

London's higher education sector, the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences

1. Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic has created a crisis situation without precedent that is affecting all aspects of society in London, the UK and beyond, and most if not all business sectors including, of course, higher education (HE). The financial implications for at least some institutions could be severe, with consequences for both current and potential new students. Like other HE sector organisations, London Higher would welcome urgent discussion regarding a package of measures aimed at helping to stabilise institutions whatever their mission types and size, and in so doing protect current and new students as well as research and wider interests.

In this position paper we outline the context in London and set out some of the key considerations that we believe should be taken into account during discussions around the impact of the crisis and in arriving at decisions on mitigation measures. This in order to keep the sector stable, best protect our universities and HE colleges in London and elsewhere, and support the needs of new and continuing students. We focus in particular on the impact of a major fall in international (EU and non-EU) recruitment that, combined with loss of other vital income, could threaten the stability of institutions, and on the potential for a knock-on impact that would have serious consequences for home students especially those from disadvantaged and BAME backgrounds.

2. Summary

With regard to international recruitment - which is a feature of HE in London - we suggest that a suite of measures are required to demonstrate, from the earliest appropriate moment, that not only is the UK open to international students but that it is *more* open and *more* welcoming than any other competitor market. In addition to the initiation of a major international recruitment campaign, we indicate five possible steps (there could of course be others) that would help to make visa turnaround time faster, and the process more streamlined. It is also important to adjust English language requirements (annex b refers). At the same time, London leads the way in regard to recruiting BAME and disadvantaged students. We are clear that whatever their background or home circumstances, those who have the potential to benefit from HE and want to do so, should on no account be disadvantaged either on entry or later in their studies as a result of the coronavirus crisis. For London, we ask that mitigation measures are considered and put in place urgently to ensure that the capital's HEIs *as a whole* experience minimum disadvantage, with being able to act in the best interests of students being a prime concern.

London Higher would welcome the opportunity to work with the government, UUK, sector organisations and other bodies regionally and nationally to work towards achieving the best solutions and outcomes for our institutions and current and prospective new students.

3. London context

Collectively London's HE institutions:

- Generate £17bn each year in goods and services, including £2.9bn in export earnings;
- Support 172,000 jobs at all skill levels;
- Educate 386,000 students or 16 per cent of the UK total;
- Employ over 94,000 staff, a fifth of the UK HE total;
- Win over £575m, a third of the total funding from Research England;
- Attract almost 120,000 overseas students, a third of all those in the UK;
- Produce over 140,000 skilled graduates every year;
- In 2018/19 had 134,000 UK BAME domiciled students, 51 per cent of the London student cohort is BAME compared 21 per cent for the rest of the UK;
- In 2018/19 had 132,000 postgraduate students;
- Have a large share of commuter students, 54% of first degree undergraduates.

London is a world city that needs a world class HE cluster. The capital has long been established as a destination of choice for students from around the globe due to the excellent and diverse group of HEIs and the standards of what they offer. The scale of international recruitment in London is different to that elsewhere – a third of all overseas students in the UK are studying in London.

As a direct consequence of coronavirus it seems almost certain that the number of International (EU and non-EU) students coming to study in London in October 2020 will be greatly reduced. Additionally, there will be a reduction in higher fees from non-EU students which are used to support other university activities such as research or widening participation support. Ultimately, financial sustainability could be at risk. Even a ten per cent drop on EU and non-EU student fee income for London would result in a yearly loss of over £190m.

Right now, for many other EU and non-EU students, studying in the UK will be the last thing they will be thinking about. However, once we come out of the peak and move into a recovery phase, and also once it is clearer that teaching will recommence this autumn as planned (see below), there will be a phase of extreme competition with other Anglophone markets, including the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and others too including the Netherlands and Germany, for international students. The introduction of the Graduate Route to post-study employment, whilst still not as attractive as those offered elsewhere, will be a great help with this and detail needs to be published as soon as possible. However, a package of measures is required to demonstrate that not only is the UK open to international students, but that it is *more* open and *more* welcoming than any other competitor market. This means that the visa turnaround time needs to be faster, the process less intimidating, and the cost lowered.

Some of the ways of achieving this the sector might suggest include:

- Removal of the “credibility interview” for all student visa applications. This removes the subjective opinion from the process which is open to abuse, and improve turnaround times;
- Ability to apply for a visa in the UK between foundation and degree courses without having to go back to their home country;
- Relaxing the requirement to have final degree certificates in order to receive their visa (particularly this year when degree transcripts and certificates may be late);
- Relaxation on rules surrounding late arrival for courses, particularly for undergraduate programmes where there is ample time to catch up;
- Plus there are additional areas that are mentioned in the attached appendix on English Language testing (see annex b).

A major international (EU and non-EU) student recruitment campaign is of course a pre-requisite.

London Higher look forward to working with UUK and national bodies on these vital issues. With a particular view to London and London’s HEIs, London Higher will in addition work with our colleagues in the Mayor’s office, London & Partners and others.

4. Potential knock-on impacts including upon disadvantaged and BAME students

London leads the UK on widening access into HE, currently having a HE participation rate c.10% higher than the average for England, with 48% of London’s young people entering university. BAME students make up c.51% of all UK undergraduates in London, compared with 21% at all other HE providers outside of the capital. In addition, commuter students make up c.54% of first-degree undergraduates (this figure is rising). In some London HEIs these percentages are much greater. All students, whatever their background or home circumstances, who have the potential to benefit from HE and want to do so, should on no account be disadvantaged either on entry or later in their studies as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

Mitigation measures need to be considered urgently and put in place to ensure that universities in London *as a whole* experience minimum disadvantage this October, and to minimise the risk of harmful instability within the London HEI cluster. London Higher is particularly concerned that prospective students looking to enter HE in the coming academic year could be faced with a narrower range of choice at both institutional and subject level. This would hit hardest those from less advantaged and minority ethnic backgrounds, and/or London domiciled students who want or need to study in London. Looking further ahead, there would also be an increased likelihood of undergraduates failing to

progress or achieve their potential. On the cutting edge of this, again, would be BAME students and those from less advantaged backgrounds who could find themselves amidst cultures and/or ways of learning that are not matched well to them and their needs.

Therefore, just as the Government has made instruction for HEIs not to make unconditional offers to prospective new undergraduates (with limited exceptions) until they have worked through a fair way to progress matters, our view is that a similar approach needs to be adopted in respect of this year's entrants only to try to create as level a playing field as possible. This to protect universities as a whole, and support the needs of new as well as continuing students. Stabilisation measures should always be temporary and clearly time-limited to avoid damaging unintended consequences. London Higher would of course be happy to support the government, UUK and other bodies regionally and nationally to work towards achieving the best mechanisms.

Taking a broader view, London's HEIs are not just dedicated to research and teaching. They also make massive contributions to their immediate communities, and to business, culture and society locally as well as regionally and beyond. This point is especially relevant at the moment when across the capital, which is the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic in the UK, London's HEIs are not only playing an intrinsic role at the front line of the NHS and in research efforts, but are contributing to local communities in a variety of ways. If the financial stability of HEIs is put under threat, there will also be consequences for many local people, jobs and businesses. This is something everyone should be striving to avoid.

5. Conclusion

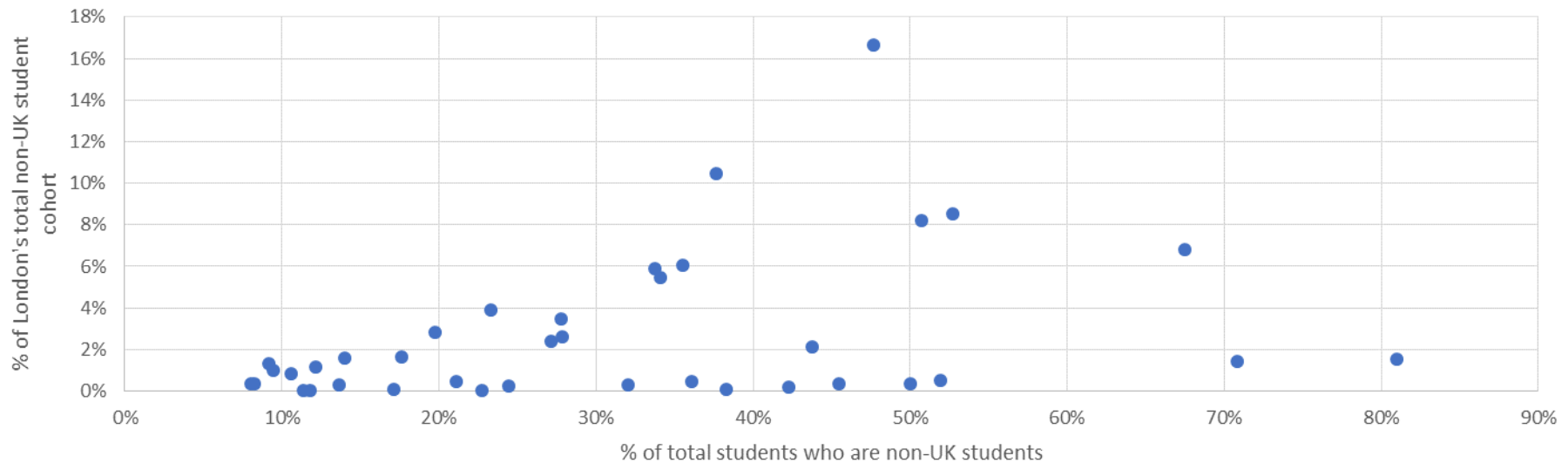
These are unprecedented times for everyone, inside and outside of the HE sector in London, the UK and across the world. The impact of the crisis will be felt on HEIs of every mission, size and type and wherever they are located. London's universities and HE colleges are a powerhouse of research, teaching and technology transfer in the UK, Europe and elsewhere. Long established as a global city of universities and destination of choice for students from outside the UK (EU and non EU), London's HEIs are likely to be disproportionately hit by what could be a major reduction in international student recruitment to the point where financial sustainability may be at risk. At the same time, London's rapidly growing population of c.9.3m is made up of a majority of minorities, and is also one where areas of wealth and extreme deprivation are often adjacent. The student population profile of London's HEIs is equally distinctive and different to that elsewhere in the UK; London is at the forefront when it comes to providing HE to those from under-privileged and minority ethnic backgrounds. Measures are needed to help ensure the financial stability of HEIs, to keep a level playing field, and also ensure that disadvantaged and BAME students, and London-domiciled undergraduates wishing or needing to study in the capital, are not adversely affected as a result of this crisis. We at London Higher look forward to working with colleagues in other sector bodies, the Government and with London partners, to help provide solutions that work for all.

Scale of London's international student population

Of London's approximately 366,000 higher education students, almost 120,000 are non-UK citizens (32 per cent). London's non-EU students make up 24 per cent (81,665) of the UK's total international students. London's EU students make up 25% (34,420) of the UK's total international students, and 25% (36,420) of the UK's total EU students.

Figure 1 below shows the concentration of each London HEI's non-UK students (EU and international students) as a percentage of their total student cohort and their contribution to London's non-UK student cohort for 2018/19.

Figure 1. Non-UK Students for London Institutions – 2018/19



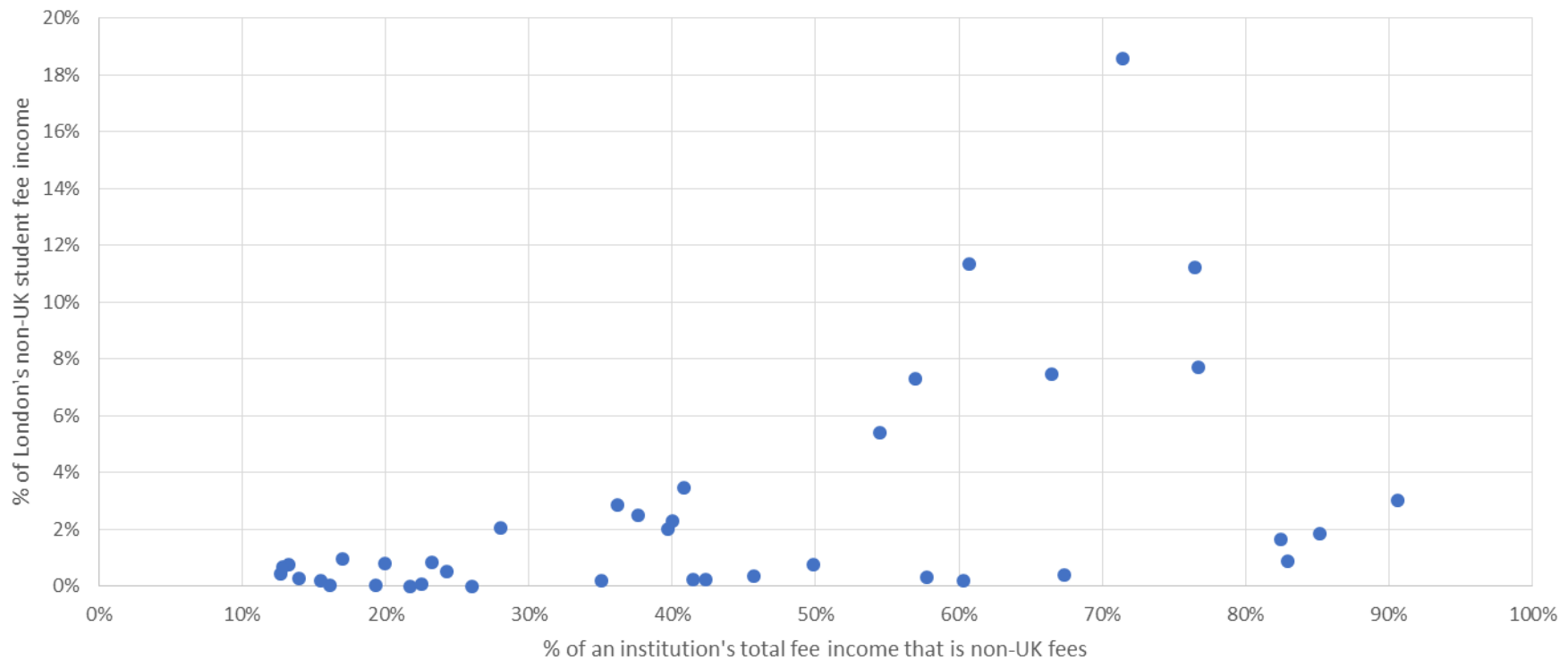
There are 11 institutions who have non-UK student cohorts in 2018/19 that make up more than 40 per cent of their student body and there are eight institutions who contribute more than five per cent of London's total non-EU student body. Four institutions meet both criteria.

Financial implications

Of London's £3.6 billion fee income, 52 per cent is from non-UK fees.

Figure 2 below shows the concentration of each London HEIs fee income for both their total income and also their contribution to London's total non-UK fee amount.

Figure 2. Non-UK Fee Income for London Institutions – 2018/19



There are 14 institutions who have non-UK (i.e. EU and other international) fee income that is greater than 50 per cent of their total income and seven institutions that contribute more than five per cent of London's total non-EU fee income. Five institutions meet both criteria.

English Language Requirements and Coronavirus

The current global Coronavirus pandemic has impacted on English language testing not just in China but across the world. Proven ability in English language is a core requirement for a Tier 4 student visa, and there are tight regulations around what universities can and can't accept, depending on the level of study.

At the moment it is very difficult for candidates to undertake a Secure English language Test (SELT) at all, and even once this crisis diminishes, as it appears to be in China, there will still be an enormous backlog of tests and limitations on the number of places. This will be the same across the world as the virus impacts.

With this in mind, the British Universities International Liaison Association (BUILA) took part in the first Coronavirus HE Sector Co-ordination Group in early March, which included all key partners and UKVI, DFE and Public Health England. The meeting followed up written requests from BUILA, UUKI & UKCISA to UKVI to consider some measures that would help support the sector with this difficult situation including:

- Temporary relaxation of requirements for secure English language tests for Short Term Study Visa applicants as an extraordinary measure for students applying for a visa for pre-session courses;
- Accelerating the accreditation of additional secure IELTS providers to increase testing capacity once centres are able to re-open and increase the range of options available to students outside their home country;
- Enabling in-country switching from Short Term Study Visas to Tier 4 visas for those on pre-session pathway courses, removing the need for these individuals to travel back to their home country in order to lodge an application;
- Introducing temporary flexibility in relation to the use of joint CAS for those studying a pre-session and progressing to a degree-level course;
- Temporary extension to the validity period (two-years) for IELTS.

To these points, we would add the following requests:

- Relaxation about what we can "deem" (i.e. accept in lieu of a SELT). Universities currently have some freedom with this but it is at their own risk. This needs to be relaxed;
- Increase the range of English tests that UKVI approves;
- Allow in-house online testing for B2 level and below for UKHEIs.