

The Graduate Route – What Voters Think

New polling shows voters value international students and think tackling illegal migration should be the Government's immigration priority.

A new survey of 1064 UK adults carried out by Survation suggests voters across the UK and supporters of every political party think restricting international student numbers is the wrong immigration priority.

The majority of those polled recognise the contribution international students make to the UK, back universities being able to recruit overseas to support and improve higher education, and agree international graduates should be able to remain in the UK to work and contribute to the economy.

This polling is published as Government is due to consider findings from the Migration Advisory Committee on the Graduate Route visa. Media reports suggest Ministers are considering additional restrictions that would make it more challenging for universities to recruit overseas, cutting export income that helps teach UK students and supports businesses.

Voters think cutting student numbers is the wrong immigration priority

While the new polling shows immigration is important for voters, the data reveals **people think cutting international student numbers through Graduate Route changes or other action is the wrong immigration priority for the UK**. Key findings include:

- 57% think tackling illegal immigration should be the Government's immigration priority.
- Just 2% think Government should prioritise reducing immigration numbers by taking action to restrict the ability of students to stay in the UK and work after their studies and only 1% want Government to prioritise reducing international student numbers. This compares to 45% who say Government should prioritise blocking small boat arrivals.
- 66% think the post-study visa should allow international graduates to work in the UK for longer, or that it is currently the right length.

Voters understand the economic value of international students

International students boost businesses and communities by growing the UK economy: modelling by London Economics shows that **a single cohort of international students has a net economic benefit of £37bn.**¹

The new polling shows voters understand how important the economic contribution international students make is for universities, communities and the UK. Key findings include:

- 43% describe the economic contribution of international students as positive with only 13% thinking they have a negative impact.
- 50% agree bringing more international students to the UK would help the economy, with only 13% disagreeing.
- 51% think international students who remain in the UK to work after their studies have a positive impact on the UK, with only 15% thinking they have a negative impact.

The UK Government estimated that the Graduate Route would result in a net fiscal gain of £6.1 billion for the Exchequer between 2021/22 and 2030/31.²

Voters understand international students benefit UK students

Without the resources international students bring to the UK, it would be much harder for universities to deliver the same level of high-quality education and skills for home students or investment in research and development:

- English universities, on average, subsidised the cost of educating UK undergraduates by £2,500 per student per year in 2022/23³
- UK universities subsidised research activity by £5 billion in 2021/22 (up from £2.9 billion in 2014/15).⁴

The new polling shows voters understand the benefits international students deliver for UK universities and home students. Key findings include:

- 52% agree more international students would support the UK higher education system, with 11% disagreeing.
- 51% think cutting international student numbers would see tuition fees increase for UK students.
- 58% agree UK universities should be able to attract fees from international students to support and improve the higher education sector, with just 7% disagreeing.

Russell Group modelling suggests a 10% reduction in international student numbers would reduce our universities' collective income by over £500m a year.⁵ This means any new restrictions on student immigration would reduce the ability of our universities to deliver research and places for UK students.

International students are hugely valued as part of UK university communities, not only for their contributions to local and national economies, but also their significant social and cultural benefits – including long-lasting soft power on the global stage.

Following new restrictions, Home Office data shows 32,100 (44%) fewer students and dependants applied for sponsored study visas in January-March 2024 than in the same period last year. Further measures, such as restricting the Graduate Route, that could see applications fall further would put these benefits at risk.

¹ [London Economics 2023.](#)

² [Home Office 2021.](#)

³ [Russell Group 2023.](#)

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

⁵ This assumes a 10% decline in international students would see a 10% decline in international fee income. HESA data shows Russell Group universities earned £5.3bn in non-UK student fees in 2021/22: 10% of this is almost £530m. Given inflation and the fact that some EU students paid home fees in 2021/22, this is probably a conservative estimate.