

# **UK International Education: global position and national prospects**

---

**Simon Marginson**

ISBN 1 870679 64 4

Occasional Paper

10.2015

**UK Council  
for International  
Student Affairs**

# **UK International Education: global position and national prospects**

---

**Simon Marginson**

Professor of International Higher Education,  
UCL Institute of Education,  
University College London

**UKCISA**

## About the author

### **Professor Simon Marginson**

Simon Marginson is Professor of International Higher Education at the UCL Institute of Education and Joint Editor of the journal "Higher Education". He is one of the world's best known researchers and commentators on global issues in higher education and the lead author of "International Student Security" (2010).

This paper was first presented as the keynote address at UKCISA's summer 2015 Annual Conference. UKCISA is very grateful to the author for his agreement to reproduce in this format as part of its occasional series of papers aimed at reaching a wider audience.

## Introduction

There is much more to international education than is captured in surveys of student satisfaction. In explaining international education in the UK this paper draws on global sociology, political economy, and the meta-method of critical realism (Bhaskar 2008; Sayer 2000). One assumption of critical realism is that the meanings of our practices are partly positioned below the surface of immediate observation. There is more to social relations than what can be readily picked off by empirical research. The activities of higher and further education institutions have deeper and longer lasting meanings than those conventionally recognized by surveys, by administrative process, by student recruitment, by quality assurance, and by the organisation and conduct of teaching and learning. In the UK international education is seen as a business, in which the lodestone is customer satisfaction. We all know that this is a rather peculiar business: it is about education and so about people, and is a bit messy and open-ended, and also interesting and enriching. But there is much more to international education than that.

Institutions have their own horizon of vision. For most people who work in them, that horizon of vision is meant to be enough. But the conventional institutional horizon is limited. Institutions are focused on their own bottom lines, and on keeping it all together. In the long sweep of history, the main activity in international education is rather different. What really matters is that in international education, we mix people across national boundaries. International education is about building educational relationships across borders. Bringing the world together, or rather bringing certain countries together with the UK. Bringing future leaders together. Contributing to mutual understanding, to the longer term blending of different ways of life and ways of seeing, to helping people to learn to live and work together in a common global space.

Increasingly, in the age of communicative globalisation which began with the Internet, international education is about building a future world society. World society is now closer than it has ever been—for the first time we have full technological pre-conditions for it—though there are still formidable barriers to it, as shown by the UK's current problems with immigration policy. In the last analysis the meaning and purpose of international education is global integration, or rather, partial integration, what we can call 'integration in diversity'. This is much more significant than international education's role in building revenues—except perhaps in the eyes of university financial officers, and Treasury, that are necessarily fixated on the bottom line. Revenue is just a means to an end. It is necessary but not sufficient. It is merely a pooling of resources that motivates HEIs and governments to do global work. People, their sensibilities and their potentials, the structuring of social relations, and global bridge building, are all more lasting and more important than today's budget, which in the long run will be forgotten.

With this larger set of meanings in mind, this paper will situate UK international education in the larger context of the global position of UK higher education. Then the paper will discuss issues and problems in the international education sector itself.

## **Core dilemmas of international education**

At the outset we need to recognise three dilemmas that are at the core of international education, dilemmas that are never wholly resolved (equilibrium is never reached) and whose tensions continue to de-stabilise international education and shape its limits and possibilities. These dilemmas affect not just the UK but international education in every country, though they play out differently from country to country, and from time to time.

### *Tension between free global movement and national territorial sovereignty*

First, there is the tension between the human right to free global movement, and national territorial sovereignty and the right of national citizens/states to control their borders. This tension dominates national politics in the global age, generating active problems in many countries. The arguments on both side of the tension are compelling. Each right is understood in absolute terms, and they cannot be reconciled.

Consider the argument in favour of free global movement. At bottom it is an historical one. These islands have been occupied by human species only intermittently during the last million years, punctuated by ice ages that forced human evacuation. Do any of us really have a special, exclusive and permanent right to one or another piece of the earth's surface, one or another piece of the eco-system? On what basis do we hold that right? By divine right? By genetic inheritance from our ancestors? By luck? By Royal fiat? By law and government as ends in themselves? By the vigilance of the Home Office? By naked force? Why should not others be able to freely enter these islands, for whatever purposes, to make a better life, or just to live, as our ancestors did? Why do we have a greater right to this piece of land than they?

On the other hand, national sovereignty and national citizenship are cornerstones of modern states, and states are the way we organise the world. National citizens have the right to peaceful occupancy and use of the land, whether privately or commonly owned, and perhaps the right to determine who enters into their local setting.

There is no fundamental principle that can permanently reconcile the right of prior occupants with the right of free movement. Nor should the matter be settled by open combat. So as long as we have nations, and especially in a world of variable living standards, with some places more desirable as places of living than others, there will be tensions entailed in cross-border mobility. At bottom this drives the recurring tension between international education policy, and home security and border policy.

We can do our best to take international education out of the firing line, for example by removing it from Net Migration Targets. Yet there is an inescapable overlap between international education. Many students who enter English-speaking or Western European countries think of migration. Why not? International education in the UK is supported by government partly as a source of skilled migrants, as in many countries: 15 per cent of students are in the UK five years after entry, mostly in graduate jobs.

However, when immigration is in the firing line—and it has been the hottest political issue in the UK for half a decade—then EU and non-EU students are vulnerable. The UK needs to

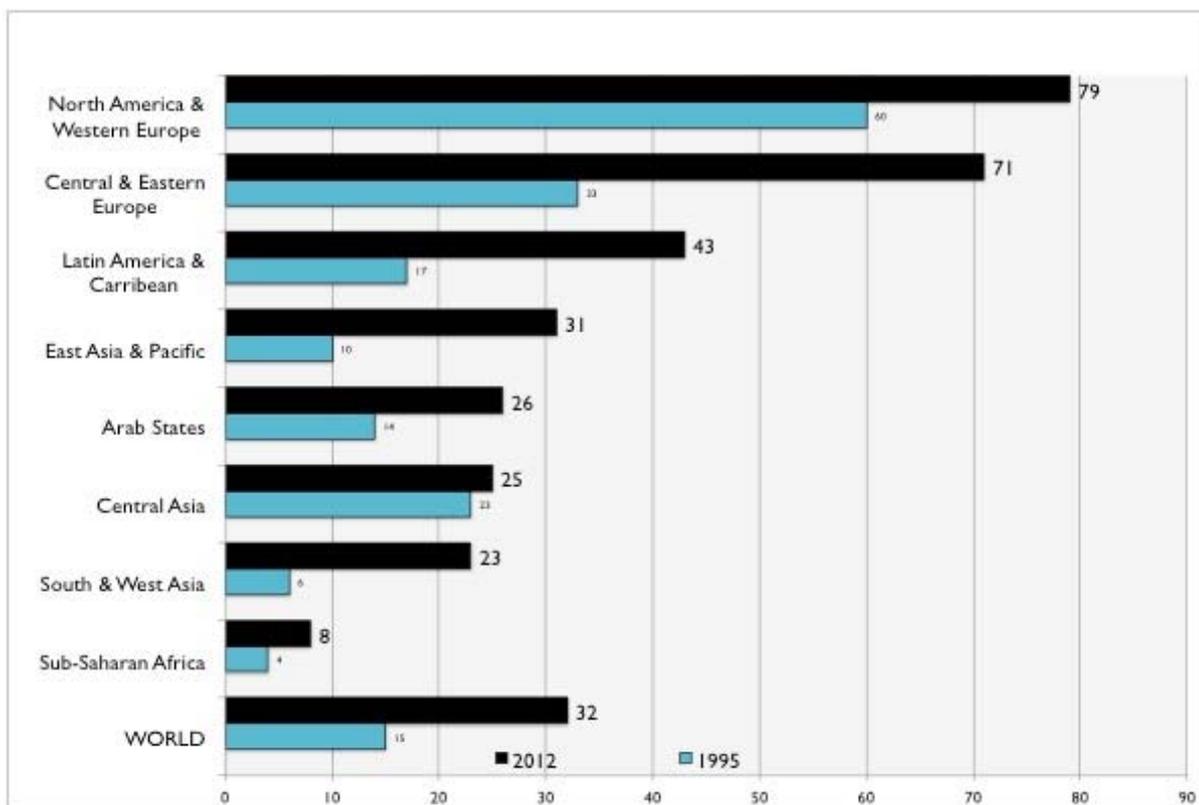
find a workable compromise, with a measure of stability, but cannot. So far in the UKIP era, students have been a secondary concern. EU-region workers have been the big issue: UKIP's Bulgarians and Romanians that steal your job. But the worsening of the non-EU student experience has been collateral damage in the immigration debate, as noted below; and in an ominous intervention six months ago, Theresa May positioned non-EU students as a direct threat to border security (BBC News 2014; Paudel 2014; Havergal 2015). We may hear more of this. We live with the tension between global mobility and national sovereignty. We do our best to rub off the rough edges.

*Tension between the cultural-learning approach to international education, and the commercial approach to international education*

Second, there is the tension between on one hand a commercial and institution-centred approach to international education, and on the other hand a student-centred and cultural-learning approach. Many of us feel we are pulled both ways at once. The commercial approach drives us to produce utilitarian educational offerings at standard cost, customising to the minimum degree necessary, while ensuring that no one is wholly left behind, which is the best achievement of quality assurance. On the other hand, the cultural-learning approach requires us to recruit not just students from China and India who will pay, but to recruit and subsidise students from a much larger range of countries; and it demands that we make an open-ended commitment to whatever extra help is needed to get students through the hurdles of settlement and academic English. Within the resource envelopes that we are handed, and given the scale of international student populations, it is impossible to do this properly for everyone.

Nominally, we attempt to 'reconcile' the two perspectives by using instruments such as quality assurance and customer satisfaction, but if we think this removes the tension, let alone gives us a deep grasp of what is going on, we are kidding ourselves. In reality quality assurance and student surveys reflect the commercial approach rather than the cultural-learning approach. They are necessary but not sufficient. There is a danger that in remaking learning and the self-development into 'customer satisfaction', and in asking students to tick boxes that we ourselves have framed (*not* the 'customer') on the basis of the institution's interest and its way of seeing, we will lose sight of the fact that international experience differs according to where people sit. International education is about students forming themselves, about piloting their own way through a complex world, and everyone does this differently and in their own terms. And international education is a cross-cultural encounter through the medium of academic learning. It is not shopping. The categories 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' in Likert scales conceal a wide range of different cultures, incompatible opinions, and thousands of learning stories.

**Figure 1. Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio by world region, 1995/2012**



Source: UNESCO 2015

*Tension between delivering our own educational tradition to foreigners, and a reciprocal engagement with them*

This leads into the third tension, between on one hand delivering our educational tradition, unchanged, to foreigners, in an unreflecting fashion; and on the other hand a reciprocal engagement with them, in which UK education is transformed, and (without losing an anchor in its strengths) becomes more cross-cultural, global and hybrid.

This tension is complex and demanding. Many students come to the UK because this is the home of standard English, because this education brand has much prestige, and because they want to acquire a UK education in its own often traditional terms. Yet for the most part they do not come to this country, as adults, to make themselves into clones of us, to be more English than the English. The research shows that most international students nurture their founding identity along with their new identity, and interpret the UK curriculum through the lens of their own prior intellectual formation.

And of course the UK curriculum does not have all the knowledge and the answers to life. We are not the last word or the gold standard, despite what our marketing says; and local students have much to gain by learning from international students. But we are not yet good at persuading local students to open their minds to international students, and we have made much less headway on reciprocal cultural engagement in the classroom, except in

isolated programmes. New curricula are expensive in staff time and salaries. Cultural superiority, cultural inertia, commercial imperatives, resource constraints and again the sheer size and diversity of the international student population, combine to block progress in this area. So UK international education chugs along, turning over from one year to the next, well below the level of its educational potential. Fortunately for us perhaps, though not fortunately for international students, the other English-speaking countries also have difficulty meeting the cross-cultural challenge.

### **Global trends shaping international education**

Nevertheless, though our tradition is resistant, change comes regardless. The setting for international education is continually evolving. This feeds into activities on the ground. The paper will look briefly at three sets of trends in the environment in which international education is provided: the growth of participation in tertiary education, the global spread of research, and the rise and growing role of East Asia.

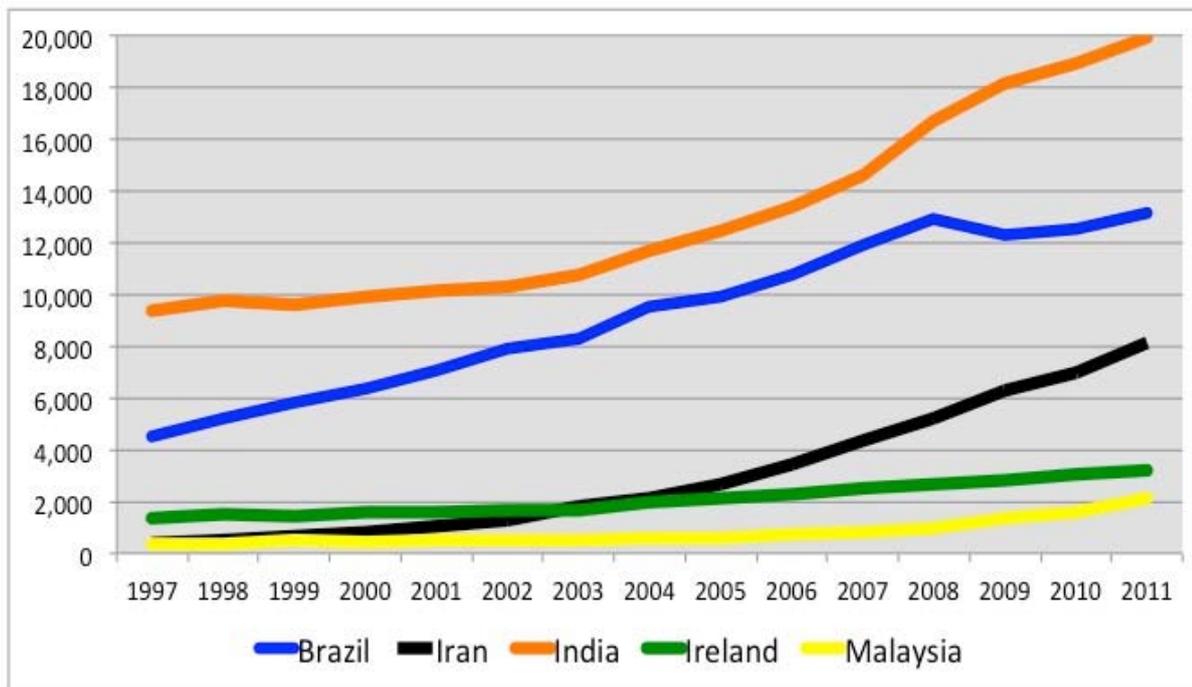
#### *Worldwide participation in tertiary education*

Across the world, there has been sustained growth in participation in tertiary education (which includes two-year programmes as well as higher education) in the last 15 years or so. The Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio or GTER has grown by 1 per cent a year (UNESCO 2015). Growth of 1 per cent a year might not sound like much, but it is 20 per cent in 20 years. Between 1995 and 2012 the worldwide GTER rose from 15 to 32 per cent. Across the world about one third of the school leaver age group enters higher education. The growth is apparent in every world region (Figure 1). In Western Europe and North America four young people in every five enrol in tertiary education. Even in Sub-Saharan Africa, where participation is relatively very low, the GTER has doubled since the mid 1990s. The world is becoming more educated, at a rapid rate.

There is much more growth of educational participation yet to come. The expansion of education is closely associated with growth in the middle class (Marginson, 2015), though in high participation societies education also reaches below the middle class. According to projections developed by Brookings for the OECD (Kharas and Gertz, 2010), between 2009 and 2030—unless there is a common catastrophe like global war or economic depression—the number of middle class people in Asia alone will expand from 0.53 billion to 3.23 billion. In one generation. The Asian middle class is ballooning in size in China, India and Indonesia as more and more families move from the countryside to the cities. At world level the total middle class will increase from 1.85 to 4.88 billion between 2009 and 2030, becoming more than half of the world's total population. These middle class families will all want tertiary education for their children

As is the case today, in 2030 a minority proportion of the global middle class will aspire to international education, regardless of the state of home country education, on the grounds that global educational mobility can create an advantage. If just 1 per cent go aboard for this reason, and the size of the global middle class multiplies by two and a half times in a single generation, then the size of the group which wants international education also grows by two and a half times. The ratio is six times in Asia. We continue to drive towards a more cosmopolitan world.

**Figure 2. Some fast growing science systems: Number of journal papers per year, 1997-2011**



Source: United States' National Science Foundation (NSF) 2014

International education will become much bigger. It is only a question of which nations will service the growth in demand, and also where the best students will go. With participation rising everywhere, a growing capacity to pay for education through both taxation dollars and private fees, and families becoming more sophisticated in their knowledge of education systems, and setting higher standards for themselves; international students will go to those countries and those institutions that offer better value in the outcome, better quality in the experience, and a warmer welcome.

*The worldwide spread of research capacity*

The second major trend is the global spread of research activity in higher education. Not all institutional providers of international education conduct research, but research is a crucial part of the environment in which international education is conducted, and the level of research activity and reputation affects all national systems. The spread of research activity is rapidly changing global relationships in tertiary education.

How is this so? First, among export nations, research reputation plays into the capacity to maintain status and attract students. Leading research nations figure strongly in global rankings, even those not confined to research measures (Marginson 2014). Second, the spread of research lifts the level of educational sophistication in student sending countries. Third, research activity is now a principal form of cross-border networking, including

networking between education export nations and education import nations. All else being equal, those nations able to sustain a strong role in global research networks, underpinned by their research reputation, are better placed to attract large numbers of international students and to recruit high quality students.

Globalisation has changed research. Significant scientific research was once the preserve of a small number of countries in North America, Western Europe, Russia and Japan. Although knowledge was the subject of international exchange, in the organisation and dissemination of knowledge, the national science systems were primary. However, since the advent of the Internet, the one-world science system, based in English-language journals, has become dominant. Except in the United States, the overwhelming bulk of innovations are now sourced from the world science system, not from national circles. Even for researchers in the US, the global science conversation is increasingly important. The majority of high citation papers are now from outside that country (NSF 2014).

To access the one-world science system, nations need the own scientific capacity. They need their own trained research personnel and facilities. They need people able to engage with the world system and collaborate with others. Relations of research exchange and cooperation are crucial to timely knowledge transfer. Accordingly, nations need people capable of contributing to research, of producing science. So there has been tremendous growth in scientific output in many countries. Figure 2 illustrates some examples, including Brazil, India, Iran and Malaysia. Others include Thailand and Saudi Arabia. Along with Iran, the growth of scientific output in East Asia and Singapore has been especially striking. In China total published research papers has grown by 17 per cent a year for more than a decade. East Asia is discussed in more detail below.

For the UK the takeout in summary is this. In future research reputation, networks and partnerships will all be increasingly essential to global effectiveness. An institution's capacity to recruit—whether that institution is in further or higher education—will partly depend on the country's capacity to build and sustain research partnerships.

### *Rise of East Asian higher education*

The third worldwide development is the rise of higher education and science in the Chinese civilizational zone, the systems in East Asia and Singapore. Apart from China, East Asia and Singapore is as wealthy, in per capita income terms, as Western Europe and the UK. In fact Singapore (\$78,744), Hong Kong SAR (\$53,203), Taiwan (\$39,600) and Japan (\$36,315) all had a higher per capita income than the UK (\$36,197) and fast growing South Korea (\$33,140) was not far behind. In China there is much regional unevenness, but Beijing, Shanghai and other parts of Eastern China already have per capita incomes at European levels, and the total size of China's economy is now passing that of the United States in Purchasing Power Parity terms (World Bank 2015).

In all East Asian systems aside from China the Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio now exceeds 60 percent' it is over 80 per cent in Taiwan and almost 100 per cent in Korea (UNESCO 2015). In China the GTER is in the mid 30s. The national target is 40 per cent by 2020, though again there is much unevenness, with Beijing and Shanghai now exceeding 60 per

cent (Yang 2014). In addition, nations in the region are now investing in R&D at levels of GDP equivalent to those in the boutique European knowledge economies in Scandinavia, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and at higher rates than the UK. In terms of total R&D investment, in 2011 East Asia spent \$448 billion, just below the North American \$453 billion and well ahead of the \$320 in Europe/UK (NSF 2014).

**Table 1. Leading universities in Mainland China  
Leiden ranking based on papers published in 2010-2013**

University	Total journal papers published 2010-2013	Proportion of papers in top 10% of their field 2010-2013	Number of papers in top 10% of their field 2006-2009	Number of papers in top 10% of their field 2010-2013	Papers in top 1% of their field 2010-2013
U Cambridge UK	12,170	17.3%	1796	2100	279
U Glasgow UK	4493	13.4%	535	600	69
Tsinghua U	11,203	10.9%	819	1217	124
Peking U	10,882	9.4%	622	1026	84
Fudan U	9581	9.3%	469	891	80
Zhejiang U	14,062	9.5%	730	1182	75
Shanghai Jiao Tong U	13,034	7.8%	664	1020	65
U Science & Technology	6153	11.0%	503	675	64
Nanjing U	7429	8.7%	402	637	59
Harbin IT	6869	8.6%	344	587	56
Sun Yat-sen U	8010	8.0%	315	637	47
Nankai U	4339	11.5%	304	498	45
Dalian U Technology	5390	8.8%	289	473	45
Huazhong U S&T	7532	8.5%	228	637	44
Shandong U	7538	7.0%	275	526	40

Source: Leiden University 2015

China, where GDP has grown continuously at an annual average of just below 10 per cent for 35 years, is in the process of establishing the world's second strongest system of higher education and second strongest science system. Research has been boosted under the 211 Programme to create research universities, followed by 985 Programme to foster top 39 World-Class Universities (Salmi 2009). In the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU 2014), China's nation's number of top 500 research universities rose from 8 in 2004 to 32 in 2014. In the next decade China's total annual R&D investment, and the nation's annual number of research papers, will pass those of the United States. The national R&D funding target is 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2020.

China and the other East Asian nations benefit from the deep tradition of Confucian educational practices in the home. This tradition, together with focused state policies of improvement in schooling, explains the exceptional performance of secondary school students in the OECD's PISA comparison—the top seven systems in PISA mathematics are all from East Asia or Singapore, providing a strong platform for learning at tertiary level. At the same time, all governments are building world-class research universities, and in some cases strong technical-vocational second tertiary sectors, in rapid time. The pace of change is truly astounding. You have to go to the region to really feel it.

It is clear that in future much of our knowledge will come from East Asia, a large proportion of the world's mobile graduate labour will also be from the region, and the majority of the world's PhD graduates will have been trained in either China or India. As Table 1 shows, already China has nine universities that produce more high citation (top 10 per cent of their field) published science papers than the University of Glasgow, which in terms of research quantity and quality is at about the halfway point in the Russell Group. It takes a decade before the effects of increased investment in research shows up in high citation rates, and global rankings. In future China, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore will be stronger in terms of published science—probably much stronger—than they are now. It will be vital for the UK to build effective research partnerships in emerging (or rather, emerged) East Asia.

### **The UK's global position**

Let's look briefly at the UK's global position in research before considering international education.

#### *Research*

Using the Shanghai ARWU as the guide, the UK has six research universities (Cambridge, Oxford, UCL, Imperial, Manchester and Edinburgh) in the world top 50, twenty universities in the world's top 200, and a total of 38 universities in the top 500 (ARWU 2015). This is a great performance for a nation the size of the UK, and places the UK as the second strongest research system in the world at present, though it is well behind the US. The UK's standing in research grounds the country's position in the international student market, and underpins the reputation of the UK as the intellectual home of standard English. All of further and higher education draw benefits from UK research; even though the quality of the UK's teaching and learning may not be as strong, in comparative terms, as UK research. Results of the OECD's comparative testing of adult literacy place UK graduates in the middle of the OECD group (OECD 2014).

The UK overall has an above average rate of research collaboration, as measured by the proportion of published papers that involve co-authorship with foreign authors. At the same time, the patterns of collaboration vary greatly from country to country. As Table 2 shows, on the basis of data for papers published in 2011, the UK has exceptionally strong patterns of collaboration with many countries in Europe, and also with the English-speaking nations outside North America (South Africa, New Zealand, Australia). On the other hand the UK is

weak in research partnerships with South Korea (in these data 0.47 is exceptionally low), China (0.56), now the world’s second largest research producer, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan; and also Iran and Saudi Arabia where research is growing rapidly. Collaboration with India at 0.68 is also disappointing (NSF 2014).

More immediately worrying—given both the rise of East Asia as a science region, and the importance of East Asian countries as sources of international students—is that the UK’s pattern of collaboration in East Asia is weaker than that of the other main English speaking countries. Much weaker. The United States has rates of collaboration as follows: China 1.10, Korea 1.25, Taiwan 1.22 and Singapore 0.74. Australia is similar in China 1.11 and Taiwan 1.14, weak in Korea at only 0.54, but strong in Singapore 1.48. Canada is weaker than both but ahead of the UK except in Singapore (NSF 2014).

**Table 2. Joint research publication by UK authors in science papers, 2011**  
**Patterns by country—high collaboration rates and low collaboration rates**  
*1.00 is the expected level of co-authored papers given each country’s overall patterns of collaboration*

High rates of collaboration		Low rates of collaboration	
Ireland	2.17	South Korea	0.47
Greece	1.66	China	0.56
South Africa	1.49	Saudi Arabia	0.58
Netherlands	1.45	Japan	0.62
Denmark	1.40	Iran	0.66
Hungary	1.38	Singapore	0.67
Norway	1.36	India	0.68
New Zealand	1.30	Taiwan	0.71
Finland	1.28	Argentina	0.73
Australia	1.24	Egypt	0.74
Sweden	1.23	United States	0.77
Italy	1.22	Mexico	0.78
Poland	1.20	Canada	0.85

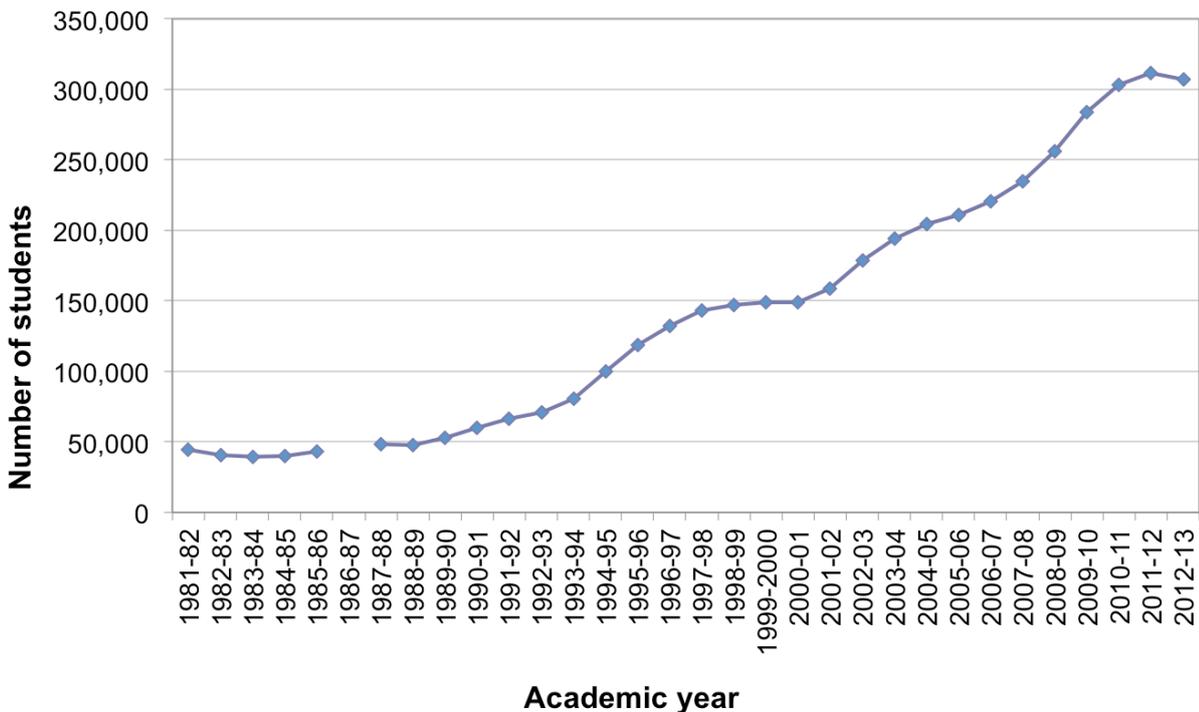
Source: NSF 2014

Why is UK research collaboration relatively weak in East Asia? The answer lies in the UK’s success in relation to European research funding schemes. The OECD R&D data show that the UK is the OECD country with the second highest level of foreign source income as a proportion of total income for research, 19.8 per cent of research income in 2012. Only

Ireland (21.4 per cent) was more dependent on foreign source income. The level in France was 7.6 per cent, Germany was 4.3 per cent and the US 3.8 per cent. UK researchers are the group most successful in the competition for European research funding. One cause and also consequence of this success is that the UK collaborates heavily with European colleagues. The opportunity cost is the low rate of collaboration in Asia. There is no equivalent of Horizon 2020 grants and similar schemes in Asia, and if there were, the UK’s researchers would not be eligible to access such schemes. But it is interesting to note that UK research patterns seem especially resource dependent, i.e. driven by financial incentives, perhaps more so than research in many other countries.

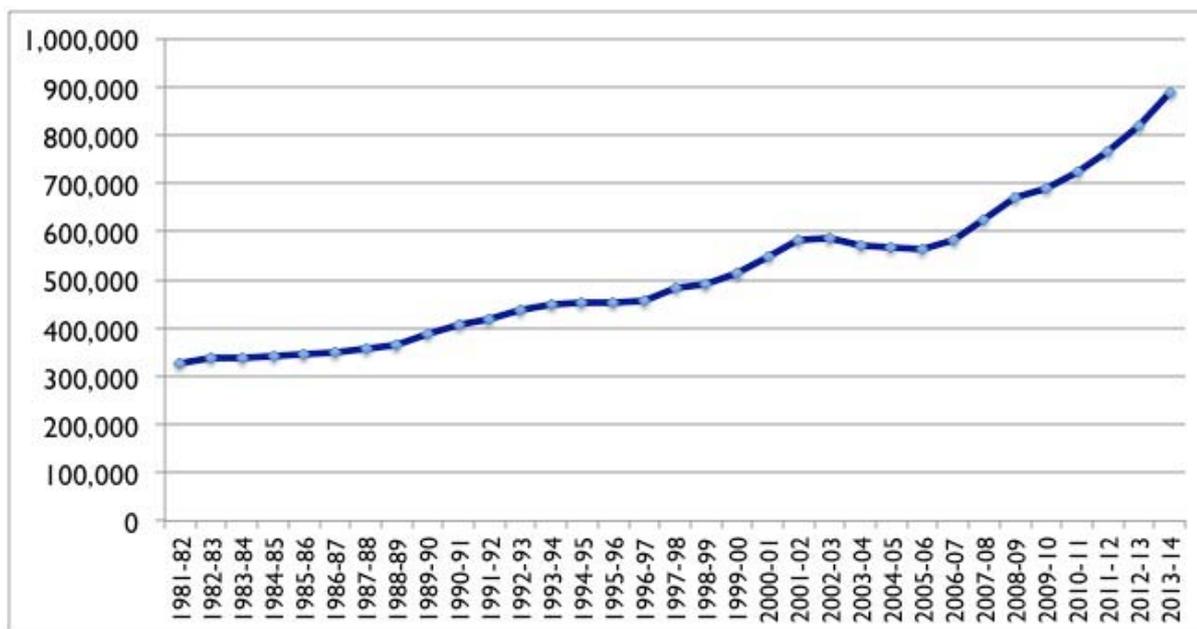
Research relationships can be very generative. They take us beyond the limits of a solely commercial approach based on customer satisfaction. Research relationships allow for reciprocal interactions between bright people, where each side can learn from the other. Clearly, UK higher education has a problem in East Asia. It has yet to successfully develop enough of those deep research partnerships that can ground long term country-country and HEH-HEI relationships and anchor the more volatile student market. Such deep research partnerships, based on trust and understanding that grows over time, can also underpin the evolution of stronger cross-cultural learning in the classroom.

**Figure 3. Full-time international (EU and non-EU) students in the UK, higher education, 1981-82 to 2013-14**



Source: HESA 2014

**Figure 4. Total International students in the USA, higher education, 1981-82 to 2013-14**



Source: IIE 2015

*International education*

The paper now turns to international education. At the worldwide level, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship is growing at an increasing rate, from 1.1 million in 1980 and 1.3 million in 1990, to 2.1 million in 2000 and 4.1 million in 2010. The latest figure from the OECD (2014) is 4.5 million in 2012. The UK’s aggregate position is strong. In 2012, the country enrolled 13 per cent of all such students, behind only the US at 16 per cent and well ahead of Germany, France and Australia each at 6 per cent (OECD 2014). The UK is also the strongest nation in all forms of offshore enrolment, including bricks and mortar campuses, twinning, and distance and online provision.

As you know, and Figure 3 illustrates, UK education exports experienced a steep climb in the previous decade before they seemed to hit the wall in 2012-13. There was a small recovery in 2013-14 but it was no a return to the previous high growth rate. It is instructive to compare the trend line in the UK with the graph over the same period in the US (Figure 4). The US started from a higher position than the UK in the early 1980s, grew at a more modest rate than the UK, and experienced a major wobble in the early 2000s. This was triggered by the bombings in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent Patriot Act, which retarded entry from the Middle East and (curiously) East Asia. But the American graph indicates the substantial upswing in the Obama years. Obama has thrown the door open. The number of international students entering the US is now growing at almost 10 per cent per annum (IIE 2015).

Comparing recent trends in the UK and US in terms of country of origin, between 2010-11 and 2013-14, the UK has seen a sharp fall in numbers from South Asia, while there has

been a slight fall only in Indian students entering the US. The UK has seen a significant decline in numbers from Saudi Arabia, while the US has seen strong growth. Both countries are being sustained by growth from China but the rate is greater in the US. In the UK numbers for Hong Kong SAR, Malaysia and Singapore are up, and Nigeria (the third largest source country) is holding steady. In the UK there have been moderate declines in the number of students entering the country from three of its major source countries: South Korea, Taiwan and Japan (HESA 2015; IIE 2015).

In Australia the export sector saw substantial falls between 2009 and 2013, largely in Vocational Education and Training. In 2014 there was a substantial recovery. Student numbers in higher education numbers are now at record levels. While Vocational Education has not returned to the 2009 levels, it has made up most of the gap (AEI 2015). There has been a surge in numbers from South Asia, despite the fact that like the UK, Australia has imposed tighter controls on rogue colleges and bogus courses. We can surmise that a chief reason why Australia has recovered ground in South Asia is that it now offers a more generous post-graduation work rights scheme than previously.

### **Problems in UK policy and regulation**

Arguably, UK international education now faces larger challenges than it has ever faced. The global higher education environment is becoming more engaged, more networked in research, more comparative—global rankings and benchmarking in specific areas are becoming increasingly influential in international recruitment, national government expectations, and domestic strategy—more reputation driven, and more competitive in the recruitment of students, especially high quality students. Leading research institutions such as Cambridge draw the majority of their postgraduates from offshore. At the same time, austerity policy means that Cambridge and many other institutions must earn enough international student revenue to survive. Higher and further education institutions have to juggle several balls in the air at once: marketing, reputation, recruitment, servicing, and successful academic survival and graduation—not to mention deep international student learning, intercultural interaction, and internationalisation at home. Then there are the intractable problems of finding the motivators that move academics to change their teaching and curricula; and finding the triggers that motivate home country students to turn their heads, and look, and listen.

And institutions must do all of this in a setting in which everyone, from Oxford and Cambridge down, is being rocked constantly by a hostile immigration debate, and by unstable and ambiguous policies and regulations. We are working in a setting in which the Prime Minister has long promised to cut net overseas migration, which includes temporary migration by international students, by half or more. Net migration is higher than when the last government, the coalition, took office (Travis 2015). But the new one-party government will be under continuing pressure from UKIP, and its own backbench. There is an ever-present possibility the curtain will suddenly come down. Yet the government wants to lift total revenues from international students by 60 per cent, to £30 billion a year by 2020 (Ratcliffe 2015). As the Americans say, ‘go figure’.

Consider the list of problems and barriers now affecting non-EU students. Their own special health care charge, the IHC, though one that does not deliver a better service. Landlord checks of student status—how unpleasant, and how open to abuse. Whoever thought of that one clearly is not renting, and is probably not female. Slow visa processing and high costs. ‘Credibility’ interviews, subjective assessments of genuine student intent. Requirements for rapid biometric processing at post offices that hit students immediately on arrival, often while they are looking for places to live and getting to grips with academic administration (UKCISA 2015a; UKCISA 2015b).

Consider the problems and barriers affecting providers, especially in Further Education, as they make their contribution to intercultural learning and global society. Institutions now administer the points-based system. Yet FE institutions are not trusted with language assessment. Instead they are required to work through SELTs centres. But—the number of SELTs centres has shrunk dramatically. At the same time, the refusal rate for loss of the Tier 4 license has dropped from 20 per cent to 10 per cent, threatening to readily catch out institutions with small numbers of students. The number of sponsored visas in FE fell from 114,000 in the year to June 2011, to 20,000 in the year to June 2014, though the number in higher education increased by 6000. FE students can work only 10 hours a week; HE students can work 20 hours. There is a total ban on work for students in private colleges. Arbitrary and unfair (UKCISA 2015a; UKCISA 2015b). Consider the 1 per cent decline in the number of ELT students, and the 3 per cent drop among private ELT providers, the majority of all ELT providers (Custer 2015).

However, if we are to effectively challenge these policies, and this increasingly tough system of regulation—which has clearly been designed to slow the flow of student numbers—we need hard evidence. Public statements often refer to anecdotal evidence that the UK is no longer seen as a welcoming place in international markets. We need hard, survey-based evidence from across the world on a comprehensive scale. Anecdotal evidence has little value. We need data that show which markets are most affected and by how much, and to what extent that prospective students are shifting to other markets. We need to collect and publish such data even if it means that there will be some negative publicity for the UK in the short term. Research is not there to make us feel good, it is there to ground and drive our development and policy strategies.

### **Graduate work rights**

Up till 2012 the UK offered non-EU graduates two years to find a job. When this was scaled down to four months, and the tough requirement for a graduate job in the field of study worth £24,000 a year, the number of graduates with extended visas dropped by 87 per cent. Meanwhile both Canada and Australia were moving work rights in the opposite direction. In international competition for good students, and perhaps competition just for volume in South Asia, work rights for graduates is the crunch issue.

It is the crunch issue because it is often essential for paying back loans for expensive tuition and city living costs, and because it hits the fault line between education and immigration. In international education, countries are being judged on their capacity to sort that tension. At bottom, this is the tension between people mobility and national sovereignty that was

discussed previously. No country can solve that problem, which is endemic to nation-states within a global world, but is essential to find a workable compromise. Such a compromise provides a steady flow of high quality international graduate contributors to the skilled professions, who are welcomed and encouraged and supported, thereby globalising the economy in useful ways, and provides also for a smaller steady flow of high quality immigrants—while also ensuring that graduate work is preceded by bona fide education, and the education and training gateway does not collapse into ‘cash for citizenship’ schemes. Canada, Australia and the US are currently managing the migration/education and stay/go balances better than is the UK.

It is true that Canada, Australia and the US do not have to contend with Nigel Farage, or the present UK paranoia (fanned by the tabloids) about regional European identity, but a more balanced approach to the education/migration interface, led by government, would help with both of these problems also. As it is, higher education and further education themselves have been left to manage these tensions in part themselves. Yet the educational institutions cannot substitute for national leadership, effective government and balanced system administration. They lack the training, and they are not accountable to the public in the same sense that public service is accountable.

Most students, international and local, enrol in degree programmes with at least half an hour on their employment and career prospects down the line. It is sad that the UK government, and in particular the Home Secretary, has managed to turn international graduate work into a negative. It has become presented to the public as a potential danger to the country. Yet at the same time, all the focus for domestic students is on employability. The country ought to transform international graduate work and careers from a minus into a plus, and to encourage institutions to focus on enhancing graduate employability, both in the source countries and in the UK. This would be good for the students, and would make UK international education more globally competitive.

In order to focus effectively on graduate employability of international students, it is necessary to have better data on their work and career outcomes. We know what happens to domestic students, where they go after graduation. But though i-Graduate collected some data in 2012, overall we have taken little systematic research-based interest in what happens to international graduates. It will be challenging to collect such data, but we need it, and international students need it. They have a right to have it.

### **Intercultural mixing and learning**

Finally, what about the large issue of intercultural learning? The recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) survey of student attitudes told us a number of things that we already knew, or we already sensed to be true. More than three-quarters of all students think studying alongside students from other countries is good preparation for work, but a higher more than 90 per cent of EU and non-EU students have this opinion, indicating that international students are more positive about cultural mixing than are local students. Some local students see disadvantages in being in a mixed classroom. For example 34 per cent of respondents think that including international students in the classroom lowers the quality of academic discussion; and 25 per cent of all students think that non English speakers ‘slow

down' classes, though 47 per cent disagree with this. Further, 26 per cent of all students say international students require more assistance from lecturers, while 44 per cent disagreed with this (HEPI 2015).

Other research evidence confirms that international students are more motivated than are local students to engage actively in cross-cultural learning and relationships. (Marginson et al. 2010). The fact that HEPI found that between a quarter and a third of local students are bothered by the presence of international students has to be a concern. These are high numbers. They show that overall, we are failing to effectively use international students and cultural diversity as a positive pedagogical medium, and as a new set of learning tools, though these possibilities are often noted. We must face the fact that 'global learning' is for the most part shallow, or largely rhetorical. We teach mostly the same old stuff. We have not persuaded the majority of local students to engage globally, in the manner that international students engage globally.

The HEPI survey also found that 30 per cent of all students disagree that shared classrooms enable students to improve their foreign language skills. We can assume that nearly all of those students are local students. The most recent HESA data shows that in 2014 only 8000 first year students in the UK enrolled in a foreign language programme. That is less than 2 per cent of all first year students (Davies 2015). We have a way to go.

On the other hand, there are some great ideas around, about integration and intercultural learning. On this topic, one of the best items I have seen is the joint UKCISA/Warwick booklet on *Promoting Integration on Campus* (2014), by Helen Spencer-Oatey, Daniel Dauber, and Stephen Williams. Strongly recommended.

## Conclusions

Let us move to overall conclusions:

1. Rapid growth in global mobility is certain; the only question is where the mobile students go. As ever the competition is for good students, not just volume
2. Research performance continues to hold up the global reputation of the whole UK higher education system.
3. However, weak research collaboration in East Asia is a problem and in the longer term will undermine UK international education efforts in East Asia unless it is corrected.
4. It would not be entirely true to say that the UK is 'unwelcoming' of international students, but there is no doubt that the environment for non-EU students is more negative than for many years, for example in relation to visa processing, surveillance, and postgraduate work rights. These problems undermine both the supply of places and international student demand for those places. In the present setting it will be difficult to increase exports by two thirds.
5. Educationally, we are not sufficiently cross-cultural. We have scarcely begun the process of deep intercultural learning among local students.

But these difficulties are not the sum of what we do. As was stated at the outset, above all international education is about people, not about rules or about money. Resources and systems are just the means to the end, which is intercultural education. International education is about changing people's lives, about new forms of freedom, and about making a new kind of semi-integrated world. What we do in international education is really important. We have much to be positive about.

## References

- Academic Ranking of World Universities, ARWU (2015). *Academic Ranking of World Universities*. <http://www.shanghairanking.com/World-University-Rankings-2014/USA.html>
- Australian International Education, AEI (2015). Data on international student numbers. <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/pages/data-and-research.aspx>
- BBC News (2014). Theresa May backs student visa crackdown. *BBC News*, 21 December. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30570248>
- Bhaskar, R. (2008). *Dialectic: The pulse of freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Custer, S. (2015). UK: No reprieve for ELT sector as numbers fall and policies toughen. *The PIE News*, 14 May. <http://thepienews.com>
- Davies, C. (2015). Only one in 65 new students chooses a modern language degree—we need a rethink. *The Conversation*, 19 February.
- Havergal, C. (2015). International students are ‘pawns in a political game’. *Times Higher Education*, 15 January, pp. 6-7.
- Higher Education Policy Institute, HEPI (2015). *What do Home Students Think of Studying with International Students?* HEPI Report 76, June. Oxford: HEPI.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (UK), HESA (2015). Data on international students. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats>
- Institute for International Education, IIE (2015). *Open Doors Data*. <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data>
- Kharas, H., & Gertz, G. (2010). The new global middle class: A cross-over from West to East. In C. Liu (Ed.), *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond economic transformation*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Leiden University (2015). *The Leiden Ranking 2014*. Centre for Science and Technology Studies. <http://www.leidenranking.com/ranking/2014>
- Marginson, S. (2014). University rankings and social science. *European Journal of Education*, 49 (1), pp. 45-59.
- Marginson, S. (2015). *High Participation Systems of Higher Education*. Paper in preparation.
- Marginson, S., Nyland, C., Sawir, E. and Forbes-Mewett, H. (2010). *International Student Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

National Science Foundation, NSF (2014). *Science and Engineering Indicators 2014*. <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind14/>

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD (2014). *Education at a Glance 2014*. Paris: OECD.

Paudel, S. (2014). Theresa May: Don't close the doors on international students. *The Guardian*, 22 December. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/dec/22/theresa-may-international-students>

Ratcliffe, R. (2015). Education exports to rise by two-thirds, says Jo Johnson. *The Guardian*, 1 June.

Salmi, J. (2009). *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities*. Washington: World Bank Publications.

Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.

Spencer-Oatey, H., Dauber, D. and Williams, S. (2014). *Promoting Integration on Campus: Principles, practices and issues for further exploration*. London: UKCISA.

Travis, A. (2015). Net migration to UK higher than when coalition took office. *The Guardian*, 26 February.

UK Council for International Student Affairs, UKCISA (2015a). *Annual Review 2014-2015*. London: UKCISA.

UK Council for International Student Affairs, UKCISA (2015b). *International Students in the UK: Strengths, challenges and opportunities. A report on the UKCISA Regional Conferences 2014-15*. London: UKCISA.

United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2015). UNESCO Institute for Statistics data on education. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.

World Bank (2015). *Data and statistics*. <http://data.worldbank.org>

Yang, Po (2014). *Chinese Higher Education Expansion*. Paper presented at the Summer School on Higher Education Research, National Research University - Higher School of Economics, Institute of Education, Pushkin, St. Petersburg, 13 June.

---

UKCISA

9–17 St Albans Place  
London N1 0NX  
T +44 (0)20 7288 4330  
F +44 (0)20 7288 4360  
[www.ukcisa.org.uk](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk)

UKCISA is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (Company Number: 4507287) and a charity registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales (Charity Number: 1095294). Its registered office is at 9–17 St Albans Place London N1 0NX.

---

**The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK’s national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.**

**It does so through research, print and web-based publications, a national training programme, dedicated advice lines for students and advisers, and liaison and advocacy with institutions, agencies and government.**

**Its aims are to:**

- **increase support for international education and raise awareness of its values and benefits**
- **promote opportunities for, and identify and work to reduce obstacles and barriers to, greater student mobility**
- **encourage best practice, professional development and the highest quality of institutional support for international students throughout the education sector**