

GMT interview

Building an internationally connected UK HE sector

with Vivienne Stern

For this article, GMT interviewed Vivienne Stern¹ Director of the UK Higher Education International Unit, an organisation which aims to support the international activities of the UK higher education sector. In this interview we asked Vivienne about the aims of the International Unit and some of the trends which attempt to improve international higher education. Find out more about the Newton Fund and Erasmus+ and why Vivienne hopes to see international student visas in party manifestos in the run up to the next general election.

What do you hope to have achieved at the International Unit in five years' time?

Our aim is to see UK higher education institutions develop more and better links with partner universities and governments around the world. In five years' time I'd like to be able to prove that we have a stronger and more internationally connected sector, and that the International Unit has played some part in supporting that.

A large part of our work is also about representing the sector collectively and I would like to see more system-to-system level opportunities for the UK sector, of the kind created by the Brazilian government's Science without Borders programme². I want to be able to point to expanded eligibility and recognition lists which allow a greater range of UK institutions to participate in international schemes. I'd like to be able to demonstrate that the information and analysis produced by our unit is genuinely useful to the staff in higher education institutions. And I want evidence that our own government in the UK values our advice about the UK sector, and listens to our arguments for increased support for international higher education activities.

Some institutions have opened campuses overseas – do you see this as part of a growing trend?

Transnational education is now a major activity for the UK sector. More than 600,000 students are enrolled in UK programmes outside the UK³. Only 3% of that happens on branch campuses – but they tend to dominate the discussion about transnational education. The decision to open a branch campus is a major one for any university. The circumstances and rationale have to be right. The experience of the universities of Nottingham and Liverpool shows that they can have a major impact on the international reputation of an institution, but they demand a huge investment in terms of management time and effort, and there are clearly risks involved in any venture of that sort.

I do see some models emerging which are compelling. There is an argument that for an internationally minded institution there should be entry points around the world and opportunities for staff and students to move around. The New York University model is an extreme example of this⁴ but I think we will see this kind of model develop rapidly over the next decade – but alongside a much more substantial development of other models of transnational education.

Do you envisage more overseas institutions opening campuses in the UK?

I think this is likely to be a growing trend and there may be some real advantages, in the long run, if high quality international institutions develop a presence in the UK. I fundamentally believe that the drive to internationalise is as much about excellence in teaching and research as it is about recruitment – so there is an argument that anything that makes it easier to collaborate should be regarded as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

¹ Vivienne Stern is the Director of the UK Higher Education International Unit, more information about the work of the International Unit can be found at: www.international.ac.uk/

² Science without Borders is a scholarship programme funded by the Brazilian Government which aims to send Brazilian HE students to study around the world at top universities <http://sciencewithoutborders.international.ac.uk/about.aspx>

³ Information about students studying overseas is taken from HESA's Student in Higher Education Institutions 2012/13 available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/pr199

⁴ As part of its mission statement the New York University refers to it, 'thriving beyond borders and across academic disciplines, NYU has emerged as one of the most networked and extensive worldwide platform for learning, teaching, researching, building knowledge, and inventing new ways to meet humanity's challenges.' www.nyu.edu/about.html#below

Can you tell us about the Newton Fund?

The Newton Fund⁵ is a new £375 million UK Government fund to develop science and innovation partnerships that promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries over the next five years. There are 15 countries – all of them emerging economies – which are part of the initiative. It is a hugely complicated scheme but the bottom line is that there are new funding opportunities to support UK universities to collaborate with partners in some of the countries which are of the greatest interest and importance to the UK sector – including China, India, Brazil and Indonesia.

Calls are opening rapidly at the moment, and they are all listed on the International Unit's website⁶. The calls are organised in three 'pillars': People, Research and Translation – and as this suggests calls are designed to support research collaboration, but also activities which will help build links between people and institutions, and support knowledge exchange.

There are several delivery partners involved in the scheme – including RCUK, the Academies, Innovate UK and the British Council. Some big schemes operate across all 15 countries – such as the British Council's Researcher Links scheme, or the Institutional Links programme. Other calls are specific to the interests of the partner country. The International Unit has a policy role in the scheme and has taken the lead on trying to make sure that communication with the sector works well. It is such a complicated scheme that this has been a big concern for us. For more information about this scheme our website has a range of presentations, videos and links to all open calls – plus the option to sign up for regular updates.

Internationalisation is supported by the EU – does this funding support graduate employability?

Yes. A recent European Commission report showed that graduates with international experience fare much better in the labour market⁷. Graduates are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment compared with those who have not studied or trained abroad and, five years after graduation, their unemployment rate was 23% lower. The EU Erasmus programme has been used to fund work placement mobility since 2006/07. This has corresponded with increased demand from and participation by UK students. Erasmus participation reached record levels in 2012/13 at 14,607.

Under Erasmus+, there is also funding available to support students pursuing internships in the year following graduation to facilitate 'transition to the labour market' although the details of how this is supposed to work are still a bit unclear⁸. However, the fact that funding for the Erasmus+ programme has increased by 40% as compared to under the previous programmes is good news.

In the run up to the election – what three initiatives would you like to see in party manifestos?

The top thing we would like is a better immigration policy which will support the recruitment of international students. We want the government to recognise that although there is substantial voter concern about immigration – the public are not generally concerned about international students. In fact, research conducted by Universities UK and British Future⁹ shows that 59% of voters think the government should not reduce the number of international students, even if this limits the government's ability to cut immigration overall. In fact, 66% of Conservative voters are opposed to cutting student numbers. 60% of voters agree that students bring money to the local economy and 75% think that international students should be allowed to stay and work after they graduate. That is a powerful case for taking students out of any net migration target. We believe there is a growing political consensus for this.

We also think that government should provide clearer post study work opportunities for international students. The perception that you can't stay and work after you graduate in the UK has particularly damaged the UK's ability to recruit Indian students. We've seen new enrolments from India drop by 49% over two years¹⁰. That fact requires an urgent response. Although international graduates can stay and work – the hoops they have to jump through make it difficult to communicate that fact.

Finally I'd like the next government to take stock of how our competitor countries promote their higher education systems. Australia, Canada, Germany and the US are all putting in place ambitious measures to help their universities internationalise. I'd like our government to do the same.

For more information about the International Unit, and to sign up for its newsletter, visit www.international.ac.uk

⁵ More information about the Newton Fund can be found here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/newton-fund-building-science-and-innovation-capacity-in-developing-countries/

⁶ www.international.ac.uk/programmes/current-opportunities/the-newton-fund.aspx

⁷ Read the full report at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-1025_en.htm

⁸ More information about the Erasmus+ internship programme can be found at: www.erasmusplus.org.uk/key-action-1/mobility-for-higher-education-students-and-staff

⁹ Read the full 'International students and the UK immigration debate' report at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/InternationalStudentsUKImmigrationDebate.aspx

¹⁰ www.international.ac.uk/media-centre/press-releases/hesa-figures-encouraging,-but-work-to-be-done,-says-international-unit.aspx