

Migration Advisory Committee's consultation on the economic and social impacts of international students

Response from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

Introduction

1 Our response to this call for evidence focuses on the fourth discussion point: the impact the recruitment of international students has on the provision and quality of education provided to domestic students.

2 In preparing our response, we have referenced UK-wide guidance on academic quality and standards relating to this issue.

3 It is important to note that QAA's activity to assure quality and standards in UK higher education does not consider the specific impact of international students on their domestic peers, and instead considers students' experiences as a whole. Nor is QAA aware of any measure within the sector that addresses this specific issue. While it is timely to consider the impact of international students, QAA would caution against any assessment or measure that threatens the positive impact that a diverse student body offers, or creates disproportionate burden for providers of higher education.

About QAA

4 QAA is the UK's independent, expert, higher education quality assurance agency, a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation. We safeguard standards, and drive quality assurance and enhancement for all providers of higher education. Students play a key role in our governance and are involved in all of our activities.

5 In England, we carry out quality assessment of publicly funded universities and colleges on behalf of HEFCE. We are currently awaiting a decision from the Secretary of State for Education on whether we will be confirmed as the Designated Quality Body for higher education in England under the new regulatory framework for higher education. A consultation on the issue led to 98 per cent of respondents supporting QAA's suitability for the role.

6 In Wales and Scotland, we are the independent external quality reviewer for Welsh and Scottish universities and higher education colleges.

7 Globally, we are recognised as an expert body for higher education quality assurance. We work closely with international quality bodies, and report (by country) on the quality and standards of UK higher education delivered internationally (known as transnational education, or TNE).

Quality and UK higher education's global reputation for excellence

8 The UK is a popular destination for students from around the world, and it enjoys a good reputation for the quality of education on offer. The UK sector's rigorous approach to assuring quality and academic standards is well respected internationally, and helps to secure that reputation.

9 The continued popularity of a UK education is a useful indicator of that reputation. The most recent data¹ revealed 438,515 students from outside the UK coming here to study. Of these, 27,440 were from other European Union member countries, while 311,075 were from outside the EU.

10 By comparison, the numbers of students studying for a UK higher education qualification outside the UK (transnational education) are 74,965 within the EU and 626,045 outside the EU (2015-16 figures). TNE is a growth area for UK higher education: while the total number of students studying for UK awards on higher education programmes outside of the UK has witnessed a 39 per cent increase in the past five years, by comparison, there was an increase of just two per cent in the numbers of international students studying within the UK in the same time period. TNE numbers, at 701,010, now exceed the number of international students in the UK by around 60 per cent. With over 80 per cent of UK universities offering some form of TNE, it is a substantial part of many providers' international strategies.²

11 While there are increasing opportunities for transnational students, and numbers are increasing, the UK itself remains an attractive destination for international students.

12 Higher education in the UK is a devolved matter, with different approaches to quality assessment. However, from an international perspective, students are mainly concerned with the UK-wide reputation of our higher education, and the value and transferability of a UK degree.

QAA guidance on international students

13 In 2015, we published *Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK: A Guide for UK Higher Education Providers*.³ The guidance sought to establish shared, UK-wide principles on developing an inclusive environment for increasingly international student bodies.

14 The guidance describes the benefit that international students bring to the student body as a whole, contributing to a rich and diverse student experience for all:

International students are an important asset for UK higher education providers, and with the right initiatives in place they can contribute to the development of intercultural competencies among the whole student body, as well as that of academic and support

¹ Higher Education Statistics Agency data for the academic year 2015-16.

² QAA *International Insights: An insight on QAA's work strengthening cross-border cooperation in quality assurance for the benefit of UK higher education*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/International-Insights-Cross-border-Cooperation-2017.pdf

³ *Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/International-Students-Guide-15.pdf

staff, and can help create intercultural environments that enable all staff, students and providers to broaden their perspectives.

15 It also notes that reflecting on the needs of international students can incentivise providers to review policy and practice and put in place measure to enhance students' experience for all, including domestic students:

This guide provides additional information that higher education providers may find helpful in reviewing and enhancing their own practices in relation to the experiences of international students. It focuses on aspects of the student journey that may be particular to international students who come to the UK to study on UK programmes or where particular considerations might apply. In doing so, it is sensitive to the diversity of international students. Moreover, it is acknowledged that much of the highlighted good practice could also be applied to supporting students on programmes delivered overseas as well as to home students in the UK.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education

16 The UK Quality Code for Higher Education⁴ gives all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide. We are currently assessing the responses to a consultation by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment on a new approach to the Expectations of the Quality Code).⁵

17 The Quality Code sets a series of Expectations for higher education providers, from the design, delivery and assessment of academic programmes to the recruitment, engagement and experience of students - both domestic and international.

18 In meeting the requirements of the Quality Code, UK providers can ensure that not only is each individual student supported, but that the student body as a whole can benefit from a supportive and inclusive learning environment, and not be adversely affected by the presence or performance of other students.

19 The following extracts from the Quality Code are particularly relevant to this inquiry.

a) Recruitment and admissions

Recruitment, selection, and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.

So, as well as meeting the subject requirements, prospective international students should have a level of English language ability that enables them to complete their UK higher education study without disadvantaging other students on their programme.

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code

⁵ Consultation on the review of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Consultation-on-the-review-of-UK-Quality-Code-for-Higher-Education.pdf

b) Learning environment

*Through adopting **inclusive learning and teaching** practices higher education providers **enhance the learning opportunities for every student**.*

*Diversity of staff and students brings with it different ideas, knowledge and experiences that contribute to **an enriched learning environment**.*

*Higher education providers recognise that **students have differing learning styles and come from diverse educational, linguistic and cultural backgrounds**, and they consider whether examples and resources used in learning and teaching are drawn from a sufficiently broad range of sources, cultures and viewpoints.*

So, international students contribute to a richer experience for their fellow students, and UK higher education providers understand the need to provide an inclusive learning environment in order to achieve this benefit.

c) Assessment

Through inclusive design wherever possible, and through individual reasonable adjustments wherever required, assessment tasks provide every student with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement.

And, related to this point, the Quality Code recommends that higher education providers:

...rais[e] staff awareness of the assessment implications of the diversity of students, including cultural diversity, differences in learning methods and the need for inclusivity.

So, assessment practices should be equitable - but providers are cautioned to ensure that staff are aware of cultural differences that may require a revised approach.

Academic integrity

20 In August 2016, QAA published a study of the scale and impact of contract cheating,⁶ sometimes known as essay mills. This is where students commission essays or other pieces of work, which are then submitted as the student's own work. This type of plagiarism is more difficult to detect, and presents a threat to academic standards.

21 QAA's investigation followed a January 2016 investigation in *The Times* that, using Freedom of Information requests, estimated that almost 50,000 cases of plagiarism had been uncovered in UK universities in the preceding three years. Of these cases, students from outside the EU were disproportionately represented.⁷ It's important to stress, however, that this estimate is not underpinned by a rigorous evidential base. There is currently no complete UK-wide data set that supports the perception that international students are more likely to cheat, and the difficulty in detecting cheating means that it is impossible to collect accurate data.

⁶ *Plagiarism in Higher Education - Custom essay writing services: an exploration and next steps for the UK higher education sector*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Plagiarism-in-Higher-Education-2016.pdf

⁷ *Universities face student cheating crisis*
www.thetimes.co.uk/article/universities-face-student-cheating-crisis

22 QAA published further guidance on tackling contract cheating in October 2017,⁸ offering practical advice for providers. It notes that while there may be particular support needs for international students, all students need support to learn appropriate academic practices, and understand why a culture of academic integrity matters:

As well as information, students need to receive support to gain the necessary skills for studying, academic writing, use and acknowledgement of academic sources, correct referencing, paraphrasing and research, to enable them to succeed without resorting to contract cheating. Information and tutorials on these topics should be relevant to the programme of study.

Given the diversity of experiences that students may have been exposed to prior to joining a UK HE institution, it cannot be assumed that students have such skills already. Students with little or no previous experience of academic writing and independent study, especially where English is not their first language, will need time and guidance to give them a fair chance to reach their potential.

23 Following the publication of QAA's guidance, we are now developing a further work programme to address academic integrity more widely. This will look at other areas of potential risk to the reputation of UK higher education, including the use of agents,⁹ and fake diplomas. As stated above, there is no quantitative evidence base to indicate that these issues disproportionately affect international students. However, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that international students are a particular target for those seeking to profit from academic fraud and cheating.

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
www.qaa.ac.uk

⁸ *Plagiarism in Higher Education: Custom essay writing services: an exploration and next steps for the UK higher education sector*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education.pdf

⁹ The use of suspected bogus agents securing entry into higher education institutions and access to loan funding was the subject of a *BBC Panorama* broadcast on 13 November 2017.
www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41966571