



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

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International Higher Education Issues
Wednesday 21 October 2020
4-5:30pm

Agenda:

4:00pm: Chris Skidmore MP (co-chair's opening remarks)
4:05pm: Graham Stuart MP, Minister for Exports, Department for International Trade
4:15pm: *Short break to allow parliamentary members to vote*
4:25pm: Facilitated Q&A with the Minister
4:35pm: Vivienne Stern, Director, Universities UK International
4:45pm: Simon Emmett, CEO, IDP Connect
4:55pm: Facilitated Q&A session with Vivienne Stern and Simon Emmett
5:30pm: Meeting concludes

Minister for Exports at the Department for International Trade Graham Stuart MP opened the meeting by speaking about the UK's history of educating world leaders, including former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He stressed the importance of hosting international students for the UK's soft power as well as economy, particularly given former students' propensity to trade with the country they studied in and the ability of higher education to foster lifelong bonds.

He reiterated the targets of increasing education exports to £35bn per year and the number of international students in the UK to 600,000 by 2030 contained in the International Education Strategy, and stated that an annual progress update would be published shortly. He later stated that his Department would not look to alter the targets in the Strategy at this stage, but would regularly review progress to ensure targets were reasonable in the context of external factors such as the pandemic.

On Covid-19, the Minister thought that UK universities had done well in reassuring international students and their parents that the UK is a safe place to study, but acknowledged the pandemic was having a devastating impact. Indicators, such as the recently released 2020 UCAS application figures for overseas students, suggest a more positive picture than was first forecast, but we should not be complacent. Cross-government coordination had been incredibly important, including the positive engagement from the Home Office in increasing flexibility in the immigration system to accommodate international students. The flexible transnational education (TNE) offer from UK universities will be a key asset in an increasingly competitive global environment.

Finally, on the role of the new International Education Champion Sir Steve Smith, the Minister said he would be undertaking a significant amount of international travel to target markets such as Indonesia, India and Nigeria as soon as it was safe. One priority of Sir Steve and the government was to identify and overcome market access barriers.

Universities UK International Director Vivienne Stern presented several slides from the Universities UK International (UUKi) publication 'Why aren't we Second?' to highlight the extent to which the UK's international student market share had been in decline; the country had lost market share in 17 of the world's top 21 sending countries.

She praised the work of the meeting's Chair Chris Skidmore MP when he was Universities Minister, as well as Trade Minister Graham Stuart for establishing the International Education Strategy, and acknowledged the improvements that had been seen through supportive decisions by the Prime Minister and Home Secretary. The introduction of the new Graduate Route and additional flexibilities in the immigration system had already made a difference, and this would be even more apparent if it were not for the effects of the pandemic, she thought.

Research by UUKi for the 'Why are we Second?' report identified countries in which the UK had lost market share such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, had a stable market share and had improved. It was important to design individual strategies to increase both student recruitment and TNE activity based on the specific characteristics of the target country. Turning to the changing trends in international education, Vivienne explained how countries that were previously net exporters of students were becoming regional net importers, giving the examples of Malaysia and Turkey.

She told attendees that one third of international students in the UK are from EU countries, and therefore a concerted effort must be made to mitigate the damage that their changing status in terms of immigration and fees will cause. She urged the government to take action by challenging myths about the cost and value of studying in the UK, establishing a targeted scholarship fund for EU students that universities can buy into, and expanding the Study UK campaign into Europe.

Simon Emmett, Chief Executive of IDP Connect presented slides to the group showing both analysis from applicants and offer holders for 2020, and the motivations of international students now and looking ahead to the 2021 recruitment cycle.

He started by highlighting the reservations offer holding students from different countries had about travelling abroad for study. The percentage of students from China that cited not feeling safe travelling outside their home country as the reason for not going through with plans to study abroad was far higher than students from other countries.

A second poll of prospective international students from June showed a higher proportion of students would be prepared to commence studies in-country with blended learning (some virtual, some in person) than would be happy to start their degree solely online in their home country (72% Vs 51%).

Another point of note highlighted by Simon was the higher levels of acceptance amongst Indian students of the need to quarantine once they reached their country of study compared to Chinese students. The latter group was more likely to defer. In terms of factors influencing students' decision whether or not to commence studies, Chinese students were

more concerned about the number of Covid-19 cases in the host country whereas Indian students were focused more on the potential post-work study opportunities available. Looking at student demand for 2021 entry and beyond, Simon explained that demand for UK higher education had been rising over the last 12 months with spikes in interest (as demonstrated by online searches) coinciding with the launch of the International Education Strategy and subsequent policy announcements. This was particularly apparent for Indian students, mainly due to the announcement of the post-study work visa (Graduate Route).

Despite positive signs for the UK, early signals show an increase in searches for higher education courses in Canada and Australia which suggests the market for 2021 and 2022 entry will be increasingly competitive. He then echoed Vivienne Stern in calling for a more ambitious campaign to champion UK higher education, whether through Study UK or other channels.

Simon then moved on to international students' perceptions of potential countries of study, and their motivations for enrolling at a university outside of their home country. Across the top host countries (UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) the top reason was the quality of education compared with prospective international students' home countries. This was particularly the case the UK and US, whereas the main reason for wanting to study in Canada was the perception it was safe, affordable and offered part-time work opportunities.

Other interesting findings included the perception that the UK and US lag behind Canada, Australia and New Zealand in terms of response to the Covid-19 pandemic, safety of citizens and visitors and economic stability. This pattern was largely reflected among Indian students as a distinct group, however, among Chinese students the UK was seen as ahead of Australia in terms of the welfare of international students.