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UK: New strategy to lure postgraduates

Writer: Brendan O'Malley
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The UK government will publish a new framework for postgraduate research to maintain its leading position as a destination of choice for researchers, Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property David Lammy told higher education experts in London.

"Postgraduate education in general and postgraduate mobility in particular remain in some senses poor relations of our university system," Lammy said. "A fact that's reflected in a funding system that can often look confusing, if not actually ramshackle. The new framework for higher education should give us, for the first time, a clear strategy on postgraduate research."

He also predicted more growth in the number of universities entering collaborative partnerships with overseas universities, following the 95 international research co-operation projects already established via the Prime Minister's initiative.

Lammy was addressing a conference on attracting international research students, co-hosted by the UK HE International Unit at Universities UK and the International Graduate Insight Group I-graduate on 4 March.

Attended by 120 delegates from the UK and overseas, it was the second in a series on "Rethinking Higher Education". It attracted senior officers in higher education sectors from 11 countries and compared the approaches of rival countries including the United States and Australia.

An I-graduate spokesperson said the themes addressed were strategically important to the UK and international universities, given the economic benefit and research outputs PhD students bring, which in turn boost departmental, institutional and national reputations.

Dr Shaun Curtis, Head of the UK HE International Unit, said British universities were hugely successful in attracting postgraduate research students from around the world.

"We have a 15% share of the global market, the highest per capita in the world," Curtis said, "But competitor countries such as Australia and the US are implementing strategies to increase their market share. Our research calls for new national and institutional responses to meet this challenge."

Professor Rick Trainor, President of Universities UK, said this was not the time for the UK to "pull up the drawbridge", as universities and the economy required access to the best and brightest students from across the world. Solutions to the global downturn would be found in greater internationalisation, not less, Trainor said.

Currently, 42% of postgraduate research students in the UK are from outside the European Union and contribute approximately £600 million (US$826 million) to the UK economy. Around 40% of postgraduate researchers from overseas want to stay and work in the UK, temporarily or permanently, after they complete their studies.

Professor Trevor Grigg, Deputy Vice-chancellor of the University of Queensland, said universities also played a central role in Australia's innovation systems and postgraduate researchers were vital to high-quality human capital development.

Grigg said the success of internationalised universities would depend on international research partnerships. He suggested that instead of competition, institutions should see engagement in partnership as 'co-operation' with other countries to attract the best and brightest researchers.

William Archer, Director of i-graduate, said national and institutional strategies were constantly being adapted worldwide in an attempt to outbid competitors in attracting international research students. Awareness of the different approaches and strategies adopted by competitor nations was therefore critical.

"The choices for students are changing all the time. For this reason it is more important than ever for institutions to track the decision making, expectations and perceptions of their research students and to monitor against changing trends," Archer said.

More than 300 universities and colleges have used i-graduate's Barometer processes to track and benchmark student opinion.

Key challenges raised in the workshops at the conference included affordability of fees, flexibility of supervision, and ensuring good quality resources and infrastructure.

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