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# **International HE in the UK: Leveraging the Policy-Institution-Expert Nexus in Uncertain Times**

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## **Abstract**

Long-established paradigms around intensifying global engagement, internationalism and 'borderless-ness' (CVCP, 2000) in the UK HE sector are being challenged and disrupted by the nationalist drift of global political and socioeconomic forces.

The UK's international HE space is fragmented with neither a coordinated national policy nor a central responsible agency overseeing sector-wide activity. Instead, a variety of national stakeholders interact in a 'policymaking-sector-expert nexus' that itself engages internationally with overseas institutions and governments. Stakeholders conduct and commission research, lobby and provide intelligence and guidance and, via a fluid and vibrant 'community of practice', as they attempt to provide the critical mass of expertise to support the development of UK international HE and enhance UK 'soft power'. In this policy space there are often conflicting, and shifting, policy directions at play, for example, ongoing tension between increasing overseas recruitment and strengthening visa controls.

This article identifies the core policy themes facing UK international HE, and reflects on how these are changing in response to the changing external climate (especially Brexit). It analyses how key stakeholders are responding to the challenges created by this fluid policy context, including increasing calls for greater policy alignment and a co-ordinated national international HE strategy. It also examines how UK institutions currently exercise their autonomy through their strategies, structures and practices, including how they create structures to support 'global engagement' and develop strategic partnerships, and how these might help them to transcend national policy concerns and weather global 'storms', or to proactively shape policy.

The article concludes by arguing that growing national policy divergence and competing policy priorities mean that enhanced co-ordination through a sector-level (and cross-national) body must precede, and facilitate, the development of any UK-wide international HE strategy. This must embrace institutional autonomy and mission diversity, recognise and value the full spectrum of international HE activities, and provide sufficient funding to leverage the implementation of institutional strategies.

## **Introduction: International Higher Education and Internationalisation in the UK**

The UK higher education (HE) sector is recognised globally for its educational quality and international orientation. It is highly attractive, and also permeable - as English is widely understood - to overseas governments, institutions, research teams, and individuals seeking to work, study and collaborate across borders.

UK universities consistently appear at the top of global university rankings which include measures of international outlook or orientation that recognise the strikingly international composition of UK universities' staff and student bodies, and the global reach and impact of their research collaboration. Ratings for international student satisfaction through i-graduate's *International Student Barometer* survey also suggest that the UK's international alumni value the private benefits, or academic and economic capital, that they receive from studying in the UK (Miller, 2013; Archer and Cheng, 2012). The UK is a 'trusted' destination country for mobility and partnerships based on its global network of relationships (British Council, 2012). UK universities have extensive international collaborations that are supported by membership of the Commonwealth and the European Union, strong links with the USA, and also a long history of capacity building and development activities in Africa and Asia which are a legacy of the British Empire.

However, the internationalisation of HE in the UK has always been implicit, and the term ‘internationalisation’ is rarely used. Instead policymakers, institutions, and other stakeholders, use the phrase ‘international higher education’ to describe the overseas engagement of UK HE providers. Much of this engagement is in outward-facing ‘internationalisation abroad’ activities (Knight, 2004) focused on the mobility of people, programmes and institutions, research partnerships and collaboration, rather than the transformation of individuals and institutions ‘at home’ to meet the challenges of an increasingly globalised HE context (Knight, 2004). Linguistic and cultural challenges hamper UK institutions’ engagement with ‘internationalisation at home’ (IaH) or ‘internationalisation of the curriculum’ (IoC) (Beelen and Jones, 2015).

International HE in the UK is mostly driven by economic and political rationales (Vincent-Lancrin, 2004) with a strong transactional emphasis focused on trade, the benefits accruing from increased engagement in international research and education programmes (such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020) and cross-border flows of human capital, which affect both the reputation and the financial ‘bottom line’ of institutions. International HE is a significant generator of export revenue, and also ‘wider’ benefits, such as soft power, enhanced trade and global influence (Mellors-Bourne *et al.*, 2013).

UK HE institutions find it challenging to embrace a more student-centred and transformative approach to internationalisation, although this can be a strong focus for institutions seeking to enhance graduate employability through increased internationalisation (Luxon and Peelo, 2009). When the Higher Education Academy (HEA) - the UK HE sector’s agency for enhancing the quality of learning, teaching and the student experience - published an ‘internationalisation framework’ in 2014 (HEA, 2014) it was met with a muted response. It failed to resonate strongly with a sector in which an institutional rather than student-centred approach to international HE was firmly embedded, and where internationalisation of learning, teaching and the student experience is often of marginal concern (Warwick and Moogan, 2013).

Nevertheless, the framework’s holistic approach to international higher education and its central focus on how higher education can contribute to the development of global citizens and global society (Killick, 2013) was embraced by international HE practitioners and researchers well-versed in the internationalisation discourse. The framework highlighted excellent and innovative resources produced by the UK’s academic community to support the internationalisation of the curriculum (Beelen and Jones, 2015), including work to help develop inter-cultural learning, outward mobility, and the internationalisation of teaching practice.

### **The UK International Higher Education Policy Space**

The UK’s success in international HE comes despite the absence of a co-ordinated national strategy and an overall lack of policy coherence. HE institutions drive the UK HE sector’s international activities. Policy-making in UK HE is more horizontal (process-focused, managing relationships across boundaries) than vertical (top-down, imposed, rules-based, structure) (Colebatch, 2009). HE sector governance is consensual, messy and incremental (Shattock, 2012), and many different policy actors have strong legitimacy and play crucial roles in developing policy. Government departments in the four devolved UK administrations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) are both actors and stakeholders (or policy audiences), alongside policy and representative agencies, and institutions, in a complex and fragmented higher education space containing elements of order, authority and expertise (Colebatch, 2009).

As a less controversial policy area, there is significant space in international HE for agency, and institutional choice, although the sector struggles to challenge the dominant discourse, which is often shaped by powerful parts of government and external influences. The focus is often on managing tensions between different policy areas, rather than developing a coherent national policy.

## ***The role of government***

Whilst nominally the responsibility of devolved education departments, international HE (at home and abroad) is also an enabler of other policy goals that are not devolved in areas such as immigration (UK Visas and Immigration - UKVI), soft power and cultural diplomacy (the Foreign and Commonwealth Office - FCO), higher education exports (the Department for International Trade - DIT), skilled migration, research and innovation (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy - BEIS), and capacity-building and partnerships in developing countries overseas (Department for International Development- DFID). Perspectives from different parts of government have created both mutually-reinforcing and conflicting policy positions; for example, complementary priorities that support the UK's 'soft power' and competing goals of increasing export revenue whilst reducing net migration.

Government departments generally take a facilitative role when the sector's international activities and strategies support broader policy either through diplomatic support at the government-to-government level, or through limited amounts of targeted funding, awarded competitively. The latter can also be used to leverage institutional behaviour (e.g. to increase transnational education, or to engage in capacity-building activities in particular countries and regions).

The UK government also takes a more active and directive role where international higher education has implications for other policy objectives, for example, related to immigration and national security, or the current negotiations around Britain's exit from the European Union (Brexit). It has also developed a 'brand' for UK education 'Study UK: Discover You' (British Council 2018) that is designed to promote British education overseas and support the global objectives of UK educational institutions. This is linked to the broader UK branding 'Britain is GREAT'. There is significant cross-national alignment and co-ordination around international higher education regulation on research funding, quality assurance via the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and the recognition of overseas qualifications via UK NARIC.

## ***Institutional approaches to international HE***

The UK HE policy space is underpinned by the core principles of institutional autonomy, co-regulation, shared governance, and accountability (both to government and society) (Shattock, 2012). UK universities are free from direct governmental control, although they are required to account for their use of public funding. The principle of co-regulation has meant that UK universities have historically either owned (as paying members) or shape the organisations that regulate the sector so that they meet the needs of both themselves and the government and other sector stakeholders, such as students and employers. However, in England the creation of a new HE regulator in 2018, directed by government (the Office for Students), marks a significant shift away from this approach as it will work to protect and advance the interests of students studying in UK HE (including international students).

UK universities and colleges don't receive direct government funding to support their international activities nor are they directly accountable to government for what they do internationally, which means that government influence is weaker (Elliott, 1998). However, they must meet regulatory requirements (e.g. around quality assurance, the recognition of qualifications, and data provision) and they are required to follow relevant legislation in other related areas (for example immigration and visa requirements, anti-terrorism law). They are also unable to use their direct public funding (for teaching and research) to support their international strategies. Evidence of their use of public funding is provided in their financial statement to the UK funding bodies. Publicly funded institutions are also expected to manage the risk of international activities through their governance arrangements (Fielden, 2011).

## Strategies

Institutions' strategies are restricted only by their status as 'exempt charities' (apart from for-profit institutions). This can make them more cautious, although nature and extent of institutions' international engagement depends on institutional missions and vision statements, and also their attractiveness to overseas partners and students. Some are more entrepreneurial, creative and dynamic and have developed sophisticated international architectures to support this work (Taylor, 2011). Others have been more circumspect, recognising that developing new international activities can require significant investment and ongoing costs, and generate both financial and reputational risks. There is very limited direct government funding to support institutions to engage in expensive activities such as capacity building and partnership development.

UK universities would consider themselves to be already 'internationalised' and are seeking develop and grow their international activities from an already strong base. Most have moved on from the 'activity-based' (Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007) mode of operating, in which international activities operate in parallel but are largely un-aligned, to a clearly defined and centrally co-ordinated strategic approach (Taylor, 2011). On the surface, there is a degree of isomorphism amongst institutions in how they position themselves internationally. Almost all UK higher education institutions have strategies which proudly highlight their international (and global) engagement in the core missions of teaching, research and enterprise (Warwick and Moogan, 2013). Institutions are increasingly positioning themselves globally and are sensitive to their status, and many are considered to be 'world-class' (Altbach, 2003).

Usually institutions' main strategic focus is on 'abroad' activities that either improve university finances or institutional reputation. This includes ambitious targets for increasing international student recruitment (at home or via transnational education (TNE)), diversifying and intensifying international research collaboration, and improving status and reputation through improving positions in international university rankings. There is a strong emphasis on revenue-generation since international activities are mostly self-funded, and income from international activities often cross-subsidises other areas, especially research (Olive, 2017).

UK universities operate as complex businesses and recognise that they can sustain short-term financial losses (e.g. from unsuccessful TNE collaborations) as well as profits. The market for internationally mobile students is a notoriously soft and increasingly competitive, influenced by economic conditions as well as the prevailing economic and political context (Ilieva, 2017). Whilst the weaker pound makes the UK attractive, should EU staff and students face restriction on their free movement this potentially makes the country less welcoming threatening teaching and research sustainability, and financial deficits from reduced EU recruitment (Conlon *et al.* 2017).

International engagement is run on business lines and has been designed to be practical and pragmatic, and flexible enough to adapt to an often-changing operating environment. The institutional challenge is to make choices about prioritising resources and the balance and focus of their international activities, so that they are aligned with institutional values, the resources available, institutional reputations and a rapidly-evolving external operating environment (Taylor, 2004). In most institutions, there is a usually a long-term agenda where different institutional priorities are aligned. For example, the presence of international students supports income generation targets and course sustainability (e.g. in STEM subjects at the postgraduate level where more than half of students are non-EU) (UUK, 2017) enhances campus diversity, and has the potential to improve educational experience for all students – including the 'non-mobile majority' - such as enhanced inter-cultural awareness and preparation for life as a global citizen (Jones, 2013; Jones and Killick 2013).

However, 'softer' areas such as a general aspiration to develop international perspectives, promoting global citizenship through the curriculum, and a commitment to capacity-building overseas, such activities are often different to progress and control (Bartell, 2003; Lunn, 2008). International strategies are often impoverished

by not building in an explicitly academic perspective that considers that purpose of education and how the educational character of the institution might need to change to become more open to ideas of reciprocity and mutual benefit. The principle of shared governance means that academics have significant freedom to develop their approaches to teaching and learning, since the academic community decides academic policy rather than institutional managers (Sayers, 2013). Thus, activities related to learning and teaching and the aspects of the student experience that relate to this are practitioner-led rather than directed by management (Warwick, 2014). Individual practitioners will incorporate emergent ideas, tools and practices from sector communities and networks in a piecemeal ‘infusion approach’ (de Vita and Case, 2003).

## **Structures**

Long-standing engagement in international recruitment, research collaboration and student exchange influenced the development of administrative functions to support these core activities (e.g. international marketing and support, and partnership offices). These functions are now usually encompassed within broad international strategies that define, co-ordinate and monitor international activity at both faculty and institutional levels. A senior academic manager (pro vice-chancellor or similar) will be responsible for these strategies and for developing relevant Key Performance Indicators, while a senior member of professional or support services (e.g. a Director of International) takes responsibility for implementing the strategy (Fielden, 2009).

Institutions with intensive international engagements can have secretariats that support the implementation of the strategy across different parts of the university, and monitor progress towards achieving international objectives (Curtis, 2012). Persistent challenges created by changing government policies and the increasingly competitive international operating context means that international strategies require active monitoring, the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and to be agile in responding to new opportunities. However, UK institutions have not adopted a ‘comprehensive internationalisation’ (Hudzik, 2011) or a ‘campus internationalisation’ (Green and Olson, 2003) approach where international work is conceived more holistically. Internationalisation is usually a supporting strategy and therefore rarely generates a bespoke institutional research function or intelligence-based approach, unless international activities are highly complex (for example at the University College London) (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2016).

International relations or global engagement offices have emerged to broker and support more ‘strategic’ or multi-dimensional partnerships in contrast to single-activity, faculty-led activities which have long been the norm (Fielden, 2008). These interact with recruitment, research, and academic exchange functions to enhance sustainability at fit with institutional strategy, for example around research priorities or target regions for student recruitment or transnational education. They are proving particularly useful as the UK HE sector seeks to diversify its international relationships as it exits the EU. Some institutions have are members of strategic alliances or multi-national networks that support many aspects of their international work through a long-term commitment to collaborate (e.g. for research projects, staff and student mobility) (Woodfield, 2017).

## ***Sector stakeholders and inter-relationships***

The fragmented international HE policy space, and lack of a sector-level policy or strategy means that there is no ‘peak body’ that oversees the higher education sector’s approach to international HE. Instead policy development is diffused amongst different stakeholders including government departments, policy agencies, higher education institutions and their representatives, and organisations that support students.

The vacuum created by the lack of a national agency is largely filled by two organisations which dominate the UK international HE policy space; Universities UK International (UUKi) and the British Council. These organisations cooperate to support ‘internationalisation abroad’ activities, and act in the interest of sector

stakeholders, including government, through providing market intelligence and policy analysis, undertaking research with experts in international HE, managing funded programmes (such as Erasmus+ and the Newton Fund) and proactive lobbying and policy engagement in the EHEA and in UK ‘target’ countries. They are funded by the sector through membership fees and paid-for services, and can receive indirect funding from government for participation in competitively-awarded programme activities. The fees that HE providers pay for support with international marketing and recruitment provide an acceptable trade-off for the protection of international autonomy, but can also result in greater sector competition overseas rather than effective co-ordination and alignment. The organisation ‘Independent HE’ plays a similar role for alternative, or non-publicly funded, providers.

These key organisations interact with other agencies and policy bodies that have more niche or specialist areas of practice, for example in the quality assurance of overseas activity (the Quality Assurance Agency - QAA), international student recruitment (British Universities International Liaison Association – BUILA) and support and guidance for international students (the UK Council for International Student Affairs – UKCISA).

However, there is no clear hierarchy in the international HE space, instead stakeholders co-exist in a vibrant and fluid international HE community of practice to influence the shape and direction of UK’s international HE in a complex policy ecosystem. They coalesce and cohere to create a critical mass of expertise in an – often opaque and ambiguous - policy nexus around shared objectives where policy influence and coordination is required, and where the potential to support the development of UK international HE and enhance the UK’s global reputation for HE is greatest. Sector organisations play provide a crucial support function for institutions as they weather ‘policy storms’ that threaten the UK’s international engagement, and also play an important policy role in the interests of government.

This policy space is the context in which UK higher education institutions exercise their autonomy to develop their international strategies. Institutional leaders, managers and practitioners engage with sector stakeholders directly through networks, communities of practice, and special interest groups built around particular international activities, and which focus on collaboration around policy engagement and analysis and sharing good practice.

### **Current policy themes**

The lack of direct government steer has been mostly positive for the UK HE sector, which has been able to grow its international activities without significant constraints. However, there are some clear policy strands that impact upon the sector and which have influenced institutional strategy and behaviour. Sometimes these generate sporadic ‘policy storms’ which can provide significant financial and reputational challenges for institutions (such as Brexit, the target to reduce net migration, and the current attempts to differentiate institutions in terms of teaching quality in some institutions), and which make them re-consider their strategies and approach to international HE. At such times the sector can feel isolated and weak without the protection and support from a defined part of government.

At other times policy interventions can have a more neutral influence on the HE sector (such as the introduction of full-cost fees, or the focus on wider benefits) or be positive (for example the focus on outward mobility and support for TNE). Where there is symbiosis between policy-makers and institutions the sector can benefit from vital financial, policy and diplomatic support.

### ***The Impact of Brexit***

Brexit refers to the process by which the UK will leave the European Union (EU), in March 2019, and the transition period which will follow (until December 2020). Brexit is highly symbolic since it relates to the UK’s place in the world and it surfaces deeply-held cultural attitudes towards international engagement and

migration, which often differ across the UK's four constituent countries. The current debate around the impact of Brexit has highlighted the extent to which European engagement is embedded in the UK's international higher education activities (Becker *et al.*, 2009), and the economic, academic, political and cultural risks should the UK significantly loosen its ties with European partners in education and science.

While the government and the HE sector are committed to retaining a strong relationship with the EU negotiations between the UK government and the EU are ongoing, so the future direction of the UK's engagement in EU education and science activities remains uncertain. The HE sector supported the case for the UK to remain in the EU via the 'Universities for Europe' campaign but was criticised for its inability to develop a persuasive narrative that could transcend the narrow self-interest of institutions to support broader national goals around economic growth, trade relationships, foreign policy and diplomacy, and developing global citizens.

The UK hosts a significant number of in-bound credit mobile students, many of whom are supported by the Erasmus+ mobility programme funded by the EU. Although the UK is expected leave the EU in March 2019 the government seeking to retain access to the successor to Erasmus+ from 2020. The UK's major international research partners are the USA and other European nations. Between 2007 and 2013 the UK was a net-beneficiary of EU Research and Development (Horizon 2020) funding which supports internationally collaborative research and development projects by £3.4bn (The Royal Society, 2017) and it is unclear whether the investment received from EU programmes will be replaced by the government after Brexit.

EU membership has also supported in-bound diploma mobility since EU students pay the same tuition fees and have access to the same levels of financial support as UK students, and in 2015/16 there were around 30,000 students from other EU countries studying in the UK (UUKi, 2017). EU students form a significant part of the student cohort in many strategically important subject areas, particularly at the postgraduate level. EU funding has also supported the mobility of academic staff, researchers, and professional and support staff to and from the EU, and 13% of the UK's academic staff are EU nationals who are able to work in the UK due to the EU's policy on freedom of movement (HESA, 2018b).

The UK HE sector is now seeking to minimise the negative impact of Brexit. Universities UK lobbies government on the sector's behalf and has created a set of short-term UUK priorities for Brexit (UUK, 2018). However, there remain serious concerns about the ability of institutions to weather the direct financial and academic impact of lost research and development income, the likelihood of lower EU student recruitment, and the potential reduction in participation in outward mobility and student exchange. University leaders, strategists and finance directors are having to develop plans and scenarios based on multiple possible outcomes of the Brexit negotiations depending on their mission and their exposure to risk related to EU programmes, and EU student recruitment.

### ***International Students and the Net Migration Target***

There is an ongoing sector campaign against the UK government's strict visa and post-study work regulations, its classification of international students as migrants, and their inclusion in the government's target to reduce net migration to the UK to the 'tens of thousands' as part of 'managed migration policy' (Home Office, 2006). The Home Office has significant influence within UK government and is working hard to implement this policy, which was central to the manifestos of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015) and the Conservative-led government which has been in power since 2015. Tighter visa controls were introduced in 2012 alongside more limited possibilities for work after study which reduced the number of students transferring into work visas from 46,875 in 2011 to 6,238 in 2013 (O'Malley, 2018).

International students are 'temporary' migrants since they mostly return to their home countries after studying in the UK, and the British public is strongly supportive of international student recruitment (ComRes, 2018).



However, international students are classed as long-term migrants by the OECD and form a major part of migration to the UK (around 25%). It has been politically difficult to remove them from migration statistics for fear of being seen to seek to move the policy target, and, since EU student numbers cannot be controlled due to EU regulations on freedom of movement, one of the few ways that the government could reach its net migration target is to reduce the number of non-EU Students. This policy environment categorises international students as the ‘other’ in the policy discourse, which also filters through to public perceptions of other migrants, and the academic discourse around international students. It also has a subtle impact on the perceptions of UK students and staff and the framing of international students in terms of their (weaker) academic skills, cultural challenges with integration, and linguistic capabilities (HEPI and HEA, 2015.).

The #WeAreInternational campaign was launched in 2013 in response to this restrictive immigration policy is supported by sector stakeholders, including other government departments. An uneasy compromise position is in place between the government and the HE sector whereby there remains no aspirational international recruitment target, but there is a message that there is no ‘cap’ on the numbers of ‘genuine’ international students able to study in the UK (i.e. who meet visa conditions and who are able to financially support their studies) or for ‘talented’ (i.e. ‘high-earning, economically important) international graduates to work in the UK after their studies.

A perception persisted in the Home Office that a significant number of international students broke their visa conditions (in terms of attendance and term time work), over-stayed after their studies, and also that the social costs (e.g. public services) created by international students outweighed the benefits. This was used as an argument to retain strict visa controls and to target international students and universities for close scrutiny. However, a recent study by the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS) found no evidence of a major issue of non-EU students overstaying their entitlement to stay (ONS, 2017), and UK HE providers must comply with strict monitoring requirements (in terms of recording attendance, student record keeping, etc.) in order to be highly trusted’ sponsors of international students. A UK Parliamentary Inquiry is currently investigating the costs and benefits of recruiting international students to the UK.

### ***Sustaining the International Student Recruitment Pipeline and Supporting UK Trade***

Recruiting international students is crucial engine of the UK’s service sector exports, whether students travel to the UK, or study at home or in a third country via TNE. In 2014-15 UK universities earned £13.1bn in export earnings from hosting international students - equivalent to 2.6% of all UK exports of goods and services and 29% of business and professional services exports (Oxford Economics, 2017). In 2015, in a speech to the Going Global conference the HE Minister set a target of increasing education exports from £18bn to £30bn by 2020, despite the lack of an international student recruitment target (Ratcliffe, 2015).

UK institutions have been remarkably successful in maintaining their overseas student numbers in an increasingly competitive international HE market, which has seen a growth in English-medium instruction worldwide. The UK remains the world’s second most popular destination for in-bound diploma mobility (after the USA). Publicly-funded HE institutions hosted 442,375 international students in 2016/17, including 307,540 from the EU (HESA, 2018a). Tens of thousands of other international students are enrolled in overseas universities based in the UK, and in private (or independent) universities and colleges.

However, the growth in international student numbers is slowing (growth was just 2.6% from 2011-15), and the UK is losing market share as other countries such as Australia rapidly increase international recruitment (Marginson, 2018). This is not a problem if the market is growing, but there is significant risk for institutional finances if numbers start to fall from particularly countries and regions (e.g. the EU) without being replaced by students from elsewhere. If international students are excluded from the net migration figures in the future and attractive post-study routes are provided, then growth could re-ignite. This seems likely as the UK redefines its role in the world with new trade agreements, and it exits the EU. It will need

highly-talented and skilled students from non-EU countries, and even more so if fewer EU students (and staff) travel to the UK after 2020.

Many prospective international students aren't willing or able to travel to the UK to study for a multitude of reasons (financial, cultural, immigration) and, to help enhance international recruitment, the UK has become the leading global provider of 'offshore' or 'transnational education' (TNE), in which students' study for overseas qualifications in their home country. UK TNE provision is usually delivered collaboratively (65%) with overseas partner institutions (e.g. validation arrangements, franchises and flying faculty) or through some form of distance or flexible learning (20%). (HEPI, 2018a). UK universities have also established a small number of highly-regarded international branch campuses (e.g. in China, Malaysia and the UAE). A significant number of mobile students also start their studies on collaborative UK TNE programmes based overseas before travelling to the UK to complete their studies. In 2016-17 there were significantly more (707,915) students registered studying for higher education qualifications via transnational education (TNE) than international students studying in the UK compared with only 388,135 in 2008-09 (UUKi, 2017).

TNE has received greater policy interest in recent years as successive governments and other stakeholders have recognised the potential for overseas delivery to expand the UK's international recruitment (and associated export income) and broader global presence and reputation, although this is contested (Healey, 2013). The economic benefits of TNE are harder to quantify than for inbound mobility since the full tuition fee is not repatriated to the awarding institutions and operating costs are harder to measure (Mellors-Bourne *et al.*, 2014), but a recent study valued the export income at £510m in 2014-15 (Department for Education, 2017b).

A cross-sector level unit - UUKi TNE - supports UK institutions to develop and grow their TNE provision through providing market intelligence, data analysis and research, brokering the sharing of good practice and promoting the interests of UK universities related to TNE to UK government and sector stakeholders, and in government-to-government discussions on international HE. UUKi TNE also works with overseas governments to help develop positive and welcoming policy environments for UK TNE, and to support funded partnership programmes focused on particular countries.

TNE is included in institutional quality reviews and UK TNE provision in the main TNE host countries are cyclically audited. TNE provision is expected to be comparable to UK-based provision, and to follow the UK's recently-revised Quality Code which outlines expectations for UK TNE wherever it is delivered. Whilst the UK has a good story to tell around international student satisfaction, ratings for teaching quality are not yet published for international students, and not all for TNE. Whilst any enhancements to the quality of the international student experience is positive, the UK government might be wary of opening a *Pandora's Box* by extending this focus to international education. Intensifying the assessment of teaching quality for international HE (e.g. via the new Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework – TEF) would significantly increase the regulatory burden and reputational risks for institutions and may lead to a decline in some types of TNE.

### ***Go International – Increasing Participation in International Experiences (Outward Mobility)***

The most visible dimension of internationalisation of the curriculum in the UK has been the 2013 and 2017 national strategies to increase participation in 'outward mobility' amongst UK-domiciled students.

In 2013 a UK-wide 'UK Strategy for Outward Mobility' (UK HE International Unit, 2013) was launched, the outcome of a sector-wide consultation activity, including input from international experts. This was met with widespread approval from institutions, many of whom have developed specific structures to support mobility. Its implementation was informed by enhanced national data collection about mobility of one week or more. UUKi runs a specific programme to support institutions to respond to the strategy, and it updated the strategy 2017 with a new target of doubling the number of UK students studying, working or

volunteering abroad by 2020. The current 'Go International: Stand Out' campaign is designed to support this goal, and to increase participation in mobility opportunities from students from disadvantaged or certain cultural backgrounds.

The UK lags behind other European countries in terms of domestic students' international experience despite the well-understood personal, institutional and wider national benefits from a more mobile student body (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2015). These include greater confidence, greater cultural awareness and inter-cultural competence, language skills, and the capacity to develop international and cross-cultural networks. Employers are increasingly seeking graduates with these globally-orientated attributes and overseas experience, although there is a notable lack of research on the experience and future careers of the UK's outward mobility alumni.

A small proportion of UK students, currently only 6.6%, are mobile for study (credit mobility), work or volunteering abroad during their degree (Gone International, 2017), and small numbers of students (around 25,000) are estimated to study abroad for their whole degree (diploma-mobility). The UK lacks a mobility culture and despite institutional efforts, financial, academic and attitudinal barriers to mobility remain. UK students are also unable to use their financial support packages for full degrees overseas.

Currently most academic mobility (for both students and staff) is supported by Erasmus+ (through grants to students for study and work placements) and the UK government subsidy for a year abroad (students pay 15% of their tuition fee for the period that they are abroad). The future of outward mobility is under threat because of Brexit, and it is unknown how many students would go abroad without a partnership arrangement (free movers) and, perhaps more importantly, without the associated financial support. Some universities are using linking outward mobility more explicitly to TNE partnerships and other collaborations, to extend the range of opportunities available to students.

### ***Promoting the 'Wider Benefits' and Soft Power of UK HE in a Post-Brexit Context***

The UK government also recognises the HE sector's support for its foreign policy goals and its contribution to developing and sustaining the country's 'soft power' (Nye, 2005; Lomer, 2017) and future trade relationships. The UK education sector - alongside language, culture and the creative industries - is one of the UK's key soft power assets (British Council, 2012) as the nation prepares to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by Brexit.

Government research with the UK's international alumni has found UK's hosting international students provide significant 'wider benefits' (alongside economic benefits) to the UK (Mellors-Bourne *et al.*, 2013). International alumni often develop a strong affinity to the UK during their studies which encourages them to continue to engage with the UK directly throughout their life and careers (Miller, 2012). They can do this directly through remaining in the UK as skilled migrants or maintaining and develop international linkages once they return home or work in another country, or indirectly through generating a positive perspective on the UK which can produce multiplier effects in terms of trade, future student recruitment, mobility opportunities for UK nationals, and research partnerships and collaboration. Other research (Mellors-Bourne, 2017) suggests that TNE alumni have weaker ties to the UK, because of their geographical difference and more distant relationship with their provider.

'Britain is GREAT' has been a carefully developed government-led brand for some time, helping UK institutions to counter-balance negative messages around immigration, but may become part of a grander strategy as the government seeks to position a non-aligned Britain as a global player using the concept of 'Global Britain'. The UK government exercises also its influence to bolster the UK's soft power both indirectly and directly, for example by supporting international scholars to study in the UK and funding international development activities to build and enhance higher education capacity overseas. There are different 'target' countries at the policy level for different types of international activity and also support for

'capacity-building' and institutional and systems development projects the quality, relevance, accessibility and affordability of higher education. Projects often include the application of new ICT, seed-funding for TNE and support for staff mobility.

Funding has typically been small in scale compared with support provided by other developed countries. Much of this activity is now supported by the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget which funds projects that contribute to a reduction in poverty, aim to further sustainable development or improve the welfare of the populations in low to middle income countries. However, new funding streams such as Global Challenges Research Fund and the Newton Fund provide opportunities for larger-scale research and capacity building collaborations in the developing world that could support the UK's soft-power objectives. The Department for International Trade (DIT) also supports the development of TNE partnerships with the potential to boost educational exports alongside supporting diplomatic objectives.

### ***Does the UK Need an Over-Archiving Strategy for International Higher Education?***

There is a recurring debate about whether or not the UK needs a strategy for international HE. Since there is no single locus of power and influence for this policy area within government and institutions must operate in a fragmented policy space where they engage with multiple parts of government as result of their complex and multi-faceted missions. Representative and policy agencies play a crucial role in policy development to help shape a sector context where institutions can thrive without direct government financial support and control. UUKi, Independent HE and the British Council support institutions' interests and have actively lobbied around Brexit and migration policy, but significant challenges remain.

UK HE institutions value their autonomy in the international HE space, and generally want the government to facilitate their goals rather than undermine their international efforts. However, the benefits being autonomous institutions in such a fluid political environment are often counterbalanced by the risks of international HE operating at the margins of wider policy-development and government decision-making. The sector has needed to engage proactively with policy-makers to shape and inform-policy making through lobbying activities, and providing robust evidence when the broader political context has created challenges for international HE.

There have been two recent time periods where the UK government has taken a strategic view of international higher education. In the early 2000's two 'Prime Minister's Initiative's' (PMIs) which ran from 1999-2005 (PMI1) and 2006-2011 (PMI2) highlighted the strong focus of the Labour government (1997-2010) which positioned the HE sector as central element of the knowledge economy (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). PMI1 focused on increasing in-bound non-EU international student recruitment to the UK in higher and further education and to encourage collaboration between universities, colleges, the Government and other bodies to promote UK education abroad (MORI, 2003). The second (PMI 2) was more wide-ranging and ambitious. It focused on consolidating this international student growth through developing marketing and communication strategies, whilst also diversifying recruitment markets, improving the quality of the international student experience and, pump-priming strategic partnerships with countries overseas to encourage UK universities and colleges to engage in collaborative partnerships with overseas institutions (DTZ, 2011).

In 2013 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills developed a wide-ranging and comprehensive 'industrial strategy' called 'International Education: International Growth and Prosperity' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). Although focused on England, it was designed to support the entire education sector to develop and expand its international activities (student recruitment, TNE, outward mobility, and the development of MOOCs) through national branding for HE and helping institutions to diversify the range of countries that they partnered with overseas. Education had been identified as one of nine major export 'industries' that could support the UK's future economic growth. However, the strategy was noted, commented upon, but largely ignored. It was a strategy without teeth, nor

any funding attached to provide the necessary leverage to encourage institutions to act to deliver on its goals and aspirations. In principle, there remained a strong desire to support the sector in its international objectives but, in practice, the financial crisis of the late 2000's and the implementation of austerity policies made any direct investment in international HE both politically and practically impossible. Furthermore, institutions were already pursuing many of these goals, but with a broader focus that included enhanced internationalism and fostering global citizenship rather than simply benefiting UK plc..

As the combined impacts of impending Brexit, ongoing visa restrictions, and increasing competition buffet the UK sector, UUKi has led calls from sector stakeholders to develop an international HE strategy to prioritise and support key internationalisation (abroad) activities and to set ambitious goals, as in Australia (Australian Government, 2016), Canada (Government of Canada, 2014) and Sweden (Swedish Government, 2018). However, although there may be more sector support for such a strategy than in 2013, the same problems around funding remain, and the complex policy landscape for international HE and the interaction between many different policy actors makes developing an overarching UK-wide strategy very challenging. It is unclear who would lead the strategy, which agency would be responsible for its implementation, and also whether a 'Co-ordinating Council' to oversee the strategy as in Australia could be convened. Without clear funding streams to leverage different activities, influencing institutional behaviour would be difficult. Financial support for new cross-sector activities would need to come from universities themselves, but why would they pool their resources when they can use these to pursue their own unique strategies for international activities without government direction and control?

Furthermore, despite support for a UK 'brand' for education, and significant shared policy and regulatory interests at the activity level (e.g. quality assurance, outward mobility), the increasing divergence of the four UK nations in terms of HE policy since devolution in 2009 makes a detailed and cross-national strategy appear unlikely. Scotland, has a stronger focus on collective engagement internationally, and a commitment to close links with Europe, and Welsh universities' international engagement is supported by the *Global Wales* initiative.

There is also a danger that headline targets, e.g. X additional students, or increasing revenue generation by £N billion will simply reinforce a narrow focus on revenue-generating internationalisation abroad activities or the soft power benefits of international engagement and marginalise more transformative activities that internationalise the curriculum for all students. Any targets and benefits should be the natural outcomes from a broader and more holistic approach to internationalisation, that outlines the UK HE sector's purpose, values and vision related to its international activities (Grant, 2013; Knight, 2013) rather than the starting point of any strategy. A national strategy would also need to consider the benefits, risks and challenges created from increased internationalisation. The HEA's 2014 Framework could be used a starting point for re-positioning and re-invigorating the UK's approach.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The funding and regulatory approach used in UK higher education provides institutions with significant autonomy to develop international strategies that align with their institutional vision and mission. This freedom from direct government control and accountability has fostered creativity, entrepreneurialism and innovation in a wide range of international activities. Institutions are also able to use the additional revenue that they receive from international work to invest in further international development activities or to cross-subsidise teaching and research. They have developed sophisticated strategies and associated structures to support these activities which are deeply woven into the fabric of institutions, such that they consider themselves to be international (and often global) institutions. These enable them to respond flexibly and adaptively to national policy changes and the wider external context (e.g. Brexit, immigration controls, greater international competition). They are also re-orientating their approach to TNE and international partnerships as relationships mature and develop. Furthermore strategic partnerships offer

opportunities for more holistic relationships between universities and other organisations overseas as the sector engages with the challenges and opportunities presented by Brexit. Such arrangements merit more detailed academic and policy-focused research.

However, the complexity of the international HE policy space, and the presence of multiple policy actors, provides institutions with little control and limited influence of national policy, and they are regularly buffeted by ‘policy storms’. Whilst a national strategy might be out of reach, a more structured co-ordination of the sector that outlines the purpose and value of UK higher education in its international work, and which is integrated with national branding is a realistic goal. National governments could provide some pump-priming funding in areas which closely align with policy goals (e.g. soft power, quality, governance, equality and diversity and widening access, research competitiveness). Significant investment may be unrealistic, but if targeted funding is provided, and its impact robustly evaluated, then international higher education could be better aligned with these broader goals.

The English HE system is undergoing reform and a new regulatory framework is being introduced to protect the interests of students (including those from other countries) as consumers, and to improve the effectiveness of the HE market (Department for Education, 2017a). If internationalisation is re-considered as a means to help institutions to meet associated demands for enhanced employability (through mobility), equality and diversity (through intercultural learning), and quality enhancement (through internationalisation of the curriculum), then the HEA’s Internationalisation Framework could be re-invigorated. Alternatively, financial imperatives, the impact of Brexit, and stagnating international student numbers could divert attention away from curriculum internationalisation towards intensifying in-bound student recruitment activity and solidifying institutional reputations for research through broader and more diversified international partnerships and collaborations.

At the core of the UK’s approach to international HE is an ongoing tension between investing in international education for long term-wider benefits and the sustaining or maintaining the income stream from student recruitment. The challenges created by Brexit and long-standing issues around immigration and post-study employment highlight this conflict, but also point towards a need or the UK sector to develop a more holistic approach to international higher education at the sector level which better encapsulates internationalisation of the curriculum practice within institutions and respects academic freedom and the reality of shared governance. Before any national strategy is developed the sector needs to debate and resolve this tension and better articulate the purpose and vision that could underpin any co-ordinated approach, and national goals.

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