

# Britain chases the postgrad market

Universities have been given a brief to attract more international students, writes **Aban Contractor**

UNIVERSITIES in Britain have been told they must develop a clear and attractive doctoral brand with emphasis on quality and innovation if they want to maintain a competitive advantage in attracting postgraduate research students.

A report prepared for the UK Higher Education International Unit based at Universities UK also warns more needs to be done to illustrate the benefits of a British doctorate to an international audience and to counter the belief that Britain is an expensive place in which to study.

Universities must also help counter perceptions among prospective students that the British immigration system is difficult and does not take into account the needs of international students such as family visas and part-time work, the report says.

Britain and the US are the most attractive countries for postgraduate research, followed by Germany, France and Australia. But the report warns more needs to be done if Britain wants to remain a global leader.

Universities UK president Rick Trainor told the *HES* that in per capita terms Britain is the most successful recruiting country for international research students, but overseas competition is growing rapidly.

"Countries such as Australia are seeking to expand their research and innovation base by increasing the scale and scope of international collaborations as well as recruiting students and staff from other countries," Trainor says. "Our report offers UK universities a number of recommendations to respond to this challenge by prioritising scholarship provision and refocusing marketing strategies."

The report, titled *The UK's Competitive Advantage: The Market for International Research Students*, released late last week, calls for a national marketing strategy that would also set targets "on a market-by-market and subject-by-subject basis".

"Seven countries provide about 40 per cent of international PGR students," the report says. "Over-reliance on few subjects and few markets should be minimised."

The report notes Australia has been the most successful country at international student recruitment during the past 10 years or so. Its main strength, however, has been in undergraduate recruitment from East and Southeast Asia. "Australia has not been as successful at the postgraduate research level," the report says.

"This relative underperformance is being addressed and more focused strategies for

PGR students are emerging. Australian universities charge about \$20,000 for doctoral students in science and engineering. Only a small fraction of students pay full fees, however, as there are a range of scholarships and discounts on offer.

"What is impressive is that most Australian universities provide comprehensive information on scholarships and funding in a readily available way for prospective PGR students through their websites. This certainly helps to overcome the initial negative perceptions associated with the fee."

The report says overseas students in Britain need greater assistance to find part-time work to help fund their studies.

"Augment fee support in specific subject areas to compete with the recruitment strategies of overseas competitor universities, in particular in those countries considered as alternatives to the UK (that is, the US, Canada, Australia and other EU countries)," the report recommends.

Offering more fees-only scholarships should be considered as a way to boost overseas student numbers, along with direct approaches to governments that provide scholarships for their nationals to study abroad.

"It may be possible for the UK to negotiate fee agreements in subjects identified as priorities by those other governments," the report says.

It also calls for a campaign to target overseas students already studying in Britain to encourage them to pursue postgraduate studies. "About four in 10 of (the) international students who apply for PGR programs in the UK are already studying in the UK," the report says.

It calls on individual universities to be more proactive, while conceding that this would require appropriate investment.

It suggests universities need to play to their strengths and not fall into the trap of chasing the same markets. At the most basic level, universities need to revamp their websites to make the material required by prospective students easily accessible.

"Organise overseas presentational visits by big-name staff to build upon a university's reputation," the report recommends.

"International students cite such presentations as an important source of information, and the quality of lecturers is a key factor associated with an overseas student's learning experience."