

## Open for Business? Survey of International Student Perceptions of Post-Study Opportunities in the UK

### Summary

This briefing summarises the findings from a groundbreaking survey conducted by Loughborough University and Paragon Law Ltd on international student perceptions of the UK as a place in which to engage in further study, skilled employment or entrepreneurial activity. We draw attention to the following key messages:

1. When electing to study in the UK, international students set particular importance on the high reputation of UK universities;
2. However, over half of international students wished to leave the UK after graduation, with the vast majority intending to return to their home country;
3. Of those who intended to remain in the UK, the majority wished to work, with a significant minority seeking to engage in further study;
4. Approximately one third of international students wanted to set up a business, although the majority intended to do so outside of the UK;
5. International students were frank in describing their mixed experiences of studying, seeking skilled work and engaging in entrepreneurial activity whilst in the UK.

### Introduction

The UK immigration system has undergone significant reform, with intense debate about its purpose and the 'value' specific categories of migrants add to the country (UKBA, 2012). At the same time, there have been concerns that recent changes to UK government policy may result in the UK becoming a less attractive destination for international students (APPG Migration, 2012). Measures that have caused particular anxiety include closure of the Tier 1 Post Study Work route, reduced entitlement of international students to work in the UK and more stringent Higher Education Institution (HEI) accreditation procedures. In recent years, the Higher Education sector has generated considerable annual export earnings for the UK, estimated at almost £8bn a year (BIS, 2011). Yet, the number of people arriving in the country for formal study has been in decline since 2010 (ONS, 2012). The most recent policy changes have been predicted to continue this trend (British Council, 2012).

Given these concerns, this study investigated international student perspectives on the UK as a country in which to participate in skilled activity on graduation. An electronic survey was emailed to all 165 HEIs based in the UK in October 2012. The research team received 694 responses by the time the survey closed in December 2012. 585 of those respondents were considered to be 'international' students i.e. they reported their country of origin to be from states whose

nationals were not eligible for UK 'home' fees as they were located outside the EEA, Switzerland and various overseas territories (UKCISA, 2013). In this briefing, we summarise the feedback from this group.

### Selected Findings

Respondents comprised a mix of undergraduate, masters and PhD students. They enrolled at various HEIs including elite global institutions (e.g. Oxford, Cambridge, LSE), newer universities (e.g. Sunderland, Northampton, Edge Hill) and specialist HEIs (e.g. Royal Veterinary College, Royal College of Art, Royal College of Music). In electing to study in the UK, these international students set particular importance on the experience gained by studying overseas and the high reputation of UK universities.

### Future Plans

Over half of international students (58%) intended to leave the UK after graduation. The overwhelming majority (84%) of these individuals wished to return to their home country. The most important reasons for this decision included a desire to be with family and friends and the perception that better economic opportunities existed either within the student's home country or elsewhere outside of the UK. International students who planned to stay in the UK were motivated by opportunities to work (62%), study further (26%), family reasons (9%) or to start a business (2%).

*'Since the Tier 1 visa category was cancelled as an option for those looking for a job after studying, the whole situation looks depressive. Plus, the legal discrimination of the non-EU/EEA citizens in terms of employment and the way it affects chances to get Tier 2 visa makes me feel very scared if I think about my future.'*

*'It is hard to plan your future when the governments are constantly radically changing the rules, which can prove disastrous for international students smack in the middle of their studies.'*

*'...the university has been extremely helpful in assisting me to develop new skills and network, so that I may be able to find paid employment in the future.'*

*'If, at the end of the day, no work experience is gained then I think the future of foreign students coming to study in the UK will be very slim.'*

### Entrepreneurial Intentions

31% of respondents wished to set up a business, with almost two thirds intending to do so in the next five years. The most likely location of the international student business start ups was within their own country (51%), whilst less than a quarter wished to set up in the UK (23%). Respondents provided mixed feedback on the opportunities and procedures involved in establishing an enterprise in the UK:

*'It is much easier to start up a business here, with a simpler tax system, less bureaucracy and several different agencies to support entrepreneurship, which is hard to find back home.'*

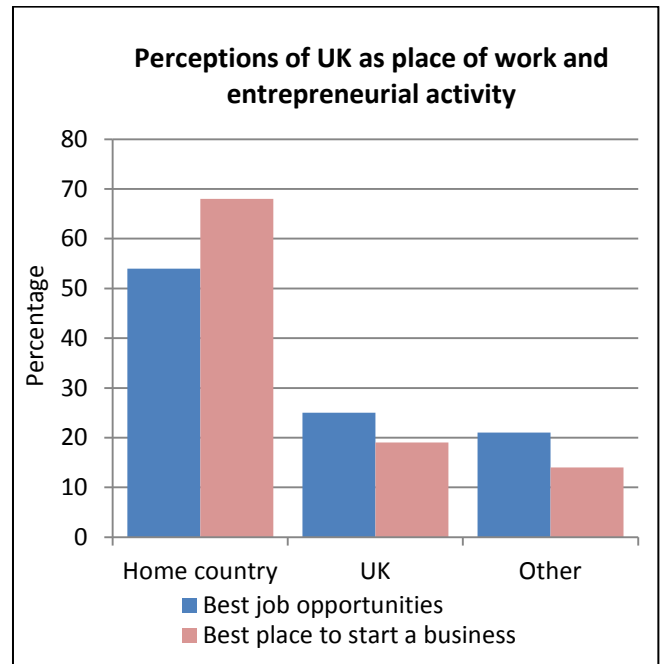
*'It is very hard to begin to think in an entrepreneurial fashion when one's visa only permits half-time work.'*

*'...I think that the government will provide a good platform for non European student to establish their business and use their skills to improve the UK economy.'*

*'...I planned to start a business in the UK, the visa being offered now requires a person to invest 50k - not everyone is Richard Branson's offspring.'*

### Perceptions of the UK

International students perceived their home country as having the best job opportunities (54%) and being the best place to start a business (68%). Far fewer respondents rated the UK as the best environment to conduct these activities.



Similarly, 33% of international students reported that they would advise friends or relatives to come to the UK to work in a skilled occupation and just 11% would recommend the UK as a place to start a business. A higher percentage (71%), nevertheless, would advise people to study in the UK.

*'...if the economic and political circumstances do not change I would definitely not recommend friends to study here, as the fees and living costs are ridiculously expensive for overseas students, and it is not worth such a big investment if there is no chance afterwards to stay and gain work experience.'*

*'The experience of studying in the UK, and away from home, helps one become more independent and reliable on oneself.'*

*'I encourage students to study as much as they can in their home country and come to the UK for Masters or final year of their degree.'*

### Further Information

A more detailed report of survey findings will be produced in due course. The research team comprised:

- Dr Adam Warren, Dr Elizabeth Mavroudi and George Windsor, Loughborough University;
- Thalej Vasishta, CEO, Paragon Law Ltd.

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