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The unintended consequences of internationalisation and global rankings

*As UK universities become more dependent on international student fees, **Chen-Ta Sung** examines the fall-out on social mobility and student wellbeing*

Education has long been regarded as one of the most **effective** channels for **social mobility**. Paradoxically, in light of the current **hyper-commodification** of higher education, it is important to recognise that higher education (HE) can also serve to reproduce social inequality. This is particularly evident in the reliance of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) on international students, who are charged more than three times the tuition fees domestic students pay, in order to sustain the institutional finances of UK HEIs.

This post does not aim to explore fees inequalities between domestic and international students, rather, it examines how the commodification of UK HE, including practices such as the promotion of global rankings, may contribute to broader patterns of social inequality. These dynamics can lead to an imbalance in the social backgrounds of students and potentially impact student wellbeing.



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reliant on tuition fees from Chinese students*



Before discussing these issues in depth, I will present some key statistics on the composition of the international student body and its financial impact on UK HE. This **structural mechanism**, I argue, plays a central role in driving the adverse consequences that will be explored later in this blogpost.

International students prop up UK HE

In 2022, **one in every five pounds** received by UK universities came from international students, highlighting the sector's growing dependence on overseas tuition fees for financial sustainability. China (23%) and India (18%) were identified as the two leading countries contributing to the international student population. Russell Group universities, a group of research-intensive universities in the UK, collected approximately £8.8 billion in tuition fees during the 2021–22 academic year, with **£2.3 billion or 26%** coming from Chinese students.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), shows that over the past decade, many UK universities have become two to three times **more reliant** on tuition fees from Chinese students. In 2021–22, for instance, Chinese students accounted for 40% of University College London's total tuition income, a significant rise from 14% just seven years earlier. Other universities with similarly high proportions of fee income from Chinese students include the University of Southampton (38%) and the University of Sheffield (37%).

Given that Chinese students have become one of the key financial pillars supporting UK HE, it is worth asking: why are they willing to study abroad and pay tuition fees that are more than 10 times higher than those charged by domestic universities in China? And what are the implications of this trend within the Chinese context?

Rankings can reproduce inequality

Having been immersed in UK HE for over a decade, both as a student and a teacher, I have had the opportunity to interact with many Chinese students. In conversations about their motivations for studying abroad, a common theme often emerges: if one aspires to work for a state-owned enterprise (SOE) or Guo Qi (国企), or to secure a position in a competitive company in China, an unspoken expectation is to obtain a degree from a university ranked in the global top 100 – typically listed by QS, Times Higher Education, or Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU). A LinkedIn post titled '*Why is **QS Ranking So Important in China** – Hukou System and Employment*' echoes this observation. In order to manage the volume of job applications received – often numbering in the thousands on a daily basis – recruiters in China rely on automated systems or standardised filters, and QS rankings, due to their widespread recognition in China, have become an easy and convenient screening tool.



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The **average tuition fee** for international students in the UK ranges from £11,400 to £38,000 for undergraduate programmes, and from £9,000 to £30,000 for postgraduate study. These fees are roughly **10 times higher** than the average tuition costs in China, which range from around £1,320 to £2,400. I argue that these high costs mean that Chinese students who choose to study in the UK are predominantly from affluent families who can afford the substantial financial outlay. As many employers in China continue to place considerable weight on QS World University Rankings when assessing candidates, this creates a feedback loop: students from privileged backgrounds gain access to a prestigious international education and, in turn, enjoy a clear advantage in an increasingly competitive job market.

As UK universities intensify their recruitment of international students to maintain financial stability, this trend risks reinforcing existing social inequalities. It privileges those who can afford elite global credentials, while further marginalising talented individuals from less advantaged backgrounds. In such a context, education no longer serves as a vehicle for social mobility. Instead, it entrenches existing class divisions and solidifies privilege.

Value division between international and home students

It is crucial to highlight that value division among students appears to be an emerging concern in the context of the increasing proportion of international students in UK higher education. Given that international students are charged significantly higher tuition fees, this has, in effect, filtered applicants by socio-economic background, favouring those from more affluent families. When international students begin to constitute a substantial minority of the student body, this can give rise to tensions and inequalities rooted in differing financial capacities, social expectations, and lived experiences.

This dynamic is illustrated by a report titled '*People Don't Understand You: An Exploration of the Academic and Social Integration of Undergraduate LSE Students from Non-Selective State Schools*' authored by one of my former students and her research partner. Their study found that students from non-selective state schools often reported feeling **less integrated** within the LSE community. Many described experiencing imposter syndrome and diminished wellbeing. In interviews,

participants revealed that they often attributed their admission to luck and expressed feelings of inadequacy.



Participants cited social expectations ... as financially inaccessible, which hindered their ability to form meaningful peer connections



While differences in educational background and social class are not interchangeable, the study found that class-based distinctions contributed to a sense of disconnection. Participants cited social expectations – such as frequenting expensive cafés, attending weekly social events, or participating in formal occasions – as financially inaccessible, which hindered their ability to form meaningful peer connections. The findings point to the need for systemic change at both the institutional level, through policies that promote tangible accessibility and inclusion, and at the student level, through greater empathy and awareness of social and economic diversity.

This post aims to spark a discussion on the emerging inequalities driven by the commodification of UK higher education. While reliance on tuition fees from international students appears to be an effective way to sustain the sector financially, this approach has also resulted in deleterious consequences, both nationally and transnationally. It is crucial that these issues are carefully considered alongside financial sustainability when evaluating the future of higher education, to ensure the wellbeing of students and the promotion of social equality, which are principles that lie at the very heart of higher education.

*Note: A **version** of this post first appeared on 15 May 2025 on the **Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning Blog**, part of the **PGCertHE** programme at the LSE.*

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