



**UNIVERSITIES UK  
INTERNATIONAL**  
STRATEGY 2021-23

# UNIVERSITIES UK INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY 2021–23

This strategy sets out what Universities UK International (UUKi) aims to achieve in the period covered by the final two years of Universities UK's strategic plan, 2021-23. It reaffirms our central goal:

**to enable UK universities to flourish internationally, through our unique ability to represent them and act in their collective interests.**

This strategy recognises that our current focus on **international student recruitment, international research collaboration, transnational education and outward student mobility** aligns with our members' priorities and with UUK's Strategic Plan. However, it also recognises that we need to be agile – to anticipate and adapt to new challenges facing our sector, such as climate change and shifting geopolitics. It places greater emphasis on providing strategic support to universities and the individuals who lead international teams within them.

Finally, we want to create a more flexible structure, with a greater emphasis on cross-team working and clearer progression opportunities, in order to support the development and retention of the outstanding people who make UUKi a success.

Throughout, 'universities' refers to all designated Higher Education Institutions in the UK. Although we are a directorate of Universities UK, we receive grant funding from Guild HE, Research England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland to act on behalf of the whole of the UK higher education sector.

## PURPOSE

**At Universities UK International, our purpose is to enable UK universities to flourish internationally through our unique ability to represent them and act in their collective interests.**

## AIMS

- **Grow and diversify onshore RECRUITMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**
- **Support the development of sustainable, scalable TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION**
- **Enhance the scale and impact of INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION**
- **Increase the proportion of students with INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE, especially those from low participation backgrounds**

**Support UK universities to develop the capabilities, understanding and resilience to meet new challenges**

## OBJECTIVES

- **ENABLE UK universities to develop and realise their international ambitions**
- **INFLUENCE the framework conditions that enable UK universities to thrive internationally**
- **CREATE new opportunities that deliver clear benefits to our members**

## ACHIEVING OUR AIMS: PRIORITIES

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Our strategic aims are long-term. In the period covered by this plan, our focus will be on the most significant opportunities and challenges in relation to each aim. We set out our priorities in this section.

### → AIM: Grow and diversify onshore recruitment of international students

#### PRIORITIES:

- Mitigate the impact of changes in fee and loan status on EU student demand, and the ongoing challenges created by Covid-19.
- Diversify international recruitment through combined action by the sector and UK government, including by identifying barriers to recruitment.
- Improve the promotion of the UK as a study destination.
- Influence the development of a stable and competitive immigration policy, and maximise the impact of the Graduate route.
- Promote the UK's strengths in international student experience, and act to improve areas of weakness.

#### KPI:

- Total number of international students – progress towards **600,000 TARGET** (HESA data) [target = 556,625 by 2023, recovery to pre-pandemic levels].
- Signs of recovery of EU student numbers from 2021/22 baseline (HESA data).

### → AIM: Enhance the scale and impact of international research collaboration

#### PRIORITIES:

- Influence UK government policy in relation to international research collaboration, especially in relation to Official Development Assistance strategy and advanced economies.
- Increase participation rates in Horizon Europe compared to the last years of Horizon 2020.
- Maximise the impact of new UK government investments in international collaboration.
- Deliver outstanding services to support UK universities to strengthen and extend international research networks.
- Identify opportunities for new funded programmes that support the sector in international research collaboration and work to deliver them for the sector.

#### KPI:

- Percentage share of total participations in Horizon Europe to show improvement compared to final year of Horizon 2020 (EU data).
- Total non-EU international Research & Innovation income – year-on-year growth (HESA data).

→ **AIM: support the development of scalable, sustainable transnational education**

**PRIORITIES:**

- Identify barriers to the development and growth of transnational education (TNE) in priority markets.
- Ensure the International Education Strategy and Free Trade Agreements are effective in removing barriers to TNE.
- Enable universities to develop scalable and sustainable TNE through insight, analysis, access and opportunities for peer learning and collective action.
- Influence the quality assurance and regulation of TNE to build confidence at home and overseas.
- Contribute to the development of better understanding of the value of TNE and student outcomes.

**KPI:**

- Progress towards or removal of one or more barrier(s) to the development of TNE in a priority market.
- An increase in the number of institutions with more than 1,000 TNE students (source: UUKi Scale of TNE annual report 2018–19, published 2020).

→ **AIM: increase the proportion of students with international experience, especially those from low participation backgrounds**

**PRIORITIES:**

- Support the implementation of the Turing Scheme to ensure maximum take up of opportunities in the first year, and a longer-term funding settlement.
- Work with partners in UK government and counterpart bodies to seek agreements with other countries to fund inward mobility to the UK.
- Provide effective support to institutions in managing mobility through the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the post-Covid recovery phase.
- Raise awareness of the individual and national benefits of outward mobility to increase and widen participation.
- Assist universities to understand the value of, and diversify opportunities for, virtual mobility and internationalisation at home.
- Provide services to third parties including overseas agencies to support student and postgraduate mobility.

**KPI:**

- An increase in the proportion of students in UK universities with international experience to **13% BY 2023** (source: HESA data 2024).
- An increase in the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are mobile, compared to 2018–19.

→ **AIM: support UK universities to develop the capabilities, understanding and resilience to meet new challenges**

### **PRIORITIES:**

- Contribute to carbon reduction targets by building capacity in universities to reduce emissions related to international activity.
  - Increase understanding of security risks relating to international engagement and build confidence in institutions and government in mitigating these.
  - Provide insight and analysis to those who are responsible for international strategy within universities to enable better decision-making.
  - Provide flexible, proactive support in relation to major new challenges, including those arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.
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### **KPI:**

- Over **80%** of member universities agree that ‘UUKi supports my institution to develop the understanding and resilience to meet new and emerging challenges’ according to our annual stakeholder survey.

## OUR OBJECTIVES: HOW WE WILL WORK TOWARDS ACHIEVING OUR AIMS

### → ENABLE UK universities to develop and realise their international ambitions

- Inform university decisions through access to intelligence, analysis and shared experience.
- Provide an outstanding service in alerting universities and our funders to opportunities, challenges and policy developments.
- Convene the UK sector through thematic and regional networks as a route to consult, learn from each other and provide access to opportunities.
- Coordinate targeted capacity building programmes in a small number of areas where universities face common challenges in internationalisation.
- Use our networks and expertise to identify barriers to internationalisation and develop a focused programme of activity to influence and overcome them.

### → INFLUENCE the framework conditions that enable our members to thrive internationally

- Influence UK government policy and policy in the devolved administrations to secure favourable conditions for UK universities' international activities to increase their comparative advantage.
- Influence international policy in a small number of priority countries to encourage conditions favourable for UK universities to work in or with that country, including through collaboration.
- Develop and maintain strong relationships with decision makers and university leaders in priority countries to increase opportunities for collaboration with the UK.

### → CREATE new opportunities that deliver clear benefits to our members

- Promote the UK university sector overseas to communicate the strengths of the UK in higher education and research.
- Use our unique convening power and relationships to create opportunities for UK universities to extend the range of partnerships in education and research.
- Secure new opportunities for UK universities through our influence with the UK government, and act as a trusted delivery partner in shaping and implementing them.
- Use our unique ability to act on behalf of the UK sector to offer efficient routes for international partners to work with UK universities and access its expertise.

## → ENABLE UK universities and our funders to develop and realise their international ambitions

### **Inform university decisions through access to intelligence, analysis, and shared experience**

We intend to refocus the way we support university decision-making, developing a core set of analytical products, enhanced support for the strategic leadership of international teams, and targeted interventions in a small number of critical areas. For the next two years, we envisage this focus to be on security and environmental sustainability, with new or enhanced programmes to build capacity in universities to address challenges.

### **Provide an outstanding service in alerting universities and our funders to opportunities, challenges, and policy developments**

We will be acknowledged as an outstanding source of intelligence in relation to key opportunities, initiatives, and challenges in internationalisation. Our communications channels will be highly rated and widely accessed by senior UK university staff; timely, tightly focused, and always relevant. Our measure of success will be evidence that our role in providing such intelligence results in tangible benefits to institutions. In the next two years a particular focus will be boosting support to universities to enable them to take advantage of opportunities for international research collaboration, building on the services we developed under our Official Development Assistance (ODA) contract with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

### **Convene the UK sector through thematic and regional networks as a route to consult, learn from each other and provide access to opportunities**

Our networks are essential to the way we work. Our ability to provide an efficient channel of communication with targeted audiences in UK universities will make us an essential partner of UK and other government bodies, funding agencies and other partners who want to inform, consult, or engage UK universities on specific topics.

In the next two years we intend to make more use of task and finish groups, reporting to the International Policy Network, to advance our work in critical areas. We will also develop the Pro-Vice-Chancellor International network with an increased focus on professional support for those in this role and develop the way we communicate with our networks to better understand our members' priorities and increase our impact.

### **Coordinate targeted capacity building programmes in a small number of areas where universities face common challenges in internationalisation**

Our work on outward mobility and transnational education started as capacity building projects. They are now core activity. Our strategy identifies two areas where universities need support in building capacity to address challenges. In the next two years we will focus on building university capacity to reconcile international ambitions and carbon reduction targets. We will also work to help universities adapt to new security risks.

### **Use our networks and expertise to identify barriers to internationalisation and a focused programme of activity to influence and overcome them**

The International Education Strategy will shape our work to identify barriers to internationalisation, with a specific focus on barriers relating to international recruitment and transnational education. We will develop and maintain a grid, listing addressable barriers in priority countries, and work with UK government, other sector bodies and the International Education Champion to address them. Our networks will be a source of insight to inform this strategy, and our regional policy officers will be charged with developing a programme of work to push towards the outcomes we seek.

## → INFLUENCE the framework conditions that enable our members to thrive internationally

### **Influence UK government policy and policy in the devolved administrations to secure favourable conditions for UK universities' international activities to increase their comparative advantage**

Our ability to represent and convene the UK university sector is our unique strength. We will work with governments across the UK to identify shared goals and work together to achieve them, including by boosting the UK economy through growth in education exports; working to deliver the aid strategy and increasing the UK's diplomatic and soft power through the promotion of UK higher education. In the next two years our focus will be on securing long-term funding for international research collaboration, including through ODA investments and increased investment in funding for collaboration with non-EU advanced economies; and for student exchange through the Turing Scheme. We will aim to ensure incremental improvement in the visa regime, and stability in visa policy following the introduction of the Graduate route. We want to make a success of the International Education Strategy and demonstrate our value as a key partner in its delivery.

### **Influence international policy in a small number of priority countries to encourage conditions favourable for UK universities to work in or with that country, including through collaboration**

In Europe, our priority in the next two years will be to secure the means of exercising influence over events which impact UK universities from our new position outside the EU. Our primary focus will be Horizon Europe, but we will maintain our engagement with higher education policy directly and through active participation in the European Universities Association. Beyond Europe, our focus will be on supporting the delivery of the International Education Strategy and aligning our work to the priority countries identified in it.

We will use our understanding of the challenges facing UK universities in achieving their international aims to identify a small number of international policy priorities, such as qualification recognition, regulatory change or eligibility criteria. We will work with other parts of the education sector, and with UK government to address these.

### **Develop and maintain strong relationships with decision makers and university leaders in priority countries to increase opportunities for collaboration with the UK**

Our strong relationships with government departments, funding agencies and university bodies in a selected group of countries will enable us to create new opportunities for the UK sector, including a strong programme of opportunities for UK universities to engage directly with decision makers from these countries. In the next two years, a particular focus will be on using our European networks to support the UK's success in Horizon Europe; and building relationships in the countries identified by the International Education Strategy to help achieve our policy aims and developing networks in priority countries for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) in relation to research collaboration. Domestically, we want to maintain strong relationships with all the government departments which impact our work but strengthen these with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Cabinet Office and Number 10. We should have strong relationships with London-based embassies of our priority countries.



## → CREATE new opportunities that deliver clear benefits to our members

### **Promote the UK university sector overseas to communicate the strengths of the UK in higher education and research**

We will increase the proportion of our time and resource focussed on supporting growth and diversification of international students in the UK towards the 600,000 target by 2030 set out in the IES. We will orientate more of our work to align with the ambitions of the IES, and we will prioritise achieving improvements in the national Study UK campaign. Within this, our top priority will be to mitigate the impact of the change in fee and loan status amongst EU students. We will produce analysis and insight to inform institutional and government strategy, building on our Why Aren't We Second publication. We will also work to sustain the inward flow of exchange students, especially from the EU. Alongside this, we will enhance the work we do to highlight the strengths of UK research. We will work to improve the way that TNE is perceived by overseas regulators through our focus on improving understanding of the quality assurance of TNE and to improve the data available in relation to student outcomes and experiences.

### **Use our unique convening power and relationships to create opportunities for UK universities to extend the range of partnerships in education and research**

Working with partners such as government departments and the British Council, we will be widely recognised for the valuable, high quality and carefully targeted programme of opportunities to meet and forge relationships with university leaders and decision makers from our priority countries. The measure of success will be whether such networking opportunities lead to tangible new opportunities for our universities. In the next two years a particular focus will be supporting the implementation of UKRI's international strategy through our grant agreement with Research England and the three other national funders. We will explore new partner-matching approaches for TNE. We will increase the use of digital mechanisms for relationship building, and we will reduce our dependence on travel as part of a drive to reduce our own carbon footprint as an organisation.

### **Secure new opportunities for UK universities through our influence with the UK government, and act as a trusted delivery partner in shaping and implementing them**

Our understanding and ability to engage UK universities, coupled with our influence with the UK government and our track record of delivery with strategic partners such as the British Council, will enable us to successfully advocate for, and help deliver, funding and other support to enable UK universities to capture international opportunities and build partnerships for mutual benefit and build capacity in higher education around the world. In the next two years we face a threat to existing contract-funded activity because of tight UK government budgets and ODA reductions. We will work to diversify our contract work to reduce the risk to the sustainability of this activity.

### **Use our unique ability to act on behalf of the UK sector to offer efficient routes for international partners to work with UK universities and access its expertise**

Over the years we have delivered a range of services to overseas government bodies to support student mobility to and from the UK, particularly at postgraduate level. We intend to proactively seek out opportunities to expand on this experience, creating new opportunities for UK universities as a result.

## DELIVERING THE PLAN

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To deliver this plan, UUKi will seek to make the following changes to the way we work:



**Diversify income through growth in events and sponsorship income, with appropriate capacity to deliver this**

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**Increase progression opportunities within and between teams**

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**Increase our ability to work flexibly, in cross-functional teams**

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**Greater focus on non-engaging institutions and engaging with Vice-Chancellors**

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**Explore provision of further strategic support to members, such as professional development for Pro-Vice-Chancellors and increased insight and analysis**

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**Reduction in UUKi's own carbon footprint compared to 2018 through reduced flights and offsetting**

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**Greater use of digital tools to increase engagement with our members and stakeholders and to reduce our carbon footprint**

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