

PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

International Students and Migration Figures

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- **International Students are an enormous benefit to UK universities, communities, and the economy**
- **Any moves to restrict or reduce international student numbers, whether directly or indirectly, would be harmful to the UK economy, and the higher education sector**
- **Removing students from the net migration figures would be beneficial, and would help to promote a more welcoming message across the world, but by itself it would not do enough**
- **The UK should reinstitute a post-study work visa and review the current compliance regulations and procedures that act as a barrier to fair and open recruitment**

The value of international students to the UK

In 2014-15 there were 2.27 million students studying at UK higher education institutions, including over **125,000 from the EU** and **over 300,000 from non-EU countries**.

In 2015 the direct contribution of international students (through tuition fees for example) was **£4.23billion** (£3.61billion in England, £143.5million in Wales, £445million in Scotland and £23.6million in Northern Ireland). This direct contribution of international students makes up an average of 20% of all universities revenue across England, and as such it is a crucial element of a universities business operations. Having these source of funding enables it to better invest in all students, and engage in research and innovation projects with its local community or with businesses.

Aside from direct contributions, these students also have a positive impact on local economies. In 2012 the off-campus expenditure of non-UK students was **£7.37billion**, and supported over **60,000 jobs** around the UK.

International students also bring wider and long-term benefits to the UK. The 'soft power' generated through students studying in the UK and then returning to their home countries is significant and helps to cement the UK's global strategic relationships.

International students also bring academic and cultural benefits to UK universities. They enable UK students to be challenged in their thinking, appreciate new ideas, innovations or cultures, and as such they are a valuable addition to our world leading higher education sector.

It is also important to note the common misconception that if the numbers of international students are reduced, then more home students can simply take their place. Aside from the direct financial impact to universities through a loss of upfront higher tuition fees from international students, the engagement of international students on some courses ensure their availability for UK home students. For example, 28% of engineering & technology undergraduates and almost 18% of mathematics undergraduates are international students.

In addition to this, 75% of engineering postgraduates, 70% of computer science postgraduates, 65% of mathematics postgraduates and 46% of physical science postgraduates are international students. Losing these cohorts would have a profound effect on universities across the UK and would risk the closure of some courses with the potential to undermine a university's links with key businesses and their supply chains.

Net Migration Figures

Despite widespread cross-party criticism, and an amendment tabled by the House of Lords on the, then, Higher Education and Research Bill to remove them, the government remain committed to the retention of students within the overall net migration numbers, and therefore target.

MillionPlus is clear that the UK needs to send out a strong signal to the world that it is welcoming of international students, and one clear way to do this would be to remove students from the numbers and the target.

Opinion polls consistently demonstrate that the public do not view students as migrants, and that the majority do not want to see a reduction in foreign students studying at UK universities.¹ Coupled with the enormous benefits that they bring, we believe there is no reason why the government should continue to keep students in this classification.

Additional Factors

Although we would welcome moves to remove students from the migration numbers, we believe that by itself this would have only a limited effect on dealing with the deeper issues that are holding the sector back. The fact remains that the current system for recruiting international students to UK universities is unhelpful and can act as a non-tariff barrier to UK trade and exports.

If a potential student applies to a UK university and they are judged to meet the academic and other standards required, the university will issue them with a Confirmation of Acceptance of Study (CAS). The potential student then must apply for a visa from UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI). At UKVI they are then assessed, and in many cases, are interviewed by Entry Clearance Officers (ECOs) to assess their perceived 'credibility'.

Over recent years' universities have noted that the numbers of refusals have increased, and report that in too many cases refusals appear to be based on highly spurious grounds, with results that are wildly inconsistent. In some cases, the family background of an applicant can be used against them, in other cases not knowing the transport links in the city they are looking to study in can mark them down as not credible, and it has become apparent that certain areas of the world are more likely to yield higher refusals by UKVI than others.

A 2013 report by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) highlighted instances of judgments being made by ECOs well beyond the stated terms of 'credibility' as a potential student, and the Home Office does not publish any information on reasons for refusal.²

¹ <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/education/universities/news/85060/public-opposed-reducing-international-student-numbers-poll>

² <http://institutions.ukcisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges--schools/Publications--research/resources/2/Tier-4-Credibility-Interviews-UKCISA-survey-report>

The decisions of ECOs have a huge impact on potential overseas students, and paints the UK in a highly unwelcome light in many parts of the world. Refusals can also have huge ramifications for universities. Currently, the refusal rate a university must be under is 10% of all CASs issued. As a result, if more than 10% of potential international students to whom a university has issued a CAS, are then refused a visa, the university risks having its Tier 4 license withdrawn or can be stopped from recruiting any international students on a temporary basis. This measure exists even though the universities themselves have no input into the visa evaluation process undertaken by ECOs. In response to decisions which affect their visa refusal rates, universities have no option but to scale back operations in areas of the world, and the markets, that they believe are deemed as high-risk by UKVI, even if they have long established relationships and investment in those areas.

We believe an urgent review into how the current system deters international students from coming to the UK is needed, with a focus on how best to promote UK exports as opposed to how to limit numbers of students coming to the UK.

The choice of the UK as a destination of study has been further undermined by changes to the post-study work route (now Tier 2) which provided opportunities for graduates to work in the UK for a period after they had completed their courses.

Whilst other competitor nations, such as Canada and Australia, are improving their offer to international students, the UK is making it harder for them to use their expertise in the UK, and live, work and contribute to the UK economy post-graduation.³

The reduction in post-study work opportunities, mixed with a more stringent application of Tier 4 regulations, as well as harsher government rhetoric around migration more generally has had a particularly disastrous impact on some markets such as India. These changes are reported around the world, and alarmingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the numbers of Indian students studying at UK universities has fallen by 53% since 2010/11.⁴

The UK should be the most attractive place to study anywhere in the world, and the government should look to improve the offer we can make to international students to work in the UK post-graduation.

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³ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/ihe/news/uk-losing-competitive-edge-new-international-students>

⁴ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/coming-soon-more-curbs-on-uk-student-visa/story-pQcvqgZlM38ZMXPm2zSPL.html>