

Foreword

International students add value to the UK. We bring diverse perspectives, linguistic traditions, and cultural diversity to classrooms, enriching British education. We contribute to the social and economic vitality of the places in the UK we call home through paid work, volunteering, and community involvement. After completing our studies, the networks and connections we establish in the UK support long-term global cultural, academic, and business links.

Amid great challenges faced by the world in recent years, we celebrate the updated UK Government International Education Strategy and its emphasis on enhancing the international student experience. This strategy brings great opportunities, as well as substantial responsibilities to ensure that these international students receive appropriate support and incentives to thrive.

As an indispensable part of the UK academic community, we believe that our voices and lived experiences should play a vital role in progressing this agenda. We want to develop a world-class student experience and uphold the values of academic integrity, utmost respect to institutions' staff and peers, and responsible engagement.

The #WeAreInternational Student Charter, which will be subject to ongoing review, aims to guide reflection, holistic change, and sustainable growth toward fairness and inclusion on campus and beyond. It also aims to foster constructive dialogue and mutual understanding between all the stakeholders involved, many of whom already offer world-class international student support.

We hope that this charter contributes to building a world-class international student experience, where these principles are reflected in institutional policy and practice through ongoing collaborative work with students, students' unions, UKCISA and the wider sector.

Simran Mahajan

Chair of UKCISA Student Advisory Group, on behalf of the #WeAreInternational Student Ambassadors

“As a former international student, I understand the importance of valuing the student voice. I'm proud that the #WeAreInternational Student Charter is led by students, with significant contributions from across the education sector.”

Lord Karan Bilimoria CBE DL

UKCISA President

“The voice of international students is vital to ensure that their needs are at the heart of enhancing the international student experience. The #WeAreInternational Student Charter outlines what we're all striving for in the UK – a world-class educational experience.”

Professor Sir Steve Smith

HMG International Education Champion

“We hope that this charter will foster a greater dialogue between educational providers and their international students. We encourage educational providers to use the charter and embed the principles into their international student experience strategies.”

Anne Marie Graham

UKCISA Chief Executive

“The #WeAreInternational Student Charter sets out the most important principles for the international education sector to focus on. It captures what UK universities should prioritise

in their strategies, and I hope that colleagues across the sector will support #WeAreInternational.”

Professor Koen Lamberts
UKCISA Chair

Introduction

The #WeAreInternational Student Charter is a student-led document, written by UKCISA’s #WeAreInternational student ambassadors, and developed with the input of students and staff from across the international education sector in the UK.

The charter provides guidance on the fundamental principles for delivering a world-class international student experience, from pre-arrival to post-graduation.

As supporters of #WeAreInternational, institutions and organisations are pledging to work towards the provision of the highest level of international student experience and support, according to the five principles highlighted in the #WeAreInternational Student Charter.

#WeAreInternational Student Charter

1) Create a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable environment for international students in the UK

International students represent a diverse body of people from different cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic, religious, ideological, and political backgrounds as well as those with migratory status. This diversity is a point for celebration and should not pose risks to student safety, dignity, and overall experience.

External events or internal changes in institutional policies can affect international students in different ways; therefore, institutions should be mindful of the potential impacts of any given policy. Intercultural awareness should be nurtured across all organisational levels of education providers to promote clarity and accessibility of information, fostering an equitable environment for international students.

2) Value international students’ perspectives and voices in institutional policy and decision-making

Education providers and the international education community would benefit in multiple ways from recognising and including international students’ voices in the institutional structures and decision-making spaces.

It is encouraged that institutional strategic plans and governance strategies are designed through active consideration of the international student experience in the short, mid, and long term, involving the multiple stakeholders who comprise the academic and wider community. Close collaboration and involvement of student bodies such as students’ unions, clubs, and societies are pivotal to the promotion of these principles.

3) Integrate sustainability as a core value in institutional internationalisation strategies

International students and education providers are part of a wider context that presents challenges and opportunities in relation to climate change.

Providers should design strategies to address the climate crisis, involving international students as stakeholders in the decision-making process, and considering sustainable alternatives to any policies and practices that have potential negative impacts on the environment.

4) Monitor and evaluate existing available support and provision for international students on an ongoing basis

Sustainable and impactful change in the international student experience comes from cohesive and interconnected actions and strategies rather than from ad hoc or occasional efforts.

Collaboration across teams as well as between staff and students should be used to evaluate current support; to identify new and enduring obstacles to a world-class international student experience; and to make available more robust data upon which decisions can be made.

5) Make available targeted support for international students in every area of the student experience

It is recognised that international students face specific challenges and require different support from domestic students, in order to achieve parity of experience, and therefore targeted support should be considered at different stages of the international student experience:

Visas and immigration

As visa sponsors, education providers have a responsibility to ensure that international students have access within their institution to timely, accurate and consistent information on immigration-related issues, including application, arrival, entitlements, and responsibilities, signposting to external sources of information and advice where relevant.

Although international students understand that they must abide by immigration law, education providers should ensure that every effort is made to avoid immigration-related issues that have a negative impact on the student experience. Understanding the sensitive nature of information relating to migratory status, institutions should seek to communicate mindfully with prospective and enrolled students.

Making a home in the UK

As host institutions, education providers have an important role in supporting international students to navigate life in the UK, through the promotion of spaces and structures where international students can have access to straightforward information about key areas such as access to healthcare, accommodation, transport, and finances. Legal, cultural, and economic conditions of access to services in these areas can be challenging for international students, which makes institutional support crucial throughout the whole international student journey.

Institutions should also assist international students to navigate socially and culturally, by proactively facilitating the integration of domestic and international students, promoting the connection between current students and alumni, and publicising content from trusted sources that supports a safe, healthy, and positive international student experience.

Academic experience

While all international students admitted to courses in the UK will have demonstrated minimum requirements for study, ensuring that all students receive the help they need to meet their specific educational needs is integral to providing a high-quality education. In this context, international students should be supported to transition smoothly into UK academic life and to be fully integrated into the academic community and its practices.

Institutions should recognise that academic standards and pedagogical relationships vary considerably across cultures, and international students should receive support and accessible guidance to enable them to properly navigate the assessment criteria and teaching structure used in the UK academic environment. Assistance should also cover guidance and advice on areas that include academic writing, academic integrity, and the relationship with peers and academic staff such as personal tutors and module convenors.

Physical and mental wellbeing

Support for physical and mental wellbeing within and beyond the university should be clearly signposted to international students, and student support services should be adequately prepared to accommodate the full diversity of the international student community, in terms of culture and nationality, level, and mode of study.

International students face unique challenges, such as culture shock, diverse understandings of wellbeing and healthcare practices, and time-zone differences that affect access to counselling services, when studying remotely. Education providers should consider these unique challenges faced by international students and reach out to them through different communication and engagement strategies in order to make access to wellbeing services inclusive.

Careers and employability

At its best, a UK education offers international students a springboard for their future careers. However, international students often encounter specific challenges when accessing careers and employability support, which can undermine their experiences, compared to those of domestic students.

Education providers can play a pivotal role in enhancing international student employability by structuring specific career services and tools for international students and embedding professional experience opportunities in different levels and modes of study when possible. Knowledge and networking related to work and employment tend to be constructed tacitly by domestic students and need to be made explicit in order to promote parity of experience for international students.

Institutions can also provide additional support by proactively informing employers about the benefits of international graduates and the possibilities opened up by the new Graduate route visa. Signposting to information from trusted sources about work-related opportunities available to international students is crucial for students, whether they intend to connect academic and professional experiences during their studies, find post-study opportunities in the UK, or return to their home countries after graduation. International student employability promotes a positive experience for students themselves and provides a platform for projecting UK higher education globally as an inclusive environment and an effective platform for personal and professional development.