

A Review of International Students' Attraction and Recruitment Strategies: Learning from UK Top Universities

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to briefly review ways of improving the institutional visibility in an international context for higher education institutions. The paper will include a list of countries to focus on as they are the highest international students' senders to the UK based on various historical key statistical data derived from official bodies in the UK, and to review International recruitment strategies used by several top recruiting universities in the UK. A recommendation list will be provided in the end for other higher education institutions in the UK and abroad to be considered for their strategic development to enhance their international students' recruitment and their institutional visibility globally.

Keywords: Students' recruitment, Higher education, international students.

INTRODUCTION

The brief paper is aimed to focus on ways of improving educational institutions' visibility in an international context. The paper is including a list of countries to focus on as they are the highest international students' senders to the UK as well as reviewing International recruitment strategies used by several educational institutions in the UK. A brief recommendation list will be provided in the end.

It is highlighted based on different statistics presented by the higher education statistics agency (HESA) that there is around 1 in 8 students studying in the United Kingdom is from outside the European Union, this reflect the amount of contribution international students bring to the UK based higher education institution in terms of diversity, enhancement of the learning experience for all students including home students, diversification of sources of income, as well as benefiting local economies through direct and indirect spending power from international students in the locality [8].

It is discussed that the continues recruitment of international students in higher education institutions based in the UK enable better strategic planning for the short, medium and long terms due to the significance that international students have in terms of demand as well as contribution to the local economy. Fluctuation in the recruitment can create unhealthy planning and growth. Furthermore, it can make higher education institutions more vulnerable considering the increasing competition coming from various emerging countries providing cheaper options to pursue a higher education qualification. However, the UK reputation in terms of being a quality provider

remain as one of the distinctive features and a competitive advantage for the country where all UK based higher education institutions can take the advantage of [8].

Key opportunities enhancing international students' recruitment for UK higher education institutions based on [1 – 2 – 3 – 7 – 8]:

- Competitiveness and ranking of UK higher education institutions worldwide with the consideration of the country effect factor as it is widely known that UK higher education system is considered as one of the most respected and demanded at a global scale.
- The continued efforts by several parties in the UK in attracting students to the UK by public, private and not for profit institutions. However, this is viewed as not enough and more demands to invest more in the process of promoting the country's higher education system globally.
- Work opportunities and the continues effort of the UK higher education institutions in the to enhance key skills leading to preparing graduates that meet the needs and demands of the job market globally. However, some restrictions are placed through

changes in immigration laws and length of visa as well as work permits.

- The capacity and expertise available in UK higher education institutions such as accessibility for research funding and development of links to engage with the external environment.
- Continues effort of UK higher education institutions to enhance internationalization of their offering through initiation of partnerships such as mobility partnerships and transnational education.

Key challenges hindering international students' recruitment for UK higher education institutions based on [1 – 2 – 3 – 7 – 8]:

- Increasing competition from other countries that are emerging as attractive for international students in different regions such as Emirates in the Middle East.
- Increase of restrictions for international students in terms of post study work opportunities and visa

with an attempt to reduce immigration in the country from EU and non – EU countries.

- The continues increase in the overall costs for international students which can be divided as the following: Firstly, direct costs paid in the form of direct university fees and studies requirements. Secondly, indirect costs such as living expenses, travel, transportation, and other related expenses.
- The process of departure of the UK from the European Union creating uncertainty for the status of the EU nationals living in the UK as well as for other key firms contributing to the UK higher education system such as partnerships in other EU countries and funding agencies.

Statistics

This part of the brief review includes historical statistics released by the higher education statistics agency (HESA, 2013-2014) [1]. The statistics clearly show the breakdown of top countries sending students to the UK, breakdown of degree levels and specialisations.

Table-1: Breakdown of EU students in the UK based on degree levels

Level of Study/Domicile	Full time	Part time	Total
EU students (Non-UK domicile) in HE			
Higher education (Research)	10,780	2,995	13,775
Higher degree (taught)	21,820	6,235	28,055
Postgraduate other	1,700	2,305	4,005
First degree	70,205	2,845	73,050
Other undergraduate	1,555	4,850	6,405
Total non-UK: EU	106,060	19,230	125,290

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

Table-2: Breakdown of Non – EU students in the UK based on degree levels

Non-EU students in HE	Full time	Part time	Total
Higher degree (research)	27,695	3,240	30,935
Higher degree (taught)	105,160	11,150	116,310
Postgraduate other	2,355	3,440	5,795
First degree	125,550	4,850	130,880
Other undergraduate	7,475	8,595	16,070
Total Non-EU	268,245	31,725	299,970

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

Table-3: Breakdown of all non – UK students based on degree levels

All non-UK in HE	Full time	Part time	Total
Higher degree (Research)	38,480	6,235	44,710
Higher degree (Taught)	126,980	17,380	144,360
Postgraduate other	4,060	5,730	9,970
First degree	195,755	8,170	203,925
Other undergraduate	9,035	13,440	22,475
Total non-UK	374,310	50,955	425,265

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

Table-4: Non – UK students’ distribution across the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)

Country	Students	% of students’ population who are international
England	355,580	19%
Scotland	48,360	21%
Wales	25,610	19%
Northern Ireland	5,950	11%
Uk	435,500	18%

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

Note that Total = full time, part time non-UK students (EU and non-EU)
 England’s percentage out of the international students’ number: 81%

International students in London: 103000 which means it is 29% of international students in England.

Table-5: Top ten Non - EU countries sending students to the UK

Country	2013-14	2013-12
China	87,895	83,790
India	19,750	22,385
Nigeria	18,020	17,395
Malaysia	16,635	15,015
USA	16,485	16,235
Hong Kong	14,725	13,065
Saudi Arabia	9,060	9,440
Singapore	6,790	6,020
Pakistan	6,665	7,185
Canada	6,350	6,190

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

Table-6: Top ten EU countries sending students to the UK

Country	2013-14	2012-13
Germany	14,060	14,520
France	11,500	11,725
Republic of Ireland	11,490	12,620
Greece	10,670	10,910
Cyprus	10,295	10,840
Italy	9,550	8,320
Spain	6,585	5,995
Romania	6,515	6,460
Bulgaria	6,355	6,060
Poland	5,200	5,280

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

Business & administrative studies: Student numbers (130,505) out of 435,235 international

students. That means students studying business and administrative studies percentage is nearly 30%.

Table-7: Students studying wholly overseas for a UK qualification

Type of provision	Total number of students 2012-13	Total number of students 2011-12
Overseas campus of reporting HEI	17,525	14,870
Distance, flexible or distributed learning	123,635	116,535
Other arrangement including collaborative provision	103,795	96,075
Subtotal-Students registered at a UK HEI	244,955	227,480
Overseas partner organisation	353,375	342,845
Other arrangement	600	340
Subtotal- Students studying for an award of a UK HEI	353,975	343,190
Total	707,350	570,665

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

Table-8: Top ten institutions recruiting international students in the UK

Institution	Postgraduate students	Undergraduate students	Total number of international students
University college London UCL	5,910	5,940	11,850
The University of Manchester	5,225	6,380	11,605
The university of Edinburgh	4,305	5,155	9,460
The university of Warwick	4,970	3,625	8,595
The university of Sheffield	4,970	3,625	8,595
The University of the Arts, London	1,960	5,775	7,775
University of Birmingham	5,465	2,250	7,715
Kings College London	3,900	3,795	7,695
University of Nottingham	3,210	4,305	7,515
Coventry University	3,055	4,425	7,480

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency [1]

International recruitment strategies used by three top UK based higher education institutions

UCL: University College London: Based on the information published at the university’s website (2015) as well as their strategic report published in 2012 for the next five years showing that the university is using different recruitment strategies to attract international students [5, 6].

- Recruitment events: The University has many recruitment activities in different countries such as China and Brazil, and different exhibitions such as the IECHE Exhibition in Saudi Arabia. Those events are advertised on each country’s section which appears when students make an application and after selecting their own country. These recruitment activities are organised by their international office.
- The university has continued in efforts for internationalizing the curriculum based on the students’ body with the aim to enhance students’ experience and attraction for further studies.
- UCL aims to diversify its recruitment strategies through having more interaction and connection with potential students in the UK and abroad and opposes the idea of total reliance on students’ recruitment agents due to the potential drawbacks perceived by the university which can be summarised as the following: Firstly, Reliance on this activity can reduce the income generated from fees. Secondly, this can be a labour-intensive activity requiring further investment in resources and staff to meet the demands of agents during the process of the recruitment. Thirdly, loss of total control over the recruitment process with potential reputational damage. Fourthly, it would result in less direct interaction with potential students to meet their expectations.
- The university aims to have deep understanding of international markets with high levels of appreciation of local differences in different

markets leading to more decentralised and localised approach in the process. This approach would enable the university’s efforts to be directed to the achieve the following: Firstly, clear local understanding of the university’s offer. Secondly, development of market specific promotional activities. Thirdly, development of key partnerships and relationships with local institutions. Fourthly, flexibility to respond to changes in market conditions. Fifthly, excellent customer relations management and enhancement of the overall students’ experience.

- The university works hand in hand with other agencies to enhance the efforts of understanding local markets; this would enable further accessibility to local resources and links.
- The university aims to invest in research to gain sophisticated understanding of overseas countries and markets to enhance international students’ recruitment. Some key highlights are picked up to summarise this point.
- Gaining further understanding and keeping up to date with all major trends and developments at a global scale.
- Usage of management information systems to gain effective use of data and statistics to understand recruitment trends.
- Benchmarking the recruitment practices of the university with other major universities in the UK with more specific focus on the Russel Group universities. This would enhance the university’s understanding of its position in the market as well as its market share.
- Further expansion of country specific understanding such as competitors’ activities, demand by levels of study, degrees, external impact on the market, social expectation and educational gaps, as well as training needs in the market.

- Gaining deep understanding of main policies applied by funding bodies in local markets.
- Usage of google analytics to gain understanding of international students' pages usage.
- Active involvement with key international British institutions such as the British council to enhance visibility and access.
- Commissioning external bodies to provide further research.

Investment in appropriate and effective promotional strategies to attract international students, this can be summarised as the following

- Identification of priority countries where further efforts can be invested, efforts such as representations in local schools and colleges, public presentations, individual sessions, participation in exhibitions, and taking part in study abroad affairs.
- Collaboration with the university's outreach office to organise visits.
- Collaboration with other key departments to organise specific activities and events for international students.
- Maintenance of appropriate and attractive section in the website specific for international students providing detailed information.
- Working closely with UCL's study abroad students to contribute to the promotional efforts.
- Working closely with other international UCL's campuses to enhance promotional activities.
- Piloting the usage of new trends and technologies to gain maximum benefits, and identification of further ways of improvement.
- Effective collaboration with key sections across the university such as student services, faculties, individual academics, admissions, student union, and senior management of the university such as the Provost's office.
- Good Media relations: UCL has strong relationships which national and international media channels such as newspapers, journals, and specialised websites to publish case studies and recent stories to a study to further engage and share best practices.
- Digital marketing: The University has different digital marketing channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.
- Based on their international strategy (2008-2011) which shows that the university will continually issue clear public statements about commitment towards helping international student's engagement and working with international institutions to help the developing world.

Other recruitment and attraction examples

University of Manchester: Based on the information published by the university's website in 2015 [9].

- Country specific information: The university's website has clear information for international students by having the option to select a country and then potential applicants would be able to see (entry requirements, number of existing students, degrees recognised in their home country, English language, local agents and representatives, and helpful contacts such as the international office within the university and the British council)
- Accommodation: Breakdown of living and rents costs within the local area, communities, availability of accommodation, and a local area guide which has specific information about the area such as (events, sports, food, shopping centres, transportations, students with families, and population).
- Visa application and detailed info on how to apply.

London Business School

- Donation: the school has an interesting campaign which asks local community in London and across the world to donate towards Scholarships and even in time. The campaign is linked with the vision of the school which is: "*Continued business impact: At London Business School, we strive to have a profound impact on the way the world does business. Our communal spirit creates an environment where we support and inspire, helping our people achieve their fullest potential*" [4]. The campaign is running successfully as the figures show that they have raised around £87 million and 56 thousand hours of volunteering to date. The campaign is divided into 6 different areas: (50th anniversary scholarship, LSB fund, reunion 2015, Graduating class gift, Sloan Alumni scholarship, Campus development, Faculty and research). Most of donations come from international institutions, governments, and communities. The school has an independent website for the campaign (<https://lbsfund.london.edu/index.html>) [4].
- Global partnerships with universities and colleges such as Hong Kong University and Columbia business school [4].
- Published information on diversity and specific information for each country [4].

Concluding considerations and recommendations

- Based on the review some changes can be initiated to the institutional website and online visibility to make it more appealing for international students and to gain further insight of key trends in recruitment of international students.

- Country specific information: To show potential student the exact entry requirements, local agents or representatives to contact, information about local community, degrees recognised in each country, number of existing students (it could be by creating students' profile for each country), English language requirements, Visa application and what to do next, and available events.
- Further investment in understanding international markets in terms of changes and demands. This would enhance flexibility of the organisation to meet the expectation of potential students.
- Working closely with key internal sections such as marketing department, faculties, admissions, student services and student union.
- Digital marketing: By creating marketing campaigns for each targeted country or region such as China, India, Middle East and EU (the top international students' senders to the UK).
- Getting recognition and internationalising the institution: Applying for recognition by other countries to save potential students time in researching whether their degree from the institution will be recognised or not. To apply for recognition in other countries the institution can contact Embassies or contact Higher education ministries countries to go through the process. If the institution was successfully recognised, it will be added on the recommended list of the ministry for students wishing to study in the UK.
- There is a great opportunity for institutions to be providing professional courses and postgraduate research degrees to students based in their home countries (Distance learning, blended). Based on the statistics provided in this paper that there are 123,635 students studied distance and online UK degrees in 2012 while being based in their home countries. Some universities provide these courses such as Manchester University, Middlesex University, and East Anglia University. Furthermore, establishing partnerships with local higher educational institutions to enhance local reputation, consideration as well as understanding of the locality needs and challenges.
- Better Media relations: Educational institutions can approach national and international media channels such as E-newspapers, journals, specialist websites to publish case studies or stories relevant to what the school provides, that would create more awareness which potentially could lead to better and higher international student's numbers.
- Creating an international donation campaign such as the one used by London school of business to attract more funds for improvements which will surely have an impact on increasing the level of awareness about the institution internationally. Donations could be from government bodies to

fund students, research, and contribute towards scholarships. The campaign could be directed to improve and educate students from disadvantaged backgrounds, poor families, or students from developing countries.

- To engage with public bodies, including UK government, in matters of support for British HE in a global market.
- The use of international verified and reputable agents and representatives as international students' pipeline with serious consideration of how to manage the risks identified as highlighted in the paper the case of UCL.

Higher education institutions based in the UK should consider enhancing their strategic planning for international students' recruitment strategy through deep understanding of key opportunities and challenges for the UK higher education system as briefly highlighted in the paper. UK higher education institutions should enhance their effort in providing consistent communication to potential students that the UK is a welcoming country for international students, providing clarity around changes in immigration laws and regulations to avoid any uncertainty and disappointment, and enhancement of skills development through their academic offering and providing work placements during and after completion of studies. Furthermore, the review can provide good key takings and learnings for other institutions based in other countries to enhance their international students' recruitment, attraction and visibility.

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