



# Student immigration to the UK

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Immigration by Students: MW 508

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## Key points

- In March 2019, the government set a target to have 600,000 students enrolled in UK higher education (HE) by 2030<sup>1</sup> - a 30% increase on 2017/18. This target had already been reached by 2020/21 ([Higher Education Statistics Agency, or HESA](#))<sup>2</sup>.
- A record 440,000 study visa were granted in year to March 2022 ([Home Office](#))<sup>3</sup>.
- The University Admissions Service (UCAS) predict further increase of 50% in international undergraduate applicants by 2026 (see [media report](#))<sup>4</sup>.
- The top 20 HE providers at which non-UK students were enrolled made up 7% of 282 organisations, yet accounted for 38% of the total number of students enrolled (or 230,000 out of just over 600,000) – [HESA data for 2020/21](#)<sup>5</sup>.
- In four institutions (all in London), the majority of students were from overseas.
- Areas with high numbers of non-UK students are London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Coventry, Glasgow, Sheffield, Leeds, Warwick and Hertfordshire (Hatfield).
- Study visas are a major long-term immigration route: 120,000 people stayed on after expiry of their initial study visa (in 2018/19), with most granted further visas enabling them to remain for more study, work or family reasons ([ONS](#))<sup>6</sup>. It is **not true** that 97% of students leave after initial visa expiry; 40% stay on ([summary](#)).
- Around 20,000 people per year have been granted a permanent stay in the UK after having originally arrived on a study visa. This route is **not** meant to be a direct route to settling in the UK ([Home Office migrant journey report](#))<sup>7</sup>.
- There are between 10,000 and 20,000 per year for whom there is no clear record of departure (according the ONS) – indicating potential overstaying.
- Driving up study visas higher than the current record would not be wise, especially during the present housing, economic and health crises. Recommendations below.
- A weakening of study visa requirements means more potential for the return of abuse and fraud which reached a peak during from 2009-11 (see Annex below).
- 61% of the public say overseas students should not receive priority in our new immigration system ([Deltapoll](#), 2020).

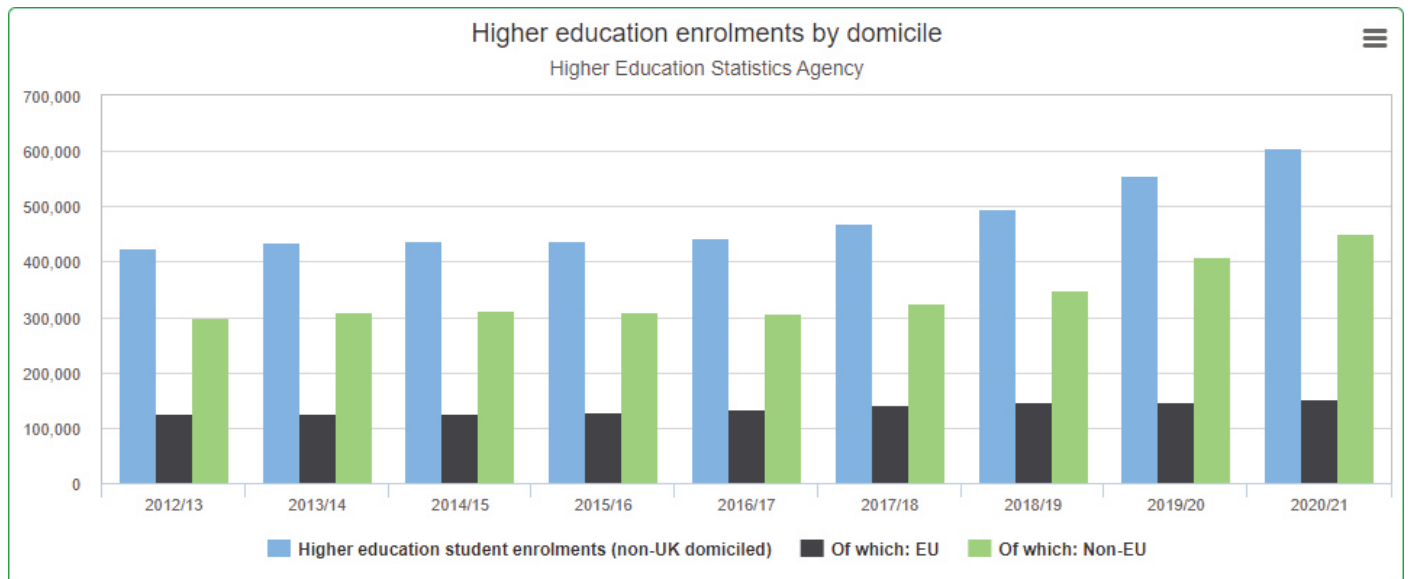
# Introduction

1. The UK's higher education product is a major export and an important component of soft power. It is important to have a viable study visa route into the UK. However, it is also important to keep numbers at reasonable levels and prevent a repetition of the wide-ranging abuse that has occurred in the past (see Annex).
2. The latest statistics show that the government have already achieved their objective of 600,000 non-UK domiciled students enrolling in higher education courses per year. Yet the University Admissions Service (UCAS) are already predicting a further 50% increase in international undergraduate applicants by 2026.
3. ONS data show that the number of students coming to the UK on study visas rose by 30% in the last four years since 2017/8. Meanwhile about four in ten overseas students stay on in the UK after expiry of initial permission, whether it is by obtaining new visas (whether for work, family or further study) or potentially overstaying.<sup>8</sup>
4. The powerful and well-connected higher education lobby is, of course, keen to keep the number of overseas students high, and growing, as they pay higher tuition fees which add greatly to their funding and, perhaps, their salaries.
5. It is not in dispute that there should be a route for the brightest and best students to be able to stay on for work, to start a business or conduct pioneering research. There are ample arrangements in place to permit all of these outcomes but the great majority of students should return home where they will hopefully be well disposed towards Britain.

## The share of foreign students

6. In 2020/21 there were a total of just under 2.8 million students enrolled in UK higher education. Of these, 22% (605,000) were domiciled outside the UK.
7. Figure 1 below shows that the largest share (about two-thirds) were from outside the EU. The vast majority (84%) of the total 180,000 increase in the number of such student enrolments in the past decade was due to a significant increase (of 152,000) in the number of annual non-EU enrolments.

Figure 1: Higher education enrolments by domicile, Higher Education Statistics Agency.



## Where in the UK are non-UK students enrolled?

8. Table 1 below shows the top 20 higher education providers at which non-UK students were enrolled, by the number of overseas enrollees. This set of 20 made up just 7% of a total of 282 UK organisations, yet accounted for 38% of the total number of overseas students enrolled (or 230,000 out of just over 600,000).

9. Areas where there are relatively high numbers of non-UK students are London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Coventry, Glasgow, Sheffield, Leeds, Warwick, Hertfordshire and Birmingham. There are four institutions (all in London) for which a majority of enrollees are overseas students.

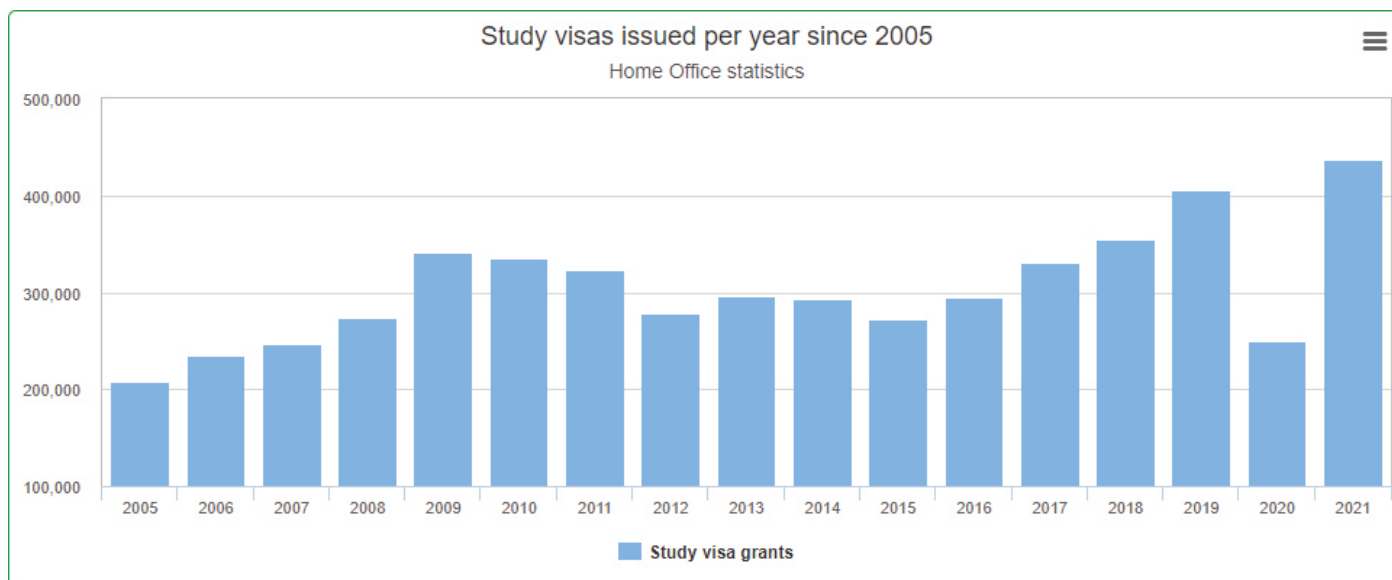
Table 1: Top 20 higher education institutions by number of non-UK students. HESA.

Rank	Institution	Number of non-UK students enrolled	Non-UK as share of enrollees of all domiciles
1	University College London	23,360	51%
2	University of Manchester	17,625	39%
3	University of Edinburgh	15,590	41%
4	Kings College London	15,550	40%
5	Coventry University	13,760	35%
6	University of Glasgow	13,245	36%
7	Imperial College London	11,265	53%
8	University of Sheffield	11,260	37%
9	University of the Arts, London	11,230	53%
10	University of Leeds	10,455	28%
11	University of Warwick	10,305	37%
12	University of Hertfordshire	9,725	32%
13	University of Birmingham	9,530	25%
14	Ulster University	9,090	28%
15	London School of Economics	9,030	67%
16	University of Oxford	9,030	33%
17	University of Bristol	8,090	27%
18	Liverpool University	7,805	27%
19	Queen Mary, London	7,795	33%
20	Cardiff University	7,725	23%
	<b>Total (top 20 institutions)</b>	<b>231,465</b>	
	<b>Total non-UK students in UK</b>	<b>603,130</b>	
	<b>Top 20 share of total</b>	<b>38%</b>	

## Annual number of student visas

10. The student route remains one of the easier ways of getting to the UK and has become the largest long-term visa entry route. In the year to March 2022, there were just under 440,000 study visas issued. Comparing calendar years, the number issued in 2021 was just under 230,000 higher than in 2005.

Figure 2: Study visas issued per year since 2005 (Home Office statistics).



11. Chinese nationals were the most common nationality granted Sponsored study visas in 2021, with 119,334 visas granted, similar to that seen in 2019 (119,825).

12. Nigerian nationals saw the largest relative increase in Sponsored Study grants compared with 2019, increasing by 34,816 (+415%) to a record high of 43,200, making them the third largest nationality group this year – see [HO summary](#).<sup>9</sup>

13. The government [notes](#) that students ***‘may have some impact on the communities in which they live’***. These impacts can include access to local housing, congestion, access to public services, environmental impacts and crime.

14. It is certainly true that, while overseas students can have a beneficial economic effect on communities, there can also be detrimental. For example, ‘rising numbers of students can cause pressures on the private rental market if the stock of housing is fixed in the short-term’ while, in the realm of transport, students ‘may add to congestion’.<sup>10</sup>

15. Additionally, if institutions have a very high proportion of overseas students, this might make it less likely that the foreign students will mix with the British students, while some domestic students have raised concerns over the quality of academic discussions and international students requiring more attention from the lecturer<sup>11</sup>. It is also likely to the detriment of British students that so many of the places in our top universities are allocated to foreign students.

16. Such factors may help to explain why 61% of the public say overseas students should not receive priority in the immigration system ([Deltapoll](#), 2020).

## The number who stay on

17. The government [says](#) that the study visa is *‘a temporary route for the purpose of undertaking a course of study within the UK, rather than to settle’*.

18. It is now apparent that government policy on student visas has been based upon a false assessment by the government of the share of overseas students who stay on for further studies or other purposes. Rather than 3%, as the government and other immigration activists have suggested, the true figure is nearly 40%. Given that an all-time record of 440,000 study visas were granted in the past year, the consequences for net migration are clearly much greater than the government has admitted, or even, perhaps realised. As the Home Office now admits, 'significant numbers' of students stay permanently<sup>12</sup>. For more on this, read our [summary](#)<sup>13</sup>.

19. Study visas provide a major immigration route into the UK; ONS analysis shows that nearly 120,000 people stayed on after expiry of their initial study visa (in 2018/19), with most granted further visas enabling them to remain for more study, work or family reasons.

20. The increase was partly due to the previous increase in non-EU long-term students whose visas expired in each year, rising from 193,000 in 2015/16 to 335,000 in 2018/19. However, the **share** staying on also increased from 29% to 35% (see ONS bulletins [here](#) and [here](#)).

21. According to ONS analysis of HO Exit Checks, there are also between 10,000 and 20,000 people who arrived on study visas per year for whom there is no clear record of departure in line with the rules. A number of this cohort may remain in the UK without permission.

22. Meanwhile, Home Office data show that, between 2009 and 2020, nearly 300,000 people (295,604) were granted **permanent settlement** in the UK after having initially entered the UK on a study visa ([HO migrant journey statistics](#)). That is between 20,000 and 30,000 per year.

## The outlook

23. On 1 July 2021 the government re-opened the flawed post-study work route that was closed after this route was deemed by the government to have failed in 2012. Foreign students are now once again allowed to stay on for two or three years, even if only to stack shelves. Applicants do need a job offer in advance or to earn a minimum salary, and will not be subject to a labour market test – aspects of the route which polling suggests are deeply unpopular with the public.

24. In the year to year to March 2022, there were 33,682 extensions granted in the new Graduate category. Indian, Nigerian and Chinese nationals accounted for over a half (58%) of grants in this route<sup>14</sup>.

25. Reviving this graduate work route needlessly loosened what was already an ample pathway for students to remain and work. It risks harming the prospects of UK jobseekers during an economic crisis and adding pressure to congestion and on housing while failing to deliver commensurate benefits (see our [paper](#)).

## Recommendations

- 26 (i). The government should restore proper control over entry to the study visa route – for example by using humans to vet applications and not relying on algorithms to electronically wave applications through.
- (ii) Access to the graduate work route should also be controlled with reasonable measures, as before, with salary thresholds, the requirement for job offers and caps to ensure both that it is the best and brightest who stay on and so that UK jobseekers and workers are not disadvantaged by being undercut and

displaced by cheaper recruits from overseas.

## Annex: Abuse of the study visa route

Unfortunately, widespread abuse of the study visa route is well documented by Home Office, the National Audit Office (NAO) and the BBC. Some examples of abuse are listed below:

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

## Government response to student visa abuse

The government responded to the well-documented abuse of the route with the following measures between 2010 and 2015:

- **More stringent sponsorship regulations** - From 2011, education institutions needed to acquire Highly Trusted Sponsor status and thus be subject to a stricter set of compliance rules and be accredited by an appropriate education body. Since then around 1,000 bogus colleges have been shut down.
- **Tougher evidentiary oversight** - In 2010, the HO implemented a mandatory system for unique electronic sponsorship documents (confirmations of acceptance for studies) through which sponsors must report non-attendance, academic progress and student contact details.
- **Tighter English language requirements** introduced for those studying below University level. Universities retain discretion to assess language competence.
- **Some interviews reintroduced** - In 2012 a "Credibility Interview" was introduced to allow Entry Clearance Officers to request an interview to assess genuineness if there were concerns about intentions to study or supporting documentation (e.g. 9,700 such interviews were conducted in 2013/14).
- **Limit on time spent studying as an undergraduate**. In April 2012, the government limited the amount of time that an overseas student could spend enrolled as an undergraduate to a maximum

of five years for most undergraduate courses. However, there is no maximum study requirement for applicants who are studying a course above undergraduate degree level.

However, since 2017, the government's approach has been to considerably loosen the study visa route, including by implementing the following measures:

- **Mid-2018:** The government loosened study visa rules, meaning that applicants from 11 additional countries were no longer required to show certain forms of documentary proof to obtain a student visa including evidence that they had enough funds to live here or that they speak an adequate level of English. This brought the total number of countries treated in this way to 27.
- **Mid-2018:** Changes are made to liberalise the system for dependants of non-EU students on a post-graduate degree at a higher education institution.
- **August 2019:** The government implemented yet more liberalisation of the study route, extending new privileges to higher education providers with a record of compliance. These changes granted new students at such institutions the ability to work of up to 10 hours per week below degree level and 20 hours per week above degree level. ***They were also able to apply for leave to remain under Tier 4 or skilled work routes without having to return overseas first.*** Finally, some could bring dependants, depending on the level and duration of study.
- **October 2020:** The new Student visa route (opened as part of new Points-Based System) made it easier to come on study visas sponsored by UK education institutions. Applicants need 70 points to be granted leave. These were to be awarded if applicants had an offer from an approved institution, spoke English and were able to support themselves while studying in the UK.
- **Mid-2021:** The graduate worker route was launched, allowing new graduates the opportunity to remain in the UK to work or to look for work after their studies. This was an extension from the UK's previous post-study work offer of four months (six months under a limited pilot programme).
- **September 2021:** The government further extended the post-study work period to 3 years for PhD graduates.

27 June 2022



# Notes

1. The target to raise the number of overseas students enrolled in higher education to 600,000 by 2030 was first outlined in March 2019 in the government's policy paper: *"International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth"*, which stated: "We want to grow the numbers of international higher education students studying in the UK to 600,000 by 2030." See document, March 2019, URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth> This document was updated in February 2021 to re-affirm this target, URL: [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth)
2. For elaboration on the target, see Parliamentary Answer to Lord Green of Deddington, June 2021, URL: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2021-06-07.HL741.h&s=speaker%3A25254#gHL741.q0>
3. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, URL: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/25-01-2022/sb262-higher-education-student-statistics/location>
4. Home Office immigration and visa statistics, Year to March 2022, URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2022/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-to-study>
5. *The Times*, May 2022, URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/international-student-numbers-could-rise-50-over-five-years-z3l9lwj0>
6. HESA data, Ibid.
7. ONS, 'Visa journeys and student outcomes', November 2021, URL: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/visajourneysandstudentoutcomes/2021-11-29>
8. Home Office 'Migrant Journey' report. 2021, URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/migrant-journey-2021-report/migrant-journey-2021-report>
9. ONS, 'Visa journeys and student outcomes'. 2021.
10. Home Office visa statistics, year to March 2022, URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2022/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-to-study>
11. Migration Advisory Committee report on international students, September 2018, p. 74, URL: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/739089/Impact\\_intl\\_students\\_report\\_published\\_v1.1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/739089/Impact_intl_students_report_published_v1.1.pdf)
12. Ibid, p. 3, URL: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/739089/Impact\\_intl\\_students\\_report\\_published\\_v1.1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/739089/Impact_intl_students_report_published_v1.1.pdf)
13. Home Office exit checks analysis, 2017 to 2020. In addition, of all those granted settlement in 2019, about 3 in 10, or 29% (27,700) originally came to the UK on a study visa, Home Office migrant journey report.
14. Migration Watch UK blog, 'This False Claim Drove The Government To Vastly Weaken Study Visa Rules, With Shocking Results', June 2022, URL: <https://www.migrationwatchuk.org/news/2022/06/22/this-false-claim-drove-the-government-to-vastly-weaken-study-visa-rules-with-shocking-results>
15. Home Office immigration and visa statistics, Year to March 2022, URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2022/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-to-study>