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Royal Society submission to the Migration Advisory Committee's Call for Evidence on International students: economic and social impacts

The Royal Society is the National Academy of Science for the UK and the Commonwealth. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists working across a broad range of disciplines in academia and industry. The Society draws on the expertise of its Fellows and Foreign Members to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to UK, European and international decision makers. The Society is also a Designated Competent Body for the Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) visa route.

Research and innovation is a global enterprise and one that benefits everyone by creating and underpinning the industries and jobs that are of strategic value to the UK, and improving the quality of life for people in the UK and around the world. International mobility is fundamental to the practice of science and the Society has a longstanding interest in immigration policy. We therefore welcome the Migration Advisory Committee's call for evidence on international students.

For the overall health of the research and innovation system, UK academia and business require the skills of not only successful leaders in research fields, but also early-career researchers, the technologists and technicians with specialist expertise that support them, and the students that learn from and work with them. International students should be attracted and welcomed to the UK. They add to the diversity of our student population and raise the level of competition for home students, as well as being worth £25 billion to the UK economy.¹

Other organisations in the research and innovation sector are better placed than the Society to provide the detailed evidence on the impacts of international students that the Committee are seeking. However, this short submission serves to highlight two issues that the Society hopes will be considered as part of the Committee's work on this topic.

First, we note that at the postgraduate level international students make a significant contribution to the UK research endeavour; over half of UK postgraduate research students come from overseas.² These students are an important part of the research workforce and integral to the UK's research effort. Any assessment of the economic and social impact of international students should also consider their impact on the health of the UK research and innovation system.

Second, and following from this, the UK should remove international students from immigration figures and targets. Polls indicate that nearly three-quarters of the British public would like to see the same number or more international students coming to study in the UK.³ A change in policy would send a message that the UK will remain a global beacon for higher education and send a message to the brightest and best young minds around the world that they are welcome to study in the UK, ensuring that they continue to contribute to the health of the UK research and innovation system.

*For further information, contact Becky Purvis, Head of Public Affairs,
rebecca.purvis@royalsociety.org*

¹Universities UK (2017) The Economic Impact of International Students (see: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/briefing-economic-impact-international-students.pdf>)

² Higher Education Statistics Agency (2017)

³ ComRes (2017) Poll: public views on international students (see: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/majority-of-british-public-would-like-to-see-same-number-or-more-international-students.aspx>)