

INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGIES

The United Kingdom

The UK is a major player in the world education market and has developed a strategy to maintain and build on its strong position.

BY DAVID TOBENKIN





WITH THE IMPORTANCE

of internationalization of campuses increasing, higher education exports serving as an important component of national economic growth, and competition for international students rising, many countries and their higher education institutions are leaving nothing to chance in their quests to recruit more, better qualified, and more diverse international students.

Increasingly, they are relying upon national strategies that seek to increase the numbers of students by a certain date; implementing branding, marketing, and outreach campaigns; and introducing administrative steps designed to ease the admissions and campus integration path, and improve international student opportunities during and after their studies.

They are finding the success of such choices is closely intertwined with other areas of highly politically charged national policy, most notably immigration and visa policy, as well as areas that are wholly, and frustratingly, outside of governments' and higher education institutions' control, such as exchange rates and the competitive offerings of other countries' higher education institutions, including, increasingly, those located in the primary source markets for international students.

The countries that are the top international student destination markets are keenly aware of each other's international student policies. They scrutinize UNESCO and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) numbers on international student flows and conduct their own surveys to determine who is up and who is down in the rankings.

When, as happened recently in France and the United Kingdom, there are dips or perceived dips in recruitment numbers for international students, alarm bells ring and responsive measures are announced.

The United Kingdom Reaches Out

The United Kingdom is an international student recruitment goliath. In 2012, the country had 427,686 foreign students, up 11 percent from 2011's figures, according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics data. While that was far less than the 740,482 international students who headed to institutions in the United States, the world international student recruitment leader, the inbound international student numbers of the UK, long the second-ranked destination country, were more than half as large as those of the United States, despite a population one-fifth that of the United States.

This article is the first in an occasional series that will appear in *International Educator* over the next year examining international student recruitment policies in five different and diverse countries: the United Kingdom, France, Canada, New Zealand, and Denmark.

The impact of higher education as an export market in the UK is large, with the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills estimating that in 2011 education exports were worth £17.5 billion, or nearly \$30 billion, to the UK economy.

So it was a cause for alarm when an April 2014 report, *Global Demand for English Higher Education*, by the Higher Education

Funding Council for England, showed a drop in international and EU students registered on full-time programs at English higher education institutions from 2011–12 to 2012–13, the first drop in 29 years of measurement.

However, subsequent recruitment numbers appear to suggest that the decline was an anomaly and limited to certain submarkets. “The most recent [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service] application data from March 2014 shows a year on year nine per cent increase in applications to UK universities from non-European Union [EU] applicants,” says Rebecca Hughes, director of education for the British Council, the UK’s international organization for educational opportunities and cultural relations. “There are increasing numbers of international students coming to the UK for pre-university courses, and then continuing for an undergraduate course. Postgraduate taught master’s courses remain very popular. There are also increasing numbers of students coming from ‘new’ markets, Brazil, Nigeria, and others.”

Much of the recruitment downturn from 2011–12 to 2012–13 was related to the Indian subcontinent, where popular press accounts of UK government efforts to limit illegal immigration and an actual change to student visa regulations in 2010 led to the impression in some Indian minds that Indian students were not wanted. Other factors contributing to the decline included improved educational opportunities at Indian institutions and a less favorable exchange rate, Hughes notes.

A variety of British Council and other governmental efforts are now aimed at improving results in that market and, according to Hughes, are having an impact. “We have an active campaign in India, in partnership with UK education institutions, and government departments, to ‘demystify’ the visa application process, along with stories of success from Indian UK alumni, and Indians currently studying in UK,” Hughes says. “For example, in India, the GREAT campaign was launched in 2013 jointly by the [Foreign & Commonwealth Office], [UK Trade and



Nicola Dandridge

Investment government department] and the British Council to tackle the growing negative misconceptions, with the British Council as the key delivery partner on education,” says Hughes.

Recently, the UK Prime Minister [David Cameron] went to India to declare that there was no cap on international recruitment. “After a concerted effort to dispel myths and reach out to ambitious young people, we had a 10 percent increase in Indian undergraduate applications to the UK

in 2013–2014,” Hughes says.

Impacts of Immigration Policies

With parliamentary elections scheduled for 2015 and immigration still a hot-button issue, the largest questions for many, however, is whether the politically charged talk on immigration could inflict new wounds and whether the nation’s immigration policy is, in relative terms, sufficiently accommodating to not create a competitive disadvantage compared with countries aggressively courting students with more generous policies to award visas, to allow work while studying, and to remain in their countries after graduation, such that it will offset the UK’s other higher education advantages.

UK universities are actively involved in seeking immigration solutions. “We are very actively involved in that effort,” says Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of Universities UK, a body that represents universities in the UK. “We are promoting a system of coregulation of student immigration [between higher education institutions and the government] to make sure the students in the system are compliant but to also send a positive message to students. It is painful, slow, and resource-intensive work that involves matching their resources and ours. If a student wants to have a job but has no skills in higher education, we do not want him or her to gain admittance to the university system. But it’s an academic judgment at the end of the day. These are autonomous universities and it is wholly inappropriate for the government to be making these decisions.”

A National Strategy

The country is seeking to build and fine-tune its academic outreach to international students with a new International Education Strategy (IES) outlined in a report published in July 2013, *International Education: Global Growth and Prosperity*. It sets a goal of increasing the number of international students in higher education in the UK by

15–20 percent over the subsequent five-year period, to secure an extra £3 billion worth of contracts for the UK's education providers overseas, and to attract nearly 90,000 extra overseas university students by 2018.

While acknowledging the country's educational strengths, the report also highlights areas with room for improvement. One highlighted by the report was that UK institutions sometimes do not coordinate because of their relative autonomy, resulting in missed opportunities.

Another challenge is institutional capacity, with many UK higher education institutions running themselves as the equivalent of charities or public interest bodies. "The governance structures and obligations of charities, or of bodies of similarly ancient pedigree established by Royal Charter or equivalent instruments, were not designed to grow rapidly, or to run a network across the world," the report noted. The report also recognized visa issues as an important challenge that needs to be addressed.

The report outlines a number of action points, including:

- Identifying eight priority countries and one region for international education: China, India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Turkey, Mexico, Indonesia, and the Gulf.
- Highlighting the development of an outward mobility strategy to encourage UK students to access study or work placements abroad.
- Launching an "Education is Great" campaign, as part of the government's GREAT Britain campaign, to promote UK education to students in emerging economies.
- Highlighting the role of transnational education arrangements and massive open online courses in promoting further growth.
- Employing a targeted approach for emerging markets pursuant to which a new Education UK Unit will identify significant opportunities requiring a coordinated response.

The reaction of many has been generally positive.

"The IES was excellent," says Universities UK's Dan-bridge. "It's exactly what we want to see happen. It needs to be supported throughout all affected areas of government, including the Home Office, which supervises immigration. We want them to prioritize the IES and commit to supporting international engagement and promoting the international nature of higher education, including through international research, higher levels of international students, and through more UK students studying abroad."

Building Networks and Branding

The British Council is a leader in the UK's higher education internationalization efforts, with particular expertise and focus on issues involving student mobility, both in-

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ward and outward, and international collaboration at all levels. "Our education networks in over 100 countries mean that we are able to reach people and organizations that governments cannot, and our understanding of the importance of mutual benefit in education relations means that we can put trade issues, including student recruitment initiatives, into a broader context, to demonstrate not only benefit to the UK, but also benefit to the host country as well," Hughes says.

It also manages the EducationUK 'national' education brand, which was first used in 2000 and represented the first national education brand in the world. "This kind of national campaign is very important," Hughes says. "Our research suggests that students considering studying abroad generally decide which country they want to study in first, before they pick a particular university or college."

Hughes says that China and India are key foci for the British Council's marketing efforts.

"India will soon have the largest population in the world," Hughes says. "More than half of these will be under 25, and the middle class will grow to over 500 mil-

lion people. At that point, India will produce the world's largest university entrance-aged cohort. Links between India and the UK are deep and strong. The India diaspora, numbering some 2 million, is the largest in the UK.

"China is also a country of huge strategic importance to the UK across a broad range of areas of mutual interest and education plays a key role in developing that wider relationship with important economic, educational and diplomatic benefits. There are currently more than 135,000 Chinese students (including Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao) studying in the UK and Chinese students form the largest group of international students in the UK.

"Our flagship activity in China includes Smart Talk, which aims to bring some of the best of British talent to China to give inspirational talks to young people and students and raise their awareness of innovation in the UK. In addition, our Education UK Exhibitions, Pre-departure Briefings and a dedicated Chinese language Education UK China website with more than 4 million unique visitors annually, along with a series of other activities, have become the most renowned and comprehensive resource for Chinese students at different stages on their way to study in the UK."



Steve Smith

Assessing Success

Measuring the success of international student recruitment efforts is complex, as it is a composite of many underlying trends of subsets of potential students.

"The battle needs to be fought market by market," says Dandridge. "Students from different countries have different expectations. There is

a strong historical focus in India on seeking to study science and engineering abroad,

whereas there is a broader range of subjects studied by the Chinese students, such as administration and management. So you need different strategies that need to be quite sophisticated, and how communications target them is different because they have different types of communication media."

Some in UK higher education say they have moved on from seeking to generally increase international student numbers to attracting the right international students.

"Our problem is getting the highest quality international students—that is the Exeter problem," says University of Exeter Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive Steve Smith. "We made the decision in 2006 to expand our international students, first to students in the EU and then externally. We now have 4,002 non-EU students and 1,600 EU non-UK students, so we have dramatically expanded. The problem is too many international students only wanted the international business school. We decided to limit the number we choose."

Smith says increasingly for UK higher education institutions in the UK's elite Russell Group, international student recruitment is tied to the goals of the institutions to improve academic prestige and performance. "Universities and countries that succeed are those plugged into coauthorship in international research," Smith says. "That made us rethink our strategy and think that it couldn't just be about increasing our international numbers—that wouldn't get us in the top 100 in the world. So we have formed key linkages in the world. When I came here in 2006, we had 186 memoranda of understanding with other universities. Now there are 14, including three in the United States and four in China, because we are concentrating on quality and collaborating with top institutions and those with similar aims."

That is not a universal sentiment, he says. "The majority of higher education institutions see international students as a way of gaining income," Smith says.



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Smith says Exeter's efforts to expand to accommodate international students have included pursuing creative ventures with others to obtain additional financial support and off-load none-core higher education internationalization functions onto others. Since 2006, the university has collaborated with the INTO University Partnerships Ltd. internationalization provider to provide a pathways center on Exeter's campus



Helen Foster

to provide academic and English language preparation for enrollment at Exeter. "So if we have an 18-year-old in Shanghai who is good in physics, they come to us to assess their language skills for a period from six weeks to a year," Smith says. "If you pass the language qualifications and achieve a certain grade in the subject, we will take you as an undergraduate student. INTO provides the money to do this themselves, a total of 45 million pounds, which saves us the costs of infrastructure, such as the building where this takes place, and recruitment and language provisions. And we split the profits. Then when they join us as students, Exeter gets all the fees."

Transnational Educational Arrangements

The UK is also a leader in transnational educational arrangements (TNEs) with other countries. The University of Nottingham, among the most aggressive UK higher education institutions that have pursued this strategy, currently has around 75 TNE teaching agreements in place with a range of Asian institutions, many in China, says Helen Foster, acting director of the University of Nottingham's International Office. "These vary in scope and include

doctoral training centres, split-site PhDs, joint postgraduate taught master's degrees, dual-award master's and off-campus delivery of courses," says Foster. "The ventures involve a number of areas, including engineering, architecture, drug discovery, biosciences, aerospace, computer science, contemporary Chinese studies and law."

The University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC)—the University of Nottingham's Chinese campus—recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. "We were the first university outside of China to set up a standalone campus in the country," Foster says, noting that the UNNC currently has more than 6,000 students, 9 percent of whom are from outside China, from over 60 different countries."

What are the benefits? "Transnational education has significant benefits for institutions, for students, and for staff," Foster says. "For institutions it can help with brand recognition, for staff it can facilitate wider collaborative opportunities in research, and for students they have the benefit of spending time at two universities, increasing their global competences, and having access to a wider range of expertise and facilities."

It has also involved large costs. "There are considerable resources involved with setting up an international campus and we have also been fortunate to have gained additional support and guidance from our partner, the Ningbo-based Zhejiang Wanli Education Group. We currently have 600 members of staff at UNNC," Foster says.

Exeter's Smith notes that many universities are finding that while international master's programs have been traditional contributors to the bottom line and internationalization on campus, international undergraduate students on campus may provide a bigger return on the investment because undergraduate students are in school for longer periods and can serve as feeders for other programs. **IE**

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DAVID TOBENKIN is a freelance writer based in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. His most recent article in *IE* was "Revitalizing Education in Afghanistan: Overcoming Decades of Devastation," in the July/August 2014 issue.