



BRIEFING

Student migration to the UK

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This briefing examines international students in the UK. It presents statistics on their numbers, characteristics, economic impact, what they do after their studies, and how many settle in the UK.

Key Points

The number of visas issued to international students declined by 19% between 2022 and 2024.

The number of visas issued to student dependants fell by 85% in 2024 after the introduction of new restrictions.

In the 2023/24 academic year, approximately 730,000 international students were enrolled in UK universities, making up 25% of the total.

The number of EU students fell sharply after Brexit and then stabilised, making up 7% of all international students in 2023/24.

In 2023/24, the top countries of origin for new international students in the UK were India (25%), China (23%), and Nigeria (8%).

For the tenth year running, University College London received the largest number of new international students.

A record number of 172,000 Graduate Visas were issued in 2024.

International students have become more likely to remain in the UK after their studies.

Students who remain in the UK usually take around ten years to receive permanent status (settlement).

Tuition fees paid by international students accounted for 23% of the income of British universities in 2023/24.

Research has consistently found that international students have a positive economic impact on higher education in the UK.

The UK continued to be the second most popular destination for international students in the world in 2023.

Understanding the policy

Under freedom of movement, EU nationals paid the same tuition fees as domestic students, and were entitled to the same taxpayer-subsidised tuition fee loans. This meant that they did not have to pay any money upfront for tuition. However, following the end of free movement on 31 December 2020, the academic year 2020/21 was the last year that EU citizens enjoyed the same benefits as domestic students. From 1 August 2021, new EU students have generally been subject to higher international student tuition fees, without entitlement to government-subsidised loans. From 1 January 2021, all foreign citizens require a visa to come to the UK to study for more than six months (and some require visas to study for less than six months). Because EU citizens now have to apply for a student visa, they bear a substantially higher financial and administrative burden than under free movement.

In this briefing, we use the term 'EU' citizens to refer to those who enjoyed free movement rights before 2021. Note, however, that this also includes non-EU citizens with free movement rights, namely citizens of Switzerland and the EEA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway. 'Home' students refers to British and Irish citizens who ordinarily reside in the UK and have lived there for at least three years before starting their course.

Non-UK nationals can apply for a visa to study with an approved education provider, provided they meet the English language requirements and can demonstrate sufficient financial support to sustain themselves during their stay in the UK. The student route in the post-Brexit immigration system is largely unchanged from the one it replaced, which was known as 'Tier 4', and was a part of the previous five-tier system.

In recent years, several changes have been made to international student policy. In 2008, the post-study work route was expanded to allow students of any subject to stay in the UK for two years after graduation and work in any job, without needing to be sponsored by an employer. This route was closed to new applicants in 2012. However, a similar route was reintroduced on 1 July 2021. Rebranded as the 'Graduate Visa', it allows students to stay in the UK for two years after graduation, or three years if they are a PhD graduate. During this time, they can live and work at any skill level, and switch into other work routes if they find a suitable job. Applicants must pay the Immigration Health Surcharge, which is set at £776 per year and must be paid upfront, along with a visa application fee of £524.

In May 2025, the government's immigration [White Paper](#) announced a reduction in the standard duration of the Graduate Visa from 24 to 18 months. This change [took effect](#) in November 2025. The potential introduction of a levy on income from international student tuition fees was announced at the same time, with further details to be published in autumn 2025.

The last Conservative government had already introduced some restrictions on international students, in response to record levels of net migration. Since January 2024, the right to bring dependants has been restricted to postgraduate research students – previously, those coming for taught postgraduate courses like master's degrees had also been allowed to bring their partner and children to the UK.

When international students apply to continue their stay in the UK on a Skilled Worker visa, their employers do not have to pay them at the 'experienced worker' rate, but rather a 30% lower salary for 'new entrants', although that salary must be at least £33,400.

Understanding the evidence

Some international students stay in the UK for [only a few weeks](#) to study English. This briefing is concerned with longer-term international student migration, with a focus on further education and higher education, rather than students in other educational institutions such as vocational colleges or English language schools. Higher education institutions are recognised bodies with the power to award degrees and include all UK universities.

In this briefing, most data on international students in UK higher education come from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). HESA categorises students by 'domicile': a person's place of permanent residence before they started their course. This means that some non-UK nationals are UK-domiciled students, and some UK nationals are domiciled overseas. Data are sometimes restricted to "newly enrolled" students, to give an indication of annual inflow. In 2021, HESA changed its data to make it more comprehensive. This means that statistics after 2021 are not strictly comparable with those for previous years.

This briefing also uses Home Office administrative data on student visa issuances and extensions. Before 2021, these data did not include EU citizens, who before 2021 did not require visas. For 2021, these data are for both EU and non-EU citizens. Visa data are thus only comparable before and after 2021 if EU citizens are excluded.

Analysis in this briefing of the UK's global market share of students is based on data from [UNESCO](#) and the [OECD](#). These data concern 'tertiary students', which comprises students at ISCED levels 5 (short-cycle tertiary education), 6 (Bachelor's or equivalent level), 7 (master's or equivalent level), and 8 (doctoral or equivalent level).

Information on the subsequent visas and settlement of international students comes from Home Office data on the visa status of non-EU migrants over time, known as '[Migrant Journey](#)' data. These data provide the immigration status of an annual cohort of migrants at the end of each calendar year after their arrival. This is used to calculate the share of those entering the UK on a student visa in a given year who have settlement or another visa. Note that the data show only whether the person is still authorised to live in the UK, and not whether they are actually still here.

How many international students are granted visas in the UK?

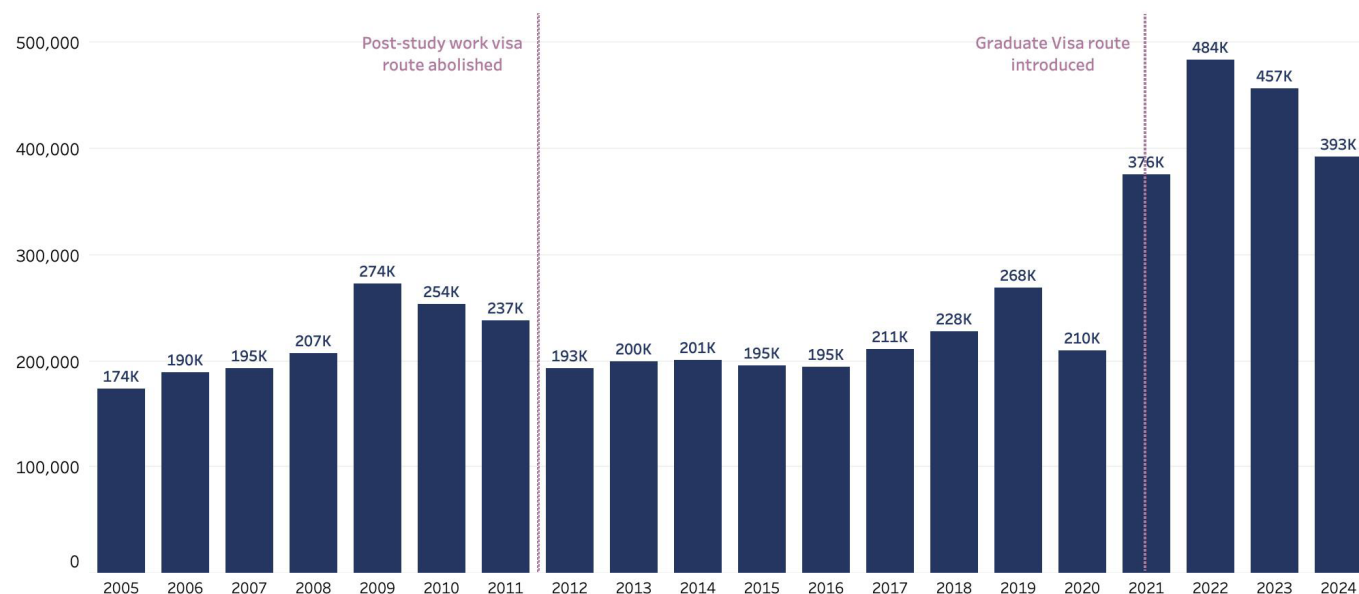
Student migration to the UK declined after reaching record levels in 2022. In 2024, around 393,000 visas were issued to international students (excluding their family members) – 14% fewer than the year before, and 19% fewer than in 2022. Nevertheless, student migration to the UK remained substantially higher than in the 2010s.

Recent declines in student migration have likely been at least in part driven by the introduction of new restrictions aimed at reducing net migration. Since January 2024, international students on a postgraduate taught course, such as a master's degree, have not been permitted to bring their partner and minor children with them to the UK. The Labour government retained these measures after coming into office, and announced further restrictions as part of its Immigration White Paper in May 2025. These include reducing the standard length of the post-study Graduate Visa from 24 to 18 months, and the introduction of a new levy on international student fees. However, at the time of writing in September 2025 it remained unclear when these new restrictions would be implemented.

Figure 1

Around 14% fewer student visas were issued in 2024 compared to the year before

Number of sponsored study visas issued, by year (main applicants only)



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics Quarterly Release, Entry clearance visa outcomes datasets, Table Vis_D02.

Notes: Main applicants only, excluding dependants. Data includes legacy student route visas, mostly issued before the introduction of sponsored study visas in 2009.



Conversely, the sharp rise in student migration between 2019 and 2022 was mostly driven by a combination of government policy and financial incentives for universities. In 2019, the government announced an explicit [target](#) to increase international student numbers to 600,000 by 2030 – which was already achieved in 2021 (see Figure 3). In addition, the Graduate route was introduced in 2021, allowing international students to live and work in the UK for two years after graduation, or three years for PhD graduates. At the same time – as we discuss in more detail below – universities in the UK faced strong financial incentives to recruit more international students since they pay significantly higher fees than domestic students.

How many family members do international students bring with them to the UK?

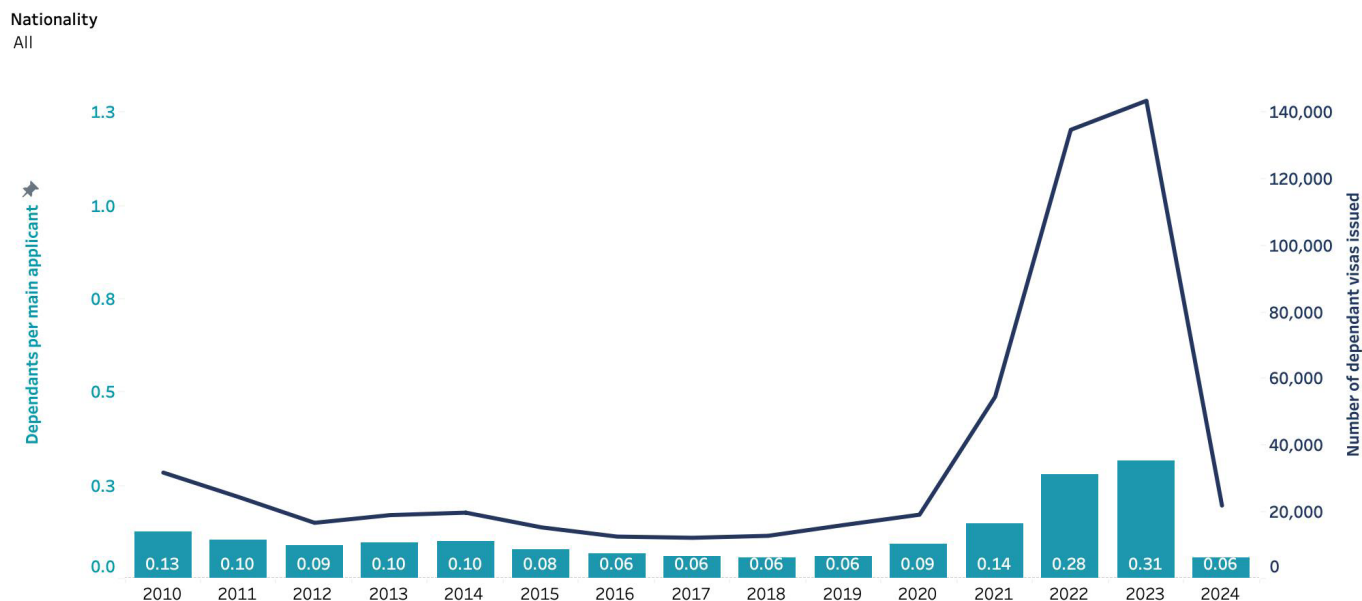
In 2024, around 22,000 visas were issued to student dependants – 85% lower than in 2023, when a record number of 143,000 student dependant visas were issued. As mentioned above, dependants were no longer allowed to join international students on a postgraduate taught course after January 2024. Only international students on postgraduate research courses, such as two-year research master's degrees and PhDs, continue to be able to bring dependants (dependants were previously allowed to join undergraduates, but this was restricted in 2011).

The average number of dependants per international student fell by a factor of five from 0.31 in 2023 to 0.06 in 2024. However, there are significant differences between nationalities. Previous increases were largely driven by higher student migration from India and Nigeria – nationals of these countries were much more likely to bring dependants than other international students, and accounted for 65% of student dependant visas in 2023. In contrast, students from other countries, like China or the United States, brought very few dependants even before the policy change.

Figure 2

The number of visas issued to student dependants fell by 85% in 2024 after restrictions were introduced

Number of student dependants visas issued and dependants per main applicant, by year



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics Quarterly Release, Entry clearance visa outcomes datasets, Table Vis_D02.

Note: Before 2021, EU nationals did not need a student visa and are hence excluded from the calculations. Data includes legacy student route visas, mostly issued before the introduction of sponsored study visas in 2009.



How many international students are enrolled in UK universities?

In the 2023/24 academic year, around 730,000 international students were studying in UK higher education institutions. That was 4% less than in 2022/23, when the number of international students in British universities reached a record high.

The share of international students in the UK has steadily increased since the 1990s. A quarter of all those studying in UK universities in 2023/23 were international students – well above the 17% in 2011/12 and 12% in 2001/02.

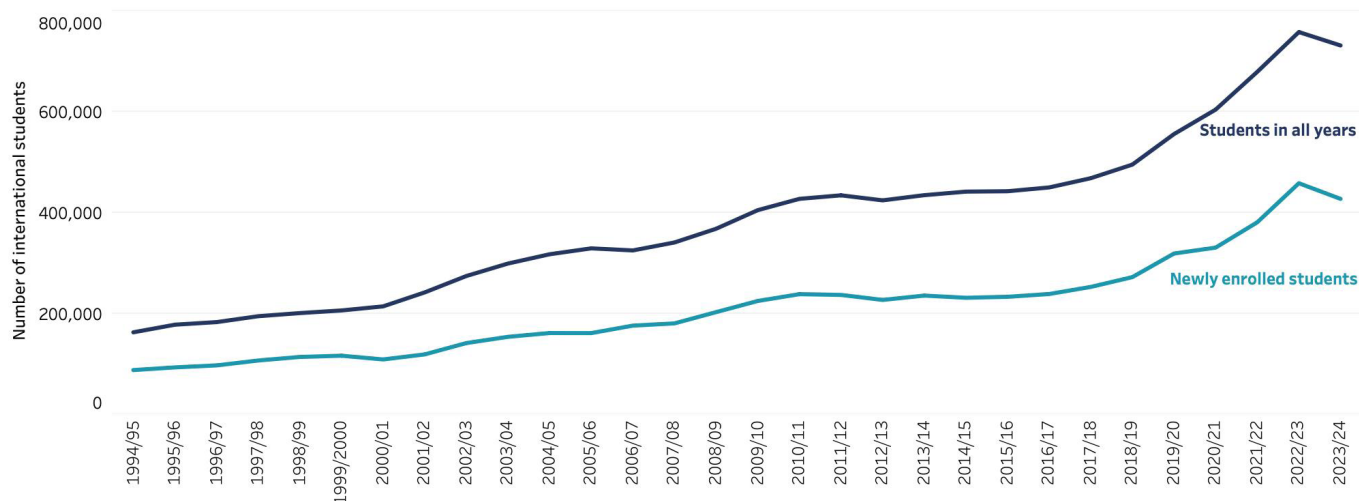
Figure 3

The number of newly enrolled international students fell by 7% in the 2023/24 academic year

Number and share of international students enrolled in UK universities, by academic year

Select metric:

Absolute number of international students



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA data. For 1994/5 to 2015/16: Students in Higher Education. For 2016/17 to 2023/24: Higher Education Student Data: Where do HE students come from? Note: These counts comprise part-time and full-time undergraduates and postgraduates. Numbers are rounded to the nearest five. Counts for 2015/16 and after are more comprehensive than previous counts and so are not strictly comparable.

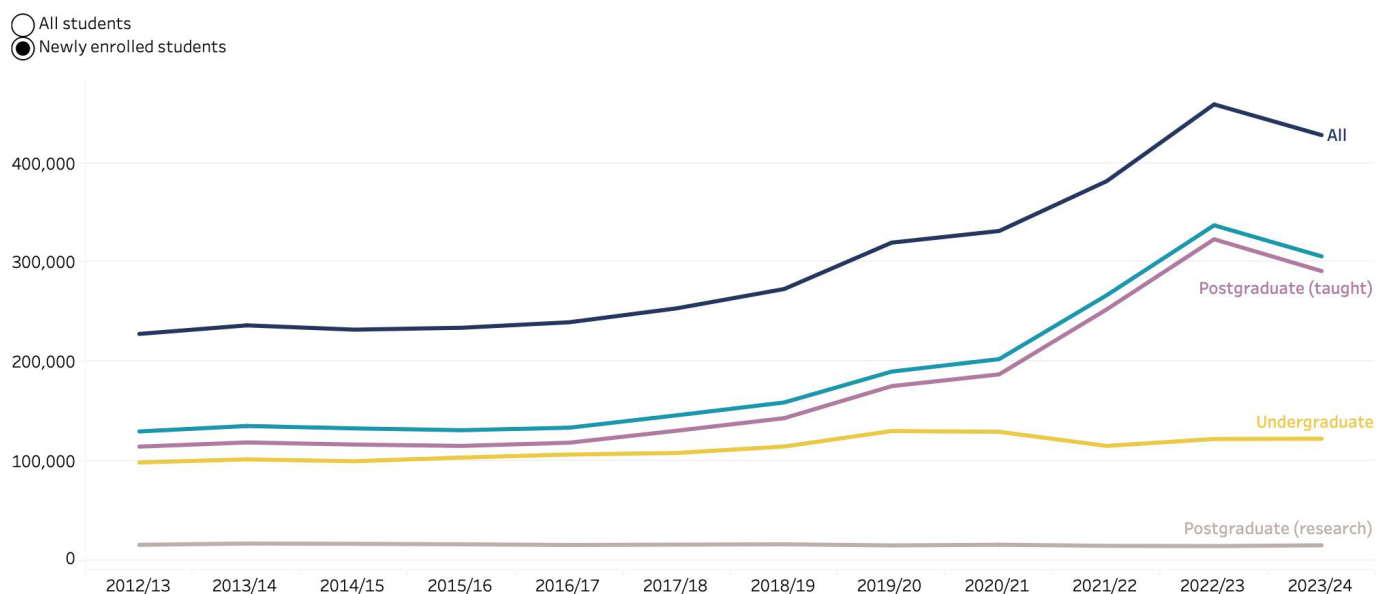


Most of the increase in international students until 2023, as well as their slight decline in 2024, was driven by those enrolling on master's courses and other taught postgraduate courses (Figure 4). The number of international students starting such courses declined by 10% between 2022/23 and 2023/24. In the same period, the number of new undergraduate students and postgraduate research students from outside the UK remained relatively unchanged.

Figure 4

In 2023/24, fewer international students enrolled on postgraduate taught courses

Number of international students enrolled at UK universities, by level of study



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA Higher Education Student Data: Where do HE students come from?

Note: These counts comprise part-time and full-time undergraduates and postgraduates. Numbers are rounded to the nearest five. Counts for 2015/16 and after are more comprehensive than previous counts and so are not strictly comparable.

**How many international students in the UK come from the EU?**

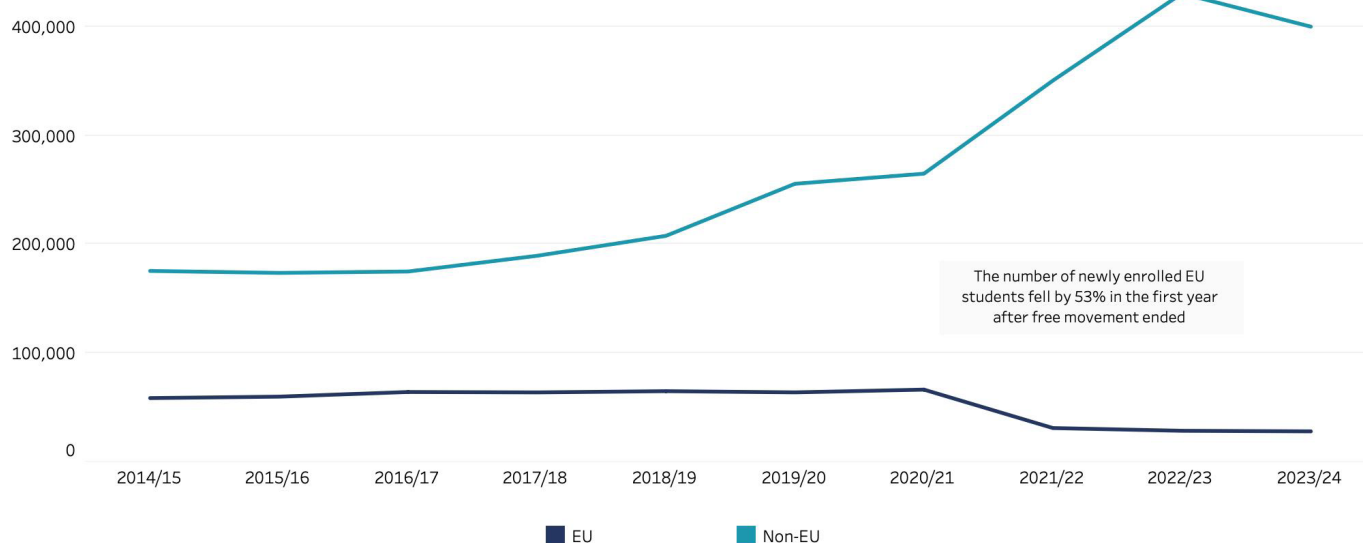
After the end of free movement and the start of the 2021/22 academic year, international students from the EU faced significantly higher international tuition fees and other requirements, such as the need to apply for visas. The number of newly enrolled EU students fell by 53% between 2020/21 and 2021/22 as the new rules came into effect. Numbers declined another 10% in the following two years. In 2023/24, around 28,000 EU students enrolled in a new course at UK universities, making up 7% of all new international students. The share of newly enrolled international students from the EU fell sharply over time, from a high of 27% in 2016/17.

The recent growth – and slight subsequent decline – in the total number of international students was mostly driven by those coming from non-EU countries, whose number more than doubled between 2018/19 and 2022/23.

Figure 5

EU students made up 7% of all international students in 2023/24, down from 27% in 2016/17

Newly enrolled students at UK universities, by domicile and academic year



Source: HESA Higher Education Student Statistics, 2021-22 academic year.

Note: Data is disaggregated by students' last domicile - their last country of residence before coming to the UK - rather than nationality, meaning some British and non-EU citizens living in the EU will be included in the figures.

**What are the most common nationalities among international students in the UK?**

In 2023/24, the top country of origin for new international students in the UK was India (25%), followed by China (23%), and Nigeria (8%).

China was the top country of origin for more than a decade before being surpassed by India in 2022/23. During the 2010s, universities in the UK become increasingly [reliant](#) on students from China as their numbers almost tripled. By 2019/20, they made up a third of all international students. The decline in the share of Chinese students reflects growth in other countries of origin rather than a fall in their overall numbers.

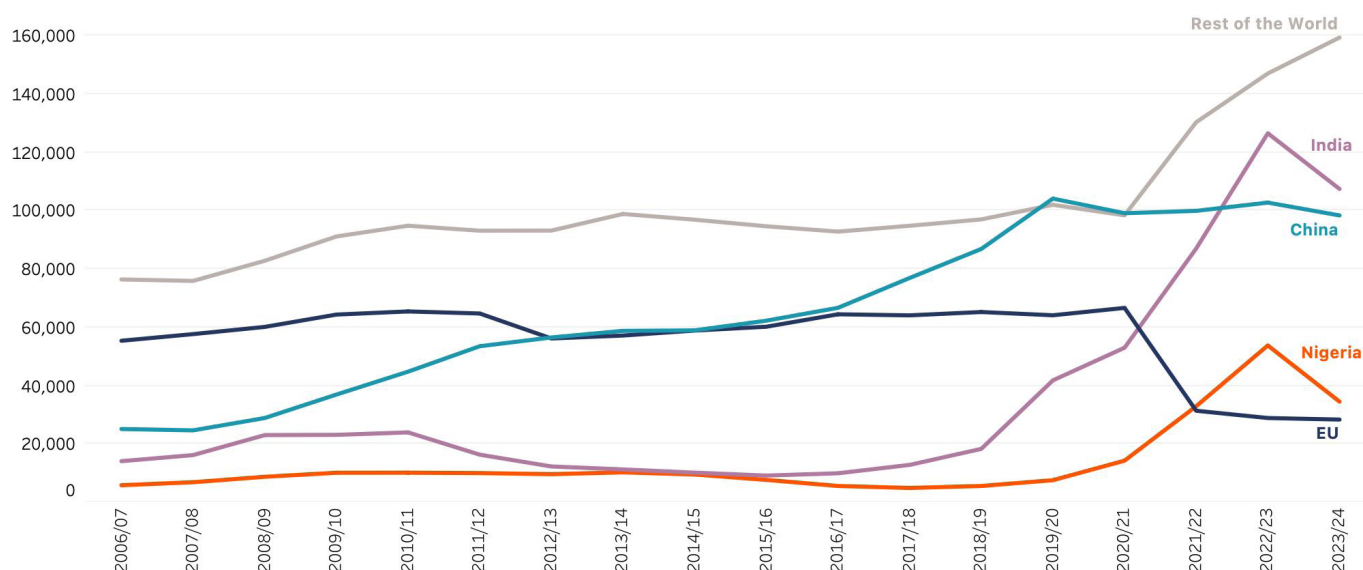
Much of the growth in overall international student numbers between 2018/19 and 2022/23 was driven by India and Nigeria. While numbers increased before 2021, the introduction of the Graduate Visa is likely to have fuelled growth. Indian and Nigerian students are particularly likely to remain in the UK after graduation (Figure 9). Indian student numbers also fell significantly after the previous post-study work visa was closed in 2011.

The decline in overall international student numbers in 2023/24 was likewise driven by these two nationalities. In fact, if Indian and Nigerian students are excluded, the total number of international students increased between 2022/23 and 2023/24. Indian and Nigerian students were much more likely than other nationalities to bring dependants before new restrictions were put in place, and hence were likely more affected by them. Nigeria also experienced [economic instability](#) after 2023, with a collapse in the currency making it more difficult for some students to [afford](#) tuition fees abroad.

Figure 6

India was the top country of origin for new international students in the UK in the last two academic years

Newly enrolled international students in UK higher education, by country of origin and academic year



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA data, Higher Education Student Data: Where do HE students come from?, OC051 Chart 6.

Note: These counts include part-time and full-time undergraduates and post-graduates. 'Rest of world' comprises all countries of origin except China, India, and EU countries. Numbers are rounded to the nearest five. Counts for 2014/15 and after are more comprehensive than counts before and so are not strictly comparable with earlier data.

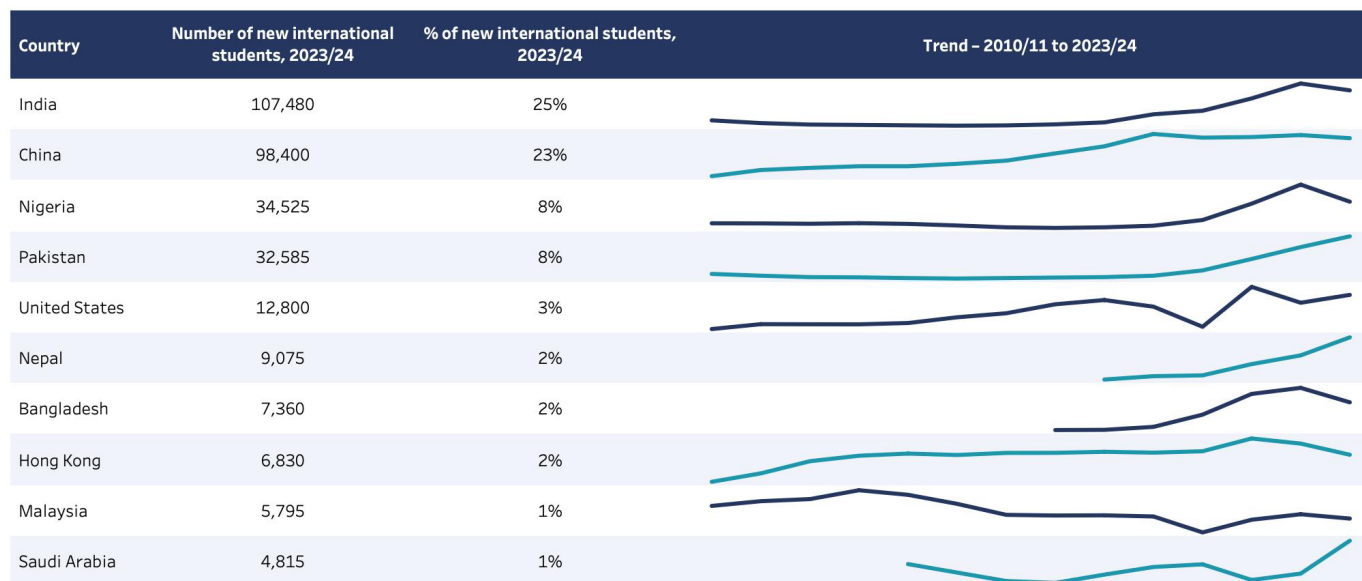


Table 1 shows the top 10 countries of origin for newly enrolled international students in UK higher education institutions in 2023/24. Eight of the top ten were Asian countries. Although there was a decline in new students from India and Nigeria in 2023/24, the number of new international students from several top destinations like Nepal and Pakistan continued to grow. For the first time in more than a decade, no European country was in the top 10, reflecting the general decline in the number of European students after Brexit.

Table 1

Asia accounts for most of the top 10 countries of origin for international students in the UK

Top 10 origin countries for newly enrolled intl. students in UK universities, 2023/24 academic year (trendlines since 2010/11)



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA data, Top 10 EU and non-EU countries of domicile for first-year student enrolments. For 2010/11 to 2014/15: Higher education student enrolments and qualifications obtained at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom; for 2016/17 to 2023/24: Higher Education Student Statistics, Where do HE students come from?

Notes: These counts include part-time and full-time undergraduates and postgraduates. Older data were missing for some countries of origin.

**Which universities receive the most international students?**

For the tenth consecutive year, University College London was the most popular UK university among international students in absolute terms, enrolling around 15,000 new international students in 2023/24 — 61% of its intake. Many universities with the largest numbers of new international students have consistently been among the top destinations for foreign students. This is particularly true of many Russell Group universities, 10 of which were part of the top 15 in the 2023/24 academic year.

However, some other institutions have experienced very fast growth in international student numbers between 2018/19 and 2023/24, despite not having a long history as top destinations for foreign students. Examples include the University of Hertfordshire and BPP University, which completed the top three in 2023/24. Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, their share of international students among new entrants increased from 24% to 62%, and from 27% to 68%, respectively. This coincides with the introduction of the Graduate visa.

Table 2

UCL was the top destination for international students in the UK for the tenth consecutive year

Number and share of newly enrolled international students, top 15 higher education providers

University	Number of new international students in 2023/24	% new international students in 2023/24	% international students, 2014/15 to 2023/24
University College London	15,360	61%	
University of Hertfordshire	11,970	62%	
BPP University	11,395	68%	
The University of Manchester	9,995	50%	
The University of Leeds	9,695	55%	
Coventry University	9,485	55%	
The University of Edinburgh	7,985	52%	
The University of Glasgow	7,890	43%	
King's College London	7,690	42%	
The University of Southampton	7,195	59%	
Ulster University	6,805	43%	
The University of Sheffield	6,590	49%	
The University of Bristol	6,075	47%	
The University of Warwick	5,950	48%	
Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	5,870	59%	

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA data, Higher Education Student Data: Where do HE students study?, DT051_Table 1.

Note: These counts include part-time and full-time undergraduates and postgraduates.

**How many Graduate Visas are issued in the UK?**

More international students have extended their stay in the UK after graduation in recent years, particularly after the Graduate Visa was introduced in 2021. This allows students to live and work in the UK after graduation – for three years for PhD graduates, and 18 months for all others (this was [reduced](#) from two years in November 2025).

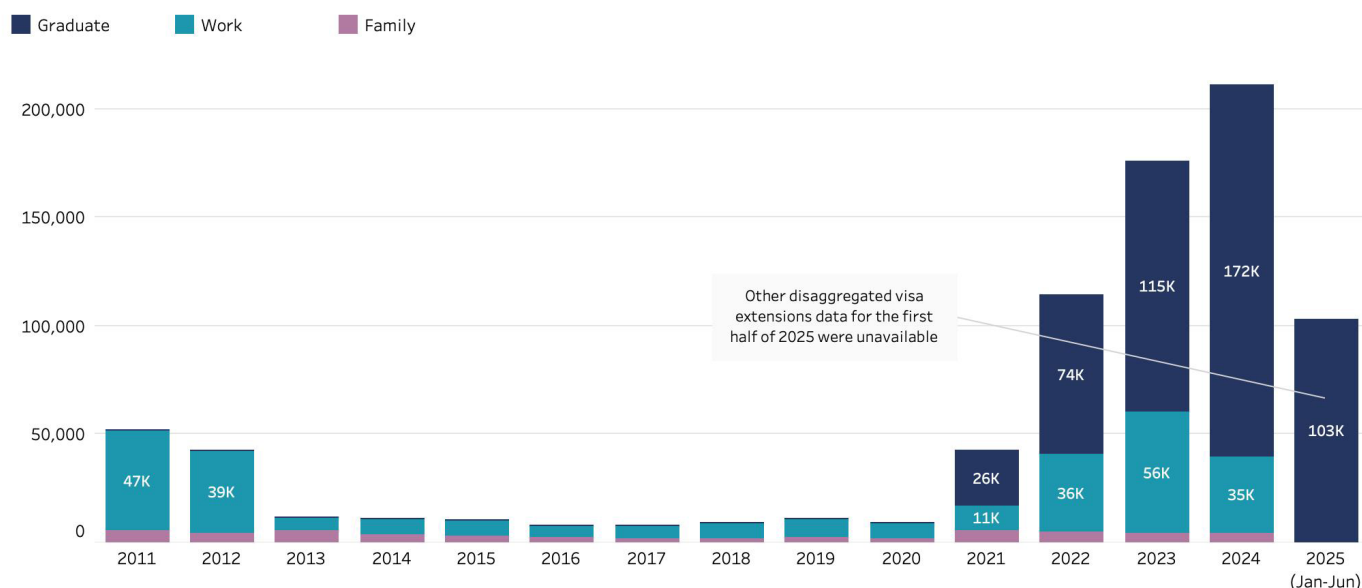
In 2024, around 172,000 former students were issued a Graduate Visa. Including dependants, around 242,000 such visas were granted. Numbers have increased sharply since the route was introduced, and evidence suggests the trend will continue in 2025 – around 103,000 visas were issued in the first half of the year, 15% more than in the same period of 2024.

The Graduate Visa is not the only way for international students to remain in the UK. In 2024, a further 39,000 international students switched to another type of visa, mostly work visas. There is evidence that a significant proportion of students switching onto a work visa after 2021 obtained jobs in the social care sector (for more details, see [International students entering the UK labour market](#)).

Figure 7

A record 172,000 Graduate Visas were issued in 2024

Number of student visa extensions for work and family, and number of Graduate Visas issued, by year (main applicants only)



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics - for 2011 to 2014: Extensions of stay, Table expc_01; for 2015 to 2024: Tables Exe_D01 and Exe_D02.

Notes: Graduate Visa issuances include a small number of people switching from another type of visa than a student visa. Data do not include EEA and Swiss nationals before 2021. Does not include "Other extensions" or extensions for study. Dependents are excluded.

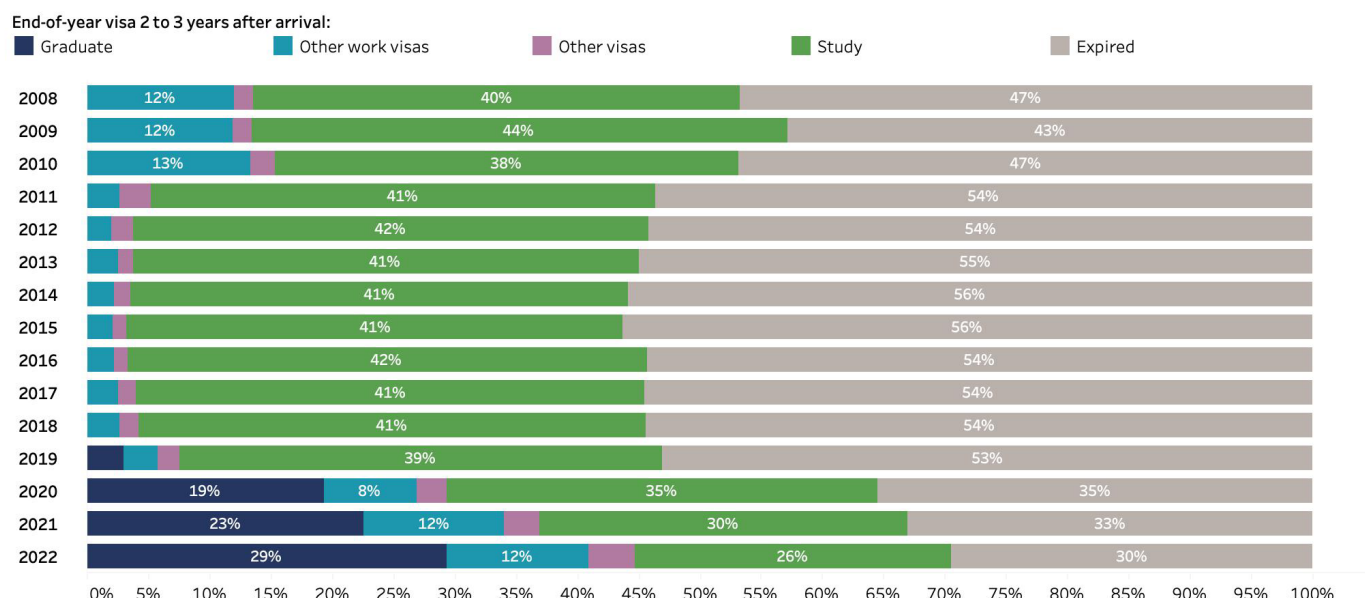


Data suggest that a significant share of recent international students have used the Graduate Route to remain in the UK. Looking at international students who first arrived in 2022, around 29% held a Graduate Visa by the end of 2024. Alongside a rise in the share of international students switching onto work visas, this means that fewer international students leave the UK within two to three years of arrival – under a third of the 2022 cohort, compared to over half in the 2010s.

Figure 8

29% of international students who arrived in 2022 held a Graduate Visa at the end of 2024

Share of main applicants on a sponsored study visa, by year of first arrival and end-of-year visa 2 to 3 years after arrival



Source: Migrant Journey dataset MJ_01.

Notes: Year refers to the year of first arrival in the UK, while the data is for visas held at the end of the year, two years later (e.g. data at the end of 2023 for migrants who first arrived in 2021). Other visas includes people who obtained ILR or citizenship.



Some researchers [argue](#) that the UK economy [benefits](#) when international students continue to work in the UK after graduating, as they are often young, educated, and have specific skills that can help British businesses break into new markets. However, others argue that the UK benefits more when international students return to their country of origin. This is because they may [become ambassadors for the UK](#), enhancing the country's [soft power](#) by becoming [influential figures](#) in their countries of origin. Returning students may also [strengthen](#) countries' business and research [links](#) to the UK.

How many international students remain in the UK after graduation?

Study visas are temporary and do not provide a direct route to settlement. This means that time spent on a study visa – or on the post-study Graduate Visa – does not count towards the five years of residence in the UK that is normally required before a migrant may apply for settlement. However, time spent on a study or Graduate visa does count towards the ten-year route to settlement, which is for those who have lived lawfully and continuously in the UK for ten years or more.

Among migrants issued an initial study visa in 2019, around 25% still had permission to stay in the UK in 2024, around five years later. The other three quarters had no valid visa, and most are likely to have left the UK. Of the total, 14% had switched onto a work visa, and another 7% were still on study visas. The share of people who still held a valid visa five years after arriving on a study visa has risen slightly in recent years, and is likely to continue increasing in the future due to the large number of international students switching into the Graduate route in recent years or otherwise extending their stay.

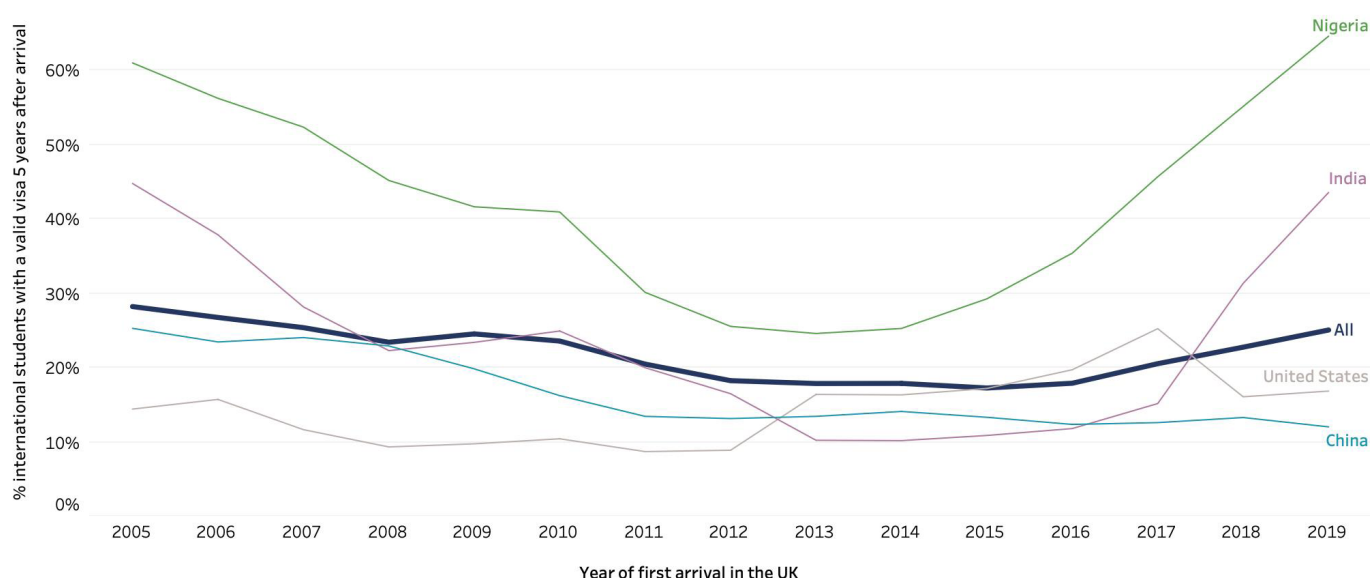
There are notable differences between nationalities regarding their status five years after arriving in the UK on a study visa. Students from Nigeria and India have been particularly likely to remain in the UK after graduation. Looking at those first arriving on a student visa in 2019, around 65% of Nigerians and 45% of Indians still held a valid visa at the end of 2024, with these shares increasing sharply in recent years. In contrast, relatively few international students from China or the US remained in the UK five years after their first arrival.

In addition to international students extending their stay by switching to another visa, recent years have seen significant numbers apply for asylum in the UK. More than 16,000 people who first entered the country on a study visa applied for asylum in 2024, four times more than in 2019. The share of international students among all asylum applications increased from 9% to 15% during this period.

Figure 9

Around a quarter of international students who first arrived in 2019 still held a valid visa at the end of 2024

Share of study visa holders holding a valid leave to remain 5 years after first arriving in the UK, top nationalities (main applicants and dependants)



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Migrant Journey, Table MJ_01.

Notes: The remaining migrants will have expired visas and so can be expected to have left the UK. 'Family visa' includes family of UK citizens or settled residents and those on EEA family permits. A valid visa does not confirm that its holder is still in the UK, because they might have left prior to the visa's expiry. Valid visas include ILR and citizenship grants.



How long does it take for international students to get settlement in the UK?

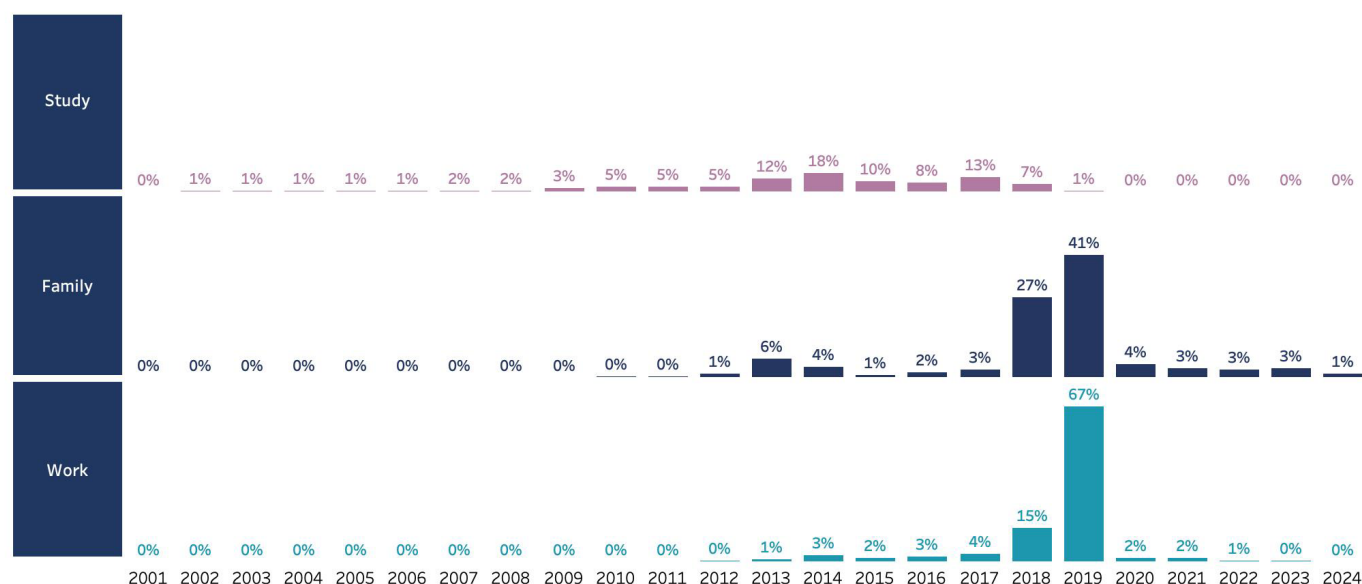
Around 11% of all migrants granted settlement in 2024 initially came to the UK on a study visa. Within this group, 61% first arrived in the UK between 2012 and 2016 – a period consistent with a roughly ten-year route to settlement among international students.

International students tend to take longer to settle in the UK than work or family migrants, who tend to be on a five-year route to settlement. Time spent on a study visa or the Graduate Visa does not count towards the residence requirement for the five-year route to settlement. However, former students can receive settlement after a total of ten years spent continuously and legally in the UK under long residence rules (for more detail, see [Settlement in the UK](#)).

Figure 10

International students who remain in the UK usually take around 10 years to obtain settlement

Number and share of people granted settlement in 2024, by type and year of initial visa (main applicants and dependants)



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Migrant Journey: 2022 report, Volume 2, Table MJ_02. Notes: 'Family' comprises visas issued to the family members of British citizens or non-British settled residents, and EEA family permits. Other categories are not included in the chart, such as 'dependants joining or accompanying', and 'settlement'.

**How much money do UK universities make from international student fees?**

UK universities have become increasingly reliant on revenue from international students' tuition fees. In the 2023/24 academic year, these fees amounted to approximately £12bn, or over 23% of British universities' total income. Income from international students' tuition fees increased sharply in recent years, from only £5.7bn in the 2016/17 academic year.

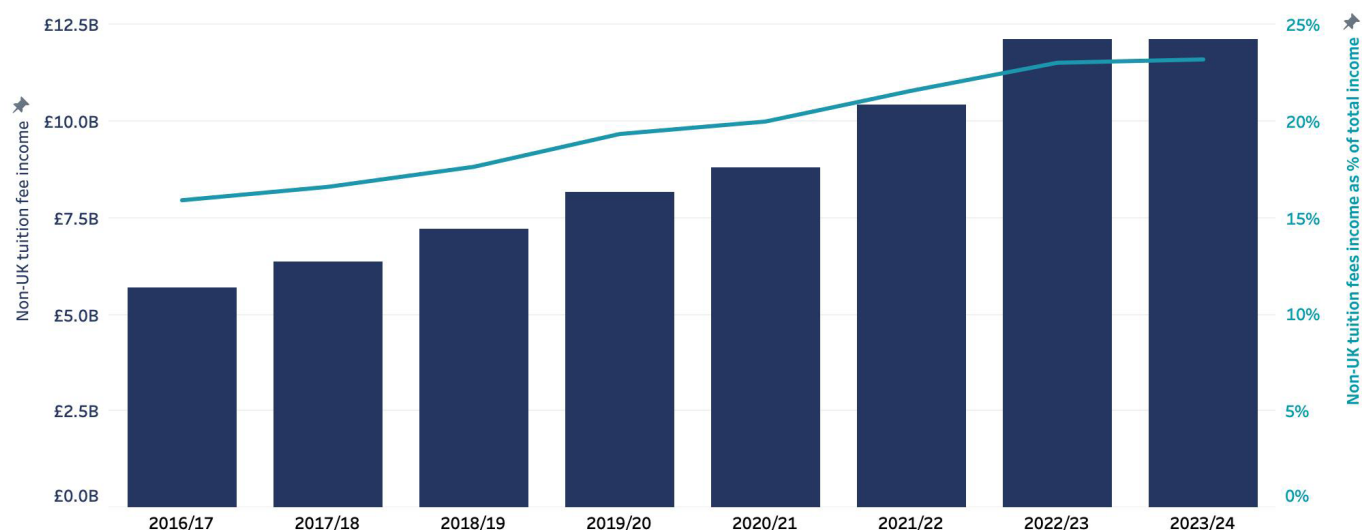
Since international students pay much higher fees than domestic students, they '[cross-subsidise](#)' the education of the former – for example, by generating revenue for improved facilities or by sustaining a wider availability of courses. The increased reliance on tuition fees from international students happened at a time of increasing fiscal strain for universities, particularly with regard to the costs of undergraduate teaching. Since rising to £9,000 per year in 2012, the undergraduate tuition fee cap in England has remained largely unchanged – it rose to £9,250 in 2017, and to £9,535 in 2025. However, even after the latest increase, undergraduate fees for domestic students fell by 27% in real terms between 2012 and 2025.

This means that many UK universities face shortfalls for each domestic undergraduate student, with consequences for their financial stability. According to [analysis](#) by the Russell Group, around 43% of universities in England were forecasting a deficit in the 2024/25 academic year. A [survey](#) by Universities UK – an industry organisation – conducted in the first half of 2025 showed that 49% of institutions had closed courses in the last three years, and 18% had closed entire departments.

Figure 11

In 2023/24, tuition fees from international students made up 23% of UK universities' income

Tuition fees revenue from non-UK students across UK universities, in £ and as a share of total income



Source: HESA Finance Data, What is the income of HE providers?

Notes: Excludes students domiciled in the UK, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Changes to regulations mean that the figures for 2018/19 include a broader range of HE providers than figures for earlier years. Therefore, the latest finance data is not strictly comparable with that for earlier years.



What is the economic impact of international students in the UK?

The main economic impact of international students comes from the high tuition fees they pay, although additional contributions may be made due to the money they spend in the UK on accommodation, subsistence, and travel. One approach to quantifying this impact is to focus on *export earnings* from the higher education sector – expenditure on goods and services in the UK using money from abroad. According to the most recent estimates from the [Department for Education](#), export earnings attributable to international students in UK higher education reached £23.1 billion in 2022. In real terms, this represents an increase of 78% compared to in 2010.

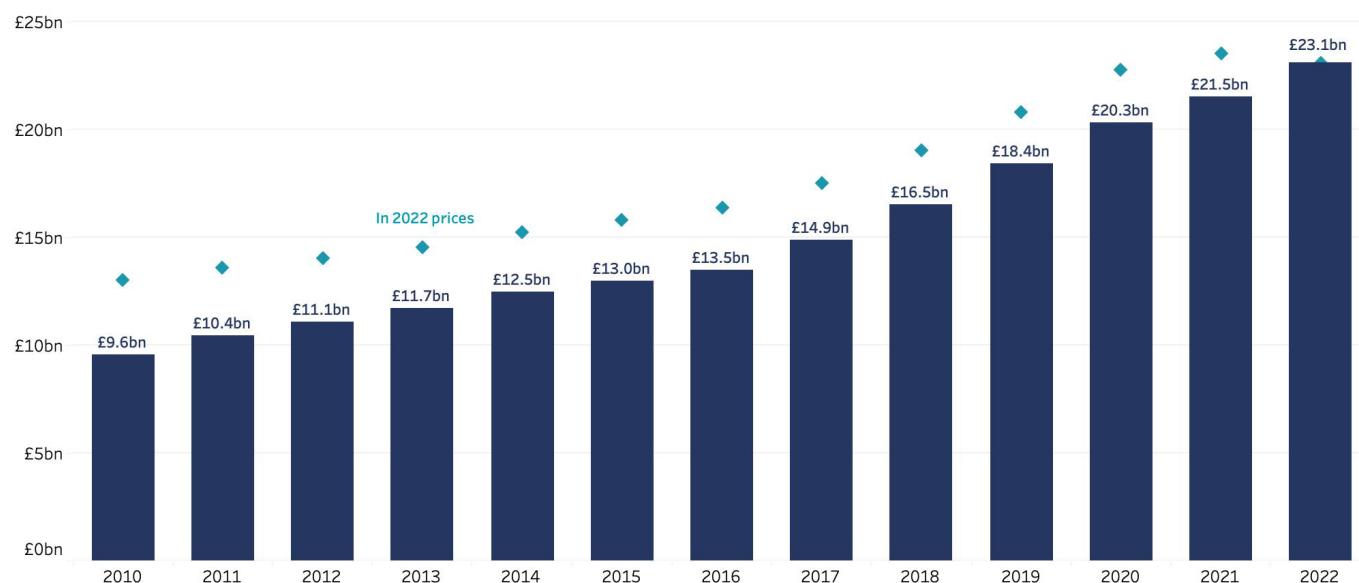
By contrast, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) found that the impacts of former international students in the UK labour market was neither particularly negative nor positive. It found that graduating students (mostly with master's degrees) had earnings and occupational distributions broadly similar to those of domestic undergraduates 15 months after graduation.

A separate question is the fiscal impact of international students who remain in the country after graduation. Those who go on to a Graduate Visa are likely to have a positive fiscal impact – at least in the short-run, while on this route. At the time of its introduction, the Graduate Visa was [estimated](#) to result in a £6.1 billion net benefit to the Exchequer within its first decade, mostly from additional tax revenue. Data remain limited, although a review of the Graduate Visa by the MAC from 2024 suggested that the fiscal impact of visa holders was likely to be positive given their relatively high employment rates and limited access to public benefits. Other international students who remain in the UK – as well as those who stay after the end of their Graduate Visa – switch onto other types of visas, such as a work visa. Their fiscal impact will depend on their characteristics, most importantly their levels of income (for more details, see [The Fiscal Impact of Immigration in the UK](#) and [International students entering the UK labour market](#)).

Figure 12

International students brought in £23bn in export earnings in 2022

Export earnings attributable to international students in UK higher education, by year



Sources: Department for Education, UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity, June 2025.

Note: Inflation-adjusted figures are obtained using the official BoE conversion rate and show 2022 prices.

**How does the UK compare to other global destinations for international students?**

Data from UNESCO shows that the UK was the second most popular destination for international students globally in 2023, behind the United States and ahead of Australia. This has been true over the last twenty years with the exception of 2019, when Australia briefly surpassed the UK. In 2023, the UK had an approximately 10% share of the global market for international students, with around 748,000 international tertiary-level students. This includes students in higher education, as well as other post-secondary courses.

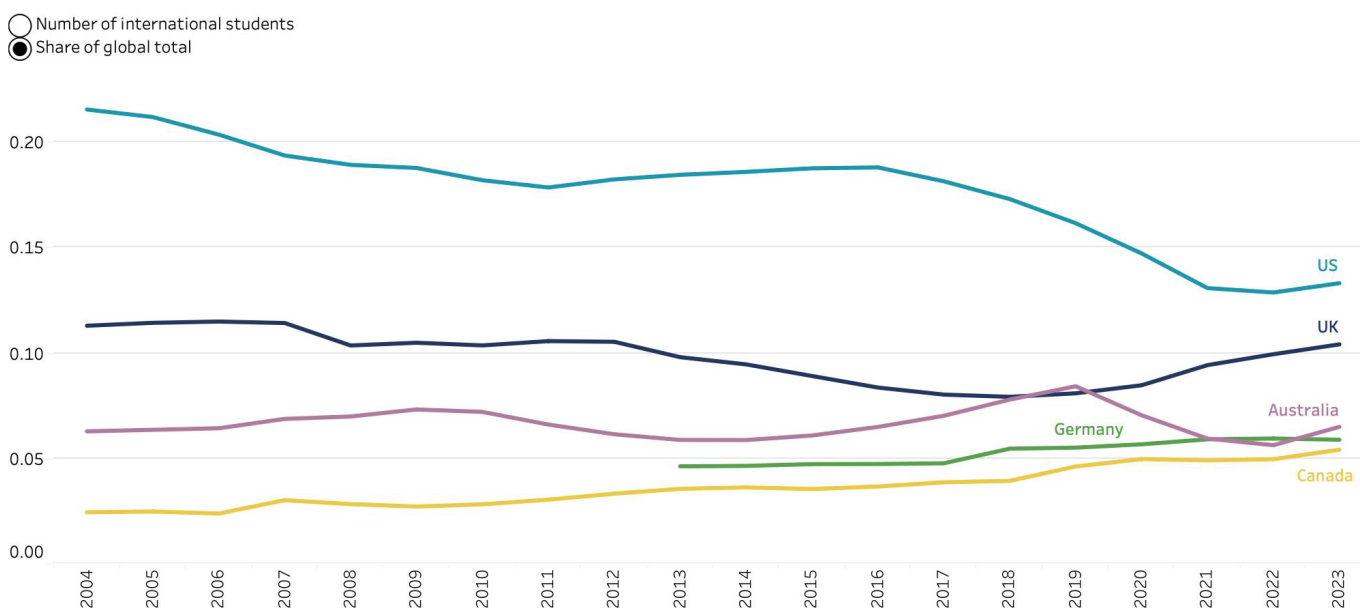
The UK's share of the global market fell from 11% in 2007 to 8% in 2019, despite an increase in international student numbers. This largely resulted from faster growth among other top destinations, like Australia and Canada. A rapid rise in the number of international students in the UK, as well as slight declines in the US and Australia, led to the subsequent reversal of this trend.

Changes in UK immigration policy, such as the closure of the post-study work route in 2012 and its subsequent reintroduction in 2021, may have also played a role. Research suggests that the UK's immigration policies do influence students' choices to study here, alongside a range of [other factors](#), such as the exchange rate, economic growth in origin countries, and policies in competitor countries.

Figure 13

The UK remained the world's second most popular destination for international students in 2023

Internationally mobile inbound students, number and share of global total, by year, selected destinations



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UNESCO Institute for Statistics and OECD data on mobile students enrolled.

Notes: Includes students at ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) levels 5 (short-cycle tertiary education), 6 (Bachelor's or equivalent level) and above. This excludes some students in UK further education, e.g. ISCED level 4, which includes "post-secondary non-tertiary education".



Evidence Gaps and Limitations

While good quality data exist on international students in higher education, mainly from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there is comparatively little information on further education.

With regard to international students' economic impact, the available research is limited largely to occasional studies of their export earnings: the revenue they generate through tuition fees and living expenditure. Yet international students may have broader effects that are difficult to measure, such as their contribution to research or the UK's soft power.

Nor is much known about the economic activities of students while they are studying, such as how many work, and what kind of work they do.

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The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration. www.compas.ox.ac.uk

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