

# Laying the Right Foundations?

## How International Foundation Pathways Can be Improved

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## Summary

International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) connect international students without appropriate qualifications to UK universities, widening access and expanding the pool of prospective students that universities can recruit from. The sector has grown rapidly in recent years, and has attracted more than its fair share of criticisms. This report identifies four problematic areas surrounding these programmes, and sets out recommendations to tackle them. The problems are as follows:

**First, definitions are confused and fragmented.**

As unofficial qualifications, the names of these courses are not standardised. Inconsistent use of terminology in describing pathway courses results in confusion, both for regulators and consumers.

**Second, data is missing.**

As courses that are adjacent to, but not, higher education, IFPs fall through the cracks of HE data collection. Applicant numbers are not always captured in UCAS data or HESA student returns. Individual institutions hold their own information, but it is extremely hard for any one actor to draw an accurate picture of the sector. Even less is known about student satisfaction and outcomes.

**Third, IFPs seem to be underperforming.**

Though the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) found IFPs to be broadly similar to equivalent domestic courses in a review, analysis of new (albeit very limited) data seems to suggest that foundation alums are doing significantly worse once at university than their peers.

**Fourth, agents are not regulated and prone to malpractice.**

Education agents who recruit international students onto courses at UK universities are not regulated. The vast majority of international students on IFPs are referred to them by agents, meaning malpractice poses a huge risk. As they are financially incentivised to push students onto university courses, and because they can have formal contracts with certain universities and pathway providers, bad practice can occur frequently.

To fix this, the government should:

- **Formally define the International Foundation Programme (and related courses).**

The government should work together with the sector to develop a standard nomenclature for foundation programmes. Similar courses across the industry should be titled similarly— courses with similar or identical structures and content should be consistently advertised.

Where similar but separate programmes are offered for domestic students, this distinction should be explicit.

- **Standardise International Foundation Programmes by adding it to the Regulated Qualifications Framework.**

IFPs already function as a semi-qualification in that they are transferrable to other universities upon completion, so they should be added to the existing qualifications framework and regulated as such.

- **Introduce better tracking of data, especially around student outcomes.**

Schemes like the TEF and the NSS should be expanded or modelled after for foundation programme students.

- **Regulate agents.**

The government should consider regulating the way in which UK universities can work with education agents. Barring this, the Agent Quality Framework, especially The National Code of Ethical Practice for Education Agents, should be made more specific in discouraging bad practice.

# Introduction

International students are an integral part of UK universities. The more than 700,000 international students in the UK enrich our universities' cultural fabric, contribute fresh ideas from unique viewpoints, and are vital to the sector's financial sustainability. Further, unless HE funding settlements change soon, this is likely to become more so the case in the future. As they come from across the world with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, they often require time to adjust– adapting to the UK's higher education system, learning to navigate life in a different country, and shoring up their English proficiency. For such students, International Foundation Pathways (IFPs) offer an opportunity to equip themselves with the skills to succeed at a UK university.

Foundation pathways are a small but growing part of the UK higher education landscape. In the 2020/21 admissions cycle they accounted for around 6% of non-UK UCAS acceptances, but this number is misleading. Most pathways offer direct, non-UCAS entry into partner universities, and students who take this route do not get captured in the UCAS data. Therefore, the actual number of students taking foundation pathways are likely to be much higher.

When it works as intended, foundation pathways offer compelling value for all involved. For prospective students, the pathway offers an otherwise-unavailable opportunity to progress to a highly desirable university while being supported by a curriculum tailored to their needs. For universities, foundation pathways unlock a vast pool of prospective international students who would not otherwise have considered studying there. Further, partnering with pathway providers guarantees a steady stream of guaranteed international applicants every year. For pathway providers, the international student market is growing and extremely lucrative, with student numbers exploding immediately after covid and continuing to rise steadily.

The industry is not free of problems, however, and often the system does not work as intended. As universities' finances become increasingly precarious, higher fee-paying international students have grown integral to their ability to deliver teaching and research at a high standard. Against this background, the foundation pathway's offer of a guaranteed stream of international students may be more enticing than ever.

# Background

## Introduction to Foundation Pathways

International Foundation Pathways are a period of additional study taken prior to progression to the first year of a full undergraduate degree. Programmes typically last up to one year and are designed to ‘bridge’ the gap between high-school (GCSE)-level education in the student’s home country and degree-level study in the UK. The government defines foundation programmes as the following:

*A foundation year is an additional year of study at the beginning of a higher education course that is designed to prepare students for undergraduate degree-level study.*

Beyond the elements included in the government’s definition, there is little that ties foundation pathways together. Courses may be developed by universities, private pathway providers, or through a partnership between both. Some use A or AS-level textbooks, but most do not. Some programmes are taught by university staff, while others by privately-hired staff, and yet others both. Some take place on a university campus, others on a private UK-based study centre, or in overseas study centres, or entirely online. Many guarantee progress to a specific UK university upon completion, provided the student achieves a certain grade, but others do not. As long as the course is an “additional period of study” to “prepare students for undergraduate study,” it may be called a foundation pathway. Though many types of pathways exist (as detailed in Box 1), this report mainly focuses on what may be called “traditional” IFPs- those delivered by a university (or a private provider in partnership with a university in a classroom setting in the UK.

It is also worth noting that IFPs are one of many similar pathways into various levels of UK higher education. International Year Ones (IYOs), for example, are a foundation-esque programme that replaces Year 1 of an undergraduate degree, instead of coming before it. In Scotland, where degree programmes typically last four years, International Year Twos (IY2s) also exist. Degree preparation programmes for prospective master’s students also exist- these are usually called “pre-masters.” Though the purpose of these programmes are different from IFPs, they share the same characteristics: being non-qualification courses that prepare international students for degree study. If a university offers these courses alongside IFPs, they are usually delivered by the same institution. Most of the problems identified in this report therefore also apply to these programmes.

**Box 1: Types of foundation pathways**

Depending on the institution, foundation pathway programmes may take many forms. Here are some that have been identified during the course of research:

1. UK-based, university-run, on-campus:  
The host university runs an in-house foundation programme using its internal resources and staff. Students study in-person on campus using university facilities. Example: Warwick Foundation Studies.<sup>1</sup>
2. UK-based, privately-run, on-campus:  
The host university partners with a private pathway provider, who runs their programme on-campus using campus facilities. Students study in-person and use university facilities. Example: INTO University of Exeter.<sup>2</sup>
3. UK-based, privately-run, off-campus:  
The host university partners with a provider who has their own study centre in the UK. Students study in-person at the study centre before progressing to university. Example: Kaplan International College London<sup>3</sup>
4. Overseas, university-run, on-campus:  
The host university partners with another university overseas, and delivers their teaching there. Students study in-person at the partner university's campus before progressing to the host university. Example: Queen's University Belfast's partnership with Shenzhen University.<sup>4</sup>
5. Overseas, privately-run, partnered with university:  
Providers partner with study centres in the student's home country to deliver their teaching there. Example: NCUK partners with local centres across East Asia, West Africa and the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>5</sup>
6. Overseas, privately-run, no partnerships:  
A private pathway provider runs a programme in the student's home country, but does not partner with specific universities. Students learn at the provider's study centre, and use the grades obtained there to apply to universities through UCAS. Example: Kings Hanoi.<sup>6</sup>
7. Privately-run, online:  
Providers deliver foundation programmes online. Students learn virtually and progress to a UK university through partnerships. Example: Study Group Online Foundation Programme.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that foundation pathways are *not* standalone qualifications- though they typically benchmark RQF Level 3/6 (equivalent to A and AS-levels, Access to HE diplomas, international Baccalaureates, etc.), there is no obligation that they must.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/study/international-foundation-programme/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.intostudy.com/en/universities/university-of-exeter/courses#international-foundation>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kaplanpathways.com/where-to-study/kaplan-international-college-london/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.qub.ac.uk/International/Global-engagement/shenzhen-and-queens/>

<sup>5</sup> NCUK, The Power and Impact of Pathways, 2024

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kingseducation.com/partner-schools/kings-hanoi>

<sup>7</sup> <https://digital.studygroup.com/programmes/international-foundation-programme>



International foundation programmes typically offer modules in study skills, academic writing, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), alongside regular academic modules in various subjects. They are increasingly delivered by private pathway providers, either at a dedicated study centre or at an integrated facility within the destination university. Students normally choose their desired progression university and course before applying, and most pathways offer guaranteed progression to a partner university upon successful completion of a course. However, universities may (and do) also consider foundation pathway students from other institutions for admission through UCAS.

#### **Case Study: Olivia**

Olivia (pseudonym) is a Politics student who progressed to a high-tariff UK university after completing an on-campus, privately-run foundation programme there. She attended a 'regular' (non-international) high school in China. She wanted to study in the UK because it was more cost-effective to study there as compared to the US, and because there was no need to learn an additional language. She said she chose to do a foundation pathway because foundation pathways had a 'certain pass rate.' Only spending one year for the qualification (as compared to studying at an international school in China) also appealed to her.

Olivia used an agent to apply to her foundation pathway programme. She explained that this was because she had decided to study abroad in a hurry and didn't have much time, and because she wanted to seek help from an intermediary for professional advice. The agent told her that a foundation pathway was necessary and 'not a bad thing.' The agent also told her that it would help her better adapt to undergraduate life in the UK and strengthen English and writing skills.

*"Because foundation year was a better choice for me at that time, I only need to spend one year to study in the undergraduate program. If I stay in China and choose an international school, and then study in the UK, the procedures are more complicated and it takes longer."*

During her pathway course, she took modules on academic writing, UK politics and law, social sciences and humanities, and art. She reflected that the modules were very relevant for her course at university.

Olivia was very satisfied overall with the foundation pathway, and thinks the course prepared her reasonably well for life at university. In terms of value she says that it was entirely worth the investment.

Reflecting on her academic development during the course, she feels slightly more confident in her English proficiency as compared to before starting the course, and feels that it was very helpful in this regard. She was not confident in her academic writing before starting foundation, but is more confident now, and feels that the pathway was helpful in improving her writing. She felt that teachers and classmates were friendly and considerate of the fact that she was not a native English speaker.

*In terms of learning, we will learn these knowledge points step by step and learn how to write essays from different perspectives, which will be very useful for my undergraduate study.*

She pointed to structured essay writing advice as the most helpful. Though she found the course to be moderately challenging, she found it slightly less so than high school in China. Though she feels that foundation prepared her quite well for university, she is only slightly confident in university now.

Students who choose IFPs do so for a number of reasons. First, their educational background may mean that direct entry into a UK university is not possible. Students from countries that only study for 12 years before university (as compared to 13 in the UK) are typically not permitted direct entry into UK universities. In such cases IFPs exist to make up the missing year. Second and relatedly, students may require adjustment from their home country's educational system to the UK's— here IFPs serve to 'bridge' the gap between the two systems. Third, students may simply lack the requisite grades or English proficiency for their desired university. For these students, IFPs offer a second chance at progression to a UK university. Fourth, students may need support in both academic and non-academic skills prior to university, including adjusting to student life in the UK. IFPs can act as a 'soft landing' to the UK for these students. Several students interviewed for this report also cited *speed*— compared to other pathways (such as enrolling in an international school that offers an IB or A-level curriculum), IFPs were both shorter and more economical as an option. To summarise, IFPs exist for prospective students who, for whatever reason, cannot progress directly to a UK university, whether due to a lack of qualifications (e.g. differing educational systems), or a lack of sufficient skills.

Though some apply independently to IFPs, most students progress onto these programmes with the help of agents, who handle the applications and visa process on behalf of students in exchange for a cut of the student's tuition fees. Some agents have formal working relationships with particular universities or pathway providers. There is no licencing scheme in place for agents in the UK, though agents may have to abide by different regulations overseas. The British Council does maintain a publicly-available list of agents who have passed its training course and signed a code of ethics called the database of certified counsellors, but membership is not mandatory.

## Four Problems Facing IFPs

International foundation programmes connect prospective students to universities, unlocking vast numbers of potential applicants for universities, and an opportunity for a world-class education for students. As the sector's small but significant slice of the international student pie expands, we must take stock of what is– and is not– working well. This section identifies four areas where problems exist or circumstances can be improved.

### 1. Definitions are confused

First, it is hard to nail down what exactly an international foundation programme *is*. This makes tracking, data collection, and monitoring unnecessarily difficult, and makes it harder for prospective international students to compare options.

Foundation pathway providers do have a good reason to run IFPs with their own curricula, rather than providing courses with existing L3 qualifications. IFPs are different from existing qualifications in purpose because it is exclusively for preparing students for their specific higher education course, not a general secondary education programme. IFP pedagogy is therefore tailored to the student's desired degree and often involve English language and academic language provisions that would be absent from other L3 qualifications. However, there being no standardisation *at all* within the industry creates confusion for students and regulators trying to compare similar pathway courses to each other.

As noted by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), there is 'significant variance' in the way providers describe their (functionally identical) programmes.<sup>8</sup> The variance is indeed significant- institutions use the same term to describe different courses, while courses with the same structure often have different titles depending on the university. Though this report has used 'international foundation programme' to describe the concept, terms like 'International Year Zero' are also used. The word 'programme' is used interchangeably with 'course,' 'pathway,' 'year,' and 'certificate' to describe pathway courses. Occasionally, there is confusion with domestic foundation years, which are titled similarly but can be delivered by different providers, even in the same university. Some universities use "pathway" to refer to multiple distinct courses as a whole, while others use "pathway" to refer to one course only. A "Foundation *Pathway*" at the University of Birmingham is a collection of "pathway courses," while the equivalent "Foundation *Programme*" at King's College London refers to the entire programme only, with individual courses being called "pathways."

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<sup>8</sup> QAA, Evaluation of International Pathway Programmes, 2024

This confusion extends beyond simple nomenclatures and into definitions. There is little agreement on what precisely a student has achieved upon the successful completion of an IFP. Different providers have different answers- Oxford International calls theirs a “qualification” that is “equivalent to A levels,” while Kaplan calls theirs a “certificate” that is *not* equivalent to A levels.

Regulators and agencies have not been helpful in clarifying this. IFPs are not recognised qualifications in the sense that they are not on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), but can be ‘considered to be a qualification’ according to the QAA.<sup>9</sup> Since these courses exist outside of the RQF, they cannot be directly compared to A levels (an RQF Level 3 qualification). Nonetheless, the QAA says they can be considered “equivalent to the completion of Year 13 in the UK secondary education system.”<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Missing data makes informed decisions difficult

Second, international foundation pathways have a data problem. Very little data exists on pathway course enrolment, student outcomes and satisfaction, and course content, making informed policy choices difficult. As foundation pathways are neither higher education nor secondary education, statistics for both do not accurately capture the state of the IFP sector, and it is hard to identify and analyse such courses from sector data alone.<sup>11</sup> Taking student numbers for instance, since most students do not apply to these courses through UCAS, they are not captured in UCAS data. Indeed, there is no publicly-available dataset that records the number of international students coming to universities through IFPs.<sup>12</sup> As will be demonstrated later, universities and foundation pathway providers do hold relevant information (which can be obtained through FOIs). However, there is no aggregate dataset that can be monitored.

Also missing is any data on the experiences of students on these courses. IFP students pay anywhere between £10,000 and £25,000 a year for their courses– as much the fees of full international undergraduate students. Yet, as they are not full undergraduate students, the institutions that teach them are exempt from participating in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF),<sup>13</sup> and a similar scheme to the National Student Survey (NSS) does not exist for them.

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<sup>9</sup> QAA, Characteristics Statement: International Pathway Courses, 2022

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/qaa-findings-on-international-foundation-years-and-international-year-ones/>

<sup>12</sup> NCUK, The Power and Impact of Pathways, 2024

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/quality-and-standards/about-the-tef/>

### 3. Pedagogy

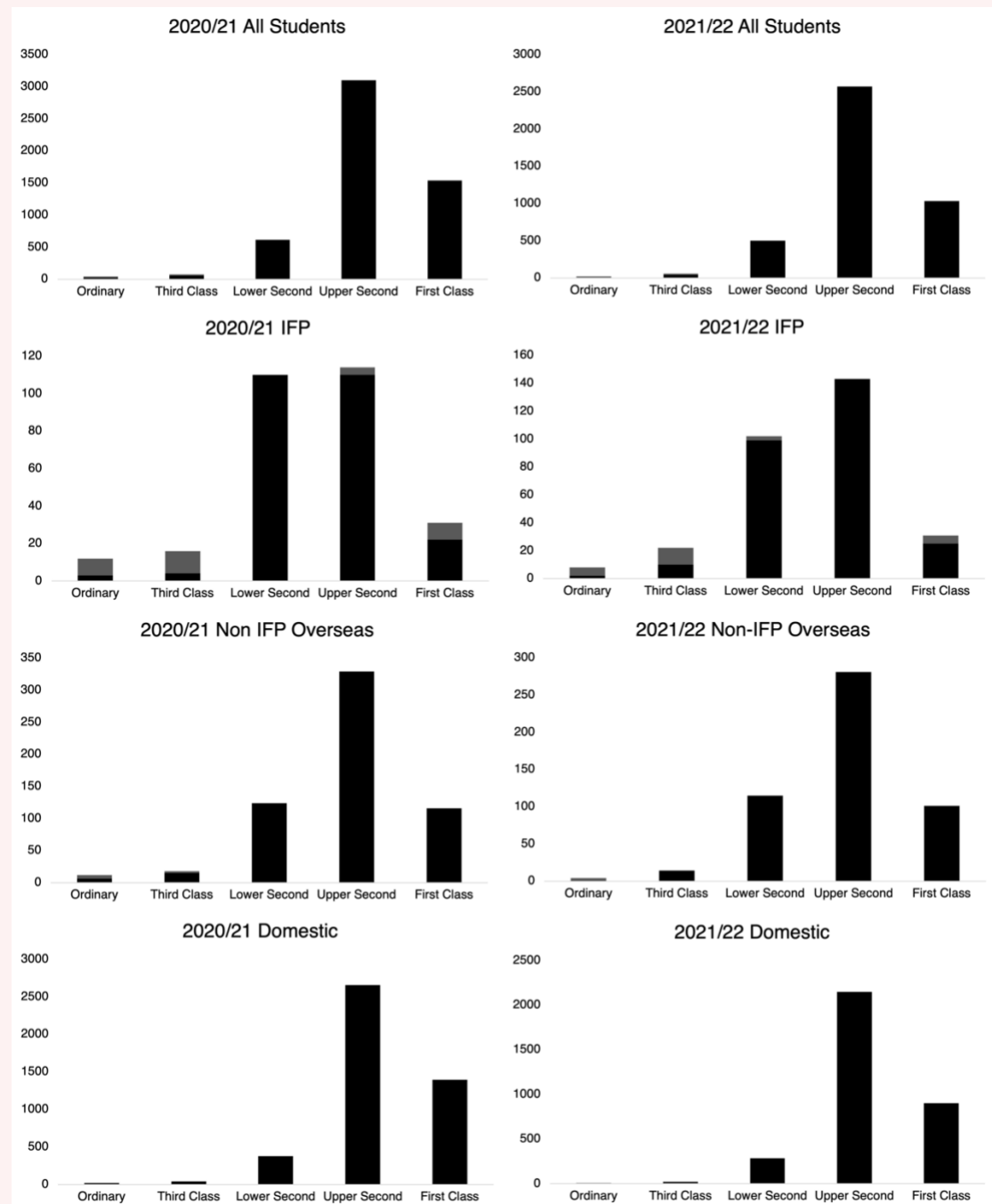
The third problem concerns pedagogy. There have been several allegations that IFPs are being used to let underqualified international students take the place of domestic students at highly-ranked universities, most notably by the *Sunday Times* early last year.<sup>14</sup> In response, Universities UK (UUK) commissioned the QAA to conduct a review of the quality of IFPs, which found a ‘broad equivalence’ between entry requirements for IFPs and equivalent domestic programmes, and that students on such courses were ‘achieving at an appropriate level.’<sup>15</sup> The QAA review was not an entirely clean bill of health, however, as the QAA’s samples were collected from providers on a voluntary basis, making it likely that those providers with higher standards were overrepresented in the returns. Further, the review only covered how well students were taught *during* IFPs, not whether they went on to do well *after* progressing to university. How, then, are IFP students doing compared to their peers at university?

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/cash-for-courses-the-foreign-students-with-low-grades-at-top-universities-pcskjb6xx>

<sup>15</sup> Quality Assurance Agency, Evaluation of International Pathway Programmes, 2024

**Figure 1. Outcomes at graduation for 2020/21 and 2021/22 intake students at the University of Bristol, by entry pathway**



Source: Analysis of data obtained through FOI. Data showed any category with less than 5 students as "<5." Grey bars account for this range of possibilities. Postgraduate outcomes have been excluded.

Figure 1 shows degree outcomes for University of Bristol graduates who entered the university in either the 2020/21 or 2021/22 academic year, broken down by entry

pathway. The University of Bristol has two International Foundation Pathways: one delivered by Kaplan International College London at their London study centre, and another delivered by the same company at a facility on campus. For the IFP statistic, outcomes for students from both pathways have been aggregated for brevity.

Analysis shows that, at least for the two years for which there is data, undergraduate students who progressed to university through the IFP did significantly worse than their peers, including international students who progressed to university through other means. IFP students achieved first class degrees at almost half the rate others did, while they achieving lower second class (2:2) degrees at almost quadruple the rate. Though this is only two years' worth of data, and by no means a representative sample of the HE sector as a whole, it does raise questions– Bristol is a highly-ranked, competitive university with an excellent teaching record, and Kaplan International Pathways is one of the most established pathway providers in the UK. If foundation pathways were preparing students to be just as successful as their A-level peers, this is where it would be most evident, yet the outcomes say otherwise.

One might argue that this is an unfair comparison, since students on IFPs are less likely to have been highly achieving academically in secondary education, and less likely to have good fluency in English. However, IFPs exist precisely because they claim to boost such students up to the same standards as other international students – if IFPs were successful at preparing students for university to the same extent as other pathways, there should not be as large a difference as found here.

Taking this and the QAA report together, the Bristol IFP seems to prepare students well enough to *survive* at university, but not well enough to *excel*. If the results found here are found to be the same elsewhere in the sector, a serious reconsideration of pedagogical standards would be warranted.

## 4. Agents

Fourth, education agents are not regulated tightly enough. Education agents recruit prospective international students for study in the UK, advising them on their university choices, handling the applications process, and filling out any associated paperwork. Their services are usually free, with the agent earning money by being paid a portion of the student's first-year tuition fee upon their successful application as commission. Though agents may work alone, they often have formal working relationships with certain universities and IFP providers. This creates obvious conflicts of interest– if an agent has agreements with some universities, they will try to push students into enrolling at those institutions.<sup>16</sup> Further, since agents earn commission on every student

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<sup>16</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/defacto-regulation-of-international-agents-is-coming-but-student-voices-are-missing-as-usual/>

they enroll, there is a financial incentive to ‘oversell’ UK universities to students, for instance by promising guaranteed accommodation and downplaying the cost of living in the UK.

Several students consulted for this report had negative experiences with agents. One had completed an International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma with high grades, but did not feel confident applying to university on her own, and sought an agent instead. The agent pushed her to apply to an expensive IFP, a decision she now regrets. Another was promised support post-arrival to the UK, including access to the sports facilities of London universities, something that did not materialise. She was also pushed by her agent to reconsider her first-choice foundation pathway in favour of one with whom her agent had a business relationship.

The UK Agent Quality Framework (AQF) was launched in 2023 to guard against such abuses, but the effort is sector-led and its provisions are not mandatory. The British Council also keeps a ledger of ‘certified’ agents and counsellors, ‘certified’ agents being those who have taken the British Council’s agent training course and have signed the National Code of Ethical Practice for Education Agents, part of the AQF. However, certification is an optional process, and being uncertified does not restrict agents from operating freely. Starting in Summer 2025, Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) documents will display agent details where applicable, improving transparency and accountability, but this is only useful after a student has already applied to university using that agent.



## Policy Recommendations

Though foundation pathways offer vital links between international students and UK universities, action is needed to remove barriers of entry for prospective international students; to make informed decisions about the industry's future; and most of all to improve the experience and outcomes of students coming to universities through these courses.

### **Formally define the International Foundation Programme (and related courses) with clear terminologies to avoid confusion, both for students and regulators**

- The government should work together with the sector to develop a standard nomenclature for foundation programmes. Similar courses across the industry should be titled similarly– courses with similar or identical structures and content should be consistently advertised.
- Where separate foundation pathways are offered for domestic and international students, this distinction should be clearly defined and signposted.

### **Standardise International Foundation Programmes by adding it to the Regulated Qualifications Framework**

- IFPs already function as a semi-qualification in that they are transferrable to other universities upon completion. Ofqual should therefore consider adding domestic and international foundation programmes as an RQF Level 3 qualification, and domestic/international year one (IYO)s as a Level 4 qualification. Completion of the qualification should be considered a taught award for the purposes of regulation.
- Recognising IFPs as an official qualification should also be followed by mechanisms to ensure that universities accept them in the same way they accept other L3 qualifications. Conditions B5.2 and B8 of the OfS's conditions of registration (which is required for any UK institution wishing to recruit international students) already stipulates that providers must follow any 'sector-recognised standards,' in this case the RQF. Adding IFPs as a qualification to the Framework would require pathway providers to comply with these conditions.
- This would not stop overseas providers from providing unregulated pathway courses, but it is difficult to see how those could be regulated without government regulating which qualifications universities are allowed to accept onto their courses, something that would add unnecessary regulatory burden to universities. It would also restrict international student recruitment, for example by preventing universities from accepting a student's' domestic academic qualifications, like the first year of a bachelor's degree in their home country.

### **Introduce better tracking of data, especially around student outcomes**

- Universities should track foundation pathway student outcomes and update pathway providers on a rolling basis, so providers can better understand the outcomes their alumni are achieving at university.
- The OfS should introduce a similar (but smaller) scheme to the Teaching Excellence Framework for foundation pathway providers, and regularly evaluate providers to ensure quality.
- There should be regular surveys of students enrolled in foundation programmes, similar to the NSS.

**Regulate agents**

- The government should consider regulating the way in which UK universities can work with education agents. For example, the government can consider requiring UK universities to only partner with agents on the British Council's certified agents database.
- This should be modelled after New Zealand, where the Tertiary and International Learners Code of Practice requires any higher education institution enrolling international students to carry out reference checks on, manage, and monitor education agents.
- Barring this, the Agent Quality Framework, especially The National Code of Ethical Practice for Education Agents, should be made more specific in discouraging bad practice.
- As proposed by Jim Dickinson,<sup>17</sup> mystery shopping of agents should be carried out regularly and systematically, with students involved via student unions or other equivalent student bodies.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/defacto-regulation-of-international-agents-is-coming-but-student-voices-are-missing-as-usual/>

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