

Staying Competitive in the Global Market

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To answer the question as to how we stay competitive, we need to understand why we are the one of the leaders in the global market.

- Quality of education¹
- English language
- Academic tradition
- Multi-cultural society (relatively recent position, more so in London)
- Good experience for students
- Integrity

In this speech I want to be clear that I am talking not only about international fee paying students but also the increasingly large European student market.

In 2004, the British Council, UniversitiesUK and IDP Australia produced a well researched report “Vision 2020 Forecasting international student mobility” which predicted that the market would grow continually and that the UK could expect a significant increase in international students, though its market share may not grow. The growth projections were seized on with enthusiasm by our universities but too often the small print was left out – provided that we worked at this market, responded to demand, provided value for money and invested in quality and student support, rather than assume that just by being in the UK, students would increasingly choose us.

When it comes to education of students from outside the UK, the fact that English is currently one of the most used languages throughout the world, and that it is commonly accepted in most countries as the language for diplomacy, business, science and air traffic control means that we have a head start against countries where English is not the first language. So it is no surprise that our main competitors for international students are USA and Australia, with many other countries catching up, particularly with continental European countries increasingly offering university teaching in English. We are already seeing the intention of several countries eg Singapore, India and in future Malaysia to become regional hubs for high quality higher education at lower cost for fees and living costs than the current market leaders. They may start by targeting the postgraduate and research market, but the undergraduate market is where the bulk is likely to be. But as more countries expand the size and quality of their universities, so the market is likely to develop.

UK universities have an established reputation for high academic quality. This has been hard won, and we have to thank, not only our long tradition of high quality education and research but the fact that we exported the English model of university education around the world in the days of our colonial past. The universities that were set up on this model have stood the test of time well in many countries, look at Yale and Harvard, but more seriously look at many of the commonwealth countries who are now becoming serious competitors to our international

¹ For a multinational business perspective see the CIHE report *International Competitiveness*

standing. The tradition of competitive entry and three year undergraduate degrees whose quality is supported through independent external examiners, even the role of QAA, has built the reputation for quality provision. 45% of applicants of international applicants to the UK only considered studying in the UK and less than 1/3 investigated entry requirements for other countries, showing that the primary importance of the quality of the qualification being sought. The quality reputation **has** been hard won and could be easily lost if a university were to fail to live up to these standards. So we have a collective responsibility to deliver with high quality and integrity.

Being a student in a strange society can, as we all know, be daunting as well as exhilarating, even for many English students studying in English universities. So students from outside these shores will have to adjust to not only a different way of life and everyday experience but also to a different approach to learning and teaching. The UK academic tradition of relatively small class sizes and personal support for students through tutorials, which is becoming more difficult to retain, is greatly valued by many students who come from different traditions. The tradition of student centred learning and self motivation is not always the norm in many countries and it is important to set the norms for study and coursework early on in the careers of international students. For example, unwittingly some international students fall foul of plagiarism rules as the tradition of full attribution is not universal.

It is important that we do not take for granted that students will simply adjust to these changed circumstances by some form of osmosis. Without being overly paternal we should ensure that we provide not only academic support but also personal and social support. Students who come to our major cities, particularly London will find that there are well established communities from their home countries in the very diverse multi-ethnic and cultural communities which have become established here. These can provide support for lonely students but can also unintentionally inhibit their integration into the university communities. We should ensure that our universities and Students' Unions offer opportunities for integration to help students and faculty to settle in to the different environment. University campus environments can be very different from inner cities. Here student residences, union bars, social, cultural and sporting clubs form a more important part of the student life. International students may club together for mutual support but not feel comfortable in some student environments, including the bar culture, thereby missing key aspects of integration.

I make no apology for speaking about this as I have experience of students who having not integrated easily have found that they fail to benefit academically and socially from their studies. I was in Malaysia recently with Bill Rammell when the Malaysian Minister of Education made clear his concerns that Malaysian students in the UK often do not integrate and thus do not wholly benefit from their experiences here. He was seeking support from our Minister to encourage universities to be more supportive.

Earlier this week, I attended a reception for Indian students studying in London, given by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. He extolled the virtues of studying in London and of long term relationships. This followed on from a similar reception for Chinese students last year. I spoke to a number of students from various universities in London. They greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet Ken and to meet fellow Indian students. Some commented that they would have liked to meet students from other countries. They were largely enjoying their time in London, had found out where to get good Indian food, complained about the cost of London, particularly travel and congestion charging and would have appreciated better orientation on arrival, not only for academic matters but also for practical living, eg how to get service from banks and how to find a doctor when ill.

Despite the best intentions and effectiveness of the Prime Minister's Initiatives for international recruitment, there are other less encouraging messages from government, from the media and from some of our employer organisations. With 24 hour global news, every negative signal about the quality and value of our system and society is reported across the world. Every hostile comment about particular groups of overseas societies is picked up. As I heard recently, the message from strident parts of our media is that "foreigners are not welcome" is noticed and reported around the world. And our Home Office, despite its current problems, needs to ensure that in its zeal to control immigration, it does not deter the very people that our HE system values, but I am grateful for the recent concessions on initial visa fees, though it is disappointing that visa extension fees remain so high. We must counter the message from some quarters that international students are only valuable because their fees prop up our universities and subjects within them-they're not- they're valuable because they bring important cultural diversity to our universities which enriches the experience for all and of course, they go away, we hope, feeling that the UK is a place where they have been well treated, and where they will want to do business with us in the future.

It is very expensive, particularly for students from outside the EU, to study in our universities. It seems possible that the demand from international students to study in the UK will decline, at least at undergraduate level, as greater capability is created in the home countries and international competition grows. Last month, I visited Malaysia and Vietnam as a member of a ministerial delegation on higher education development, and I also went to India for my own university to meet alumni and partner universities. The cost of studying in the UK loomed large in all meetings. Our fees are high, necessarily so as they have to cover full costs. The Sterling exchange rate is disadvantageous to many countries, thereby increasing the relative cost of living. The competition from elsewhere is strengthening and the recruitment practices of a small number of our HEIs are causing concerns about lowered integrity of our system. I have already mentioned the Malaysian minister's concern about lack of social and academic integration. The other matter that I was faced with in India were some highly critical press reports about the difficulties Indian students have experienced recently in England about gaining work placements during their studies and post graduation. I met some students who were still paying off the loans they had taken out to study in England, and were concerned that they could not find, back home, sufficiently well paid jobs to make early repayments of these loans. There was a feeling that, even when they had enjoyed their studies, the promises of career success were not being fulfilled.

So there are no grounds at all for complacency. The approach of the Home Office, not only to visas, but also to permission to work after graduation in England is unhelpful. It is very difficult to explain to other countries that the Scottish Fresh Talent opportunities are not available in England and Wales. Actually it is quite difficult to explain it here. We really do have to resolve that problem. The option to apply for work without leaving the UK and the number of hours that can be worked whilst studying were identified as important for potential students.

Some students and their parents are expressing concerns about safety and security here in the UK. We can give assurances but recent events have made their impressions. Some of our competitor countries have made references to perceived security issues in the UK in the promotion of their institutions and there is no doubt that some cultures see potential safety issues as important.

We do need to have a more coherent approach to many of these matters than we have at present. We are in an internationally competitive market and we must not forget that. Whilst

the British Council does much to support our universities, I remain of the view that there could be closer working between the Council and many of our universities.

Costs loom large in discussions with international students. There is not much that we can do about foreign exchange rates but we can try to assist students to meet the high costs of living and studying here. Many universities have scholarships to help meet part of the costs but it is not possible for us to meet the needs of all. The University of Westminster gained The Times Higher award for outstanding support for overseas students for its scholarship scheme and there is no doubt that this has helped our international reputation. Of course the fees problem is much less serious for students from the EU countries but the cost of living can be a major deterrent particularly for students from the recent accession states. But we must emphasise that completion of an undergraduate degree in only three years, or even two in some cases, and Masters degrees in 12 months reduces the apparent costs based solely on fee and cost of living figures.

So to sum up, to stay competitive in the Global Market, we must pay attention to key factors. There is no doubt that our best ambassadors are those alumni who feel that they have had an all-round good experience when studying here and their experiences can influence significantly the decisions of future students. We have been very successful in attracting international students to study in the UK. This is where our reputation for quality has been successful. But we cannot be complacent against the increasing international competition.

- First and foremost, it is essential that we remain ahead of the competition in terms of quality of provision, and that we promote that. Whatever disadvantages arise through matters beyond our control, we must be able to continue to claim the high quality of the degrees, viewed internationally, that are gained by our graduates.
- We must ensure that our operating practices both here in the UK and when overseas are ethical and above suspicion of favours or bias
- We must make provision to prepare students properly to benefit from their studies through induction in study methods, in use of English as a language for study and through opportunities to mix with a whole range of students
- We must not cut corners on admission standards, including the standards of English, to make sure that the students are able to benefit academically from their studies.
- We should try to avoid creation of national ghettos in halls of residence where students of any particular country slip into not mixing with students from other countries for we are preparing our students to enter the global society. In my mind, one of the imperatives of international education is to prepare graduates who are at ease with others from around the world.

If we do all this, we should continue to flourish as world leaders, but we must watch the competition, wherever it might come from.

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