

PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

The UK International Education Strategy 2019

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1. MillionPlus is the Association for Modern Universities in the UK, and the voice of 21st century higher education. We champion, promote and raise awareness of the essential role played by modern universities in a world-leading university system. Modern universities make up 52% of all UK undergraduates, and 37% of all postgraduates, with over one million students studying at modern institutions across the UK.
2. Almost **450,000** non-UK domiciled students study in UK universities, and UK education-related exports are valued at **£18.76bn**. Each international student generates a net economic benefit to the UK of **£95,000**, and they support over **200,000 jobs** across the country. A **third** of all international students study at modern universities, bringing academic and cultural diversity to campuses and enriching the student experience for all students.

THE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION STRATEGY

3. MillionPlus welcomes the Government's International Education Strategy (hereafter 'the strategy'). It is a much-needed signal of intent that the UK is seeking to change tack and become more outwardly welcoming to overseas students, and to commit to that as a policy objective. For too long the UK has not capitalised on the enormous draw of its world-leading higher education sector, and the UK has lost market share to competitors as a result.
4. The ambitions set out in the strategy are ones MillionPlus has broadly endorsed and are ones that our membership will work with the government on to see realised. The UK Government has **targeted an increase in education exports to £35bn by 2030** and **growing international student numbers coming to the UK to 600,000 by 2030**. We believe that these targets are an important step in the right direction, but also that we have the capacity to exceed them. We therefore hope that the government will see these as a minimum threshold in its work with the sector, not as the end point we hope to arrive at. As highlighted above, international students are a phenomenal asset for the UK, and are spread across every region, generating huge economic growth as well as academic excellence. Visa policy in the round should reflect this.

KEY QUESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. MillionPlus, and the sector more broadly, support this strategy, and we have called for it to be formally outlined for some time, and the government should be recognised for its ambition and vocal support of the sector. However, in order to achieve sustainable growth across the UK some key questions around the strategy need to be addressed.

The Student Visa system and Home Office engagement

6. The strategy itself was launched jointly by the Department for International Trade and the Department for Education, but Home Office buy-in is critical to its success and we would seek further assurances from the Home Office that both themselves, and UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) are fully aware of the strategy at an operational level, otherwise its success may be limited.
7. MillionPlus has long campaigned on the issues around the current student visa system, and we believe that in its current form it is a barrier to trade and a barrier to growth for many within the sector. We [recently published a paper](#) outlining its significant flaws, proposing way to resolve them, with the current system being overly bureaucratic, complex and overly subjective in its judgements. It actively deters many universities from expanding overseas due to the penalties it imposes – even when institutions have no control over any aspect of the decision-making process.
8. The strategy rightly targets new and emerging markets that the UK can, and should, be doing more in. However, some of these are the same markets that the Home Office/UKVI deter universities from going into, and those that do try and work in them can end up facing significant problems if applicants are seen as non-credible due to the country that are applying from. The strategy therefore needs to ensure that there is greater co-ordination across government as to overall strategy objectives, otherwise the results will not be as positive as we all would like to see.
9. MillionPlus strongly believes that until the Tier 4 system is reformed, and a more open and welcoming system is put in place, we will not see the growth match the ambitions of the strategy. This will be even more of the case for the UK's modern universities who fare disproportionately badly through the subjective Tier 4 system, and will see themselves, and their students, further disadvantaged if changes are not made.

Brexit and EU Students

10. There is relatively little discussion within the strategy around the future of EU students, who currently are distinct from international students, and pay home fees. Currently, **135,000 EU students** study at UK universities, and support the UK higher education sector. The **net** economic impact of EU students is estimated to be **£68,000 per student** (or £1million for every 15 students)¹, which makes their future access to the UK market a significant economic concern, and that is before we get to the academic and cultural benefits, and their support for certain courses that they are a significant proportion of (particularly at postgraduate level).
11. Clearly, with the UK's exit from the EU the relationship will be altered, but we believe that the International Education Strategy should be seeking to maximise all markets in a clear and level-headed manner that is best for the UK, and not take any knee-jerk decisions that may have unintended consequences. For example, it is estimated that if the UK decides to move EU students into the international student category, with everything that goes with that, we would see a **47% decline in EU students** coming to UK universities². A key question would be, therefore,, should this be the path the UK takes, is this new target figure one that will be factored into the targets being set by government, as if we see, for example, 70,000

¹ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Economic-benefits-of-international-students-by-constituency-Final-11-01-2018.pdf>

² <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-determinants-of-international-demand-for-UK-HE-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

students now not coming the UK will this logically mean the 600,000 target is revised upwards to 670,000?

12. MillionPlus has advocated a clear-headed review of the future relationship with EU students, that works in the best interest of the UK. As is highlighted above, these students are a net benefit to the UK whatever the government decides to do, so it is important to think carefully about giving up a significant market in which the UK thrives to direct competitors – few industries or sectors are keen to do anything like this, and this must be taken into account.
13. If the UK and EU can reach an agreement on reciprocal beneficial access to higher education, that may be the most desirable outcome. Indeed, many countries around the world are pursuing such ideas with their closest neighbours. Australia and New Zealand, for example, offer home fee status to students from each nation, so we must make sure that the UK is not rowing against the tide on this. Furthermore, the well documented issues with the current international student visa system does not make it beneficial currently to increase the amount of applications going through it by a significant amount.
14. It is critical that any global strategy takes account of the whole world, including Europe. Understanding new markets is critical to success, but so is maintaining and expanding the markets that the UK already has, and is enormously successful in. It is possible to have both, and we believe that should be an ambition of government.

Using the Strategy – Practical Implications

15. A key question for the strategy going forward is whether it can be used to address cold spots and work in a more interventionist manner? The document currently outlines an excellent vision for the UK in the year ahead, and one that all universities will be working towards, however could there also be scope for using the strategy, and those working on it, to help raise up the potential of those working in the most challenging markets, or the most challenging parts of the UK.
16. It is vital for any strategy to make use of the diversity of the entire UK higher education sector, and that diversity is one of the sector's greatest strengths. It will not be enough for the strategy to simply target areas where success is already well established and seek to maximise it, as it should be exploring potential and seeking overall growth if it is to be truly UK-wide. At a time when many areas of the country can see themselves as being 'left behind', and where the university is one of, if not the central, pillar of the community and local economy, this strategy must bring success and growth to the areas that need it the most, and questions should therefore be asked of the potential for this strategy in the year ahead to help address this.

CONCLUSION

17. The International Education Strategy is very welcome, and we recognise the Government's plans and stated commitment to growth in this critical area.
18. The strategy, however, is a means to an end, and must not become an end in itself. The targets should be there to be exceeded, reform of Tier 4 must be undertaken to meet the targets, and a level-headed analysis of the future of EU students should be at the forefront of the government's minds.

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