



UNITED KINGDOM

Ministers launch new international education strategy

Brendan O'Malley 18 March 2019

The United Kingdom's Department for Education and Department for International Trade have jointly launched a new International Education Strategy, with the twin targets of increasing the value of education exports to £35 billion (US\$46 billion) per year and raising the total number of international students to 600,000, both by 2030.

This would amount to a near doubling in the value of education exports from £20 billion in 2016 and a rise by more than a third in the number of international students, from 442,000 in 2016.

One of the strategies includes a commitment to extend the post-study work period for international students, and to consider changes to visa processing for them, in order to strengthen the UK's visa offer for students.

The £20 billion figure includes more than £1.8 billion generated by transnational education (TNE) activities, an increase of 73% since 2010 at current prices.

Currently education exports are expected to reach £23 billion by 2020. To hit the £35 billion target will require an annual average increase of 4%.

“In order to drive progress against this target, we intend to build our global market share in international students across the education sectors,” the **strategy report**, *International Education Strategy: Global potential, global growth*, says.

“We also intend to improve how we capture education export data to monitor our progress against this ambition,” it adds.

In a joint foreword to the report, which views international education primarily through the prism of economic growth and soft power, Secretary of State for Education Damian Hinds and Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade Liam Fox, say the government's Export Strategy has set the scene for how government will support UK exporters following the UK's departure from the European Union – which is likely to be delayed beyond the 29 March 2019 deadline – and that this strategy “builds on that ethos for the education sector”.

“With around 90% of global economic growth in the next five years expected to originate outside the European Union, forging a new role for the United Kingdom on the world stage starts with rising to the exporting challenge – of which this strategy and the education sector will form a key part. Working together, we can help UK education reach its full, global exporting potential,” Hinds and Fox say.

The strategy sets out five ‘cross-cutting strategic actions’, developed through consultation with the education sector:

- Appoint an ‘international education champion’ to spearhead activities overseas, open international opportunities, develop strong international partnerships in new and established markets and help tackle challenges and barriers.
- Ensure ‘Education is GREAT’, the government campaign promoting international study at British institutions, promotes the breadth and diversity of the UK education offer more fully to international audiences. This includes encouraging education bids to the £5 million GREAT Challenge Fund for 2019, which supports export activity for the sector. The campaign is currently concentrated in China, Turkey, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and India.
- Continue to provide a welcoming environment for international students and develop an increasingly competitive offer. This includes extending the post-study leave period; considering where the visa process could be improved; supporting employment; and ensuring existing and prospective students feel welcome.
- Establish a whole-of-government approach by implementing a framework for ministerial engagement with the sector and formalised structures for co-ordination between government departments domestically and overseas.
- Provide a clearer picture of export activity by improving the accuracy and coverage of annually published education export data, developing an approach with a strengthened methodology and a better range of sources.

Geographical areas targeted

The report claims that leaving the EU “gives the UK the freedom to pursue an independent trade policy that reflects its unique strengths”. But in reality this very much depends on the terms of whatever future relationship is negotiated with the EU and it is hard to predict what that outcome will be, given the current political uncertainty.

The report nevertheless identifies four “high-value” geographical areas in which to focus education export campaigns. These are China and Hong Kong; the Middle East and North Africa; Latin America; and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) group of nations.

It says these regions present many opportunities for UK providers, but various barriers and complexities mean that accessing these education markets can be difficult without the support of government.

The regions share common features that underpin their high value and potential, including:

- A drive from governments to prioritise investment in education and research.
- Demand for the best learning experiences from the expanding middle classes.
- Economies that are diversifying towards skills, knowledge and services.

Prioritising this group of regions will allow government resources to be deployed towards “developing and fast-growing education markets, where market access barriers are highest and where government can have the most impact”, the report says.

“These regions also have a high concentration of countries undergoing education reform, which presents UK providers with a range of export opportunities.”

The report also indicates a growing interest in potential opportunities in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa and a continued interest in growing the UK’s share of the market in India.

Increasing competition

Hinds and Fox warn that the global education market is developing quickly.

“While this changing market offers many opportunities to the UK, our ambitious competitors are also galvanised to action. It is becoming ever more globalised, specialised and competitive, rewarding providers with the experience, talent and reputation to meet its rapidly growing demand. We must rise to meet this challenge,” they say.

Professor Dame Janet Beer, president of Universities UK, strongly welcomed the document, particularly the target of raising international student numbers to 600,000.

She said: “International students contribute a huge amount to the UK, not only economically but also by enriching the international education environment in our universities for all students. Whilst their presence in the UK is worth an estimated £26 billion in direct and knock on effects, sustaining over 200,000 jobs in all parts of the UK, they bring much wider benefit to our academic and civic communities.

“We particularly welcome steps to improve the visa regime, including the extension of opportunities for our graduates to work in the UK once they graduate, to six months for undergraduates and masters students, and a year for those who undertake PhDs. We would like the government to go further and extend this opportunity to at least two years and we will continue to urge them on this point.”

‘Hindered by visa regime’

Dr Greg Walker, chief executive of MillionPlus, the Association for Modern Universities, welcomed the new strategy but warned that the goal for international student recruitment would be hindered unless there were “major changes” to the international visa application

process and the “arbitrary way in which compliance is assessed”.

The government’s 2018 immigration white paper sets out a number of proposals that would bring positive changes, including increasing the post-study leave period to six months for all masters students and undergraduate students, and to 12 months for all doctoral students. During the post-study leave period students will have unrestricted access to work.

The plan is also to make it easier for international higher education students to move into skilled work in the UK by allowing them to apply for a skilled work visa three months before their course ends or to switch into skilled work from their home country for two years after graduation.

Distant targets

Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute and former special adviser to the universities minister, said the targets are so far in the distance that current ministers would not be held accountable for meeting them.

He added that the “silliest target of all”, the government’s separate commitment to reduce net immigration, of which students are a major part, to tens of thousands, has yet to be fully rescinded. Therefore, while the report is jointly owned by the education and international trade departments, it couldn’t succeed without the full endorsement of the Home Office, which is responsible for immigration.

Hillman also pointed out that the 4% average annual growth target is much lower than elsewhere, with Australia enjoying an annual growth rate of more than 17%.

He pointed out that the UK had previously, in 2015, set out a target of reaching £30 billion in education exports by 2020 but is expected to fall far short, reaching £23 billion.

He also warned that the UK can only hit the new 2030 target “if we perform much better in the future than in every recent year”.

He said even if Brexit didn’t threaten current success, the paper “doesn’t include policies of the scale needed to guarantee success”.

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