

FIVE WAYS TO STABILISE EU / EEA STUDENT DEMAND FOLLOWING THE INTRODUCTION OF THE NEW POINTS-BASED SYSTEM

The introduction of the [points-based immigration system](#) represents one of the biggest changes to EU/EEA student recruitment in a generation

This would be a significant policy challenge at any point, but 2020 presents unique risks due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Universities accept that freedom of movement is coming to an end and, alongside the announcements regarding EU student tuition fees across the UK, recognise the need for an immigration system that treats EU and non-EU citizens equally. However, this change will have a significant impact on EU/EEA student recruitment, as it means those from across Europe will now have to apply to enter the UK before studying. Many across the sector had already been planning for a downturn in EU/EEA student inflow however Covid-19 has turned this into an issue of critical importance. As a result, universities fear a domestic and international recruitment crisis as a result of the pandemic that lasts far beyond 2020.

The combination of these two factors is likely to result in a steep decline in EU/EEA students over the coming years. Therefore, to help stabilise EU/EEA demand, we believe government action is essential.

Government action is needed to ensure that the UK remains a competitive study destination

The UK is one of the most popular destinations in the world for international students to come and study. Each year, we attract around 450,000 students from overseas, with EU students making up almost a third of the [total](#). The impact of these students is not just felt across university campuses – where they enrich the diversity of our institutions and university life – but also across the wider UK economy. Research by [HEPI, Kaplan and London Economics](#) has found that one EU cohort can add as much as £5.1 billion to the UK economy through the direct and indirect economic benefits associated with student spending, a figure that amounts to an individual contribution of £87,000 per student. This combination of economic and cultural contribution made by international students is why it is vital we get the transition to the new points-based immigration system right first time.

This change to a points-based immigration system is very likely to lead to a decline in enrolments from EU/EEA students, but government action could help mitigate this. The government's own [impact assessment](#) estimates that the points-based system will result in a 20% reduction of EU students, yet other estimates, such as research from [HEPI and Kaplan](#), show that enrolments of EU students could decrease by 57% (over 31,000 students). Crucially, these estimates do not factor in the impact of Covid-19. Although future immigration trends amid Covid-19 are hard to predict, early estimates looking at the impact of the pandemic appear to show international recruitment declining. For example, in [mid-February](#), [27%](#) claimed that their plans to study overseas had been impacted by the coronavirus, yet, within six weeks, this figure had

more than doubled to 62%. While such surveys need to be treated with caution, universities – although doing everything possible to reassure students of their plans for the coming academic year – are clearly going to be operating in an even more competitive global marketplace following the impact of the pandemic.

On top of this, we know students are already asking questions about the new immigration system. While we welcome the details of the [new Student route](#) being published, it is vital that these changes are effectively communicated. Research from Hotcourses has shown that 80% of EU students begin researching their UK study options at least 12 months before their start date, although we understand that some students begin research much earlier than this. Therefore, we can assume that EU students with January start dates will have been researching their study options for around nine months already – despite little information about the design of the new system being previously available – while those looking at September 2021 starts will have also now begun looking at their options. With 96% of EU students coming to the UK in the autumn intake (September and October), UUK believes that ensuing prospective students are aware of these changes with sufficient time to prepare is essential to enable them to make an informed decision to study in the UK.

Five steps to stabilise EU/EEA student demand

UUK has been reassured by commitments to international students made by the government and has welcomed the appointment of Professor Sir Steve Smith as the UK's first international education champion. The improvements in the new Student route are positive and the responsiveness of the Home Office in recent months has been valuable. Yet further action, working in partnership with the sector, is required to prevent a steep decline in EU/EEA students.

We recognise the challenges posed by implementing a new immigration system during a global pandemic, however the following steps could help stabilise EU/EEA demand:

1. **Continue to promote the new Student route** (which is replacing the Tier 4 visa) so that all international students are aware of the changes being introduced. This is particularly important for EU / EEA students.
2. **Improve and extend the Study UK campaign into key markets in Europe.** We believe this can be achieved by coordinating existing campaigns currently in European markets and increasing investment in Study UK from existing levels to £20 million a year, with improved governance and sector involvement, especially in countries where it is not currently activated and with greater campaign work in Europe.
3. **Ensure EU students are able to continue financing their study in the UK by providing targeted financial support such as through an expanded or newly developed EU scholarship offer.** UUKi have developed a proposal around this following consultation with the sector, which outlines a potential government match-funded model. Further, exploring mechanisms to offer government backed loans on commercial terms to international students from selected countries should be considered.

We envisage that this could be expanded to all international students over time, firstly focusing on easing the transition for EU students.

4. **Boost UK competitiveness by bringing immigration route application costs in line with our international competitors.** Current UK immigration arrangements are among the most expensive in the world. There is a [405%](#) difference between the student immigration route and the average cost of the leading science nations. This difference needs to be significantly reduced to remain competitive against our international competitors.
5. **Commit to continually reviewing immigration requirements in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.** We cannot predict how the pandemic may develop around the world or in the UK; we ask the government to commit to being flexible to the changeability of the current period.

The voice of universities

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