



# 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 granted to international students increased slightly in 2025, but remained 16% lower than in 2022
- The number of visas issued to student dependants dropped by 85% after the introduction of new restrictions in 2024
- Around 686,000 international students were enrolled in UK universities in 2024/25, making up 24% of the total
- The number of EU students fell sharply after Brexit and then stabilised, making up 7% of all international students in 2024/25
- The top countries of origin for new international students in the UK in 2024/25 were India (23%), China (23%), and Pakistan (8%)
- University College London had the most international students of all UK universities, though several institutions outside the Russell Group rapidly expanded recruitment in recent years
- Around 166,000 Graduate Visas were issued in 2025, slightly fewer than 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 settlement
- Tuition fee income from international students made up 23% of all income among UK universities but declined by 2% in 2024/25
- Research has 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 2024

## 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, Lichtenstein, 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 £1,035 per year and must be paid upfront, along with a visa application fee of £937. The standard duration of this visa will be [reduced](#) from 24 to 18 months starting in January 2027. Universities in England will also face a new [levy](#) of £925 a year for each international student starting in 2028/29.

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?

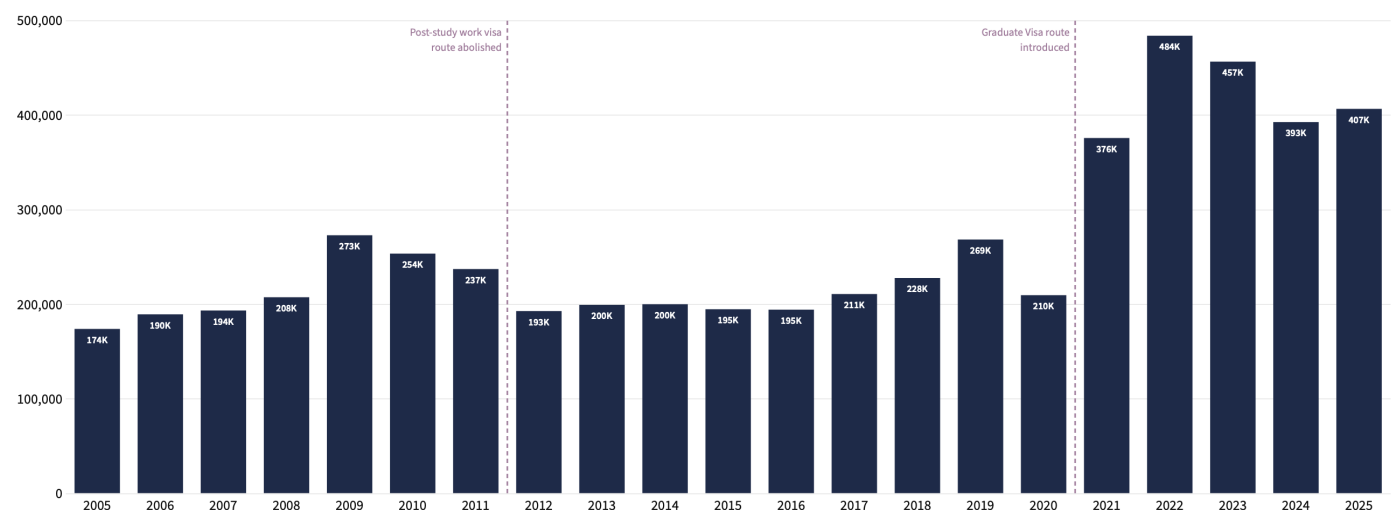
Student migration to the UK has fallen after reaching record levels in 2022. Around 407,000 visas were issued to international students in 2025, excluding family members. Numbers increased slightly after two years of decline but were 16% lower than in 2022. However, student migration to the UK remained substantially higher than in the 2010s.

Restrictions aimed at reducing net migration likely explain at least part of the recent decline in the number of international students. 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. From January 2027, the standard length of the post-study Graduate Visa will be **reduced** from 24 to 18 months. Universities in England will also face a **new levy** of £925 a year for each international student starting in the 2028/29 academic year.

**Figure 1**

### Student visa numbers rose 4% in 2025 after two years of decline

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



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Vis\_D02.

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



The previous sharp increase 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). The Graduate route was also 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?

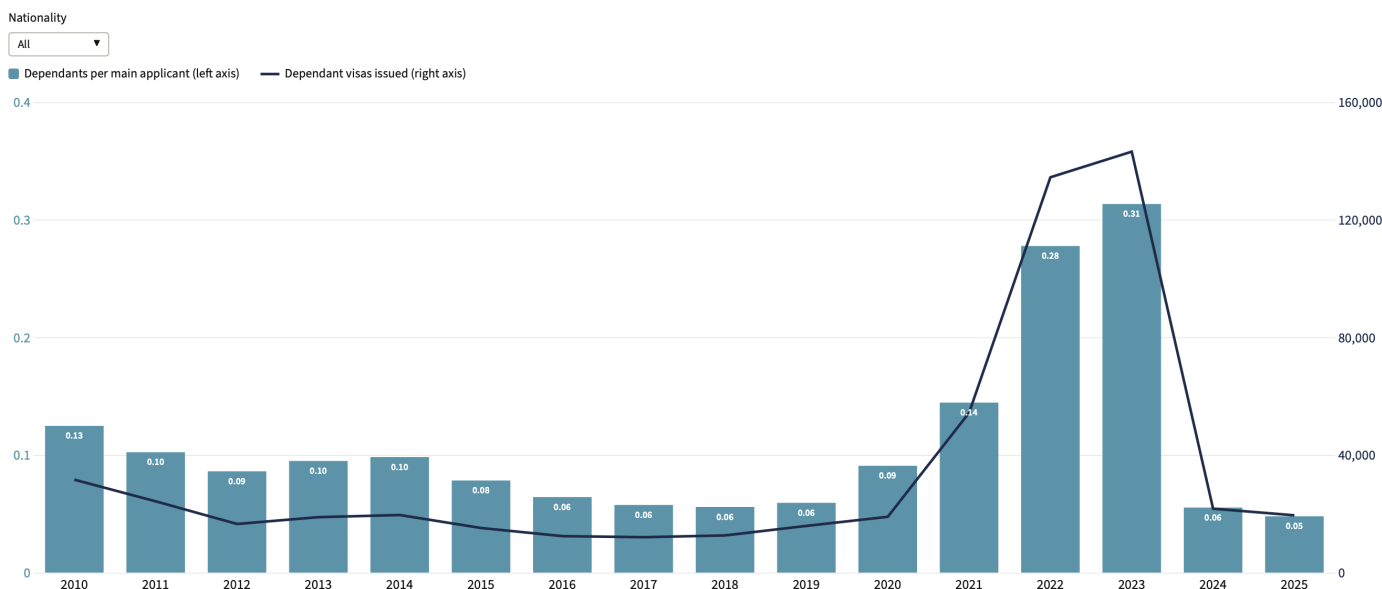
Around 20,000 visas were issued to student dependants in 2025 – 86% lower than in 2023, when a record number of 143,000 student dependant visas were issued. As mentioned above, dependants were no longer allowed to join international students on a postgraduate taught course after January 2024. Only international 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 six from 0.31 in 2023 to 0.05 in 2025. 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

### Visas grants to student dependants fell sharply after restrictions were introduced in 2024

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



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Vis\_D02.

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



## How many international students are enrolled in UK universities?

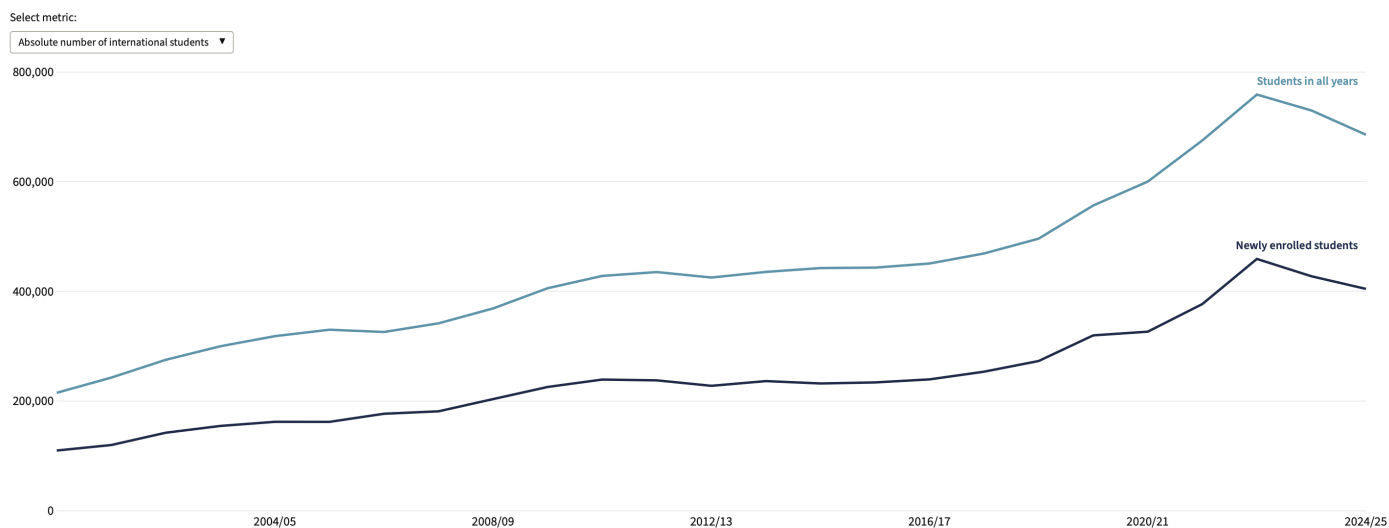
In the 2024/25 academic year, around 686,000 international students were studying in UK higher education institutions, 10% less than the record number reached in 2022/23.

The share of international students in the UK has increased significantly since the 1990s. Almost a quarter of all those studying in UK universities in 2024/25 were international students – well above the 12% level in 2000/01.

Figure 3

The number of international students starting a new course in UK universities fell by 5% in 2024/25

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



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA data. For 2000/01 to 2015/16: Students in Higher Education. For 2016/17 onwards: Higher Education Student Data: Where do HE students come from?

Notes: 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.

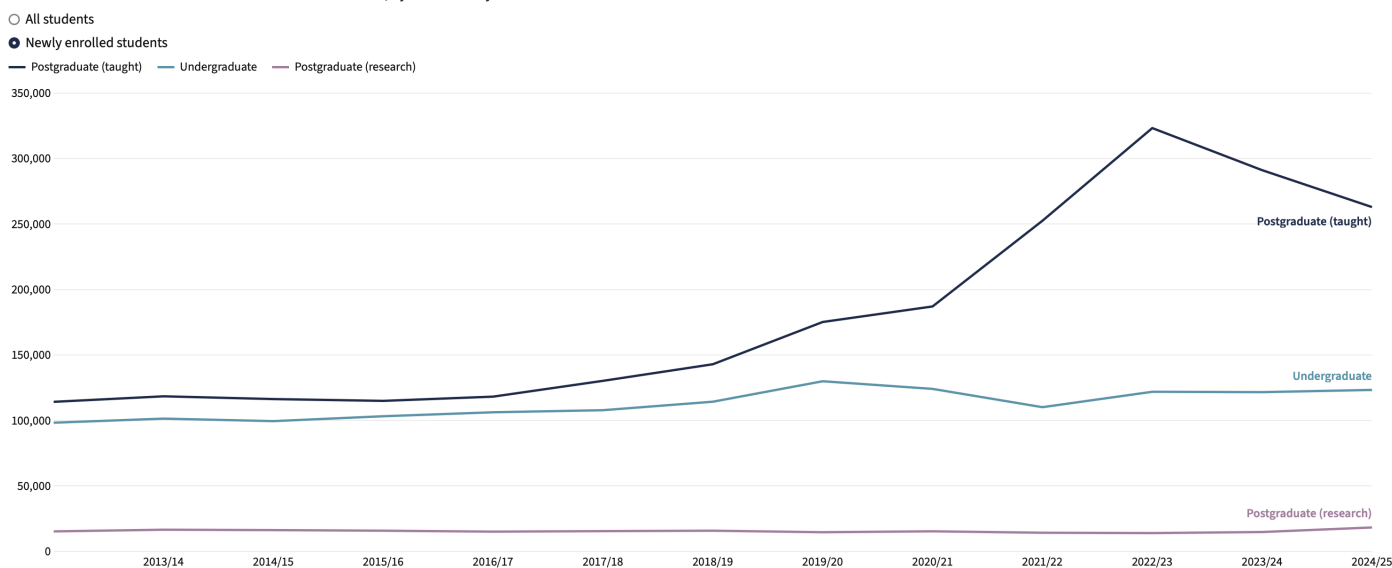


Most of the increase and subsequent decline in international students was driven by those enrolling on taught postgraduate courses like master’s degrees (Figure 4). The number of international students starting such courses increased by 85% between 2019/20 and 2022/23, then fell by 19% until 2024/25. Enrolments on undergraduate courses from outside the UK remained relatively unchanged in this period. The number of students starting a postgraduate research course – which includes PhDs and research-focused master’s degrees like MRes and MPhils – rose by 23% in 2024/25, after a long period of relative stability. Several universities sharply increased enrolment on MRes courses – which continued to allow students to bring dependants to the UK – in 2024/25. However, absolute numbers remained low compared to other types of courses, and increased use of this route did not lead to a noticeable rise in dependant numbers.

Figure 4

Postgraduate taught courses have driven recent changes in international student numbers

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?

Notes: 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?

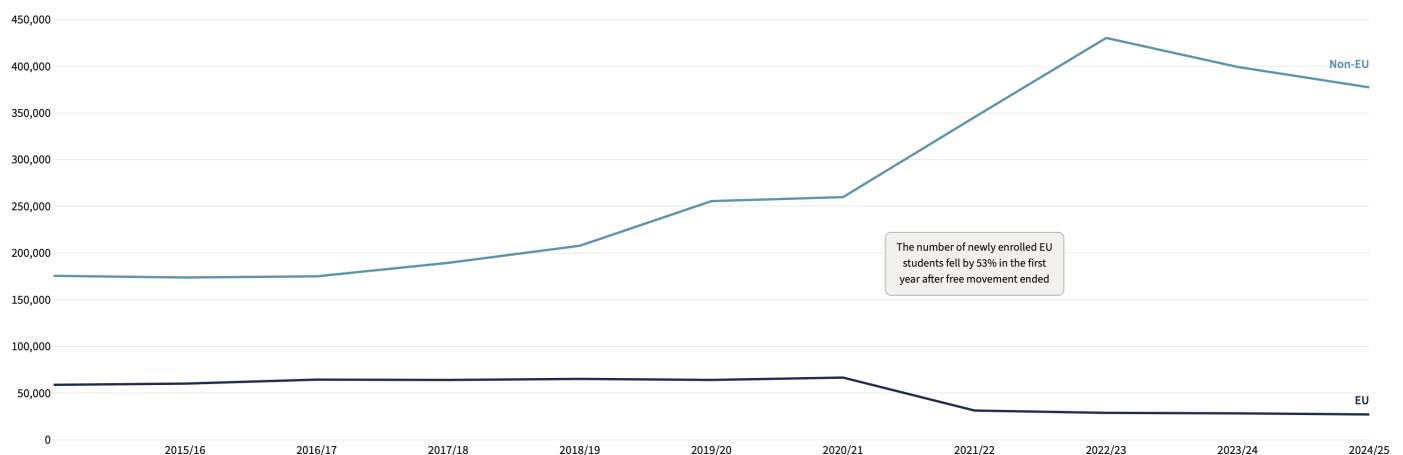
After the end of free movement and the start of the 2021/22 academic year, international students from the EU faced significantly higher international tuition fees and other requirements, such as the need to apply for visas. The number of newly enrolled EU students fell by 53% between 2020/21 and 2021/22 as the new rules came into effect. Numbers declined another 13% in the following three years. Around 27,000 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 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 2024/25, down from over a quarter in 2016/17

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



Source: HESA Higher Education Student Statistics.

Notes: Data are 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?

The top country of origin for new international students in the UK in 2024/25 was India, accounting for 23% of the total. It was followed by China (23%), Pakistan (8%) and Nigeria (6%).

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 became increasingly **reliant** on students from China as their numbers almost tripled, making up a third of all international students by 2019/20. The recent decline in the share of Chinese students mainly reflects growth in other countries of origin rather than a fall in their overall numbers.

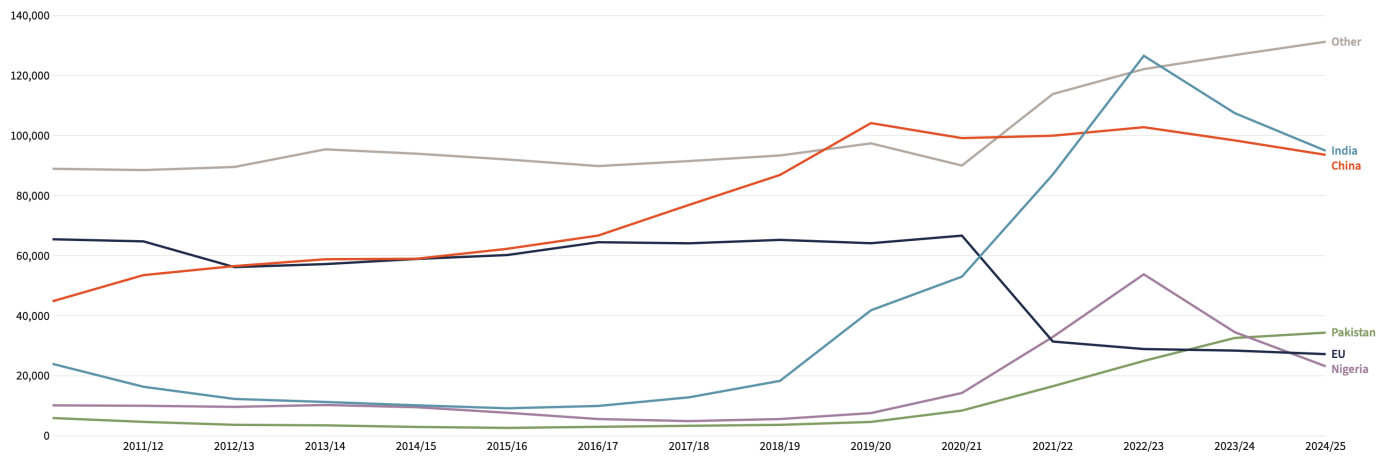
India and Nigeria drove much of the growth in international student numbers between 2018/19 and 2022/23. While numbers increased before 2021, the introduction of the Graduate Visa is likely to have fuelled growth. Indian and Nigerian students are particularly likely to remain in the UK after graduation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

The recent decline in international student numbers was likewise driven by these two nationalities. If Indian and Nigerian students are excluded, the total number of international students increased in 2023/24 and 2024/25. 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 international students in the UK for the third year in a row

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



Source: HESA Higher Education Student Data.

Notes: These counts include part-time and full-time undergraduates and post-graduates. 'Other' 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 countries of origin for newly enrolled international students in UK higher education institutions in 2024/25. Eight of the top ten were Asian countries. There was a decline in new students from India and Nigeria in the previous two years, though the number of international students from several destinations like Pakistan and Nepal continued to grow. The number of Nepalese students enrolling on a new course in the UK almost doubled in the most recent year.

Table 1

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

Top 10 origin countries for newly enrolled intl. students in UK universities, 2024/25 academic year

Country	Number of new international students 2024/25	Year-on-year change	Share of new international students 2024/25	Trend, 2015/16 to 2024/25
India	94,955	-12%	23%	
China	93,585	-5%	23%	
Pakistan	34,375	5%	8%	
Nigeria	23,160	-33%	6%	
Nepal	17,385	92%	4%	
United States	13,115	2%	3%	
Bangladesh	7,550	3%	2%	
Hong Kong	5,980	-12%	1%	
Malaysia	5,195	-10%	1%	
Saudi Arabia	4,295	-11%	1%	

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; from 2016/17 onwards: 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?

University College London has been the most popular UK university among international students in absolute terms for over a decade. It had around 15,000 international students in 2024/25, making up 52% of the total. 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, nine of which were part of the top fifteen in the 2024/25 academic year.

However, some other institutions have experienced very fast growth in international student numbers between 2018/19 and 2024/25, despite not having a history as top destinations for foreign students. Examples include BPP University, the University of Hertfordshire, the University of East London, and Ulster University. Their international student numbers increased by more than four times between 2018/19 and 2024/25.

Table 2

### Some institutions rapidly expanded international student recruitment in recent years

Total non-UK HE student enrolments, top 15 providers in 2024/25 (2018/19–2024/25)

Institution	Number of international students in 2024/25	Share of international students in 2024/25	Change in international student numbers 2018/19 to 2024/25	Trend 2018/19 to 2024/25
University College London	26,610	52%	+36%	
BPP University	21,865	69%	+673%	
University of Hertfordshire	19,310	58%	+324%	
The University of Manchester	18,515	40%	+28%	
The University of Edinburgh	16,235	42%	+23%	
King's College London	15,690	38%	+27%	
The University of Glasgow	13,880	36%	+43%	
Coventry University	13,300	45%	+11%	
The University of East London	13,230	49%	+606%	
The University of Birmingham	12,485	31%	+37%	
University of the Arts London	12,385	54%	+28%	
Imperial College London	11,905	53%	+18%	
The University of Bristol	10,900	34%	+68%	
The University of Leeds	10,890	31%	+18%	
Ulster University	10,710	33%	+354%	

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Higher Education Student Statistics, Figure 7 (HE student enrolments by HE provider and permanent address).

Notes: "Non-UK" = EU + non-EU students. Covers all years of study and all levels and modes. Shares are non-UK enrolments as a percentage of all enrolments at each institution. BPP University was classified as an Alternative Provider in 2018/19; its 2018/19 figure is taken from Figure 6a.



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

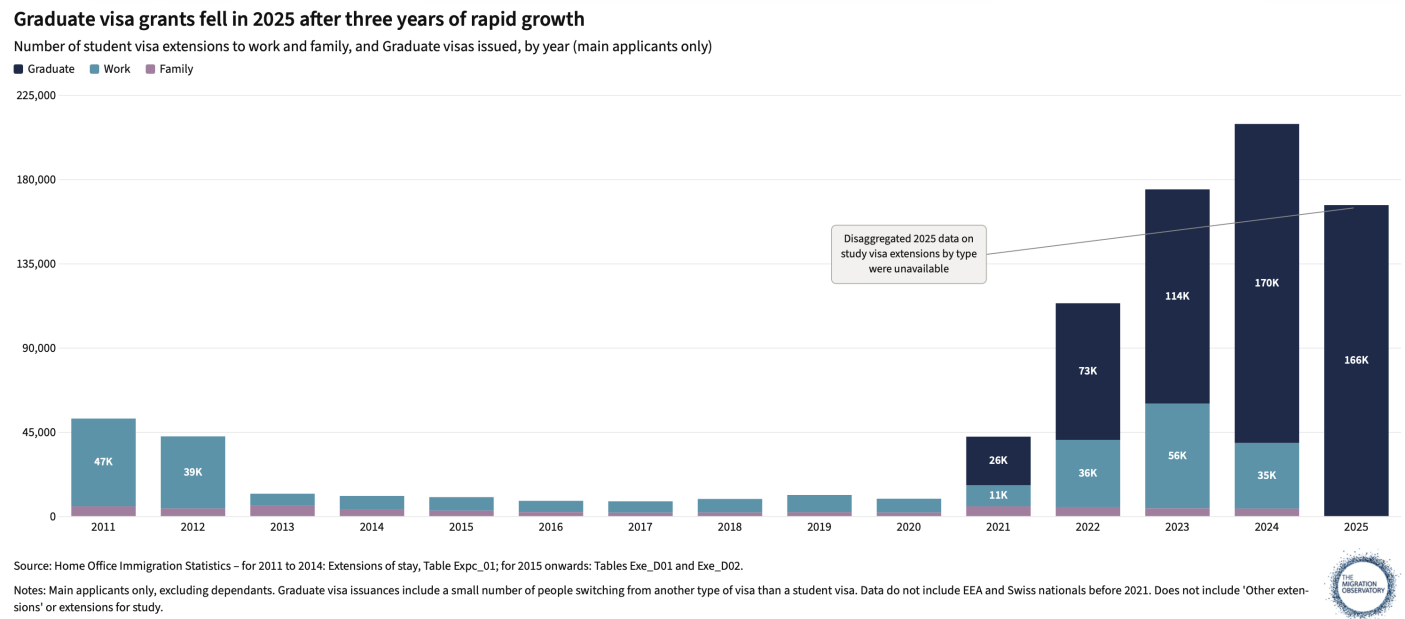
More international students have extended their stay in the UK after graduation in recent years, particularly after the Graduate Visa was introduced in 2021. This allows students to live and work in the UK for two years after graduation, or three years for PhD graduates. The standard duration of the visa will be **reduced** from 24 to 18 months in January 2027.

Around 166,000 former students were issued a Graduate Visa in 2025 – a fall of 2% following three years of rapid growth. Including dependants, around 221,000 Graduate visas were granted in 2025.

The Graduate Visa is not the only way for international students to remain in the UK. Some switch to another type of visa, mostly for work. Around 39,000 international students switched to another type of visa in 2024. That was lower than the year before, though data for 2025 were unavailable. There is evidence that a significant share of students

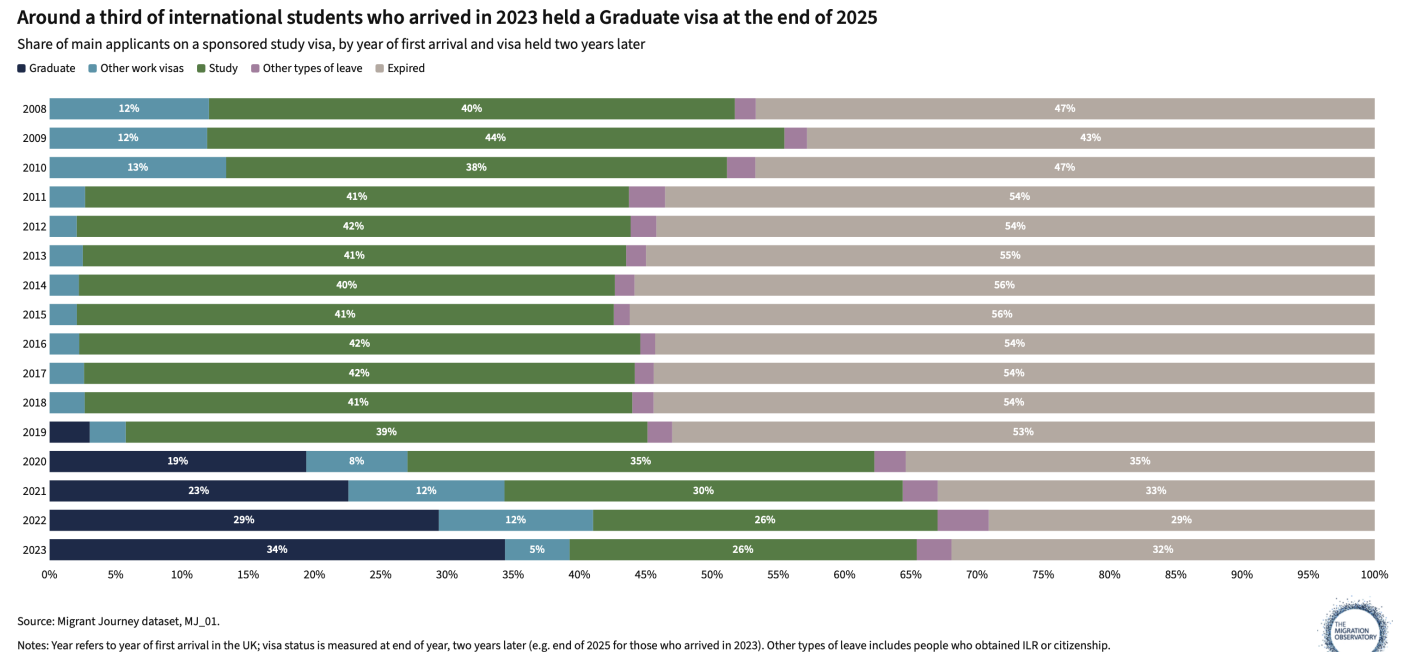
switching onto a work visa after 2021 obtained jobs in the social care sector (for more details, see [International students entering the UK labour market](#)).

Figure 7



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 2023, around 34% held a Graduate Visa by the end of 2025. Other international students switch directly onto work visas, though their share has fell compared to the 2021-22 cohorts. Overall, fewer international students now leave the UK within two or three after arrival – under a third of the 2022 cohort, compared to over half in the 2010s.

Figure 8



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 Graduate Visa – does not count towards the five years of residence in the UK that is currently required before a migrant may apply for settlement. However, time spent on a study or Graduate visa does count towards a separate route that grants settlement to people lawfully and continuously living in the UK for ten years. In November 2025, the government announced changes making it harder for migrants to obtain settlement in the UK, including by doubling the standard residence requirement to ten years. However, details about timelines and implementation remained unclear at the time of writing in June 2026 (for more details, see [Settlement in the UK](#) and [Changes to settlement: what do they mean?](#)).

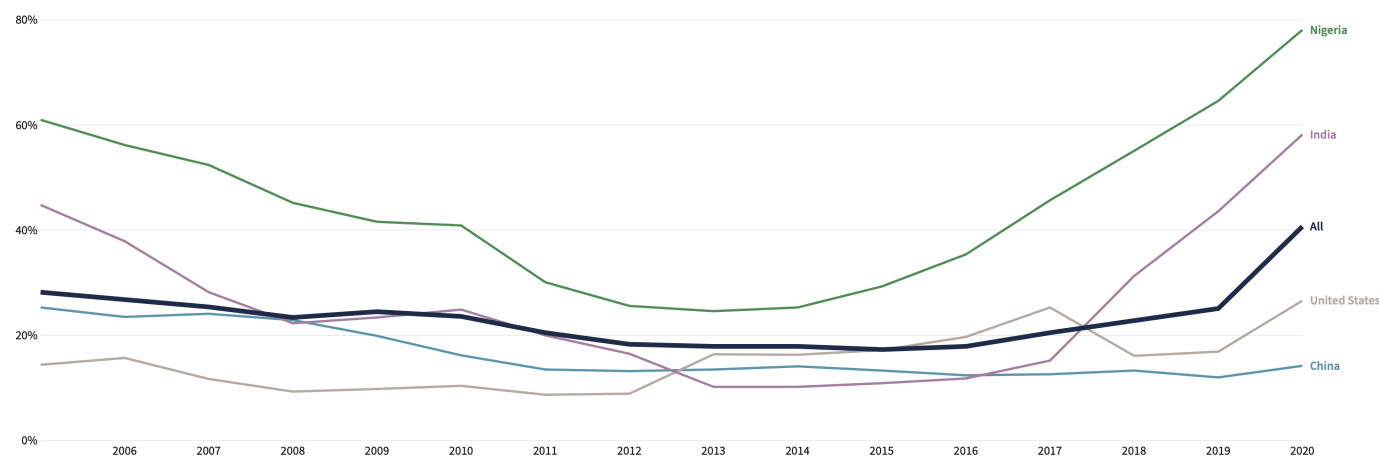
International students have become more likely to remain in the UK after their studies in recent years. This is likely driven by a large number of international students switching into the Graduate route or otherwise extending their stay. Among migrants issued an initial study visa in 2020, 41% still had permission to stay in the UK around five years later, at the end of 2025. Of the total, 26% had switched onto a work visa, 6% were still on study visas, and 59% had no valid visa, meaning they were likely to have left the UK. For the 2019 cohort, the share still holding a valid visa five years later was 25%.

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 2020, around 78% of Nigerians and 58% of Indians still held a valid visa at the end of 2025, with these shares increasing sharply in recent years. In contrast, fewer international students from China or the US remained in the UK five years after their arrival.

### Figure 9

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

Share of study visa holders with 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. 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.



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. Around 13,000 people who first entered the country on a study visa applied for asylum in 2025, making up 12% of all asylum applications.

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

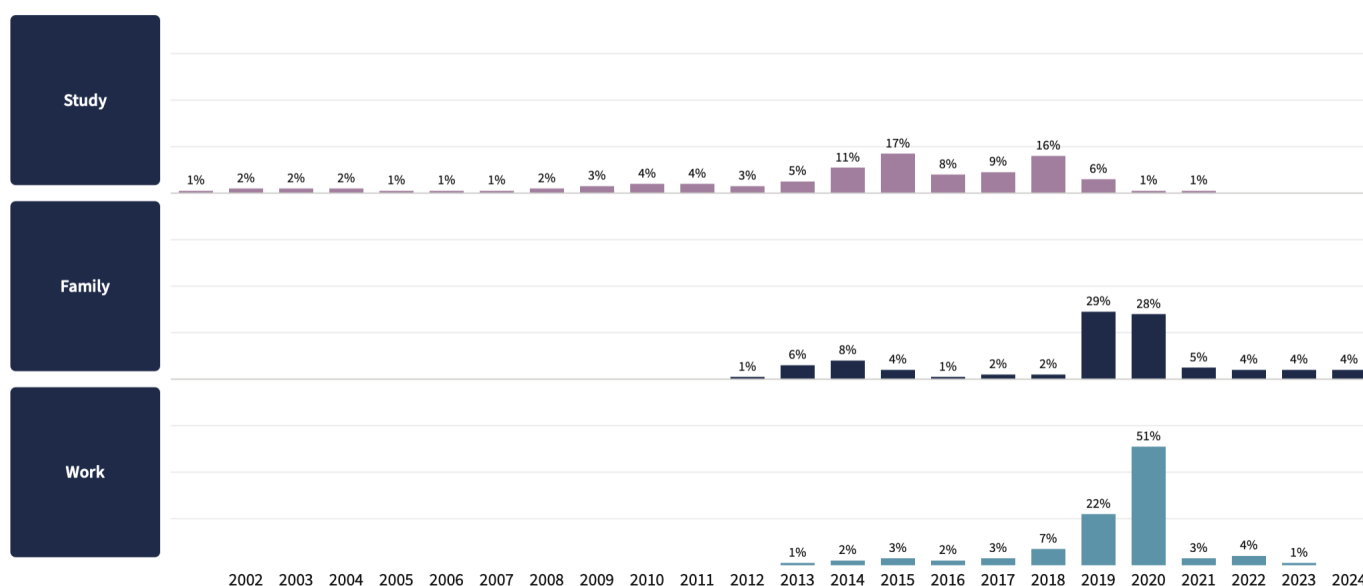
Around 11% of all migrants granted settlement in 2025 initially came to the UK on a study visa. International students usually take longer to settle than other migrants – half of those granted settlement in 2025 arrived between 2013 and 2017, consistent with a roughly ten-year route to settlement. However, there has been a shift towards earlier settlement among international students compared to previous cohorts, with more obtaining settlement after six or seven years in the UK.

Other migrants mostly settle after around five years. Unlike other visas, time spent on study or Graduate visas does not count towards the residency requirements for settlement (see above).

Figure 10

### Most international students who remain in the UK take around ten years to settle

Share of people granted settlement in 2025, by initial visa category and year of visa issue (main applicants and dependants)



Source: Home Office, Immigration and Protection Data

Notes: Settlement via main routes only. EU Settlement Scheme not included. Years shown are year of initial visa issue.



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

UK universities have become increasingly reliant on revenue from international students' tuition fees. These fees amounted to approximately £12.4bn in the 2024/25 academic year, or 23% of the total income of British universities. Income from international tuition fees fell by 2% in nominal terms that year, after a period of rapid growth. It had previously doubled between 2018/19 and 2023/24.

Since international students pay much higher fees than domestic students, they 'cross-subsidise' other university functions including research and education of domestic students. The size of this cross-subsidy will vary by institution, since some have much higher tuition fees than others.

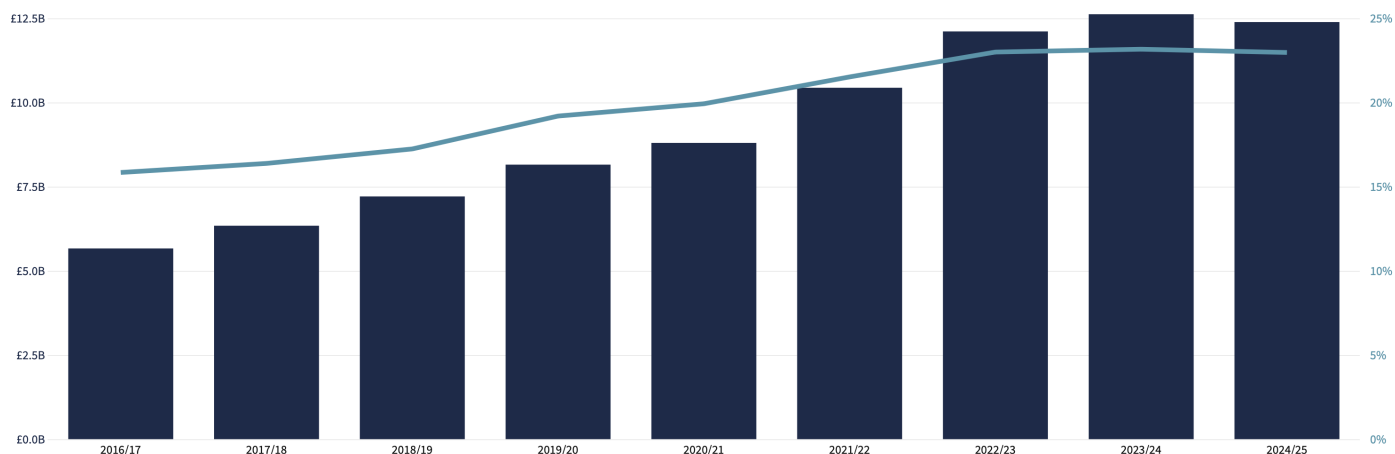
The increased reliance on tuition fees from international students happened at a time of increasing fiscal strain for universities. The undergraduate tuition fee cap in England remained largely unchanged after increasing to £9,000 in 2012, only increasing slightly in 2017 and 2025. That meant that tuition fees declined significantly during this period after adjusting for inflation. Tuition fees will be permanently linked to inflation starting from 2026, when they reached £9,790. In real terms, that remained around a third lower than in 2012.

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 2026 showed that 79% of institutions had implemented voluntary redundancies or hiring freezes, 44% had closed courses in the last three years, and 13% had closed entire campuses.

**Figure 11**

**Tuition fee revenue from international students in the UK fell by 2% in 2024/25**

Tuition fee revenue from non-UK students across UK universities, in £ and as a share of total income, 2016/17–2024/25



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA, Publications Archive, Open Data, HE Finance Plus; and HESA, Higher Education Provider Data: Finance, 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. The money they spend in the UK may have some additional impacts. According to the most recent estimates from the Department for Education, international higher education students' expenditure in the UK using money from abroad was £23.7 billion in 2022. Of this, £11bn went towards tuition fees, and around £10bn was made up of general living expenses. However, these are gross figures, and the net economic impact of international students would likely be smaller, as it would account for the costs of providing goods and services, and the fact that some goods are imported, among others.

Another potential impact is in the labour market. 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.

Finally, international students may have a fiscal impact, both before and after graduation. A [study](#) commissioned by the Migration Advisory Committee in 2018 found that non-EEA international students before Brexit had a small net positive fiscal impact of around £5,000 per year (not including the impact of any family members, which is [likely](#) to be negative). After graduation, the MAC concluded in a 2024 analysis that international students who went on to a Graduate Visa were likely to have a positive fiscal impact despite relatively low earnings, because of their high employment rates and lack of access to benefits. At the time of its introduction, the Graduate Visa was [projected](#) to result in a £6.1 billion net benefit to the Exchequer within its first decade, mostly from additional tax revenue.

International students who remain in the UK longer term switch onto other types of visas, such as work visas. 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](#)).

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

The UK was the second most popular destination for international students globally in 2024, behind the United States. They were followed by Australia, Canada, and Germany.

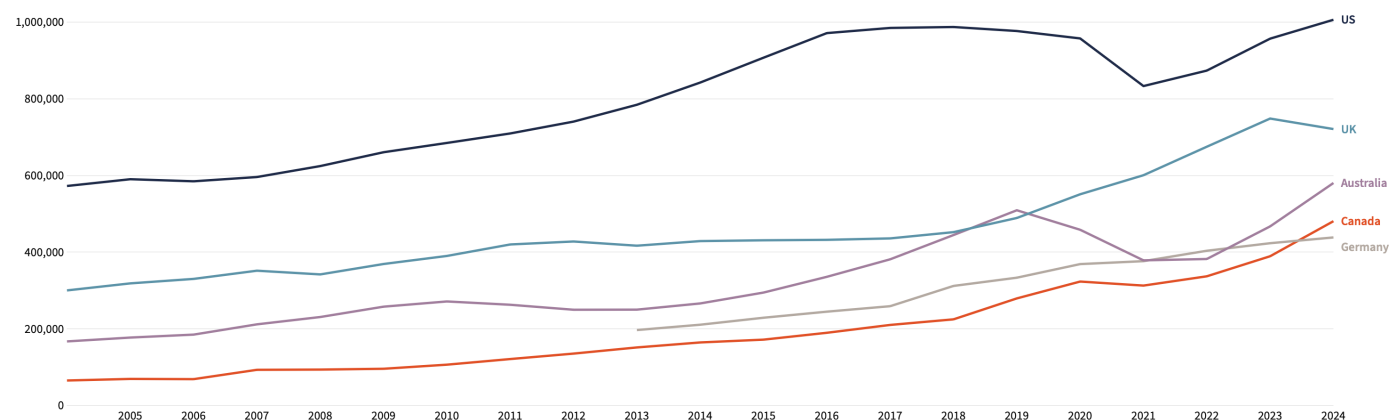
The UK had around 721,000 international students in tertiary education in 2024. Data for all countries were not available for 2024, though in previous years the UK had a roughly 10% share of the global market for international students. The UK lost market share in the 2010s as other top destinations increased recruitment faster – leading Australia to briefly overtake it in 2019 – though this was then reversed.

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 visa policies in competitor countries.

**Figure 12**

### The UK is the world's second most popular destination for international students

Internationally mobile inbound students, number, by year, top 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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