

Instilling international trust in English higher education - a quality perspective

Executive summary

The higher education sector is one of the UK's biggest assets - culturally, socially and economically. Higher education providers are huge local employers and attract local and regional investment up and down the country. They equip students with the skills and attributes needed for personal development and to fulfil labour market needs. They are also hubs of innovation and research, where solutions to some of the world's most complex problems, and the technologies that will drive the high-value industries of the future, are developed.

The sector is a significant exporter in its own right. One of the biggest assets of the UK higher education sector is its international reputation as a world-leading destination for students who make significant social, cultural and civic contributions while studying. Its reputation generates investment, jobs, research funding and mutual culturally and economically beneficial international partnerships. This all strengthens the UK's position on the world stage as a trusted, reliable and influential partner.

The sector's reputation has been built and earned over time and relies heavily upon international trust in the quality of provision in the UK. Without it, the implications for international student recruitment, international partnerships and research collaborations are stark.

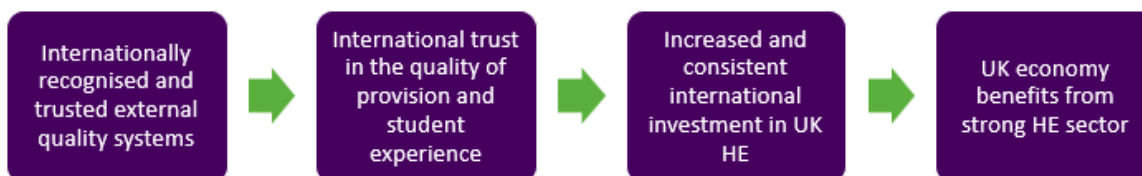
The system - which oversees, protects and assures quality - should produce the information international stakeholders need to assure themselves of the quality of provision. Despite the fact that the vast majority of English higher education provision remains of very high quality, the current approach to maintaining and improving the quality of provision in England puts the sector's international reputation, and its significant benefits to the UK, at risk.

While the English sector is distinct in many respects and has a regulatory landscape that acknowledges this, its approach to quality diverges from practice that is agreed and trusted internationally through the Bologna process. The divergence can be seen in issues of independence, transparency, student engagement and the availability of recent information. There is a significant risk that, if left unaddressed, this approach could undermine the trust that international stakeholders have in English and UK higher education provision.

An incoming government should seek to bolster the reputation of the English - and, by proxy, the UK - higher education sector and reap the benefits this would accrue. Publishing regular

assessments of quality, in line with the approach taken in the other UK nations, would demonstrate the high quality of provision in England and counter unhelpful political rhetoric, reinforcing its excellent international reputation. The quality system offers a simple, direct and financially sustainable way to achieve this.

Why is international trust in UK higher education so important?



Higher education is crucial to economic growth and the UK's position on the global stage

The higher education sector is a major exporter, and one of the most significant contributors to the UK's international reputation. It is world-leading, reaching across the globe to deliver social and economic benefits and soft power, contributing to international relationships and policy priorities.

In the 2021-22 academic year, the higher education sector contributed £116 billion to the UK economy.¹ The spending of international students added a further £15 billion to that figure.² 84% of UK university research is world-leading or internationally excellent,³ and almost one-third of academic staff in UK institutions are international,⁴ with over 60% of UK research publications having international co-authors.⁵

UK higher education's world-leading reputation is built on trust in the system

The UK sector's international reputation and its appeal as a destination for students and academics, and as a partner of choice, is built on trust in the quality of provision, the learning experience students receive, and the high-calibre staff producing world-renowned research that informs cutting-edge teaching.

This trust in the provision and student experience is derived directly from the information that the external quality assurance system provides international stakeholders. International trust in the system is generated through transparent, up-to-date information about the quality of all providers, and robust mechanisms to 'catch' potential pockets of poor provision such as a

¹ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2023-09/LE-UUK-Economic-Impact-of-UK-HEIs.pdf

² www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2023-09/LE-UUK-Economic-Impact-of-UK-HEIs.pdf

³ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/features/impact-universities-numbers/how-do-universities-lead-world-research

⁴ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-publications/international-facts-and-figures-2023

⁵ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-publications/international-facts-and-figures-2023

periodic touchpoint with providers. This is the model on which most external quality systems around the world are based.

The trust in, and reputation of, UK higher education is crucial to its financial sustainability

The enduring reputation of UK higher education is also the basis of the increasing levels of international student recruitment, international research funding and mutually beneficial international partnerships. These provide vital income streams in an increasingly challenging funding landscape and, crucially, they protect the UK's standing as a partner of choice internationally. As such, it is crucial that policymakers do all they can to safeguard and strengthen the foundations upon which international student recruitment and international partnerships rely.

What do international stakeholders need?

While UK higher education provision remains competitive globally, the existing external quality system in England risks providing insufficient assurance to international partners about its sustained quality. As the UK higher education sector is typically perceived internationally as a single sector - rather than four devolved approaches - international concern about any one of the nations individually often impacts them all.

Devolved administrations and their funding councils and regulators are having to provide more reassurance to international partners about their own systems because of England's change in approach. That change has also reduced the UK's competitive edge when other countries use the cohesiveness of their quality systems to gain advantage in the global competition for talent.

An open and collaborative approach to international engagement

Higher education is a global sector, a thriving export industry and a key factor in strengthening international connections. However, some English policy changes in the last five years - whether around international student mobility or association with international funding programmes - suggests that these international connections are not a priority. This same approach can be seen in England's divergence from the quality agreements to which the UK pioneered and committed through the European Higher Education Area. This has resulted in complicated relationships with key international partners, and positions the UK more tentatively as a leader in this space.

The new regulatory approach to quality in England has diverged from the arrangements committed to and pioneered by the UK. This has meant that up-to-date, transparent information on a provider's quality, assessed by an independent body with students actively involved, is no longer available for English providers. The reasons behind this move have not been clearly communicated to international stakeholders, leaving many with the impression that England has chosen to distance itself from the international community, risking the mutual trust that is needed to operate successfully in a global sector.

These international commitments create a shared language between countries and quality systems that provide a firm foundation of understanding and collaboration upon which other partnerships can grow. The shared language supports international student recruitment, student mobility between countries, recognition of qualifications and transnational education provision.

'London is a global hub with over 179,000 international students, and the leading destination for FDI [foreign direct investment]. It is vital that the UK higher education sector maintains its international connections and outreach to demonstrate to overseas stakeholders that the UK is very much still an open, willing and collaborative partner on the world stage, and demonstrate to international students and partners how valuable they are to our university campuses and UK society.'

London Higher

Clear communication and transparent, easily accessible information

The confusion and opacity arising from England's divergent approach to quality are compounded by the complexity of the UK's devolved higher education system, leaving little scope for familiar reference points for an international audience. The mechanism of devolution is often poorly understood, and the dominance of the English sector's size results in other UK nations bearing the brunt of any negativity associated with the English sector's decisions. The marketisation of the sector in the UK, particularly in England, also differs from many other systems around the world. While institutional autonomy remains rightly coveted, not enough has been done to assure international audiences of what oversight exists to provide external confidence in the system.

This lack of understanding is met with a lack of trust when the current approach in England leaves international stakeholders unable to find assessments of provider quality. In the current English system, it is the absence of recent public regulatory information about a provider that tends to denote high quality. This is a global anomaly. England's divergence from international norms has led to opacity in the system that fails to account for the concerns of international stakeholders.

A matter of years ago, if an international stakeholder wanted to carry out due diligence on an English institution for the purposes of international student recruitment, or to progress a transnational education partnership, they could find a recent review report of that institution on QAA's website, which represented up-to-date, public information about the quality of the institution. Under the current approach, while English providers can continue to conduct their own due diligence, this cannot be reciprocated by international partners, undermining the principles of equitable partnership.

Since England's change in approach, QAA has heard from international partners that the absence of this kind of information in the current system has delayed partnership agreements and undermined confidence when deciding whether to sponsor international students for English institutions. The House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee's report into the work of the English regulator has urged the realignment of the English approach with international good practice. QAA's policy [briefing](#) - 'An English higher education quality system fit for the future' - outlines how this might work in a risk-based system, something that The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) has successfully implemented.

Case study

NVAO Flanders: Aligning with international good practice in a risk-based system

- The quality agency NVAO carries out reviews of all its providers on a periodic basis.
- There are typically two categories of provider in Flanders - universities and universities of applied sciences; and other recognised higher education providers. The categories reflect the degree of trust NVAO has in provider quality based on their past performance (the risk profile).
- The nature, scope and frequency of the quality review depends on the risk profile of the institution. These are usually split into institutional and programme-level review schemes.⁶
- For higher risk providers, more granular reviews are undertaken at programme level. Where institutional reviews into historically low risk providers indicate concern, they are moved onto the more granular programme review scheme for a defined period of time.
- Lower risk providers undergo institutional review every six years. They must publish information about the quality of each of their programmes that acts as a balanced critique that is relevant, evidenced and valid. It includes strengths and areas for enhancement or improvement and involves a range of internal and external stakeholders.
- NVAO uses that self-assessment as a basis for its institutional review and visit.
- The review process is seen as a positive tool for enhancement and transparency which enables providers to evaluate their quality in line with their own strategies.
- Specific themes that reflect areas of special attention and future enhancement are considered in cycles of system-wide analysis to address cross-cutting thematic issues and to highlight good practices. This encourages institutions to learn from each other.
- NVAO critically assesses, and actively seeks feedback on, its own role in the process and how this might be influencing the results of providers, particularly where need for enhancement or improvements are found.

A welcoming environment in which international students can thrive

The English quality system sits within a wider environment that must welcome and support international students. The role of international students in particular has become politically contentious, with immigration decisions taken which have signalled, whether intentionally or not, that international students are less welcome in the UK than perhaps they once were. This is compounded by increasing rhetoric around displacement of domestic students and the concept of international students as 'cash cows'. This does not necessarily only pertain to applicants and those choosing the UK as a place of study. The soft power of higher education internationally

⁶ NVAO Quality Assurance System Flanders 2019-2025
www.nvao.net/files/attachments/5789/NVAO_FL_Assessment_framework_institutional_review_2019_2025.pdf

includes the impact of students returning to their home countries with a positive perspective. A positive learning experience is therefore vital to prevent this influence from being diminished. Present discourse, in addition to the persistent rhetoric about 'low-value' degrees, demonstrate how the political debate risks undermining the global reputation of UK higher education.

International stakeholder perspective

An international quality authority has expressed concern that England's change in approach has not been communicated effectively to international partners. This has been difficult for overseas partners to understand because the UK has helped build quality systems overseas based on principles from which England itself has now diverged. The fact that this divergence has coincided with political rhetoric casting doubt on the quality of degrees in England, has compounded perceptions that there might be an issue with the actual quality of provision in England.

How could a decline in international trust impact the higher education sector?

UK higher education still enjoys a world-leading reputation. However, as the English sector is the largest in the UK, its approach to higher education and rhetoric in England about the sector greatly influences this reputation. The absence of international-facing recent information from a recognised authority confirming the high quality of English higher education providers presents unnecessary barriers for international partners. If left unaddressed, these issues risk the gradual decline of international trust in UK higher education.

The global higher education market has become increasingly competitive, and many countries with growing and thriving higher education sectors are capitalising on opportunities to cement their place higher in the global rankings. It would be a mistake to take the UK higher education sector's reputation for granted.

A decline in international trust poses three critical risks: financial sustainability of the English higher education sector; the UK's soft power; and the recognition and mobility of English graduates.

The topic of international students frequently arises in discussions about higher education. In addition to their civic contributions, they present an important income source for many providers. Their high fees enable institutions to cross-subsidise teaching and research that is not covered by domestic income alone. As funding becomes more challenging, the financial sustainability of providers relies on the protection of this income stream.

However, as many international students are state-sponsored, their governments need to be sure about the quality of education at the receiving institution to justify the sponsorship. With other countries willing and able to offer this, the UK risks losing its competitive advantage. The same can be said of the international partnerships that provide institutions with income and profile raising. Without clear assurance of the quality of providers, international stakeholders are cautious about entering into these agreements. Over time, this could result in further financial precarity for the sector if left unaddressed.

The potential decline in trust in English higher education could also impact student mobility of English graduates. The further the English quality system diverges from the shared principles under the Bologna process that were designed to create 'easily readable and sharable degrees', the less recognisable English qualifications become on the world stage. This has the potential to limit where English students and graduates are able to live, work and study.

The UK higher education sector also significantly bolsters the UK's soft power and global standing more broadly. The strong reputation of the sector has generated significant investment and helped to position it as a research and innovation leader in critical fields. A decline in international trust in the sector could affect collaborative research projects and partnerships, hindering the UK's position as a leader in innovation, its international relationships and soft power.

How can policymakers maintain and instil international trust in English higher education?

Below are three recommendations that policymakers in England should implement to maintain and instil international trust in the English higher education system in order to safeguard the UK higher education's reputation globally.

1 **Policymakers should publicly champion the higher education sector on the world stage**

Policymakers - in particular those representing the government - should be ambassadors for the strengths of the higher education sector, prioritising constructive engagement over political rhetoric. The higher education sector is a vital industry, contributing to economic growth and delivering a host of wider social and economic benefits, both locally and nationally. The vast majority of provision is of high quality and delivers on the ambitions policymakers have for the sector. The narrative delivered by policymakers should reflect this.

2 **Government should adopt a collaborative global outlook**

Collaboration and cooperation across the world are crucial to sustaining the sector. Government should develop an international approach that welcomes the global higher education community and honours the commitments made in these forums. In particular, the UK government must honour its commitments under the European Higher Education Area, and the Bologna Process, to which the UK Government is a signatory. This would help to halt any potential decline of trust in the system.

3 **Make changes to England's external quality system to increase international trust**

Trust from international stakeholders contributes immeasurably to the success of the UK higher education sector. The least we can do is provide them with the information they require for that trust. England's quality system should be realigned to internationally recognised good practice.⁷ This would require a **periodic touchpoint** between all

⁷ QAA is not the authority on determining whether a country's system is compliant with the European Standards and Guidelines committed to under the Bologna process. The authority is the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). As QAA itself is a compliant agency on the register, we are in a position to make recommendations to bring England closer to this.

providers and an **independent body** (with **students actively engaged**) to secure **up-to-date assessments** of their provision, the outcomes of which are **transparently published**.⁸ This will assure stakeholders of quality, build confidence in provision, reinforce the UK's international reputation, and support enhancement in individual providers to improve skills and growth.

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⁸ See more in QAA's briefing on an English quality system fit for the future:

www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/news/an-english-higher-education-quality-system-fit-for-the-future.pdf