Diversification and strengthening international recruitment practices

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Foreword by Jamie Arrowsmith, Director, Universities UK International

International students deliver huge cultural, social, and economic benefits to the UK. A single cohort delivers a net economic contribution of over £37 billion to the UK economy, with every 11 non-EU students generating £1 million worth of net economic impact for the UK economy

We should be proud that our universities continue to attract students from all over the world, and that higher education is one of the UK's most important and successful exports.

Recent years have seen a marked increase in the number of international students choosing to study in the UK. This has come off the back of the success of the government's International Education Strategy (IES) and introduction of the Graduate route, which have both been important in helping the UK to regain our position as the second most popular study destination in the world.

Since 2017–18, the number of international students studying in the UK has increased by approximately 45%. In 2021–22, the UK hosted a record 679,000 international students and, in doing so, met one of the key targets set out in the government's IES. This growth should be celebrated as demonstrating the UK's strong reputation as a leading destination for higher education.

At the same time, UK universities have increasingly been looking to diversify their international student recruitment. There are many drivers behind this shift, but moving recruitment away from a few core countries is one way that universities can help protect themselves against recruitment shocks due to circumstances outside their control.

As numbers of international students continue to increase, and universities recruit students from a wider range of markets, we must continue to be vigilant. Increased recruitment from countries which are more sensitive to economic and political changes, as well as from countries typically deemed as 'higher risk' by UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) due to their higher rates of visa refusals, means that we must take

Executive summary

This report sets out the findings of a survey of UUK's membership and is intended to support the sector's efforts to achieve both sustainable growth and diversity in international

Using pre-CAS interviews

Using pre-CAS interviews can help universities understand the motivation and level of interest an international student has in studying a particular course at a particular university.

57% of respondents to our survey told us that their university carried our pre-CAS interviews. Most respondents who told us they use pre-CAS interviews told us these were only for select domiciles.

Common elements of pre-CAS interviews include using a variety and range of questions, identity checks, and conducting interviews with a more intensive conversational element.

Dependants

Following the marked increase in the number of dependants on sponsored study visas over the last few years, universities should consider making changes to their processes in response, including asking students about whether they have dependants that plan to travel to the UK at the point of offer so they can provide appropriate advice and better plan support for them.

Almost half (45%) of respondents to our survey told us that their university asked postgraduate students about whether any dependants were planning to travel to the UK.

Working with agents

Universities should consider how they can best work with international student recruitment agents to support diversification. Respondents to our survey told us about a wide variety of activity with agents. The most frequently mentioned was recruiting agents in new markets or using existing agents in target markets, as well as providing training and support to agents, and capping numbers for some specific programmes or domiciles.

We strongly recommend that universities familiarise themselves with the UK Agent Quality Framework to support their work with agents and agent aggregators.

Over half (55%) of respondents to our survey told us that their university uses the framework. This includes incorporating it into the design of agents' contracts, using it to review policies and processes and use in agent training.

Sub-agents and agent aggregators

Over half (55%) of respondents to our survey told us that their university worked with agent aggregators or agents who use a subagent model.

Universities who do use agent aggregators or a sub-agent model may wish to consider how they can increase transparency and maintain quality. We asked respondents to our survey about how they do this, and the measures most frequently mentioned by respondents was performance assessments or
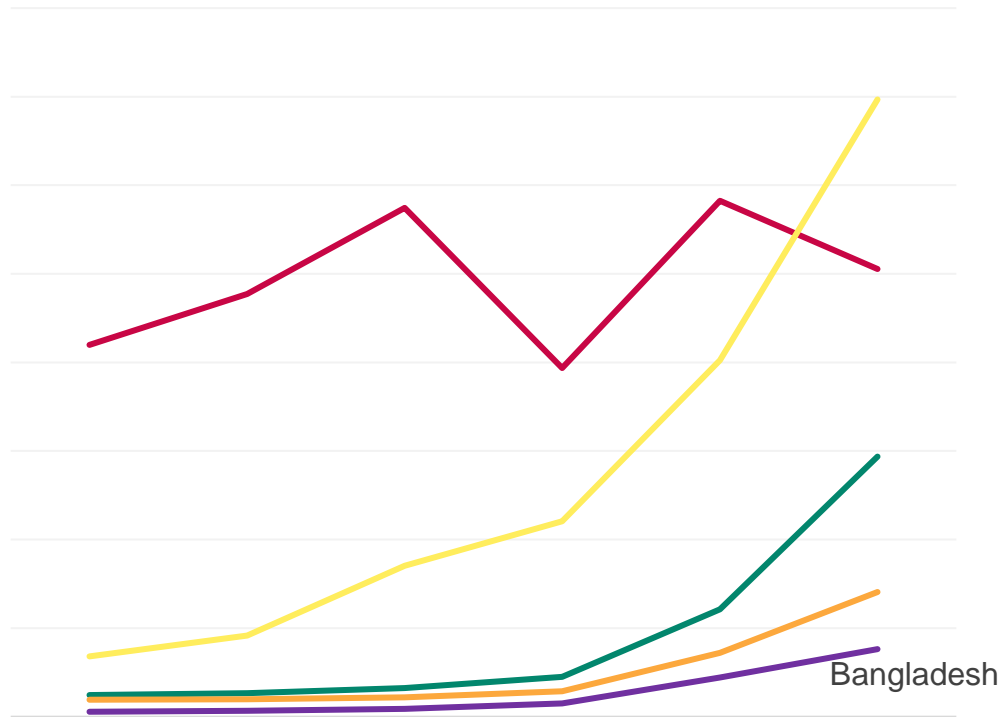
Introduction

International recruit ment trends

There has been an increase in the number of international students studying in the UK over the last few years.

In 2021-22, there were 679,970 international students studying in the UK. 120,140 of

FIGURE 1

Source: Home Office

According to HESA, total enrolment figures for the top 10 sending countries to the UK in 2021-22 were:

1. China (151,690)
2. India (126,535)
3. Nigeria (44,195)
4. Pakistan (23,075)
5. United States (22,990)
6. Hong Kong (17,630)
7. Bangladesh (12,700)
8. Malaysia (12,135)
9. France (11,870)
10. Italy (11,320)

For more information, please see our publication on international student recruitment data and the Home Office's quarterly migration statistics

Diversifying international recruitment

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) demonstrates a rise in international students from a range of countries, including India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This is mirrored in our survey findings, which suggest that many universities are currently diversifying their international student recruitment.

We asked our members whether they had plans to diversify international student recruitment – for example, by seeking growth from a wider spread of source countries or changing the composition of their international cohort overall or for select programmes.

90% of respondents told us that their university currently had plans to diversify, and the remaining 10% reported that their university was considering doing this.

FIGURE 2

Does your university currently have plans to diversify international student recruitment?

- Have plans to diversify international student recruitment
- No current plans, but considering it
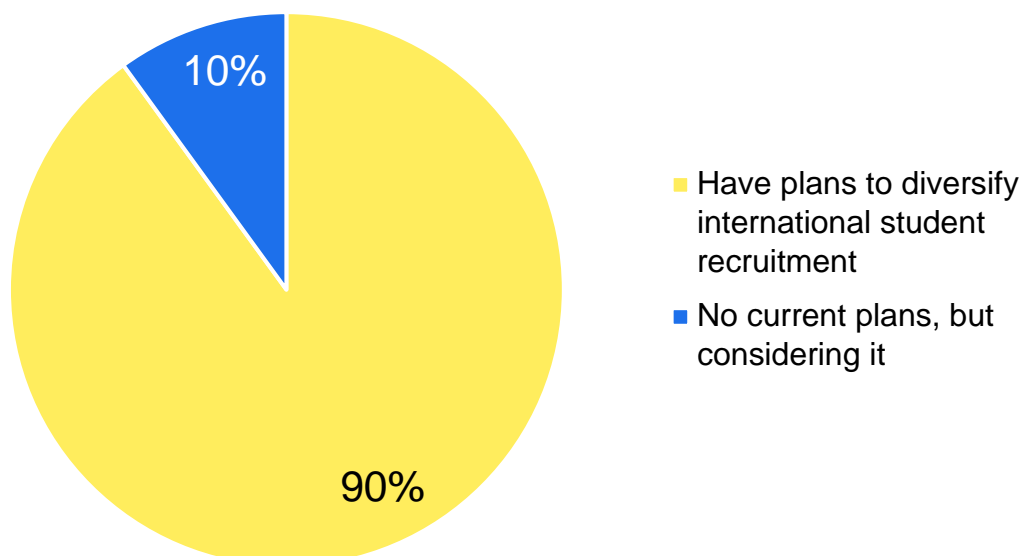
Key regions

We asked respondents what regions and markets their diversification strategies were focused on. Respondents listed a wide range of markets, including 40 different countries. The most commonly mentioned countries by respondents were the US, India and Malaysia.

Deposits

Universities may wish to consider reviewing their deposit requirements alongside their diversification plans to help

Deposit amounts

FIGURE 3

Two thirds (67%) of respondents to our survey told us that their university's deposits for international students were set at a specific monetary amount. We asked about what the specific amount was, and answers ranged from £500 to the full first year fee.
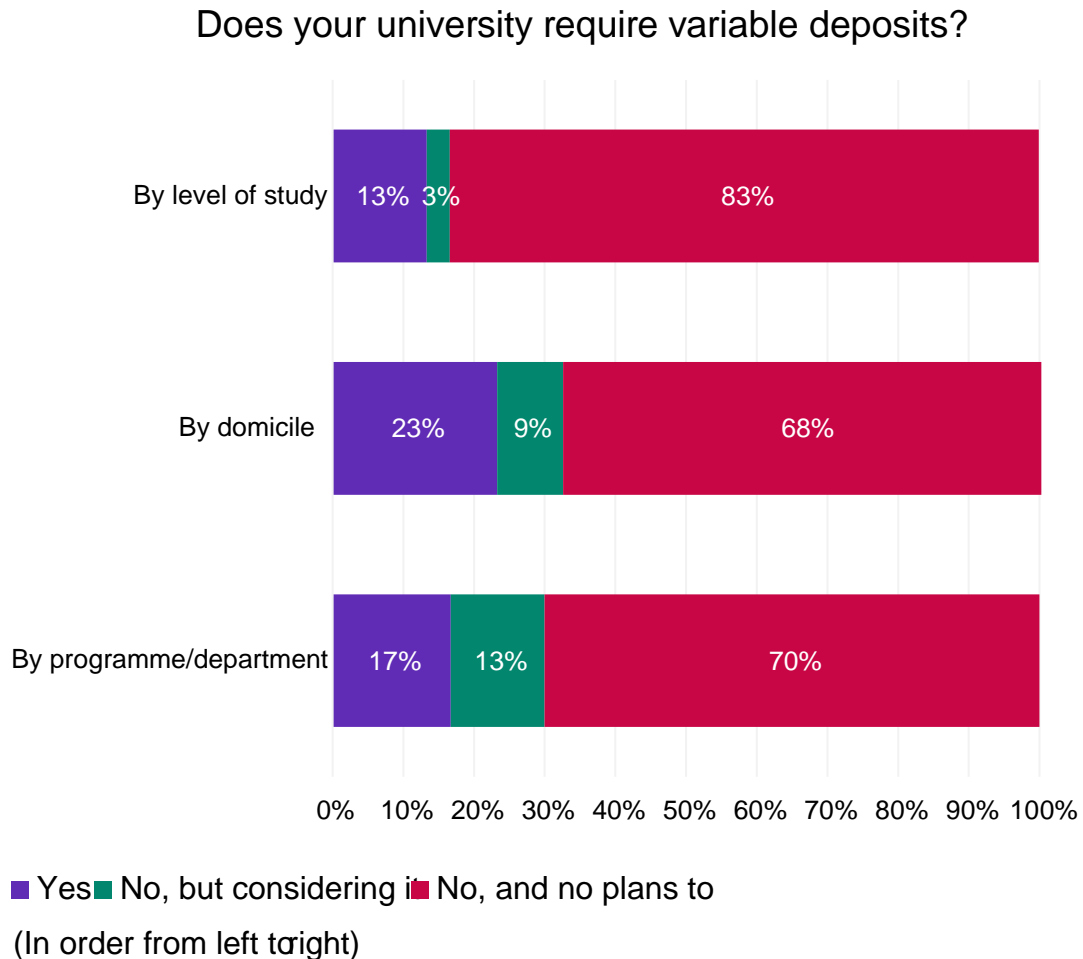
17% of respondents told us that their university's deposits for international students were set at a percentage of the tuition fee. We asked about what the percentage charged was, and although answers ranged from 10% to 70% of the tuition fee, the most common answer was 50%, given by almost three quarters of respondents to this question.

We also asked what the approximate amount of this percentage was. Responses varied from £3,500 to £14,000, with most respondents noting that this amount varied depending on programme or level of study.

Of the 12% of respondents who selected 'other', most of these told us that they used

Use of variable deposit amounts

FIGURE 4

Does your university require variable deposits?

Category	Yes	No, but considering it	No, and no plans to
By level of study	13%	3%	83%
By domicile	23%	9%	68%
By programme/department	17%	13%	70%

■ Yes ■ No, but considering it ■ No, and no plans to

(In order from left to right)

The majority (70%) of respondents to our survey told us that their university did not currently require variable deposits by academic programme or department and that they did not plan to. 13% said that they do not do this currently but were considering it.

Of the 17% of respondents who said their university did require variable deposits by programme or department, a range of courses were referred to, with business courses most frequently mentioned. Several respondents told us that the deposit value varied depending on course specifics, such as demand or non-standard fee programmes.

A slightly higher proportion of respondents (23%) told us that their university required variable deposits by domicile. 68% told us that their university did not do this and did not plan to, and 9% said that they did not do this currently, but were considering it.

Most respondents (83%) told us that their university did not require variable deposits by level of study, with 13% saying that their university did require this. Of those who reported that their university required variable deposits by level of study, a few respondents told us that their university required higher deposits for postgraduate taught courses.

Examples of emerging practice

Managing risk of refusals

To manage the risk of refusals, a university has started asking for proof of meeting the maintenance requirements in addition to increasing deposit amounts.

Introducing different deadlines

A university has introduced different application and deposit deadlines for high demand postgraduate taught and undergraduate programmes. The university frequently re-evaluates application data and adds programmes to the earlier deadlines if demand increases.

Examples of emerging practice

Introducing informative videos

A university has introduced mandatory pre-CAS videos that students need to declare they have watched before the university will issue CAS.

The videos include information on accommodation, academic conduct, fees and finance, and dependants.

The videos have had high levels of engagement and have helped manage expectations of what the university expects from students and what students can expect from the university.

Introducing additional pre- CAS checks

A university has introduced additional pre-CAS checks for some student groups, as well as earlier application and CAS deadlines. This includes offer interviews for applicants who are looking to study a course at the same academic level as a previous qualification, and pre-CAS interviews for applicants for whom there is evidence of an irregular immigration history of previous visa refusals.

The university has also introduced additional pre-departure communications to ensure students are aware of expectations, including the development of an accommodation guide.

It has also started using an embedded software that supports compliance.

Dependants

There has been a marked increase in the number of dependants on sponsored study visas over the last few years. In the year ending March 2023,

Source: Home Office

Responding to the rise in dependants

While government has announced restrictions for some international students

Working with agents

Universities should consider how they can best work with agents to support diversification. Respondents to our survey told us about a wide variety of activity with agents. The most frequently mentioned activity was recruiting agents in new markets or using existing agents in target markets.

Respondents also mentioned:

providing training and support to agents to support diversification, for example:

training xle (o)2 (g)Tj Td [T6 (M 0 Tj 04is)-2 (p)1 (o)TT2 TJffntsi:

a monthly global agent newsletter
ad-hoc university updates on key developments
regional bespoke newsletters

framework, and the student guide will be included in a revamped webpage, currently under development.

Recruiting specialist staff

A university has recently recruited a dedicated Agent Compliance Manager whose role includes implementing the framework within the university's processes for agent recruitment, management, training and commission processing.

Reviewing current agent practices

A university has used the framework to review their current agent practices at every stage, including policies, contracts, communication, management, commission and incentivisation, as well as internal staffing. The university has identified a list of changes and improvement required in the short, medium and long term.

Examples of the improvements identified include:

> combining a single agent management policy to publish on the staff intranet
> working with the university's legal team to request additional information on the proforma and additional sections to be added to the agent contract
> investigating the potential of implementing a digital agent management platform
> developing new training materials and developing the agent website

The university is also reviewing all current agents against the framework and development timetable, as well as using a scoring rubric for reviews throughout the application cycle.

Sub-agents and agent aggregators

Over half (55%) of respondents told us that their university worked with agent aggregators or agents who use a subagent model.

Universities who do use agent aggregators or a subagent model may wish to consider how they can increase transparency and maintain quality. We asked respondents to our survey about how they do this, and the measure most frequently mentioned by respondents was performance assessments or monitoring. This includes reviewing metrics such as application quality and volume, enrolment ratios, non

and traditional agencies, as well as looked at together fe

DIVERSIFICATION AND STRENGHTENING