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Research and analysis

Student visa: Views of students and higher education institutions

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since leaving the EU, the UK government has maintained a highly competitive offer for international students who want to study in the UK via the Sponsored Study visa route. At present, under the Future Borders and Immigration System (FBIS), there continues to be no limit on the number of international students who can undertake sponsored study in the UK.

In 2023, there were 457,673 sponsored study visas granted to main applicants, 5% fewer than in 2022 but 70% higher than 2019. The Sponsored Study visa route plays a crucial part in the UK government's plan for growth, and ministers are keen to build an evidence base on route delivery to inform future policy and underpin assessments of economic impact.

1.2 Student visas

The Sponsored Study visa route is open to international students who are aged 16 and over, have been offered a place on a course by a licensed Student sponsor, have enough money to support themselves and pay for their course, can speak, read, write, and understand English and, if 16 or 17, have consent from their parents.

The length of time successful applicants can stay depends on the length of their course and what study they have already completed in the UK. If they are aged 18 and over and the course is at degree level, they can usually stay up to 5 years. If it is below degree level, they can usually stay up to 2 years.

To sponsor international students, higher education institutions (HEIs) must hold an active and unsanctioned licence. There are routine duties which must be fulfilled by the sponsoring institution to maintain a valid sponsorship licence – these and other immigration compliance requirements are set out in the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) Student sponsor guidance.

1.3 Research aims

The aim of this research was to understand international student and sponsor decision-making when using the Sponsored Study visa route. The outputs of the research will be used to aid understanding of trends appearing in management information (MI) data, and to help inform the focus and design of future evidence gathering and evaluation plans.

Specifically, the research aims were:

- to understand why international students chose to study in the UK, awareness of policy restrictions, the relative attractiveness of policy features and how these compare to

international offerings, and the relative importance of other drivers outside the sphere to policy influence

- to gather details on post-study work intentions and reflections on the Sponsored Study visa route interacting with other visa routes (for example, Skilled Worker, Graduate) as means of retaining international talent and pathway for high-skilled migrants to work and settle in the UK
- to learn from user experiences and identify areas for improvement in operational delivery, including experiences of the fully digital application process
- to provide insight on HEIs' understanding of sponsorship requirements, how sponsors comply, any external support needed to overcome barriers and burdens, and the impact of sponsorship policy on international student recruitment efforts; the research aimed to address what influences actions taken by sponsors when recruiting domestically and internationally and whether this varied by different faculties

The key research questions were:

- what factors motivate international student decisions to undertake higher education study in the UK (compared to other countries); to what extent are they influenced by policy features (for example, ability to bring dependants); how did they learn about the route
- has the launch of the Graduate route influenced study intentions; what are their intentions for after their course ends
- what labour market activities are the dependants of visa holders undertaking in the UK
- how have students and sponsors found the application/sponsorship process; how have students found their experience of studying in the UK
- how have changes to the Sponsored Study visa route impacted wider HEI strategy around international recruitment
- what are HEI sponsors doing to achieve their international recruitment objectives; how is this working in practice

1.4 Methodology

The research was split into 2 strands, one focusing on the views and experiences of the Student visa holders, the other focusing on the views and experiences of higher education institutions. This involved an online survey with over 2,000 Student visa holders and 25 follow-up qualitative interviews, and a telephone survey of 115 institutions and follow-up qualitative interviews with 20 institutions.

On the Student visa holders strand, 2,415 current Student visa holders completed the survey out of the 40,000 invited. The sample of students invited was selected to match the overall population profile of Student visa holders by nationality, age, and gender. The number of completed surveys by each of those categories is presented in table 1 below. The completed surveys were then weighted on an age by nationality basis back to the main population profile.

Table 1: Profile of students who completed the visa holders survey

Nationality	Total	% (Unweighted)
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India	519	21%
China	507	21%
Nigeria	431	18%
Pakistan	155	6%
Bangladesh	87	4%
Nepal	63	3%
United States of America	51	2%
Sri Lanka	48	2%
France	25	1%
Malaysia	19	1%
Hong Kong	18	1%
Other countries	492	20%

Age	Total	% (Unweighted)
23 and under	1,207	50%
24 to 34	951	39%
35 to 44	224	9%
45 and Over	33	1%

Gender	Total	% (Unweighted)
Male	1,157	48%
Female	1,258	52%

For the qualitative strand, 25 interviews were completed, aiming for a spread of profiles and experiences, by nationality (at least 3 to 6 interviews with students from India, Nigeria, and China), dependants (14 had dependants), level of qualification (5 undergraduate students, 15 master's students, 5 doctoral), working practices (18 worked while studying), experience of applying (17 positive, 8 negative), and future plans (18 plan to stay).

For the HEI strand, a census approach was adopted. computer assisted telephone interviews were completed with 115 HEIs, out of a total sample of 172 institutions. Each institution had up to 4 named contacts, and all were considered in scope for the survey. No weighting was applied.

Table 2: Profile of institutions who completed the HEI survey

Region	Total	%
London	31	27%
South East	19	17%
Scotland	13	11%
South West	9	8%
West Midlands	9	8%
East of England	7	6%
North West	7	6%
North East	6	5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	5	4%
East Midlands	3	3%
Northern Ireland	3	3%
Wales	3	3%

Institution type	Total	%
Russell Group	11	10%
Non-Russell Group	104	90%

Sponsor status	Total	%
Former Premium sponsor	80	70%
Non-former Premium sponsor	32	28%
Not declared	3	3%

For the qualitative strand, 20 follow-up interviews were conducted with a range of institutions from across the UK (9 from London and the South, 11 from the rest of UK). The cohort included responses from a range of institutions with varying percentages of international students (6 each of high, medium and low, and 2 unknown), and respondents included some HEIs who wanted to increase their international students intake (3 HEIs), and some who used third-party services (6 HEIs).

More information on the methodology for both strands of the research can be found in [Appendix 1: Methodology](#).

2. Prior awareness of visa routes

This chapter explores the ways students reported first hearing about the Student visa as well as examining their awareness of other visa routes, namely the Graduate route.

2.1 How did students first hear about the Student visa?

When asked about where they first heard about the Student visa, students indicated that they were most likely to have heard about it from friends or family members (23%). This was closely followed by education agents (22%) and places of study in their home country (19%)(figure 1).

Figure 1: How visa holders first heard about the UK Student visa



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders (2,415).
2. Percentages <1% are not included in this chart.

Differences by nationality

There were some differences by nationality in how the students first heard about the Student visa. Nigerian students were the most likely out of all nationalities to have heard about the visa from friends and family (42%), whilst Chinese students were the least likely (12%) to have done so. Chinese students were the most likely out of all nationalities to have found out about the visa from a place of study in their home country (33%). Pakistani students were more likely than average to have reported hearing about the visa from social media or an employer or work colleague (15% and 5% compared to 8% and 1% respectively).

Differences by subject and level of study

There were further differences depending on the subject studied and the level of study. Those who were studying a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subject were more

likely to have heard about the visa from friends or family than those studying a non-STEM subject (25% compared to 22%). In contrast, those who were studying a non-STEM subject were more likely to have heard about the visa from an education agent (23% compared to 20% among those studying a STEM subject) or from a place of study in the UK (10% compared to 7%).

Undergraduates were most likely to have first heard about the visa from a place of study in their home country (28%). Master's students were more likely to have heard from friends or a family member (25%) and doctoral students were more likely to have heard from a place of study in the UK (25%).

Differences by age and dependants on Student visa

The age of the student also seemed to determine how they first heard about the Student visa. For example, older students, aged 25 and over (27%) were more likely to have heard about the visa through friends or family compared to younger students aged 16 to 24 (19%). In contrast, younger students were more likely than average to have heard about the visa through an education agent or a place of study in their home country (both 24%).

Those with dependants were more likely than those with no dependants to have heard about the visa from a friend or family members (32% compared to 22%), from the UK government website (19% compared to 14%), from social media (14% compared to 7%), as well as from colleagues or peers (4% compared to 2%). In comparison, those with no dependants were more likely than those who had dependants on their visa to have heard about the visa from an education agent (24% compared to 13%), a place of study in their home country (17% compared to 11%) and a place of study in the UK (9% compared to 4%).

Several students who participated in the qualitative interviews found out about the Student visa through official websites, such as the GOV.UK website, the Home Office website and the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) website. This was driven mainly by students studying non-STEM subjects, those on master's courses and those with dependants on their Student visa. This predisposition towards official sources among the qualitative interviews could be explained by the slight "self-selection" of the kind of audience who would be confident enough to take part in qualitative interviews.

"I was just searching on Google and then I found out that the UK actually has a UK government website with all the information." – Student visa holder, India, master's, no dependants.

"[I] just checked the information that's available on the Home Office website, like the conditions, and of course the information that they provide when they grant a visa." – Student visa holder, France, doctorate, has dependants.

Interviewees also reported that they found out through friends and family as well as from universities in the UK, mostly on their website. It was often the case that the friends and family were themselves students in the UK and had Student visas themselves, which indicates that they would be in a good position to offer advice or share knowledge about the Student visa. Some of the students who had first heard about the Student visa through universities in the UK had come across this information whilst proactively searching courses and university requirements. For others, they had been informed about the Student visa through acceptance letters that they had received from the universities.

“Once your application to the university is approved, they start to send you emails about how to apply for the visa.” – Student visa holder, USA, doctorate, has dependants.

2.2 Awareness of other routes

Most students (70%) were aware of the Graduate route before the survey had taken place. Just over two-in-five (22%) students were not aware of the Graduate route and only 8% said that they did not know if they were aware of it.

Figure 2: Awareness of Graduate route



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders (2,415).

Certain nationalities were more aware of the Graduate route. Pakistani (80%), Nigerian (78%) and Indian (78%) students were more likely to have been aware of the Graduate route than Chinese students (63%). Furthermore, students who had ‘other’ nationalities, not including Pakistani, Nigerian, Indian and Chinese students, were more likely to be unaware of the Graduate route (31% compared to 22% overall).

Those studying on a postgraduate course, both master’s and doctorates (76% and 70%), were more likely to be aware of the Graduate route compared to undergraduates (54%). This finding may have been influenced in part by the higher proportion of postgraduate students being from Pakistan, India, and Nigeria who, as mentioned before, had more awareness of the Graduate route. Furthermore, those who were studying at Russell Group universities were more likely to be unaware of the Graduate route compared to those who were studying at non-Russell Group universities (27% compared to 20%). This may have been driven by the high proportion of Chinese students studying at Russell Group universities.

Students who may have been more likely to benefit from the Graduate route were more aware of its existence. For example, those who had the intention to remain in the UK post-study were more likely to be aware of the Graduate route than those who wanted to leave the UK post-study or did not know what they wanted to do after their study (76% compared to 56% and 62% respectively). Those who had worked whilst studying were more likely to be aware of the Graduate route compared to those who didn’t (82% compared to 67%). Additionally, those who had dependants on their Student visa were more likely to have been aware of the Graduate route than those with no dependants on their Student visa (80% compared to 74%).

Younger students were less likely to be aware of the Graduate route. Over three-quarters (78%) of students aged 25 and over were aware of the Graduate route compared to 62% of students aged between 16 to 24. This may be influenced in part by the high proportion of Chinese students aged between 16 to 24 (70%) who were less likely to have been aware of the Graduate route.

3. Decision-making

This chapter explores the reasons and decision-making process of Student visa holders when choosing to come study in the UK, including the influence of other countries, visa routes, and other influences. The chapter then considers how HEIs prioritise how many Student visas to sponsor and why, discusses the recruitment practices and goals of sponsor HEIs, and investigates the impact of the recent policy changes on their practices.

3.1 Reasons for studying in the UK

The majority of Student visa holders said their reason for coming to study in the UK under the Student visa was because they wanted to pursue a particular course at a particular university (60%). A further third said that studying at their chosen university and wanting to live in the UK were both equally important (33%). Only 4% of international students said their main motivation was primarily wanting to live in the UK.

Table 3: Main drivers for decision to come study in the UK, overall and by nationality

	Total	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
Wanted to pursue a particular course at a particular university	60%	58%	74%	56%	51%	50%
Both were equally important	33%	34%	20%	42%	41%	39%
Wanted to live in the UK	4%	3%	1%	1%	3%	8%
Don't know	4%	5%	5%	1%	5%	4%

Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents; Total (2,415), India (519), China (507), Nigeria (431), Pakistan (155), Other (803).

Students from China were more likely to say they wanted to pursue a particular course at a specific university (74%). Students were also more likely to say a particular course or university was what drove their decision if they were studying for a PhD (80%), planned to leave the UK after their studies (75%), studying at a Russell Group university (69%), or had no dependants (62%).

On the other hand, students from Nigeria and Pakistan were more likely than average to say that both living and studying in the UK were equally important for them (42% and 41% respectively). A similar pattern was found among students who worked while studying (45%), students with

dependants (38%), and those with 3 or more dependants (43%).

Reasons for choosing the Student visa over other UK visa routes

Students who wanted to live in the UK and those who thought living in the UK was equally as important as pursuing a course at a particular university were asked their reasons for choosing a Student visa over other UK visas. Access to the Graduate route, the ease of the application and the ability to bring dependants were influences on students' decision to get a Student visa rather than a different UK visa. Among this group, the main reason for choosing the Student visa was the fact that they primarily wanted to study in the UK, rather than work (57%). In addition, more than a third (37%) said they chose the Student visa because it led to the Graduate route, about one-in-six (16%) chose it because it was an easier application process compared to other UK visas, and one-in-ten (10%) chose it because it allowed them to bring dependants. A full list of the reasons for choosing the Student visa over other UK visas is in figure 3 below.

During the qualitative interviews, most students indicated that their decisions were mostly driven by the fact they wanted to do a bachelor's degree, master's or doctorate (as applicable), and it was just a matter of deciding where to do it.

“Wanting to study a master's was my priority one and then came studying in the UK and then finally the university.” – Student visa holder, India, master's, no dependants.

Figure 3: Reasons for choosing the Student visa over other UK visa options



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents who wanted to live in the UK and those who thought it was equally as important as pursuing a course at a particular university (1,004).
2. Percentages under 5% are not shown above.

Among those who said they wanted to primarily pursue a certain course at a particular university, the majority chose their current option because it fitted their academic interests (74%) and because the course would enable them to develop the right professional or technical skills (73%). In addition, almost half (47%) said it was the reputation of the UK higher education institution that attracted them.

The reputation of the UK institutions seemed to be an attraction particularly among students from China (56%), who indicated in the qualitative interviews that they sought the good reputation of UK universities and relative accessibility of acceptance compared to the high competition for good universities in China.

“So I come from China, and it is so competitive if I want to go to a very high reputation university but in the UK it is not that hard to get an offer from a university, and the second reason that I came here is that I am really interested in the culture and the history, so I choose to come here.” – Student visa holder, China, undergraduate, no dependants.

The UK's reputation for higher education also extended beyond China, with students from India and the USA also noting the UK's academic reputation.

"I really like the intellectual community at the University of [redacted]...The reputation of the university itself." – Student visa holder, USA, doctorate, has dependants.

"My choice of destination was always the UK because I know the top Universities are always in the UK." – Student visa holder, India, master's, no dependants.

Additionally, some students from Nigeria and India mentioned that they preferred the UK's practical and applied learning system, compared to the very theory and book-based approach in their countries.

"In India a lot of the studying comes from the book but not practical. When it came to [studying] other countries it had practical as well as theoretical so I chose something that gave me hands on practice." – Student visa holder, India, master's, has dependants.

3.2 Impact of alternative options on students

Half of the Student visa holders (50%) also considered other countries before applying to come to the UK, as shown in figure 4. While two-fifths (41%) considered other countries as study destinations, 12% considered other countries for non-study related reasons. Students from India and Pakistan were the least likely to consider going to other countries (31% and 36% respectively).

Figure 4: Proportion of Student visa holders that considered other destinations, overall and by nationality



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents; Total (2,415), India (519), China (507), Nigeria (431), Pakistan (155), Other (803).

The countries most mentioned were firstly other English-speaking countries like the USA (by 51% of those who said they were considering other countries alongside the UK), Canada (42%), Australia (34%), followed by Germany (19%), France (13%) and Japan (10%).

The USA and Canada were more likely to be considered by Nigerian students, 60% of whom considered the USA, and 79% considered Canada. Canada was the main alternative destination considered by those with dependants (70%).

Students from Pakistan were more likely than average to consider Australia (50%) and Germany (32%). Students from China were also more likely than average to consider Australia (40%) and were the most likely to consider France (19%) and Japan (19%).

In line with the survey, most of the students in the qualitative interviews mentioned they had considered either Canada or USA, or both, due to the international recognition of their degrees and accreditations, and opportunities after graduation (the same reasons as for the UK).

“I considered Canada and the US but after weighing up the pros and cons I decided on apply to a UK university because the visa process was simpler, and the documentation required. I had just got married too so I liked that I could bring my wife with me while studying.” – Student visa holder, Nigeria, master’s, has dependants.

“I was also looking at other countries that have master’s programmes, like Canada, because they are internationally recognised and allow board placement.” – Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

Reasons for choosing the UK in the end

The reasons for choosing the UK over the other countries in the end, as represented in figure 5, included the UK course or institution being better (67%), because they wanted to experience living in the UK (42%), or because they wanted to move to an English-speaking country (28%). Almost a quarter (23%) mentioned that the UK Student visa was a better fit for them, rising to 41% of students from Pakistan, to 46% among those aged between 35 and 44 and to 36% among those with dependants.

Figure 5: Reasons for choosing the UK over other countries



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, Respondents who considered moving to a country other than the UK (1,192).

For some students, the deciding factor in choosing the UK seemed to be the ease of application and the speed of the processing of the UK Student visa compared to those of USA and Canada. Many people said they were put off by the USA visa needing an in-person interview which was difficult to set up due to high demand, and by the cost of it. In contrast, the process for applying for a Canadian Student visa was all online and straightforward, but the processing times were very long.

“Looking at both the Canadian and the UK visa thing for students, I found the UK process to be a little more laid back and convenient for me, especially since I was married by then.” – Student visa holder, India, master’s, has dependants.

“I applied to 5 universities in the UK through UCAS, and Canada as well. I was supposed to go to Canada, applied for the visa and all, but Canadian visa got very delayed due to COVID-19, so I decided to accept the [UK university] option just in case.” – Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

In one instance, a student who was accepted by a Canadian and a UK university was forced to accept the offer from the UK university, despite the Canadian university being their first choice. This was because COVID-19 caused delays to the processing of their Canadian visa, meaning they would arrive in Canada after the course had already started. The UK student visa provided them the option to pay to expedite this process, allowing them to start their course on time.

Influence of dependants on decision-making

Ability to bring dependants was important. Not many of those with dependants mentioned it was a driving factor in their decision, but most mentioned how important it was that they were able to bring them too.

“What attracted me the most was the ability to bring my wife with me and the ability to work after my studies... And to get sponsored so I could continue my career.” – Student visa holder, Nigeria, master’s, has dependants.

“If I’d not been able to bring my kids, I would not have considered coming at all, I would not have given it a second thought.” – Student visa holder, USA, doctorate, has dependants.

“It’s important because my course is 3 years. Having my husband with me in the UK is making the whole thing a little bit easier, it’s making the whole journey easier... We are able to support each other. But it was not a criteria for me coming to the UK. What I prioritised was getting the admission to [University] I still would’ve struggled on with it.” – Student visa holder, Nigeria, doctorate, has dependants.

For those who had children as their dependants, they tended to consider the quality of the UK education system for their children and that played an important role in their decision as well.

“I didn’t want my children to have a Korean education because Korean education is very tough and high cost...and I really like them to have physical education too.” – Student visa holder, South Korea, Post-graduate, has dependants.

Influence of the Graduate route

The Graduate route was also a consideration for Student visa holders. As previously mentioned, most students were aware of the Graduate route (70%), and over six-in-ten (62%) had been aware of the route from before applying to the UK Student visa. Of those aware of the Graduate route when applying, as depicted in figure 6, 85% of them said that its availability influenced them

to apply for a UK Student visa at least to some extent, and just over a third (35%) said it influenced them to a great extent. Students from Nigeria and Pakistan were more likely to have been influenced by the Graduate route to a great extent (46% each).

Figure 6: Influence of the Graduate route on decision to apply for UK Student visa



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who were aware of the Graduate visa route when applying (1,059).

However, only a third (34%) of those who said they were influenced by the Graduate route would have changed their destination if it had not been available, while almost half (46%) said they would have still made the same choice, and 20% were unsure what they would have done otherwise. Students from Nigeria were more likely to choose a different country if the Graduate route had not been an option (44%).

Having the Graduate route available provided some peace of mind for international students, that if they wanted to, they could try to find a job in the UK after their studies and they would have the time to look for it.

“It felt hopeful when I was back in my home country that ‘Ok, we still have some time to, you know, find a job and get the experience that I was looking for’ because studying here is an experience that I can get and working is again, another experience that I can have on my resume.” – Student visa holder, India, master’s, has dependants.

“I decided on the MBA because I can get the one-year visa plus 2 years extended visa for working... It was a huge impact on my decision.” – Student visa holder, South Korea, master’s, has dependants.

The length of the course and the UK culture were also common themes in the qualitative research.

“There was very much an experience component of if I’m going to be spending this much money on a master’s degree, how could I make it part of my life experience?” –Student visa holder, Australia, master’s, has dependants.

The fact that UK master’s programmes are 1-year and bachelor’s are 3 years, when in most other countries they are 2 and 4 years long respectively, was seen as a plus, particularly among students returning to education after working full-time. A few students also mentioned wanting to “get away from” the political situation and corruption in their country of origin, and one student mentioned they were attracted by the rule of law in the UK.

Case study 1 - Decision-making

One master's student interviewed was a 34 year old man from Nigeria, studying sociology, a non-STEM subject in the UK. He had a teaching qualification from Nigeria and had previously worked in Nigeria and the UAE, but he wanted to further his education. He felt that the Nigerian higher education system relied too heavily on textbooks, while he wanted to get a more practical experience out of his master's. He felt this practical experience would improve his future employment prospects in the education sector.

He was made aware of the opportunity to study in the UK via the Student visa by a friend while he was working in the UAE. He was also considering Canada and the USA. After some internet research on different criteria and application processes for universities as well as visas, he decided on the UK.

This was influenced by the simplicity of the visa process and the documentation required, as well as the fact that he could bring his wife with him as a dependant, as he had just got married. For other visas and university applications he noted the need to use a consultant to be able to navigate the process, which he saw as being prone to fraud and unnecessarily expensive.

“What attracted me the most was the ability to bring my wife with me and the ability to work after my studies...And to get sponsored so I could continue my career”.

He also highlighted the rule of law, and lack of corruption as being very important considerations in his decision-making process for a study destination, as corruption was something he had experienced both in his home country and while working in the UAE.

He was quite happy that his lived experience of the course matched his expectations, and he enjoyed the ability to put into practice what he was learning about. He was working while studying, during weekends, in a hotel in a neighbouring city. After finishing his studies, he was hoping to build a career here in the UK by undertaking a teaching qualification and furthering his teaching practice, though he was originally planning on going back to Nigeria.

“It's easier to get a job here in the UK than it is in Nigeria.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, master's, non-STEM, has dependants.

3.3 Impact of the ability to change to different visa routes on students

In the qualitative interviews no one mentioned the Student visa as one of the main attractions for coming to the UK. A lot of students said they did not consider the visa until after they chose their destinations for study. But, as previously mentioned, some did cite the ease of the visa application process (compared to Student visas in other countries) to be a plus, and sometimes a deciding factor in which country to go to.

Figure 7: Level of agreement with statement: ‘As a Student visa holder, it is important that I am able to switch to another visa (for example, Skilled Worker) before completing my studies



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who are not PhD students (2,338).

Although no longer allowed, but a possibility at the time of application for the students interviewed, students studying at below doctoral level were asked whether it was important for them to be able to switch to another visa (for example, Skilled Worker) before completing their studies. Just under a third (31%) agreed with that statement, while 29% disagreed, 26% neither agreed nor disagreed, and a further 15% were unsure of their answer.

Figure 8: Whether people would still have applied for a UK Student visa if early switching was not an option



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who agreed the early-switching option was important (741).

However, if the early-switching option was not available at the time of their application, three-quarters (74%) of the people who agreed that having that option was important to them would have still applied for a UK Student visa. Students from Nigeria were more likely to say they would have still applied for the Student visa without the early-switching option (84%).

From the HEIs' perspective, two-thirds (67%) said that it was rare for students to change visas before the end of their studies, 13% said not notably rare nor common. Only 13% of HEIs said it was common. The final 7% did not know.

3.4 Reasons for HEIs recruiting via the Student visa route

Most (93%) HEIs reported that they actively recruit international students. All Russell Group universities surveyed reported that they did this, as did 92% of non-Russell Group Universities.

Figure 9: Factors leading HEIs to sponsor international students on the Student visa route



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEI respondents (115).

The most common reason for becoming a sponsor for international students was to increase cultural diversity. This factor was reported by 64% of HEIs. Universities in the North (78%) and Scotland (77%) were more likely to be recruiting to increase their cultural diversity than the rest of the UK.

“We’ve got the corporate reasonings, which is established in to diversify recruitment significantly. There’s obviously finite reasonings as well, but a lot of it is around diversifying our recruitment portfolio.” – HEI, East of England, non-Russell Group.

Almost half (47%) of HEIs stated that they were motivated to sponsor international students for financial reasons. In the qualitative interviews some reported that this worked alongside increasing cultural diversity.

“If we didn’t [sponsor], we wouldn’t be able to recruit students and that’ll have a massive impact on both the diversity of the student population but also, the university is a business.” - HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

There was also a sense in the qualitative interviews that sponsoring international students was something that the HEI had always done, and the strategy continued to be an integral part of the institution. This was reported by 12% of HEIs in the survey.

One-in-ten (10%) of HEIs reported that they wanted to build global long-term connections with other countries and 10% also stated that they recruited as part of international partnerships with institutions. These 2 motivations were also referred to in the qualitative interviews, particularly those with specific research interests.

“We’ve always had very sound international relationships with universities overseas, so this is just a continuation of that.” – HEI, outside of England, Russell Group.

3.5 Level of recruitment of international students

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of HEIs said they planned to increase their level of international recruitment, as figure 10 indicates. Russell Group universities were less likely to plan an increase, but this was from a small base. There were no statistically significant differences by region.

Figure 10: HEIs recruitment goals for numbers of international students over the next 1 to 2 years



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEIs who actively recruit international students (107).

In the qualitative interviews, those who planned to expand tended to say this was driven by financial reasons.

“[The] only way we can actually grow income is by recruiting more international students.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

Most of those planning an increase in recruitment were only planning a small increase (53% overall). While around a third were looking to increase the number of students (31%), this was frequently either because they felt that a small increase was what was within their capacity, or felt it was more realistic to have some growth for stability given some uncertainty around policy changes.

“There’s a plan to increase slightly, but it will only be slight because we are a small school... We’ve asked to increase our CAS capacity by about 15 but it’s still under 100 we’ll be requesting.” – HEI, London, non-Russell Group.

“So we’re now looking to broadly stabilize our numbers and a lot of that’s reflecting on governmental policy recently around the dependant changes and within the wireless sector has been reported, you know in a number of areas and there is the significant decrease in stream recruitment.” – HEI, East of England, non-Russell Group.

Just under a third of HEIs (30%) reported that they wanted to increase their markets or diversify them. For some, this was an active part of their institution’s strategy.

“The school’s strategy for overseas growth is about the diversity of the student body, and it was about what overseas students bring to the curriculum, in terms of the student cohort.” – HEI, Yorkshire and the Humber, non-Russell Group.

Others felt that there was a need to offset reducing student numbers coming from the UK and also from the EU following the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

“Home students have been a steady decline due to pre-COVID-19 and Brexit, a downturn in the 18-year old demographic ... so [we’re] exploring more into other markets.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

A full list of what HEIs were hoping to achieve in relation to their international student recruitments can be found in figure 11.

Figure 11: HEI goals in relation to international student recruitment



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEIs who actively recruit international students (107).

One institution reported that they recruited specifically so that they qualified for grants from the Scottish government.

“No, we couldn’t [recruit any less] because we’ve got to hit the Scottish numbers...If we don’t do that, we don’t get the bigger block grants from the Scottish Government.” –HEI, Scotland, non-Russell Group.

As seen in figure 12, 90% of HEIs considered international recruitment to be important to their overall strategy (80% very important). This was often because it was a crucial financial aspect but also that internationalisation was a core part of the philosophy of the institution and how they provide and contribute to education.

“[HEI] has always been an international or a global university, and we have always had a large proportion of international students and staff and I think that that is part of the make-up of a global university, (so we are one of the top 100 in the world). Typically leading universities are very international in terms of not only composition, but how they engage with the world.” – HEI, West Midlands, Russell Group.

Figure 12: Importance of international student recruitment to HEIs’ overall strategy



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEIs who actively recruit international students (107).

Figure 13: Activities undertaken to attract international students and meet recruitment objectives



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEIs who actively recruit international students (107).

The most common form of activity to attract international students was overseas outreach and advertising (64%), followed by the use of student recruitment agents (56%). Respondents in the qualitative interviews gave some examples of overseas outreach, which can include recruitment trips, British Consular events in the UK, but also revising what they offer and the language criteria for international students.

In addition to the reasons identified in the quantitative survey as seen in figure 13, respondents in the interviews commented that they were reviewing courses and language policies in order to

further appeal to certain target markets.

“The team is also looking at revising our qualifications and English language policy to potentially suit more those markets [Nigeria and Ghana].” – HEI, London, non-Russell Group.

Other strategies identified to increase numbers included having feedback on their website from alumni and running campaigns with Study International. Some identified alumni as the biggest recruitment asset through word-of-mouth and being ambassadors for the institution.

Note: Study International is an independent resource aimed at giving students, parents, educators and institutions a globally-inclined information hub with the latest news and trends in international education.

3.6 Targeted recruitment of international students

Over seven-in-ten (71%) HEIs planned to expand the countries or regions of the world they recruit international students from over the next 1 to 2 years. Sponsors who were previously subscribed to the premium service were more likely to intend to expand than non-Premium sponsors (74% compared with 58%), and non-Russell Group universities were more likely than Russell Group universities (72% compared with 64%, but from a low base so not statistically significant).

As shown in figure 14 the most common country for HEIs to target was the USA (28%), followed by China (24%) and South America in general (20%). The qualitative interviews suggested that countries tended to be targeted for financial reasons.

“Countries being targeted next year include Nigeria and Ghana because the intelligence was telling our international recruitment team that those countries have a very young population, from kind of wealthy backgrounds, and there is a desire from that area for young people to come and study in the UK, so that’s some of the indicators which prompted the team to explore that area.” – HEI, London, non-Russell Group.

In some cases, the motivation was to tap into previously unexplored markets.

“I think we want to look at more of South East Asia in terms of Singapore, China and Vietnam where we traditionally don’t get any students from.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

Figure 14: Locations where HEIs plan to increase recruitment from



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEIs who plan to expand the countries or regions they recruit

international students from (76).

3.7 Impact of policy changes

HEIs were mostly positive about their ability to adapt to policy changes affecting students, 66% thought they could do so easily, although only 17% said very easily, as seen in figure 15. The qualitative interviews suggested that the difficulty stemmed from timings and being able to process and disseminate these changes to students efficiently.

Figure 15: Extent to which HEIs are able to easily adapt to visa policy changes affecting students



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEI respondents (115).

For changes that affect institutions directly, HEIs were slightly less optimistic about their ability to manage the changes – 60% thought it would be done easily, and 9% very easily, as shown in figure 16. Changes that meant having to adopt new processes could take time, particularly around introducing digital technology such as the shift to eVisas or uploading scans of qualification certificates, because this creates certain questions around how they verified the veracity of digital documents, and particularly the algorithm to filter immigration applications had affected the length of time for processing.

One institution also thought that changes could be difficult to adapt to because they were changes that do not suit institutions and were being made when they can make things harder for HEIs.

“I think the Home Office need to think carefully about how they manage that relationship with the sector, both in our operational level and on that more the wider engagement piece, because I think there’s a certain amount of tone deafness there.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

Figure 16: Extent to which HEIs are able to easily adapt to visa policy changes affecting organisations



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEI respondents (115).

When asked whether specific aspects of policy changes would affect recruitment of international students, many qualitative respondents felt that it was difficult to predict the amount of impact there would be.

“It’s tricky to see how large an impact it’s going to have until it’s kind of been in operation for a while.” – HEI, South East, Non-Russell Group.

As shown in figure 17, those who did feel they could predict what the effects would be thought that most changes would not have a major impact. Just over half (59%) of HEIs thought greater scrutiny over student finances would have an impact (6% to a great extent), 35% thought greater scrutiny over international student agents would have an impact (3% to a great extent) and 27% thought students being unable to switch out of the Student visa route would have an impact (3% to a great extent).

Figure 17: Extent to which HEIs think policy changes to the Student visa will affect their recruitment of overseas students in the UK the following year



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEI respondents (115).

HEIs thought that losing the ability to bring dependants was the most likely change to have an effect. Three-quarters (75%) thought this would have an impact to at least some extent, 30% to a large extent.

Some respondents in the qualitative interviews felt that they had already started to see an impact in this regard.

“We have like all other institutions [noticed] a marked decline in the number of applications for this January and we’re as a sector, I suppose we assume we’re putting that down to that removal the of dependants.” – HEI, North West, non-Russell Group.

Across the subgroups, there was a feeling that this change would be likely impact older students in particular, and especially female students.

“It’s a big pull to move to another country and if you’ve got kids or a spouse, you’d want them to come with you naturally.” – HEI, North West, non-Russell Group.

“Our biggest disappointment in regard to that (visa changes), was that we knew that it would particularly impact on women in some cultures where they are not permitted to travel unless their partners come with them.” – HEI, West Midlands, Russell Group.

One institution gave anecdotal evidence that they thought this would have a big impact on Iranian students or certain cultures, but in general respondents found this a difficult topic to talk about with any certainty because it’s not an area that they hold detailed or robust data on.

One specific recent policy change was the ability of students to be able to switch visa routes. For most HEIs it was rare for student holders to switch visas before the end of their studies. Two-thirds (67%) thought it was rare and a third (33%) very rare, as seen in figure 18.

Figure 18: At your institution, how common was it for Student visa holders to switch visas before the end of their studies?



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All HEI respondents (115).

4. Dependants

This chapter covers the characteristics of the Student visa holders who also had dependants on their visa, as well as dependants themselves, exploring their relationship to the visa holders, age, and main activities in the UK before briefly discussing their influence on the visa holder's decision to come study in the UK.

4.1 Profile of students with dependants

Almost a quarter (24%) of Student visa holders had dependants on their visa. A further 3% expected their partner and/or child(ren) to join them as dependants on their Student visa later, and another 3% on another visa in the future. Lastly, 70% of students had no dependants associated with their visa nor any plans to bring some in the future.

By nationality, students from Nigeria were more likely than those from any other countries to have dependants on their visa, with 59% of them currently having dependants. By contrast, only 2% of students from China had dependants, making them the least likely to have dependants.

By level of study, master's students (25%) were more likely than those pursuing a doctorate (10%) to have dependants on their Student visa. Additionally, more students who planned to stay in the UK after their studies had dependants (27%), compared to those who wanted to leave the UK (14%).

Also more likely to have dependants were students who worked while studying (35% compared to 18% among those who didn't work), women (34% compared to 14% among men), and students at non-Russell Group universities (32% compared to 5% among those at Russell Group HEIs). The likelihood of someone having dependants increased with their age, from 6% among those aged 24 and under to 32% among those aged between 25 and 34 years, and 62% of those aged 35 and over.

4.2 Profile of dependants

Among the students who had dependants on their visa, almost all (94%) had their partner as a dependant, and 35% had their children as dependants. The majority of those with children as dependants had between 1 and 2 children, with a mean average of 1.7 children.

Students from Nigeria were more likely to have children as dependants (53%), and also more likely to have 3 children as dependants (19% compared to 12% overall among those with dependent children).

Additionally, students aged 35 and over with dependents were more likely to have children on their visa (72%), as were those who wanted to stay in the UK (39% compared to 22% among those who wanted to leave)."

Figure 19: Activities of dependant partners



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who have a partner as a dependant (516).

In terms of the activities of the dependent partners, as shown in figure 19, they were most likely to be a full-time employee in the UK (61%). This was followed by the partners being unemployed (13%) or working part-time (10%). Partners of students from India were more likely than average to be full-time employed (74%).

4.3 Influence of dependants in decision-making

When asked whether they would have still come to study in the UK if they were not able to bring their dependants with them (figure 20), roughly two-in-five (38%) said they would have looked for other options instead. Around half (49%) of students with dependants said they still would have chosen to study in the UK, but 10% would have chosen shorter courses or qualifications. In addition, 13% were not sure what they would have done if bringing dependants was not an option.

Figure 20: Whether people would have still chosen to study in the UK if they could not bring dependants



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who have dependants (549).

Students with dependants from India were more likely than those from other countries to say they would have still chosen to come study in the UK without their dependants (66% compared to 43%

for Nigeria, 41% for Pakistan and 35% for all other countries). The base size for students with dependants from China was too low (5 students) to provide any indications.

In general, the more dependants they had, the less likely Student visa holders were to have applied without their dependants. Just over a third (34%) of those with one dependant would have looked for other options, whereas almost half (46%) of those with 2 dependants and just over half (51%) of those with 3 or more dependants would have looked for other options. Perhaps related to the number of dependants, the likelihood of choosing other options also increased with age, from 34% among those aged 34 and under, to 52% of those aged 35 and over.

“Having them [my children] on my visa was crucial. As I mentioned, the reason why I didn’t go to Canada first is because my daughter was really young at that time and I wasn’t sure if I could study and then have her because she was so young, and also coming to the UK with my children was really something that I considered because I checked all the conditions and I saw that it was possible to bring my family members.” – Student visa holder, France, doctorate, has dependants.

It should be noted that many HEIs interviewed did not record data on dependants in any significant way and did not comment on the influence of dependants in the decision-making process for students. Anecdotally, universities expected to see an impact of students not being able to bring dependants in coming years.

Case study 2 - Dependants

One student came from South Korea to the UK to study a non-STEM subject at a postgraduate (non-doctorate) level. She had previously studied in Australia and came to do a one-year course as a mature student. Her husband had studied in the UK and recommended it because of its culture and lifestyle.

Dissatisfied with life in South Korea, she wanted to come to the UK and while the intention was to study, she would have applied for a work visa if she was unable to come as a student. Being able to bring dependents with her was a critical factor in coming to the UK because she wanted her children to experience a UK education and live close to mainland Europe to be able to experience a wide range of history and culture.

“Compared to other countries, like the US, it’s more like focussing on the polite attitudes and really like a high education for the children from the young ages to higher education as well.”

“I didn’t want my children to have a Korean education because Korean education is very tough [with a] high cost.”

She learned about the visa through her husband, sought further information from the university website and received guidance from an agent. She wanted to do an MBA (masters in business administration) because being able to get the 2-year working visa extension was very appealing, although she noted her university did not advertise this.

“I decided on the MBA because I can get the one-year visa plus 2 years extended visa for

working...it was a huge impact on my decision.”

Through the support she received, she found the whole process very straightforward and quick.

“It was a lot faster than I expected compared to Korean speed.”

Student visa holder, South Korea, master’s, non-STEM, has dependants.

More detail about the influence of dependants on the decision to come study in the UK was covered in the chapter on motivations and the decision-making process for coming to study in the UK.

5. Application and sponsorship experience

This chapter explores the visa application process for students as well as the sponsorship process for HEIs. The transition from Tier 4 sponsorship to Student sponsorship is also examined.

5.1 The application process for students

Satisfaction with the application process

Overall, satisfaction with the Student visa application process was high. Over four-in-five (82%) students reported that they were satisfied with the application process as a whole. Over a third (37%) said that they were very satisfied. Only 5% said that they were dissatisfied and just over one-in-ten (12%) said that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. A full break down of satisfaction is shown in figure 21 below.

Figure 21: Visa holder’s satisfaction with the application process



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents (2,415).
2. Data labels below 3% not shown. ‘Don’t know’ not shown (1%).

Satisfaction was highest amongst students from Pakistan, Nigeria and India (94%, 92% and 90% respectively). Students from China and other countries were less likely to be satisfied. Around three-quarters (78%) of students from China and 73% from other countries reported being satisfied, both lower than average.

Students studying at Russell Group universities were less likely to be satisfied with the application

process compared to those studying at non-Russell Group universities. Overall, 86% of students at non-Russell Group universities said that they were satisfied whereas this was 75% for those at Russell Group universities.

Students in the 35 to 44 age group were the most likely to be satisfied with the application process, with 92% having reported being satisfied. The 25 to 34 age group were also more likely than average to be satisfied with the application process with 86% reporting satisfaction. The 16 to 24 age group were the least likely to be satisfied with application process. Less than four-fifths (78%) of this group said that they were satisfied.

By qualification level, those studying a non-doctoral postgraduate degree, such as a master's degree were the most likely to be satisfied (87%). Those studying a doctorate level degree were the least likely to be satisfied (70%), followed by undergraduate degree level students (71%). Both doctorate and undergraduate students were below the overall average in terms of their satisfaction.

The qualitative interviewing also brought up challenges which affected students during the application process. For example, several people described having to pay more money compared to other countries for elements of the visa application process and that these fees had reportedly gone up in recent years. Others said that they were not made aware of costs for services, such as the NHS, at the start of the application.

“These costs [for the Student visa] were orders of magnitude above the amounts I paid for study visas to France. I paid about 100 euros for France and about £3,000 for the UK for one year.” – Student visa holder, Australia, master's, has dependants.

“When I started the [visa application] process I did not realise we had to buy in the services of the NHS for the entire life of our visa. The payment wasn't a problem for me, but it wasn't necessarily communicated at the outset of the application process.” –Student visa holder, USA, doctorate, has dependants.

Completing the application

When applying for their visa, over three-quarters (76%) of all students said that they had received some help to complete their application. Students most commonly used an education agent to help them with their application (50% of all Student visa holders). Other support came from friends and family (26%), and places of study (12%). A full list is detailed in figure 22 below. Students from India were the most likely to have received support, with 85% of Indian students reporting that they had used at least one person or organisation for help. Nigerian students were the least likely to have used support, though a majority of them still did (65%).

Figure 22: People or organisations from where visa holders received help for their visa application



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents (2,415).

Students from India were more likely than others to use an education agent, with 61% reporting that they used one to help with their application. This was also higher than the overall average. Students from Nigeria and other countries were less likely than average to use an education agent (42% and 37% respectively). Chinese students were the most likely to have received support from a place of study, with 18% of these students saying that they had received support in this way. Qualitative interviewing suggested that education agents performed a variety of roles, from helping organise paperwork, to translation of official documentation.

“So I actually had like an agent. I thought maybe it was safe to have someone as a person who can guide me.” – Student visa holder, India, master’s, no dependants.

Students attending Russell Group universities were less likely overall to have received support with their application than those attending non-Russell Group universities (73% compared to 77% respectively). However, those attending Russell Group universities were more likely to have received support from a place of study compared to those attending non-Russell Group universities (16% compared to 10% respectively).

Students were asked whether particular elements of the visa application process were easy or difficult. They were asked about:

- locating the necessary documents and information required for their application
- navigating and completing online forms
- receiving updates and communicating with the UK Home Office about the status of their application

Just under half of all students (46%) said that it was easy to locate the necessary documentation for their application. Around a fifth (19%) said that it was difficult and a third (33%) said that it was neither easy nor difficult. Figure 23 below shows the breakdown in further detail.

Figure 23: How easy or difficult visa holders found locating the necessary information or documents for their application



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents (2,415). ‘Don’t know’ not shown (3%).

Undergraduate students were the most likely to suggest that they struggled with locating the right documents for their application. A quarter (25%) of this group said that they found it difficult. By comparison, this was only 16% for students studying a master’s degree.

“The financial statements that you need to include are a bit confusing, because not everyone has just one source of income. I had to move some money around to get the one figure acceptable for the application.” – Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

Just over half (52%) of all students found navigating and completing the online application forms easy. Conversely, 15% said that they found it difficult and 31% said that they neither found it easy nor difficult. A full breakdown is shown in figure 24 below.

“It was quite easy for me because everything was self-explanatory ... You could easily navigate the site and answer the questions [the Home Office] asked.” – Student visa holder, Nigeria, doctorate, has dependants.

“The financial statements that you need to include are a bit confusing, because not everyone has just one source of income. I had to move some money around to get the one figure acceptable for the application.” – Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

Figure 24: How easy or difficult visa holders found navigating and completing online application forms



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents (2,415). ‘Don’t know’ not shown (2%).

Students from Nigeria were the most likely to report finding the online application forms easy to navigate and complete (72%). On the other hand, students from China were the least likely to say that. Just under two-fifths (38%) of these students said that it was somewhat easy or very easy.

Those who had dependants on their visa said that they found navigating and completing the online forms easier than those who did not have dependants (62% compared to 54% respectively).

Those who attended non-Russell Group universities were more likely to say that they found navigating and completing online application forms easy compared to those who attended Russell Group universities (55% compared to 47% respectively).

Overall, just under half (47%) of all students said that they found getting updates about the status of their application easy. Conversely, 22% said that they found this aspect difficult and under a third (28%) said that they found it neither difficult nor easy. A further breakdown of this is shown in figure 25 below. This element of the application process had the highest proportion of students suggesting that it was very difficult (7%), higher than the other 2 aspects investigated. Qualitative interviewing revealed that many had been told that they would receive an outcome to their visa application by a certain date but that this was not met. Some had to re-arrange their travel at their own cost and some missed the start of their course due to Home Office processing delays.

“We were told it would take 3 weeks [for the application to be processed] and it took 11 weeks. We got no updates in that time except for an automated response when we submitted our application ... Our passports arrived one working day before we flew out ... it was so stressful.” – Student visa holder, Australia, master’s, has dependants.

Figure 25: How easy or difficult visa holders found getting updates about the status of their application and communicating with the UK Home Office



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents (2,415). 'Don't know' not shown (3%).

Similar to previous aspects of the application process, there was a difference between students attending Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities. Students attending non-Russell Group universities suggested that they found finding out the status of their visa application and being able to contact the Home Office much easier than those attending Russell Group universities (52% compared to 35%).

Case study 3 - Application experience

This student applied to study in the UK after completing GCSEs and the International Baccalaureate at her international school in India. She applied to 5 universities in the UK as well as Canada. Her first choice was to study in Canada, however her Canadian visa was heavily delayed and the UK visa came back first. She therefore opted for the UK as it was closer to India geographically, and the universities she applied to had a higher global reputation.

In order to complete her application, she reached out to an education agent for support. The agent helped her with her Letter of Recommendation (LOR) and Statement of Purpose (SOP). They also supported her with providing bank statements and financial documents for the application. She had struggled to understand the financial side of the application which was confusing due to the number of bank accounts she held her money in. The education agent was able to guide her through the process and ensure she had her money in the right place.

Once her application was submitted, she received a quick resolution, and she was accepted onto an undergraduate psychology course at the university of her choice.

“The application process is short and straightforward but financial statements less so.” – Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, STEM, no dependants.

5.2 Sponsor experience with the application process

Renewing a sponsorship licence

For an education provider to be able to sponsor visas they must obtain a Student sponsor licence. This licence must be renewed every 4 years in order for HEIs to be able to continue sponsoring visas for overseas students. Through qualitative interviewing, HEIs suggested that sponsorship renewal process was not difficult or cumbersome. One HEI suggested that an online portal for renewal would have been useful as it would have allowed everything to be submitted in one location. However, overall, there seemed to be little issue with the renewal process.

“I think from a business efficiency perspective for the Home Office and for us it would’ve been easier if there was a one stop shop for submitting documents” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

Another HEI mentioned that at the beginning of the Sponsorship Licence, the Home Office said that HEIs would receive a notification that their licence renewal window was opening however this had not materialised.

On the whole, however, most HEIs suggested that the sponsorship licence application process was positive.

“It seemed to be quite sensible, far less complicated than I’d thought. I thought they might ask questions where I’d have to go hunting down the answer, and I didn’t.” – HEI, Wales, Russell Group.

Experience of being a sponsor

HEIs gave mixed responses when describing their experience of being a sponsor. Some HEIs suggested that the experience was positive and that their relationship with the Home Office was constructive. These HEIs also reported that they had good networks between institutions which could help share information.

On the other hand, some HEIs suggested that there were issues with the system and that the Home Office was not always able to help in the way that they would have liked. Several HEIs reported issues during the COVID-19 pandemic when students were stranded either in their home countries or in the UK with expiring visas. One HEI however said that whilst it was stressful at the time, in the longer term, COVID-19 had helped.

“We were forced to do things differently during COVID-19, but in the long term that’s helped us. It’s helped us with new automatic ways of doing things which makes it more robust I think.” – HEI, Wales, Russell Group.

Other HEIs expressed their frustrations at certain aspects of the visa application process for students. Delays in processing for students from low-risk countries had created problems and there were instances where, due to miscommunication, students had been allocated in-country visa application interviews after the HEI’s final registration date. One HEI suggested that having a live ‘Confirmation of Acceptance’ (CAS) update would be useful for ensuring that things like that did not happen. Another HEI said that the communication around CAS allocation was poor.

“We are not told why we didn’t get the CAS we asked for, we should be.” – HEI, West Midlands, Russell Group.

Several HEIs mentioned that the process for assigning CAS and the software was easy to make mistakes on, and the implications of these mistakes could be large. One HEI mentioned that the Home Office did not provide training on the CAS software and training had to be sought through the private sector at a significant cost.

“If we make a very human mistake, it’s very difficult to go back and have that altered, so that’s quite a challenge.” – HEI, Scotland, non-Russell Group.

Additionally, HEIs mentioned that the frequency of policy changes was hard to follow and remember what the current guidelines were. This led to what one HEI described as second-guessing particular rules.

Several HEIs reported that the loss of the Premium customer service support team was a real issue as it meant that they were unable to source the information they required to ensure that they were complying with the guidance. When the HEI survey took place (prior to the closing of the Premium customer service team) 70% of HEIs said that they were a Premium sponsor. One HEI said that because the Premium customer service team no longer existed, when they went to discuss issues with the Home Office, they often had more knowledge than those who they were contacting.

“Those quick announcements and changes in policy direction can be a bit of a challenge.” – HEI, Scotland, non-Russell Group.

“Having the Premium customer service team was an excellent way of getting clarification and confirmation about policy and getting support to ensure that we were abiding and not deviating from the UKVI rules, ... but now they are closed.” – HEI, London, non-Russell Group.

When asked what improvements would benefit the experience of being a sponsor, several suggested that the sponsorship management software needed to be updated. Additionally, bringing back the Premium customer service support team was mentioned by a couple of HEIs. Some HEIs also raised the need for consistency with regulations and guidelines which would help ensure that HEI staff would not have to second-guess themselves.

HEI engagement with students regarding sponsorship

Most HEIs said that they were very engaged with students throughout their visa application process. Those who reported that their involvement was not that much said that if applicants were struggling, they would still assist where they could. Engagement throughout the application process took multiple forms including producing written guidance sent to applicants and direct contact with individual applicants if necessary. HEIs said that they often took steps such as directing students to other sources of information first, such as the UK Council for International

Student Affairs, before engaging with the student directly.

Whilst students' studies were ongoing, HEIs reported that they tended only to have direct contact with students if they were failing to comply with the requirements. However, a small minority of HEIs mentioned that they held monthly seminars on compliance information for their students.

“The word we use is compassionate compliance: when a student looks like they might have slightly fallen off the rails, one of our colleagues brings them in, we have a compliance briefing, we reiterate the importance of not missing a tutorial or a lecture to get them back on track ... We want to work really closely across our services, so we're not just saying 'you're not being compliant with your visa', but we're saying 'what's the reason for that, how can we signpost you to services that will help you, and if you're not able to be compliant, let's find a way for you to pause your studies so you can go away and deal with that.’ – HEI, Scotland, non-Russell Group.

Some HEIs said that they were considering increasing the dedicated support for international students in the future. One HEI mentioned that they were considering creating roles within the university to support.

“We're thinking about bringing in dedicated visa application advisors...Applying for a visa is more complicated than applying for a mortgage.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

Most HEIs said that they ran surveys of their international students to receive feedback on their processes. HEIs reported that these surveys often have a poor uptake and that the results were negatively skewed as only those who have had issues tend to fill them in. HEIs felt that a level of frustration was to be expected with visa applications and compliance checks.

Subject specialisms and post-COVID-19 trends

Through qualitative interviewing, HEIs were asked whether there were any subjects that were more popular amongst international students. A majority of HEIs reported that courses related to business and management were most popular amongst international students with some saying that courses in health and nursing were also popular.

Very few HEIs said that course popularity had changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. A minority of HEIs mentioned that there was a greater interest in technology and computer-related courses than there was before the pandemic.

Transitioning from Tier 4 sponsor to Student sponsor

Overall, transitioning from being a Tier 4 sponsor to a Student sponsor seemed to have been a positive experience. Of those who were involved in the transition process from their institution being a Tier 4 sponsor to a Student sponsor, 60% said that the process was fairly easy or very easy. Just over one-in-ten (12%) said that it was difficult and 29% said that it was neither difficult nor easy. A full breakdown is shown in figure 26 below.

Figure 26: How easy or difficult HEIs found the transition from Tier 4 sponsorship to

Student sponsorship



Notes:

1. Base: HEI Survey, All those who were involved in the transition process (84).

Of those who did find it difficult, the most common response was that there were difficulties communicating rule changes and dealing with student enquiries. The second most common response was the information was provided too late or was difficult to obtain.

“[It’s] always an area with lots of changes, not necessarily in line with HE cycle, last minute changes which affect students’ admission.” – HEI, Scotland, Non-Russell Group.

Another reason for difficulty discussed in an interview was that there were difficulties surrounding the set-up such as not having a registration number and being unable to get approvals in place.

“The system was so complicated; it took us 2 years to build it.” – HEI, Scotland, Non-Russell Group.

The timing of the change was also a challenge, coming when institutions were dealing with the pandemic and complexities around bringing students to the UK.

“My understanding is everyone will be moving to a digital immigration status check at some point in the next 18 months which is good, but it’s been complex when the whole world’s been kind of turned upside down.” – HEI, South East, Non-Russell Group.

For those who didn’t find the transition to be difficult, there was a sense that these changes were part of a gradual evolution rather than a sudden big change.

“To be honest, it hasn’t made much difference to me... Sponsorship is exactly the same really just with slight changes in the points you get for CAS. But in effect nothing has changed from that kind of experience really.” – HEI, North West, Non-Russell Group.

Throughout the transition process some HEIs had sought support. Those who had been involved in the transition process were asked what support they had used. The most common support used was an account manager (11%), UKVI (10%) and legal advisors (4%). The majority (65%) said that they had not sought assistance during the transition process.

6. Support received

This chapter covers the various forms of support used by HEIs and that was offered to students. This included third-party support for HEIs, Premium sponsorship, support that students received from the HEIs, and finally the work and financial support students received.

6.1 Third-party support received by HEIs

When HEIs were asked about their use of third-party support, such as consultancy firms or immigration advisors, the majority did not use any to manage their sponsorship licences (68%). Of the nearly a third who did use support (31%) the most common organisation types used were immigration law firms (64%).

Over half of the time, third-party support was used to help with audit preparation and mock audits (58%). It was also used for policy review or interpretation (19%) and general advice (11%). The full breakdown of this can be seen in figure 27.

Figure 27: How HEIs use third-party support to manage their sponsorship licence



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All those who have received third-party help (36).

These findings were echoed in the qualitative research, where many respondents had no or minimal interaction with third-party support systems. As with the quantitative research, audits were one of the primary ways that HEIs used third-party support and were mostly used on an ad-hoc basis as and when needed.

International agents were again referenced as the most common source of third-party support, where they either worked in a recruitment role for the HEI or as a way to support students in their application process. Most experiences of using third parties were positive, but some highlighted difficulties using international agents and worried that agents do too much to support students during their application process.

“It’s clear that the agent network does help them [in their application], they probably do too much.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

6.2 Premium sponsorship

The majority of HEIs surveyed had been Premium sponsors (70%, compared to 28% who were not), and institutions with larger cohorts of international students were more likely to be Premium sponsors (84%). Almost all of the former Premium sponsors used their named account manager and regional account manager (99%), and nine-in-ten used the student immigration history details

(93%). The full breakdown of the services used can be seen in figure 28.

Figure 28: Services HEIs have used from the student premium customer service



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All those who are a Premium sponsor (80).

HEIs that had an international student population of over 2,500 students were more likely to use student immigration history details (98%).

On the whole people felt positively about the services offered with the Premium sponsorship, and at least eight-in-ten respondents felt satisfied with the 4 most common services offered. The full breakdown of satisfaction can be found in figure 29.

Figure 29: Satisfaction with services offered by the student premium customer service



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All those who were a Premium sponsor (80).

As can be seen in the quantitative research, the named account manager worked well and HEIs were satisfied with it as a feature. This was supported by the qualitative research where the main element of the Premium sponsor system mentioned was the named account manager.

Respondents discussed the benefits of the named account manager which included having detailed knowledge of their institution, ongoing direct support, and a more streamlined process which avoided repetition.

“Having the Premium customer service team was an excellent way of getting clarification and confirmation about policy and getting support to ensure that we were abiding and not deviating from the UKVI rules ... but it is now closed.” – HEI, London, non-Russell Group.

“You could go to the premium account manager and get an answer pretty much within a couple of days.” – HEI, North West, non-Russell Group.

The loss of Premium sponsorship was raised by multiple respondents as a negative change, and many reported that they felt disappointed at this decision.

“I think the loss of the premium account manager, I think that’s going to be catastrophic, because you’re not going to have any dedicated support for the errors that happen.” – HEI, Scotland, non-Russell Group.

6.3 Support from HEIs towards students

The majority of HEIs signposted applicants to other sources of help and support whilst they were completing their Student visa application (97%). Other forms of common support offered by HEIs were helping applicants to understand the eligibility criteria (89%) and gathering evidence to support applications (68%). This can be seen in more detail in figure 30.

Figure 30: Help offered by HEIs for applicants whilst they complete their Student visa



Notes:

1. Base: HEI survey, All respondents (115).

HEIs that were looking to increase their recruitment goals were more likely to signpost applicants to other sources of help (100%), and HEIs that were Premium sponsors were more likely to support students in gathering evidence to support their application (75%). HEIs with a medium percentage of international students (between 10% and 20% of all students) were more likely to help students to fill out forms (59%).

In the qualitative research, HEIs discussed a range of support that they offer to students, which included but was not limited to:

- information on the website
- signposting to alternative supports
- online videos and webinars
- chatrooms
- regular checks ins and opportunities to discuss their application

HEIs highlighted their role as a place to provide transparency and information, as well as steering applicants in the right direction to find additional support.

“From the visa perspective it is probably more around [providing] transparency because we are often at the coal face in terms of speaking to students and helping them through the process of joining us to study in the UK. The main issue they run up against is the lack of transparency, so – ‘What do I need to put in place to make a successful visa application?’ and it is keeping students updated on that process.” – HEI, West Midlands, Russell Group.

“We try to provide as much information on our website and documentation to kind of steer people in the right direction as well.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

There was some variation in the amount of support offered to applicants, with some institutions only offering support when something had gone wrong, whereas others took a more hands-on

approach in supporting applicants. It should be noted that the HEI that discussed a hands-on approach reported they had only small numbers of international students so potentially had more resource available.

“Because we’ve got a small amount of CAS’s we don’t want any mistakes with the applications so we’re kind of a bit pedantic with it and in touch with them a lot.” – HEI, London, non-Russell Group.

“Even though technically we don’t usually help applicants ... if they are really, really in a mess, we will help them.” – HEI, Wales, Russell Group.

When asked about the level of support offered to students, HEIs mostly felt satisfied with their current offer. There was some interest in more resource to provide more support, but others also worried about overwhelming students with too much contact.

HEIs also highlighted that their institution offered different levels of support based on the level of risk associated with their applicants. When it came to HEIs who recruited mostly low-risk applicants there were institutions who offered high levels of support and others who offered lower levels of support. An institution that offered high levels of support did so as they felt there was less risk of losing out due to a rejected application – by offering support across other aspects of the application process they were able to ensure return on the investment.

“So we focus on low risk countries to make the process more streamline and also one the key things is that historically they have less issues with visa applications ... Because our students go through such a thorough selection process with all the documentation, by the time they get to the selection process, they have gone through so many hoops that they are unlikely to get rejected.” – HEI, London, non-Russell Group.

However, another institution which recruited from low-risk countries reported less engagement and support offered to these applicants. This was because they were lower risk so needed less support on producing documentation and other requirements.

“Students who are under the differentiation arrangement or low risk, we do less checks which is common practice across the sector.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

Thinking about the feedback received from international students, HEIs reported that there was usually a level of mixed feedback, but that was to be expected with a stressful process like Student visa applications and often feedback is only received when it was a negative.

“We only tend to hear [feedback] from the ones where they’re having a problem. On the whole, there’s nothing particularly surprising.” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

However, on the whole, universities felt that students had as positive an experience as they could

offer.

6.4 Financial support and student's work

A minority of students' main reason for choosing to study their course was because they had a grant or scholarship (6%), and students doing a doctorate or from India were more likely to have reported a grant or scholarship as a motivator (24% and 9% respectively).

In the qualitative research, some respondents received financial support such as grants or scholarships. Generally, these grants or scholarships only partially covered the costs associated with their degree. There were mixed views on whether receiving a grant or scholarship influenced their decision to attend university in the UK. Some had already made up their minds to study in the UK regardless of the outcome of their scholarship, whilst others said it was an incentive to study in the UK over another country.

“It was an incentive for me, knowing that I would have part of my cost of living covered by the tuition fees.” – Student, France, doctorate, has dependants.

The majority of students had not undertaken any paid work alongside their studies (68%), though of these 46% were considering taking up some form of paid work in the future, whilst around a quarter of students were working (23%). Students who worked alongside their studies were more likely to be from Nigeria and India (47% and 33% respectively), as were those studying for their doctorate (33%).

The majority of work was non-study related work (73%), with a third working on a study-related work placement (32%). Doctoral students were more likely to have a study-related work placement (57%), as were those who attended a Russell Group institution (45%).

In terms of sectors, the most common sectors students were working in were hospitality and wholesale / retail work (36% and 23%). The full breakdown of sectors can be found in figure 31.

Figure 31: Sectors that students worked in



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who have undertaken paid work (618).

Students who were studying at undergraduate level were more likely to work in hospitality (45%), whilst those studying for a doctorate were more likely to work within education (51%). Students who had dependants were more likely to work within the health and social work sector (40%), as were students from Nigeria (53%).

Students said they worked alongside their studies because primarily to gain work experience and to meet new people (68% and 57% respectively). Other reasons students worked were to support

themselves or family in the UK (47%), to practice their English (36%) or to support themselves and / or family outside the UK (22%).

Students from Nigeria were more likely to report the main reason why they worked was to gain work experience (85%), whilst students from Pakistan and India were more likely to say that it was to practice their English language skills (64% and 50%).

Similar findings were found in the qualitative interviews, with respondents highlighting the importance of gaining work experience.

“[I worked] because I need extra money, and also I need experience; teaching at [my university] is a great experience which I want to have on my CV.” – Student visa holder, France, doctorate, has dependants.

Students also discussed the impact of the increased cost of living as a reason for engaging with paid work, as well as unfavourable exchange rates.

Students were working an average of 16.9 hours a week. The majority of students were working 16 to 20 hours (73%), and a small minority were working more than 20 hours (2%) within one week. The 2% working more than 20 hours during term time are not working within the rules. This is a small minority and may also be at least in part an error in approximation on the part of the student. The average time spent working increased to 22.3 hours a week when students were asked about their time spent working outside of term time. Outside of term time around half of students were working more than 20 hours a week (43%) and a third worked 16 to 20 hours a week (33%). More detail can be seen in figure 32.

Figure 32: Hours worked by students in and outside of term time



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who have undertaken paid work (618).
2. The data labels not shown are 2%.

As shown in figure 32, the number of students working over 16 hours a week did not vary much from term to non-term time, but the way in which they were working changed.

Outside of time term over half of the 73% of students who worked 16 to 20 hours a week moved to working more than 20 hours a week (43%). The students who worked more casual hours (less than 15 hours a week) were less likely to work outside of term time, with the number of students who did not work at all raising from 2% to 16%.

Students from Pakistan, India and Nigeria were more likely to work 16 to 20 hours during term time (88%, 81% and 79% respectively). Outside of term time, students from Nigeria were more likely to work over 20 hours a week (54%) and to work on average of 25.1 hours a week. Master's students were more likely to work 16 to 20 hours a week during term time (80%).

From qualitative research, respondents felt that it could be hard to secure work and felt that the 20-hour limit was sometimes a barrier. Though they did report that it was easy to keep under the 20-hour cap during term time once they had secured work. Some noted that their employers were well versed in the regulations which made it simpler for them.

“I told my employer I was a student, and he explained the conditions to me.” – Student visa holder, Nigeria, Master’s, has dependants.

In terms of pay, students most commonly earned between £10.43 and £14.99 per hour. Nine-in-ten students earned up to £14.99 an hour (90%), and over a third earned up to £10.42 an hour (35%). This can be seen in figure 33.

Figure 33: Visa holders earning per hour



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All those who have undertaken paid work (618).

Students from Nigeria were more likely to earn between £10.43 and £14.99 per hour (71%), whilst students from India were more likely to earn between £7.49 and £10.42 per hour (44%).

Case study 4 - Work and study

This student came from Nigeria to study a STEM master’s degree, with the aim of applying for a further doctorate programme. He wanted to stay in his home country but became dissatisfied with the quality of the teaching and lack of research opportunities. He applied to study in the UK and received a £2,000 scholarship for his particular course. This was an influencing factor when he chose to study in the UK at the specific university. He viewed this scholarship as a ‘discount’ for paying the university fees.

When he first started at university, he did not work but once term time finished, he began to look for work. The student wanted to work to meet new people and because a UK salary converts to more money in their home country. Initially, he found it difficult finding suitable work, as he wanted to work in a school setting or a professional setting related to their course, but the timing was wrong for the school roles, and he could not meet the working hours criteria employers were looking for.

“I applied to schools for a teaching assistant role, but they were on summer break, and when I applied for professional jobs, I was unable to get one; they all wanted full-time, full-time, full-time.”

Whilst he looked for work in a school, he got work in a warehouse. The student felt that this work helped him build confidence and allow for a settling-in period. Eventually he joined an agency and worked once a week as an agency supply teaching assistant.

Student visa holder, Nigeria, master’s, STEM, has dependants.

7. Future intentions

This chapter explores the future plans of students and whether they intended to remain in the UK after finishing their studies, as well as what they planned to do in the UK once their studies had finished, and the different visa routes they were considering. Additionally, this chapter also looks at HEIs' plans around their status as a Student sponsor in the future and explores any further reflections they may have.

7.1 Future plans for students

More than half (58%) of Student visa holders said that they would apply for a further visa to stay in the UK once their current visa expires. Nearly a third (31%) of students were not sure yet if they would apply for a further visa.

Nearly one-fifth (18%) of Chinese students said that they would not apply for a further visa, making them the least likely out of all nationalities planning to stay in the UK after their studies. A further two-fifths (41%) of Chinese students did not know if they would apply for a further visa, which was higher than reported in all other nationalities (Table 4).

Table 4: Intention to apply for a further visa once current visa expires

	Overall	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
Yes	58%	67%	41%	71%	68%	58%
No	11%	8%	18%	4%	8%	12%
Don't know	31%	25%	41%	24%	24%	30%

Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders (2,415); India (519), China (507), Nigeria (431), Pakistan (155), Other (803).

Master's students were most likely to be planning to apply for a further visa, when compared to doctoral students and undergraduates (60% compared to 45% and 52% respectively). However, undergraduate students and doctorate students were also more likely to report that they did not know if they would apply for a further visa (37% and 44%) when compared to master's students (28%).

Students who had dependants on their Student visa were more likely than those with no dependants to report that they intended to apply for a further visa (67% compared to 57%). They were also less likely to not know if they intended to apply for a further visa (27%).

Older students had a better understanding of their future intentions than younger students. Over three-fifths (62%) of students aged 25 and over had the intention of applying for a further visa. In contrast, over a third (34%) of students aged between 16 and 24 reported that they did not know if they would apply for a further visa, which was higher than those aged 25 and over (28%).

Students who had worked whilst studying were more likely to be planning to apply for a further visa. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of those who had worked whilst studying intended to apply for a further visa compared to over half (55%) of those who did not work whilst studying. Additionally, those who did not work whilst studying were more likely than those who worked whilst studying to say they did not intend to apply for a further visa (14% compared to 6%) or that they did not know if they intended to do so (31% compared to 23%).

Most students who intended to stay in the UK planned to work (76%), followed by planning to enrol in further study (38%). Just under one-in-ten (8%) of those who intended to stay in the UK were not sure of their future plans.

There were notable differences in sub-groups in terms of which students were considering working in the UK. Nigerian students who were planning to stay in the UK were more likely to be planning to work in the UK (83%). Furthermore, master's students were more likely to be planning to work in the UK (80%). For those with no dependants, over four-fifths (81%) reported that they planned to work in the UK. Those who were aged between 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 were also more likely to plan to work in the UK (80% and 85% respectively). Unsurprisingly, those who had worked whilst studying were more likely to plan to work in the UK after their studies compared to those who had not worked whilst studying (84% compared to 75%).

In terms of enrolling in further study, Chinese students were more likely than any other nationality to be planning to take this route (58%) at the end of their visa. Similarly, undergraduates were more likely to be planning to enrol in further study (60%), as were younger students aged between 16 to 24 (43%). Additionally, those who were studying at Russell Group universities were more likely to be planning to enrol in further study compared to those in non-Russell Group universities (48% compared to 35%).

The most important factor for students when considering remaining in the UK were opportunities for work in the UK (91%). The next most important factors were familiarity with the English language (37%) and having personal networks in the UK (34%) (figure 34).

Figure 34: Importance of factors when considering remaining in the UK



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders intending to stay in the UK (1,439).
2. Percentages <1% are not included in this chart.

The importance of certain factors varied depending on the nationality of students. Nigerian and Chinese students were more likely to think that personal networks (49% and 43%) were important

than Indian and Pakistani students (24% and 23%). They were also more likely to think that familiarity with British culture was important (50% and 44%) compared to Indian and Pakistani students (25% and 27%). Chinese students were the most likely out of all nationalities to think that familiarity with the English language was an important factor (57%).

In terms of work being a motivating factor to remain in the UK, those studying at Russell Group universities were more likely than those studying at non-Russell Group universities to think opportunities for work in the UK was an important factor (94% compared to 90%). Students with dependants on their visa were more than twice as likely to think opportunities for dependants to work was an important factor (33% compared to 16% overall). This suggests that when it comes to decision-making, those with dependants' place emphasis on the benefits that were available to not only them, but also to their dependants.

There were also further subgroup differences when personal networks in the UK was a motivating factor. Doctoral students, (64%), those at Russell Group universities (42%) and students aged between 35 and 44 (42%) were all more likely to think that this was an important factor.

Most of the students in the qualitative interviews were also planning to stay in the UK. Many were planning to work in the UK or were at least considering it as part of their plans.

“I want to gain professional experience in Business analytics because that was my main purpose for coming here” – Student visa holder, India, master's, no dependants.

In line with the survey, a few students also mentioned staying in the UK to enrol in further study, such as master's or a PhD.

Some students we interviewed were motivated to remain in the UK due to better opportunities in the UK. This included jobs being more readily available as well as having access to high quality education. It was also noted that it was relatively easy to stay in the UK as they were familiar with the culture, had developed local networks and had visa options available to them. A few students interviewed also reported that the Graduate route and the time it gave them to think about their future plans was an encouraging factor to consider staying in the UK.

“Also it's in Leeds, so it allows me to stay local, because all my friends I knew after I get to UK, my church, Christian Union, it's all in Bradford... so Leeds gave me that option [to stay local].” – Student visa holder, China, undergraduate, no dependants.

“The Graduate route is something that I've considered. So, I think that's one thing that's attracting me to stay because it gives you more time to find work and stuff like that.” – Student visa holder, USA, doctorate, no dependants.

Of the few students from the qualitative interviews who were unsure of what they planned to do in the future, this was mostly because they considered they had time on their side to decide as they were on an undergraduate course. The students did have some idea of what they may do in the future but nothing firmly decided.

The Graduate route was the most likely route that students who wished to stay in the UK would apply through (62%), followed by Skilled Worker visa (34%) and Global Talent visa (10%) (figure 35).

Figure 35: Visa routes being considered for application after studies are finished



Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders intending to stay in the UK (1,439).
2. Percentages <3% are not included in this chart.

There was a considerable difference in the routes students were thinking of taking depending on their nationality, with Chinese students overall most likely to apply for a range of visas, as shown in table 5 below. Nigerian students were most likely to apply for the Skilled Worker visa (49%), the Health and Care Worker visa (25%) and indefinite leave to remain (settlement) (13%). Pakistani students were the most likely to not know which routes they might apply for (21%).

Table 5: Potential routes students might apply for after finishing studies

Visa routes	Overall	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
Graduate visa	62%	55%	70%	64%	56%	66%
Skilled Worker visa	34%	37%	14%	49%	41%	36%
Global Talent visa	10%	6%	22%	14%	3%	8%
Indefinite leave to remain (settlement)	8%	4%	12%	13%	1%	10%
British National (Overseas) visa	8%	5%	18%	2%	6%	8%
Health and Care Worker visa	8%	8%	2%	25%	3%	5%
High Potential Individual visa	4%	2%	13%	1%	0%	4%
Temporary Worker visa	4%	6%	8%	0%	1%	3%
Global Business Mobility visa	2%	2%	6%	2%	1%	1%
Don't know	14%	15%	14%	5%	21%	14%

Notes:

1. Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders intending to stay in the UK, Total (1,439); India (346), China (211), Nigeria (308), Pakistan (106), Other (468).

As the Graduate route was the most popular potential visa route, it was selected by a range of students. Doctorate students were more likely to consider the Graduate route (83%) as well as students studying non-STEM subjects (65%) and at Russell Group universities (71%). Furthermore, those with no dependants were more likely to consider the Graduate route (66%).

Visas that related to working also attracted certain students. The Skilled Worker and Health and Care worker visa was more likely to be considered by students on STEM subjects (38% and 10% respectively), those at non-Russell Group universities (36% and 10%) and those who had worked whilst studying (45% and 12%).

Over half (56%) of those who did not plan to stay in the UK after their course reported that they would leave immediately after the end of the course. Just under one-fifth (18%) reported that they would stay longer and just over a quarter (26%) did not yet know.

Subgroup analysis for this particular question was limited due to small base sizes. However, it should be noted that men were more likely to leave the UK immediately compared to women (64% compared to 48%). Women were also more likely to not know how long they planned to stay in the UK (31% compared to 20% of men).

Case study 5 - Future intentions

This Student visa holder was a master's student from India who studied international business. She had her husband and her child as dependants on her visa. Whilst studying in the UK, she had undertaken work, which included working at a fast-food restaurant and at a retail store as a sales associate. After her Student visa expired, the student planned to either apply for the Graduate visa so that she could work or secure a Skilled Worker visa. This was part of her original 5-year plan as the student thought working in the UK in her field would be a different experience to studying in the UK.

“I, along with the student experience in the UK, want the job experience too, so if I'm not getting the Skilled Worker one, I'll apply for the Graduate route visa.”

“So far I've worked in the retail sector, but that's not where I want to work in the long run, so I want to get the perfect [multinational corporation] (MNC) experience to add to my previous work experience.”

Another factor that motivated the student to stay in the UK was that she was on a 2-year long master's course, with the intention being that students would secure an internship during this time. However, she found the process of securing an internship very difficult and was ultimately unsuccessful. By moving onto the Graduate route or securing a Skilled Worker visa, she hoped to be able to gain the job experience she would have gained from the internship.

Student visa holder, India, master's, non-STEM, has dependants.

7.2 Remaining a HEI sponsor

Nearly all (98%) HEIs said that they were likely to continue to be a Student route sponsor. The majority (95%) of HEIs reported that it was very likely they would continue to do so.

Nearly three-in-ten (29%) HEIs reported that they had no further reflections on being a Student route sponsor. Of those who did have reflections to share, the most common ones related to the communication from the Home Office needing to be improved (23%) and issues with the premium account service (23%). This was followed by issues with policy changes or timings of policy changes (21%) (figure 36).

“The uncertainty and the changes of the last year or so do make our lives quite difficult.” – HEI, Wales, Russell Group.

“The Home Office need to think carefully about how they manage that relationship with the sector, both in our operational level and on that wider engagement piece, because I think there’s a certain amount of tone deafness there. Most of the sector wasn’t in favour of the withdrawal of the premium customer service, they wanted it to be enhanced, improved so offered better value for money. But that seems to have been interpreted by the Home Office as nobody wants to pay so let’s make it a free service and offer less...” – HEI, South East, non-Russell Group.

Figure 36: Further reflections from HEIs on what can be improved



Notes:

1. Base: HEI Survey, All HEIs (115).

Those who sponsored over 2,500 international students were more likely than average to report policy changes (33% compared to 21% overall). They were also more likely to want more support or consultation from the Home Office (23%) and would like to see improved information sharing between the Home Office and student route sponsors (9%).

8. Conclusions

8.1 Decision making and prior awareness of visa routes

Students indicated that they were most likely to have heard about the Student visa from friends or family members (23%), from education agents (22%) and places of study in their home country

(19%). It was often the case that these friends and family were students in the UK and had Student visas themselves, which indicates that they would be in a good position to offer advice or share knowledge about the Student visa.

The majority of Student visa holders said their reason for coming to study in the UK under the Student visa was because they wanted to pursue a particular course at a particular university (60%). Only 4% of international students said their main motivation was primarily wanting to live in the UK.

Among the students for whom living in the UK was at least partly important, access to the Graduate route, the ease of the application and the ability to bring dependants were influences on student's decision to get a Student visa rather than a different UK visa, though the most common reason was because they mainly wanted to study in the UK. Most students (70%) were aware of the Graduate route visa before the survey had taken place, particularly those studying at a postgraduate level.

Half of the Student visa holders (50%) also considered other countries before applying to come to the UK, most commonly the USA and Canada. The UK Student visa was a factor in deciding to come to the UK over other countries in almost a quarter of cases.

The ability to change to a different visa before finishing their studies was perceived as important by almost a third of non-doctoral international students, but three-quarters of those students would not have been deterred from applying for a UK student visa if this option wasn't available at the time.

Most (93%) HEIs reported that they actively recruit international students, mostly to increase cultural diversity, but also motivated by financial reasons. Most HEIs planned to further increase their level of international recruitment as well as to expand the countries or global regions that they recruit from.

International recruitment was seen as a core element of most HEIs' overall strategy from an internationalisation and financial point of view as well. HEIs did this mainly by overseas outreach and advertising and via the use of student recruitment agents. Most commonly targeted countries for HEIs were the USA and China and South America in general.

Finally, HEIs were mostly positive about their ability to adapt to policy changes affecting both students and the institution itself. However, some HEIs mentioned that the frequency of policy changes was hard to follow and remember what the current guidelines were. This led to what one HEI described as second-guessing particular rules. Several HEIs reported that they were disappointed with the loss of the premium customer service support. As well wanting to see this reinstated, HEIs felt that the sponsorship management software needed to be updated.

8.2 Dependants

Almost a quarter (24%) of Student visa holders had dependants on their visa. Almost all of these had their partner as a dependant, and just over a third had children as dependants. Most dependent partners were employed full-time (61%), with a further 10% being employed part-time.

About half of all students with dependants said that they would have still chosen to come study in the UK if they couldn't bring their dependants on their visa, while just over one-in-three would have looked for other options and 13% were unsure of what they would have done.

8.3 Visa application and sponsorship experience

Overall students were satisfied with the application process, Over four-in-five (82%) students reported that they were satisfied with the application process as a whole. Over a third (37%) said that they were very satisfied. Students studying at Russell Group universities were less likely to be satisfied with the application process compared to those studying at non-Russell Group universities.

When applying for their visa, over three-quarters (76%) of all students said that they had received some help to complete their application. Students most commonly used an education agent to help them with their application.

Students were asked whether particular elements of the visa application process were easy or difficult. They were asked about: locating the necessary documents and information required for their application, navigating and completing online forms, and receiving updates and communicating with the UK Home Office about the status of their application. Just under half of all students (46%) said that it was easy to locate the necessary documentation for their application.

Through qualitative interviewing, HEIs were asked whether there were any subjects that were more popular for applications amongst international students. A majority of HEIs reported that courses related to business and management were most popular amongst international students with some saying that courses in health and nursing were also popular.

Most HEIs said that they were very engaged with students throughout their visa application process. Those who reported that their involvement was not that much said that if applicants were struggling, they would still assist where they could.

Through qualitative interviewing, HEIs suggested that sponsorship renewal process was not difficult or cumbersome.

HEIs gave mixed responses when describing their experience of being a sponsor. Some HEIs suggested that the experience was positive and that their relationship with the Home Office was constructive. These HEIs also reported that they had good networks between institutions which could help share information.

On the other hand, some HEIs suggested that there were issues with the system and that the Home Office was not always able to help in the way that they would have liked.

Transitioning from the Tier 4 to the Student visa route was not seen as difficult by HEIs. Only difficulties flagged were in getting quick specific information about and communicating rule changes to students, compounded by the timing of the change with the COVID-19 pandemic, which had added further complexity.

Overall, transitioning from being a Tier 4 sponsor to a Student sponsor seemed to have been a

positive experience. Of those who were involved in the transition process from their institution being a Tier 4 sponsor to a Student sponsor, 60% said that the process was fairly easy or very easy.

8.4 Support received and student's work

When HEIs were asked about their use of third-party support, such as consultancy firms or immigration advisors, the majority did not use any to manage their sponsorship licences (68%). Audits were one of the primary ways that HEIs used third-party support and were mostly used on an ad-hoc basis as and when needed.

On the whole HEIs felt positively about the services offered with the Premium sponsorship, at least eight-in-ten respondents felt satisfied with the 4 most common services offered.

The majority of HEIs signposted applicants to other sources of help and support whilst they were completing their Student visa application (97%). Other forms of common support offered by HEIs were helping applicants to understand the eligibility criteria (89%) and gathering evidence to support applications (68%).

Only a minority of students' main reason for choosing to study their course was because they had a grant or scholarship (6%), and students doing a doctorate or from India were more likely to have reported a grant or scholarship as a motivator (24% and 9% respectively). Similarly, the majority of students had not undertaken any paid work alongside their studies (68%), though of these 46% were considering taking up some form of paid work in the future, whilst around a quarter of students were working (23%).

Students said they worked alongside their studies because primarily to gain work experience and to meet new people (68% and 57% respectively). Other reasons students worked were to support themselves or family in the UK (47%), to practice their English (36%) or to support themselves and / or family outside the UK (22%).

8.5 Future intentions

More than half (58%) of Student visa holders said that they would apply for a further visa to stay in the UK once their current visa expires. Nearly a third (31%) of students were not sure yet if they would apply for a further visa.

Master's students were most likely to be planning to apply for a further visa, when compared to doctoral students and undergraduates (60% compared to 45% and 52% respectively).

Students who had worked whilst studying were more likely to be planning to apply for a further visa. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of those who had worked whilst studying intended to apply for a further visa compared to over half (55%) of those who did not work whilst studying.

Most students who intended to stay in the UK planned to work (76%), followed by planning to

enrol in further study (38%). Just under one-in-ten (8%) of those who intended to stay in the UK were not sure of their future plans.

Some students we interviewed were motivated to remain in the UK due to better opportunities in the UK. This included jobs being more readily available as well as having access to high quality education.

The Graduate route visa was the most likely route that students who wished to stay in the UK would apply through (62%), followed by Skilled Worker visa (34%) and Global Talent visa (10%).

Nearly all (98%) HEIs said that they were likely to continue to be a Student route sponsor. The majority (95%) of HEIs reported that it was very likely they would continue to do so.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Student visa holder method

The study with Student visa holders comprised of an online survey of over 2,000 international students, and follow-up qualitative interviews with 25 students.

The contact details for the student survey were provided by the Home Office. A file containing the details of international students who had had their Student visa approved since 2019 was sent securely and saved on the IFF Research internal secure access servers. The reason for only including Student visa holders from the last 4 years was in order to increase the number of visa holders who were still students and had not completed their studies yet. The data from the Home Office was cleaned to remove any accidental duplicates and to exclude students whose email address was that of an agency or law firm that helped them with the application process, in order to try to maximise the response rate from the drawn sample.

The survey consisted of a one-week pilot between 20 and 26 September 2023 and a mainstage fieldwork period of 5 weeks between 18 October and 20 November 2023.

A sample of 2,000 records was randomly selected from the cleaned file for the pilot, and 40,000 contacts were drawn for the mainstage survey, representative of the total population of Student visa holders by a cross-section of nationality and age and gender. The Home Office were particularly interested in the nationalities that had the highest number of Student visa holders, therefore the top 11 countries were monitored separately, while all other countries were grouped together.

The survey and all communications were translated and made available in Mandarin for all students from China. Weekly reminder emails were sent to those who had not yet completed the survey, including those had only partially completed it, up to a maximum of 4 reminders.

The survey was completed by 46 students during the pilot and by 2,369 students during the mainstage fieldwork period, a total of 2,415 completes. In order to keep the profile of the survey

completes as close to the population profile as possible, the data was weighted to nationality by age-band (the gender split was already close to that of the overall population). The full weighting grid can be found in table 6.

Table 6: Weighting grid profile for the Student visa holder survey, country of origin by age

Country	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total
India	13.4%	14.1%	0.8%	0.1%	0.0%	28.4%
China	19.4%	8.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	27.6%
Nigeria	1.0%	5.5%	3.1%	0.5%	0.0%	10.1%
Pakistan	1.8%	3.4%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	5.5%
Bangladesh	1.0%	1.8%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%
United States of America	2.0%	0.8%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%
Malaysia	1.1%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%
Nepal	0.7%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%
Hong Kong	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%
Sri Lanka	0.2%	0.6%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%
France	0.9%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%
Rest of countries	10.1%	5.9%	0.9%	0.1%	0.0%	17.0%
Total	52.6%	40.9%	5.7%	0.7%	0.0%	100.0%

The number of international students surveyed was split across the different demographic categories as represented in table 7 through to table 12.

Table 7: Achieved student interviews by country and age

Age	Total	%	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
16-24	1,207	50%	268	429	47	51	42
25-34	951	39%	238	74	227	93	319
35-44	224	9%	11	4	139	10	60

45+	33	1%	2	0	18	1	12
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Table 8: Achieved student interviews by country and gender

Gender	Total	%	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
Male	1,157	48%	278	235	192	96	356
Female	1,258	52%	241	272	239	59	447

Table 9: Achieved student interviews by country and level of study

Level of study	Total	%	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
Below degree level	28	1%	4	12	1	1	10
Undergraduate	594	25%	61%	177	37	11	308
Postgraduate	1,705	71%	446	295	385	143	436
Doctorate	77	3%	6	23	6	0	42

Table 10: Achieved student interviews by country and university type

University type	Total	%	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
Russell Group	653	27%	66	363	7	8	209
Non-Russell Group	1,762	73%	453	144	424	147	594

Table 11: Achieved student interviews by country and subject of study

Subject of study	Total	%	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
STEM	982	41%	260	175	195	59	293
Non-STEM	1,398	58%	255	307	236	96	504

Table 12: Achieved student interviews by country and whether they have dependants

Dependants	Total	%	India	China	Nigeria	Pakistan	Other
Have dependants	549	23%	105	5	233	44	162
No dependants	1,222	51%	341	312	157	98	314
Answer not given	11	0%	6	1	1	1	2

For the qualitative interviews with students, we aimed to cover a wide range of experiences and profiles, with a focus on a few characteristics, as represented in table 13 below. We also covered a good spread of subjects studied (15 non-STEM, 10 STEM), despite it not being an original quota.

Table 13: Qualitative interviews achieved with students, by category

Nationality	Total	%
India	5	20%
China	3	12%
Nigeria	6	20%
Other countries	11	44%

Level of study	Total	%
Undergraduate	5	20%
Postgraduate	15	60%
Doctorate	5	20%

Dependants	Total	%
Yes	14	56%
No	11	44%

Working	Total	%
Yes	18	72%
No	7	28%

Institution type	Total	%
Russell Group	7	28%
Non-Russell Group	18	72%

Post-study intentions	Total	%
Stay in the UK	18	72%
Not stay in the UK	7	28%

Experience applying	Total	%
Positive	17	68%
Negative	8	32%

The qualitative interviews covered in more detail student's decision making process for coming to study in the UK, their experience with the UK Student visa application process, their experience of working while studying, and their plans for after they finish their current studies.

Ten interviews were conducted by telephone and 15 via Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes on average and took place between 8 November and 11 December 2023.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) method

The study with HEIs comprised a telephone survey of 115 institutions, and follow-up qualitative interviews with 20 institutions.

The sample for HEIs comprised 172 institutions, with up to 4 named contacts for each, and all were considered in scope for the survey. A census approach was adopted, and no weighting applied. Contact details were provided from the Home Office for up to 4 members of staff at each institution that had a role that made them suitable to talk about the impact of sponsorship policy on their institutions decisions to attract international students and the requirements of being a sponsor. These roles included: Associate Directors of Admissions, Deputy Academic Registrars, Head of Compliance and Immigration Compliance, Head of Admissions, and Director of Human Resources. Screener questions were used in the questionnaire to ensure the respondent was in a position to answer questions fully.

Minimum call protocols were put in place for each piece of sample so each institution was treated equally as it would be for random probability sampling (RPS).

The telephone survey consisted of a one-week pilot between 18 and 22 September 2023 and a mainstage period of 5 weeks between 16 October and 7 December 2023.

Table 14: Achieved HEI interviews by geographical region

Region	Total	%
East Midlands	3	3%
East of England	7	6%
London	31	27%
North East	6	5%
North West	7	6%
South East	19	17%
South West	9	8%
West Midlands	9	8%
Yorkshire and the Humber	5	4%
Northern Ireland	3	3%
Scotland	13	11%
Wales	3	3%

Table 15: Achieved HEI interviews by Russell Group/Non-Russell Group status

Institution type	Total	%
Russell Group	11	10%
Non-Russell Group	104	90%

Table 16: Achieved HEI interviews by prior Premium sponsor/non-Premium sponsor status

Sponsor status	Total	%
Former Premium sponsor	80	70%

Non-former Premium sponsor	32	28%
Not declared	3	3%

For the qualitative interviews with HEIs, soft quotas were used to ensure coverage across some areas as outlined in table 17.

Table 17: Qualitative interviews achieved with HEIs by category

Region	Total	%
London and the South	9	45%
Rest of the UK	11	55%

Percentage of international students	Total	%
High	6	30%
Medium	6	30%
Low	6	30%
Unknown	2	10%

Planning increase of international students	Total	%
Yes	3	15%
No	17	85%

Used third-party service	Total	%
Yes	6	30%
No	14	70%

The qualitative interviews covered in more detail HEIs' level of engagement with sponsoring students (for example, intermittent vs. extensive), length of time as a sponsor, experience of being a sponsor and renewing licences, use of third-party support, and subject specialisms.

Five of these interviews were conducted by telephone and 15 via Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes on average and took place between 14 November and 14 December

2023.

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