

International Students: a UK success story

The fact our universities attract people from around the world is an asset and should be seen as a UK success story: they bring in vital export income, enrich the learning environment for domestic students and support the provision of high-quality education and research across the country. It is why the UK Government's ambition was to host 600,000 international students a year by 2030 and why it celebrated hitting that target years ahead of schedule.

Introducing new restrictions on international students and their dependants risks damaging the UK's prospects for economic growth, with the impact being felt across the whole of the country. Such an action could also impact on quality and choice for domestic students as well as the UK's research and innovation capability, stymying efforts to cement our status as a science superpower.

The value of international students

Russell Group universities proudly host over 240,000 international students. Studying alongside domestic students at all levels, they bring specialist skillsets and diverse perspectives to our classrooms and labs. On graduating most return home, and those who stay typically take up jobs in areas of domestic shortage or create businesses with international links.

International students' fee income is used to mitigate growing deficits in public funding for teaching, which are predicted to grow to £4,000 per home student per year by 2024/25, and research where public funding only covers approximately 71% of the total cost of projects. This is enabling universities to advance cutting-edge research and innovation in areas of national and local importance and to increase numbers of domestic undergraduates each year, especially in higher cost STEM subjects.

2022 saw a record number of UK 18-year-olds securing a place at university, supported by the contribution of international students. For example, numbers of domestic 18-year-old undergraduates at Russell Group universities have grown by 12% since 2019, compared to 5% for the equivalent international students.

Some courses, in particular at Masters level, would not be viable without international students. So if the ability to recruit these students is restricted further – i.e. beyond existing visa and security rules – then this will have a detrimental impact on provision, affecting domestic students as well as those from overseas. At course level, this could include reductions in choice, particularly in some postgraduate STEM courses where international students are highly represented.

This includes strategically important disciplines such as postgraduate mathematical sciences and engineering where international students make up around 50% of the student body across the Russell Group, with many of these highly skilled individuals remaining in the UK after completing their studies.

Key statistics on international students' contribution to the UK:

A single cohort of international students is worth a net **£25.9bn** to the UK economy with benefits spread all over the country, even when we factor in the costs associated with dependants, for example educating children and using public services.

The UK Government's export strategy aims to increase education export earnings to **£35 billion** by 2030. International students currently contribute **70%** of UK education exports – this is one of the UK's leading export success stories post-Brexit and a key area where further growth is achievable.

International students provide an average net economic benefit of **£40m** per parliamentary constituency across the whole of the UK.

Universities face an annual public funding deficit of **£4bn** for research. Overseas tuition fees help plug this funding shortfall, supporting cutting edge R&D at no extra cost to the taxpayer.

Each international student is estimated to generate **£132,000** in economic impact for the UK, and these students also have the highest compliance rates of any visa category, with at least **97.5%** leaving on time.

Immigration

The UK is the second most popular study destination for international students, behind the US. The UK's ability to attract over 600,000 international students annually is the envy of competitors across the EU and nations like Canada and Australia, with this success supported by a comprehensive post-study visa offer.

In 2021, the UK reintroduced the post-study work visa for international students, allowing them to remain in the UK for up to 3 years and secure a skilled job after graduating. The graduate route has been critical in helping achieve Government's target of attracting 600,000 international students, and the holders of graduate visas have the highest rate of compliance of any visa category.

Our international competitors have responded and are enhancing their post-study work offer. For example, in Australia international graduates studying areas of skills shortage will have an additional 2 years (up to six in total) to look for a job after graduating, and Indian ICT and STEM students graduating with a first-class degree will receive a 12 month extension to standard graduate visas.

Moving to restrict the scope of graduate visas, reduce the quality of the UK's visa offer or cut the number of institutions eligible for sponsorship through the graduate route, would mean fewer international students coming to the UK. This in turn would mean less spending in local communities, fewer opportunities for domestic students and less UK research.

After the PSW visa closed in April 2012, the number of international students switching into work routes after their studies decreased by 87% to only around 6,000 students per year. Repeating this policy now would undermine the UK's prospects for growth and exacerbate skills gaps for businesses and public services such as the NHS.

Student dependants

The overwhelming majority of international undergraduate students are not eligible to bring family members to the UK. Postgraduate students and foreign government sponsored undergraduates are allowed to bring dependants with them for the duration of their studies, and are required to show the Home Office they have funds to support their family. Under current rules, a student studying a 9-month course who wished to bring their spouse and two children must demonstrate they have over £34,000 in their bank account. Before coming to the UK, students must also pay for their dependants to use the NHS – over £10,000 up-front for the same family if the student is studying a PhD.