



**Grant Thornton**  
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# Transforming international student mobility

Higher Education report 2016



# Executive summary

The way we live, work and learn is changing – and higher education institutions are no exception. This means daunting challenges lie ahead for any established, traditional HEIs that are resistant to change. Yet new ways to connect with students and employers around the globe will also present opportunities.

As businesses become ever more global they increasingly demand employees with international experience. They want staff who can help them adapt and grow in new markets. In fact, studies show that 60% of employers actively seek or attribute value to international study experience when recruiting.<sup>1</sup>

And so HEIs must ensure that their programmes address these changing needs and skills gaps. Institutions that show they can improve students' employability through international experience are more likely to attract prospective students. But this means looking beyond local businesses and forging links with international companies and HEIs.

Take Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand as an example. They're using an innovative approach with their AUT interNZ programme. Their programme helped fast-track students' careers and brought significant reputational gain. The institution is now ranked 12th in the world for international outlook.<sup>2</sup>

Governing boards can also look to US and Australian universities for best practice. These institutions use their international alumni to boost their reputation for employability around the world. Too often, former international students are overlooked in institutions' alumni engagement activity. But if they are encouraged to live the brand throughout their careers, HEIs could see a significant reputational gain.

New technology also has an important part to play. International students already use different platforms when deciding where to study, so HEIs must include the most relevant channels in their recruitment strategy. These students also expect institutions to have the latest digital technology in place when they arrive at university; whether it's Next Generation wi-fi hotspots to stay in touch with friends and family, or online platforms to engage with lecturers and support staff.

Governing boards at HEIs can't assume it is business as usual any more in the higher education sector. To adapt to the challenges of the next decade, they must review their strategy and business model to ensure it is fit for purpose. Our report makes three key recommendations to help with this:

- **Think global:** work with multinational firms and overseas HEIs to develop new opportunities for students to gain international experience. Use these to attract international students who want to increase their employability.
- **Build your brand:** encourage international alumni to live your brand throughout their careers, building their brand and your reputation.
- **Dive into digital:** invest in new technology which attracts, educates and maintains contact with international students.



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HEIs face an unprecedented set of political, economic, social and technological challenges. Institutions that increase their students' global employability and make the most of technological advances will come out on top. Whereas those that bury their head in the sand and hope for the best will lose out – as international students decide to study elsewhere, and take a vital source of income with them.

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**Carol Rudge**

Partner and global leader of not for profit  
Grant Thornton



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**CONTENTS**

**Important trends:**

Studying abroad for global work opportunities	4–5
Digitalisation	6–7

**Recommendations:**

Create strategic partnerships	8
Build up the brand	9
Dive into digital	10
Conclusion	11



## Important trends

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# Studying abroad for global work opportunities

Employers increasingly seek staff who are internationally minded, and students realise this. HEIs will attract more applications if their study abroad programmes prepare graduates with the soft skills they need to join the global workforce, and help them climb the career ladder faster.

In the US, 72% of all S&P 500 companies reported some international revenue in 2014, and international revenue represented 37% of total revenue, an increase of 5.5 percentage points since 2008.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, across the Atlantic, 77% of the revenue generated by FTSE 100 companies comes from outside the UK, and the same trend is true in France and Germany.<sup>4</sup>

Statistics like this show the pace of globalisation, with firms increasingly looking for people with international experience. In fact, 60% of employers actively seek or attribute value to international study experience when recruiting.<sup>5</sup> Elaine Daly, partner at Grant Thornton Ireland, says, “the companies leading the pack in a decade will be those that make the most of increased connections between different regions. They will need staff who understand and have experience of different countries. This represents a huge opportunity for universities with strong international reputations and expertise in study abroad programmes to boost their attractiveness to students.”

Maritheresa Frain, executive vice president of study abroad programmes at the Council on International Educational Exchange in the US, says graduates need “more than just good grades...[they] need soft skills to be competitive in the workforce”.<sup>6</sup> Employers are looking for skills like openness to and curiosity about new challenges, problem-solving and decision-making – as well as confidence and tolerance towards other values and behaviours.<sup>7</sup> These are all skills that studying abroad can help to foster.

Students are already attracted to international study as a way to improve their career prospects. Research shows that 87% of participants on the EU's Erasmus student exchange programme want to study or train abroad in order to enhance their employability.<sup>8</sup> As Richard Shaw, head of education at Grant Thornton UK, comments, “students are pretty smart in terms of what is going to look best on their CVs to get better employment. They will spend time studying abroad so they can stand out from the hundreds of

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“Dynamic businesses are thinking globally, so they need employees who think globally too. That means people with international study experience have a significant advantage over those who have never experienced life outside their home country.”

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Barry Lodewyk  
Partner  
Grant Thornton South Africa

other people who will be applying for the same jobs. Clearly they will be attracted to the universities that can show the employment benefits of studying there.”

Studying abroad also increases students' willingness to work abroad. For instance, 93% of Erasmus alumni say they could envisage living abroad, compared to 73% of their stay-at-home counterparts.<sup>9</sup> This makes them very attractive to employers with operations in multiple countries. Oliver Watson, managing director for the UK, North America and the Middle East at executive search firm Michael Page,

says that because companies are now operating over so many international boundaries, “the more languages and experience with different cultures you can bring to a company, the more you can help expand its global reach”.<sup>10</sup>

Bill Dow, associate vice president of student services at British Columbia Institute of Technology in Canada, agrees. He highlights that “a large number of businesses trade overseas. To do that well they need to understand the language and culture of other regions, so they’re looking for staff who have that experience.”

Study abroad experience also helps students progress faster in their careers; 64% of employers report that graduates with an international background are given greater professional responsibility

more frequently.<sup>11</sup> That figure is set to rise with businesses looking further afield for customers and trading partners. Scott Hartley, partner at Grant Thornton Australia, notes that “international student experience will be of considerable benefit to companies who export or source internationally, as those individuals can help open up new markets for the organisation. This means that HEIs with a strong reputation in international study will become more and more attractive to both students and employers.”

This doesn’t mean that all students will want or need to spend their whole time at university studying abroad. Richard Shaw, head of education at Grant Thornton UK, predicts that in the future “students will go to different countries for shorter courses to get

their international experience”. And Patrick Kelley, special adviser to the president of Concordia University in Montréal, Canada, says universities will have to learn to work more closely together to “improve the system for transferring credits, so students can more easily study across different countries”.





## Important trends

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# Digitalisation

HEIs must find new ways to attract and engage with prospective international students using digital technology. They will expect online interaction at every stage, from researching where to study, to the way they are taught when they arrive.

Stephen Avery, chief financial officer at Royal Holloway in the UK, says that “traditional methods of attracting students are becoming obsolete. Recruitment is becoming more digital.” And while websites are already an important tool for HEIs attracting international students, research shows that mobile technology has a role too. Data from US-bound prospective international students found that 56% used a smartphone and 26% used a tablet during the search process. So HEIs must ensure their websites are fully compatible with mobile platforms.

Students also increasingly look beyond university websites for information; 24% use online discussion forums to find information about studying abroad and 22% use social media websites like Facebook.<sup>13</sup> Trevor Goddard, associate director of global programmes at Monash University in Australia, says that “social media will play a more important role in recruitment. We’ve already seen

the benefits – when Brazilian students in the Monash soccer team won the Australian University Games they posted about it on social media, which grew our brand awareness in Latin America.”

Brent Kennerley, partner at Grant Thornton New Zealand, says many HEIs need to raise their game when it comes to online branding and marketing. He says engaging websites with video content and easily accessible social media feeds are a must, but he urges institutions to look beyond Facebook, Twitter and Sina Weibo: “universities should be investing in Next Generation wi-fi hotspots so they can promote how easily international students can keep in touch with friends and family at home. And they should be using the newest innovations, like virtual reality tours to allow prospective international students and their parents to really feel like they are visiting the campus from their living rooms.”

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“Digitalisation will have a far-reaching effect on the whole of the international student experience. HEIs should consider how technologies can help prepare students for the culture adjustment of studying in another country, and integrate them into the wider student population. For instance, social networking sites could link international students with each other and with domestic students long before they arrive. And throughout the year, real-time forums and webinars could allow international students to get support without having to travel to campus.”

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Christine Regimbal  
Partner  
Raymond Chabot Grant Thornton Canada

“Online bloggers can have followers worldwide, so HEIs must consider how to engage the right influencers as advocates in their recruitment efforts.”

Mark Oster

National managing partner of the not for profit and higher education practices, Grant Thornton US

HEIs must also think about cultural differences in different regions, and use the most popular and relevant social media channels. Scott Hartley, partner at Grant Thornton Australia, highlights that “prospective international students in the Asia Pacific region tend to prefer Facebook and WeChat when looking for information, whereas North Americans are using platforms like Snapchat and Vine. HEIs need to be across all these platforms, using the most appropriate one in each region where they’re recruiting.”

Digital technology is also changing the educational experience itself. Online learning is seen by some as an alternative to the traditional campus-based university experience. Massive, open, online courses (Moocs) have brought online higher education to the masses. Coursera, one of the world’s biggest providers of Moocs, was founded just a few years ago but now offers almost 2,000 courses from 145 partners across 28 countries<sup>14</sup> and has seen 19.1 million course enrolments

from students who represent 190 countries.<sup>15</sup> Coursera president, professor Daphne Koller, predicts that within the next five years leading universities will offer fully accredited undergraduate courses online, whether wholly online or with some residential components.<sup>16</sup>

Yet many HEIs have been reluctant to invest in or develop online education options for their students. This is because of concerns that the platform could undermine their reputation for rigour and quality, which has been built and maintained in a traditional classroom setting.<sup>17</sup>

Peter Rodriguez, senior associate dean for degree programmes at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business in the US, says that “fear of brand dilution” was a significant part of his institution’s online strategy.<sup>18</sup> However, Robert Jones, a brand consultant and professor at the University of East Anglia in the UK, believes HEIs can boost their brands by embracing online opportunities: “being seen to be among the first to venture into Moocs has been viewed positively”.<sup>19</sup>

Barry Lodewyk, partner at Grant Thornton South Africa, believes Moocs and other online tools “will not replace the experience of going to a physical campus. Online education is here to stay, so HEIs should look at how they can complement or augment their campus based learning.” While some may be concerned about the risk Moocs could pose to their reputation, there is a considerable opportunity for institutions that engage with online education platforms. HEIs who leverage their international reputation and which offer blended learning courses are expected to benefit most from this activity.



## Recommendations

# Create strategic partnerships

HEIs should create opportunities with multinational firms and other HEIs so they attract more students who want to increase their employability. These programmes should develop soft skills, heightened cultural awareness and an improved understanding of how global businesses operate.

Dynamic, growing businesses want people with international experience. As US commerce secretary Penny Pritzker puts it: “more and more employers want to hire people with a true ‘world view’ – with the adaptability and openness that comes with having experienced other cultures”.<sup>20</sup> Trevor Goddard, associate director of global programmes at Monash University in Australia, believes that “students are graduating into a global market” and that this is layered into all the institution’s services.

So HEIs should develop partnerships with international firms and other institutions to offer study and work experience placements for students around the world. They should also make sure all of their academic programmes adequately equip students for the world of work. It’s not enough for universities to collaborate with local employers to offer internships and think they’ve ticked the employability box. As the world becomes more global, students looking for work need to show they’ve got international experience. Ambitious

HEIs should be working with each other and international companies to develop new opportunities, allowing their students to stand out from the crowd when applying for jobs.

“All new programmes should be deliberately designed to include global elements.”

Patrick Kelley  
Special adviser to the president of Concordia University in Montréal, Canada

## Case study: New opportunities in New Zealand

The Auckland University of Technology (AUT) is the second largest university in New Zealand, with 28,000 students.<sup>21</sup> With its strong history of technical education, it is committed to developing graduates who are ready to enter the workforce and provide new ideas to industry.<sup>22</sup>

In 2013 the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) developed the AUT interNZ programme to link students and graduates with industry leaders around the world. But unlike most HEIs, AUT thought global before it thought local.

AUT interNZ launched with an international scholarship programme designed to give graduates professional skills which complement their academic qualifications.<sup>23</sup> Graduate students can intern with a range of global companies operating in the US, from Saatchi & Saatchi to BMW and Apple.

This helps them “fast track their career transition and build global business acumen through immersion into a new market and culture”.<sup>24</sup>

The AUT interNZ programme is the only one of its kind in New Zealand. AUT’s vice chancellor, Derek McCormack, says the university “saw the need to create more opportunities for New Zealand young achievers to tune and expand their capability through the experience of working and living in global markets with different business cultures”.<sup>25</sup> He believes that “cultural

competence... is undeniably important for the future of [New Zealand’s] export-led economy”.<sup>26</sup> He highlights the programme’s focus on building the ‘C-skills’ of communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking that are particularly important given the changing shape of work.<sup>27</sup>





## Recommendations

# Build up the brand

HEIs should encourage their international alumni to live the university brand throughout their careers. This lets international students benefit from the institution's reputation as they build their own brands. It also demonstrates the employment potential for graduates, and in turn, boosts the HEI's brand globally.

Alumni relations is a crucial part of any HEI's corporate development team. Former students are often encouraged to maintain their links with the institution after graduation by volunteering or donating money, for instance. But alumni relations is an expensive business. In the UK alone, investment in alumni relations was £39 million in 2014/15.<sup>28</sup>

However, Donna Diskos, partner at Grant Thornton Canada, points out that while there are exceptions, "most universities are not very good at alumni relations, especially when it comes to international alumni. They need to find new, cost-effective ways to involve former students in raising awareness and boosting reputation. Given the importance of employability to prospective international students, promoting the jobs alumni go on to have should be central to these efforts."

Elaine Daly, partner at Grant Thornton

Ireland, agrees. She notes that "most universities I speak to, whether in Ireland or overseas, have alumni engagement teams of 15 or 20 people but only one or two of these employees will be thinking about international alumni. That's a huge missed opportunity." HEIs can turn this to their benefit, but they must encourage international students to live the brand after they enter the workforce.

If institutions want their alumni to do this, they have to make it easy and demonstrate the benefits. As Brent Kennerley, partner at Grant Thornton New Zealand, says, "international alumni could be referencing their university experience in work presentations. But they need to be asked, and be convinced that they too will benefit from association with the university after they leave."

"Top American universities have successfully developed strong brands that international students are happy and proud to promote. When you walk into virtually any campus store in the US, you see masses of branded items developed in partnership with companies. This is, of course, an immediate revenue stream for the institution, but in the longer term, it provides the opportunity for brand promotion around the world as domestic and international students buy merchandise for themselves, as well as for friends and family."

Mark Oster

National managing partner of the not for profit and higher education practices, Grant Thornton US

## Case study: Australia overseas

Higher education is one of Australia's biggest exports. In May 2016, almost a quarter of a million international students enrolled to study there.<sup>29</sup> And the government has recognised the value these students bring as brand advocates if they continue to promote their experience at home.

Australia has developed an international programme of scholarships and fellowships called the Australia Awards. These support international students studying in Australia and domestic students studying overseas and have been designed to establish a network of ambassadors around the world.<sup>30</sup>

Individual HEIs in the country are now building on these national efforts, with the University of Sydney being particularly active – almost a quarter of its students are international.<sup>32</sup> The university asked its recent international graduates to volunteer as alumni ambassadors on the

university's global student recruitment team. The university points out that ambassadors also benefit from improving their communication skills, increasing their volunteer experience and expanding their alumni network.<sup>34</sup>



## Recommendations

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# Dive into digital

Institutions should take advantage of digital marketing platforms which personalise materials and inspire international students in engaging new ways.

As international students embrace new digital technology, so too must HEIs. President of Stanford University, John Hennessy, believes that technology offers the best hope of keeping higher education sustainable. He says, “if you look at the threat to most universities, it’s that their cost model currently grows faster than their revenue model. So now the question is, can you find a way to introduce technology and help reduce your cost growth?”<sup>35</sup>

Brent Kennerley, partner at Grant Thornton New Zealand, observes that “HEIs are often ageing institutions and can move slowly – it can be a bit like trying to turn an oil tanker! This means they risk missing out on opportunities for growth, because technology moves quickly. Institutions need to make sure they’re getting the right commercial advice to future-proof their operations.”

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“Technology is fundamentally changing education, and it will go further in the future. We now have wearable technology, but in 20 years it’s possible that students might just have a chip that downloads information for them. Universities must understand and respond to these advances; they can’t continue with business as usual.”

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Stephen Avery  
Chief financial officer, Royal Holloway, UK

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### Case study: All about apps

Arts University Bournemouth (AUB) is one of the UK’s smaller universities. It has just over 3,000 students, with around 10% coming from international locations, who study art, design, media and performance. AUB places a high premium on creativity and collaboration, and keeps this central to its teaching and learning strategy, but also to marketing and recruitment.

AUB wanted to boost its social media presence, strengthen its brand and to engage prospective students. So it launched the world’s first kaleidoscope app with camera and video: kscope.

Simon Pride, head of marketing and communications at AUB, explains that the university “decided to define our brand by what we do rather than what we say about ourselves. Kscope is the calling card of our creative community”.<sup>36</sup> The app allows users to create a kaleidoscopic still image or short video using their mobile phone.

These images are then uploaded onto an online gallery and shared with others.

Kscope has been a resounding success for AUB, both in the UK and overseas. Within a week, Apple had promoted the app to number 3 of the best new apps in the App Store.<sup>37</sup> Two years later, it had received over 60,000 downloads across almost every continent, won several awards and has even been the subject of a talk at Apple.<sup>38</sup>

The app has also featured in exhibition stands and international recruitment campaigns,<sup>39</sup> and kscope creations have been posted from all over the

world. AUB believes that the creation of kscope (part of a wider marketing strategy) was responsible for a 15% rise in its UCAS applications in the year after its launch.<sup>40</sup>

Simon Pride believes this is because AUB understood the need to start conversations. He says, “social media should not be used as a form of advertising, but as a tool to engage. You have to invest in the stories you place there, whether that be capturing and celebrating the student experience or creating apps like kscope which are designed to provoke that engagement.”<sup>42</sup>

# Conclusion

To present a compelling choice to internationally mobile students, HEIs need to take advantage of all the emerging trends outlined in this report.

That means thinking and acting with a global outlook; outwardly presenting a brand that is powerful enough to transcend national boundaries; and harnessing new platforms.

So institutions must demonstrate how they boost employability, and provide students with the experience they need to join the global workforce. HEIs should make better use of their global alumni as brand ambassadors

too. And they must embrace the latest digital tools to meet international students' expectations.

While the future is uncertain, the pace of change shows no signs of slowing. And our research shows that HEIs will continue to evolve, in line with advancing globalisation and technology. Institutions that capitalise on new approaches will prosper, while those that don't will struggle.

Grant Thornton's team has broad experience in the higher education sector. Our specialist teams work in over 130 countries, so we're well placed to help you implement the recommendations outlined in this report.

**To find out more and connect with a specialist in your country visit [www.grantthornton.global](http://www.grantthornton.global)**

## Footnotes:

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