

19 May 2024

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Prime Minister
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Dear Prime Minister,

This coming week the latest net migration figures will be released by the Office for National Statistics. It is worth remembering that this is a lagging data set, covering the year to the end of December 2023. This is crucial, because the data will only capture a very small portion of the impact of a major policy change that only came into force in January this year: namely, the ban on postgraduate taught students bringing dependants with them when they come here to study.

That policy change was highly significant. Monthly monitoring of visa applications by the Home Office indicates that 32,100 (c.44%) fewer students and dependants applied for sponsored study visas in January to March 2024 (ie since the ban was introduced) than in the same period last year.

This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the policy impact on prospective international students, and the consequences on universities of them choosing to study here or not. The real impact will be felt in the next academic year as most courses at most universities begin in the autumn, not in January.

Russell Group universities have already seen, on aggregate, a 10% decline in international applications for postgraduate taught (PGT) courses starting this September. If this translates into a similar drop in all international enrolments it would cost our group £500m in lost income.

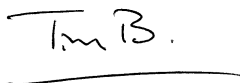
We are aware that the drop in international PGT applications is nearly three times bigger (-28%) across the sector as a whole, according to the latest survey by BUILA.

Currency fluctuations and geopolitical issues are a regular challenge for international students and universities to navigate, but all of the indications are that it is the January policy change that has had the biggest impact. With visa applications down so sharply, the number of international students (and their dependants) coming to the UK will fall, and potentially quite significantly, over the next 6-12 months. The net migration figures published in May 2025 will therefore be the ones to show that the Government's policy on dependants has been successful.

International students bring huge value to our communities – they are net contributors to the treasury, they create jobs and companies, and they bring skills and global perspectives to universities and workplaces. A further restriction in international students would not only be unnecessary – as numbers are already falling – but also damaging, resulting in less spending in local communities, fewer opportunities for domestic students and less UK research.

As you contemplate how to respond to the Migration Advisory Committee's review of the Graduate Route, I hope that you will take this prospective evidence into account, alongside the Committee's strong recommendation that the Graduate Route should continue in its current form.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Tim Bradshaw
Chief Executive, Russell Group

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