

20<sup>th</sup> January 2026

## New International Education Strategy Recognises Importance of Sector for Growth and Soft Power

The Government has published its updated International Education Strategy, which recognises the power of international education to enhance the UK's global standing and drive growth. The three key ambitions of the strategy are:

- To increase the UK's international standing through education and make the UK the global partner of choice at every stage of learning.
- To sustainably recruit high-quality international higher education students from a diverse range of countries.
- To grow the value of education exports to £40 billion a year by 2030, *"backing providers to deliver UK education overseas in new and expanding markets"*.

The **Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson**, said:

"UK education is one of our most valuable exports and this strategy backs the sector to go even further - underlining our commitment to fuel UK growth."

"By expanding overseas, our universities, colleges and education providers can diversify income, strengthen global partnerships and give millions more access to a world-class UK education on their doorstep, all whilst boosting growth at home."

"This strategy and our Plan for Change will drive growth that delivers for our economy and for communities across the UK, as well as our standing in the world".

Key elements of the strategy include:

### Scraping target numbers

The commitment to increase education exports replaces the previous target numbers for international students in the UK. The DfE said that the Strategy, whilst continuing to welcome international students: *"shifts the focus towards growing education exports overseas by backing UK providers to expand internationally, build partnerships abroad and deliver UK education in new markets"*.

### Diversification across sub-sectors

The Strategy outlines: *"We see diversification across sub-sectors as key to long-term success"* and says that the UK must promote the full spectrum of its education offer. Beyond higher education, there is a large focus on early years and schools, English language training, special educational needs and education technology.

## Toughened compliance

In its press release on the Strategy, the DfE references the Basic Compliance Assessment thresholds (on which BUILA is expecting further detail soon), noting that:

“[The Strategy] comes alongside new government action to ensure those coming here to study are genuine students, and education providers take their responsibilities seriously.

“Universities will be subject to toughened compliance standards and those which fail to meet them will face action, including recruitment caps and licence revocation.”

## Cross-government ownership and joint working with the sector

The Strategy is co-owned by the Department for Education, the Department for Business and Trade, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

The Government notes that the UK is taking a new diplomacy-led approach by appointing Heads of Missions to drive education-industry collaboration to meet demand from global partners.

It outlines that the sector will be central to the successful delivery of the Strategy and confirms it will work in partnership with the UK Government’s International Education Champion, Sir Steve Smith, the British Council, and a repurposed Education Sector Action Group. It has not been confirmed who will sit on this group, but the document notes that each representative will lead on an action plan, published within the first 100 days of appointment to ESAG, outlining how their members will support delivery of the three ambitions of the Strategy.

## Sustainable international student recruitment and recognition of the Agent Quality Framework

Under a section titled: ‘A strategic approach to sustainable international student recruitment’, the Strategy outlines that the Government is committed to building *“a more resilient, diverse and long-term pipeline of international talent, individuals who return home equipped to lead in government, business, science, education and the arts”*.

It says that this will be achieved through sustainable recruitment that prioritises:

- Well-managed and responsible recruitment
- A high-quality student experience
- World-class outcomes for graduates

Through the Education Sector Action Group, the Government says it will work with the sector to support institutions in putting the student experience first, **including adequate infrastructure and access to local housing**. This underlines the importance of BUILA’s recent [report](#) looking at best practice in institutions’ relationships with local housing, health and transport providers.

It also notes that it will encourage institutions to diversify their recruitment, reducing reliance on any single country.

The Strategy then recognises the work on the Agent Quality Framework, outlining:

“We will also encourage sector-led initiatives to support the integrity of the UK’s immigration system, such as the Agent Quality Framework (AQF) to help tackle the risk of poor practices, protect students, and drive improved standards in the recruitment of international higher education students.”

It says it will work closely with the sector to ensure that institutions recruit international higher education students in a way that maintains quality and student experience. This includes considering factors such as skills and entry requirements, adequate infrastructure, local housing, and support systems, *“whilst respecting institutional autonomy”*.

### **Maintaining a competitive offer**

The Strategy commits to ensuring that the UK’s offer to international higher education students remains globally competitive, highlighting that it has retained the Graduate Route for up to 18 months.

It also references the expansion of the High Potential Individual route to include those graduating from the top 100 international institutions, and making it simpler and easier for leaders under the Global Talent visa to come to the UK by expanding a fast-track option for researchers with fellowships.

The Strategy also references the International Student levy, noting that it will be fully reinvested into higher education and skills, including the reintroduction of targeted maintenance grant for disadvantaged domestic students.

It concludes:

“The UK Government’s approach to international student recruitment will continue to align with the UK’s migration and visa policy framework, maintaining the integrity of the Graduate Route and ensuring that the UK remains a destination of choice for high-quality students. We will continue to welcome genuine students who want to benefit from the UK’s world-class higher education system, while taking firm action against those who seek to exploit our immigration routes.”

## **Sector response**

The sector has broadly welcomed the strategy.

**Professor Malcolm Press CBE, President, Universities UK**, said:

"Universities UK warmly welcomes the UK Government's new International Education Strategy.

"It signals a renewed commitment to fostering the global reach, reputation and impact of our universities, and recognises the huge benefits this delivers to our global partners and to communities across the whole of the UK.

"The new strategy provides a clear framework for growth and partnership that will benefit learners, the economy, and the UK's international standing."

**Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive of Independent Higher Education (IHE)**, said:

"We strongly welcome this ambitious International Education Strategy, which signals a powerful new partnership between Government and the education sector.

"The world is experiencing economic and technological transformation at an unprecedented pace. Success in business tomorrow rests on access to high-quality education today. Global industries demand resilient and agile professionals with domain expertise, leadership skills, and deep international insights. The Strategy's commitment to expand finance and digital services for SME providers in particular will support responsible growth, enhance sector resilience, and future-proof the UK's international education offer.

"The UK offers safe harbour in an unpredictable world, with a diverse ecosystem of provision and collaborative instincts that make us education partners of choice for governments and global business. Independent providers are leading the way in pioneering new models of flexible delivery, embedding industry skills into their educational offer, and driving innovation within their disciplines.

"IHE is committed to working with our strategic partners to secure the UK's position as a global hub for business, innovation, scholarship and professional learning. Together we can leverage the success of UK education on the world stage to enhance our global influence, our international trade, and the inward investment in our communities."

**Emma Meredith, Director of Skills Policy and Global Engagement at the Association of Colleges**, said:

"It's positive and timely to see the revised cross-government international education strategy; global engagement brings with it so many benefits for both learners and education staff, creating lasting connections and life-changing experiences.

“There are excellent and long-standing international partnerships in colleges across the country, with many engaged in student mobility, student recruitment and transnational education. It is therefore encouraging to see colleges recognised in the strategy and steps to grow their contribution towards the new £40bn annual export target.

“However, colleges face a lot of red tape and policy restrictions, causing unnecessary barriers for those looking to expand or to initiate their international offer. At AoC, we are committed to working with the government to identify and remove these barriers to export and ensure that colleges can fulfil their potential in the international space.”