

The Global University: Are we exporting education or exploiting students?

Introduction

The first Keele Debate took place on Tuesday 17 February in Westminster Theatre at Keele University. The event was a part of the Keele Debate Series introduced by Vice-Chancellor Professor Kevin Shakesheff to “unpick the disagreements within UK universities, as part of the University’s wider strategic conversations exploring the future of higher education. While the University is undertaking data-led modelling on recruitment, tariffs and market positioning, the debates provide space to explore the ethical and societal questions that quantitative analysis cannot answer. The event was attended by over 400 participants across both in-person and online formats.

Summary

The first debate examined the sustainability of the current UK university funding model and the sector’s growing reliance on international student recruitment. The panel explored whether international education is mutually beneficial or rather a system that creating financial dependency. The audience raised questions about fairness, transparency and the long-term resilience of the model.

The Panel

1. **Professor Adam Habib** - Vice-Chancellor, SOAS University of London
2. **The Rt Hon Jo Johnson** - Former Minister of State for Universities
3. **Vivienne Stern** - Chief Executive, Universities UK
4. **Jessica Turner** - CEO, QS Quacquarelli Symonds
5. **Paul Lovegrove** - CEO Europe & Global COO, Navitas

Chaired by **Professor Kevin Shakesheff** - Vice-Chancellor, Keele University.

Key Themes

a) **The Sustainability of the UK Funding Model**

A repeated topic that came up was the continuing reliance of UK universities on international student fees. Speakers noted that domestic tuition fees in England have remained frozen in recent years, meaning institutions increasingly depend on international recruitment to maintain teaching and research activity.

Professor Adam Habib suggested that this financial structure creates long-term strategic risk for the sector, particularly if universities become overly dependent on a small number of international markets. Changes in migration policy, geopolitical tensions or economic conditions could therefore have significant consequences for institutional stability.

Other panellists emphasised that international student mobility has become a normal feature of a globalised education market. Rt Hon Jo Johnson argued that students increasingly make international choices about where to study, the UK remains competitive because of the quality and reputation of its universities.

b) Exploitation or Exchange?

The debate also examined whether international education represents a mutually beneficial exchange or rather the current system raises ethical concerns.

Some speakers highlighted the economic and cultural contributions international students make to universities and to the wider UK economy. Vivienne Stern emphasised that international students contribute not only financially but also academically and culturally to campus communities, strengthening research collaboration and global engagement.

However, the discussion also acknowledged concerns about fairness and transparency. Several contributors questioned whether the significant difference between domestic and international tuition fees can be justified if those fees are effectively supporting broader institutional funding pressures. This raised wider questions about whether the system risks creating structural dependency on international recruitment.

c) Global Market & Competition

There was a focus on the changing global landscape of higher education. Jessica Turner discussed how international rankings and global competition increasingly shape university strategies, influencing where students choose to study and how institutions position themselves internationally.

Paul Lovegrove highlighted the growing importance of transnational education partnerships and pathway programmes as universities seek to expand internationally while managing financial and regulatory risks.

Several speakers noted that emerging higher education systems in countries such as China, India and Malaysia are rapidly expanding their domestic capacity. This could gradually reduce outbound student mobility and force UK universities to rethink their reliance on international recruitment as a central financial strategy.

Questions from the Audience

Audience contributions expanded the discussion and introduced additional perspectives. Questions addressed several key issues, including whether the UK risks “exploiting itself” by becoming overly reliant on international student markets during a domestic cost-of-living crisis, and whether exporting UK education abroad could ultimately strengthen global competitors. The audience also asked whether universities could prioritise their responsibilities to local communities alongside international

ambitions and whether student exchange programmes might represent a more balanced form of internationalisation.

Across the discussion, audience questions reflected broader concerns about the sustainability and fairness of the current higher education funding model. Several contributors highlighted the sector's increasing dependence on international student recruitment, particularly given the continued freeze on domestic tuition fees. Others raised ethical questions about equity and transparency, including whether international students receive sufficient support and whether differential fee structures are justified.

Overall, the audience discussion reinforced many of the themes raised by the panel, highlighting tensions between global competition and local responsibility, as well as the challenge of balancing financial sustainability with the broader public purpose of universities.

[Arguments For and Against Internationalisation](#)

While the panel reflected different perspectives within the sector, the debate also mirrored a wider discussion taking place across higher education about the role of international students in university funding.

Supporters of internationalisation emphasise the academic, cultural and economic benefits of global student mobility. Stern highlighted the significant contribution international students make not only to university finances but also to research collaboration and campus diversity. From this perspective, international recruitment reflects a competitive global education market in which students exercise choice about where to study. Johnson similarly emphasised the UK's strong reputation as a global education provider and the role international students play in sustaining world-class institutions.

However, other contributors highlighted potential risks within the current funding structure. Professor Habib noted that increasing reliance on international student fees raises questions about long-term sustainability, particularly if universities become dependent on a limited number of overseas markets. Changes in migration policy, geopolitical tensions or global economic conditions could therefore expose institutions to financial instability.

The debate also touched on ethical considerations surrounding transparency and access. Some critics argue that the cross-subsidy model- where higher international tuition fees help support domestic teaching and research- raises questions about fairness. Concerns have also been raised about whether prospective international students fully understand the financial and employment realities of studying in the UK, particularly given rising living costs and an increasingly competitive graduate labour market.

These arguments formed an important backdrop to the panel discussion and illustrated the broader tensions shaping the future of internationalisation in higher education.

Student's Perspective

From a student perspective the debate raised important questions about fairness, transparency and sustainability within the UK higher education system. While internationalisation clearly brings academic, cultural and economic benefits to universities, the discussion highlighted growing concern about how heavily institutions now rely on international student fees. Several arguments suggested that this model has helped universities remain financially viable, particularly as domestic tuition fees have remained largely frozen.

At the same time, the debate encouraged students to consider whether this reliance raises ethical and practical challenges. Questions about transparency, affordability and long-term employment prospects were particularly relevant for international students who often make study decisions at a young age and from outside the UK. For many students in the audience, the discussion highlighted the complexity of balancing global engagement with fairness and sustainability.

Ultimately, the debate demonstrated that the issue is not simply whether international education is beneficial or exploitative. Rather, it raised a broader question about how universities can maintain financial stability while ensuring that internationalisation remains transparent, equitable and genuinely beneficial for all students.

Strategic Takeaway

The debate highlights a number of strategic considerations for Keele University, particularly in relation to the sustainability and positioning of higher education.

The discussion suggests that increasing reliance on international student income raises questions about the long-term stability of the current funding model. This points towards a need for universities to continually reassess how they balance financial sustainability with commitments to accessibility, diversity, and academic integrity.

A further implication relates to the positioning of universities within a global market. The emphasis on internationalisation highlights both opportunity and risk, raising questions about how institutions maintain competitiveness while avoiding over-dependence on specific regions or recruitment strategies.

More broadly, the debate reflects an ongoing tension between higher education as a public good and as a market-driven system. This suggests that universities may need to navigate increasingly complex trade-offs between financial pressures, student expectations, and their wider social and educational missions.

While the discussion does not point towards a single strategic solution, it highlights a set of interconnected challenges that institutions will need to keep under review in an evolving policy and economic landscape.

Inaya Choudhury, Keele University student