

## destination analysis

# UK gains ground

International enrolments at UK universities grew for the 2002/2003 academic year, but there are fears that visa problems could hamper future growth.

According to statistics compiled by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (Hesa) in the UK, a record 35,155 Chinese students were studying in the UK higher education system in 2002/2003. "China is our biggest international market and it remains to be so," confirms Rebecca Brown Forden, International Officer at York College.

However, while on paper the Chinese market appears to be particularly healthy – growing by over 140 per cent in the previous two years – Brown Forden has reservations about its future potential. "2003/04 enrolment figures were considerably higher than 2002/2003, but applications for 2004/2005 entry seem significantly lower than this time last year so we are expecting a downturn in enrolments," she says. "The reasons could be the strength of the pound [or] changes in the visa system in China – such as the abolition of visa interviews which gave students the opportunity to put their case forward. Now, some applications are being rejected on the basis of the information students have submitted."

Despite visa problems, many institutions continue to market their courses in this area of the world. Judith Woodman from Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology says that they will be targeting Chinese students in the future despite the fact that it is "still not easy for Chinese students to obtain a visa and Embassy staff are not always cooperative [or] responsive to our staff". Brown Forden adds, "We are trying to cling on to the

market [in China] we have, rather than go into new territory at the moment."

Sandy Lloyd from City College in London points out that it is not just Chinese enrolments that are suffering. She says Embassy and High Commission staff throughout the world simply can't cope with the volume of visa applications they are receiving. "The delays in visa applications can stretch into months in some countries – we suggest Nigerian students give at least three to four months for their applications," she says.

For some, however, 2004 has definitely brought changes that have made studying in the UK a lot easier. From May 1 this year, students from the European Union (EU) accession countries became classed as home students, meaning that they no longer have to pay international student fees and do not have to apply for a visa.

Lloyd says that this is already having an effect on private education providers. "This source of students for the private sector is beginning to reduce as students realise it is possible for them to have free access to [education in] the state sector," she says.

Plans for future overseas marketing strategies are mixed. Some are waiting to take their cue from government, which has already hit its target of boosting enrolments in the sector by 2005. "We are watching what [measures] will be put in place to replace the Prime Ministers Initiative," says Eileen Stephens at Manchester College of Arts and Technology. "We haven't decided on [strategy] for next year yet."

**Number of overseas students in UK higher education by top provider country\***

Country	2000/2001	2001/2002	% change 00/01 v 01/02	2002/2003	% change 01/02 v 02/03
China	12,095	20,710	71	35,155	70
India	4,875	7,570	55	12,465	65
Malaysia	10,005	10,680	7	11,780	10
USA	9,425	9,985	6	11,630	16
Hong Kong	8,335	8,870	6	10,105	14
Taiwan	4,525	4,870	7	5,465	12
Nigeria	2,650	3,340	26	4,585	37
Singapore	4,410	4,175	-5	4,250	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>230,870</b>	<b>242,755</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>275,270</b>	<b>13</b>

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency  
\*not including EU countries