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# UK higher education

A challenging economic environment and visa changes are concerning UK high education institutions, as BETHAN NORRIS finds out.

The previous 12 months have presented certain challenges for higher education institutions in the UK – most significant has been the influence of changing exchange rates, which for some nationalities means that studying in the UK, as well as some other English speaking destinations, has become more expensive.

Paul Cullen from Writtle College in Chelmsford says that international students numbers have decreased at the college from a peak in 2006. "This was due to a fall in numbers from our two main markets of China and Japan where factors such as increased competition in pre-masters courses by UK and local universities and exchange rate pressures have had a big effect on our competitiveness in these markets," he says.

Bryony Blinman from Bath Spa University in Bath says that international student numbers have dropped over the past four years due to Chinese students increasingly deciding to study in their own country instead of going overseas. "This year our numbers have dropped slightly again, in part due to the credit crunch," she adds.

However, the economic downturn is by no means affecting all international student markets and institutions that have been focusing on increasing their international marketing have been reaping the rewards. Mariann Baker from St Mary's University College says that their international office is building a network of agents and strategic

**"International students will have to prove that they have UK£9,600 (US\$14,035) per year for accommodation and maintenance costs"**

partnerships as a new campaign to actively recruit students from overseas. "The first signs are extremely encouraging," she says, "With the undergraduate intake having doubled from September 07 to September 08."

When it comes to recruiting international students, many institutions find that developing career-focused courses aimed at the international market can prove successful. Cullen says, "Our postgraduate courses in horticulture are very attractive to international students from Africa and South Asia who wish to specialise in their chosen fields, which have very strong employment possibilities in the home regions." Other popular courses include short-term credit courses, which are popular with the US market, and those focusing on the transition between English language learning and higher education. Gemma Calbet from Cardiff College International in Cardiff, says, "The most popular [courses] at the moment are English, Accounting and A-levels. We are in the process of developing our International Foundation Programme."

International student visas are an issue that institutions are keeping a close eye on. The current changes to the system being introduced from March are likely to have some effect on enrolments as international students will have to prove that they have £9,600 (US\$14,035) per year for accommodation and maintenance costs. Cullen says that this sum "is significantly more than we recommend currently". He adds, "This I believe will make the biggest impact on us as most of our students, who often apply from developing countries, are very price-sensitive and may look to cheaper options in other countries to continue their studies."

Calbet adds that there may be problems with the initial set up of the monitoring and sponsorship system. "We are aware of how the system will work in theory, however, no training has taken place yet and [that] is where questions will appear."