students include:

- recruiting international students to higher education programmes run in the UK
- collaborating or partnering with providers in 'overseas' countries
- developing and managing programmes delivered by the institution outside of the UK, including establishing overseas campuses

## 11. International students studying in the UK

In 2016/17 the total number of higher education students in the UK was 2,317,880 of which 425,375 (c.19%) were from outside of the UK. Of the total number, 6% of students were from EU countries. with the remaining 13% coming from non-EU countries.

## 12. Level of study

While the number of international students studying on undergraduate programmes is significant, they form a larger proportion of total postgraduate taught student population. Non-UK students comprise 16% (246,820 students) of the total number of undergraduate students, but make-up 53% (148,155 students) of the total number of students studying on full-time postgraduate taught programmes.

## 13. Enrolment by country of permanent residence

The main countries of origin for non-EU students were China (95,090), the United States (17,580), Malaysia (16,370) and Nigeria (12,665). For EU students, similar numbers of student attend UK providers from Germany (13,655), France (13,560) and Italy (13,455). In total, the number of non-UK students had grown by 4.1% over five years<sup>4</sup>.

## 14. Investments to support recruitment

Recruitment of international students requires investment to build (and then maintain) the necessary infrastructure (international office, overseas offices, networks of agents, links with 'local' feeder providers) to recruit students. Some higher education providers have partnered with a company specialising in the recruitment of international students (eg. [INTO](#)). Irrespective of strategy, most providers target particular countries in order to focus their efforts.



## 15. Attractiveness of UK providers

The attractiveness of a UK higher education provider to international applicants is influenced by a number of factors. These include the reputation of the provider, the presence of a community of students from the 'home' country and the support and facilities offered by the provider. Provision of student accommodation and learner support are important. Some higher education providers also offer linked pre-university 'foundation' years as feeders to their degree programmes. These are often delivered by partners offering further or secondary education.

## 16. UK Visa and Immigration

To sponsor international students to gain a visa to study in the UK, higher education providers need a 'highly trusted status' (HTS) license from the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) service. A licence is valid for 4 years and providers are subject to regular inspection by the UKVI's assurance team.

To maintain its HTS the education provider must comply with the conditions specified by the UKVI. Failure to comply with the conditions may lead to the license being 'suspended' or 'revoked'. If the license is revoked students can no longer study with the provider and need to find an alternative sponsor to remain in the UK. The revoking of HTS is likely to have significant financial and reputational impacts<sup>5</sup>.

## 17. International student experience

The Governing Body is responsible for the quality of the student experience and should assure itself that international students have a positive experience. Feedback from students should be sought to establish if their experience was positive and to identify areas where efforts to achieve further improvement may need to be directed.

## 18. Transnational education

Transnational education (TNE) is education delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding provider is based. Some 707,555 students were engaged in TNE with a UK higher education provider in 2016/17. This is an increase of 18.2% when compared to 2012/13. Over the last five years, the growth in TNE involving a UK higher education provider has occurred largely outside of the EU.

## HE student enrolments studying wholly overseas for a UK higher education qualification, 2012/13 to 2016/17

Type of activity	2012/13	2016/17	Total
<b>Within the European Union:</b>			
• Students registered with a UK HE provider	39,605	35,880	-9.6%
• Students studying for an award with a UK HE provider	37,635	42,525	+13.0%
<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>77,240</i>	<i>78,045</i>	<i>+1.0%</i>
<b>Outside of the European Union:</b>			
• Students registered with a UK HE provider	204,960	253,595	+23.7%
• Students studying for an award with a UK HE provider	316,285	375,910	+18.8%
<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>521,245</i>	<i>629,510</i>	<i>+20.7%</i>
<b>Total all</b>	<b>598,485</b>	<b>707,555</b>	<b>+18.2%</b>

Source: Where do students come from? [HESA](#)

## 19. Where are transnational students based?

The majority of transnational students are based outside of the EU. The largest number of transnational students studying overseas for a UK higher education qualification were in Malaysia (74,180), China (70,240), Singapore (48,290) and Pakistan (43,870)<sup>6</sup>.

## 20. Overseas campuses

Some higher education providers have opened overseas campuses, on occasions working in partnership with a locally-based provider<sup>7</sup>. As well as offering local provision the overseas campus may act as a feeder enabling the transfer of students to the provider's UK campuses. This is referred to as 'articulation'. A recent estimate of international articulations to the UK suggests that numbers are falling. It is suggested that this is due to regulatory tightening by the host country, increased price sensitivity and the maturation of key markets<sup>8</sup>.



## 21. Transnational developments and partnerships

TNE developments and partnerships are frequently time-consuming and expensive to set up and maintain<sup>9</sup>. The Governing Body should be aware of this, and of the potential financial and reputational risks associated with engaging in TNE. Ahead of agreeing to any new TNE development/partnership the Governing Body should require a full assessment of the development and/or prospective partner, including a comprehensive due diligence and an assessment of the financial and reputational risks associated with the proposal. Unless the Governing Body is fully satisfied with the strategic and financial assessment and associated outcomes, including assurances as to the management of the risks involved, the proposed new development/partnership should not be allowed to proceed.

## 22. Franchise and validation

Overseas campuses represent a small proportion of the total offshore activity, with collaborative arrangements, including validation and franchising being more common. Under a franchise arrangement the student is registered with the UK provider but is taught by the provider's partner on a programme of study designed by the UK provider. Under a validation arrangement the student is again taught by a partner institution but is not registered with the UK provider. The student's achievement of the 'local' qualification is 'validated' by the UK provider in terms of one of its own qualifications.

## 23. Quality assurance

Providers are responsible for the academic standards of their awards delivered inside or outside of the UK. The [Quality Assurance Agency \(QAA\)](#) reviews partnership arrangements made with providers in other countries to deliver UK programmes and also reviews delivery on overseas campuses. In the past some assessments of overseas provision have been highly critical.

## 24. Conclusions

International student recruitment and transnational education offers opportunities and risks for providers. Governing bodies need to exercise appropriate oversight and closely monitor the provider's international activities. In particular detailed assessments of the benefits and risks associated with TNE developments should be undertaken and assessed before new developments are sanctioned.

## Questions to review

- Q How important are international activities to the provider's strategy and financial outcomes?
- Q Is there a clear international strategy, with agreed KPIs and associated targets?
- Q Have the key risks of the international strategy been identified, can these be mitigated and does the level of risk align with Governing Body's risk appetite?
- Q How is the international strategy to be implemented?
- Q Are potential new international activities discussed with the Governing Body at an early point in their development?



## End notes and further reading

- <sup>1</sup> In 2016, the UK received 14% of all international students from OECD countries, making it the second most popular destination after the United States. [Country Note – United Kingdom, Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators](#), OECD, September 2018, p.1.
- <sup>2</sup> It is possible to differentiate between partnerships at levels one, two and three for both teaching and research activities. See, Fielden J (2011), [Getting to Grips with Internationalisation](#), Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (now AdvanceHE), pp.28-29.
- <sup>3</sup> Several global rankings of higher education providers are produced and published annually. These include the [World University Rankings](#) published by the Times Higher Education, and the [QS World Rankings](#) produced by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). Both provide an overall rank for each provider, as well as for subject provision.
- <sup>4</sup> See Higher Education Statistical Agency, [HE student enrolments studying wholly overseas by location of provision, 2012/13 to 2016/17](#).
- <sup>5</sup> In August 2012 the UK Border Agency (UKBA), the organisation which preceded the UKVI, revoked the licence of London Metropolitan University (LMU). Following judicial review, the UKBA allowed LMU's existing international students to remain on the University's courses for the academic year 2012/13.
- <sup>6</sup> Higher Education Statistical Agency, [Where do HE students come from?](#)
- <sup>7</sup> In 2016/17, figures published by HESA show 410,705 (58% of the total) students were studying for a UK higher education qualification with an overseas partner organisation, with the majority be located outside of the EU. This compares with a figure of 25,615 students studying at an overseas campus of the reporting higher education provider. Overseas students are therefore 16 times likely to be studying on a campus run by a partner organisation than by a UK provider.
- <sup>8</sup> Durnin, M., [The plates are shifting on transnational education](#), Times Higher Education, December 6, 2018.
- <sup>9</sup> Durnin, M., Ibid.

