

Learning more about international students

International students benefit greatly from their time at English universities and colleges,¹ receiving a world-class higher education, exposure to a new culture and new ideas, and valuable experience of living in an English-speaking country. In turn, the richness and diversity of their experience contributes new viewpoints and knowledge to English higher education.

International collaboration is a major part of research and development at English universities, and many have now

expanded their campuses into regions such as the Middle East and East Asia, where students can study for a higher education qualification from an English university or college. Without this movement of students into and out of the UK, the English higher education sector would not be what it is today.

The OfS's job is to ensure that all students, whatever their background, have a fulfilling experience of higher education, and this includes international students studying at English

Summary

As well as gaining the benefit of studying with an English university or college, in the UK or overseas, international students make an invaluable contribution to our higher education, culture and economy. Though we have data about these students' numbers and demographics, too little is known about their unique experiences and needs, and the best ways for universities to support them.

providers, whether in the UK or abroad. We also support the government's international student strategy, which aims to promote the breadth and diversity of the UK's higher education offer.²

At present the information we have about international students' experiences and needs is incomplete, and we need to improve our understanding of the former to allow us more effectively to ensure that the latter are met. To this end the OfS, in partnership with the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) and the Department for Education, is launching a project to identify effective practice in ensuring that international students can integrate and receive a fulfilling experience in the UK.

Jargon buster

International students: Students from outside the UK who come to study at institutions in England, or who study with English institutions at local campuses or via distance learning while resident abroad.

National Student Survey (NSS): An independent survey that gauges final year undergraduate students' experiences of learning and teaching.

Transnational education (TNE): This refers to education delivered across international borders, with the student based in a different country from the higher education provider. In this brief we use it in connection with higher education students abroad studying with universities and colleges in England, rather than vice versa.

UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA): A charity and membership organisation supporting international students and all who work with them through advice, training and up-to-date guidance about relevant rules and information.

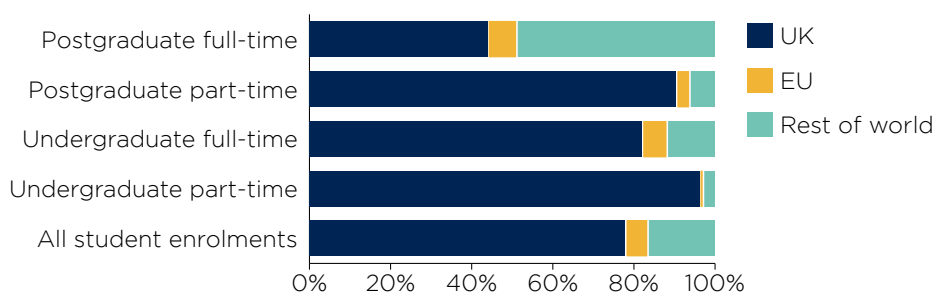
The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We regulate to promote quality, choice, competition and value for money in higher education, with a particular remit to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

Background

In 2020-21, 22.2 per cent of all students in England were international students – around 501,000 people.³ Around half of them are postgraduates, compared with around a fifth of UK-domiciled students.⁴ Accordingly, they make up a majority of full-time postgraduate students registered at English universities (56.1 per cent in 2020-21), and a smaller proportion of the undergraduate full-time population (17.9 per cent in 2020-21).⁵ Meanwhile some 409,000 students are studying for a higher education qualification from an English university or college abroad.⁶

A number of factors may have affected international recruitment to English higher education in recent years. Since the UK's exit from the EU, students from Europe are normally now charged full international fees. The pandemic and the resulting lockdowns and border controls have affected the flow of students internationally, though perhaps less than might have been expected. Over the last decade, there have been ebbs

Figure 1: Higher education student enrolments in England by level of study, mode of study and domicile, academic year 2020-21



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Higher education student enrolments by level of study, mode of study and domicile: Academic years 2020-21.³⁰

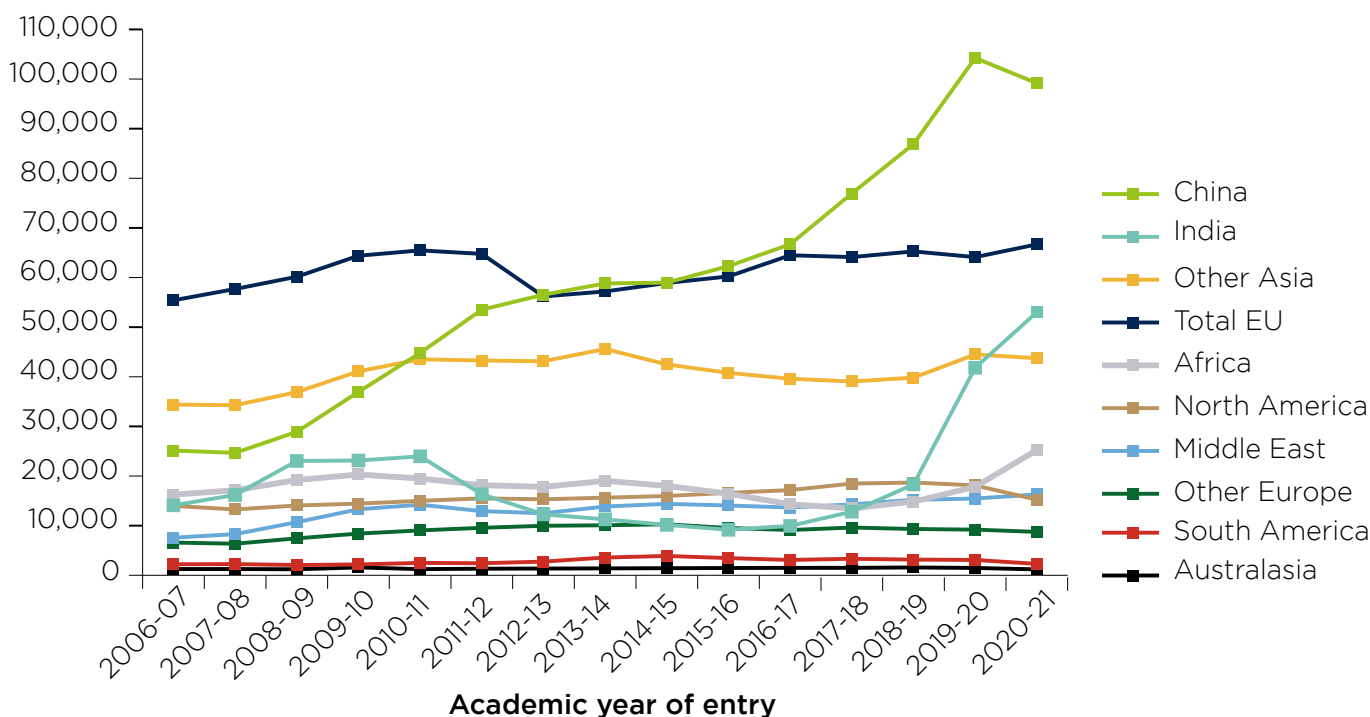
and flows in where international students come from.

Across the UK, while EU students made up the largest number of international students at the beginning of the decade, peaking at 65,470 first year students in 2010-11, by 2020-21 Chinese students were the largest grouping by a considerable margin – 99,000 first year students (a slight reduction from 2019-20's figure of 104,000). There has also been a growing number of students from India, following a dip during the early

2010s: in 2020-21 53,000 Indian students entered UK higher education, compared with 23,000 in 2009-10.⁷

Firm figures for student entry in 2021-22 are not yet available. However, early indications from UCAS admissions data suggest that numbers of applicants from the EU to UK universities in 2021 and 2022 showed a steady fall, while applications from outside the EU, having increased in 2021, may have held steady in 2022 despite the increased difficulty of travel following the pandemic.⁸

Figure 2: First year international students in the UK by origin, 2006-07 to 2020-21



Source: HESA, First year non-UK domiciled students by domicile: Academic years 2006-07 to 2020-21.³¹

Applications from China and India rose between 2021 and 2022, by 12 and 11 per cent respectively.⁹ Meanwhile, 18.5 per cent more student visas were issued for non-EU students in 2021 than in 2019 (following a substantial dip in 2020).¹⁰

The slowing down of growth in international students

While the numbers of international students in the UK have increased over the past decade, their proportion of the overall student population has not changed markedly. Between 2014 and 2019, their actual numbers increased by 28 per cent, but this was matched by a similar growth in UK students, meaning that the proportion of the student population they represented remained broadly the same.

While other anglophone countries began the same

period with lower proportions of international students, some have seen the increase in these proportions grow more considerably. In Australia the proportion of international students among the student population grew from 18.3 per cent, similar to that in the UK, to a much higher 28.4 per cent, although reports suggest a decrease in 2021-22.¹¹

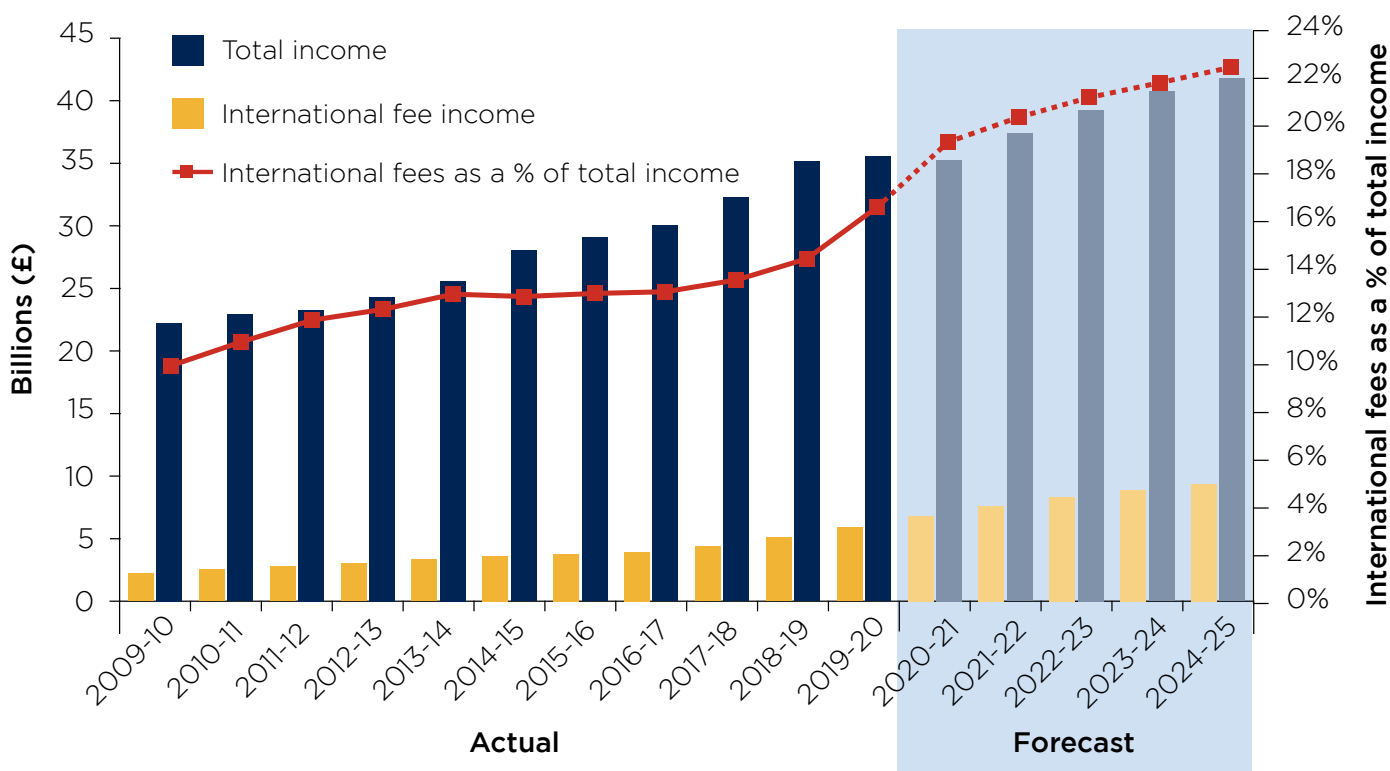
This disparity has been ascribed to a number of factors: tighter visa restrictions (eased more recently), controversies over accusations of cheating in English language tests, and increased fees for EU students.¹² Simultaneously, countries such as India and China are embarking on policies to expand their higher education sectors, with some Indian institutions planning to open campuses in the UK. Though potentially beneficial to the economy, this could further affect the UK's ability to recruit from abroad.¹³

Changes to visas, fees and funding

To encourage more international students to come to the UK, the government has made changes to the visa system. In September 2019, the UK government introduced the two-year post-study work visa. This allows international students to secure employment in the UK up to two years after graduation. Recent proposals include extending this to three years for PhD students.¹⁴

During the coronavirus pandemic, international students faced further complications. For example, students who were taught through distance and blended learning were also eligible to apply for the graduate route, provided they were in the UK by 6 April 2021. UKCISA has called for this flexibility in the visa and immigration system to be maintained and expanded.¹⁵

Figure 3: International fees as a percentage of total income for providers in England



Source: HESA financial return, 2010-2018. Office for Students, financial and student number forecasts, 2019 and 2020.

Note: The population over this period changed as more higher education providers (including non-traditional institutions) were registered with the OfS. Students from the EU are grouped with UK students up to 2019-20, and with international students from 2020-21.

Financial benefits from international students

Changes to international student numbers have a potential impact on the incomes of universities and colleges. Figure 3 compares tuition fee income from international students with the total income received by English universities and colleges between 2010 and 2018, and with these universities' forecasts of their income to 2023.¹⁶ The percentage of income represented by these fees increases throughout this period, from 10 per cent in 2010 to 14 per cent in 2018.

International tuition fee income increased by 167 per cent between 2009-10 and 2019-20, from £2.2 billion to £5.9 billion, while universities' forecasts in 2020 were that it would reach £9.4 billion by 2024-25. If realised, this would represent an increase of 59 per cent on 2020 levels, and 324 per cent on 2010. This would make up 22 per cent of universities' total fee income by 2023, compared with 10 per cent in 2010.¹⁷

Outside the realm of fees, international students provide substantial income to the communities where they live. A recent report by Universities UK and the Higher Education Policy Institute estimated that taking into account tuition fees, living costs, and visitor income, the 2018-19 cohort of international students benefited the UK economy to the tune of £28.8 billion.¹⁸ Those who stay after graduation to work in the UK will also contribute taxes. A recent study estimated that international students in the 2016-17 cohort contributed £3,173 billion in tax.¹⁹

Other benefits from international students

International students contribute diversity of experience and culture to campuses, exposing UK higher education students to new ideas and perspectives and preparing them better to compete in the global careers marketplace. Even if they return home after study, international students' experience of living and learning in England creates

connections and bonds that boost the UK's 'soft power' abroad, helping to foster trade and research links.

A 2018 survey by the Migration Advisory Committee found that domestic students generally had a positive view of studying alongside international students, whereas there was limited evidence of any negative impacts on the former's educational experience. International students' fees contribute to the sustainability of universities generally, and in particular to that of courses that might be in danger of discontinuation if they could recruit only from the UK.²⁰

A 2017 survey for Universities UK found that 64 per cent of British adults believed international students had a positive impact on the local economies where they study, and 61 per cent that they also had a valuable social and cultural impact on university towns and cities.²¹

Transnational education

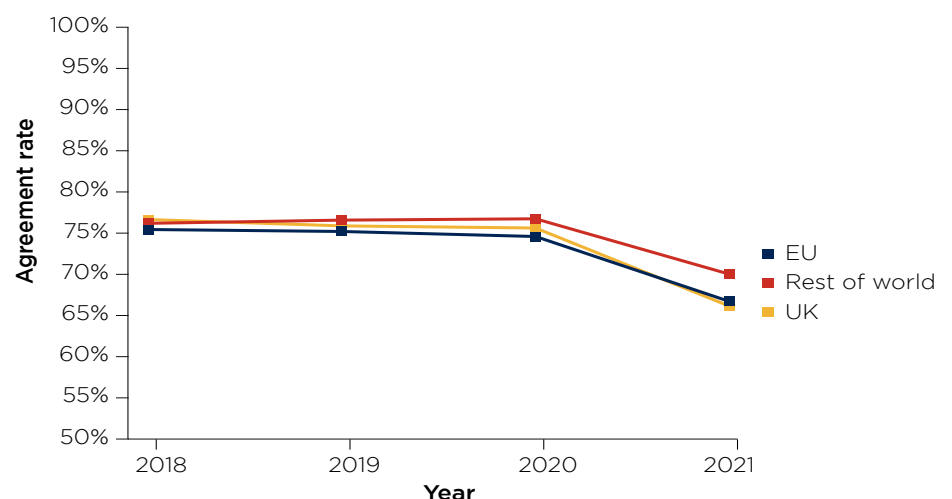
In 2020-21 there were more than 400,000 students studying around the world for qualifications offered by English higher education providers, referred to as transnational education (TNE).²² Higher education providers are continuing to establish new and

diverse international partnerships, delivering innovative teaching and research, and supporting student and staff mobility.

The OfS's role is to protect the interests of any student of a registered English higher education provider, whether they live in the UK or overseas. TNE students are entitled to the same high quality courses and rigorous standards as those in the UK, and we should seek out and improve poor quality courses wherever students are based. In our consultation on a new approach to regulating student outcomes, we are explicit that our proposals would mean that all courses would be subject to the same minimum requirements.

We propose to analyse sector-level data relating to students' continuation and completion on TNE courses in 2019-20 and 2020-21, and to publish this in spring 2022, along with relevant case studies. We will use this analysis to inform our regulation of quality and standards. In the longer term, while there are still some issues with data collection to be resolved, we will work to create student outcome measures and set minimum requirements for TNE courses in a similar way to courses delivered in the UK, and will consult on these in due course.²³

Figure 4: Agreement rates 2018 to 2021 by characteristic for NSS Scale 7, Learning community



Source: OfS analysis of NSS responses.³²

International students' views of English higher education

Undergraduate international students tend to hold favourable views about the education they receive at English colleges and universities. In the 2021 survey National Student Survey (NSS), non-EU international students' agreement with the positive statements on every scale was at least equal to, and generally higher than, that of UK and EU students.

In all cases the agreement of all three groups has dropped in 2021 compared with 2020, however. For instance, international students' rates of agreement with the questions regarding their learning community (scale 7) have fallen noticeably: EU students' agreement rates fell from 75 per cent in 2020 to 67 per cent in 2021, while non-EU international students' rates fell from 77 to 70 per cent.²⁴ While UK students saw a comparable drop in agreement (from 76 to 66 per cent), this is especially important for international students, as a sense of belonging has long been highlighted as important for international students to feel part of their university or college.²⁵

Support

The pandemic highlighted a number of issues faced by international students, including not being able to return to home countries because of stringent border controls, having to quarantine on arrival in the UK, and uncertainty about visa conditions. For some international students these will have exacerbated existing pressures of homesickness, culture shock and language barriers. As universities and colleges seek to expand the number of international students they recruit, there will be an increased need to ensure that these students are supported.

International students face other mental health and wellbeing issues common in students, such as loneliness, financial worry and exam stress.²⁶

Case study: Leeds University Union International Student Advisory Board

Leeds University Union (LUU), the students' union at the University of Leeds, has sought to better understand the international student experience at Leeds to shape how it supports its diverse student body. Crucial to this is its International Student Advisory Board.

In 2020-21 the International Student Advisory Board was made up of students from 21 countries, representing undergraduate, postgraduate taught and research and international foundation year students. LUU developed the group as a forum for international students to discuss issues important to them, like their social experience, online learning experience, intercultural and linguistic awareness, wellbeing and mental health support, employability, and housing. The students who form the board are given a range of training as part of their role, to reward them for their work and help them develop skills for the future.

LUU has taken the insight from the group and fed it into the development of its services and its partnership work with the University of Leeds. At the start of the project, staff attended these student discussions, but teams are now asked to come with interactive activities planned. The goal is always to facilitate getting to the heart of what is working for international students and what needs improvement.

Students overall have become more likely to report a disability in recent years, with the proportion of UK students doing so rising from 9.5 to 17.7 per cent between 2010-11 and 2019-20 (the most

recent year for which comparable figures have been published). During the same period, the numbers of international students doing so doubled from 2.3 to 4.6 per cent. As among UK students,

Case study: Supporting international students' mental health at the University of Nottingham

As part of Globally MindEd, an Office for Students Challenge Competition funded project,²⁷ the University of Nottingham is working with SOAS University of London and the University of Leeds, their respective students' unions, Student Minds and Campus Life Ltd to support the mental health and wellbeing of international students.

The University of Nottingham has recruited two dedicated posts to support international student mental health. These have played a leading role in proactively responding to the impact coronavirus has had on international students at the university.

For example, mindful of the time difference for international students who have returned home, the university has been able to reserve morning online appointments with a dedicated mental health adviser for international students. Furthermore, to reduce barriers the university introduced the ability for students to self-refer to use this service.

The postholders have also worked closely with the university and students' union welfare teams during the creation of the institution's mental health coronavirus webpages to ensure that international students' needs are addressed.

The university has been able to draw on the experiences of its Malaysia and Ningbo campuses to inform its responses for international students. For example, the UK and Ningbo welfare services have worked closely to ensure an online video call offer is possible in mainland China.

the largest increase was in those reporting a mental health condition, from 0.2 per cent in 2010-11 to 1.5 per cent in 2019-20.²⁸

Different cultures have different attitudes and understandings of mental health, and some nationalities and ethnicities may find it harder to disclose illness than others. It is important that support is clearly signposted, and accordingly some universities produce written documents in students' native languages.

Work across the sector has identified substantial concerns about harassment and sexual misconduct experienced by international students. According to an Equality and Human Rights Commission report, one in five victims of racial harassment were international students.²⁹ Language and cultural barriers to accessing support, additional vulnerability around reporting (for example regarding visa implications), and an increase in xenophobic attacks since the start of the pandemic all contribute to these challenges.³⁰

Many international students are legally unable to access certain welfare benefits and local authority housing. International students can apply for university and colleges' hardship funds; nevertheless, media reports suggest that some such students had to use foodbanks during pandemic lockdowns (though without any direct comparison with how often UK students have done so).³¹

Career support is also important to international students, all the more so because they need post-study visas to continue their careers in the UK. A recent study showed that only 52 per cent of international students thought their institution was doing well at satisfying their careers support needs.³²

What the OfS is doing

The OfS is committed to ensuring that all students have a high quality experience and this includes international students studying in England and at

Themes of the call for evidence

Through this work we are seeking to:

- identify innovative and sector-leading practice in ensuring international students can integrate and receive a fulfilling experience in the UK
- disseminate information on this effective practice across the sector
- identify gaps where further work would benefit the international student experience.

We are seeking submissions from providers and organisations that relate to one or more of the identified themes relating to the international student experience:

- work to prevent and address harassment and sexual misconduct
- how responding to the coronavirus pandemic has shaped practice in supporting international students adapt and integrate to UK higher education
- work to ensure the accessibility and effectiveness of wellbeing and support services (such as student services, mental health provision, etc.).

We are also interested in how submissions may relate to one or more of the following cross-cutting themes:

- advancing equality of opportunity for students with one or more protected characteristic
- partnership with international students
- intervention that may also benefit home (UK-domiciled) students.

The full call for evidence is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/working-in-partnership-to-improve-international-student-integration-and-experience/.

English universities' campuses abroad. We are also committed to increasing the breadth and diversity of the UK's higher education offer.

We seek to ensure that English higher education is delivering positive outcomes for past, present and future students. Our objectives as a regulator reflect the things that matter most to students: high quality courses, successful outcomes, and the ongoing value of their qualifications. We use the tools in our regulatory framework to mitigate the risk that these regulatory outcomes are not delivered in practice for students from all backgrounds, including international students. These include the conditions of

registration for higher education providers, including those that relate to quality and standards. To this end we collect data on students and set minimum requirements for their outcomes, including overseas students at English higher education providers.

It is clear, however, that to better support international students, especially in light of their increasing numbers, we need to gather further information on their needs and experiences. As part of this, we are launching a project to work in partnership with the Department for Education and UK Council for International Student Affairs to improve international student integration and their

non-academic experience. This includes calling for evidence to identify effective practice in ensuring that international students can integrate and receive a fulfilling experience in the UK.

As we continue to develop our approach to TNE courses, we will work to raise the profile of the OfS's regulatory activities beyond the UK, and to increase understanding of how our approach to TNE fits within the approach across the UK. This includes targeted engagement with government and regulatory bodies and representative groups.

Conclusion

International student numbers have grown markedly in England since the turn of the century, attracted by the strong reputation enjoyed by UK higher education. Despite the impact of the pandemic on international travel, the sector is anticipating a further increase in international students in the coming years after several years of relatively slow growth.

In addition to the economic benefit they bring, these students' presence can further enhance the academic culture and the exchange of ideas. They also can bring added skills as graduates to the UK's economy. But in return for such benefits, it is important that they have a high quality academic experience, with the right support to ensure that they are fully integrated into their university and the wider community, with the sense of belonging that this brings. The importance of such support was highlighted during the pandemic, too.

As the OfS develops our international work, we will build evidence of what works in supporting the integration and wellbeing of international students.

Endnotes

1 In this brief, for the sake of readability, we have used 'universities and colleges', or sometimes simply 'universities', to refer to what our regulatory framework and other more formal documents call 'higher education providers'.

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