



# RUSSELL GROUP

## International students in the UK

International students help make the UK a world leader in education, supporting our economy, society, domestic students and research

International students bring cultural, social, and economic benefits to all UK nations and international demand for our higher education should be regarded as a genuine UK success story. They bring new skills and diverse perspectives to our classrooms and labs, strengthen the UK's international relations and drive research and innovation across the country:

- **Over a quarter of world leaders were educated at a UK university**, conferring soft power benefits for generations to come.<sup>1</sup>
- **A single cohort of international students generates £37.4bn net economic impact for the UK.**<sup>2</sup>
- **Entrepreneurial international students launch spinouts in the UK** that create jobs, attract inward investment and spur economic growth.
- **Skilled international graduates will be an integral part of the future workforce**, bolstering the UK's R&D capability and staffing innovative British businesses that will be central to realising the ambitions of government's new Industrial Strategy.<sup>3</sup>
- **Overseas tuition fees enable universities to grow places for domestic undergraduates.** Despite growing funding deficits, overseas fees have enabled our universities to increase UK undergraduate numbers by 15% since 2013/14.<sup>4</sup>
- **International students are integral to university research teams**, comprising 46% of all postgraduate research (PGR) students at Russell Group universities and 60% of students enrolled onto engineering and technology PGR courses<sup>5</sup>.
- **International students enable university research**, as overseas tuition fees are the largest single income source helping plug university research funding deficits that totalled £5.3bn in 2022/23.<sup>6</sup>

**Stability in government policy on international students and a more positive rhetoric around UK higher education will ensure the UK remains a leading destination for international students, benefiting domestic students, UK R&D and businesses.**

### Benefiting UK students

International students help create a diverse learning environment at UK universities, bringing new skills and perspectives which benefit home students. The resources they bring have also been vital in addressing teaching deficits and increasing the number of places for UK undergraduates. The Russell Group estimates that English universities supplemented the cost of undergraduate education by an average of £2,500 per student per year in 2022/23. Much of this was through international fees, which makes up between a fifth and a third of income for most Russell Group universities.<sup>7</sup>

## International student numbers are falling

Whilst international student numbers grew in the UK following the pandemic, this was partly a result of exiting lockdown before competitors. Numbers are now falling as the market cools and new visa fees and restrictions are taking effect, including provisions banning taught masters (PGT) students from bringing family members:

- Home Office data shows 67,000 fewer students and 98,000 fewer student dependants applied for a study visa in January-September 2024 compared to the same period last year.<sup>8</sup>
- In May 2024 most Russell Group universities reported a decline in international PGT applications compared to May 2023, with an overall drop of 10% for September 2024 starts.<sup>9</sup>

Any further measures aimed at reducing international student numbers could have a significant impact on the sector and its contribution to economic growth and UK skills. There is also a lack of public support for further restrictions: **only 1% of the British public believe UK government should prioritise reducing international student numbers** to reduce immigration.<sup>10</sup>

Russell Group modelling suggests a 10% reduction in international student numbers would reduce our universities' collective income by over £500m a year.<sup>11</sup> **Recommitting to the principles of the International Education Strategy,<sup>12</sup> providing a welcoming environment and a stable, competitive visa offer, would help universities recruit responsibly and protect all the benefits international students bring to the UK.**

## Sustainable and responsible recruitment

Russell Group universities have identified three key areas to ensure overseas recruitment is sustainable and not subject to abuse. We stand ready to work with government and play our full part in sector progress in each:

- **Accommodation:** our universities are working with local partners to develop solutions to accommodation pressures. For example, the University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University and Nottingham City Council recently launched a joint Student Living Strategy, aligning student needs and local planning. UUK has issued a briefing to support good practice in student accommodation, drawing on initiatives and insights from across the sector.<sup>13</sup>
- **Recruitment agents:** we support targeted measures to prevent abuse by agents. All Russell Group universities who use agents are signed up to the Agent Quality Framework and have cut ties with any agents found to engage in bad practices. Better data sharing between UKVI and universities would help identify agent abuse and drive progress in tackling it effectively.
- **Diversification:** our universities are targeting a diverse range of countries to ensure recruitment is sustainable. University efforts, including setting up in-country recruitment offices, have already produced results: our universities have increased numbers of Indian students by 200% in the last 5 years.<sup>14</sup> Retaining the Graduate Route visa will support further diversification.

<sup>1</sup> [Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\), Soft Power Index](#) (2023)

<sup>2</sup> [The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy](#), London Economics (2023)

<sup>3</sup> Outlined in a [letter from UK business leaders](#) to the Prime Minister (2024)

<sup>4</sup> Based on Russell Group analysis of trends from 2013/14 to 2022/23, [HESA student data](#) (2024).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> [Office for Students TRAC 2022/23](#) (2024)

<sup>7</sup> Russell Group analysis of 2021/22 [HESA finance data](#) (2023)

<sup>8</sup> [Home Office \(2024\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> Based on a private survey run by BUILA in May 2024 which included responses from 23 Russell Group universities

<sup>10</sup> [A poll of 1,064 British adults](#) ran by Survation and commissioned by the Russell Group (May 2024)

<sup>11</sup> Russell Group analysis of 2021/22 [HESA finance data](#), assuming a 10% drop in numbers would lead to a 10% drop in income.

<sup>12</sup> [DfE and DIT \(2019\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [UUK \(2023\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> Russell Group analysis of recruitment from 2018/19 to 2022/23, [HESA student data \(2024\)](#).