

Global Talent Local Impact

How Universities Collaborate with
Communities to Support International
Students and Drive Regional Growth

The British Universities' International Liaison Association (BUILA) is a membership organisation for those working on international recruitment and compliance at 149 UK universities.

FOREWORD

The UK's global reputation for higher education is built not only on academic excellence but also on the vibrant, diverse communities that our international students help to shape. As the Government's Immigration White Paper sets out new expectations for institutions to demonstrate they are considering local impacts when recruiting international students, we are presented with an opportunity not just to act, but to lead through sharing best practice gathered from across the UK.

At BUILA, we know that our members are already deeply embedded in their communities, working collaboratively to ensure that international students are welcomed, supported, and empowered to thrive. Yet, these partnerships are as varied as the regions our members work in. There is 'no one size fits all' model, therefore this work often goes unseen. To address this, and building on the APPG for International Students' recent report on regional impact, we convened a series of regional roundtables, bringing together voices from higher education, housing, health, business, and local government. Our goal was clear: to identify the partnerships already making an impact and bring them together in one place, both to showcase their success to the Government as it shapes policy and to enable our members to learn from each other.

This report is the result of those conversations. What we heard unanimously was that international students bring huge value to the communities they study in. And, to the extent that communities might have experienced pressures in managing provision in housing or healthcare, that these are shared challenges that affect all students, not issues that should be considered for international students in isolation from domestic students.

The other resounding message was that communication and collaboration are key: between institutions, with local government and with the housing and health providers that support our student populations. The more we can work together on a strategic basis, the stronger our local communities will be.

To our members, we encourage you to share this report with your colleagues; effective relationships between university departments are just as crucial as those externally.

As we look to the future, we hope that the report will act both a testament to what is already being achieved and a call to action. By working together, universities, local government, service providers and communities can ensure that international students continue to succeed, and in doing so, help our regions to grow, innovate, and thrive.

Andrew Bird
Chair, BUILA

Contents

4 Executive Summary

10 Best Practice Recommendations

- 10 On Housing
- 12 On Health
- 14 On business, growth and regional collaboration

16 Housing

- 20 Best Practice Case Studies:
- 20 Nottingham Student Living Strategy
- 23 Scotland's Housing Emergency And Increased Collaboration On
Student Accommodation
- 24 Edinburgh Student Living Report
- 27 Cross-City Collaboration

29 Health

- 32 Recording international student status within the NHS
- 35 Best Practice Case studies:
- 35 Newcastle-Wide Engagement on Healthcare
- 36 Integrated health partnerships
- 37 Specialist mental health support

Contents

38 Collaboration with Other Providers

- 40 Engagement Structures
- 41 Best Practice Case Studies:
 - 41 Strong Partnerships in London

45 Business and Local Growth

- 47 Pacadar: A local Kent Success Story
- 48 Best Practice Case Studies:
 - 48 Collaboration to Drive Regional Growth and Meet Local Skills Needs in Northern Ireland
 - 50 Midlands Universities Collaborating to Drive Foreign Direct Investment and Harness International Student Skills
 - 52 University of Bristol Temple Quarter Enterprise Campus
 - 53 Maritime Solent
 - 53 International Students Meeting Veterinary Shortages
 - 54 International Students Filling Nursing Gaps in Wales Through UK-First Pilot
- 55 Community
- 56 Engagement with Local Employers

58 Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

- 59 Best Practice Case Studies:
 - 59 3Dental Aligners Manufacturing Ltd
 - 60 WASE

Contents

61 Commercialisation and Spinouts

63 Key learnings

64 Best Practice Case Studies:

64 Game Intuit Ltd

65 Startups

67 Best Practice Case Studies:

67 Seeai

68 Cricketqube

69 Conclusion

70 Contributors

73 Reference

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Government's Immigration White Paper signals a new era of accountability, asking universities to demonstrate how international student recruitment is embedded into the communities they serve.

This report showcases best practice of how UK universities are working in partnership with local communities, not only to support international students but also to fuel innovation, create jobs, and harness their contributions to regional growth.

We found that universities are increasingly strengthening collaboration with local authorities, housing providers, healthcare services and transport networks to ensure international students are well-supported throughout their academic journey.

We also found that recent policy changes and evolving student trends have already influenced accommodation dynamics. A combination of factors including the reduction of dependants following changes to visa rules, changes in enrolment patterns and shifts in domestic student behaviour have eased accommodation pressures that previously existed in some regions. These pressures also served as a catalyst for improved engagement. Many participants noted that institutions are now working more closely with regional partners than they were just a few years ago, driven in part by the need to address earlier challenges.

How universities engage with other partners across their regions varies; from informal, ongoing engagement in Northern Ireland, to much more structured mechanisms for collaboration in areas with strong devolution structures such as London and Greater Manchester.

Greater Manchester was frequently cited as a model of best practice, with universities working closely with Mayor Andy Burnham and the Combined Authority to align student support with regional planning. On skills, for example, the Combined Authority Labour Market Information Team gives presentations on labour market trends at least twice yearly, so that universities can develop a responsive curriculum and assess their output in terms of filling skills gaps.

Executive Summary

On housing, institutions are working with councils and Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) providers to plan for student numbers and ensure access to safe, affordable accommodation. Best practice can be seen in cities like Nottingham and Edinburgh, which have developed strategic frameworks to align student housing provision with broader urban planning, helping to reduce pressure on local housing markets and foster community integration.

The Nottingham Student Living Strategy is a collaborative plan by Nottingham City Council, the University of Nottingham, and Nottingham Trent University which sets out a commitment to working together to help address the challenges associated with a large population of short-term student residents, and to help build stronger links between students and the city.

As part of the Strategy, the council has worked closely with both universities to establish the number of students who require accommodation in the city. Their methodology uses actual enrolment data and excludes students living at home or outside the city, based on registered enrolment addresses. This approach differs from using headline figures from sources such as HESA and the Office for Students, which often include part-time students and those studying at other campuses, as well as operating on a lag. By jointly developing an accurate measure of housing need, the council and universities have created a data-driven foundation for planning that ensures resources are targeted where they will have the greatest impact.

Following efforts to address previous accommodation pressures, we heard that some

regions now face an oversupply of PBSA. This shift has been driven by increased development, changing student behaviour such as a rise in commuter students, and lower international student numbers. Where surplus PBSA or on-campus housing exists, there is an opportunity for universities to explore alternative uses, such as offering rooms to local employers, for example for hospital staff, or creating bursary schemes for domestic students. Any repurposing, however, must account for licence conditions, which often require PBSA occupants to be full-time students.

To increase confidence on standards in the private rental sector, a number of universities operate portals where they recommend local, 'good' landlords. Improved communication both across university teams and externally with students has been key in promoting these schemes.

In healthcare, universities are partnering with NHS trusts and GP practices to improve access and understanding for international students, including initiatives like on-campus GP registration and multilingual resources. Mental health support is also being strengthened through integrated models, such as the University of Glasgow's pilot with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, which embeds NHS staff within university wellbeing services to streamline referrals and care.

Best practice examples include a new 24/7 app launched by the University of the West of England, which aims to alleviate challenges in languages barriers and cultural differences that international students may face in accessing health support. This includes providing access to counsellors in students' own language.

We heard that international student status is not consistently recorded throughout the healthcare system, and that making this standard practice would enable provision to be much better planned and monitored.

Whilst discussing how universities manage health provision for international students, many highlighted the role they play in providing health services in their local community.

The University of Bristol Dental School runs a dental practice which offers appointments to local residents, enabling student dentists, including international students, to improve local healthcare provision and offer vital services in light of a shortage of NHS dentistry within the city. A similar initiative exists in Portsmouth, where the University has developed a state-of-the-art Dental Academy training facility in partnership with the King's College London Dental Institute and the NHS and is aiming to bring more dental students, both domestic and international, to the local area to meet local health need.

In a UK-first, to address declining domestic nursing applications, Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW), NHS Wales and Welsh universities launched a pilot in 2023 offering funded nursing places to international students. Graduates commit to working for two years in NHS Wales, mirroring the domestic bursary scheme. The programme adjusts places based on domestic demand so that international candidates do not take precedence over home applications, ensuring that skills gaps are filled with international talent as required. The current split is around 20% international and 80% home students. The programme is attracting interest from other sectors, including physiotherapy and pharmacy, as a model for filling workforce gaps.

Beyond accommodation and health, universities are working with police, transport providers, and community organisations to ensure international students feel safe, informed, and connected. This includes working with transport providers to manage student flows, for example notifying rail providers and local airports of term dates to help manage demand. Similarly, universities spoke of working closely with the local police service to destigmatise their role, which may be very different to that experienced in international students' home countries.

These efforts reflect a broader civic responsibility, with institutions viewing international students as part of the wider student population rather than a separate group.

As well as seeking best practice on how institutions are considering local impacts when recruiting international students, we also sought examples of how international students are contributing to regional economic growth. We heard that universities are leveraging their talent to address skills shortages in sectors such as healthcare, engineering, digital technologies, and life sciences, in line with the Government's Industrial Strategy. In Northern Ireland, there are strong links between universities and industry to drive business engagement and innovation, including placements for international students to meet skills needs in the country. Across the roundtables, participants pointed to the widespread support from businesses for international students and their role in research, development and innovation, which is crucial for driving growth in the economy.

Executive Summary

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) are a prime example of this impact. University accelerators and enterprise programmes are also nurturing international student-led startups and spinouts. These initiatives provide early-stage support, access to cutting-edge research, and connections to engaged alumni networks. At the University of Leeds, approximately 40% of student startups over the past five years have involved international students, many in emerging fields such as AI and digital health.

Spinouts further highlight the value of global talent, with nearly 40% of UK spinout company directors being foreign nationals, many of whom began as international PhD students or researchers. These individuals are helping commercialise university research, create high-value jobs in their regions, and strengthen regional innovation ecosystems.

More widely in terms of international students' contributions to local growth, many participants spoke about how often it is international students who are the first to engage in volunteering opportunities in their local community. Universities highlighted how they sit on local economic growth boards and work closely with mayors in their region as they develop new growth strategies. As power continues to shift to local leaders under the Government's Devolution Bill, universities have a growing opportunity to embed international students into regional strategies for skills, innovation, and growth.

This report highlights best practice of the positive work underway and calls on universities to deepen collaboration and communication, both internally and externally, to ensure international

students are supported and their contributions to regional development are fully realised and recognised.

Improved data sharing amongst key stakeholders and internal coordination within universities remain essential to maximise impact and meet new policy expectations.

We encourage international directors to take the lead in building strong connections with student services, accommodation teams, and enterprise departments, working together to ensure you are meeting the new policy requirements for recruitment whilst providing comprehensive support for international students.

Best Practice Recommendations from the Report Include:

On Housing

Engage Strategically with Local Authorities and Purpose-Built Student Accommodation Providers

Universities should maintain ongoing dialogue with local authorities and Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) providers throughout the student recruitment cycle, and particularly if they are expecting changes in their recruitment trends either upwards or downwards. This helps anticipate accommodation needs, monitor recruitment trends, and identify potential pressure points early. The most effective planning can take place when all parties have access to the most accurate data possible. For example, in Nottingham, the council and Universities jointly developed a data-driven approach to assess housing need. Using verified enrolment data and excluding students living at home or outside the city, this method provides a far more accurate picture than headline figures from HESA or the Office for Students. The result is targeted, responsive planning that ensures resources go where they are most needed.

To Consider: Repurposing Surplus Accommodation

Following efforts to address previous accommodation pressures, some regions now face an oversupply of PBSA. This shift has been driven by increased development, changing student behaviour (such as a rise in commuter students), and lower international student numbers. Where surplus PBSA or on-campus housing exists, universities could explore alternative uses, such as offering rooms to local employers, (for example for hospital staff), or creating bursary schemes for domestic students. Any repurposing, however, must account for licence conditions, which often require PBSA occupants to be full-time students.



Housing

Coordinate City-Wide Planning in Multi-University Locations

In cities with multiple higher education institutions, universities should engage jointly in planning with local councils. Regular, collaborative meetings can ensure a unified approach to accommodation strategy, helping to manage demand and improve housing outcomes across the region.

For example, in Edinburgh, against the backdrop of Scotland declaring a national housing emergency, the four universities collaborated to conduct research to evaluate where student housing demand is concentrated in the city and how best to address this. This has led to ongoing engagement with The City of Edinburgh Council on the new Edinburgh Local Housing Strategy 2025–30 to address student housing need, and participants commented that the local authority was now in a much better position to plan for health and housing provision following improved data sharing from universities.

Establish Voluntary Collaborative Accreditation Schemes for Student Housing with Private Landlords

Universities can work in partnership with local councils and private landlords to develop voluntary accreditation schemes, such as the Southampton Accreditation Scheme for Student Housing (SASSH), that ensure international students have access to safe, high-quality, and well-managed accommodation. The University of Portsmouth has also set up an online portal recommending reputable landlords and a similar voluntary scheme exists in Manchester - The

The Good Landlord Charter – into which the Greater Manchester Student Assembly provided input.

Partner with Local Guarantor Schemes to Support International Students Secure Housing

Many private landlords require students to have a UK-based guarantor, often a parent or relative, who is responsible for covering the rent if the student fails to pay. This can be a barrier to access for international students. To support international students in securing private rental housing, universities can collaborate with local guarantor schemes. Institutions such as Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Birmingham have successfully implemented such partnerships.

Improve Transparency in Accommodation Listings

Universities should work with private providers to ensure accurate marketing of accommodation, including location, transport links, and amenities, especially for international students who may not be familiar with the area. The University of Birmingham has improved communication with international students pre-arrival to ensure that they are aware of where accommodation providers are located in the city and the proximity to campus.

On Health

Improve Data Sharing and Collection

Universities should advocate for consistent recording of international student status in NHS systems to be able to better identify student health needs and understand usage.

Enhance Pre-Arrival Communication and Educate on Health System Navigation

Universities should provide clear guidance on NHS access, registration, and expectations before students arrive to help build a better understanding of the NHS and what the health surcharge covers.

This can include working with NHS partners on resources like NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's student page, which provides clear explanations on how and when to access various NHS services. In addition, using multilingual resources and peer introductions to reduce isolation is recommended.

In Newcastle, a joint project with Northumbria and Newcastle Universities and the Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust is exploring a centralised health hub for students.



Facilitate GP Registration

Universities can organise on-campus registration events in partnership with the largest GP providers in their area at the start of term to drive uptake amongst international students and remove barriers to access, ensuring they have health support in place ahead of need.

Integrate Mental Health Services

Universities can explore creating joint roles like the pilot scheme at the University of Glasgow, to enable direct referrals and shared care plans, as well as improve partnership working with the local NHS.

More widely, Information Sharing Agreements can help to deliver coordinated mental health support. Northumbria University partners with Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust under an Information Sharing Agreement to deliver coordinated mental health support across Student Health and Wellbeing Services, the NHS, and commissioned partners.

Universities could also explore creating dedicated mental health services on a collaborative regional basis. The University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin Mental Health Service has been established to provide moderate to severe mental health support for students within the area. This has been modelled on a similar service in Greater Manchester, which began as a pilot but has now been fully commissioned by the Integrated Care Board.



On Business, Growth and Regional Collaboration

The business and growth section of this report primarily highlights case studies of international students working in Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, startups, and spinouts, as well as highlighting where universities are feeding into local growth plans. Key best practice recommendations include:

Proactively Engage and Educate Employers on the Benefits and Processes of Hiring International Students

Universities should develop targeted outreach and guidance for local and regional employers to clarify visa routes, regulatory requirements, and highlight the value international graduates bring, particularly in sectors facing skills shortages. This could include hosting employer information sessions, collaborating with industry bodies, and equipping students with knowledge about migration processes to support confident engagement with potential employers.

Actively Engage with Local Skills Improvement Plans and Strategic Authorities to Embed International Students into Regional Growth Strategies

Universities can strengthen collaboration with Strategic Authorities in line with the Government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper and the English Devolution Bill. By participating in Local Skills Improvement Plans, as both educators and employers, universities can ensure international students are recognised as a vital part of the local skills pipeline. This structured engagement will help align international recruitment with regional economic priorities.

As universities strengthen their relationships with Strategic Authorities, international recruitment teams should ensure that their university colleagues sitting on local economic growth boards or working groups are aware of the specific role international students can play in driving regional growth and filling skills gaps. Close working could also include presentations from the Strategic Authority on labour market trends and gaps to universities, as is the case in Greater Manchester.

Work with Local Transport Providers to Manage Student Flows

Universities should work closely with transport providers in their region to manage student flows, for example notifying rail providers and local airports of term dates to help manage demand. Universities could also invite transport providers to orientation sessions to ensure international students are familiar with how to get around their new home and are aware of any discounted student fares.

Strengthen Community Integration

Universities should work closely within their local communities to consider how best they can support international student integration as part of wider student integration in the local area. This could be through holding community forums which bring together the police, healthcare providers and local stakeholders, as is the case at Ulster University, to hear any community concerns. This could also include specific work with the police to destigmatise their role, which may be very different to that experienced in international students' home countries.



Housing

Current government guidance asks education institutions requesting a significant increase on previous years' international student allocations to confirm that the institution has the capacity to accommodate them, specifically referencing supporting infrastructure such as housing.

In response to how universities work within their region to plan for accommodation, many spoke about how this is viewed as a whole student, rather than international student, issue.

We heard anecdotally that international students are more likely to live in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) than domestic students, indicating that they place less pressure on local housing stock, although this varies by their home country and course level. This is backed up by previous research from Savills, which finds that overseas students are 60% more likely to live in PBSA than domestic students. For Chinese students, this rose to 124%.

Maria Hatch, Director of Client Relationships at PBSA provider Greystar, said that PBSA is “heavily dominated” by international students, although noted greater price sensitivity in regions rather than cities. Data from Durham University shows that international students account for 78% of all students living in PBSA in the city. In addition, many universities highlighted that they guarantee accommodation for international students, either in their own accommodation or through arrangements with PBSA providers.

Changes in Housing Challenges

Many roundtable participants commented on how pressures on accommodation had peaked in 2021-22 following a surge in enrolments after COVID-19 but had since reduced or stabilised. Whilst acknowledging that there had been challenges with students adding to a city’s accommodation pressures at the peak of enrolments, many participants said that this was now not an issue, particularly since the dependants ban came into effect for most international students, resulting in a far reduced need for family housing. Although, in areas still struggling with a lack of housing options, participants commented on the importance of ensuring that students were not renting accommodation that could be used by local families.

The level of challenge varied by region. For example, Northern Ireland participants spoke about how they had not experienced the same pressure on housing as elsewhere in the UK, whereas Scotland is facing a housing emergency. Similarly, London participants spoke about the acute pressures on housing in the capital and the importance of PBSA in preventing the students from adding to the supply and demand

imbalances in the private rented sector.

In most regions participants highlighted an increase in PBSA provision, with many now citing an oversupply. For example, the number of PBSA beds in Belfast has doubled between 2015 and 2022. Professor Peter Bonfield, Vice Chancellor and President of the University of Westminster, spoke about how they had struggled to fill PBSA beds in recent years because of a drop in international student numbers.

The role of PBSA was viewed favourably. Many roundtables discussed how PBSA provides much more opportunity to offer a good quality of accommodation compared to private rented stock, which is often older and can suffer from issues of damp and mould. In London, participants also spoke about the role PBSA can have in terms of wider community regeneration and economic stimulation.

Universities spoke about working closely with local councils and PBSA providers. For example, Durham University works to understand housing stock availability across the city. This is a key part of student number planning as students want to be based in the city centre itself rather than further afield. Likewise, the University of Glasgow has taken a lead on creating strategic partnerships with local authorities and is a member of the Glasgow City Development Plan and Student Accommodation Working Group, which allows the University to shape the portfolio of PBSA development. Speaking at the roundtable, Jenny Fernandes, Director of Recruitment and International Relations, said that a lot of work has been done in terms of creating a broader university and city approach to mitigate accommodation challenges.

Advanced Planning and Greater Information Sharing

Some universities recognised the need to talk more about their international recruitment strategies with the council to facilitate better joint planning, especially if increases in student numbers are planned.

Maria Hatch, Director of Client Relationships at PBSA provider Greystar, said providers welcome working with universities and councils in any region. She noted that, since COVID-19, providers are more data driven and have started to work with international and university recruitment agents to better understand student demand. She highlighted that, as relationships become closer, there is work to be done on data protection agreements to ensure more information can be shared to understand accommodation trends.

Universities spoke about aiming to fill their own accommodation first, then PBSA, then landlords known to universities, rather than taking homes that could be used for families in their area.

The University of Birmingham highlighted that they had previously experienced challenges with international students' accommodation being further away from campus than they had expected, impacting their overall satisfaction and happiness. One of the measures they have put in place is the accommodation and recruitment team linking in closely to make sure prospective overseas students better understand the scale of the city, where the different private providers are located and how close that is to campus.

An additional challenge is that many private landlords require students to have a UK-based guarantor, often a parent or relative, who is responsible for covering the rent if the student fails to pay. This can be a barrier to access for international students. To support international students in securing private rental housing, universities can collaborate with local guarantor schemes. Institutions such as Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast, and the University of Birmingham have successfully implemented such partnerships to enhance housing access for international students. For example, the University of Birmingham has a guarantor partnership scheme which acts as a UK guarantor for a fee that is based on the rental amount. Students also benefit from a discount via this partnership.

A number of universities also operate portals where they recommend local, 'good' landlords, to increase confidence on standards. Improved communication both within the university teams and externally with students has been key. Some examples of these are outlined on [page 28](#).

Increase in Commuter Students

Nina Davies, Chief International Officer and Director of Strategic Partnerships at the Royal Veterinary College said that whilst the college hadn't seen a decrease of international students, it has found filling accommodation more challenging due to an increase in domestic students commuting. Comments on an increasing number of commuter students due to cost-of-living pressures were echoed in other regions. Data from Northumbria University found that 42% of all home students (full and part-time) were living at home as of 12th February 2025.

Housing

In a joint series on commuter students, UCAS and WonkHE data explores this trend. In 2024, 30% of UK 18-year-olds said they planned to live at home during their studies – up from 25% in 2019 and just 21% in 2015. Looking beyond the headline figures, they note that over half of the most disadvantaged students live at home during their studies, compared to fewer than one in five of the least disadvantaged. Regional distribution also has an impact, with London seeing the highest proportion of live at home students in England.

Cost of Living and Financial Support

Cost of living and financial support considerations are playing an increasingly important role for students in deciding where to study. UCAS director of strategy Ben Jordan notes:

“The availability of support with the cost of living has risen in relative importance as a factor when shortlisting universities from 12th in 2022 to 3rd in 2024 – a significant shift, which suggests a change in student mindset. There have also been large changes in rank importance of “universities that are close to home” from 9th to 4th, “universities with low-cost accommodation” from 13th to 7th and “universities I can attend but still live with my parents” from 16th to 11th.”

Ben Jordan
UCAS Director of Strategy
Writing for a May 2025 Wonkhe article

This underlines the importance of universities working closely with their local authorities to ensure that there is sufficient provision of affordable, high-quality accommodation. Whilst these reported shifts are for domestic students, we heard strongly that accommodation provision needs to be considered in the round, rather than solely being looked at as an international student pressure. The situation also varies greatly between different student demographics, and it is important to note that there is no one size fits all approach. Universities need to understand the specific requirements of their intakes and work with councils to plan for this.

Best Practice Case Study: Nottingham Student Living Strategy

The Nottingham Student Living Strategy is a collaborative plan by Nottingham City Council, the University of Nottingham, and Nottingham Trent University, which has been widely praised and awarded as a best practice example of partnership working on accommodation. It sets out a commitment to working together to help address the challenges associated with a large population of short-term student residents, and to help build stronger links between students and the city.

The strategy aims to improve the quality, safety, affordability and location of student accommodation across the city. Key objectives include increasing the choice and quality of affordable student housing, maximising the benefits of a large student population, and addressing any challenges this can pose for local communities where students live in high concentrations, for example noise disturbance and waste collections.

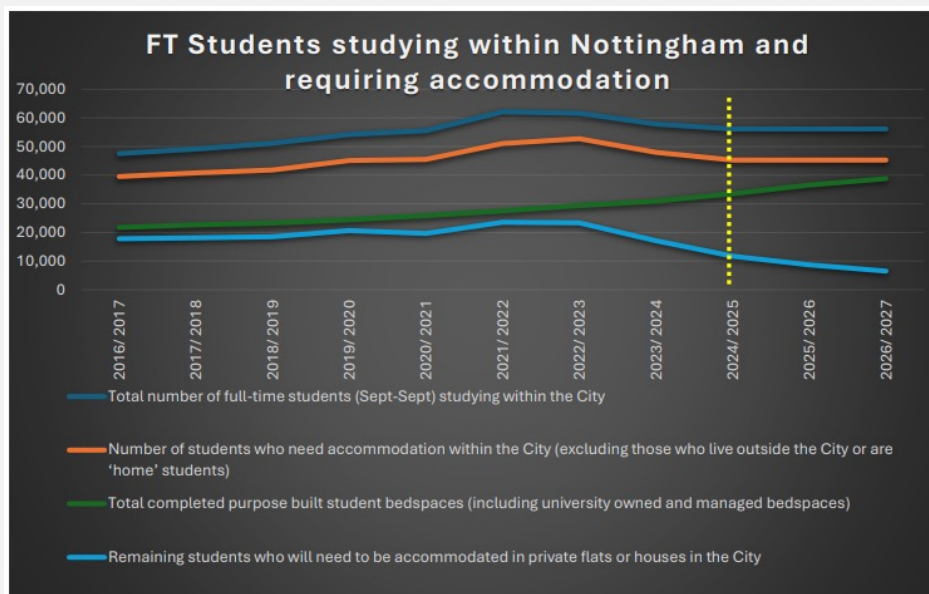
The strategy places particular emphasis on delivering more purpose-built, affordable student accommodation in appropriate locations, with a focus on shared living formats rather than studios to encourage support networks and the social aspects of on-street accommodation. It also aims to ***“encourage neighbourliness, where students contribute to creating a clean, attractive and sustainable environment which supports the wellbeing of the community”***.

Key Learnings – the ‘How’

Council representatives spoke about the strength of the partnership between Nottingham City Council, the University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University, and housing providers.

As part of the strategy, the council has worked closely with both universities to establish the number of students who require accommodation in the city. Their established methodology uses actual student enrolment data and then excludes students who either live at home or live outside of the city, based on their registered addresses when enrolling and following a data check. This is very different to the headline number of students from sources such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Office for Students because, as pointed out by the council, such figures will often include part-time students and students who study at other campuses outside of the city, as well as the fact that they operate on a lag.

As an example, the graph below shows the total number of full-time students studying and living within the city (dark blue line). Those students who live in their own home (and therefore don't have housing need) are excluded, leaving only those students studying within Nottingham with housing need (orange line). PBSA delivery including anticipated future years is shown on the green line. Finally, this leaves remaining students who are assumed to be living 'on-street' either in HMOs or other accommodation such as small houses or flats on the light blue line.



Nottingham City Council also publishes regular update reports monitoring student accommodation across the city, including a PBSA dashboard showing anticipated bedspaces. For the past 5 years on average there has been an increase of over 1,800 additional PBSA bedspaces in Nottingham, which often reports the highest delivery of any city outside of London. This is a reflection of the council's aim to move students out of on-street housing to reduce pressures in areas with high concentrations of students, as outlined in the Nottingham Student Living Strategy

Since 2014 the council has also carried out an annual occupancy survey of the Nottingham PBSA market. This has shown consistently very low rates of vacancies in all types of PBSA within the city from 2014-15 – 2023-24, at an average of 0.85% excluding the first year of the pandemic. In 2023-24 however, this rose to 3.5%, and in 2024-25, it grew further still to 11.2%.

The most recent student accommodation update, from June 2025, notes that the decline in international student numbers has softened demand in PBSA schemes “as there is a preference for this type of accommodation from international students”.

Whilst local authorities in other cities with a strong HEI presence have relationships with their universities, Nottingham is leading the way in having formalised this into a strategic document, going beyond just operational relationships and setting out an overarching vision for the city.

Some universities commented that they don't discuss their accommodation strategy enough with the council and the PBSA sector in terms of expected numbers and student groups, and that this is an area where stronger links can be built. Institutions should have more detailed conversations with local councils, PBSA providers and landlords.

Best Practice Case Study:

Scotland's Housing Emergency and Increased Collaboration on Student Accommodation

In May 2024, Scotland declared a national housing emergency. Michelle Christian, Housing Codes and Standards Lead at CUBO, the association for campus and commercial services professionals, noted that this backdrop has led to an increased focus on student housing, quality and access, and a drive for closer collaboration between institutions and local authorities to better plan for student housing demand as part of the wider pressure on the sector as a whole.

As part of this, the Scottish Government undertook a review of PBSA . One of the key recommendations was for “maximising partnerships”; for universities to work more closely with local authority housing planners and strategy teams to plan for future student housing demand and also to improve the quality and experience of the large number of students living in the private rented sector.



Best Practice Case Study: Edinburgh Student Living Report

- Against the backdrop of Scotland declaring a national housing emergency, Edinburgh's four universities collaborated to conduct research to evaluate where student housing demand is concentrated in the city and how best to address this. By the size of its full-time student population, Edinburgh is the seventh largest location in the UK, home to 62,660 students in 2021-22.
- The student population in Edinburgh has grown quickly over the last decade and such growth in student numbers has increased the demand for bed spaces in the city, although overall enrolment numbers stabilised in 2024-25.
- Whilst approximately 36,500 students will live in university operated housing, their parental/own home or Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA), an estimated 27,000, largely later year students, are trying to secure housing privately.
- Edinburgh has seen a 23% drop in available private rented properties over six years, whilst student demand has increased. This supply and demand imbalance has created challenges in students accessing suitable housing options, with students facing heightened competition, increased rental prices and potentially lower living standards.
- The research found that average weekly rents for students in the city are 14% higher than peer group comparison universities and the average price of a private sector direct-let bed is over 30% higher. Annually, a direct-let bed is priced 91% higher than a university room, far higher than the 50% average across the peer group.

- The report concludes that partnership working between local authorities and universities must be formed to explore options such as planning dispensation on development of campus land to meet the need for student housing while freeing up sites for general development across the region.
- The report also recommends that universities and the council should identify opportunities and partnerships to deliver a model to bring together mixed tenures of housing, where student accommodation is only one component.
- Partnership working is underway, with universities in Edinburgh working jointly with The City of Edinburgh Council on the new Edinburgh Local Housing Strategy 2025–30 to address student housing need. Representatives from Edinburgh commented that the local authority was now in a much better position to plan for health and housing need following better data sharing from universities.
- Alongside this, the students unions across the city have been working to make sure that the housing challenges faced by students are captured in the Housing (Scotland) Bill through working closely with MSPs. This has led to three key amendments being passed to the bill to address unaffordable rents for students and to increase their housing protections.
- The data on where students live is being updated in 2025-26.

Key Learnings – the ‘How’

- Increased collaboration between universities and local authority housing departments is key to ensuring that student housing need is considered as part of future local housing plans.
- The Edinburgh Student Living Report also demonstrates the importance of universities working together across a region to assess their impact holistically.
- Again, data plays an important role; councils need universities to provide accurate enrolment data and forecasts to support their plans.

Best Practice Case Studies:

Cross-City Collaboration

Similar to Edinburgh, other representatives from multi-university cities spoke about the need to collaborate closely across institutions and with the council and housing providers to manage their student populations.

The University of Bristol and University of the West of England spoke about working closely with the council through the 'One City Approach' and 'One City Plan', which encourages organisations to work collaboratively across Bristol to respond to immediate and long-term city-wide opportunities and challenges that go beyond organisational boundaries.

As part of this, the University of Bristol is a member of the 'One City Homes and Community Board', which convenes stakeholders from across the city to deliver its housing goals. The University of the West of England sits on a Bristol City Council international committee that meets quarterly. Presentations from the University have included: highlighting the HEPI data on the benefits of international students to the city and the composition of the University's largest student nationalities; on accommodation and cost-of-living; and on the Graduate Route. One of the actions arising from this group was the creation of a factsheet on the University and its regional contribution which could be circulated more widely.

Similarly, Southampton Solent University and the University of Southampton both sit on the council's Housing Strategy Group to provide input on accommodation and the type of housing available for staff and students, with both providing student number guides to the local council and providers.

The city also runs the Southampton Accreditation Scheme for Student Housing (SASSH), a partnership between the University of Southampton, Southampton Solent University and Southampton City Council to ensure that students have access to a supply of high quality, safe accommodation that is well managed.

To advertise a property through the scheme, a landlord must declare that the property meets the required SASSH standards. This is a self-accreditation scheme and relies on landlords making accurate assessments of their property against the SASSH standards. However, Southampton City Council carries out random spot checks of registered properties to ensure they meet the standards claimed. In addition, if a report is made to the Universities or to the council, the council can make arrangements to check that particular property.

The University of Portsmouth has also set up an online portal recommending reputable landlords, following some rogue landlords and letting agents targeting international students. A similar voluntary scheme, 'The Good Landlord Charter' exists in Manchester, into which the Greater Manchester Student Assembly provided input. To become a member, landlords need to demonstrate they are meeting the legal minimum standards of renting and, with support, commit to higher standards than they are currently required to by law.

It is worth noting that changes recently introduced through the Renters' Rights Act will bring in a national database for landlords in the private rented sector (PRS), as well as a mandatory Decent Homes Standard to improve

the standards of properties in the PRS. This may mean that in the future there is less need or incentive for localised schemes.

Jo Purves, Pro Vice Chancellor for Partnerships and Global Development at the University of Salford and a member of the Greater Manchester Civic Universities Board, also pointed to Manchester Student Homes, an organisation which looks at the availability of PBSA and predicts pinch points across the region.

More widely, the Greater Manchester Civic Universities Board is considering the spread of PBSA and potential gaps, with spare PBSA accommodation in Salford being used by students from the two Manchester universities. Jo she highlighted the importance of managing demand across the city region to avoid over-pressure on one particular area. She noted that houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) are much harder to work with, with private landlords not necessarily in contact with universities, although adding that students crowding into certain areas has historically been more of a home rather than international student issue.

Similarly in Leeds, Unipol, which oversees one of the standard codes for student housing, is based in the city and convenes universities and other bodies interested in student accommodation to manage provision across the city.

Health

International students who come to the UK for more than six months pay an immigration health surcharge of £776 per year to cover their use of the NHS. This increased from £470 in February 2024, a 65% increase.

With the NHS grappling with funding challenges, increasing demand and staffing shortages all leading to long waiting times for patients, it is important that universities can demonstrate how they are working in their communities to manage health provision for students.

We heard how the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University have worked together to get better projections of overall student numbers for up to ten years ahead for the purposes of GP registration. They have been liaising with the strategic planning department within the Health and Social Care Partnership in Edinburgh, the main provider of health and social care services.



Other universities similarly spoke of liaising with their local NHS trust on the number of students coming into the region and with GP practices close to campus.

However, many participants noted that local engagement on health provision was more challenging than on accommodation due to the system's complexity and many different layers and services.

Cultural Unfamiliarity

One of the key challenges highlighted in supporting international students' health provision was cultural unfamiliarity and the need to explain the concept of the healthcare system being free at the point of use. It was frequently raised that international students are often confused about what they have paid for and think that the health surcharge entitles them to levels of private healthcare that you might see in other countries, and are then disappointed by access and availability. For example, they believe that healthcare will be private and immediately accessible. International students are also often unaware of the different touchpoints within the NHS and, without guidance, may use A&E for all health needs.

Nicola Paxman, Operations Manager at Leeds Student Medical Practice, outlined that appointments for international students in the first term can often extend beyond a 10-minute slot while they overcome initial confusion and misunderstanding.

Many universities outlined the work they do to explain the health system to international students and how they encourage them to

register with a local GP. The NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's student page was highlighted as an example of best practice in helping students navigate NHS systems and access the right support. This explains all of the different health touchpoints available for students including; how to register with a GP, the support pharmacies offer, where to access mental health and sexual health services, and when to attend A&E.

A number of universities have GPs on campus or invite local GPs to campus during fresher's week to encourage registration. For example, following challenges with students not registering with local GPs and then struggling to access help when they need it, Ulster University has since brought large GP surgeries onto campus at the start of the year and successfully registered nearly a third of its international intake on site during a two-day period.

As with accommodation, a comment was made that lack of GP registration was more challenging previously when there were more students with dependants who might need to access health services.

Other challenges specifically relating to international students' healthcare provision included that they may take medication not known in England. Nicola Paxman outlined that the Medical Practice seeks to proactively work with international students before they come to the University to discuss these issues, including through calls to explain what the NHS is and what provision they can access. The practice also has interpreters and language lines, so language barriers are less of an issue.

Student housing providers also highlighted the health support they offer, with The Unite Group having a 24/7 student wellbeing helpline available in different languages. Kim Nisbett, Head of Data and Insights at The Unite Group, also spoke about the importance of communication with students in advance of their arrival in the UK, especially introducing them to their future flatmates to promote integration and reduce isolation. The University of the West of England had just launched a similar 24/7 service app, aiming to alleviate challenges regarding language barriers and cultural differences. This includes access to counsellors in students' own language.

Another challenge that can increase pressure on local health services is vaccine catch ups for international students, as they are unable to evidence which vaccines they have received, or the vaccines in question are not available in their country. For example, the Leeds Medical Practice has HPV clinics weekly with hundreds of Chinese students coming for this vaccine which is routinely offered in UK schools.

While participants did not have data on international students' private healthcare usage, there was general agreement and anecdotal evidence that fewer international students are now taking out private healthcare due to their belief that this is what the higher NHS surcharge covers. Students coming for shorter courses, who are not required to pay the surcharge, are more likely to take out private cover.

Recording International Student Status Within the NHS

As with housing, there have historically been concerns over the potential burden international students might place on local health systems. However, universities spoke about how they viewed student health provision as a whole student population issue, rather than specifically an international one, albeit that there may need to be additional considerations for this group.

It is hard to assess the impact of international students on local healthcare, as their usage of the health system is not recorded systematically.

While students using the NHS may be asked of their occupation (which would confirm their student status), this is not mandatory and there is no consistent follow up question to confirm whether a student is international. There was evidence that some GP practices did track international student status, but this was not the norm.

Many participants suggested that recording student status should be standard practice.

The University of the West of England also highlighted that the NHS is currently working on a project with the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care to enable students to register their status, such as when calling 111, however this is at an early stage.

To better understand student health needs, the University of Glasgow is working with its GP services on campus to look at trends and anonymise data from those registered with the practice.

Tackling Local Health Challenges

In discussing how universities manage health provision for international students, many highlighted their role in providing health services in their local community.

University of East London Stratford Health Campus aims to become the primary multi-professional health hub in Newham, creating links between students studying health courses with health providers in East London. The goal is to address health inequalities whilst also supplying the healthcare sector with practice-ready professionals. The plans include:

- Expanding the health community: To enhance training, research, innovation, and community outreach.
- Training tomorrow's workforce: Developing a future-facing workforce for health and social care.
- Providing state-of-the-art facilities: Offering spaces for medical care, research, student accommodation, and green social spaces. The Campus will include a 'student village' with over 650 bed spaces.
- Community engagement: Creating a welcoming environment where students live, study, and connect with the local community.

The University has partnered with NHS Trusts, hospitals, GPs, local councils, and community

groups to identify and address critical health needs.

Through the One East London Network, launched by the London Mayor, it is working with over 60 primary care practitioners and anchor institutions to tackle health inequalities in innovative ways.

This is just one example of universities working to address health challenges in their local area. Karen Blackney, from the University of East Anglia, highlighted the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital (NNUH) Research Park, where both institutions conduct significant physiotherapy research and provide clinical services.

Salford is developing a new health and wellbeing building to support the education, training and recruitment of health care professionals, which will also offer public services for the local community.

In Portsmouth, the University has developed a state-of-the-art Dental Academy training facility in partnership with King's College London's Dental Institute and the NHS, and is aiming to bring more dental students to the local area.

Whilst none of these initiatives are targeted at international students specifically, all spoke about how they are recruited as part of these courses and therefore contribute to improving local health and wellbeing.

Mental Health Support

Many universities highlighted the support they offer for students in terms of their mental health, although noted that challenges arise where international students are not registered with the NHS, causing delays for making referrals.

Attendees raised the importance of the consistency of partnerships, noting that university mental health teams often operate in parallel with NHS services, rather than acting in an integrated way.

The Scottish Government's Student Mental Health Action Plan, published in 2024, emphasises the need for strengthening partnerships between universities, student bodies, local NHS Boards and Health and Social Care Partnerships. Andy Shanks, Director of Student Wellbeing at The University of Edinburgh and Executive Member of AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation, said that he hoped the action plan will be a vehicle for better joint working, data and consistent standards.

The action plan builds the effective student-institutional collaborations already in place through NUS Scotland's government funded Student Mental Health Agreement Project, which provides tailored support for colleges, universities and students' associations to develop and promote their mental health work. 88% said participating has improved the partnership between the students' association and institution.

Best Practice Case Study:

Newcastle-Wide Engagement on Healthcare

Northumbria and Newcastle Universities collaborate closely with NHS and public health partners to support student wellbeing, despite no formal planning mechanism for international student arrivals. Their joint efforts include:

- **Integrated Mental Health Care:** Northumbria partners with Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (CNTW NHS Trust) under an Information Sharing Agreement to deliver coordinated mental health support across Student Health and Wellbeing Services, the NHS, and commissioned partners.
- **Student Health Hub Feasibility:** A joint project with CNTW and Newcastle University is exploring a centralised health hub for students.
- **Civic Collaboration:** Under the Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement, introduced following close joint working during the pandemic, both universities work with the city council and NHS on initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of the region, including playing a leading role in:
 - **Net Zero Newcastle:** Working to reduce greenhouse gases and support the delivery of the Newcastle Net Zero Action Plan.
 - **Newcastle Health Innovation Partners:** discovering, developing and delivering new solutions in healthcare to tackle health inequalities in the region.
 - **IntoUniversity:** a new learning centre designed to support more young people to fulfil their potential and achieve a place at university.

This case study highlights the power of city-wide collaboration both in enhancing student health services and tackling wider health and wellbeing challenges.

Best Practice Case Study: Integrated Health Partnerships

- Clare Craig, Director of Student Wellbeing at the University of Glasgow, outlined a pilot project between the University of Glasgow and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to manage mental health demand, which has been underway for almost two years. This followed challenges with students struggling to navigate the NHS and find the right service for their needs.
 - The pilot includes provision for an NHS liaison nurse based within the university's mental health service and community mental health teams. The university pays for the role but the person is an NHS employee, enabling the university to make direct referrals into NHS teams and vice versa – the person has access to both university and NHS systems.
 - Clare outlined that the pilot has been useful in terms of managing acute needs and preventing cases from escalating to crisis point. She also highlighted how there were cases whereby the university has continued to work with students over time, with the liaison role ensuring that referrals are appropriate and that the university can complement NHS treatment plans.
-
- She also pointed to positive NHS feedback, saying the pilot has improved communication and relationships “enormously”, noting an initial perception that international students were placing demand on mental health teams which universities were not addressing. Clare concluded that the pilot has successfully addressed concerns about potential increased pressures on NHS services as the university is working proactively to address needs. She said that surveys show senior NHS colleagues are very positive about the partnership.
 - More widely, Clare highlighted how, because of the pilot, there is now much more trust and openness between the university and the NHS to have productive, collaborative discussions.
 - Those on the call agreed that this type of partnership should be standard practice.

Pilot Project:

Specialist Mental Health Support

- The University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin Mental Health Service has been established to provide moderate to severe mental health support for students within the area. This has been modelled on a similar service in Greater Manchester, which began as a pilot but has now been fully commissioned by the Integrated Care Board.
- Bethany Bates, Service Manager, commented that international students often find it difficult to access the health services they need due to complexity and bureaucracy.
- Addressing some of the data challenges, Bethany outlined that the service, as it is especially for students, will record international student status for service evaluation and improvements.
- As well as providing student specific support, the pilot demonstrates the value of universities collaborating to meet student needs in a region.

Collaboration with Other Providers

In addition to the focus on accommodation and health provision, it was clear that universities are already working much more broadly within their communities to ensure that their student population is integrated.

In Wales, Wrexham University spoke about working closely with rail services on term times and managing major student flows.

As a member of Bristol City Council's international committee, the University of the West of England collaborates with Bristol Airport on passenger route feedback and with Visit Bristol to highlight the positive impact international students and their visiting families have on regional tourism.



In Northern Ireland, Ulster University works closely with the transport provider, Translink, to offer free and discounted bus and rail services. As with GP services, Translink is invited to the university's orientation sessions. Other universities also spoke of putting on free or subsidised travel to support students transit to travel to campus, particularly where they might be living in more affordable accommodation further away.

Mehvish Ashfaq, Interim Director of Global Engagement at Ulster University, also highlighted the university's work with the police to destigmatise their role, which may be very different to that experienced in international students' home countries, and address any potential issues around hate crime.

Mehvish noted that Northern Ireland doesn't have a large BAME home population, and that issues affecting minority ethnic groups are likely to also affect international students.

She said that community liaison groups met regularly with the police service during the race riots in summer 2025 and non-uniformed police officers visited students who wanted to report an incident. The university also offered free taxi and transport services if students didn't feel comfortable taking the bus.

The university also has a community forum which brings in the police service, healthcare providers and community stakeholders for the university to listen to community issues and consider its role in supporting dialogue in the community and activating change. Mehvish spoke about how this work is around integrating the student voice into the community voice, and that international students are being integrated as students, rather than as international.

Other universities also spoke about working closely with the police and hosting events to engage the outside community with the work of the university.

Engagement Structures

How universities engaged with other partners across their regions varied, from informal engagement in Northern Ireland to much more structured mechanisms for collaboration in areas with strong devolution structures such as London and Greater Manchester.

As further power is shifted from central government to local leaders in line with the Government's English Devolution Bill ambitions, there are opportunities for universities to establish more strategic engagement structures with local partners. Combined authorities are at different stages of development across the country; those in areas where these are relatively new structures spoke of hoping to learn from Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and Yorkshire.

Participants often highlighted Greater Manchester as a leading example of strong collaboration between universities and local government, particularly through the close working relationship with Mayor Andy Burnham. Representatives from the North East, which recently elected a new mayor, expressed aspirations to develop similar strategic partnerships in their region.



Best Practice Case Study:

Strong Partnerships in London

London demonstrates a strategic model of collaboration between universities and local government to support student needs and drive regional growth. Rob Anderson, Research Director at the Centre for London, noted that stimulating economic growth through partnerships with higher education institutions is a stated priority for local authorities, sub-regional partnerships, and the Greater London Authority (GLA), highlighting how partnerships span housing, health, and transport, with universities playing a key role in shaping city-wide planning.

London Higher, the capital's university membership body, sits on the Mayor's Academic Forum, which informs the London Growth Plan - the city's blueprint for housing development in London - and guidance on purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA). This work has strengthened planning relationships and promoted mixed, inclusive neighbourhoods, with PBSA seen as vital for easing pressure on the private rental sector and supporting regeneration. The forum meets around three times a year and brings together the GLA, local councils, housing developers and universities, with the aim of ensuring London meets student needs.



The London Growth Plan identifies international education as a priority sector, recognising universities as a pipeline of world-class talent. It outlines:

“[These growth sectors] matter beyond their economic contribution alone: they are the city’s soft power sectors, positioning London on the global stage. We prioritise the experience economy and international education because they are some of the foundations of London’s prosperity.”

London has the most international students of any city in the world, educating over 200,000 international students each year. The plan commits to backing universities to continue to attract international students, demonstrating a clear alignment between the city's universities and local leadership.

Collaboration with Other Providers

A new inclusive talent strategy, developed in partnership with universities, aims to align education with economic needs through sector talent boards. These will bring together higher education, further education and employers to make the system more responsive to London's economic needs and make it easier for businesses to find talent. The strategy notes:

“London’s alumni become global decisionmakers, with an affinity to London that often lasts a lifetime. International students feed our talent pipeline.”

On transport, London Higher, students' unions and the London Partnership Board, whose membership includes senior representatives from the police, transport, healthcare and central government, are lobbying the Mayor of London to reduce student travel charges during peak times.

London's four sub-regional partnerships bring together councils, universities, and businesses to drive local economic growth priorities and improve skills and employment in their sub-regions, supporting the goals of the London Growth Plan. The West London Alliance, for example, notes that their partnership:

“aligns with the Government’s Industrial Strategy, which focuses on boosting innovation, developing future skills, and investing in clean energy and advanced technologies. By working together, West London’s universities and councils are helping to deliver the local partnerships and long-term planning needed to meet these national priorities.”

London Higher has produced a Civic Map to showcase how London's higher education sector works in partnership beyond the traditional campus with key stakeholders across the city to make improvements for all. For example, the Civic Map highlights a partnership with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and London South Bank University to revolutionise the detection of kidney disease in the borough through home testing.

Other regions could look to produce similar maps for their area to demonstrate the tangible projects underway to benefit local communities.

Greater Manchester was frequently referenced as an example of best practice in terms of the close collaboration and strong partnership working between universities and local government.

The Greater Manchester Civic Universities Board was convened in 2021, with the establishment of the Civic University Agreement, to ensure strategic alignment and that universities are aware of their impact on place and can articulate their benefits. This includes regular citizens panels, with the next one on skills, where citizens from all twelve boroughs discuss their priorities. There is also an upcoming panel on neighbourhoods, which will cover international student impacts.

Jo Purves, Pro Vice Chancellor of Partnerships and Global Development at the University of Salford and member of the board, highlighted that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Labour Market Information Team gives presentations on labour market trends and gaps at least twice a year to all academic schools so that universities can develop an appropriate



curriculum and assess their output in terms of skills gaps.

Others in newer combined authority areas expressed interest in this type of collaboration.

The Combined Authority is currently having discussions on its international strategy, which will be aligned with the Industrial Strategy and have international students as a priority.

It was also referenced that high commissions and embassies overseas are asking for combined authorities to corral vice chancellors into focused trade missions and that Manchester is doing well on this front.

In the North East, all five universities, spanning two combined authorities, participate in the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership to increase access to higher education for

disadvantaged groups including care-experienced students and those in areas of low higher education participation.

Discussions are beginning on the North East's skills strategy as part of Mayor Kim McGuinness' New Deal for North East Workers, to make the most of talent in the region and develop sector-based work including through knowledge exchanges.

Similarly, Tees Valley Combined Authority is now beginning to write its new growth plan, therefore is hosting panels with stakeholders separated by different pillars, such as tech, digital, and creative sectors. Teesside University is regularly engaged at all levels and is developing an action plan on how it can support the combined authority with regional growth and productivity.

Collaboration with Other Providers

Likewise, the University of Bristol is involved in discussions with the West of England Combined Authority about its regional growth strategy, sitting in on meetings on innovation and enterprise. The University of Sussex spoke about working closely with businesses through their local authority economic growth boards.

Across the country, we heard that combined and local authorities are working with universities and businesses on local skills needs, particularly through Local Skills Improvement Plans.

The Government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper outlines its ambition for strategic authorities (these are defined as a number of councils working together, such as combined authorities) to take the lead in ensuring that the skills and employment system can meet the needs of the local economy, employers and residents, working closely with local stakeholders and partners. This will be implemented through the English Devolution Bill, which establishes strategic authorities as the default delivery partner on adult skills.

As part of close and regular working, the Chair of Skills England will convene mayors to discuss local labour market challenges, building on the sector priorities that mayoral strategic authorities are setting out in their local growth plans (another new requirement under the English Devolution Bill) and ensure that this is aligned with national policy. The white paper outlines:

“Higher education providers should engage more actively with Local Skills Improvement Plans as both providers of skills and as employers. Through this engagement with Local Skills Improvement Plans, higher education providers will build on and strengthen their collaboration with strategic authorities and further education providers, and ensure they are better meeting the needs of employers.”

Business and Local Growth

A 2023 HEPI report, in collaboration with Universities UK International and Kaplan International Pathways, found international students contribute significantly to local economies, with a £41.9 billion gross economic benefit to the UK in 2021-22, outweighing costs and providing a net benefit of £37.4 billion. On average, each UK parliamentary constituency receives a net contribution of about £58 million, equivalent to roughly £560 per citizen.

With these headline figures well-known, we sought to uncover further detail on what this looks like in practice in communities across the UK, particularly against the backdrop of the government's focus on growth. We heard that international students are central to innovation and enterprise across UK universities. They play a vital role in driving knowledge exchange with businesses, contributing to startups, and advancing research commercialisation. Their involvement spans the government's eight high-growth sectors, supporting the UK's ambition to become a science superpower by 2030. Through launching and scaling new ventures, international students are helping to position the UK as a leading destination for entrepreneurship and business growth, one of the government's key ambitions.

International Graduates Working in the NHS

Nichole McIntosh, Regional Head of Nursing and Midwifery at NHS England – London, highlighted the clear benefits of international students and graduates working in the NHS, particularly in building trust and confidence amongst different ethnic groups. She noted that seeing nurses “who look like them” can be particularly important for patients during sensitive moments such as end-of-life care and bereavement. Dean Gimblett, Head of Capital Nurse at NHS England, reinforced this point, stating that every NHS Trust in London recognises the importance of workforce diversity in enhancing development, retention, and a sense of belonging.

Supporting Business Growth Through Industry Placements in Kent

The University of Greenwich partners with Twin Group to provide Kent businesses with access to international skills and a pipeline of talent to support their growth.

Since 2019, Kent businesses have had the opportunity to hire international master’s students from the University of Greenwich for a one-year placement at the end of their course, providing access to skilled, early-career professionals educated at the University of Greenwich Medway campus. 87% of students supported by Twin Group in their placement have been retained by their placement company since 2021, and 542 students have been placed in UK-wide companies since 2020. Of the 542 placements secured, 15% were within small or micro-sized companies.

These employers particularly benefit from:

- Flexible and supported placement onboarding of university students often leading to post-placement roles.
- Direct access to international talent without recruitment fees.
- Fresh research perspectives and knowledge of emerging technologies.
- Opportunities to address skills shortages in technical sectors.

Twin Group matches students to skilled roles without recruitment costs to the employer. Primarily from STEM and business management backgrounds, these students are helping companies meet skills shortages while allowing them to leverage their master’s level education and research experience in their area of study.

Employers reported finding value in the cultural diversity and global insight international students contribute. A notable example is Terrafox Soil Solutions, which hosted international MSc student Pooja Rajidan, whose research expertise advanced the company’s soil carbonisation programme, demonstrating how placements can drive innovation and applied research impact.

Pacadar: A local Kent Success Story

Pacadar UK Ltd., based in Kent, is an international company leading in the pre-cast concrete sector for both civil engineering and building construction projects. They have recruited 12 international master's students for manufacturing, production, logistics, quality control, and health and safety roles via the industry placement partnership. Gema de la Guia, Pacadar's People Specialist, highlighted their positive attitude, and willingness to create value, and says:

"So far we have 100% success rate with this placement programme. The international students perform really well. They have a strong background from their University course".

Gema de la Guia

Other universities also spoke about the success of placement years, with some commenting that international students tend to opt for these in greater numbers than domestic ones.

UWE highlighted its internship scheme which provides work experience opportunities for UK and international students, connecting them with local employers across Bristol to support business needs and projects. This academic year, 24 international students successfully completed internship projects within small and medium-sized enterprises and local businesses, gaining practical skills, industry insight, and contributing meaningfully to their host organisations. The scheme supports global talent and the regional economy, fostering collaboration, innovation, and professional growth.



University of Greenwich master's placement students on site at Pacadar UK Ltd. Kent

Best Practice Case Study:

Collaboration to Drive Regional Growth and Meet Local Skills Needs in Northern Ireland

Across the roundtables, participants emphasised the vital role international students play in addressing local skills gaps and driving regional economic growth. We heard best practice of universities working in close partnership with businesses to foster innovation and support development in key sectors aligned with regional priorities. Northern Ireland examples are outlined below.

Northern Ireland Funding Research in Line with Local Industry Need

The Department for the Economy and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland fund postgraduate studentships at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University for research and certain approved full-time postgraduate courses. These are in line with the economic priorities of the government and where there is research of direct interest to industry. Queen's University spoke about how it has made the case for a percentage of studentships for international students, demonstrating the impact of international students through PhDs, KTPs and spinout companies for businesses in Northern Ireland.

The universities also offer placement opportunities with Northern Irish companies, particularly in fintech and local engineering firms, with Mehvish Ashfaq, Interim Director of Global Engagement at Ulster University, noting that Ulster is working to ensure that this is consistent for international students.

Belfast Region City Deal

Whilst Northern Ireland does not currently have an International Education Strategy to set a strategic ambition, attendees spoke of a close working relationship between the “triple helix” of universities, businesses, and government. Professor Margaret Topping, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Global Engagement at Queen's University Belfast, pointed to regional city deals as an example of this close working. The deals are aimed at helping to harness additional investment, create new and higher-paid jobs, attract and retain talent, and speed up inclusive economic growth at a local level.

The Belfast Region City Deal, for example, has an overall value over £1 billion and is expected to generate up to 20,000 jobs over the next 10-15 years. A key component is a drive to build digital and innovation capabilities in the region, with the deal driving investment in research and investment in sectors such as health and life sciences, advanced manufacturing and digital and creative industries, all priority sectors under the UK Government's Industrial Strategy. The City Deal website outlines:

"Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University have collaborated extensively to develop proposals for global centres of innovation excellence. Investments in innovation will be targeted to build upon the research strengths of our local universities, aligned to sectors that are demonstrating the potential for exceptional growth. The Deal will invest more than £300 million in five industry-led centres of excellence, focusing on the industries of the future, providing new tools and utilising data insights to support increased productivity and business competitiveness."

Indeed, the British Council's 'Opportunity Northern Ireland' report highlighted how one of the Unique Selling Points of Queen's University Belfast is the strong ties to industry to drive business engagement and innovation, including placements for international students to meet skills needs in the country. The report outlines:

"Queen's University Belfast also develops strong partnerships with employers from various economic sectors in Northern Ireland. These agreements feed into the university's offer for international students by allowing students to study for a degree with an embedded work placement in Northern Ireland. According to Queen's University Belfast's International Office, professional and industry placements can address the demand for various skills in Northern Ireland. Moreover, through these partnerships, Queen's University Belfast aims to dispel any myths or erroneous information about employing international graduates and drive the economic contribution that overseas students can bring."

Best Practice Case Study:

Midlands Universities Collaborating to Drive Foreign Direct Investment and Harness International Student Skills

Launched in 2024, the Invest in UK R&D Midlands Campaign aims to attract and maximise Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into local and regional economies, particularly into research and development.

The campaign is led by Midlands Innovation, which brings together the region's eight universities with Midlands industry to drive research, innovation and skills, along with the Midlands Engine and West Midlands Growth Companies and national government through the Office for Investment. The Campaign aligns with the priorities of the new West and East Midlands mayors, supporting efforts to secure funding for major regeneration projects across the region, with universities as core partners.

Focusing on five high-growth sectors - agritech, creative and digital industries, health and life sciences, transport technologies, and zero carbon energy - the campaign showcases the Midlands' R&D strengths through outbound missions.



A key initiative is the UK's first University Investment Concierge Service, connecting investors with universities and government partners. The campaign is backed by £1.5 million from the International Science Partnership Fund, with additional support from UKRI, AHRC, and the Global Science and Innovation Network.

Dr Helen Turner, Director of Midlands Innovation, outlined how in addition to better collaborating to drive investment, the organisation has been working to understand how to support businesses to harness the language and cultural skills of international students to support their export growth.

She cited research finding that SMEs embracing language capabilities are 30% more successful in exporting than those who don't, and highlighted Northern Ireland's Graduate to Export scheme as leading the way on this, and a model worth replicating. The programme provides 50% salary support up to a maximum of £21,000 to employ a graduate for a duration of 18 months. The graduate will spend six months in Northern Ireland getting to know the business, followed by 12 months in an export market conducting research that fits with the company's plans.

She also emphasised the value of international alumni as connectors between universities, businesses, and civic partners, noting recent global trade discussions in Japan led by the East Midlands Mayor. Helen stressed that the region could better harness international students' appetite for work experience, referencing a previously successful East Midlands Chamber programme, now discontinued due to the loss of EU funding, that placed international students in export-focused roles.

Best Practice Case Study:

University of Bristol Temple Quarter Enterprise Campus

The Temple Quarter Enterprise Campus is an urban regeneration project next to Temple Meads station intended to facilitate interaction between academia, industry and local partnerships, while also spearheading innovation and entrepreneurship. The campus will be focussed on teaching interdisciplinary programmes, between science, engineering, business, social science, law, health and life science faculties, with the campus also hosting an AI supercomputer. It aims for students and staff to work alongside industry partners and civic communities to respond to local, national and global challenges, and is aligned to the city's regional growth strategy.

The Bristol Dental School, which opened a new building in the Temple Quarter in 2023, runs a dental practice which offers appointments to the local community, enabling student dentists to improve local healthcare provision and offer vital services in light of a shortage of NHS dentistry within the city. The practice has provided more than 40,000 appointments since opening, including for homeless and paediatric patients. Dental students have also provided training in care homes, and the practice receives referrals from hospitals and general dental practices. In the last year, it held nearly 20,000 patient appointments, and received over 200 hospital and over 200 general dental practice referrals. Professor Liang-Fong Wong, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor (International Education), highlighted the School's contribution to healthcare provision within the city and the involvement of international students.

Best Practice Case Study:

Maritime Solent

Maritime Solent brings together universities with world-leading businesses in the maritime sector. Courses at Southampton Solent align closely with the region's maritime industry and many of the students work with local employers as the courses are practice led.

Andrew Bird, Chief Marketing Officer at Southampton Solent University and Chair of BUILA, spoke about the value of the partnership in highlighting areas of complementarity and distinction within the sector to promote the cluster and drive forward investment into the region. He also highlighted how many international students continue working with local businesses when they return to their home country, promoting global business ties.

Best Practice Case Study:

International Students Meeting Veterinary Shortages

Nina Davies, Chief International Officer at the Royal Veterinary College, emphasised that the UK faces critical skills shortages in veterinary science, nursing, and biosciences. These are fields where domestic student enrolment alone cannot meet demand and there are insufficient home students enrolling in these programmes. She underscored the importance of educating international students and enabling them to work in the UK, even temporarily, to help fill these gaps and support sector growth. Davies also highlighted the strong backing the college receives from international alumni and parents, who actively foster links with innovation hubs and research opportunities. She warned that losing these connections would significantly diminish the college's global reach and impact.

Best Practice Case Study:

International Students Filling Nursing Gaps in Wales Through UK-First Pilot

In response to declining domestic nursing applications, Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW), NHS Wales and Welsh universities launched a pilot programme in 2023 offering funded nursing places to international students. Graduates commit to working in NHS Wales for two years, mirroring the domestic student bursary scheme.

The programme is a first within the UK and is a clear example of how universities can work in their local area to fill gaps in the labour market. It is being closely watched by other countries and other sectors, for example physiotherapy and pharmacy, who are interested in how it could be applied in their area.

The number of places available is adjusted according to domicile applications so that international candidates do not take precedence over home applications. This is a key part of the success of the programme; that it will adjust depending on domestic needs and applications. The current split is around 20% international students versus 80% domestic.

Universities are expected to support international students through facilitating placements within the clinical environment, providing accommodation, and support with accessing local healthcare such as help registering with a GP. Speaking at the roundtable, Diane Powles of HEIW noted the programme's success in enhancing patient care, filling staffing shortages and enhancing workforce diversity.



Community

From a wider perspective of international students' contributions to local growth, many participants spoke about how often it is international students who are the first to engage in volunteering opportunities and with their local community.

Awards such as the Spirit of Sussex and Bristol Plus, which reward students with an additional qualification upon demonstrating certain hours spent volunteering, were both highlighted as being particularly popular with international students.



Engagement with Local Employers

Across the roundtables, there was consensus that employers often lack understanding of the benefits of hiring international students and the visa processes involved. This lack of clarity can deter engagement, with employers often viewing hiring international graduates as “too complicated”.

Risk aversion and regulatory changes – such as the 2023 increase in skilled worker salary thresholds – have further discouraged recruitment, particularly in regions with lower average wages like Northern Ireland, which also has to compete with the Republic of Ireland for skills. Phil Murray, People and Skills Lead at the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, said that the increased salary thresholds had caused concern and re-evaluation among larger businesses with many graduates in their skills pipeline.

While some universities offer guidance on visa routes and salary thresholds, there was broad agreement that more proactive, consistent support is needed to help employers navigate the system. Phil Murray says that “a lot of work to be done” within the business community to understand the value of international students and the potential opportunity they offer in terms of their links to different global markets. He said that businesses he had spoken to highlighted how international students have improved their business, specifically in advanced manufacturing, hospitality and at the postgraduate level, and that hiring international students should be “celebrated and as easy as possible”.

Regions like Wales identified potential for deeper partnerships with organisations such as the Institute of Directors, Welsh Chambers, and FinTech Wales to improve employer engagement and unlock talent pipelines.

In the London meeting, Karina Mazur, Co-Founder of Migreates, a platform built to help international talent secure sponsored roles, also raised the importance of educating students themselves on visa and migration requirements so that they were well informed and could be confident about the process during interviews. Universities such as Queen's University Belfast have led initiatives with industry bodies to promote the Graduate Route and clarify hiring processes.

In North East England, a collaborative session with five universities educated employers on immigration routes and heard directly from North East employers who have successfully recruited international graduates into their organisations.

The University of the West of England highlighted that many international graduates choose to stay in Bristol to take the next step in their career journey, working for employers such as Airbus, NHS, BBC, Bristol City Council, Civil Service, Bristol Zoo, Bristol Water, Hargreaves Lansdown, as well as in local schools and the creative sector.

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) are designed to build beneficial collaborations between universities and businesses, funded by government. We heard numerous examples of international students contributing to local business growth through KTPs. Universities noted that KTP associates go through highly competitive recruitment processes and their skills, experience and attitude earned them the positions.

Kelly Cotter, Head of International Student Campus Experience at the University of the West of England (UWE) said that approximately 80-90% of their KTPs are in line with the government's industrial strategy, and that many associates are international students. In the seven currently live Knowledge Transfer Partnership projects at UWE, five of the KTP associates are international graduates. One student is on a management KTP regarding commercialisation of a product and the other four are involved in highly technical KTPs, ranging from machine vision to drone technologies. UWE said that historically KTPs have recruited international graduates onto a significant number of their projects, many of whom have gone on to high level roles in their chosen fields.

Professor Margaret Topping, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Global Engagement at Queen's University Belfast, outlined that 70% of KTPs at the university involve international graduates under the Global Talent Visa.

Best Practice Case Study:

Sugarcrete®

Adam Doyle, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Careers and Employer Engagement at the University of East London, similarly outlined a significant amount of interest from international students in startups and knowledge exchange activities and highlighted the example of Sugarcrete®, which upcycles sugarcane waste into construction products as a cheaper, carbon neutral alternative to bricks and concrete, and is being used in buildings around the world. In 2024, it won the Times Higher Education award for the Knowledge Exchange Initiative of the Year. Postgraduate research students involved in the project are from Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Turkey. Sugarcrete® has won several other awards, including the Built by Nature Prize 2024 and the Climate Positive Awards' circular economy section at the United Nations Climate Change Conference.

Best Practice Case Study:

3Dental Aligners Manufacturing Ltd

Based in County Durham, 3Dental Aligners Manufacturing Ltd specialises in the rapid digital production of dental aligners for the healthcare sector. In 2022, the company partnered with Northumbria University on a two-year KTP, appointing Venkata Sravan - a recent MSc graduate in Advanced Computer Science from India - under the Global Talent Visa.

Faced with rapid growth and manual process limitations, the KTP enabled a full digital transformation, supported by academic expertise in engineering, computing, and design. Venkata played a key role in:

- Expanding into new markets, gaining over 500 new customers (60% NHS).
- Increasing turnover by 400%.
- Growing the workforce from 14 to 27 staff.

Described by the CEO as a “game changer,” the project positioned the company as a leader in digital dental manufacturing. Venkata now serves as Lead Software Engineer, and the project has been shortlisted for an Innovate UK Business Transformation Award.

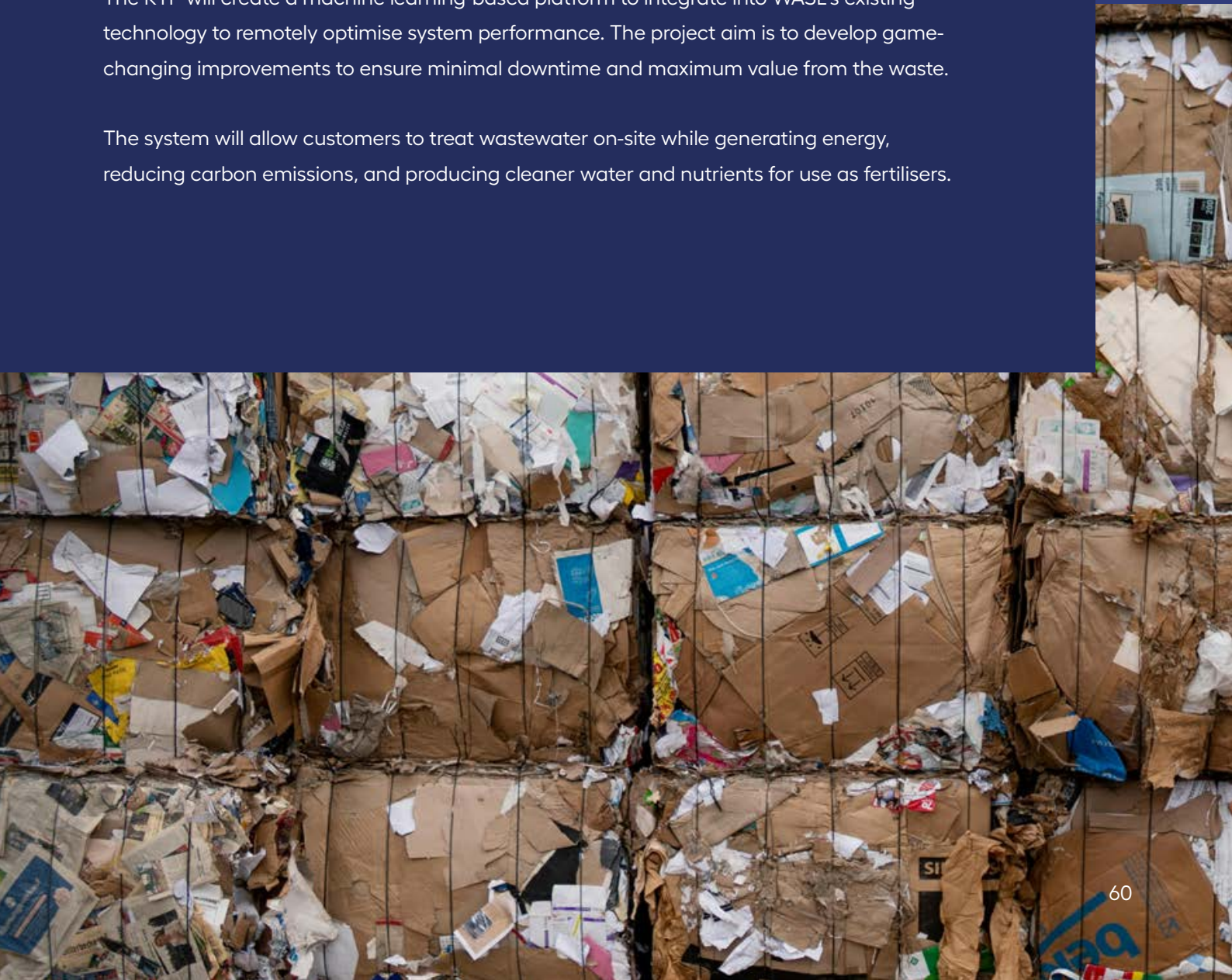
Best Practice Case Study: **WASE**

WASE provides waste-to-energy technology to support a circular economy and accelerate sustainability.

Software Engineer Abdulrazaq Sanni, an international student at the University of the West of England, partnered with WASE to help position them at the forefront of innovation in the anaerobic digestion sector through the application of AI and operational automation.

The KTP will create a machine learning-based platform to integrate into WASE's existing technology to remotely optimise system performance. The project aim is to develop game-changing improvements to ensure minimal downtime and maximum value from the waste.

The system will allow customers to treat wastewater on-site while generating energy, reducing carbon emissions, and producing cleaner water and nutrients for use as fertilisers.





Commercialisation and Spinouts

Spinouts are new, private companies created by one or more academics or research staff with the aim of commercialising research carried out at that institution. We heard that international students play a key role.

A newly published spinout register from HESA details nearly 2,500 spinout companies founded or owned by 100 UK higher education providers. This includes 160 founded in the most recent reporting year of 2023-24.

A report from the Royal Academy of Engineering finds that ***“international talent is vital to the success of high-growth businesses, driving growth through diversity and collaboration.”*** In January 2025, 39% of spinout directors (1,459) were foreign nationals.

US nationals are the most common foreign directors in UK spinouts, making up 29.4% of non-UK directors. The report notes that shared language and cheaper cost of starting a business likely make the UK attractive to American students and professionals. Among European nationals, Ireland leads with 137 directors, followed by Germany (105) and Italy (79). It outlines: ***“Proximity to the UK, alongside its renowned academic institutions, funding, and networking opportunities, draws European talent”***.

Commercialisation and Spinouts

Professor Margaret Topping, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Global Engagement at Queen's University Belfast, spoke about how spinout employees often start as international PhD students and postdoctoral researchers, before moving into companies on Global Talent Visas. The vast majority of spinouts at the university are in government priority growth areas such as health and life sciences and deep tech.

Andy Hogben, Head of Commercialisation at the University of Sheffield, outlined how the university works closely with Sheffield City Council and the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority to launch companies that create highly skilled, highly paid jobs. This includes in the city centre as part of the Sheffield Innovation Spine - a collaborative corridor linking the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University through key regeneration areas - and outside of the city centre in the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, which has a focus on advanced manufacturing and energy and is closely tied into the wider region's growth plans.

South Yorkshire ranks second in the UK for advanced manufacturing innovation cluster size, with the sector accounting for 12.5% of the regional economy and contributing £3.4bn in GVA. The South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority's Growth Plan outlines that a key focus area for the region's next stage of growth is to "bulk up [its] research strengths", noting that it benefits from a "strong ecosystem anchored by the University of Sheffield, a top UK performer in public-led R&I and Sheffield Hallam University, with its leading role in workforce-skills provision enabling adoption".

The plan says that these strengths create key opportunities to consolidate South Yorkshire's leadership in applied research and technology development in fields such as clean hydrogen, advanced materials, and industrial manufacturing, and enable the translation of local research into productive capabilities and high-quality jobs, particularly in defence technologies, energy and creative industries.

Whilst international students are not tracked separately as part of this work, the University of Sheffield's fellowship scheme, which funds individuals for three months to explore establishing a spinout company, has had 45% international representation from 33 fellowships since July 2023. This includes both international postgraduate students and staff.

Key Learnings – From University of Sheffield

The multi-level engagement between the universities, council and mayor's teams are key to the success of this joint working and were already in place to then be able to harness commercialisation opportunities for the region. This engagement happens at both the strategic level (vice chancellors to mayor), public affairs levels (regional engagement team to mayor's advisers) and on the technical level of the work details.

Similar innovation hubs exist across the country, where universities, businesses and local government are working closely together to create jobs, attract investment and cement the UK's position as a leader in science and technology.

For example, the Imperial West Tech Corridor in London is home to 1,000 innovation businesses with a £9bn turnover in 2023. We heard time and time again that international students play a key part in these hubs of entrepreneurship and innovation, driving forward advances in the government's priority growth sectors like AI, life sciences and engineering biology.

Best Practice Case Study: Game Intuit Ltd

Game Intuit Ltd is a Loughborough University spinout founded by two international doctoral students that offers unique AI solutions for decision-making analysis in sports. Its products cater to the sports market, including professional teams seeking a competitive edge, coaches and trainers aiming to optimise training effectiveness, scouts looking for an efficient tool to identify talent, athletes striving to enhance individual performance, and sports media seeking to elevate their broadcasts.

From a research and development perspective, Shaun Holmes, Senior Policy Manager at the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) pointed to the widespread support from businesses for international students and their role in RDI, which is crucial for driving growth in the economy. A joint letter coordinated by the Campaign for Science and Engineering and signed by 37 health research charities and universities outlines:

“International researchers are an enormous benefit to the sector, bringing with them new knowledge and expertise that spark innovation in UK labs and upskill the UK workforce. They also open opportunities for UK institutes to form international collaborations and are vital to fill skills gaps in R&D industries that cannot be addressed by building domestic skills in the short-term.”

Startups

The Government's Plan for Small and Medium Sized Businesses, published in summer 2025, outlines its ambition to "make the UK the best place to start and grow a business". Universities UK's campaign, 'Unis Start up the UK', highlights that 38,000 student and staff startup companies have emerged with the support of universities since 2014-15, excluding spinouts. It also finds:

- On average, more than 4,300 firms are registered each year.
- In the academic year 2022–23, more than 64,000 people were employed by start-ups that had emerged from universities.
- The turnover of start-ups supported by universities has grown by 702% and external investment into student startups has increased by over 346% across the sector in the last nine years.



Greg Miller, Deputy Director of Student Success and Educational Engagement at the University of Leeds, noted that university accelerators are so successful because they support startups from the earliest stages, offering strategic guidance, credibility, and access to academic expertise. Their engaged alumni networks provide mentorship and connections, while the University brand adds trust and prestige that can attract investors.

He outlined that approximately 40% of student startup companies over the last 5 years from Leeds have involved international students. He also highlighted that the survival rates for university supported startups (circa 82%) are considerably above the range of national reports for survival rates, which vary but are between 40–56%.

Greg also noted international students are more likely to be in ‘cutting edge areas’ such as AI, adding the university will support on average 20 founder visa applications a year and spinout 55 student businesses a year.

Karina Mazur, Co-Founder of Migreates, highlighted the Entrepreneurs Network finding that whilst less than 15% of the British population is foreign-born, 39% of the UK’s 100 fastest-growing companies have at least one immigrant co-founder. The 2024 Job Creators report notes:

“We believe this shows the critical contribution that international talent makes to Britain – without their effort and vision, our economy would be less dynamic and competitive”.

Best Practice Case Study:

Seeai

Saile Villegas, from Mexico, and her business partner, Japanese graduate Reo Ogusu, founded Seeai after completing their studies in Computer Science at the University of Leeds.

Seeai joined University of Leeds' Nexus community as part of the Propel programme, a six-month digital health accelerator programme delivered by the Yorkshire & Humber Academic Health Science Network (AHSN), that targets SMEs with digital health innovations for the Yorkshire and Humber region.

Early projects for the company included a partnership with NHS Grampian in Scotland to develop AI that can automatically detect bone fractures in X-ray images. Seeai used deep learning-based technology to make medical diagnoses of bone fractures from radiographs – a technology that has the potential to address the shortage of trained radiologists in UK hospitals, making analysis quicker and more cost-effective.

Today, Seeai has evolved beyond healthcare to work across multiple industries, helping businesses to unlock the value of technology through tailored software solutions including in sectors such as aviation, construction and manufacturing.

The case study is a great example of international students leading both on industrial strategy priorities as well as supporting the government's mission to build an NHS fit for the future through a shift from analogue to digital.



Best Practice Case study: Cricketqube

International student Alosk K Jose, an MSC International Sports Management graduate from Northumbria University, set up social enterprise Cricketqube to make cricket accessible for everyone, regardless of age, ability, or background.

The platform aims to bring the game to schools, community centres, care homes and local parks, inspired by Alosk's childhood growing up in India, where the sport was revered and played by all.

Cricketqube now hosts an average of 16 sessions and 250 face-to-face interactions a month. They also conduct a variety of projects, from helping older South Asians improve their fitness with cricket, and another in collaboration with the University of the West of England to promote healthy ageing amongst ethnic minorities. 61% of people say they visit the GP less often since starting the Cricketqube sessions, and 87% feel happier after participating. Alosk says that the company has also reduced NHS spending on dementia care. The enterprise successfully secured Innovate UK Inclusive Innovation Award funding.



Conclusion

International students are not just learners, they are catalysts for growth, innovation, and cultural exchange. As this report demonstrates, universities across the UK are already forging powerful partnerships with local authorities, healthcare providers, housing organisations, and businesses to ensure these students thrive and, in turn, strengthen the regions they call home.

The government's call for institutions to demonstrate local impact is an opportunity to lead, not simply comply. By deepening collaboration, improving data sharing, and embedding international students into strategies for housing, health, and skills, universities can unlock their full potential to create resilient regions.

The roundtables were organised by The Public Affairs Company on behalf of BUILA.

With thanks to Mia Briggs and Holly Fleming for drafting this report.

With thanks to our contributors:

Adam Doyle, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Careers and Employer Engagement, University of East London

Alice McCallum, Deputy Associate Director International, University of Sussex

Andrew Bird, Chief Marketing Officer, Southampton Solent University and Chair of BUILA

Andrew Haxell, Director, Graduate Futures, Northumbria University

Andy Shanks, Director of Student Wellbeing at University of Edinburgh and Executive Member, AMOSSHE

Bethany Bates, Service Manager, University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin Mental Health Student Service

Brett Cordle, Head of Partnerships - Business Development, iQ Student Accommodation
Charlie Pybus, Director, International, Durham University

Clare Craig, Director of Student Wellbeing, University of Glasgow

Clare Guinness, CEO, Belfast Chamber of Commerce

Dan Lucas, Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager, Nottingham City Council

Dean Gimblett, Head of Capital Nurse, NHS England

Diane Powles, Strategic Education Advisor Health Education, and Improvement Wales (HEIW)

Dr Helen Turner, Director, Midlands Innovation

Dr Matthew Jackson, Public Affairs Manager, Queen's University Belfast

Dr Warren Harrison, Pro-Vice Chancellor International, Teesside University

Einita Suman, Director of Accommodation & Operations, University of Birmingham

Emma Murphy, Government Affairs and Campaigns Officer, Queen's University Belfast

Emma Payne, Director of University of Portsmouth Global

Francis Glover, BUILA Executive member and Director of Global Recruitment, Oxford Brookes University

George Hunt, Director of International Development, Teesside University

Gregory Miller, Deputy Director of Student Success and Educational Engagement, University of Leeds

Heather Taylor, BUILA Executive Lead for Northern Ireland and Head of International Markets, Queen's University Belfast

Iain Harris, International Recruitment Manager Americas, Northumbria University

Imtiaz Hussain, Secretary General, Wales Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce

Jamie Pipkin, Head of International,
Southampton Solent University

Jenny Fernandes, Director of Recruitment and
International Relations, University of Glasgow

Jo Purves, Pro Vice Chancellor Partnerships
and Global Development, University of Salford
and member of the Greater Manchester Civic
Universities Board

Joe Paley, BUILA Executive Wales Representative
and Head of International and Partnership
Development, University of South Wales

Jonathan Fisher-Jones, Deputy Director,
International Recruitment, Bangor University

Karen Blackney, BUILA Executive member and
Associate Director, University of East Anglia
Global

Karen Mai Jones, Head of International, Wrexham
University

Karina Mazur, Co-Founder, Migreats

Kelly Cotter, Head of International Student
Campus Experience, University of the West of
England

Kim Nisbett, Head of Insight, The Unite Group
Maria Ditchburn, Senior Strategy Advisor at
Teesside University

Maria Ditchburn, Senior Strategy Advisor at
Teesside University

Maria Gonzales, Principal, International Relations
at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Maria Hatch, Senior Director, Client Relationships
– Europe, Greystar

Mark Corbett, Head of Policy and Networks,
London Higher

Mark Hilton, Policy Delivery Director, BusinessLDN
Matthew Grant, Local Plans Manager,
Nottingham City Council

Mehvish Ashfaq, Interim Director of Global
Engagement, Ulster University

Michelle Christian, Housing Codes and Standards
Lead, CUBO, and Director of Student Operations,
The University of Edinburgh

Nichole McIntosh, Regional Head of Nursing
and Midwifery - Deputy Chief Nurse Workforce,
Training and Education Directorate, NHS England
– London

Nicola Paxman, Operations Manager, Leeds
Student Medical Practice

Nina Davies, Chief International Officer and
Director of Strategic Partnerships at the Royal
Veterinary College

Phil Murray, People and Skills Lead, NI Chamber
of Commerce

Philippa Collins Robson, Executive Director, BUILA

Professor Liang-Fong Wong, Associate Pro-Vice
Chancellor, International Education, University of
Bristol

Professor Margaret Topping, Pro-Vice-Chancellor
for Global Engagement, Queen's University
Belfast

Professor Peter Bonfield, Vice Chancellor and
President, University of Westminster

Professor Richard Follet, Pro-Vice Chancellor,
International, University of Exeter

Professor Steven McGuire, Pro-Vice Chancellor,
International, University of East Anglia

Rob Anderson, Research Director, Centre for
London

Robbie Willis, Head of International and
Postgraduate Recruitment, The University of
Edinburgh

Shaun Holmes, Senior Policy Manager, National
Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB)

Stuart Easter, BUILA Executive Scotland
Representative and Director of Student
Recruitment and International, Edinburgh Napier
University

Reference

- [1] All Party Parliamentary Group for International Students, 2025, The UK's Global Edge: Regional Impact and the Future of International Students, available at: <https://internationalstudents.org.uk/news/appg-news/2025/the-appg-for-international-students-launches-inquiry-report-on-the-uks-global-edge-regional-impact-and-the-future-of-international-students/>
- [2] Savills, 2020, Spotlight on Student Accommodation, available at: https://www.savills.com/research_articles/255800/305386-0
- [3] WonkHE, 2025, How cost of living is influencing UK student mobility, available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-cost-of-living-is-influencing-uk-student-mobility/>
- [4] Nottingham City Council, Nottingham Trent University and University of Nottingham, 2024, Nottingham Student Living Strategy 2023 – 2028, available at: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/db0fab12ed64ace8c693e71a99bc10b>
- [5] Nottingham City Council, 2025, Nottingham Student Accommodation Update Report, available at: <https://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/media/sijgl245/student-accommodation-update-report-june-2025-3.pdf>
- [6] Nottingham City Council, Purpose Built Student Accommodation Dashboard, available at: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/0689085f65b0421e900188e13f1e45a>
- [7] Scottish Government, 2022, Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) and Student Housing: Research, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/research-purpose-built-student-accommodation-pbsa-student-housing-scotland/pages/8/>
- [8] Edinburgh Napier University, The University of Edinburgh, Heriot Watt University and Queen Margaret University, 2024, available at: https://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/35540/elc_388_final_student_living_report_2024.pdf
- [9] HEPI, 2023, The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Full-Report-Benefits-and-costs-of-international-students.pdf>
- [10] University of Southampton, Southampton Accreditation Scheme for Student Housing, available at: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/student-services/student-living/accomm/looking-for-private-rented-page>
- [11] Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Good Landlord Charter, available at: <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning-and-housing/housing/good-landlord-charter/>
- [12] NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Information for Students, available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/your-health/right-care-right-place/information-for-students/>
- [13] Newcastle University, 2021, Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement, available at: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/press/articles/archive/2021/07/collaborativenewcastleuniversitiesagreement/>
- [14] Scottish Government, 2024, Student Mental Health Action Plan, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/student-mental-health-action-plan/>
- [15] Think Positive About Student Mental Health, Student Mental Health Agreement Project, available at: <https://thinkpositive.scot/collection/student-mental-health-agreement/>
- [16] NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin Mental Health Student Service, available at: <https://www.cpft.nhs.uk/ucarmhss/#:~:text=UCARMHSS%20offers%20a%20range%20of,agree%20on%20a%20treatment%20plan.>
- [17] London Councils and Mayor of London, 2025, London Growth Plan, available at: <https://growthplan.london/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/london-growth-plan.pdf>
- [18] London Higher, Civic Map, available at: <https://londonhigher.ac.uk/our-work/civic-map/>
- [19] Universities for North East England, Who We Are, available at: <https://unee.ac.uk/>
- [20] Yorkshire Universities, Vision and Strategy, available at: <https://yorkshireuniversities.ac.uk/vision-strategy/>
- [21] HM Government, 2025, Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f518ee06e6515f7914c7ce/Post-16_Education_and_Skills_white_paper_Accessible_Version.pdf
- [22] HEPI, 2023, The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Full-Report-Benefits-and-costs-of-international-students.pdf>
- [23] Belfast Region City Deal, The Belfast Region City Deal, available at: <https://belfastregioncitydeal.co.uk/>
- [24] British Council, Opportunity Northern Ireland, available at: https://nireland.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/opportunity_northern_ireland_report.pdf
- [25] Comtec, 2023, It's official: businesses that embrace language skills are fluent in growth, available at: <https://www.comtectranslations.co.uk/content-hub/businesses-that-embrace-language-skills-are-fluent-in-growth/>
- [26] Invest Northern Ireland, Graduate to Export, available at: <https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/export-and-capability-development/graduate-to-export>
- [27] University of Bristol, Temple Quarter Enterprise Campus, available at: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/temple-quarter-enterprise-campus/>
- [28] University of Bristol, Bristol Dental School, available at: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/dental/>
- [29] Maritime Solent, available at: <https://maritimesolent.com/>
- [30] The University of the West of England, 2025, UWE Bristol Internship scheme 2025-2026, available at: <https://www.uwe.ac.uk/business/businesses-and-employers/recruiting-talent/interns/uwe-bristol-internship-scheme>
- [31] HESA, 2025, 2,269 university spin-out companies recorded in new register, available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/05-06-2025/2269-university-spin-out-companies-new-register>
- [32] Royal Academy of Engineering, 2025, Spotlight on Spinouts, available at: <https://raeng.org.uk/policy-and-resources/research-and-innovation/accelerating-enterprise/>
- [33] South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, South Yorkshire's Growth Plan, available at: <https://www.southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk/getmedia/f8b5b0f1-1c0d-4c9c-9212-b3244f761630/45525-SY-Growth-Plan-Final-2025-09-30.pdf>
- [34] Imperial West Tech London, available at: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/strategy/amplifying-impact/westtech-london/>
- [35] Game Intuit, available at: <https://www.gameintuit.com/>
- [36] Campaign for Science and Engineering, Cross Sector Letter on International R&D talent, available at: <https://www.sciencercampaign.org.uk/analysis-and-publications/detail/cross-sector-letter-on-international-rd-talent/>
- [37] Department for Business and Trade, Backing Your Business, Our Plan for Small and Medium Sized Businesses, available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/688b1f6f1affbf4bedb7b11d/our-plan-for-small-and-medium-sized-businesses.pdf>
- [38] Universities UK, Unis start up the UK, available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/campaigns/unis-start-uk>
- [39] The Entrepreneurs Network, 2024, Job Creators 2024, available at: <https://www.tenentrepreneurs.org/job-creators-2024>
- [40] Nexus, Seai's Story, available at: <https://nexusleeds.co.uk/case-studies/seais-story/>