

Universities urged to cut 'fraudulent' applications from overseas

PETER FOSTER

Universities need to act urgently to reduce the number of "fraudulent" applications from international students or risk facing a backlash in Westminster, a former Conservative universities minister has warned.

Lord Jo Johnson said the higher education sector was "reaching the political limits" of tolerance for an ever-higher number of international students as too many were dropping out of courses or were unable to support themselves.

"It's clear to me that the days of government support for further growth in numbers are over," he told a conference on international student recruitment

yesterday, organised by Universities UK, the sector lobby group that represents more than 140 universities.

Universities have become increasingly reliant on higher-paying international students to subsidise domestic students. International fees account for nearly 20 per cent of universities' income from about 10 per cent just over a decade ago.

Despite such students delivering nearly £42bn in economic benefits to the UK in the 2021-22 academic year, a £10bn rise from 2018-19, Johnson said fears that some universities were "selling immigration to the UK rather than education" risked obscuring the positive narrative about their benefits.

Urging universities to take "collective action to weed out poor quality and fraudulent applications", Johnson warned that "entirely unacceptable" dropout rates among Indian and Bangladeshi students of "approaching 25 per cent" was damaging the sector's reputation.

Home secretary Suella Braverman in May removed the right of masters students to bring family members and closed a loophole enabling students to switch to skilled worker visas midway through their course. But she did not close off the so-called graduate route visa which allows students to stay in the UK for two years after their course.

A survey of international students this year by IDP Connect, a recruitment

site, has indicated that the visa changes were having an impact on recruitment.

Rachel MacSween at IDP Connect said the UK, while still popular, had slipped behind Australia and Canada as the most sought-after destination. "Uncertainty around graduate visas in the UK is a major consideration . . . As other countries are enhancing post-study work rights the UK's share as a top destination has declined," she said.

Separately, senior leaders at four top-tier UK universities have said they had seen much fewer international students not taking up confirmed places, including after paying their deposits.

Two of the senior leaders, who asked not to be named, said the shortfall had

hit budgets. "It's been a real financial blow for us," added one.

Amid growing competition for the students, Johnson, who is chair of FutureLearn, a digital learning platform, urged the sector to reduce its reliance on Chinese and Indian students while improving quality, a combination he recognised would be challenging.

Johnson suggested charging application fees, requiring tuition fees to be paid upfront and following Canada in requiring annual living expenses to be lodged in escrow by students on arrival.

Vivienne Stern, head of Universities UK, acknowledged that failure to maintain a robust recruitment system risked a further government crackdown.