



# **International Higher Education: A Statement by Yorkshire Universities**

April 2024

## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Summary of Key Messages</b> .....  | 3  |
| <b>Background</b> .....   | 4  |
| <b>The origins of international students in Yorkshire</b> .....                           | 6  |
| <b>Where international students study in Yorkshire</b> .....                              | 8  |
| <b>The economic contribution of international students to the region</b> .....            | 9  |
| <b>The employment of international students and graduates</b> .....                       | 10 |
| <b>Trade, Investment and Global Alumni Connections</b> .....                              | 11 |
| <b>Themes identified at the YU-International Higher Education Commission Roundtable</b> . | 12 |
| <i>The benefits of working at a Regional Level</i> .....                                  | 12 |
| <i>The Value of the ‘International Classroom’</i> .....                                   | 13 |
| <i>Contributing to High-Value Sectors in Yorkshire</i> .....                              | 14 |
| <i>Expanding the Region’s Talent Pool</i> .....   | 14 |
| <b>Conclusions</b> .....  | 15 |

## Summary of Key Messages

- International students generate significant economic net impact (estimated to be £37.4 billion) to the UK regions and nations. The net impact of international students to Yorkshire and the Humber was £2.93 billion.<sup>1</sup> International students contribute to the economy of local places directly by spending money in shops, on services, on transport, and on accommodation.
- International students and graduates contribute to Yorkshire's economy through employment, as well as contributions to local businesses alongside or as part of their studies, such as through internships. International students also help to boost trade and exports.
- Any measures that are designed to cap international student numbers, directly or indirectly, will disproportionately hit the regions and nations outside London, given the greater economic dependency on universities in these regions and nations. A cap will damage efforts to improve local and regional economies. International students should not feature in UK immigration figures, but numbers should be collated separately.
- International students offer a rich variety of skills to public and private sector employers in Yorkshire whilst studying; working directly with businesses, through placements; and via other vocational elements. International students and graduates are leading innovative entrepreneurship activities in Yorkshire.
- UK Visas and Immigration undertakes checks on international offers, arrivals, and departures, ensuring that no student remains in the UK without holding the relevant visa requirements.
- The Graduate Route Visa is recognised as a valuable mechanism to attract and recruit global talent, but more could be done to promote it to employers. Amidst the current review of the Graduate Visa, it is vital that there is policy consistency and coherence in the UK.
- In response to criticism that international students 'displace' UK students from going to university, the data shows that, despite significant growth in the overall number of international students attending UK universities between 2017–18 and 2021–22, the proportion of non-UK international students at undergraduate level changed little – rising from 14.3% to 15.1% over the period.<sup>2</sup>
- More robust, real-time, and co-ordinated, data is needed to improve the tracking and analysis of international graduate outcomes.
- Funding from international students is benefitting teaching and research provision, in all universities, for all students, and international student tuition fees cross-funds researchers and professionals who produce impactful work to the benefit of UK economy and society.<sup>3</sup>
- Peer-reviewed research has found that international students do not hinder the educational or labour market outcomes of UK students they study alongside.<sup>4</sup>
- Greater engagement with international students benefits the graduate job prospects of UK students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students from the UK and overseas meeting and working together expands the evolution and sharing of new ideas and experiences, and it delivers a major contribution to the diversification of higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> London Economics HEPI, UUK International & Kaplan International Pathways (2023) [The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy](#). Based on the net impact of the 2021-22 cohort.

<sup>2</sup> UUK (2024) [Are universities letting international students in on lower grades?](#) 2 February.

<sup>3</sup> UUK (2024) [Financial sustainability of UK universities: PwC findings](#).

<sup>4</sup> Costas-Fernandez, J., Morando, G., and Holford, A. (2023) '[The effect of foreign students in higher education on native students' outcomes](#)', European Economic Review, 160, November.

- The UK benefits significantly from the soft power and global influence that is provided by international alumni who have studied at UK universities.
- The Turing Scheme, the UK's programme for studying, working and living abroad, is welcome, but it needs more flexibility and funding to support the needs and participation of students from less affluent backgrounds.
- It is important to recognise the specific contribution and value of Transnational Education as part of the UK's international higher education offer.
- The reputation of universities is said to be one of the top factors, alongside employment prospects, influencing where international students choose to study.<sup>5</sup> Stringent mechanisms, such as internal institutional processes and external examiner scrutiny, provide quality assurance to proposed and current students. Furthermore, in addition to the parameters set and regulated by the Office for Students, in England, the Teaching Excellence Framework also measures performance, and the latest assessment reflects outcomes that are above the baseline.

## Background

Universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) work alongside public and private sector partners to promote Yorkshire as a destination of choice for students, including those choosing to study from outside the UK.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the cultural and social value that international students generate, there is increasing evidence of the broader beneficial impact of international students and international higher education (HE) in attracting, sustaining and expanding investment, trade and jobs into the region.<sup>7</sup>

Through its 'International Higher Education Strategy 2.0' the International Higher Education Commission (IHEC) has sought to demonstrate the benefits to the UK nations and regions in "*hosting international students, communicating their value locally, and ensuring they have good student experience*".<sup>8</sup> The IHEC recommends that nations and regions should develop bespoke propositions that are clearly and coherently aimed at global markets to help the UK remain competitive in international HE.<sup>9</sup> Yorkshire Universities (YU) has engaged directly with the IHEC through Professor Karen Bryan (YU Chair and Vice-Chancellor, York St John University) and Professor Simone Buitendijk (former Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Leeds) who were appointed as IHEC Commissioners. The YU Executive Team has also worked with the IHEC Secretariat to inform the Commission's regional analysis.

One of the key questions in the initial IHEC Terms of Reference was: "*How should local regions develop tailored local international education strategies and plans to reflect local strengths and priorities?*"<sup>10</sup> Reflecting different and distinct markets, shaped by specific economic and social conditions, and institutional context, all regions and nations have something to contribute towards the UK's international HE offer. National policy and strategy would be more effective if it better reflected, and took account of, the geographical diversity of how international student recruitment plays out in practice within and across all parts of the UK.

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<sup>5</sup> QS Quacquarelli Symonds, (2022) [QS Higher Education Briefing: Is COVID-19 still impacting student. decision making?](#), 27 May.

<sup>6</sup> [See, for example, the recent promotional film, 'Your University City', by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield.](#)

<sup>7</sup> London Economics HEPI, UUK International & Kaplan International Pathways (2023) [The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy.](#)

<sup>8</sup> Ilieva, J. B. & Killingley, P. (2023) [International Higher Education Strategy 2.0: Targeted Growth for Resilience.](#) International Higher Education Commission. p.18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

YU's 2022-25 Strategy states that, "*YU will work with partners to strengthen the unique brand of Yorkshire on the national and global stage*".<sup>11</sup> YU members value their international partnerships and relationships, and the added value they bring to individual institutions and to the region itself. In drafting this Statement, YU has reflected upon the experience of London Higher, which published an 'International Education Strategy for London', highlighting the challenges and opportunities for London, and setting out pathways for international success for different types of HEIs.<sup>12</sup>

This Statement identifies the key issues facing international students and international HE in Yorkshire. It is based on desk research, and it has also been informed by discussions that took place at a roundtable, held in September 2023, convened by YU and IHEC, and chaired by IHEC Chair, Chris Skidmore. The roundtable featured senior leaders from YU member institutions and IHEC Commissioners, and it was the third IHEC 'regional' roundtable, following meetings held in Scotland and London. The Statement also reflects upon policy announcements made by the UK Government, and has been shaped by consultations with the YU Board.

The Statement profiles where international HE students in Yorkshire come from, and where they study, before moving on to highlight key elements of international student and graduate input into the region's economy, particularly in relation to employment and global alumni connections. The Statement articulates how international students generate economic and broader impacts for the universities they attend, the home students they study alongside, and how they enhance education, culture, social capital, and the UK's soft power.

At the same time, some challenges that have emerged as the international (and overall) student population has increased. Problems in ensuring an adequate supply of accommodation, in particular places, bound up in broader housing market dynamics, have materialised.<sup>13</sup> YU's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), with Yorkshire and Humber Councils (YHC),<sup>14</sup> provides a framework for HE and local government in Yorkshire to identify and collaborate on shared priorities. Initial discussions have taken place to better understand and share information and intelligence on how to work strategically to ensure that sufficient social infrastructure exists in the region to attract and retain international students.

There is uncertainty around the impacts of new policy changes preventing postgraduate taught students from bringing dependants, restricting movement to a skilled worker visa before course completion, and increasing the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), as well as the review of the Graduate Route Visa.<sup>15</sup> Analysis from the Home Office estimates that the restrictions on dependants will result in a 140,000 reduction in student dependants, but it does not account for any reduction in international students due to the uncertainty around behavioural responses, and so it assumes that the main applicants would still have come to the UK without their dependants.<sup>16</sup> There are concerns that the analysis of impacts does not reflect any reductions from international students who can no longer bring dependants, and it does not capture any impacts of the IHS uplift or the restrictions in switching visas, which were judged to have 'negligible' impacts. There could also be impacts from the broader negative signals that these policies present. There have been initial indications of reductions

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<sup>11</sup> YU (2022) [Yorkshire Universities 2022-25 Strategy](#).

<sup>12</sup> Beech, D. & Dixon, E. (2022) [International Education Strategy for London](#). London Higher.

<sup>13</sup> Blakey, M. (2023) [Accommodation shortages: are the odds stacked against students?](#) HEPI.

<sup>14</sup> YU (2021) [Yorkshire and Humber Councils and Yorkshire Universities agree new Memorandum of Understanding](#).

<sup>15</sup> Home Office (2024) [Letter from the Home Secretary to Professor Brian Bell, 11 March](#).

<sup>16</sup> Home Office (2023) [Legal migration statement: estimated immigration impacts](#).

in international students choosing to study in the UK as part of the January 2024 intake.<sup>17</sup> The latest UCAS figures show a 0.7% increase in international applicants for undergraduate courses, with increases from China, but decreases from Nigeria and India.<sup>18</sup>

The second part of the Statement outlines some of the key issues discussed at the YU-IHEC roundtable, and those raised by the YU Board, which illustrate the key priorities facing YU member institutions.

### **The origins of international students in Yorkshire**

Data from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) reveals that 49,365 international students enrolled at HE providers in Yorkshire, in 2021-22, the latest year of available data. Out of this total, 4,690 were from the European Union (EU), and 44,675 were from outside the EU.<sup>19</sup>

The overall number of international student enrolments in Yorkshire, in 2021-22, increased by 16,605 or 51% since 2014-15.<sup>20</sup> There have been year on year increases since 2016-17, with the biggest individual increase being in 2021-22, which was up 18% on 2020-21.<sup>21</sup> The number of EU students enrolling has decreased year on year, with the exception of 2016-17, which saw a 6% increase on the previous year's figures.<sup>22</sup> The largest drop in EU students was the 25% decrease between 2020-21 and 2021-22. The biggest year of growth for non-EU international student enrolments was in 2021-22, which saw a 25% increase from the year before.<sup>23</sup> The UK also saw an increase, as lockdown and other restrictions were lifted sooner compared to other countries. However, this 'competitive advantage' is at risk of being eroded.<sup>24</sup> Emergent evidence shows that international student numbers may be falling significantly given the fall in visas issued to international students for the January 2024 intake, compared to 2023.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that the increase in international students has not come at the expense of home students studying in Yorkshire. In fact, the number of UK domiciled students enrolling at providers based in the region has increased by 14,270 between 2014-15 and 2021-22, representing a 9% increase over this period.<sup>26</sup> The numbers of UK domiciled students enrolling in Yorkshire each year has been fairly until there was a 2% decrease in 2019-20, which was then offset by an 8% increase in 2020-21.<sup>27</sup> International students contribute to the experience of home students in many ways through the value of the 'International Classroom', as outlined below, but also through cross-subsidisation of teaching that helps to mitigate against the impacts of frozen home tuition fee levels that have been eroded by high-inflation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Enroly (2024) [CAS and deposits rally but remain significantly down year-on-year as Pakistan leapfrogs Nigeria](#), 11 January and ICEF (2023) ['Signs point to cooling demand for UK higher education in non-EU markets'](#), 5 December.

<sup>18</sup> UCAS (2024) [2024 Sees More 18-Year-Olds Apply For Higher Education](#)

<sup>19</sup> HESA. (2023) [HE student enrolments by domicile and region of HE provider](#). Table 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Based on discussions that took place in a [WonkHE podcast, broadcast on 8 December 2023](#).

<sup>25</sup> ICEF (2023) ['Signs point to cooling demand for UK higher education in non-EU markets'](#), 5 December and Enroly (2024) [CAS and deposits rally but remain significantly down year-on-year as Pakistan leapfrogs Nigeria](#), 11 January.

<sup>26</sup> HESA. (2023) [HE student enrolments by domicile and region of HE provider](#). Table 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> UUK (2024) [Financial sustainability of UK universities: PwC findings](#).

**Table 1: Number of student enrolments to HE providers in Yorkshire by domicile<sup>29</sup>**

|                            | 2014-15       | 2015-16       | 2016-17       | 2017-18       | 2018-19       | 2019-20       | 2020-21       | 2021-22       |
|----------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>EU</b>                  | 6,650         | 6,360         | 6,710         | 6,675         | 6,590         | 6,345         | 6,245         | 4,690         |
| <b>Non-EU</b>              | 26,110        | 24,915        | 24,420        | 25,525        | 28,040        | 32,080        | 35,700        | 44,675        |
| <b>Total International</b> | <b>32,760</b> | <b>31,275</b> | <b>31,130</b> | <b>32,200</b> | <b>34,630</b> | <b>38,425</b> | <b>41,945</b> | <b>49,365</b> |
| <b>UK</b>                  | 159,330       | 162,550       | 161,930       | 161,210       | 162,660       | 159,145       | 171,855       | 173,600       |

On an annual basis, between 2014-15 and 2021-22, the country that provided the most enrolments in Yorkshire was China, by a significant margin.<sup>30</sup> Until 2019-20, the number of students from China was between 5 to 10 times the number of students than the next most common domiciled country each year, with the difference peaking in 2018-19, when there were 10 times the number of students coming from China as from India.<sup>31</sup> This gap has decreased significantly in the last two years, as the number of students from India has grown. The latest figures show twice the number of students in Yorkshire from China as from India.<sup>32</sup>

**Table 2: Top 10 areas of domicile for international students enrolling at HE providers in Yorkshire 2021-22<sup>33</sup>**

| Domicile   | Number of enrolments |
|--|----------------------|
| China  | 16,470               |
| India  | 7,895                |
| Nigeria  | 5,300                |
| Pakistan   | 1,470                |
| Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China) | 1,245                |
| Kuwait   | 1,215                |
| Malaysia   | 820                  |
| Saudi Arabia                                       | 810                  |
| United States                                      | 735                  |
| United Arab Emirates                               | 665                  |

The countries that have seen the biggest growth recently, include Nigeria, which saw the number of entrants into Yorkshire increase by 187% in the year from 2020-21 to 2021-22.<sup>34</sup> This was part of an overall trend rate of 482% growth in Nigerian students coming to study in Yorkshire between 2018-19 and 2021-22,<sup>35</sup> which reflects the overall growth in students from Nigeria across the UK.<sup>36</sup> The number of students from India has also grown significantly, in recent years, with a 472% increase in entrants from 2018-19 to 2021-22, with the largest annual increase being the 83% rise in entrants in 2021-22.<sup>37</sup> The number of students from Pakistan, studying in Yorkshire, also increased by 297% between 2018-19 to 2021-22.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>29</sup> UUK (2024) [Financial sustainability of UK universities: PwC findings](#).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> HESA. (2023) [HE student enrolments by domicile and region of HE provider](#). Table 11.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Parr, C. (2023) [Nigerian students surge as EU numbers collapse](#). Research Professional News.

<sup>37</sup> HESA. (2023) [HE student enrolments by domicile and region of HE provider](#). Table 11

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

There are concerns at the potential impact of new immigration rules on dependant visas, and what this could mean for markets that have previously been targeted for growth by the UK. Demographically, students that are more likely to bring dependants, include India and Nigeria, and there are already initial indications of reductions in students from these countries.<sup>39</sup>

### Where international students study in Yorkshire

In 2021-22, 49,355 international students, from over 130 countries, studying at YU's twelve member institutions, represented 22.4% of the total HE student population of 220,670 at those institutions.<sup>40</sup> The University of Leeds and the University of Sheffield recruited the most international students.<sup>41</sup> There were, however, significant international student populations at other YU members.

In terms of sub-regional analysis, 22,350 international students (or 45% of the total international student population in Yorkshire) were studying in West Yorkshire at the seven YU member institutions based in Bradford, Huddersfield and Leeds.<sup>42</sup> In South Yorkshire, 16,165 international students (or 33% of the regional total) were studying at the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University.<sup>43</sup> In the City of York, 7,260 international students were at the University of York and York St John University, whilst in East Yorkshire, the University of Hull had enrolled 3,580 international students.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 3: Non-UK HE students by HE provider and country of domicile in YU member institutions 2021-22<sup>45</sup>**

| HEI                 | EU    | Europe | Africa | Asia  | Australasia | M East | N Am | S Am | Total         |
|---------------------|-------|--------|--------|-------|-------------|--------|------|------|---------------|
| Bradford            | 220   | 10     | 1,275  | 1,375 | 5           | 425    | 40   | 5    | <b>3,355</b>  |
| Huddersfield        | 350   | 45     | 1,180  | 2,335 | 5           | 255    | 25   | 10   | <b>4,205</b>  |
| Hull                | 345   | 55     | 1,160  | 1,265 | 15          | 625    | 105  | 10   | <b>3,580</b>  |
| Leeds Arts          | 50    | 20     | 15     | 100   | 0           | 10     | 20   | 0    | <b>215</b>    |
| Leeds Beckett       | 315   | 15     | 440    | 2,015 | 10          | 330    | 100  | 5    | <b>3,270</b>  |
| Leeds Conservatoire | 50    | 15     | 0      | 50    | 0           | 0      | 10   | 5    | <b>130</b>    |
| Leeds               | 1,090 | 210    | 565    | 7,530 | 25          | 1,285  | 325  | 90   | <b>11,125</b> |
| Leeds Trinity       | 35    | 0      | 0      | 5     | 0           | 0      | 5    | 0    | <b>50</b>     |
| Sheffield Hallam    | 345   | 15     | 1,505  | 3,140 | 5           | 150    | 30   | 10   | <b>5,205</b>  |
| Sheffield           | 1,140 | 165    | 435    | 8,225 | 15          | 700    | 210  | 75   | <b>10,960</b> |
| York St John        | 85    | 25     | 145    | 930   | 0           | 10     | 155  | 0    | <b>1,355</b>  |
| York                | 660   | 160    | 175    | 4,285 | 15          | 200    | 355  | 60   | <b>5,905</b>  |

<sup>39</sup> Graham, A. M. (2023) [Recommendations for International Student Policy](#). HEPI. Enroly (2024) [CAS and deposits rally but remain significantly down year-on-year as Pakistan leapfrogs Nigeria](#), 11 January. and UCAS (2024) [2024 Sees More 18-Year-Olds Apply For Higher Education](#).

<sup>40</sup> HESA. (2023) [HE student enrolments by domicile and region of HE provider](#). Table 11 and HESA. (2023) [Table 1 - HE student enrolments by HE provider](#)

<sup>41</sup> HESA. (2023) [Non-UK domiciled HE students by HE provider, country of domicile, level of study, mode of study and academic year](#). Table 28.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> HESA. (2023) [Non-UK domiciled HE students by HE provider, country of domicile, level of study, mode of study and academic year](#). Table 28.



## The economic contribution of international students to the region

A report by London Economics, for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), Universities UK International, and Kaplan International Pathways, set out the significant increase in the net economic benefits of international higher education students, which represents a positive contribution to all constituencies across the UK.<sup>46</sup> The total net impact on the UK economy of the cohort of first-year international students, enrolled at UK HEIs in the 2021/22 academic year, was estimated at £37.4bn across the duration of their studies.

Sheffield and Leeds featured in the top ten local areas in the UK where international students make the greatest economic impact.<sup>47</sup> This report suggests that the net economic impact of international students in Yorkshire, for 2021-22, was £2.93bn,<sup>48</sup> although it should be noted that this is an estimate based on an assumed multiplier.

Figures from London Economics show that, outside of London and the South East, Yorkshire was the most attractive region in England for international students, with the highest number of international first year students in 2021-22.<sup>49</sup> YU's analysis of the figures also found that Yorkshire had seen the largest percentage increase of first year international students (50%), since 2018-19, out of all of the regions in England.

International students also generate significant income for universities in Yorkshire, helping to cross-subsidise research, teaching, and other activity,<sup>50</sup> which otherwise may not be undertaken given rising inflation and the reduction in the value of the home tuition fee, which is now estimated to be worth around £6,000.<sup>51</sup>

**Table 4: International student starters by region<sup>52</sup>**

| Region             | Number of International student starters |                |
|--------------------|--|----------------|
|                    | 2018-19                                  | 2021-22        |
| London             | 70,370                                   | 98,825         |
| Scotland           | 29,730                                   | 44,085         |
| South East         | 29,075                                   | 34,660         |
| Yorkshire & Humber | 20,925                                   | 31,360         |
| West Midlands      | 23,545                                   | 29,750         |
| North West         | 20,860                                   | 27,680         |
| East of England    | 17,400                                   | 24,835         |
| East Midlands      | 17,995                                   | 24,235         |
| South West         | 14,640                                   | 19,700         |
| North East         | 12,595                                   | 18,715         |
| Wales              | 12,335                                   | 14,905         |
| Northern Ireland   | 3,450                                    | 12,615         |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>272,920</b>                           | <b>381,000</b> |

<sup>46</sup> London Economics, HEPI, UUK International & Kaplan International Pathways. (2023) [The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy](#).

<sup>47</sup> London Economics, HEPI, UUK International & Kaplan International Pathways. (2023) [The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy](#).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> UUK (2024) [Financial sustainability of UK universities: PwC findings](#).

<sup>51</sup> Weale, S. (2023) ['Minister rules out lifting cap on student tuition fees in England'](#), The Guardian, 2 August.

<sup>52</sup> London Economics, HEPI, UUK International & Kaplan International Pathways. (2023) [The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy](#). This table has been updated by Yorkshire Universities on 11 June 2024 to include both 2018-19 and 2021-22 figures.

## The employment of international students and graduates

International students and graduates contribute to Yorkshire's economy through employment, and to local businesses alongside or as part of their studies, such as through internships. Universities offer a broad range of support for international students and graduates in relation to employment and employability, as well as engaging directly with employers to facilitate connections. However, there is limited regional data to track international graduate outcomes, an issue that YU has been discussing directly with HESA, and which YU is keen to see a solution to. In the absence of specific data, we summarise below some key national research, and impart regional applicability, with links to ongoing work in Yorkshire highlighted.

Finding employment in the UK after graduation, and the support available to find work, is a key priority for many international students and graduates. A report by HEPI found that most international students studying in the UK (71%) said they planned to stay in the UK after graduation to work, but over three-quarters of those who wanted to stay were concerned if they would earn enough to support themselves.<sup>53</sup> HEPI also reported that the vast majority (82%) of international students define the careers support they expected to receive as either 'important' or 'very important' when choosing a university in the UK, while employability skills were considered 'important' or 'very important' by 92% of respondents.<sup>54</sup>

A report by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisors Services (AGCAS) also highlighted that the drivers for international graduates remaining in the UK, after study, include work experience and skills development, as well as university and employer support, and broader visa, employment and lifestyle opportunities.<sup>55</sup> Given the importance attached to employability prospects and career success from undertaking work-related experience, it is important to consider and reflect upon the findings from HEPI that 39% of international students gained no work experience during their time studying, and many reported that they believed it was harder for them, than UK students, to secure internships or placements.<sup>56</sup>

The Graduate Route Visa, introduced in 2021, enables international graduates to stay and work in the UK for two years (or three years for doctoral students) without the job or wage restrictions of other work visas, and reduces bureaucracy for employers. Research by HEPI has found a mixed picture of employer understanding and willingness to use the Graduate Route Visa.<sup>57</sup> Only 3% of employers have knowingly used the Graduate Route Visa, although 42% of employers reported that they would consider using it but have not done so.<sup>58</sup> A larger proportion of employers surveyed (20%) had sponsored a visa for an employee previously or were in the process of doing so, while a further 35% would consider doing so in the future.<sup>59</sup> HEPI's research also found a lack of knowledge of, and interest in, the Graduate Route amongst some employers, with 27% stating they were not familiar with the mechanism, and a further 20% reporting they have not used the Graduate Route and have no plans to do so.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> HEPI and Kaplan International Pathways (2021) [Paying more for less? Careers and employability support for international students at UK universities.](#)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> AGCAS (2023) [International Graduate Routes: Narratives from the UK job market.](#)

<sup>56</sup> HEPI and Kaplan International Pathways (2021) [Paying more for less? Careers and employability support for international students at UK universities.](#)

<sup>57</sup> Hillman, N. (2023) [Not heard of this: Employers' perceptions of the UK's Graduate Route visa.](#) HEPI.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

A series of reports have published recommendations for supporting the employment of international graduates in the UK. Many of these studies suggest that it is important to encourage collaboration or link to ongoing or planned activities in the regions. A common theme is the importance of partnership between local universities and businesses, in terms of the proactive liaison role that universities play between students and employers,<sup>61</sup> as well as engaging international students, and raising awareness of opportunities with prospective employers.<sup>62</sup> One such example of joint working, in Yorkshire, on supporting engagement between students and employers, was the successful piloting of a collaborative online ‘mega careers fair’ in November 2022, with the involvement of 83 employers, including some large firms that individual universities had struggled to engage with in recent years. There are plans to expand this collaborative careers’ fair in future academic years.

The AGCAS report highlighted the importance of university career services in promoting inclusive recruitment practices to employers, as well as promoting examples of success stories from international students and graduates.<sup>63</sup> This reflects collaborative work taking place between HE careers services in Yorkshire who are actively working together, and with a range of partners, to promote inclusive recruitment practices through the development and publication of a YU Regional Inclusive Recruitment Guide for Employers.<sup>64</sup>

There is also an opportunity to consider how resources, such as materials developed by the International Student Employability Group that highlight the benefits of, and methods for, employing international students, could be promoted wider.<sup>65</sup> Examples of good practice within Yorkshire, such as the University of Huddersfield’s guide for employers on international graduate recruitment, have featured within YU’s broader programme on supporting ‘graduate talent’.<sup>66</sup> There is also an opportunity to promote good practice elsewhere across Yorkshire, building on the qualitative case studies that were collated by YU and shared ahead of the YU-IHEC Roundtable. There are also further opportunities to connect international HE and students into YU’s communications campaign to promote the value of graduates to Yorkshire.<sup>67</sup> The APPG for International Students has also recommended stronger cooperation between HE and the UK Government, including joint promotion of the Graduate Route Visa to students and employers.<sup>68</sup>

## **Trade, Investment and Global Alumni Connections**

Yorkshire benefits from the large number of international students who come to study in the region through the extended and far-reaching global connections that are facilitated during a student’s time and experience at university. Many of these relationships can continue long afterwards through alumni engagement.

A 2023 report, published by HEPI, on ‘The role of universities in driving overseas investment into UK Research and Development’, articulated the value of attracting and embedding foreign direct investment through a more effective utilisation of the global reach of universities’ alumni networks, as well as the opportunities to better connect with tourism,

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<sup>61</sup> APPG for International Students (2023) [The Graduate Visa: An Effective Post-Study Pathway for International Students in the UK?](#)

<sup>62</sup> AGCAS (2023) [International Graduate Routes: Narratives from the UK job market.](#)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> YU (2023) [Inclusive Recruitment Guide for Employers.](#)

<sup>65</sup> Plant, J. (2023) [Promoting the benefits, and ease, of employing international students.](#) HEPI.

<sup>66</sup> University of Huddersfield (2023) [Case Study – International Graduate Recruitment Information Session for Regional Employers.](#) Yorkshire Universities.

<sup>67</sup> YU (2023) [Graduate Implementation Group.](#)

<sup>68</sup> APPG for International Students (2023) [The Graduate Visa: An Effective Post-Study Pathway for International Students in the UK?](#)

place marketing and the visitor economy.<sup>69</sup> One of the HEPI report's recommendations encouraged the UK Government specifically to work more closely with universities to "*leverage global alumni connections, international industry partnerships and UK research and innovation strengths to attract and retain a greater proportion of globally mobile R&D investment.*"<sup>70</sup>

Increased collaboration with universities in the regions, working with industry and other partners, such as mayoral combined authorities, to coordinate efforts around foreign direct investment, also has the potential to contribute to reducing regional imbalances and increasing R&D investment. Innovative pilot work is taking place in the Midlands, led by Midlands Innovation and the Midlands Enterprise Universities, a coalition of seventeen universities, local economic growth partners (Midlands Engine, West Midlands Growth Company, LEPs), and UK Government, to take forward the 'Universities as Drivers of Trade and Investment Pilot'. YU has been engaging with the Pilot to explore if any outputs and findings could be applicable to Yorkshire. There is also already similar collaboration taking place in Yorkshire, such as through the space industry cluster.<sup>71</sup> YU has also provided input into regional strategies relating to trade and investment,<sup>72</sup> as well as tourism, making the case for the importance of the international HE to regional growth and prosperity.

### **Themes identified at the YU-International Higher Education Commission Roundtable**

The YU-IHEC roundtable, in September last year, was designed to inform IHEC's work programme. IHEC Chair, Chris Skidmore, highlighted the significance of the UK meeting the target of 600,000 international students enrolling in UK HE. He suggested that the figure should be seen as a floor, rather than a ceiling, given the increasing global competition the UK faces in international HE.

The IHEC has recognised the opportunity and importance of communicating narratives around the 'regional story' of UK international HE. The YU-IHEC roundtable pored over the areas raised in the first part of this Statement, and these and other themes have been discussed, at length, by the YU Board. Together, the topics outlined provide a basis for potential action on the part of universities, partners, and policymakers, within the region, and at a national level.

#### *The benefits of working at a Regional Level*

To address the issues, opportunities and themes identified in this Statement, a diverse range of institutions and partners will need to work together. Yorkshire has the 4<sup>th</sup> largest community of international students in the UK (and has seen the largest recent growth of any region in England).<sup>73</sup> Engagement with regional partners should help YU members co-design, and take forward, proposals developed by the IHEC and others on creating sustainable new national and regional strategies.

The IHEC has recommended the development of regional international education strategies, given the policy importance of levelling up, devolution, and the value attached to adopting a

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<sup>69</sup> Brown, A. (2023) [The role of universities in driving overseas investment into UK Research and Development](#). HEPI.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. P.51.

<sup>71</sup> See [Space Hub Yorkshire](#).

<sup>72</sup> YU (2021) [Universities and Place Promotion in West Yorkshire](#).

<sup>73</sup> YU's own calculations based on figures in London Economics, HEPI, UUK International & Kaplan International Pathways. (2023) [The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy](#).

place-based approach to attracting international students and growing international HE within and across all parts of the UK.

YU is well-placed to convene, to encourage the sharing of knowledge and good practice, to facilitate collaboration, and to impart a distinct 'Yorkshire approach' to international higher education. YU's MoU with the region's local authorities and Mayoral Combined Authorities provides a framework for supporting international higher education and international students in Yorkshire. It also enables HE and local government to work together to make the case for developing the social infrastructure to underpin an effective approach to destination marketing, recruitment and sustaining international student numbers in the region.

### *Providing a High-Quality Student Experience*

One of the fundamental questions posed at the YU-IHEC roundtable was how the HE sector and regional partners could provide and maintain a high-quality experience for students coming to study and live in Yorkshire. For reasons outside the direct control of the HE sector, too many international students have faced negative experiences, relating to problems with poor and expensive housing, the rising cost of living, and limited access to health care and education. These issues have contributed towards increasing non-completion rates. There is a consensus that YU member institutions and regional and local partners should work more closely together, and with the UK Government, to improve the quality, and the experience, of international students in Yorkshire. In an open letter to candidates standing in the three Mayoral Elections, in Yorkshire, on 2 May, YU invites those elected as Mayors to *"join YU's campaign to make Yorkshire the preferred destination for UK and international students to study, which requires a national immigration policy that enables universities in Yorkshire to attract and retain international students and staff, that would bring in new talent, drive economic growth, and inject international money directly into local communities."*<sup>74</sup>

### *The Value of the 'International Classroom'*

International HE requires universities to take a holistic approach. This means taking appropriate measures to encourage more international and home students to mix, and for all students to enjoy a global experience, including acquiring international skills through cohesion, and for institutions to create an international classroom culture. It is also important to note the financial value of international students to universities in Yorkshire, illustrated by international student tuition fees, which cross-subsidise research and the teaching of home (UK) students.<sup>75</sup>

Participants at the YU-IHEC roundtable recommended that universities and the sector in Yorkshire should build sustainability into the model of the 'international classroom' through Transnational Education (TNE), and by making all students feel valued. As part of the increased demand for international HE, TNE has grown rapidly. In 2021–22, 558,215 students were studying for awards from 162 UK providers in 230 countries and territories through TNE – a 9.3% increase from the previous year.<sup>76</sup> TNE has become a critical strand of universities' international activities. The importance of TNE is also recognised by the UK International Education Strategy, which aims to increase education exports to £35 billion per year by 2030.<sup>77</sup> In 2020, the income generated from UK TNE activity was approximately £2.3

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<sup>74</sup> YU (2024) [Yorkshire Universities' Five Key Asks ahead of the Mayoral Elections in Yorkshire](#).

<sup>75</sup> UUK (2024) [Financial sustainability of UK universities: PwC findings](#).

<sup>76</sup> [UUK \(2023\) The scale of UK HE TNE 2021-22, 5 December](#).

<sup>77</sup> [DfE and DBT \(2021\) International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth](#).

billion, an increase of 112.9% in current prices since 2010.<sup>78</sup> Discussions with the YU Board have reconfirmed the scale and value of some Yorkshire universities' investment in TNE, and have reinforced the case for any existing or future strategies and plans for international HE to include the specific impact and economic contribution of TNE.

The benefits of greater internationalisation extend to home students, particularly those from poorer communities and backgrounds. Inclusive learning and pedagogy for international students and home students can help to increase cultural awareness, diversity, and improve student satisfaction. However, the loss of the UK's access to the Erasmus+ programme has curtailed efforts to nurture and expand global engagement amongst home students, and within the sector overall. It is important to create new opportunities for students in Yorkshire through the Turing Scheme, but some changes are required to the Scheme itself. In line with recommendations of the Year 1 Evaluation Report, universities in Yorkshire believe that the Turing Scheme, or similar programmes, should offer shorter overseas experiences, and create new, or increase the funding for existing, programmes designed to support more disadvantaged students.<sup>79</sup>

### *Contributing to High-Value Sectors in Yorkshire*

As illustrated earlier, international HE is increasingly significant to the growth and dynamism of high value sectors, and it underpins much of the research and industrial collaboration that exists within and across Yorkshire. Studies have found that Yorkshire has different overseas international student recruitment patterns to other regions.<sup>80</sup> Given these differences, by subject and geography, there are concrete benefits in exploring further how to communicate the different and diverse educational and economic strengths of Yorkshire, as part of a move to incorporating more explicit regional narratives within the overall UK story on international HE.

This work would not only help to improve the targeting of marketing and communication campaigns, but it would also create opportunities to better leverage the talent pool offered by international students, which, in turn, is linked to creating new opportunities to reach out to, and connect with, industry. There is also an important role for innovation and enterprise in driving increased student and graduate employability and entrepreneurialism, with innovation hubs and enterprise schemes in some of Yorkshire's universities benefiting significantly from international student and graduate engagement.

### *Expanding the Region's Talent Pool*

Whilst international students can help to expand the pool of high-skilled labour in Yorkshire, there is a gap between balancing the demand for, and supply of, talent. Too many students and graduates, with the right skillsets, are not being hired by local businesses in Yorkshire. Driving greater employer demand for higher-level skills and increased innovation is, therefore, important. However, as discussed earlier, too many employers have limited knowledge about the Graduate Route Visa. There is a key role for university careers services and business engagement teams in Yorkshire to communicate the opportunities of staying to work in the region. The Chief Executive of Universities UK, Vivienne Stern, has

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<sup>78</sup> [UUK \(2023\) The scale of UK HE TNE 2021-22, 5 December.](#)

<sup>79</sup> [DfE \(2024\) Turing Scheme: Year 1 Evaluation, Research Report by IFF Research, Department for Education.](#)

<sup>80</sup> Baldaccchino. K. (2023) [Benchmarking Yorkshire for Success](#), presented to the YH-IHEC roundtable on 28 September.

called on Ministers to commit to retaining the Visa to help the UK remain an attractive destination for international students.<sup>81</sup>

Using the world-class research and analytical capabilities in Yorkshire's universities, including through platforms such as the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN),<sup>82</sup> and the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership (Y-PIP),<sup>83</sup> will help universities and partners better understand economic and labour market growth, and identify where future demand for skills, including those of international students, will come from. Both Y-PERN and Y-PIP also feature strong community engagement projects, which are important in the context of demonstrating and communicating the value of universities and international students to the region. Better marketing campaigns are needed to properly inform companies, particularly SMEs, of the opportunities available, and to build connections between international students and local enterprises, and boost employability through the Graduate Route Visa. YU could work with the local chambers of commerce, and other business organisations, more closely to promote this opportunity in Yorkshire.

However, where there have been placements inbuilt into programmes, some international students have felt inhibited by going into a business. A venture creation programme, managed and funded by York St John University, for example, is one model of support that universities are introducing to enable more international students to engage with local businesses, as part of a bridging solution, until such time as they feel confident to enter fully the labour market.

Equally, universities in the region should be transparent about the reach, influence, and dynamics, of global labour markets. Taking a responsible approach to recruiting international students means being clear at the outset that universities and local partners may not always seek, or be able, to find employment in Yorkshire for international students.

## Conclusions

The role and impact of international HE and international students on YU member institutions, as well as Yorkshire as a region, has grown in significance. As these issues have risen in scale and visibility, they have come increasingly into the spotlight of policymakers and political discourse.

Universities in Yorkshire are civic institutions, founded, rooted, and working on behalf of the region, but also connected globally. Research, innovation, teaching, and knowledge exchange, underpinned by student development and experience, lie at the heart of HE. Yorkshire has benefitted enormously from the international connections that have spawned new ideas. Whilst universities face major challenges, it would be wrong to suggest that these problems stem from the growth in international students. International student fees have helped to bridge the gap in university finances in the face of real term reductions in other funding. A curb on the number of international students would exacerbate problems for the HE sector, and it would undermine attempts to improve local and regional economies.<sup>84</sup>

This Statement has illustrated the benefits of international HE and international students to Yorkshire, but it has also outlined areas for improvement. Although many policies are framed

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<sup>81</sup> Parr, C (2023) [Graduate visa route 'must not be scrapped'](#), Research Professional News, 5 December.

<sup>82</sup> YU (2023) [Policy Engagement and Y-PERN](#).

<sup>83</sup> YU (2024) [Trailblazing Yorkshire-based project linking academics with policymakers and communities awarded £5m funding](#).

<sup>84</sup> UUK (2024) [Financial sustainability of UK universities: PwC findings](#).

and applied nationally, greater recognition of place, especially the regional scale, to the successful co-design, rollout and implementation of decisions relating to international HE, would produce better policy and practical outcomes for international students, for higher education, and for Yorkshire and the country overall.



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