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EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT IN BRITISH UNIVERSITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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The article examines the evolution of social and academic support for international students within the higher education system of the United Kingdom through the interconnected analytical dimensions of belonging, agency, and strategic governance. Over the past decades, international student mobility has become a structurally significant component of British higher education, influencing institutional governance, internationalisation strategies, and pedagogical practices. In this context, international students are increasingly perceived not merely as recipients of administrative services or sources of economic revenue, but as active participants in academic communities whose integration, wellbeing, and long-term trajectories require coordinated institutional support.

Drawing on a historical and pedagogical analysis, the study proposes a periodisation of the development of international student support in the UK higher education system and identifies three major stages: organisational-foundational (1968–1998), strategic internationalisation (1999–2011), and socio-integrative (2012–2026). The analysis demonstrates that support practices have gradually evolved from fragmented advisory assistance into a comprehensive and institutionally embedded system integrating academic guidance, language support, wellbeing services, career development, and post-study transition mechanisms.

The findings indicate that contemporary support models increasingly combine student-centred, inclusive, and digitally mediated approaches while simultaneously responding to intensified migration regulation and global competition in international education. As a result, social and academic support has become a strategic component of university governance and a crucial factor in ensuring international student success, institutional sustainability, and the global competitiveness of British higher education.

Keywords: social and academic support; international students; higher education institution (HEI); academic mobility; internalisation; intercultural communication; Great Britain.

ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ СОЦІАЛЬНО-ПЕДАГОГІЧНОЇ ПІДТРИМКИ ІНОЗЕМНИХ СТУДЕНТІВ У БРИТАНСЬКИХ УНІВЕРСИТЕТАХ У КОНТЕКСТІ МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОЇ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ

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У статті досліджено еволюцію соціальної та академічної підтримки іноземних студентів у системі вищої освіти Великої Британії крізь призму категорій приналежності, агентності та стратегічного врядування. На основі історико-педагогічного аналізу обґрунтовано періодизацію розвитку цієї системи та доведено її трансформацію від фрагментарних і реактивних форм допомоги до цілісної, інституційно закріпленої та стратегічно керованої моделі, що охоплює весь життєвий цикл міжнародного студента. Встановлено, що сучасний етап розвитку підтримки поєднує студентоцентризований, інклюзивний і цифровізований підходи в умовах посилення міграційного регулювання та ринкової інтернаціоналізації.

Ключові слова: соціально-педагогічна підтримка; міжнародний студент; заклади вищої освіти; академічна мобільність; інтернаціоналізація; міжкультурна комунікація; Велика Британія.

Over the past decades, international student mobility has become a structurally significant component of the United Kingdom's higher education system, reshaping institutional priorities, governance mechanisms, and pedagogical practices. British universities, historically positioned as global actors, have progressively moved beyond viewing international students primarily as recipients of administrative services or sources of economic revenue. Instead, contemporary discourse increasingly frames them as active participants in academic communities whose integration, wellbeing, and long-term trajectories require systemic and strategically coordinated support. Within this context, the concepts of belonging, agency, and strategic governance have emerged as central analytical lenses for understanding the evolution of international student support.

The shift from a service-oriented model of student assistance to a holistic, lifecycle-based approach reflects broader transformations in migration policy, marketisation, and internationalisation strategies. As regulatory environments have tightened and global competition intensified, universities have been compelled to reconcile compliance with immigration frameworks, institutional performance metrics, and commitments to inclusivity and student experience. Consequently, support structures have expanded from fragmented advisory services toward integrated systems encompassing academic guidance, language development, wellbeing provision, career pathways, and alumni engagement. In this evolving paradigm, fostering a sense of belonging is no longer an auxiliary objective but a strategic condition for student success, retention, and institutional reputation.

The historical development and progression of international student mobility, internationalisation, and support structures within British higher education have been investigated by scholars including S. Marginson, V. King, T. Tapper and B. Salter, J. Walker, D. Scott, and O. Fakunle. Their research examines the evolving interplay between policy, governance, migration control, and student experience. Notably, the current body of scholarship is characterised by fragmentation; while certain studies emphasise policy and governance, others concentrate on student transition, sense of belonging, or institutional approaches to support. The intricate relationship between internationalisation processes, support practices, and the shifting needs of international students throughout various historical periods remains insufficiently explored. This article aims to address this particular gap in existing research.

This article examines the evolution of international student support in British universities through the interconnected dimensions of belonging, agency, and strategic governance. By analysing the historical trajectory and institutional consolidation of support practices, it argues that contemporary models represent a mature phase in which social and academic support is embedded within university strategy and policy frameworks. The study seeks to conceptualise this transformation not merely as organisational reform, but as a reconfiguration of the role of international students – from serviced beneficiaries to empowered stakeholders within globally oriented higher education systems.

The late 1970s marked a decisive turning point in UK policy towards international students, driven by economic recession, political restructuring, and the rise of neoliberal public governance. Internationalisation shifted from a predominantly diplomatic-cultural agenda (soft power, Commonwealth links, academic exchange) to an explicitly economic and market-oriented logic. International students became increasingly “visible” in public debates amid rising tuition costs, intensified immigration discourse, and racial tensions (Walker, 2010).

A key early marker of this shift was the Robbins Report (*Committee on Higher Education*, 1963) [6], which quantified the public subsidy for overseas students (approximately £9 million) and acknowledged their diplomatic and long-term economic value. However, it largely omitted social, cultural, and academic support, illustrating the dominance of economic rationality in national internationalisation discourse [12]. The introduction of differential tuition fees in 1969 (£250) formalised the regulatory distinction between “home” and “overseas” status, setting the stage for intensified marketisation.

During the 1970s – 1980s, structural reforms accelerated: UK accession to the EEC (1973), fiscal austerity, and the election of Margaret Thatcher’s government (1979) contributed to the transition toward full-cost tuition for international students. Fee increases in 1971 triggered protests, while the 1977 differentiation by level of study – up to 100% cost recovery for postgraduates – culminated in full-cost fees for new entrants from 1980 [7]. The politicisation of overseas student admissions is evident in Hansard parliamentary debates (5 July 1979; 23 October 1979). These changes reduced access for students from developing countries and generated reputational and diplomatic tensions [25].

In response, the state introduced compensatory mechanisms. The Pym Package (1983) [16] – a £46 million three-year initiative – expanded scholarships (including Chevening), reinforced technical cooperation, and strengthened the British Council’s recruitment and advisory role. Tapper and Salter [26, 65] interpret this as evidence that government

increasingly shaped the higher education landscape through financial instruments rather than diplomacy alone.

Parallel to state restructuring, universities began institutionalising professional support infrastructures. Although international students were not yet fully conceptualised as a distinct group requiring targeted socio-pedagogical support, growing immigration controls, the Race Relations Act (1976) [17], and difficulties documented in UKCOSA reports (1974–1978) [21] highlighted systemic informational, legal, and social barriers. These pressures supported the gradual institutionalisation of advisory services and reinforced the coordinating role of the UK Council for Overseas Student Affairs [20]. By 1980, institutions with high international enrolments (e.g., the London School of Economics) developed specialist international offices providing visa guidance, administrative support, cultural programming, and early integration initiatives such as buddy schemes. Student welfare services expanded toward housing, financial hardship, and wellbeing support, while English for Academic Purposes (EAP) became a structured component of pedagogical provision. Simultaneously, reduced block grants intensified recruitment and encouraged British Council-led overseas marketing and recruitment fairs (Walker, 2014) [24].

After the enrolment decline of 1983/84, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw renewed growth. By 1996, international student numbers reached approximately 196,000 (O’Leary, 1990; Greenaway & Tuck, 1995) [24, 13]. The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) expanded the institutional landscape by granting university status to polytechnics, while UKCOSA strengthened professionalisation through crisis planning, advisory networks, and the development of formal qualifications in international education (1997). By the late 1990s, marketisation coexisted with professional consolidation: UKCOSA membership exceeded 350 institutions [23], and the English language sector expanded sharply (approximately 205,000 students in 1997 to 381,000 in 2010), integrating preparatory and linguistic support into an export-oriented strategy.

Overall, the period produced a governance “triangle”: the state redefined funding and immigration regulation; universities expanded institutional support infrastructures; and national bodies professionalised advisory and advocacy mechanisms. Although social and academic support was not yet fully conceptualised as an autonomous domain, its institutional foundations were established through specialised programmes, intermediary structures, and rising demand for cultural, informational, and legal support.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the UK entered a phase of strategic internationalisation in which international students were positioned simultaneously as an economic asset, an instrument of soft power, and a target of structured support. Enrolments exceeded 200,000, generating nearly £4 billion annually [23]. A pivotal moment occurred in 1999, when T. Blair announced Prime Minister’s Initiative I (PMI1) at the London School of Economics, targeting an increase of 50,000 students in higher education and 20,000 in further education [11, p. 14]. PMI1 framed recruitment within partnership-building and global engagement [4; 10; 11] and expanded instrumental support, including enhanced work rights during study [4]. National branding through Education UK strengthened coordinated international communication [11; 12] and exceeded target outcomes by 57% (additional 93,000 in HE and 23,300 in FE). Yet, despite growth, the UK lost around 3% global market share ([7]), illustrating intensifying competition. Institutional governance was reinforced through the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 1999), British Council strategy Vision 2020 [7], and the report

Student Mobility on the Map (UKCOSA/CEC, 2000).

Prime Minister's Initiative II (PMI2, 2006) broadened goals beyond recruitment to include satisfaction, employability, perception management, and partnership diversification (HEA, 2014) [17; 29]. It conceptualised the "international student experience" as a multidimensional policy domain [3], foregrounding "soft" factors such as host culture, social integration, hospitality, and informal support [3, p. 3]. PMI2-funded projects addressed intercultural mentoring, students' unions internationalisation, expectation management, and financial transparency tools such as the International Student Calculator [17; 29], alongside staff development for cultural competence [11].

However, the 2000s also intensified the contradiction between attraction and control. Immigration reforms culminating in the Points-Based System (Tier 4) introduced stricter monitoring and language thresholds (minimum B2 for undergraduate level) [15, p. 11], responding to concerns about "bogus colleges" and irregular employment [18; 27]. Post-study schemes such as the Science and Engineering Graduates Scheme (2004), Fresh Talent Scotland (2005), and the International Graduates Scheme (2007) supported employability (UKCOSA/UKCISA reports, 2004–2007), while universities expanded compliance and legal/visa advisory capacity. UKCISA (renamed from UKCOSA in 2007) consolidated its national coordinating role (50th Anniversary Annual Review). In sum, early twenty-first-century UK international student support evolved into a multi-layered system embedded in national branding, regulation, quality assurance, and institutional strategy – while increasing immigration control generated new structural demands for legal, informational, and socio-cultural support.

In the early 2020s, market and structural reforms reshaped the sector. The White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011) and the 2012 tuition reform (fees up to £9,000) consolidated a student-loan model and strengthened the separation between "home" and "overseas" fees. International education was positioned as an export sector in International Education: Global Growth and Prosperity (BIS, 2013), valued at £10.2 billion in 2011–2012, alongside reports emphasising broader benefits and the value of transnational education (2013; 2014). Governance reforms continued through the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) and UKRI (2018). Brexit reclassified EU students (fees, loans, mobility), while the Graduate Route (2021) partially addressed post-study transition. Immigration governance shifted again when Tier 4 was replaced by the Student Route (2020). Throughout the decade, digitalisation (online induction, portals, chatbots, e-advising) and COVID-19-driven hybridisation expanded lifecycle support capacities. The structural tension between global recruitment and national regulation is consistent with "glocal" interpretations of universities [20, p. 394] and national-system persistence [19, p. 289], shaping mobility governance and student experience [12, pp. 20–24]. The International Education Strategy (2026) consolidates a holistic approach linking education, diplomacy, economics, and migration, aiming to raise education exports to £40 billion by 2030, prioritising student experience, responsible recruitment, and comprehensive support infrastructures, while sustaining the Graduate Route and alumni networks within a lifecycle framework.

The proposed periodisation of the development of social and academic support for international students in the UK higher education system is based on a historical-pedagogical analysis. This approach allows the phenomenon to be examined both across long-term

historical transformations and within specific policy and institutional contexts. Following the interpretation of the concept of a *period* as a time interval by specific events, policies, and structural changes, the periodisation is grounded in several analytical criteria: transformations in state education and migration policy, the institutionalisation of support structures, shifts in dominant pedagogical approaches, and changes in the socio-cultural positioning of international students within the university environment.

According to the defined criteria, the development of social and academic support for international students in British higher education can be divided into three main periods:

- period I (1968–1998) – organisational-foundational;
- period II (1999–2011) – strategic internationalisation;
- period III (2012–2026) – socio-integrative.

The first period (1968–1998) – can be characterised as *an organisational-foundational stage*, during which the basic institutional, financial-economic, and regulatory foundations of support for international students in the UK higher education system were formed. During this historical phase, international students gradually began to be recognised as a distinct social group within the university environment; however, state policy remained primarily focused on economic and diplomatic interests. This period witnessed a gradual transition from a paternalistic model of state subsidisation to a market-oriented logic of internationalisation, accompanied by transformations in funding structures, access regulations, and governance mechanisms for student mobility.

Thus, the organisational-foundational stage created the institutional groundwork for the future support system through the formal recognition of international students as a target group, the development of financial mechanisms, and the expansion of institutional and community-based infrastructures. At the same time, the social and academic dimension of support remained secondary and developed largely as a response to economic, administrative, and political challenges rather than as a coherent strategic policy.

Among the key regulatory decisions and events shaping policy transformation in the 1970s–1990s were:

- the publication of the Robbins Report (1963), which first recognised the economic value of international students and the costs of state subsidisation;
- the establishment of the UK Council for Overseas Student Affairs (UKCOSA) in 1968, the first national body responsible for coordination, advice, and advocacy for international students;
- the introduction of differential tuition fees (1969) and subsequent fee increases during the 1970s, culminating in the transition to full-cost tuition in 1980, consolidating a market-based model of internationalisation;
- the adoption of the Race Relations Act (1976), which established a legal framework for combating discrimination and promoting social integration;
- the UK's accession to the European Economic Community (1973), the election of the Margaret Thatcher government (1979), and parliamentary debates of 1979, which reinforced policies aimed at reducing public expenditure and strengthening regulatory control;
- the introduction of the Pym Package (1983), which initiated the Chevening scholarship programme, expanded international education programmes, and strengthened the role of the British Council;
- institutional changes in the 1990s, including the financing of the UKCOSA advisory

handbook (1991), the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), the transformation of UKCOSA (1993), the introduction of quotas for international students (1994), and the introduction of tuition fees for British students (1997), which consolidated the transition toward a market-based higher education system.

The second period (1999–2011) marked a shift from a predominantly regulatory and economically restrictive policy toward an active state strategy aimed at attracting international students as a strategic resource for the development of higher education, the knowledge economy, and international partnerships. Internationalisation became a deliberate state policy combining the branding of British education, the liberalisation of instrumental support mechanisms (visa, employment, financial), and the gradual institutional recognition of student experience, socio-cultural integration, and employability as components of global competitiveness.

To sum up, the second period can be defined as a phase of strategic internationalisation and systemic institutionalisation of social and academic support, during which international students were firmly established not only as an economic resource but also as full participants in the educational process with complex academic, socio-cultural, psychological, and legal needs. This period laid the conceptual, organisational, and regulatory foundations for more holistic, inclusive, and wellbeing-oriented models of international student support in subsequent stages.

Key developments of the early twenty-first century included:

- the launch of the Prime Minister's Initiative I (1999), which strengthened pre-arrival information services, orientation programmes, and intercultural integration;
- the creation of the Education UK brand, which enhanced the role of information and communication support for prospective students;
- the institutionalisation of the right to work during studies, expanding financial and career guidance services;
- the recognition of the “international student experience” as a policy category within Prime Minister's Initiative II (2006), stimulating the development of wellbeing centres, housing services, and career support;
- the tightening of migration control after 2001 and the introduction of the Tier 4 visa route (2009), which led to the expansion of university visa advisory and legal support services;
- the transition toward a career-oriented model of student support, alongside the coordinating role of UKCOSA/UKCISA in developing advisory and integration programmes.

The third period (2012-2026) is characterised by the combination of market consolidation in higher education, strengthened migration regulation, and the institutionalisation of student-centred and inclusive approaches to international student support. During this stage, internationalisation in British higher education became firmly established as an economically significant, strategically governed, yet politically contested process in which international students simultaneously function as consumers of educational services, carriers of “soft power,” and subjects of intensified regulatory oversight.

Under these conditions, social and academic support acquired critical importance as a mechanism for mitigating structural, migration-related, and socio-cultural risks associated with international mobility. This stage represents the mature institutionalisation of social and academic support, in which market mechanisms of internationalisation are increasingly

combined with rights-based, inclusive, and human-centred educational policies.

Key policy developments in the 2020s that directly influenced support systems include:

- the introduction of the Graduate Route (2020) within the UK's points-based immigration system, strengthening the role of universities as visa sponsors and expanding institutional visa advisory services;
- increased migration restrictions (including regulations concerning dependants and transitions between study levels), which intensified the need for legal, informational, and advisory support;
- the confirmation of priorities such as student experience quality, wellbeing infrastructure, housing provision, career centres, and post-study support in the International Education Strategy (2026);
- the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated digitalisation and legitimised hybrid learning models, including online induction, digital counselling, chatbots, virtual student portals, and remote wellbeing services;
- the growing tension between policies aimed at attracting international students and stricter migration control, which led universities to expand legal, visa, psychological, and social support infrastructures.

The analysis of the genesis of social and academic support for international students in the UK higher education system demonstrates its gradual evolution from fragmented and largely reactive forms of assistance to a comprehensive, institutionally embedded, and strategically governed system. During the first period (1968–1998), international students were gradually recognised as a distinct social group, although state policy remained primarily driven by economic and diplomatic considerations, and social and academic support developed mainly within universities and civil society organisations. The second period (1999–2011) was characterised by the strategic internationalisation and marketisation of higher education, accompanied by the professionalisation of support services and the recognition of international student experience as an important policy domain. The third period (2012–2026) reveals a deepening tension between economic openness and migration control, alongside the growing emphasis on student-centredness, digitalisation, and inclusivity in support models.

Overall, social and academic support for international students in Great Britain has evolved into a multi-level system integrating state, institutional, and community mechanisms, covering the entire international student lifecycle and functioning as a crucial factor in educational quality, social integration, and the sustainable development of internationalised higher education.

We see our further research in the analysis of international students as a social group in the higher education system in Great Britain.

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