INTRODUCTION

UK universities are international organisations with long-established links with universities and other organisations around the world. These links include research partnerships and collaborations, academic and student exchange and consultancy. UK universities have a long tradition of welcoming international students and researchers attracted by the wide range of high quality courses and educational support, and a world class research base. This tradition is important but it is vital that we maintain our strength in international activities as higher education becomes an increasingly globalised activity and international competition for students, staff and research funding grows.

In 2003/04 there were 213,000 international students and 104,000 students from other EU countries in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). There are also many more international and EU students on exchange or study-abroad programmes at UK universities. International student numbers in UK higher education institutions have increased by over 60% in the last five years. The UK’s research base is one of the most productive and influential systems in the world with UK universities participating in world-class research made possible by long established international research collaborations both within Europe and internationally.

UK universities, and the UK as a whole, benefit greatly from international activities and particularly from the opportunity to educate citizens of other countries. This provides the UK with significant geopolitical and cultural benefits as well as broadening the educational experience of UK students and ensuring the diversity of the student body. The international activities of UK universities make an important and growing contribution to their income and to export earnings for the UK economy. A recent study of the global value of education and training exports calculated that higher education contributed around £4billion annually to the UK’s export earnings through research activities, transnational activities and international students. Similarly, the UK benefits significantly from international research collaborations and partnerships. For example, the UK enjoys strong success in the European Framework Programme, with funding coming to UK universities accounting for 25% of the total for that sector.
Universities UK’s international role

Universities UK’s international role aims to ensure that our Member institutions are equipped to maintain and build on the success of the whole range of international activities in which they participate. Universities UK works in partnership with several organisations both within and outside the UK on international activities. Our international work forms four broad categories:

- the work of the Universities UK International and European Strategy Group;
- links with university associations in Europe and around the world;
- international and European dimensions to UK policy development; and
- international and European visitors and international and European enquiries.

Current European activities

On specifically European activities, Universities UK supports the role of the Europe Unit (see below) in raising awareness of developments in European higher education and working with relevant agencies on European issues. As European policy and legislation increasingly have a direct effect on UK higher education, Universities UK will continue to expand its European influence. Universities UK aims to engage strategically and positively in European HE policy decision-making fora. Universities UK seeks to do this primarily through its support for the UK HE Europe Unit. With the funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales, Universities UK supports and directs the activities for the Europe Unit, in line with its three objectives:

- to act as an observatory on all major European HE issues;
- to work with UK HEIs, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP), the funding councils and other stakeholders to produce a UK response on major European policy positions; and
- to lobby on such statements on behalf of the UK HE sector.

Universities UK’s priority European issue is the Bologna Process to create the European Higher Education Area by 2010. The Unit seeks to raise awareness of the Bologna Process across the sector by encouraging HEIs’ engagement with the Process and, where appropriate, implementation of Bologna reforms. Indeed, as the UK prepares to host the 2007 Ministerial Summit of the Bologna Process, increased engagement with the Process is essential.

Universities UK’s priority European Union issues will include the research Framework Programmes and the proposed creation of the European Research Council.

The benefits from increased UK engagement in European issues are greater opportunities for collaboration and potential funding options, an enhanced international dimension, student benefits from cultural maturity and linguistic diversity, and developed labour market skills. Universities UK is committed to ensuring its overall international strategy has a strong European dimension.

Reputation

Our aim is to ensure that the good reputation, quality and success of UK universities’ international and European activities are sustained, strengthened and developed.

- We will seek to promote UK universities’ international and European activities and their success to audiences in the UK, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA) and around the world through media activities, events and publications.
Policies and strategies

We will maintain and promote the competitiveness of UK higher education in the growing global higher education market through support for the continuation and further development of a national marketing strategy for UK higher education.

• We will work with the British Council and the international sections of the DfES and Office for Science and Technology (OST), Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland to ensure that the UK, with its diverse higher education sector, is the country of first preference for international students and international partners. We will work to ensure that the advantages gained through the Prime Minister’s Initiative and the Education UK brand are maintained and developed further. We will work to ensure that the challenges posed by the expansion in international student numbers forecast in Vision 2020 are recognised and responded to by the sector.

We will ensure that domestic policy development takes account of UK universities’ international and European activities.

• Drawing on the outcomes of the joint Universities UK Longer Term Strategy Group/International –EU Strategy Group seminar and discussions with relevant Ministers, funding bodies and other relevant organisations, we will ensure that the international and European dimensions are considered and built into policy proposals and implementation.

We will promote the exchange of staff and students internationally.

• We will continue to work with the UK Socrates-Erasmus Council, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, UK funding bodies and other relevant organisations to ensure that scholarship, fellowship and exchange programmes operate effectively and support the activities of UK universities.

We will promote international academic collaborations.

• We will contribute to and disseminate information on initiatives to encourage academic collaborations such as the British Degrees in Russia project and the UK–China Higher Education collaboration project. We will contribute to the work of the OST which is examining the strength and volume of partnerships between researchers and identifying measures that can help overcome barriers and disincentives to the effective development of international partnerships and collaboration.

We will support UK universities in developing transnational collaborations and provision in all modes and areas of activity.

• We will continue to support the work of the Universities UK/Association of Commonwealth Universities Observatory on Borderless Higher Education in informing the sector about transnational developments.

We will engage with other bodies, public and private, with international and European interests to mutual benefit.

• We will maintain and strengthen our relationships with the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the European University Association (EUA), UKCOSA: The Council for International Education, the British Universities International Liaison Association (BUILA), the Association of UK Higher Education European Officers (HEURO), the British Council, DfES, Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government, Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland, UK Research Office (UKRO), FCO, Home Office and UK funding bodies. We will work with the business community to raise awareness of the potential for mutually beneficial partnerships in international activities.
Universities UK’s international role

Students

We will develop, promote and disseminate good practice in the recruitment and admission of international and European students.

• We will work with our Members, SCOP and the National Disability Team to develop guidance on supporting international students with disabilities.

We will support universities in providing a welcoming and valuable experience – educationally, culturally and socially – for international and European students who study in the UK.

• We will work with UKCOSA, the British Council and SCOP to disseminate the findings of Broadening Our Horizons, reporting on international student experiences in the UK, to the higher education sector and the wider world to ensure that the success of the UK sector is recognised and that we continue to develop our capacity in international education.

Information

We will identify, gather and disseminate information on international and European developments and opportunities in higher education to Universities UK Members and reflect international and European developments in Universities UK’s policy development.

• We will ensure that appropriate information on international and European developments and opportunities is circulated to Members in a useful format. We will also ensure that all our policy development work includes consideration of the international and European dimension. As one of the outcomes of the joint Longer Term Strategy Group/International-EU Strategy Group seminar, our forthcoming publication Patterns in higher education institutions – Fifth report (September, 2005) will focus on international issues.

Partnerships and Links

We will maintain and develop strong links and influence with key external partners and stakeholders.

• We will participate in the work of the High Level Policy Forum on international issues and the High Level Policy Forum on Europe involving the British Council, funding bodies, QAA, DfES, OST and representatives of the devolved administrations. We will ensure that the British Council–HE Forum is a useful group that ensures the mutually beneficial relationship with the British Council including the Education Counselling Service (the Education UK Partnership from April 2005) is maintained and strengthened to secure maximum value and effectiveness for UK higher education.

We will sustain and develop links with university associations around the world.

• We will improve our communications and sharing of information with key university associations.

We will welcome and exchange information on higher education with international and European visitors.

• We will ensure that international and European visitors receive appropriate information about Universities UK and higher education in the UK and maintain contact with key international and European visitors.

We will support UK universities in their work with partners in developing countries to strengthen and advance higher education in developing countries.

• We will work to ensure that the new Higher Education Links programme to link universities in the UK with universities in developing countries builds on the success of the previous programme to enable useful and relevant participation by universities in the UK and in developing countries. We will assist Members in co-ordinating activities or gaining access to facilities or partners overseas where there is such a demand.