MIGRATION WATCH

THE FUTURE FOR STUDENT VISAS

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A review of the existing student visa system, an analysis of its failures, and recommendations for its reform.

MIGRATION WATCH

Contents

Foreword

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For too long, successive governments and the powerful and influential higher education lobby, have peddled the myth that student migration is somehow distinct from immigration. As Migration Watch UK has been saying for many years, the reality is very different. By the government's own figures, study visas are now the single largest route into Britain, accounting for nearly half of all visas issued last year.

What was meant to be a modest, carefully managed flow has become a torrent, encouraged by the reckless, government-imposed target of 600,000 international students - a goal reached almost a decade early.

The consequences are plain. Universities, increasingly reliant on ever-higher foreign fees, have been allowed to behave like immigration clearing houses, drawing in vast numbers with little regard for quality, or indeed for whether the "students" intend to leave or to study at all.

Nearly two million students have arrived since 2022, with over half projected to stay on beyond the expiration of their visas, and many are staying on; through the Graduate route, through work visas, or, most egregiously, and increasingly, by claiming asylum. It is no coincidence that almost a third of asylum claims now come from those who first entered on student visas. This is abuse of the system, pure and simple.

If Britain is serious about regaining control of its borders, we must begin with student visas. That means capping numbers, ending the Graduate route, restricting dependants, and restoring proper scrutiny when visa applications are first made as well as at the border. Anything less will be a betrayal of the British public, who have been promised control for decades yet continue to see record immigration. The time for excuses is over.

The allowance for international students to work up to 20 hours a week during term time, and an unlimited amount outside of term time, must end. To make these recommendations, the paper looks first at the numbers of study visas issued in the last decade, followed by the impacts both real and potential on the UK.

Last but by no means least, I am most grateful to Glyn Williams, former Director General for Borders and Immigration at the Home Office, for his guidance and invaluable input to this report.

Introduction

Getting immigration under control must be the first and main priority of the new government. The problem now lies not merely in illegal immigration, which the current government has liked to make a big show of tackling, but the legal routes to entry that have allowed the immigrant population to explode and become the principal driver of our population growth.

This briefing document looks at the most prominent route that has led to an increase in immigrant numbers – international students on study visas – and how they can be reduced. There is debate over whether international students should be excluded from or included in the official numbers; however, there is a simple reason for including them, which is that the visa type aligns with the United Nations' (UN) Statistics Division definition of an immigrant:

A person who moves to a country other than their usual residence for at least 12 months, with the destination country becoming their new usual residence.

This is the definition used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as well.

Moreover, there are three common sense reasons as to why international students should be considered migrants and included in migration numbers:

1. Student visas are, for all intents and purposes, no less temporary than visas issued to workers, due to the extended period of coverage, the high level of overall retention rate, and the ability for recipients to bring dependants with them (*with caveats – see Section Two*).
2. The consumption of services both public and private is no lower for student visa recipients simply because they are students. International students are still entitled to access the National Health Service (NHS), use public transport, occupy property, and so on.
3. The student visa system encourages remaining, by allowing international students to work during their courses (up to 20 hours for full-time university students of any level, set by the Home Office), and apply for the Graduate Visa route once their studies are completed (see Section Two).

Given these practicalities, and the fact that the shortest university course

lasts at least twelve months, there is an obvious reason for including these "education immigrants" in the figures.

On the basis of two facts – that immigration must be brought under control, and that study visas are the largest source of immigration – the reduction of study visas must be considered as an immediate option. This briefing paper recommends the following four methods for introducing **a cap on the number of study visas issued each year:**

1.   Provide licensed universities with a set   number of "Certificates of Sponsorship"   for visas.
2.   Disallow the issuing of visas for dependants for all students, except for PhD research students.
3.   Visa interviews should be administered by the Home Office prior to any visa being issued, and the decision should rest with the interviewing officer.
4.   The allowance for international students to work up to 20 hours a week during term time, and an unlimited amount outside of term time, must be ended.

    To make these recommendations, the paper looks first at the numbers of study visas issued in the last decade, followed by the impacts both real and potential on the UK.

A Note on Caps

Our recommendation is that, for every visa route, a cap should be calculated on the following basis:

1. An overall limit on visas should be chosen (such as 300,000 per year) broken down by three main routes: study visas; work visas; and family visas.
2. Determine the share of the overall cap for each route (for example, 40% study visas, 40% work visas, 20% family visas).
3. Divide the annual route cap by twelve to give a monthly allocation (and, if necessary, weighting could be given to certain months to match usual patterns of application).
4. Invite sponsors to apply once a month for Certificates of Sponsorship (COS) they wish to issue for whichever reason based on the routes available.
    5. The number of COS issued that month must not exceed the number of visas allowed under the cap for that month.
6. If the number of COS applied for is below the monthly allocation limit, the unused portion may be added to the allocation of the next month in that year.

This is designed to be sensitive to the needs of each sector that typically aligns with each route; for example, the Higher Education sector may need to weight their visa offers to the busier months, such as August to October, in order to match demand.

It will be necessary to impose individual caps per sponsor Institutions that have proven to be unscrupulous or lax in controlling their international student numbers.

Key Points

- Student visas made up most of the visas issued in 2024 (45%).

- This is primarily fuelled by the government setting a target in 2019 of 600,000 international students by 2030. This target was reached in 2022.

- International students are now predominantly from China, India, Pakistan and Nigeria.

- An overreliance on international students means the Higher Education sector is left vulnerable to fragile economies around the world. This is a result of universities being given a free hand to recruit from overseas, fuelled by increasingly higher fees paid by international students.

- Sectarian violence in distant parts of the world are at risk of being imported by the back door if the Study Visa system is not reformed.

Key Recommendations

- The associated Graduate Visa route must end. Numbers are too high to control and the routes are open to abuse. On qualifying, all graduates should be required to leave and apply for work visas from their own countries.

- Study visas should be capped using two related mechanisms:

    a. Provide licensed universities with a set number of "Certificates of Sponsorship" for visas, and
    b. Disallow the issuing of visas for dependants for all students, except for PhD research students.

- There should be a reintroduction of visa interviews for all routes, but especially for student visas, administered by the Home Office before a visa can be issued; the decision on granting a visa should rest with the visa officer at the point of application.

- The allowance for international students to work up to 20 hours a week during term time, and an unlimited amount outside of term time, must be ended. It is very rarely enforced, and distracts from the primary purpose for which these visas are issued – studying.

Student Visas in the United Kingdom

It has been the stated goal of the British government to increase the number of international students studying in the United Kingdom (UK). This was part of the <u>International Education Strategy</u> [1], published in 2019, under the Theresa May government, which set out two goals: first, to "*increase the value of education exports to £35 billion per year by 2030*"; and second, to "*increase the total number of international students choosing to study in the UK higher education system each year to 600,000 by 2030*" (*Department for International Trade, 2019*).

This goal was reached nearly a decade early, in 2022. Given the compounding factors of accompanying dependents, there is no doubt that this is contributing to the drastic rise in legal immigrant numbers in recent years. This section looks at the following three aspects of this increase: study visas by numbers; the typical sources; and how this is fitting into a wider trend in changing higher education.

Study Visas by Numbers

Student visas are one of the biggest sources of inward flows of immigration to the UK year-on-year. In fact, in the year ending December 2024, excluding visas issued for visitors and transit, <u>**student visas were the biggest source of migration**</u> [2], accounting for 45.03% of all visas issued that year - an increase of 1.5% (*Home Office, 2025*).

2024

Family Visas 9%   Other 5%

Work Visas 40%

Student Visas 45%

2023

Family Visas 6%   Other 6%

Work Visas 44%

Student Visas 44%

Figure 1: *Percentages of entry visas issued by type, excluding transit and visitor visas (2023 and 2024)*

1 *International Education Strategy: Global Potential, Global Growth, March 16th 2019.*

www.gov.uk/government/ publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth

2 *Entry Clearance Visas Granted Outside the UK, updated August 21st 2025.*

https://www.gov.uk/ government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#entry-clearance-visas-granted-outside-the-uk
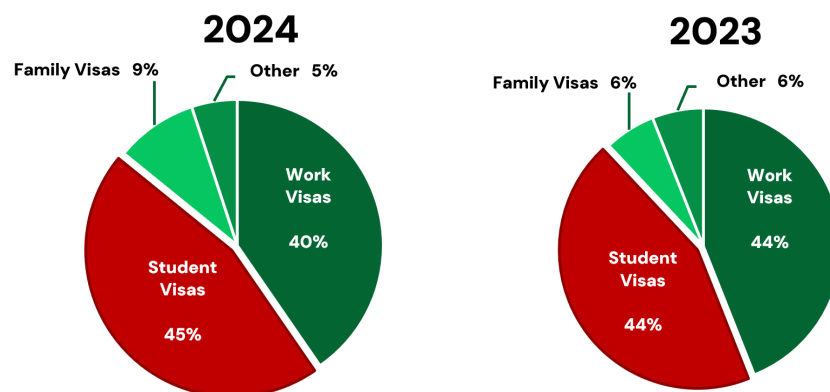
Notably, the increase in percentage is mostly attributable to a greater decline in other types of visas being issued from the previous year in 2023, especially work visas (which declined from 44.2% to 39.67%).

However, the increase in percentage also obscures the relative decline in terms of absolute numbers. In 2023, there were 605,253 study visas issued, which fell to 419,312 in 2024. Overall though, 2024 marks what appears to be a slight blip in a consistent and steady rise in the number of study visas issued annually since 2015, with the only other exception being 2020 which, due to the pandemic, is hardly surprising (*Figure 2*).

Table 1: Numbers of Visas Issued by Type in 2023 and 2024, and Changes

Visa Type	2023	2024	Change	Percentage change
Total work visas	613,627	369,419	–244,208	–40%
Worker	498,204	254,229	–243,975	–49%
Temporary Worker	77,034	80,706	3,672	5%
Investor, business development and talent	9,574	7,372	–2,202	–23%
Other work visas and exemptions	28,815	27,112	–1,703	–6%
Total study visas	604,253	419,312	–184,941	–31%
Sponsored study	600,024	415,103	–184,921	–31%
Other study	4,229	4,209	–20	0%
Total family visas	80,083	86,049	5,966	7%
Total dependents joining or accompanying	4,362	3,864	–498	–11%
EEA family permits	90	2	–88	–98%
EUSS family permits	17,283	13,869	–3,414	–20%
BN(O) visa route	28,168	19,273	–8,895	–32%
Ukraine Family Scheme	9,302	1,190	–8,112	–87%
Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme	30,985	18,156	–12,829	–41%
Total entry clearance visas	1,388,153	931,134	–457,019	–7%

9

The Future for Student Visas   Who Is Coming To The UK To Study?

Total Number of Study Visas Issued (2014–2024)
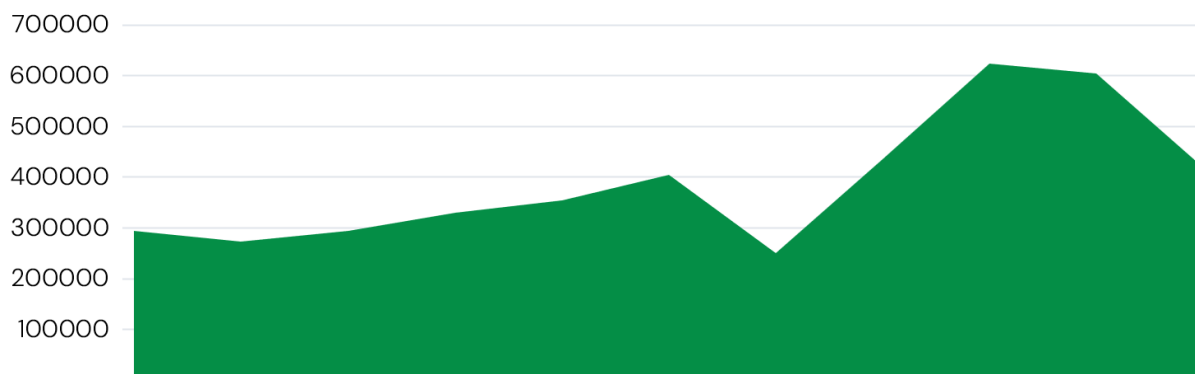
Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total study visas	293,648	272,919	294,454	330,101	354,878	404,410	250,121	435,110	623,698	604,253	419,312

Figure 2: *Total Number of Study Visas Issued (2014-2024)*

What this means is that, unless a serious disruption like a pandemic occurs, study visas are rising both in terms of raw numbers and in terms of percentages. This is a trend that is only moving in one direction.

This has been accompanied by some particularly stark shifts in the way the United Kingdom Higher Education industry is operating. As David Kernohan has explained in detail [3] (*Kernohan, 2025*), as of Spring 2025, the number of taught postgraduate qualifications awarded has exceeded the number of first degree undergraduate qualifications, of which 64% were awarded to international students. It is worth noting that this is only marginal, with 467,765 postgraduate taught qualifications compared to 456,240 first-degree undergraduate qualifications. However, the 64% statistic means that 299,369 postgraduate degrees were awarded to international students.

3 *New HESA Student Data Shows Sector in Flux, March 20th 2025.*

https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/new-hesa-data-shows-sector-in-flux/

Who is Coming to the UK to Study?

Study visas are primarily being provided to students from China, India, and Pakistan, of which the grant rate is 99%, 94%, and 87% respectively. Indeed, China accounts for 25% of all overseas students, India for 22%, and Pakistan for 9%, meaning three countries provide over half (56%) of all overseas students studying in the UK.

Abuse of this system is extensive, and is catalogued further in Section Two, but the primary method of abuse seems to be through "gaming" the requirements, such as needing to prove a certain amount of money in a current account prior to applying for the visa, but which is actually shared among applicants in an attempt to defraud the system.

Moreover, student visas are often used as an "easy" method of entering the UK, with no serious intention to continue with the studies once the recipient has arrived. Such a fact is recognised in the British Government's own White Paper on immigration, issued in May 2025 (*His Majesty's Government, 2025: 30*):

> *"We have also seen a series of problems involving misuse and exploitation of student visas, where visas are used as an entry point for living and working in the UK without any intention to complete the course, and increasing numbers of asylum claims from students at the end of their course, even though nothing substantive has changed in their home country while they have been in the UK."*

The paper goes on to detail the need for changes to the ways in which student visas are issued and monitored, but this amounts to tinkering at the edges rather than overhauling the system to correct its deficiencies. Such measures include "a levy on higher education provider income from international students" or an intention to "*will strengthen the requirements that all sponsoring institutions must meet in order to recruit international students*" (*ibid: 36–37*).

11

The Future for Student Visas   Who Is Coming To The UK To Study?

Table 2: Nations of origin for study visas issued (2024)

Nationality	World Region	Applications	Applications Resolved	Applications Granted	Grant Percentage	Grant Rate	Refusals
China	East Asia	103,947	103,908	103,230	25%	99%	379
India	Southern Asia	96,365	98,013	92,305	22%	94%	4,411
Pakistan	Southern Asia	39,286	43,242	37,682	9%	87%	3,663
Nigeria	Western Africa	29,646	30,034	27,128	7%	90%	2,498
United States	North America	15,703	15,747	15,480	4%	98%	155
Nepal	East Asia	13,694	13,152	12,655	3%	96%	422
Bangladesh	Southern	9,486	9,034	7,108	2%	79%	1,008
Saudi Arabia	Western Asia	6,391	6,436	6,185	1%	96%	203
Malaysia	South East Asia	5,532	5,525	5,485	1%	99%	32
Hong Kong	East Asia	5,219	5,228	5,184	1%	99%	25
Kuwait	Western Asia	4,916	4,900	4,830	1%	99%	42
Turkey	Western Asia	4,853	4,888	4,746	1%	97%	114
Ghana	Western Africa	4,486	4,596	3,780	1%	82%	708
Sri Lanka	Southern Asia	4,409	4,617	4,054	1%	88%	381
Germany	Western Europe	4,377	4,379	4,308	1%	98%	17
France	Western Europe	4,154	4,152	4,067	1%	98%	25
Canada	North America	3,840	3,839	3,797	1%	99%	28
South Korea	East Asia	3,817	3,803	3,772	1%	99%	18
Thailand	South East Asia	3,722	3,721	3,682	1%	99%	28
Indonesia	South East Asia	3,573	3,572	3,517	1%	98%	51
Other Nationalities		68,041	66,892	62,108	15%	93%	3,501
Total		435,457	439,678	415,103		94%	17,709
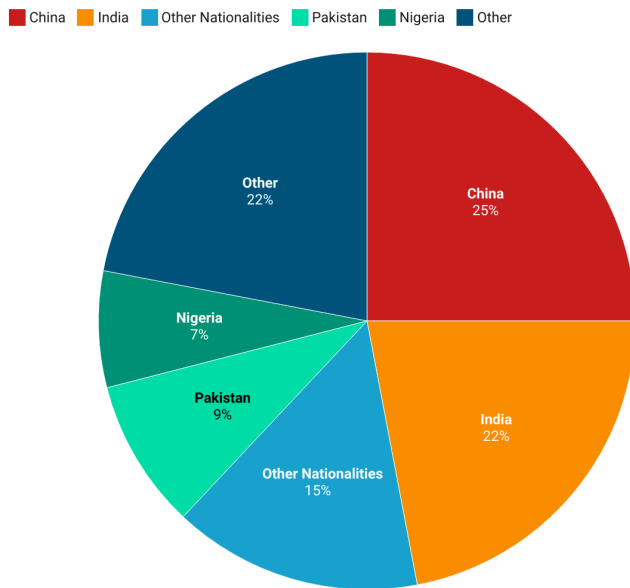
Source: Home Office • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3: *Study Visas Issued by Nation (2024)*

However, there are clear and evident differences between the nations whose citizens return following the completion of their studies, and those who remain in the UK, on either a Skilled Worker, or Graduate, Visa (see below).
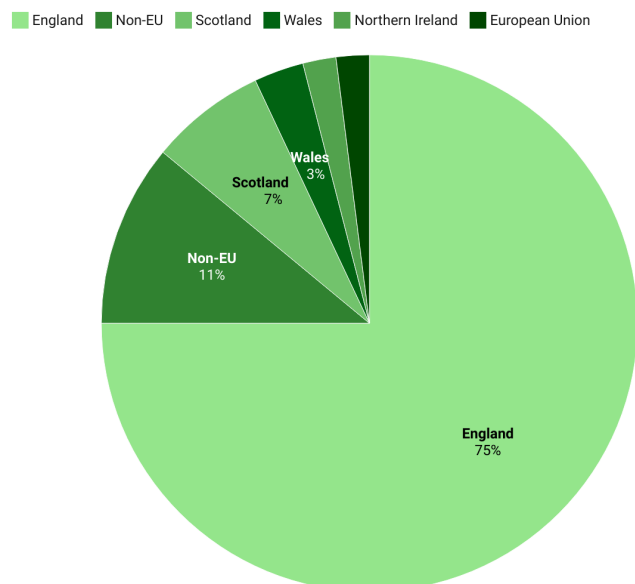
Source: Home Office • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4: *Origins of Accepted Applicants for Undergraduate Study (2023)*

13

The Future for Student Visas   Who Is Coming To The UK To Study?

Moreover, study visas accounted for a significant number of all enrolled students in the UK. As the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service's (UCAS) end of 2023 report showed, there were 554,465 accepted undergraduate applications to higher education institutions; when this is broken down further, 482,895 of those approved applications were for students from within the UK, while 71,570 (13%) were from international students (*UCAS, 2024a*).

In addition to this, the Commons Research Briefing from 2025 shows that, in terms of full-time students, for the 2023/2024 academic year international students made up 16.05% of undergraduates, 47.78% of postgraduate research students, and 75.61% of postgraduate taught students (*Bolton, 2025: 7*), meaning that just under one-third of all full-time students are international, and 25% of all students of all types are international.

Table 3: Full Time Students in the United Kingdom in Thousands, by Type and Whether of UK or International Origins

Full Time Students	UK	International	Total	UK as Percentage	International as Percentage
Undergraduate	1475	282	1757	83.95%	16.05%
Postgraduate Research	47	43	90	52.22%	47.78%
Postgraduate Taught	119	369	488	24.39%	75.61%
Total	1641	694	2335	70.28%	29.72%

Table 4: Total Students in the United Kingdom in Thousands, by Type and Whether of UK or International Origins

Full Time Students	UK	International	Total	UK as Percentage	International as Percentage
Undergraduate	1758	296	2054	85.60%	14.41%
Postgraduate Research	72	48	120	60.00%	40.00%
Postgraduate Taught	339	388	727	46.60%	53.37%
Total	2169	732	2901	74.80%	25.23%

Where Are They Going To Study?

The Government's immigration White Paper repeated a common talking point on the issue of international university students, and the system of allowing foreign students to come to the United Kingdom to study: "*International students allow the UK to export its world class higher–education sector and make up an important pillar of growth in the UK*" (*His Majesty's Government, 2025: 30*).

This oft-repeated claim, that Britain's university education is an export, is complicated by two factors: one, the proportion of students attending non–Russell Group universities; and two, the retention rate of international students. The retention of students is addressed in more detail in Section Two, but here the focus is on the ratio of students attending non–Russell Group universities, and the number of "extended stay" visas issued in the last 15 years.

Visas and extensions issued by Russell Group affiliation, 2010 - 2024

Visas issued to non-Russell Group Universities

Visas issued to Russell Group Universities

Extensions of stay issued for non-Russell Group Universities

Extensions of stay issued for Russell Group Universities

Chart: Migration Watch • Source: Home Office • Created with Datawrapper

15

The Future for Student Visas   Where Are They Going To Study?

As Figure 5 indicates, there is a significant number of international students attending non-Russell Group universities, and this has only increased since the Covid pandemic, to drastic levels of disparity.

This matters because only one non-Russell Group university is in the top 100 global universities: the University of St Andrews in Scotland, which is itself a highly selective institution with an enrolment rate of roughly 10% of applicants. This increase in international students attending lower-ranking universities has itself been pointed out in the White Paper (*His Majesty's Government, 2025: 32*):

> *Visas for universities ranked between 601 and 1,200 (according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 202539) increased by 49% (77,000 to 115,000) between 2021 and 2023, whereas the number of visas for universities ranked in the Top 100 fell by 7%. 40 New restrictions have reduced the number of dependant visas.*

Not only this, but the substantial number of international students attending such universities has increased as a proportion of all visas issued: in 2013, the height of the pre-Covid numbers, 99,566 visas were issued to students attending lower-ranked universities, accounting for 18% of the 532,000 entry visas issued; in 2022, this number increased to 299,613 which accounted for 25% of the 1,164,135 entry visas. As of 2024, the 226,890 study visas issued is equivalent to 24% of the 933,874 total entry visas.

Moreover, retention of international students remains high and is inflated due to the number of "extensions of stay" issued each year, though they have declined somewhat in recent years. These temporary visa extensions means the enforcement of visa restrictions is itself lax, and it is often considered "easier" to extend a visa rather than enforce the restrictions required by the visa.

The Impact of Student Visas

As Neil O'Brien MP has recently put it [4], "*overseas students have displaced UK students. This has meant that a dramatic reduction in British students from independent schools has not fed through into higher numbers from state schools. Essentially overseas students have just replaced British students from independent schools*" (*O'Brien, 2025*). This is due to two related reasons: first, the government's artificial and inflationary goal of 600,000 international students per year; and second, the higher fees that international students are expected to pay, typically as high as three times the fees of British students.

But the reliance on international students is causing serious long-term problems for Britain's Higher Education system, and for the country as a whole. We run the risk of creating a bubble based on shoddy economics and fragile economies around the world, as well as importing large numbers of migrants who do not have good relations with one another, creating the grounds for violence. Moreover, there is widespread and ongoing abuse of the Study Visa and related Graduate Visa routes, which needs serious reform if migration numbers are to be reduced.

The Goal of More International Students

As mentioned above, the UK government International Education Strategy 2019/2021 set the goal of reaching 600,000 international students by 2030. This was achieved in the 2020–2021 academic year with 605,130 study visas issued which, as Universities UK points out [5], was "*almost a decade earlier than the 2030 deadline*" (*UniversitiesUK, 2024*). This was achieved once again, indeed with an increase of 74,840 (12.4%), in the 2021–2022 academic year (*UniversitiesUK, 2025*).

International students are primarily attending postgraduate courses, as indicated in the above section, with the most common being business and management (by a significant margin), Engineering and technology courses, and computing. Importantly, in the 2021–2022 academic year, there were more international students studying business and management than all other

4 *DfE versus the Home Office on Foreign Students*

https://www.neilobrien.co.uk/ p/dfe-versus-the-home-office-on-foreign

5 *International Facts and Figures 2022, May 15th 2024*

www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/ universities-uk-international/ insights-and-publications/ uuki-publications/ international-facts-and-figures-2022

courses combined, of which just over one-third (36%, 70,745) were undergraduates, and two-third (64%, 124,190) were postgraduates, accounting for 46.2% of all business and management students in the UK (*ibid*).

Universities UK cites that the 2021-2022 international student cohort alone contributed just shy of £42bn to the UK economy [6] (*UniversitiesUK, 2025*). This is unsurprising, given that international undergraduate fees range in from £11,400 to £38,000, though this is of course dependent on course and institution [7] (*British Council, n.d.*). Neil O'Brien has charted this in detail, making the following key observations (*O'Brien, 2025*):

1. The number of European Union (EU) students is decreasing while the number of non-EU international students is increasing.
2. The share of all international students attending Russell Group universities has increased since the 2014/2015 academic year by roughly 5%.
3. This is particularly pronounced among international postgraduate students, with over half (55%) attending Russell Group universities.

This is important as Russell Group universities tend to charge higher fees for international students. For example, Yocket.com [8] – a website designed for Indian students considering studying abroad – lists the average tuition fees per year for each university in the Russell Group, which in turn averages to roughly £27,500 (*Jain, 2024*).

But while Universities UK and the Higher Education (HE) sector in general champions this contribution, the sector has come under increasing scrutiny for an "overreliance" on international students. The Times Higher Education reported in February 2024 [9] that the Russell Group drew a "*majority of fee income from overseas*" (Morgan, 2024), while the BBC reported that the UK HE sector has seen universities recruiting "*more international students – who pay higher fees – in recent years, to make up for the fall in income due to frozen fees for UK students*" (*Clarke and Hendry, 2024*).

This overreliance is evident not merely in the lucrative business of accepting large numbers of overseas students for their higher–paying fees, but moreover for the instability of the countries from which they originate. **A particular case study comes in the form of Dundee University** [10] which, in March 2025, was reported to be "*fighting to survive*" due to a "*currency crisis*" in Nigeria (McLaughlin, 2025). A combination of attracting a significant number of students from Nigeria, "*the university's biggest source of international students, nearly 1,300 in 2022-3, outstripping of all of the countries of Europe, the Middle East and North America combined*", and the Naira (the Nigerian currency) being "*sharply devalued in June 2023*", meant that the university was in deep financial trouble.

Dundee was not alone: the same article reported that "*seven of Scotland's 18 universities recorded a deficit in their most recent accounts, according to research by the Scottish Liberal Democrats.*" It is not entirely clear that all of these universities were facing financial difficulties for the same reason, but it would not be surprising if so.

Dependants

The impact of study visas on immigration is complicated by the fact that international students often bring dependants. **As detailed by the Home Office in February 2025** [11], there has been a significant rise in the number of dependants for every main foreign study applicant, as much as "*6 for every 20 in the year ending June 2023*", though this has since declined to one in 20 (5%) in December 2024 (*Home Office, 2025b*). When compared to the figure in Table 1, this means that 20,965 dependants arrived in the year ending December 2024.
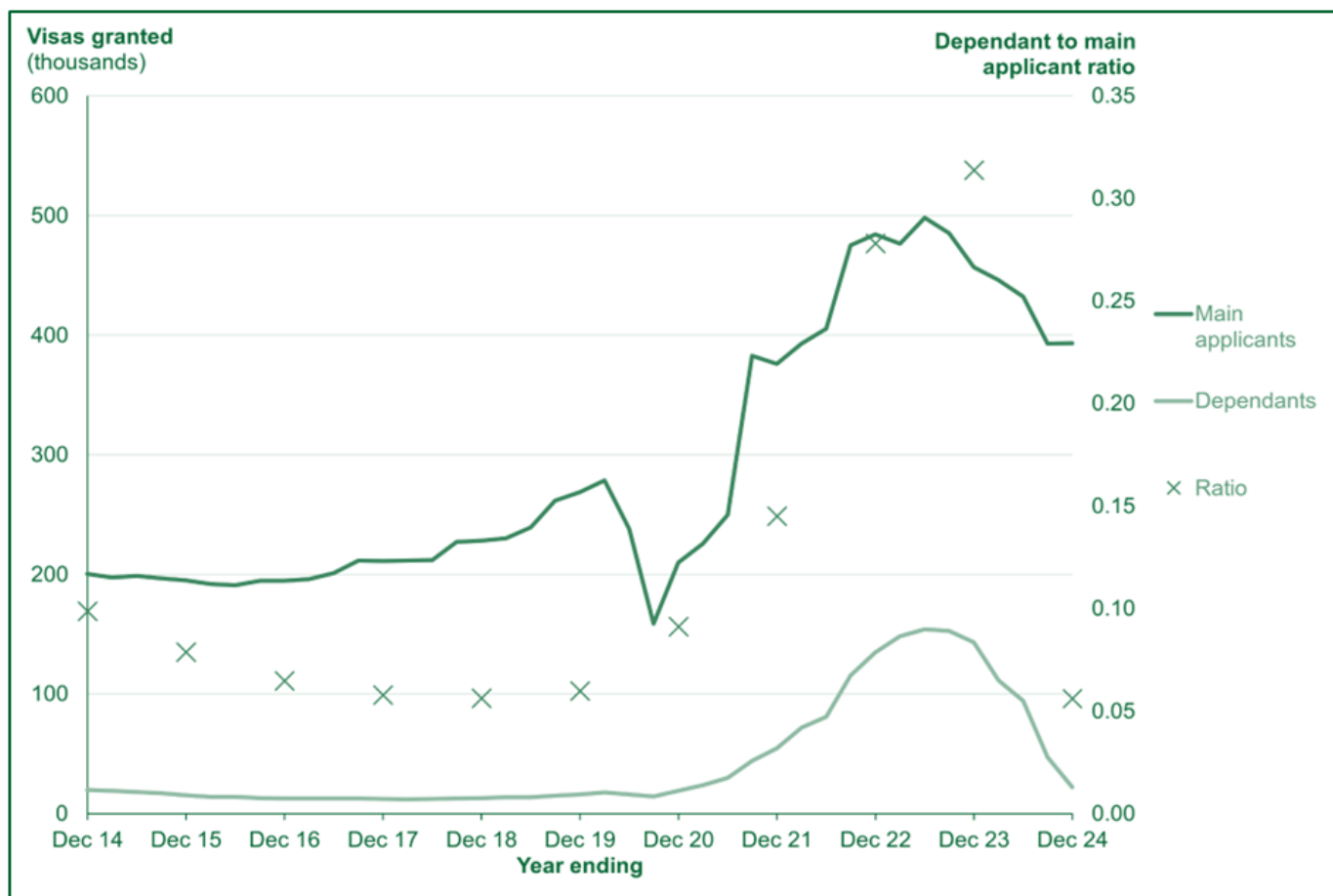
There have been attempts to reduce the ratio of dependants accompanying international students, due to rising pressure over the scale of dependants. The BBC reported in 2023 that as many as 135,788 visas were issued to dependants alone (*Seddon, 2023*); for comparison, this is roughly the annual figure of net migration in the early–2000s (*Migration Observatory, 2024*).

The specific statement of the policy change was made by then-Home Secretary Suella Braverman KC MP, including six changes (Braverman, 2023):

1. Removing the right for international students to bring

10 *Tuition Fees Must Go Up, Unis Say As Term Begins, September 17th 2024*

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czxdd7qglp6o

11 *Why Do People Come to the UK? Study, February 27th 2025*

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration–system–statistics–year–ending–december–2024/why–do–people–come–to–the–uk–study

Figure 6: Sponsored Study Visas Granted by Applicant Type, 2014-2024

All credit to gov.uk. This image can be accessed here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67b7134978dd6cacb71c6a78/iss–dec24–12.svg

       dependants unless they are on postgraduate courses currently designated as research programmes.

2.   Removing the ability for international students to switch out of the student route into work routes before their studies have been completed.

3.   Reviewing the maintenance requirements for students and dependants.

4.   Steps to clamp down on unscrupulous education agents who may be supporting inappropriate applications to sell immigration not education.

5.   Better communicating immigration rules to the higher

education sector and to international students.

6.   Improved and more targeted enforcement activity.

The substantive, relevant change here is in Point One, on only allowing international students on postgraduate research programmes to bring dependants; taking into account the fact that, as pointed out in Table 3 that there are roughly 48,000 international postgraduate research students in the UK.

However, Point Three indicates an awareness, and increasing salience of, university study visas as a method of manipulation for bad-faith actors to enter the country using legitimate means, only to then circumvent the appropriate channels and disappear.

Graduate Visa Numbers

We have been warning for a while that this abuse exists. As we wrote in 2022, the abuse of the system is both widespread and "well documented by the Home Office, the National Audit Office (NAO) and the BBC".

We included the following examples, all of which are worth repeating here:

1. In 2009/10, there were so many dubious student visa applications that consulate posts had to be closed for several months.
2. The NAO found in 2012 that the HO implemented Tier 4 with flaws "*which were predictable and could have been avoided*".
3. In the same report, the NAO said that because "*the UKBA implemented Tier 4 before the key controls were in place*", 40,000–50,000 of those who entered might have come to work rather than to study.
4. The NAO also pointed to serious shortcomings in enforcement action against students found to be overstaying or working in breach of their visa conditions.
5. A 2011 Home Office study showed that around 60% of students from major source countries such as India, Bangladesh and Nigeria should have been refused a visa to study on credibility grounds.
6. In 2019 the NAO concluded that there had been cheating on a large scale at two English language test centres. The HO pointed to significant organised fraud.

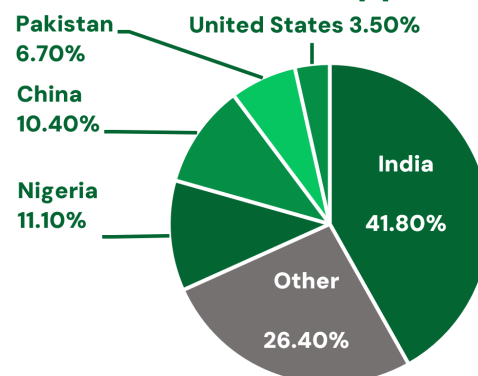### Top 5 Nationalities Granted Graduate Visas (Main Applicants)

Pakistan 6.70%
United States 3.50%
China 10.40%
Nigeria 11.10%
India 41.80%
Other 26.40%

Figure 7: *Top Five Nationalities Granted Graduate Visas (2024)*

Table 5: Top Five Nationalities Granted Graduate Visas (Main Applicants)

Nationalities	Grants	Percentages	Study Visas Issued	Retention Percentage
All Nationalities	213,250	100%	604,253	35%
India	89,321	42%	119,863	74%
Nigeria	23,648	11%	42,047	56%
China	22,191	10%	109,138	20%
Pakistan	14,337	7%	31,008	46%
United States	7,493	4%	14,583	51%
Others	56,350	26%	287,614	20%

As the Government 2025 White Paper points out, retention has increased across the board for international students since 2019, due to the relaxation of rules following leaving the European Union (Brexit) and the Covid-19 pandemic (Covid). The change has been stark (*His Majesty's Government, 2025: 32*):

> The proportion of students remaining in the visa system following the end of their studies has increased in recent years. Over half of students completing their studies in 2022, 2023 and 2024 had moved onto another visa route, compared to fewer than 20% in 2019 and 2020.

Perhaps more worryingly, recipients of student visas have then gone on to claim asylum (*ibid: 33*):

> The number of asylum claims matched to a visa has increased relatively steadily since mid-2021. Around 30% of asylum claims are from visa holders. Of this, students account for the largest proportion, at almost half (47%) of all asylum claims from visa holders.

If nearly half of all asylum claims from visa holders have been from former international students, there is evidently a cynical exploitation of the visa system taking place that cannot be considered a legitimate use of the intention of the system.

No effort has been made thus far to quantify these consequences of significant rates of student retention to the overall net migration figures. Notably, there exists no single data

source for numbers of completed degrees each year, with most sources focussing on enrolment statistics (included visas issued). Therefore, figures around completion and subsequent retention rates are estimates at best, but an estimation can be made.

Erudera has calculated that for the academic year 2021/22, a combined total of 191,676 international students received a postgraduate degree, and a further 97,160 received an undergraduate degree, for a total of 288,835 (*Erudera, 2022*). Similarly, for 2023, approximately 342,552 degrees were awarded to international students according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (*HESA, 2024*). HESA also calculated that there were 316,055 postgraduate degrees and 77,818 undergraduate degrees awarded to international students in the 2023/24 academic year (*HESA, 2025*).

Table 6: Estimated Numbers of International Students Awarded a Degree and Staying in the UK After Graduation

Year	Postgraduate Students	Undergraduate Students	Total	Estimated Staying
2022	191,675	97,160	288,835	144,418
2023	239,664	84575	324,239	162,120
2024	316,055	77,818	393,873	196,937
Total	**747,394**	**259.553**	**1,006,947**	**503,474**

Taking these figures together, we can see the following table, which estimates that over half a million people (514,470) joined the UK population by transferring their visa from a student visa to another type.

- Over the same period, if 30% of asylum claims were made by visa holders (as the government estimated), of which 47% were student visa holders, this equalled 44,851.
  - In 2022, the number of asylum claims coming from existing visa holders was 39,655, of which students accounted for 18,638.
  - In 2023, the number of asylum claims coming from existing visa holders was 38,575, of which students accounted for 13,430.
  - In 2024, the number of asylum claims coming from existing visa holders was 27,197, of which students accounted for 12,783.

This totals 559,321. Based on the government's own projections therefore, combined with ONS statistics, over half a million additional persons have joined the population since 2022 as a result of the explosion in student visas alone.

It is also possible to take the existing data available regarding enrolled international students and, calculate that of the roughly 50% of international students that have attended a UK university since 2022, this could lead to over one million people staying in the UK after their degrees end:

Table 7: The Number of International Students Enrolled in UK Universities Since 2022, and the Projected Number Expected to Stay by Changing Their Visa

Year	Postgraduate Students	Undergraduate Students	Total	Projected Staying
2022	372,520	302,680	675,200	351,104
2023	455,780	303,080	758,860	394,607
2024	435,630	296,655	732,285	380,788
Total	1,263,930	902,415	2,166,345	1,126,499

All of this compounds the existing pressures and issues identified in this report thus far. Not only this, but the Graduate Visa route has also proven itself to be subject to abuse and scandal. As Poppy Coburn detailed for The Critic in February 2023, it became clear that recipients of study visas, especially from Bangladesh and India, were abusing the system. As Coburn writes:

> *Indian media [was] reporting on the increasing use of scams, with prospective migrants finding loopholes in the British visa system to fraudulently enter the country. Take the example of agents enticing foreign students with thousands of pounds in loans in order to facilitate tuition fee proof, with the loan subsequently refunded after the amount has appeared on the client's bank statement.*

This is a story that has been repeated multiple times, especially recently. Former immigration officer Tony Smith has revealed in 2025 the same practices are still taking place, writing:

> *There are those who appear legitimate — with their paperwork in order — but are in fact gaming the system.*

Someone would come in with a bank statement showing they had £30,000 in their account. Our people could phone their bank and they would say it's true. Then you'd hear the applicant had turned up at a soup kitchen in the UK with no money, saying they were destitute. The would-be "students" — or organised criminals — pass the £30,000 from one applicant to another. Some crooked colleges in the UK are also in on the scam, providing proof of enrolment for bogus students.

The issue here is that cynical manipulation of the study visa system allows large numbers of foreign nationals to enter the country and then disappear. As far back as 2014, the Daily Mail reported that "*100,000 foreign students go missing every year*". The key reason is the total failure of the government to track international students once they have completed their degrees.

Conclusion: Reducing Student Visas

The student route should be capped. It is the largest visa route and as such must be controlled if the government plans to control overall numbers within a target. Widespread system abuse must be addressed, and the higher education sector must monitor international students and ensure they leave the United Kingdom after qualifying. If they wish to work in the UK, they must leave and qualify for a work visa in the way other overseas applicants do. The student visa route must cease to be one of the major paths to settlement.

As detailed in Section One, the main cause of high immigration in the United Kingdom is the study visa, of which the main route is sponsored study, where nearly all students are in higher education institutes, with most studying on a one-year taught masters postgraduate course. A very lax approach to dependants, plus a generous graduate visa, caused an explosion in numbers in this route from 2021, especially for students from India and Nigeria, as detailed in Section Two.

Dependants were allowed to work full-time, and the student

was guaranteed at least 2 years in the UK after their study (previously not even on completion of the course), during which they could work and attempt to become eligible for a sponsored work visa. Plus, work is permitted during study. So the study route virtually became a work route. The rules were tightened in 2024 so that only students on research postgraduate programmes could bring a dependant. This had an immediate impact on the numbers of dependants.

The child student route is for foreign children under 18 who attend UK independent schools. Numbers appear relatively small (though not *de minimis*) but the trend appears to be upwards. At this stage, exempting it from the cap would make it easier for officials to focus on managing the university sponsors, but a cap in a second phase might be necessary, depending on how numbers go There is no need to cap the short-term study route which is very small and is for short-term courses only.

How to Allocate a Cap on Study Visas

The creation of a cap on Study Visas follows the basic mechanism outlined above. First, the government would need to begin by deciding a reasonable cap, in line with the wider policy goal of reducing immigration numbers; then, the overall cap would need to be divided between institutions, would in turn be allowed to issue Certificates of Sponsorship. While student visas are issued throughout the year, there is a surge ahead of the start of the academic year in the Summer and Autumn months, so allocations may need to be front-loaded accordingly (and probably quarterly not monthly).

Universities may make more offers to students than they have places on the basis that students may choose a place of study from amongst several offers they hold; this will have to be factored in. A fixed number of COS could be allocated at the start of the cycle to each licensed sponsor, corresponding to their historical COS issuance, reduced to ensure the overall total is within the allocation; e.g. if the cap were 10% lower than the previous year's number of study visas, each sponsor would get 10% less than their most recent COS issuance (unless a 5 year average figure was used as the base

for each sponsor). This would allocate all the cap, whereas you might want to top slice 10-20% and distribute it as suggested below.

If a sponsor was not set to use their COS allocation, they could return it (with an incentive for early returns, e.g. in the form of non-loss of allocation share for next year); or, they could be allowed to trade their COS to other sponsors by selling at a price (to be agreed between them). In any case there needs to be a review and re-distribution mechanism to ensure allocations are used. To the extent they have a commercial value, trading between sponsors should be permitted and even encouraged.

A further elaboration would be to give an extra allocation (top sliced from within the overall cap) to a restricted number of institutions who are deemed to be world class according to an agreed league table. The Home Office already uses an index of internationally recognised institutions for the High Potential Individual visa (*UK Visas and Immigration, 2024*), with possibly the top five UK universities being drawn from this list. That would mean other universities receiving smaller allocations. It might also be desirable to skew allocations towards certain types of courses considered beneficial to the UK, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses.

Visas for PhD research programmes could be considered exempt from the cap. This is because they account for, in O'Brien's words, "*a trace element*" in the system, accounting for roughly 1% of all qualifications awarded in the 2023/2024 academic year (*O'Brien, 2025*). Dependants of PhD students could be left outside the cap, though the right of Masters research students to sponsor dependants ought to be removed. Alternatively, those dependants could count against a sponsor's COS allocation, requiring such institutions to choose between fee-paying main applicants or dependants.

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