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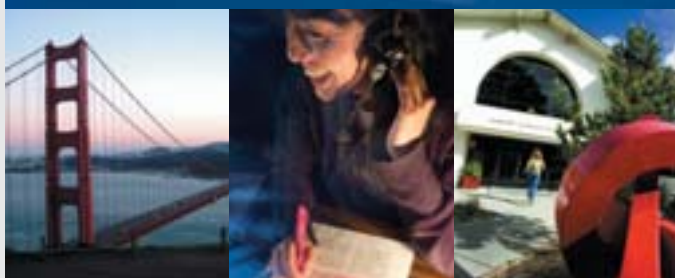
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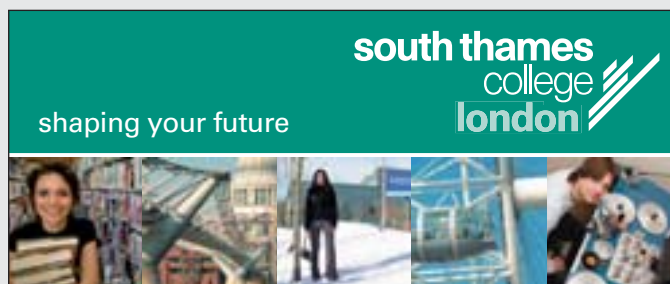
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UK higher education

Record numbers of international students attended British universities in 2006/2007, improving on 2005/2006 figures. With dynamic marketing strategies in place and helpful visa initiatives, it appears institutions are well positioned for success in 2008 too. NICOLA HANCOX reports.



According to figures released by the British Council, foreign students provided a much needed boost to the UK economy during the 2005/2006 academic year; a

trend that appears to have continued well into 2006/2007. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa) has released an initial report citing a six per cent increase in the number of European Union (EU) students (from 106,225 to 112,260) and a seven per cent increase in the number of non-EU students (from 223,855 to 239,210) showing real promise in the realm of international student recruitment.

Universities UK (UUK) – the representative body for executive heads of UK universities – accredits healthy student growth to relaxed visa issuance and new government initiatives. “There are a number of reasons for a strong international student market,” said a UUK spokesperson, citing new two-year graduate visas for all international students that have studied here and government initiatives such as PMI 2.

The Prime Ministers’ Initiative – or PMI 2 – was launched in April 2006 following the success of the first PMI (a strategic plan by the government to up international student numbers). Concentrating on overseas marketing campaigns, the government and the British Council aim to streamline entry procedures and relax work rules for overseas students. With a set number of goals to achieve by 2011, PMI 2 aims to attract an additional 70,000 international students to UK higher education and envisages growing partnerships between the UK and other countries.

Amanda Chick, Press Officer at the Cass Business School, part of City University in London, relates that they offer several different programmes including MBAs, MScs and undergraduate courses in business and finance and she notes that international student enrolments for all programmes are high. “Seventy per cent of our students are international on the full-time MBA [course],” she relates, while their other Masters degree programmes have “approximately 1,200 students from 100 different nationalities” enrolled for the 2007/2008 academic year.

Interestingly, Chick surmises how the UK’s position in the global business market makes it a preferred destination choice for many international students. “It is truly a centre for global business with extensive trade links and multinational HQs which makes this a very attractive

proposition for potential students in terms of enhanced learning, networking and career opportunities,” she says.

However, Chick notes that while some markets have experienced significant growth, other countries have been less fruitful in terms of student applications. “Recent changes include significant growth in demand from the UAE, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Mauritius and Morocco; whilst we are seeing fewer students from traditionally strong markets such as Kenya.” She suggests that any decline from Kenya is not linked to the recent political situation, “but more to do with the rise of the pound which makes it much more expensive for students to come over”.

The strength of the pound may be the biggest deterrent for students coming to the UK. “It makes the UK comparatively expensive as a study destination,” says Chick. But on the flip side, the UK’s education credentials and global business links stand it in good stead. “The fact that UK degrees are recognised around the world as being high quality and lead to excellent employment opportunities, and that international students are widely recognised as valuable migrants to the UK [account for the UK’s strong international student market],” says UUK.

According to Bristol University’s Student Systems and Information Office, the number of overseas students enrolled on courses at the university

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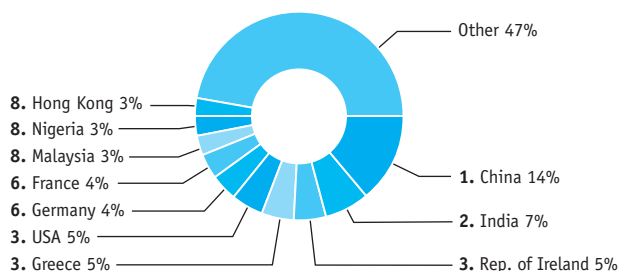
rose from 1,978 students in 2005/2006 to 2,108 students in 2006/2007 but Barry Taylor, Communications and Marketing Director at the university plays down such nominal change. “Such a modest increase may be due to no more than natural fluctuations, associated with a range of factors such as the reputation of the university, the city and the UK and the strength of our international marketing efforts,” he says.

Newcastle College in Newcastle upon Tyne is a prime example of further education (FE) providers moving into the higher education (HE) sector and many FE colleges are now teaming up with universities to offer full degree courses. Although Pete Fiaschi, Director of the International Office, signals that competition is strong, he says, “Here at Newcastle College we have experienced a growth of 36 per cent year on year from a wide range of nationalities,” and cites China and India as two of their main providers. Newcastle College students can undertake a foundation degree or an honours degree course in several different disciplines or an international MBA – in conjunction with the University of Wales.

Many providers predict that international student numbers will continue to climb in 2007/2008 but Fiaschi believes adaptability is pivotal if providers are to stay ahead of the competition. “Flexibility is the key word. Marketing should be based on a reaction to changing needs in a changing market,” he says. Agent usage remains an integral aspect of many marketing strategies. At the Cass Business School – which uses agencies for undergraduate enrolments and has a marketing team travelling overseas and an international office in Shanghai, China – Chick says, “Visits to [agents] countries and close liaison with the agents remains essential”.

She offers one further reason for the UK’s ascendancy. “Candidates have turned to Europe where there are strong schools, strong offerings and a strong alternative to the US MBA model,” she ventures. “The European MBA model differs in length, structure and approach to international business. The UK has particularly benefited as a destination for this reason.” ■

Percentage breakdown of overseas students accepted into UK higher education for 2006/2007



Total no. of EU students = 112,260 Total no. of non-EU students = 239,210

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