BRIEFING

Student migration to the UK

AUTHORS: Peter William Walsh
PUBLISHED: 23/09/2022
NEXT UPDATE: 25/09/2023

5th Edition

www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk
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**

Student migration to the UK rebounded after the COVID-19 pandemic, hitting an all-time high in 2021.

In the academic year 2020/21, more than 600,000 international students were enrolled in UK higher education, making up 22% of all HE students.

EU student applications fell by around 50% from 2020 to 2022.

Among international students starting in UK higher education in 2020/21, 80% came from non-EU countries and 30% came from China.

For the seventh year running, University College London received the largest number of new international students (in the academic year 2020/21).

From 2008 to 2019, the UK lost global market share in international students to Australia, Canada, and China, although the absolute number of international students coming to the UK increased.

Work visa grants to non-EU former students fell by 84% from 2011 to 2020, before the decision to re-introduce post-study work rights in 2021.

Most non-EU students leave the UK after their studies.

Students who remain in the UK longer term usually take ten years to settle.

Research has consistently found that international students have positive economic impacts in the UK.

Tuition fee income from non-EU students has grown substantially from 2000/01, making up 17% of UK universities’ total income in 2020/21.

**Understanding the policy**

Under EU freedom of movement, EU citizens paid the same tuition fees as ‘Home’ students, and were entitled to the same taxpayer-subsidised tuition fee loans, which meant that they did not have to pay any money up front for tuition fees. 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 Home students. From 1 August 2021, new EU students have generally been subject to the 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 administrative burden than under free movement.
In this briefing, we use the term ‘EU’ to describe those who enjoyed free movement rights before 2021, but please note that this also includes non-EU members with free movement rights, namely Switzerland and the EEA countries Iceland, Lichtenstein, and Norway. ‘Home’ students refers to British and Irish citizens who are ordinarily resident in the UK and 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, as long as they meet minimum English language requirements and can support themselves while they are 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, there have been several changes 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, and students’ permission to work was restricted. However, this 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 – to live and work at any skill level, and to switch into skilled work routes if they find a suitable job. Applicants must pay the Immigration Health Surcharge, which is currently set at £624 for each year the person will be in the UK and must be paid up front, along with the visa application fee, which is £725.

When former international students apply to stay on 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’, so long as it is at least £20,480.

In 2019, the UK government published a policy paper on International Education Strategy (with an update published in 2021). The paper set targets to increase the value of education exports to £35 billion per year, and the number of international students hosted in the UK to at least 600,000 per year by 2030. The latter of these targets has already been met (see Figure 2).

**Understanding the evidence**

Many international students stay in the UK for only a few weeks to study English (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018, p.4). This briefing is concerned with longer-term international student migration, with a focus on higher education and further 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 as well as some higher education colleges.

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. 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 the statistics for 2021 are not strictly comparable with those for previous years.

More recent data on applicants for university study in the UK come from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which manages the undergraduate application process to UK universities. As such, these data are not available for postgraduate applicants.

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 over time if EU citizens are excluded.
Student migration to the UK rebounded after the COVID-19 pandemic, hitting an all-time high in 2021

COVID-19 substantially reduced student migration to the UK (Figure 1). This is clear from the number of sponsored study visa issuances, which are those issued for studying in universities or colleges (and excluding short-term study visas, which are for English-language courses lasting less than 11 months). Issuances of student visas have a seasonal pattern: most are issued in the third quarter of a year (i.e., in July, August, or September), before the beginning of the academic year in September. In Q2 2020, issuances of sponsored study visas (i.e., for longer term study in higher education rather than short-term English language courses) were down 99% compared with Q2 2019, and in Q3 2020, 42% fewer student visas were issued than in the same quarter in the previous year.

By Q3 2021, student visa issuances had rebounded. In Q3 2021, 244,000 visas were issued, more than in any other quarter since 2005, the earliest year of record in the latest Home Office datasets. Some of this increase may have been due to the 2020/21 cohort of students delaying their applications for student visas due to the pandemic, when universities shifted to remote learning, and then applying for them after universities reintroduced face-to-face teaching.

Figure 1

Analysis in this briefing of the UK’s global market share of students is based on data from UNESCO. 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) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

Information on the settlement of students comes from Home Office data on the visa status of non-EU migrants over time, known as ‘Migrant Journey’ data (Home Office, 2022b). These data provide the immigration status of an annual cohort of new non-EU-citizen entrants at the end of each calendar year after their arrival, and may be used to calculate the share of those entering the UK on a student visa in a given year who have settlement or citizenship, or permission to stay in the UK on another visa, five years later. 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.
In the academic year 2020/21, more than 600,000 international students were enrolled in UK higher education, making up 22% of all HE students

Study is a major reason that people move to the UK (see the Migration Observatory briefings, Migrants in the UK: An Overview and Who migrates to the UK and why?). In the academic year 2020/21, around 605,000 international students, both EU and non-EU, were studying in UK higher education institutions, the largest number on record (Figure 2: Absolute number of international students). This exceeded the target of 600,000 by 2030 set in the government’s Higher Education Strategy.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, the number of newly enrolled international students (i.e., those starting their course) reached a record high in 2020/21 of around 332,000, up 4% on the previous year (Figure 2: Absolute number of international students). This does, however, represent slower growth than in previous years: 2019/20 student enrolments were 17% higher than in 2018/19.

The decline in visa grants during height of the pandemic in 2020 did not correspond with large falls in student numbers. One plausible explanation for this is that people enrolled at UK universities instead studied remotely (HESA, 2022a), which does not require a visa for entry to the UK.

The increase in international students during the pandemic ran contrary to some forecasts (e.g., Drayton & Waltmann, 2020). But other analysts, such as the Higher Education Policy Institute, predicted an increase in student enrolments, because “recessions tend to mean that people want more education because the alternatives – underemployment or unemployment – are worse, and having more skills can protect you against the economic chill winds” (Hillman, 2020).

Since 1994/95, international students have made up a growing share of all higher education students in the UK. In 2020/21, international students made up 22% of all students in UK higher education, the highest on record (Figure 2: International students as a % of total students).

Figure 2

Number of international students in UK higher education, and as a share of all students, 1994/95 to 2020/21

For international students in all years and newly-enrolled students; non-UK domiciled students (EU and non-EU); academic years

![Graph showing the number of international students and their share of total students from 1994/95 to 2020/21]
The UK’s 24 Russell Group universities attract a disproportionate share of the UK’s newly enrolled international students. Whilst the Russell Group universities made up 9% of the UK’s higher education providers (24 out of the 273 listed by HESA) in the academic year 2020/21, they attracted 42% of new student enrolments (139,000 out of 332,000).

According to UNESCO, in 2019 the UK was the third most popular destination worldwide for international students, behind the United States and Australia (referring to total tertiary students enrolled). However, Australia’s tough COVID restrictions may mean that the UK and other countries will have overtaken it in new overseas student enrolments in 2020 and 2021.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total international students enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>370,653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>500,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>480,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>331,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>282,922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>279,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>France</td>
<td>246,378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>225,339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>202,907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
<td>201,177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, Education, National monitoring, Number and rates of international mobile students (inbound and outbound).

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”. Includes those in any year of their studies (and not just newly enrolled students).

EU student applications fell by around 50% from 2020 to 2022, likely due in part to Brexit

There has been a decline in the number of EU applicants for undergraduate study, with 51% fewer applicants for study in the 2022 academic year (beginning in September) than in the 2020 academic year (Figure 3). This decline took place alongside a 24% increase in non-EU undergraduate student applications over the same period, suggesting that Brexit, which affected only EU citizens and their family members, is likely to have played a role, and not just the pandemic. Factors contributing to this decline in undergraduate EU applicants include the need to apply for a visa, higher international student tuition fees, and not being able to access government-subsidised loans for the payment of tuition fees.
Among international students starting in UK higher education in 2020/21, 80% came from non-EU countries and 30% came from China

A large majority of international students starting in higher education come from outside the EU. In the academic year 2020/21, non-EU students made up 80% of the annual international student intake (Figure 4). This is despite the fact that non-EU domiciled students at that time paid higher tuition fee rates than Home students and were not entitled to subsidised tuition fee loans.

From 2009/10 to 2019/20, UK universities became increasingly reliant on students from a single country, China (see Johnson et al., 2021). In 2019/20, Chinese students made up a third of all newly enrolled students. However, there is evidence that this reliance is decreasing: in 2020/21, Chinese students made up 30% of new students (Figure 4 and Table 2). Visa data suggest this trend may continue, due to higher numbers of students from India, Nigeria, and Pakistan (Home Office, 2022a).

China's large population and growing wealth make it an increasingly major source country for international students globally. In the US, for example, Chinese students across all levels and not just in higher education accounted for 35% of all international students (not just newly-enrolled students) in the academic year 2020/21 (IIE, 2021). In Australia, the figure was 28% (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022).

Indian student numbers fell from 2011/12 to 2018/19, but rose to record levels since. In part, the fall may have been due to the abolition of the post-study work visa (Figure 9 shows the preference of Indian students for work in the UK after graduation). The reversal in Indian student numbers was clear in 2019/20, before the pandemic, and continued to grow despite the pandemic, reaching 53,000 new enrolments in 2020/21. These figures do not include those studying at further education colleges, where the decline in Indian students was particularly sharp following policy changes in the early years of the 2010–2015 coalition government. In 2011, there were around 34,000 confirmations of acceptance for studies (CASs) issued to Indian nationals for study in tertiary, further education, or other non–HE institutions, compared with around 1,500 in 2021 (Home Office, 2022a).
Figure 4

Table 2 shows the top 10 countries of origin for newly enrolled international students in UK higher education institutions in 2020/21. There has been particular growth in new students from Nigeria and Pakistan. This trend appears to have continued, as evidenced by the more up-to-date statistics on sponsored study visa issuances. These show large increases in visa issuances in Q3 2021 compared with Q3 2020: a 329% increase in visas issued to Pakistani nationals (around 1,300 to 5,700 main applicants), and a 335% increase for Nigerians (from around 3,000 to 13,000).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of new students, 2020/21</th>
<th>% of new students, 2020/21</th>
<th>Trend - 2008/09 to 2020/21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>99,160</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>52,015</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>14,270</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>9,870</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>8,420</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>7,120</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>6,630</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>6,220</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>6,040</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>5,960</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA data, Higher Education Student Statistics. Where do HE students come from? Table 2 shows the top 10 countries of origin for newly enrolled international students in UK higher education institutions in 2020/21. There has been particular growth in new students from Nigeria and Pakistan. This trend appears to have continued, as evidenced by the more up-to-date statistics on sponsored study visa issuances. These show large increases in visa issuances in Q3 2021 compared with Q3 2020: a 329% increase in visas issued to Pakistani nationals (around 1,300 to 5,700 main applicants), and a 335% increase for Nigerians (from around 3,000 to 13,000).
For the seventh year running, University College London received the largest number of new international students (in the academic year 2020/21)

In the academic year 2020/21, around 332,000 international students began their first year in UK higher education (see Figure 2, above). For the seventh year in a row, the most popular university destination was University College London, which received over 14,000 new international students (Table 3). LSE had the largest share (72%) of new students that were international – also coming top in that league table in every academic year from 2014/15 to 2020/21.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Number of new international students</th>
<th>% of new students that are international</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London School of Economics and Political Science</td>
<td>5,930</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine</td>
<td>5,785</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College London</td>
<td>14,395</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the Arts, London</td>
<td>5,145</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Edinburgh</td>
<td>8,415</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Sheffield</td>
<td>7,025</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Manchester</td>
<td>10,075</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Glasgow</td>
<td>8,980</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Warwick</td>
<td>5,880</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King's College London</td>
<td>9,080</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coventry University</td>
<td>7,670</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulster University</td>
<td>7,550</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Leeds</td>
<td>6,635</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Hertfordshire</td>
<td>5,635</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Birmingham</td>
<td>4,980</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Year 2020/21

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

Note: These counts include part-time and full-time undergraduates and postgraduates.
From 2008 to 2019, the UK lost global market share in international students to Australia, Canada, and China, although the absolute number of international students coming to the UK increased

Although the UK has more than doubled its intake of international students over the past 20 years, from 2008 to 2019 its global market share fell from 11% to 8% (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Total international tertiary students coming to the UK per year, and the UK’s share of global tertiary students, 1998 to 2019

The UK, in addition to the United States, traditionally also a popular choice for international students, both lost market share during this period, while Australia, Canada and China gained market share (Figure 6). Note, however, that these UNESCO statistics run only to 2019, and so do not reflect the recent and substantial increases in international students in the UK from 2020 to 2022, which may have led to increases in its market share.
The higher education sector has raised concerns that the decline in the UK’s market share of international students resulted from changes in policy in the 2010–2015 term of government, such as restrictions of post-study work options (e.g., see evidence cited in Migration Advisory Committee, 2018, p. 37–45). Research suggests that the UK’s immigration policies do indeed influence the choices of students to study here – but in addition to a range of other factors, such as the exchange rate, overseas economic growth, and policies in competitor countries (Prazeres and Findlay, 2017; Conlon et al., 2018; QS, 2019).

Over the past decade, the fall in the UK’s global market share of international students reflects its gradual loss of its share of students from the US, Europe, and especially India (Figure 7).
The post-2011 fall in student numbers from India (also shown in Figure 4) followed the closure of the post-study work route in 2012 and the introduction by the Home Office in 2010 of a new student visa system. The latter policy was aimed at reducing abuse of the student route, and included new controls on international students and the institutions hosting them. These included an English language requirement for students, a restriction on students below degree level bringing dependants, and the implementation of a Highly Trusted Status licence for sponsoring institutions. After these changes were introduced, there was a sharp decline in the number of further education colleges licensed to sponsor students (see the Migration Observatory’s Election 2015 Briefing – UK Migration Policy since the 2010 General Election). Further education institutions had been an important destination for Indian students in particular.

Work visa grants to non-EU former students fell by 84% from 2011 to 2020, before the decision to re-introduce post-study work rights in 2021

Some researchers argue that it benefits the UK economy when international students continue to work in the UK after graduating, because they are young, UK-educated, and have specific skills such as language and cultural knowledge that can help UK businesses break into new markets (e.g., Hawthorne, 2008; Brown, 2009; Lomer, 2017, p. 127–198). Research commissioned by HEPI also found that international students who stayed in the UK after graduating made a net positive contribution to UK tax revenues (Conlon et al., 2019).

Others argue that when international students return to their country of origin the UK still benefits. This is because they may become the “UK’s ambassadors” (House of Lords, 2014; Lomer, 2017, p. 99–125), enhancing the UK’s ‘soft power’ by becoming leaders or occupying important positions in their origin country (Hillman & Huxley, 2019; see also Hillman, 2022), or by creating business and research links with the UK (e.g., Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013; Holden & Tryhorn, 2013; Hill & Beadle, 2014).
From 2012 to 2020, non-EU international students who wanted to stay in the UK after their studies generally had to switch to another type of visa, usually a work or family visa (from July 2021, they could remain in the UK for two to three years on a Graduate visa). In 2020, around 7,400 non-EU migrants who previously held study visas were granted extensions to stay in the UK to work. This was down 84% on the number of grants in 2011, the year before the government closed the post-study work route to new applicants (Figure 8). The new post-study work route, known as the Graduate route, introduced in July 2021 for all non-UK citizens, proved popular in 2021 (Figure 8), with around 26,000 issued to recent graduates (main applicants only). In the first half of 2022, around 30,500 Graduate visas were issued (main applicants). If that rate continues, then the number of people using the post-study work route in 2022 will be greater than used it in 2011.

Figure 8

Most non-EU students leave the UK after their studies

Study visas are temporary, and they do not provide a direct route to settlement. This means that time spent on a study visa does not count towards the five years of residence in the UK that is ordinarily required before a migrant may apply for settlement. Among non-EU migrants issued an initial study visa in 2016, only 17% still had permission to stay in the UK (i.e., valid leave to remain) around five years later at the end of 2021. Around 5% (around 7,800) held work visas, 9% (around 14,000) were still on study visas, and around 0.1% (169) had settlement (Figure 9). The remaining 83% had an expired visa, and so would have been required to leave the UK.

Home Office exit checks data show that at least 98% of non-EU students left on time for those whose visas expired in the year ending March 2020 (Home Office, 2020a, p. 1). This figure represents the minimum level of compliance with visa duration, because the departures of some people are not recorded, or are not matched against their arrival in the system (see Home Office, 2020a, p. 1).
There are notable differences between citizens of different countries in their status five years after initially coming to the UK on a study visa. For example, Indian students are more than five times as likely as Chinese students to have moved onto a work visa, while Chinese students are about 50% more likely than Indians to still have a study visa (Figure 9). These data also show that, along with Indians, Nigerian and Pakistani students are particularly likely to work after graduation.

**Figure 9**

**Immigration status in 2021 of migrants issued a student visa in 2016**

Excludes EU citizens; main applicants only, excluding dependants; for top 10 nationalities of visa recipient in 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement or citizenship</th>
<th>All Non-EU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family visa</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work visa</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study visa</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expired visa</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Migrant Journey, Volume 1, 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.

**Students who remain in the UK longer term usually take ten years to settle**

The low numbers of students with settlement five years after arriving in the UK is due in part to students tending to be on a longer route to settlement than work, family, or asylum migrants – around ten years, rather than five years (see our briefing on Settlement in the UK).

Of all migrants granted settlement in 2021, 18% initially came to the UK on a study visa (Home Office, Migrant Journey; includes main applicants and dependants), and almost three-quarters of this group (74%) arrived in the five-year period from 2009 to 2013 inclusive, consistent with a roughly ten-year route to settlement (Figure 10).
In 2019, an estimated 1.2 million foreign-born people who were living in the UK – 13% of all the foreign-born – said that they originally moved to the UK to study (Office for National Statistics, 2020). This is equivalent to just under 2% of the UK’s total population.

**Research has consistently found that international students have positive economic impacts in the UK**

Students’ main economic impact comes from them spending money in the UK, including on tuition fees, accommodation, subsistence, and travel. Most of the recent studies examining the economic impact of international students have focused on export earnings: expenditure on goods and services in the UK using money brought in from abroad (Figure 11).
The most recent estimate of the ‘overall economic impact’ of international students in UK higher education subtracted economic costs (e.g., use of public services) from benefits (e.g., tuition fee income, spending). It found that over the entire duration of their studies in the UK, international students were a net economic contributor: £25.9bn for the 2018/19 cohort, up from £20.3bn for the 2015/16 cohort – a 19% increase in real terms. Of the £25.9bn, non-EU-domiciled students generated 82% (£21.3bn) of the total (Halterbeck & Conlon, 2021, p. xiii). The higher non-EU contribution was driven largely by the higher tuition fees charged to non-EU-domiciled students.

International higher education students also contribute to the UK economy after their graduation by paying taxes. A 2019 study estimated that the 2016/17 cohort of international students would contribute £3.2bn to government revenues in the first ten years after graduation through income tax, VAT, and National Insurance payments – £1.2bn from EU students and £2bn from non-EU students (Conlon et al., 2019).

Because international students are typically young and with few dependants, they are thought to generate relatively little cost through demands on public services such as education for children and health (Conlon et al., 2019).

**Tuition fee income from non-EU students has grown substantially from 2000/01, making up 17% of UK universities’ total income in 2020/21**

Before the end of free movement, universities in England could charge UK and EU students up to £9,250 per year for undergraduate degree programmes. Postgraduate degree tuition fees vary substantially, depending on the university and subject, from around £4,900 a year to over £30,000, with an average of around £11,000 per year (UCAS, 2022). Non-EU students tended, before Brexit, to pay higher fees for undergraduate and postgraduate courses than UK and EU students, and thus generate more tuition fee revenue per person.
This has led researchers to conclude that non-EU students have in effect been ‘cross-subsidising’ the education of domestic students – for example by generating revenue for improved facilities or by sustaining a wider availability of courses (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018; Hillman, 2020).

The tuition fee payments of non-EU students contribute a relatively large share of UK universities’ total annual income. In the academic year 2020/21, non-EU students made up 16% of all students in UK higher education and contributed 17% of UK universities’ total annual income. By contrast, the tuition fee payments of UK-domiciled students, who make up 78% of all UK HE students, contributed 31% of UK universities’ total annual income, while EU students, who made up 6% of total students, contributed 3% (HESA, 2022b). Tuition fee income from non-EU students has become increasingly important in recent years; in 2000/01, it made up only 5% of UK higher education’s total income (Figure 12).

![Figure 12](image)

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.
Acknowledgements

With special thanks to Nick Hillman at HEPI, for his detailed feedback on the 2020 and 2022 versions of this briefing. Research for this briefing was funded by Trust for London, which is one of the largest independent charitable foundations in London and supports work that tackles poverty and inequality in the capital. More details at www.trustforlondon.org.uk.

References

- HESA (2022b). *What is the income of HE providers?* Chart 1 and Table 6.
BRIEFING: Student migration to the UK


Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing – Election 2015 Briefing – Why do International Migrants Come to the UK?
- Migration Observatory briefing – Immigration by Category: Workers, Students, Family Members, Asylum Applicants
- Migration Observatory briefing – Migrants in the UK: An Overview
- Migration Observatory briefing – Settlement in the UK
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.

[Website link]

About the authors

Peter William Walsh
Senior Researcher
The Migration Observatory
peter.walsh@compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil
Head of Media and Communications
robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk
+ 44 (0)1865 274568
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

Recommended citation

Walsh, P. W. (2022) Student Migration to the UK. Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford