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Research and analysis

Student route evaluation (wave 2)

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Annex 1: Methodology

1. Introduction and methodology

1.1 Background

The new Student visa route opened to applicants in October 2020, replacing the Tier 4 visa route. Since then, the number of applications to the Student visa has increased significantly. In the year ending June 2024, there were 432,225 sponsored study visas granted to main applicants, 13% fewer than in the year ending June 2023 but 61% higher than 2019 (See [Reducing Net Migration Factsheet – May 2024 – Home Office in the media](#)).

In May 2024, the Government introduced several policy changes designed to limit the number of student arrivals in the UK. The Home Office is keen to build an evidence base on the Student route to inform future policy and underpin assessments of economic impact. A first wave of research was commissioned and completed by IFF in 2023. This second wave made similar use of online surveys and telephone interviews with Student visa holders and Higher Education Institution (HEI) sponsors. Given the policy changes that have occurred since the first wave of research, the design process for this wave was shaped by a new theory of change model and revised research questions.

1.2 Student visas

The Sponsored Student visa route is open to international students who are aged 16 and over, have been offered a place on a HE 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, HEIs must hold an active and unsanctioned Student Sponsor 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](#).

Some changes have been made to the Student visa route since the first wave of research was conducted in 2023:

- only international students studying postgraduate research courses and those with government-funded scholarships for a course lasting six months or longer can now bring dependants
- students are no longer able to switch into work visa routes before completing their studies unless they are a PhD student who has completed at least 24 months of their course
- new measures have been introduced aimed at reducing misuse of Student visas, including tougher compliance standards for HEIs, increasing financial maintenance requirements, reviewing English language assessments, and restrictions on remote delivery of teaching

1.3 Research aims

This wave of research had a specific focus on the themes of accessibility and growth, and compliance and misuse.

Specifically, the research aims were:

- to understand Student visa holders' perspectives on the visa route, including why they chose to study in the UK and their educational experiences on the visa, and the impact of recent policy changes, including dependent restrictions
- to assess the impact of the presence of international students in the UK; how do they contribute to the local economy, what do they do once they have completed their studies, and how reliant is the higher education sector on international students
- to explore any unintended impacts such as misuse and non-compliance from non-

genuine international students, educational institutions, and recruitment agents and representatives, and examine how effective policy and operational changes have been in contributing to a reduction in misuse of the route

The key research questions were:

- what attracts/pushes international higher education students to study in the UK and what role does the Student visa route play in promoting the UK's global attractiveness and reputation as a higher education destination?; how has the Student visa route contributed to the wellbeing and educational experience of international students in the UK?
- how has the increased presence of international students contributed to local communities and the UK economy?; what jobs do they do while studying or are likely to qualify for post-study?; how do their spending behaviours compare to UK-domiciled students?
- to what extent has the policy of restricting dependants affected the number and nature of dependant applications?
- to what extent is the UK's higher education sector reliant on sponsoring international students?
- what do international higher education students plan to do after their course ends?; to what extent did the Graduate Route (and other visa options) influence their original study intentions?
- what evidence is there of misuse and non-compliance from non-genuine international students, educational institutions, and recruitment agents and representatives?; to what extent have policy and operational changes contributed to a reduction in misuse of the route and how effective have they been?

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 HEIs. This involved an online survey with over 3,000 Student visa holders and 25 follow-up qualitative interviews, and a telephone survey of 58 institutions and follow-up qualitative interviews with 20 institutions.

On the Student visa holders strand, 3,060 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. Figures showing survey data breakdowns used in the report may not sum to 100%, due to rounding.

Comparisons of the profile compared to wave 1 of the survey are provided in [Annex 1](#). Due to differences between sample profiles across the 2 waves, direct comparisons of wave 1 and wave 2 findings should be treated with caution.

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

| Nationality | Total | % (Unweighted) |
|--------------------------|-------|----------------|
| China | 743 | 24% |
| India | 682 | 22% |
| Nigeria | 351 | 11% |
| Pakistan | 334 | 11% |
| Nepal | 191 | 6% |
| Bangladesh | 94 | 3% |
| Ghana | 57 | 2% |
| United States of America | 53 | 2% |
| Sri Lanka | 42 | 1% |
| Other Countries | 513 | 17% |

| Age | Total | % (Unweighted) |
|--------------|-------|----------------|
| 23 and under | 1,825 | 60% |
| 24 to 34 | 995 | 33% |
| 35 to 44 | 224 | 7% |

| | | |
|--------------------|----|-----|
| 45 and over | 16 | <1% |
|--------------------|----|-----|

| Gender | Total | % (Unweighted) |
|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Male | 1,670 | 55% |
| Female | 1,389 | 45% |
| Other | 1 | <1% |

For the qualitative element of the Student visa holder strand, 25 interviews were completed with Student visa holders, aiming for a spread by age, gender, nationality, subject, level of study, type of HEI, post-study intentions, experience of digital application, whether they had brought dependants on their visa, and whether they had undertaken work while in the UK.

For the HEI strand, a census approach was adopted. Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) were completed with 58 HEIs, out of a total sample of 164 institutions. Each institution had up to 2 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 | 18 | 31% |
| South East | 7 | 12% |
| Scotland | 7 | 12% |
| South West | 3 | 5% |
| West Midlands | 2 | 3% |
| East of England | 4 | 7% |
| North West | 4 | 7% |
| North East | 2 | 3% |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|----|
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 4 | 7% |
| East Midlands | 2 | 3% |
| Northern Ireland | 2 | 3% |
| Wales | 3 | 5% |

| Institution type | Total | % |
|--------------------------|--------------|----------|
| Russell Group | 0 | 0% |
| Non-Russell Group | 58 | 100% |

For the HEI qualitative element, 20 follow-up interviews were conducted with HEIs from across the UK covering a range of regions. Interviews also aimed to cover a range of institutions in terms of the percentage share of international students, intentions to increase the number of international students, and whether they had assistance from third parties in maintaining their sponsorship licence.

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

Accessibility, growth and experience

This section explores the attractiveness of the UK as a study destination, and how international students became aware of the Student visa route. It then covers visa holders' experiences of the application process and HEIs' experiences of maintaining their sponsor licence. This section also discusses Student visa holders' experiences of living and studying in the UK, including their views on in-person and remote learning, their spending behaviours, experiences of paid work, and integration into UK life. Finally, the section looks at the impact of dependants on doctoral students' decision-making.

2. What attracts international students to

the UK?

Most Student visa holders were attracted to the UK by its reputable, high-quality higher education system, offering courses they felt met their academic interests and enabled them to develop professional skills for employment. The extent to which living in the UK was seen as an equally important motivator varied by nationality and their future intentions after completing their studies.

The majority of Student visa holders were primarily motivated to study in the UK due to a desire to pursue a particular course at a particular university (61%), rather than to live in the UK (4%). A third (33%) reported that these were equally important factors.

Figure 1: What was most important to respondents when applying to the Student visa



■ To pursue a particular course at a particular university ■ Both were equally important ■ To live in the UK

Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Motivations to come to the UK varied by nationality, with students from China more likely to report that the course and university were most important (73%) rather than equally important as living in the UK (24%). Students from Nigeria were the most balanced in terms of the proportion that were primarily motivated by their course and university (53%) and those who felt living in the UK was equally important (43%).

Doctorate students were also more likely to say the course and university of study were the main motivator with just over three-quarters (78%) stating this compared to around three-fifths of undergraduates (57%) and non-doctoral postgraduates (61%).

Those who hoped to stay in the UK after their studies were more likely to report that their course of study was equally as important as living in the UK (44%) as opposed to those who intend to leave (14%).

Of those who were motivated by living in the UK, or felt this was equally important as their course and university of study, over half (52%) said they chose the Student visa over other visa options as they primarily preferred to study in the UK rather than work. The Student visa allowing access to the Graduate Route was a factor among two-fifths (40%) of these respondents. A quarter (25%) hoped to transfer to another visa route once they had completed their studies.

When asked why they chose to apply for the UK Student visa over other UK visa options, a preference for studying rather than working in the UK was reported most among respondents from India (59%). Nigerian students were least likely to have chosen the Student visa for this reason (40%), with a larger portion being motivated to apply to the Student visa as it allowed access to the Graduate Route (50%).

Of those who wanted to pursue a particular course at a particular university or who thought this was equally as important as living in the UK, the majority chose their current course as it fitted their academic interests (75%) and enabled them to develop their professional/technical skills (75%). The reputation of the UK institution was also a key reason among nearly half of these respondents (48%), especially among students from China (58%) and those who studied at a Russell Group institution (64%). Fewer students from India and Pakistan reported reputation as a key consideration (41% and 32% respectively).

Receiving a grant or scholarship was also a motivation for studying in the UK for nearly half of doctoral students who responded to the survey (45%), compared to only 10% across all levels of study. However, finding a course that fit their academic interests was still the principal motivator for this group (88%).

This focus on the quality of UK higher education and reputation of universities is supported by qualitative interview findings. Student visa holders cited the importance of UK universities offering an internationally recognised standard of education. They also emphasised the importance of applying to courses that met their specific needs and interests, as well as being guided by the funding opportunities available to them.

“The UK education system is good and it cannot be contested in any part of the world. Having studied here, placed me on the platform that ... whenever you look through my CV, you know that whatever I say is credible.”

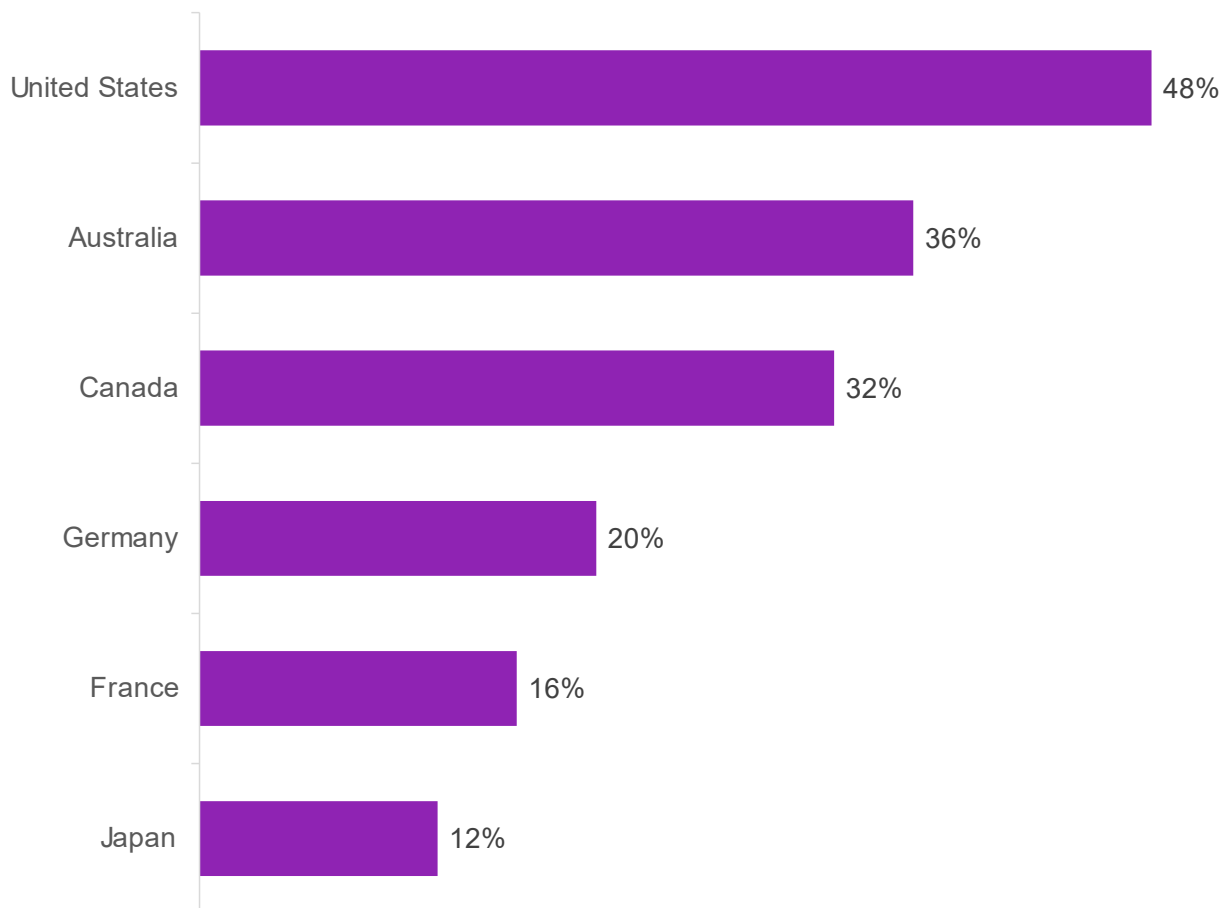
Student visa holder, Sierra Leone, doctorate, has dependants.

3. What other countries did international students consider?

Just over half of Student visa holders (52%) had considered going to countries other than the UK. Students from China were particularly likely to have considered other countries (67%). In contrast, students from India and Pakistan were more likely to have only considered the UK (64% and 60%, respectively).

The United States, Australia and Canada were most likely to be considered as alternatives to the UK, as shown in Figure 2. The US was considered by almost half of those who contemplated other countries (48%), while around a third considered Australia (36%) and Canada (32%). As these all are majority English-speaking countries, this suggests that language was a consideration. The next most popular countries considered by Student visa holders were Germany (20%) and France (16%).

Figure 2: Top 5 countries considered by Student visa holders who considered going to other countries



Base: Student visa holders who had considered other countries (1,519).

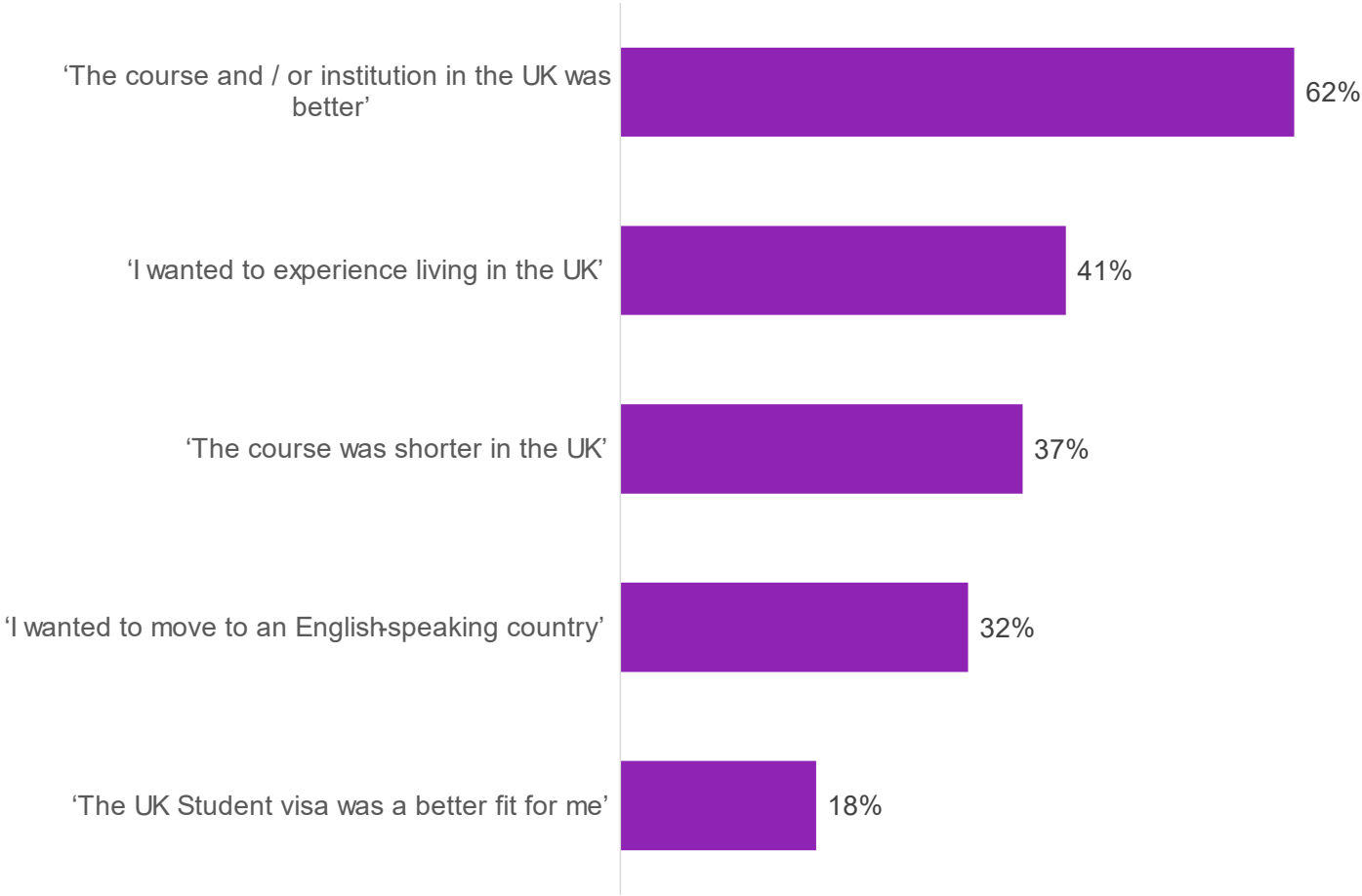
After the top 5, the next most popular country considered was Japan (12%), though this was largely due to a quarter of students from China having considered it, as interest was notably lower among other nationalities. No other destinations were considered by more than one-in-ten. These were the same alternative destinations mentioned in the first wave of the Student visa holders survey, although Canada was the second most-considered previously.

Notably fewer doctorate students considered Australia (23%), with Germany being the second most popular choice among this group (37%) after the US (50%).

Among students from Pakistan, Australia was the most popular alternative to the UK, considered by 67% of those that had considered other countries. Canada was the most popular alternative among students from Nigeria, considered by three-quarters of those who had considered alternatives (75%).

Student visa holders were asked what factors ultimately led them to choose the UK over other destinations they were considering. The top 5 reasons given by Student visa holders for choosing the UK over other countries they considered are shown in Table 3 below.

Figure 3: Why Student visa holders chose the UK over other countries considered (top 5 decision-making factors)



Base: Student visa holders who considered moving to a country other than the UK (1,519).

The quality of the UK course and institution was the top reason for choosing the UK over other countries, mentioned by three-fifths (62%) of Student visa holders who had considered other countries, further evidencing the importance of a high-quality higher education system in the UK being a key attraction for international students. The experience of living in the UK was also a notable consideration (41%).

Over a third of respondents who considered other countries (37%) reported the shorter length of courses in the UK as a key decision-making factor. Postgraduate students were more likely to mention this (45%). This was reinforced by qualitative interview findings, where masters’ students often highlighted that the UK had more options for full-time, 1-year masters courses compared to other countries. One interviewee noted that this was the maximum length of time their sponsorship would cover.

“The UK has a lot of full-time masters, so this is the advantage over I think

Canada and the USA... Our sponsorship is limited. It's only for one year."

Student visa holder, Libya, masters, has dependants.

Around a third of survey respondents (32%) were also attracted to the UK as an English-speaking country, further reinforcing the importance of this factor on what countries are considered by international students.

Nearly a fifth (18%) of those that had considered other countries answered that 'The UK Student visa was a better fit for me'. This proportion was somewhat higher among Pakistani (29%) and Indian (25%) students. This was also a factor among a larger proportion of postgraduate students (21%), those hoping to remain in the UK (22%) and those who worked while studying (22%).

However, the general sense among students interviewed was that the Student visa itself was just a necessary requirement to facilitate studying the course they wanted to in the UK, rather than being attractive in and of itself.

"I just thought it was necessary. You need the appropriate visa for the appropriate thing that you're going to do."

Student visa holder, Nigeria, doctorate, has dependants.

Having connections with family, friends or a partner in the UK was a consideration among 11% of students who had considered other countries. This proportion was highest among students from Nigeria, 26% of whom identified this as a decision-making factor, whereas only 5% of student from China cited this as a consideration.

Some interviewees also mentioned the cultural diversity of the UK, especially London, being attractive for international students, with one also noting that the current political landscape of the US had undermined how safe they felt it would be to study there.

"The diverse nature of London really attracted me to the city ... you hardly see any tribe or any sex that is not represented in London, so you feel at home when you're here."

Student visa holder, Nigeria, masters, no dependants.

4. How does the Graduate Route impact decision-making?

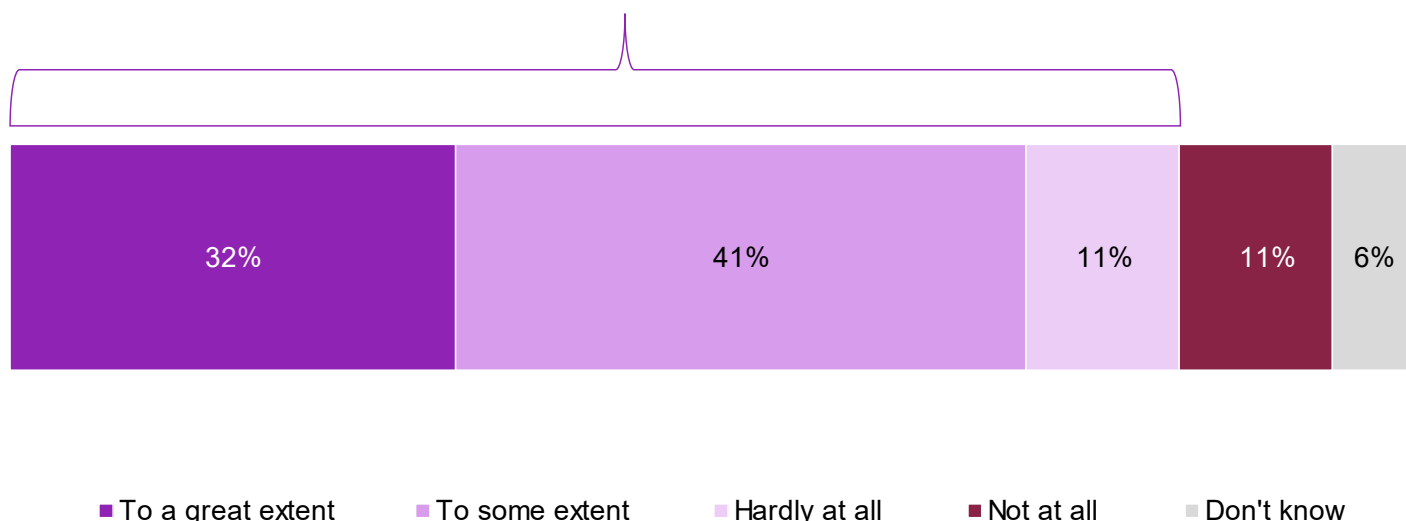
In addition to the reasons above for coming to the UK, the Graduate Route also influenced the decision to apply for the Student visa for some international students. Of all Student visa holders surveyed, two-thirds (66%) had heard about the Graduate Route before completing the survey. This is a slightly lower proportion when compared to Student visa holders who took part in the first wave of research, 70% of whom said they were aware of the Graduate Route. As with the previous research, awareness was notably lower among students from China (59%) compared to other nationalities. A higher proportion of those hoping to remain in the UK after their studies were aware of it (75% compared to 54% of those intending to leave).

Of those Student visa holders who were aware of the Graduate Route, three-fifths (59%) had heard of it before applying to the Student visa. This awareness was lowest among students from China (50%) and highest among students from Pakistan (69%) and India (65%).

The majority of those who were aware of the Graduate Route when they applied for their Student visa said that it had at least some influence on their decision to apply (83%). Nearly a third (32%) said that it had influenced them to 'a great extent'. This proportion was higher among students from India (43%) and Pakistan (41%).

Figure 4: Influence of the Graduate Route on decision to apply for UK Student visa

Those influenced to at least some extent (83%)



Base: Visa Holders Survey, Respondents who were aware of the Graduate Route when applying for the UK Student visa, (1,265).

Notes:

1. Due to rounding, percentages do not sum to 100.

Students who intended to stay in the UK beyond their current Student visa were more likely to have been influenced by the Graduate Route (87%) compared to those who planned to leave the UK after their studies (74%).

Half (49%) of those that said the Graduate Route had influenced their decision said that they would have chosen to study in the UK even if the Graduate Route was not available. This is a similar proportion compared to wave 1, where 46% of Student visa holders said they would still have chosen to study in the UK. However, three-in-ten (29%) said they would not have chosen to study in the UK if the Graduate Route was not available, and a further fifth (22%) said that they didn't know. In wave 1, just over a third (34%) said they would have changed their destination if the Graduate Route wasn't available, suggesting that access to the Graduate Route was a deciding factor for a very similar proportion of Student visa holders in both waves. Though responses were relatively split, this indicates that the Graduate Route remains a motivating factor for studying in the UK for a notable proportion of

international students.

This is supported by interview findings where the Graduate Route was noted by several Student visa holders as an attractive feature of studying in the UK.

“I love to study, and I love to learn, but also the work permit [Graduate Route] also played an important role in that [decision].”

Student visa holder, Pakistan, undergraduate, No dependants.

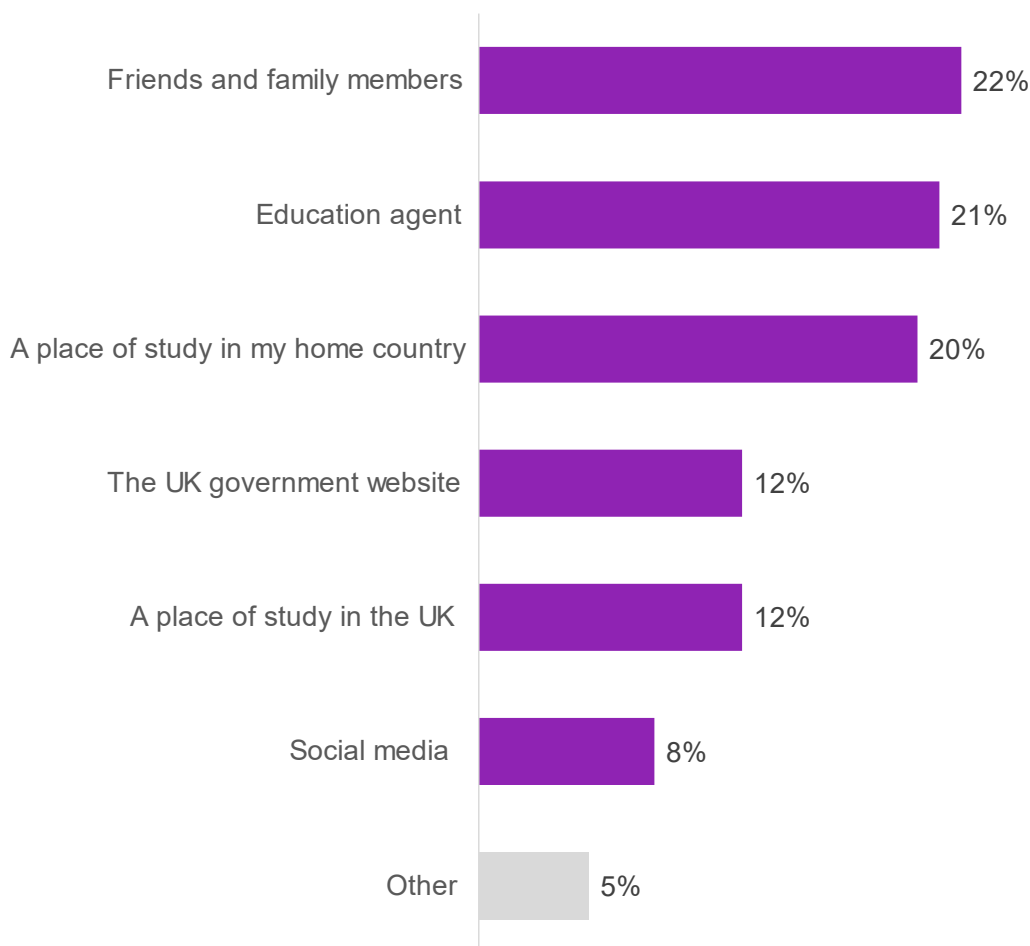
Students who said they were influenced by the Graduate Route to at least ‘some extent’ were asked if they would still have chosen to study in the UK if it were not available. Of these survey respondents, undergraduate students were more likely to say that they would still have chosen to study in the UK (59%), when compared to postgraduate students (47%). Those studying at Russell Group institutions were less likely to say that they would have come to study in the UK even if the Graduate Route was not available (40%, compared to 51% among non-Russell Group students).

5. How did international students find out about the Student visa?

Nationality had a notable influence on how Student visas holders first heard about the visa, as shown in Figure 5 below. Personal connections were the most common way that Nigerian students became aware of the Student visa, whereas Student visa holders from China were more likely to have heard about it through academic channels.

Overall, a friend or family member was the most common way that survey respondents had heard about the visa (22%). This was a particularly common source among Nigerian students, two-in-five (41%) of whom had heard about it this way. This proportion was markedly lower among students from China (9%) who were much more likely to have heard about the visa through a place of study in their home country (34%) or via an educational agent (27%).

Figure 5: Where Student visa holders first heard about the Student visa – sources by nationality



Base: Visa Holders survey, All respondents (3,060).

The UK government website was a source of awareness of the Student visa for 12% of survey respondents overall. Several Student visa holders interviewed in the qualitative phase also mentioned having consulted the UK government website for information on the visa, even if this was not how they initially learned about it. Many interviewees assumed that some form of visa would be required to study in a foreign country, so were aware that this would be something they would need to apply for before finding out the specifics of the Student visa.

A minority of students had initially heard about the visa through other sources including an employer or work colleague (1%) or a lawyer, immigration advisor or immigration representative (1%).

6. How do UK HEIs promote their institution to international students?

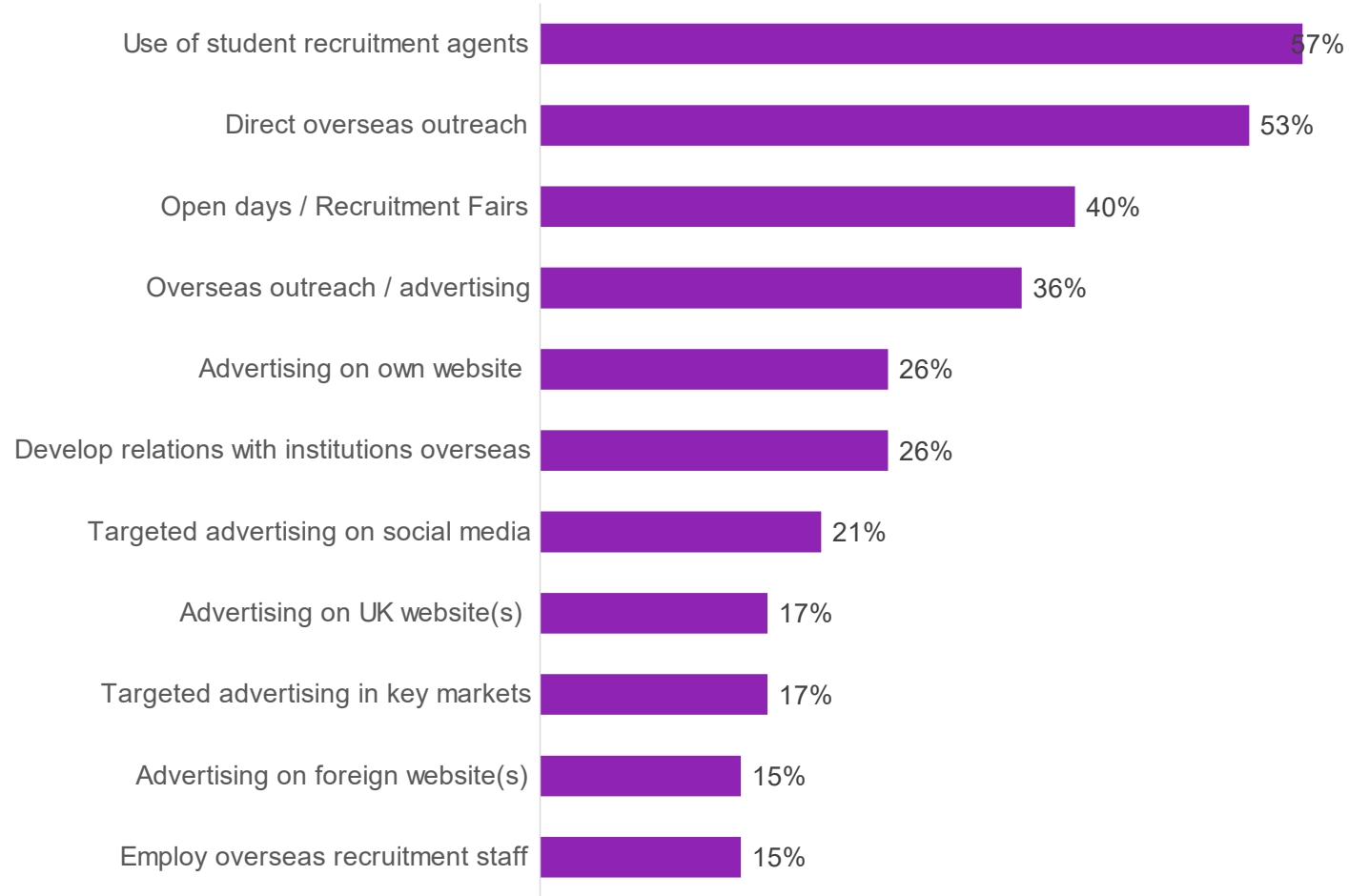
HEIs reported an important reliance on Student visa holders. All HEIs (100%) felt

that sponsored international student recruitment was important to their strategy, with 85% considering it to be very important.

The vast majority (91%) of HEI survey respondents said they actively recruit sponsored international students. Most (76%) were looking to increase their intake of international students over the next 1 to 2 years, which is similar to the 73% who said they were in the first wave of the survey. Only a fifth (21%) were planning to maintain their current levels of international student recruitment and none were planning on a reduction.

Student recruitment agents were the most common way that HEIs were actively seeking to attract international students (57%), followed by directly approaching students via overseas outreach (53%) and via open days and recruitment fairs (40%), as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Activities undertaken by HEIs to attract international students and meet recruitment objectives



Base: HEI Survey, All HEIs who actively recruit international students (53).

Notes:

1. Percentages <15% are not included in this chart due to low base size.

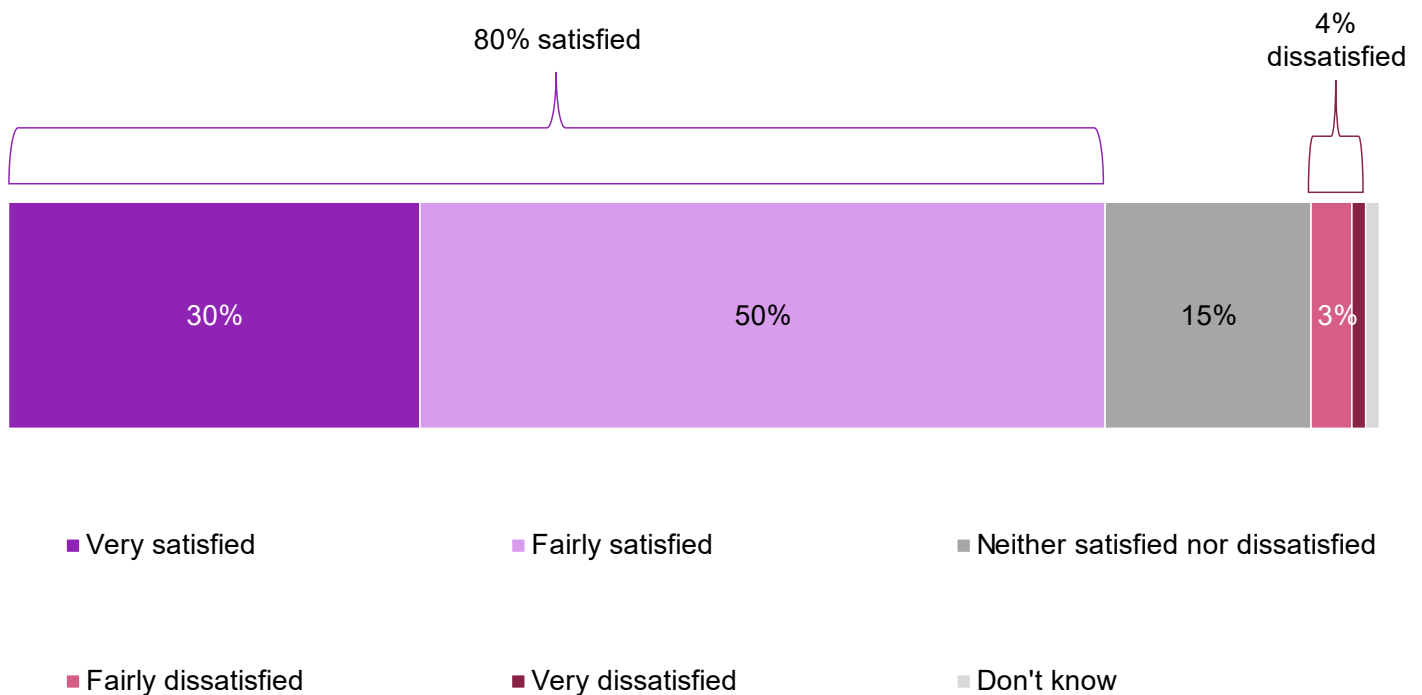
Many HEIs hoped to expand the countries or regions they recruited international students from (64%). Of these, the United States was the most common destination mentioned by respondents, though this was based on a small sample (34). A wide range of countries and continents were also mentioned, including across Europe, Africa, Asia, North and South America and Australasia.

All HEI survey respondents (100%) said they were likely to continue being a Student route sponsor over the next 1 to 2 years, with 98% 'very likely'. This suggests that any fluctuations in international student recruitment will continue to impact almost all HEIs in the UK for the next few years.

7. Students' satisfaction with the application process

Satisfaction with the UK Student visa application process was high. Overall, four-in-five visa holders (80%) were satisfied and only 4% dissatisfied, while a further 15% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied – see Figure 7 below. This is similar to the first wave survey of Student visa holders, in which 82% reported feeling satisfied with the application process, 5% dissatisfied, and 12% neutral.

Figure 7: Visa holders' satisfaction with the application process



Base: Visa Holders Survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Notes:

1. Data labels below 3% not shown: 'Very dissatisfied' 1% and 'Don't know' 1%.

There were some differences in satisfaction by nationality: students from Nigeria (95%), India (91%) and Pakistan (89%) were more likely to be satisfied with the application process, while those from China were less satisfied (71%).

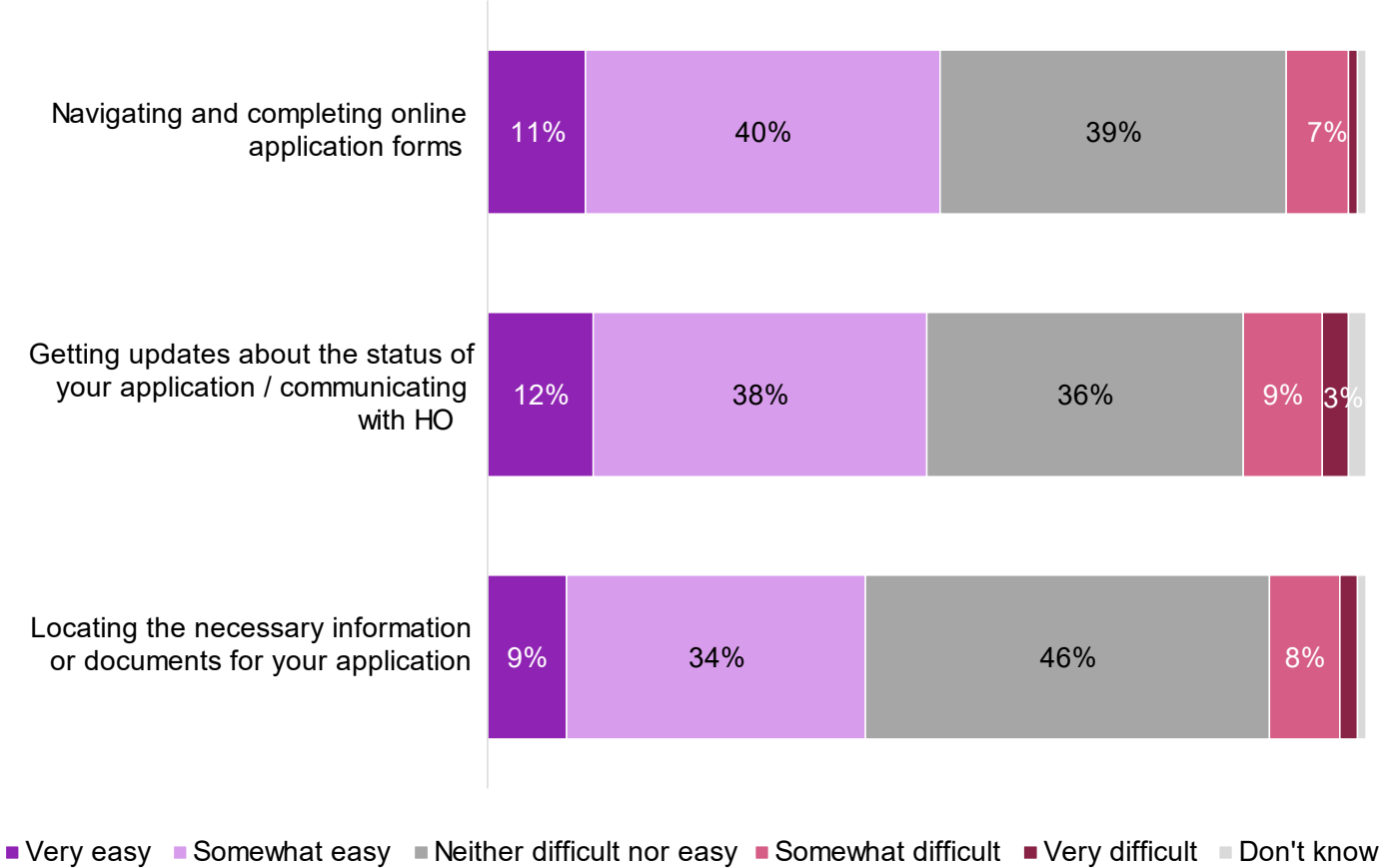
Visa holders studying at non-Russell Group establishments were more satisfied with the application process (83%, compared to 74% of Russell Group applicants). Older students were also more satisfied with the application process: 89% of those aged 35 to 44 and 84% aged 25 to 34 were satisfied, compared to 78% of younger students aged 16 to 24.

Students were asked about different aspects of the application process – their responses are shown in Figure 8 below. While under half (43%) found it easy to locate the necessary information or documents for their application, a similar proportion (46%) described this as 'Neither difficult nor easy' and around one-in-ten (9%) found it difficult.

Around half of visa holders (51%) said it was easy to navigate and complete the online application forms, and a further two-in-five (39%) found this neither difficult nor easy. Again, one-in-ten (9%) had difficulty with this aspect of the application process.

Almost half of Student visa holders (49%) also reported that it was easy to get updates about the status of their application, while just over a third found this neither easy nor difficult (36%). Around one-in-eight (13%) found this aspect of the application process difficult.

Figure 8: Ease of aspects of the application process for visa holders



Base: Visa Holders Survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Notes:

1. Data labels below 3% not shown.

Again, there were differences in experiences around the ease of application among different groups of Student visa holders:

- when it came to locating the necessary information for their application, students from Nigeria, Pakistan and India were more likely to find this easy (62%, 49% and 48% respectively), and those from China were less likely to (33%); older visa

holders found it easier than younger students (58% of 35 to 44s found this easy compared to 40% of 16 to 24s)

- similarly, visa holders from certain countries were more likely to find the online application forms easy, particularly Nigeria (70%), Pakistan, and India (both 59%), while only 37% of applicants from China found them easy; again, older applicants found the experience easier than younger (66% of 35 to 44s said it was easy, compared to 48% of 16 to 24s)
- in terms of getting updates about the status of their application or communicating with the UK Home Office, applicants from Nigeria were more likely to say this was easy (70%), along with those from India and Pakistan (both 61%); in contrast, only three-in-ten applicants from China found this easy (29%); older visa holders again found this easier than younger applicants (71% of 35 to 44s said it was easy, compared to 45% of 16 to 24s)

Students were also asked whether the requirement of proving minimum funds presented any difficulty when applying for a UK Student visa. More than half of visa holders (61%) experienced some element of difficulty, including one-in-ten who said they experienced difficulty ‘to a great extent’, a third (31%) ‘to some extent’, and one-in-five (20%) ‘hardly at all’.

Those more likely to find proving minimum funds problematic to a greater extent included Student visa holders from India (19%) and Pakistan (15%). Applicants from China were also more likely to have experienced any difficulty (72%).

Qualitative interviews with visa holders supported the finding that most students found the application process easy and straightforward. Positive elements of the application process mentioned in interviews included that it was online, quick, had clear timelines, and communication was good. Some mentioned that they received help or guidance to complete the application. Several visa holders said they received their visa sooner than expected.

“The visa process itself was quite smooth. It took exactly 6 working days for me, from the day I applied, for me to get my visa... I would say it was a pleasant surprise for me to hear back from them.”

Student visa holder, India, doctorate, no dependants.

“It’s also one super positive aspect is that you can do everything online, which is great. It’s amazing.”

Student visa holder, Portugal, undergraduate, no dependants.

Where negatives around the application process were mentioned, these included payment issues, such as having to make two separate transactions or a lack of clarity about which payment cards were accepted. Some international students were dissatisfied with the amount of time taken to receive their visa, which in some cases was up to 2 months. Some applicants also experienced minor technical issues, such as with photo uploads.

“It tells you upload a photo, you upload it and... the system blocks and you have to start the whole thing again”

Student visa holder, Mauritius, masters, no dependants.

Some issues with Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) and Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) were also mentioned, including unclear processing times and criteria.

“I cannot tell you how stressful that is as a student. It’s hard enough to get into a PhD position and then you have to jump through all of these hoops to an ATAS certificate, which is completely out of your control, it’s totally untransparent. If they reject your application, they don’t even tell you why they’ve rejected it ... This was the most stressful process for me in the course of applying for my visa.”

Student visa holder, India, doctorate, no dependants.

A few visa holders also experienced what they considered to be long wait times or said they did not receive a reply to emails. One visa holder felt the information about English tests was unclear and had taken the wrong test, at a cost of £500.

When asked about improvements that could be made to the application process, students made a number of suggestions. Most commonly these were around the length of time taken or clarity around payments, while others had specific requests reflecting their individual experiences. Comments around lengthy waiting times referred to the time between sending documents and receiving a reply.

Several comments related to the immigration health surcharge payment, which many felt was too high. A number of students mentioned being unaware they had to pay the surcharge upfront and that it was a lot of money to pay at once with no instalment options.

“I’m paying for a healthcare service that I never used”

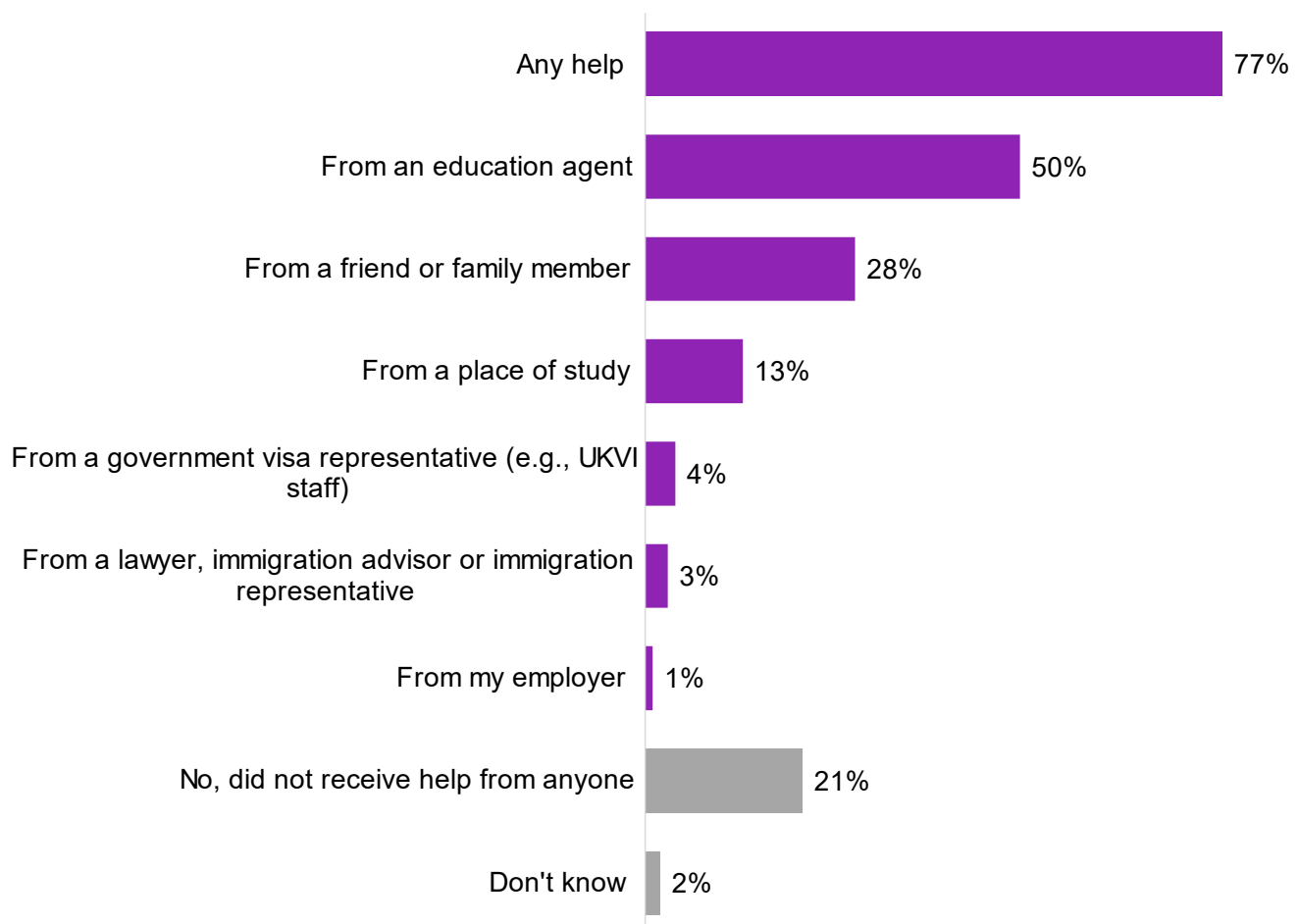
Student visa holder, China, masters, no dependants.

Other suggestions from visa holders included increasing the working hours allowance to enable students to better support themselves while studying, more time at the end of their visa to allow for finding work and postgraduate courses, and scrapping the English tests for doctorate-level applicants.

8. Help and guidance with applications

Students were asked in the survey whether they had received any help to complete their application, with over three-quarters indicating they had some kind of help (77%). Half of applicants (50%) had received help from an education agent, over a quarter from friends or family (28%), and one-in-eight (13%) from their place of study. Just one-in-five (21%) indicated receiving no help with their application.

Figure 9: Help received by visa holders when completing application form



Base: Visa Holders Survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Notes:

1. Responses less than 1% not shown.

Different visa applicants had different experiences regarding help with their application:

- overall, visa holders from Pakistan, India, and China were more likely to receive help with their application (83%, 82% and 82% respectively), and students from Nigeria were less likely to (69%); younger applicants were more likely to have help than older applicants (80% of those aged 16 to 24 compared to 58% aged 35 to 44); those applying for a doctorate were among the least likely to have help with their application (46%)
- education agents were more likely to have been used by applicants from China, Pakistan, and India (58%, 58% and 57% respectively), and more likely to have been used by younger applicants (52%)
- friends and family helped more for those applying from China (37%) and for younger applicants aged 16 to 24 (31%)
- the students' place of study was also more likely to provide help with applications

from Chinese students (17%) as well as for undergraduate courses (17%)

In qualitative interviews, students elaborated on their experiences of help with the application process. Education agents helped with applications to educational institutions (UCAS application) as well as the visa process. Several of those who had help from education agents described this as not having added much value to the visa application.

“It [using education agents] won’t happen again. I mean, it wasn’t a bad experience. But I just feel [it was] something I could have done myself.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, masters, no dependants.

Help from friends and family often came from a parent for younger students, or a sibling whose English language skills were stronger. In qualitative interviews, HEIs also mentioned receiving phone calls from parents of some international applicants.

Examples of help from universities described by students included information sessions (online webinars) and providing a support team who helped resolve specific issues.

HEIs were also asked in qualitative interviews how they supported students’ applications. For many, support was on a case-by-case basis, for example, offering reviews of application forms or answering quick queries by phone, email, or video call.

“The support is there but it is down to the student to ask for it.”

HEI, North of England.

“We answer any questions they have but we wouldn’t help them complete the application.”

HEI, North of England.

Some institutions felt that they offered a lot of support for international students, for example assigning all students a visa compliance officer who helps them through the visa processes and makes sure they have all the required documents.

“There’s actually quite a lot of and quite wide-ranging support for students as they navigate that process.”

HEI, Wales.

Other establishments acknowledged that they did not have the resource to support students as much as some would like.

“If anything, they would like more support from us, but as a small institution we don’t have teams of people doing this, so they have to be quite self-led.”

HEI, London.

9. Proof of English language ability

Overall, four-in-five Student visa holders (80%) were asked to prove their English language ability when applying for their visa. Students from Pakistan and China were more likely to have had to prove their English language ability (96% and 86% respectively), while those from Nigeria were less likely (68%).

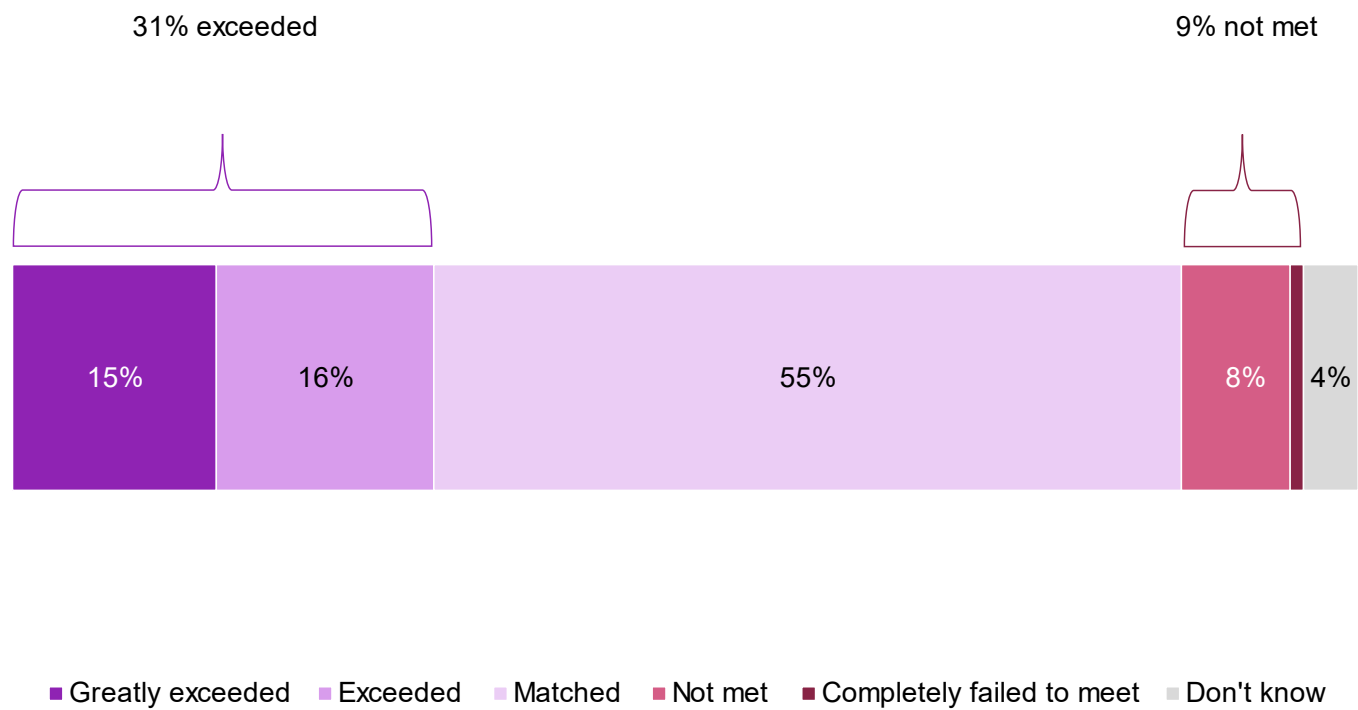
The top method for proving English language ability was passing a Secure English Language Test (SELT) from an approved provider at Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level B2 or higher (38%) or at level B1 (30%). A further one-in-ten (10%) had to take a test set by their Higher Education Provider.

Among students who did not have to prove their English language ability, this was generally because they had a qualification equivalent to a UK degree from a country where proof is not required (43%) or they were from a country or territory where it is not required (37%). A further one-in-eight had proved their English ability in a previous visa application (14%).

10. Overall educational experience

Most students were positive when asked how their experience of being in the UK on a Student visa compared with their expectations, as shown in Figure 10. A third (31%) said the experience had exceeded their expectations, and more than half (55%) reported that it had matched their expectations. Around one-in-ten students (9%) reported that their experience in the UK had not met their expectations.

Figure 10: Experience on a Student visa compared to expectations



Base: Visa Holders Survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Notes:

1. Data labels below 4% not shown: ‘Completely failed to meet expectations’ 1%.

Student visa holders whose experiences were more likely to exceed expectations included those from India (48%) and older students (39% aged 35 to 44). Students at non-Russell Group establishments were twice as likely to find that their experience exceeded their expectations than those studying at Russell Group universities (36% and 18% respectively).

On the other hand, Student visa holders from Pakistan were more likely to say their experience had not met their expectations (15%). Those from China were

particularly likely to say the experience had matched their expectations (76%).

Student visa holders in the survey were asked why their experience either had or had not met their expectations. Among those whose experience had exceeded their expectations, the top comments were a mix of positive reflections on their university experience and their experience of living in the UK. Students said that their course was interesting and they had learnt a lot, the people were friendly and supportive, that they had a good experience of UK culture or found it easy to integrate, and they were happy with their university.

Some qualitative interviewees were also extremely satisfied with their experiences of being on a Student visa in the UK.

“I can recommend the UK for almost anyone that has the capabilities to come as a student, because it’s an environment that gives everything that students require to excel.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, doctorate, has dependants.

Among the large proportion whose experience matched their expectations, the top comment was that it was what they expected, or it was okay. Some students were also generally positive about living in the UK or said their course was interesting. These sentiments were also reflected in qualitative interviews.

“Overall, the university experience is fine and living here is ok. I can handle it.”

Student visa holder, China, undergraduate, no dependants.

Student visa holders in the survey whose experience had not met their expectations had three main complaints: a lack of opportunity for work or further study, that the cost of living or fees were too high, and issues with the course being too difficult or not meeting their needs.

Feedback in qualitative interviews also touched on the cost of living in the UK and lack of opportunities for paid work. One student had been advised to use food banks by their university.

“You’re spending very much and you’re getting the minimal lifestyle.”

Student visa holder, Pakistan, undergraduate, no dependants.

“If the scholarship really reflected the expenses that are linked to our stay here I think... if I had a bigger scholarship... that is more realistic. I wouldn't have anything to complain about.”

Student visa holder, Brazil, doctorate, no dependants.

Several Student visa holders also revealed dissatisfaction with securing accommodation as an international student.

“The Uni basically told me, oh, well, the students are booking accommodation a year in advance.”

Student visa holder, Mauritius, masters, no dependants.

In qualitative interviews, students were generally very positive about their course, and many considered the quality of in-person teaching to be excellent. Students on postgraduate courses appeared to be particularly positive about the support they received from tutors.

“I am glad to have the kind of tutors I have... [They] make you understand that you're not alone in this work. If you have issues, if you have problems, reach out to us. ... So, it's been awesome. It's been great.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, masters, no dependants.

Some Student visa holders did raise issues about the teaching, either because it did not suit their learning style, they felt the quality was mixed, or it did not seem to represent value for money given the cost of tuition fees.

“Is it really worth it... for the amount of tuition you are paying?”

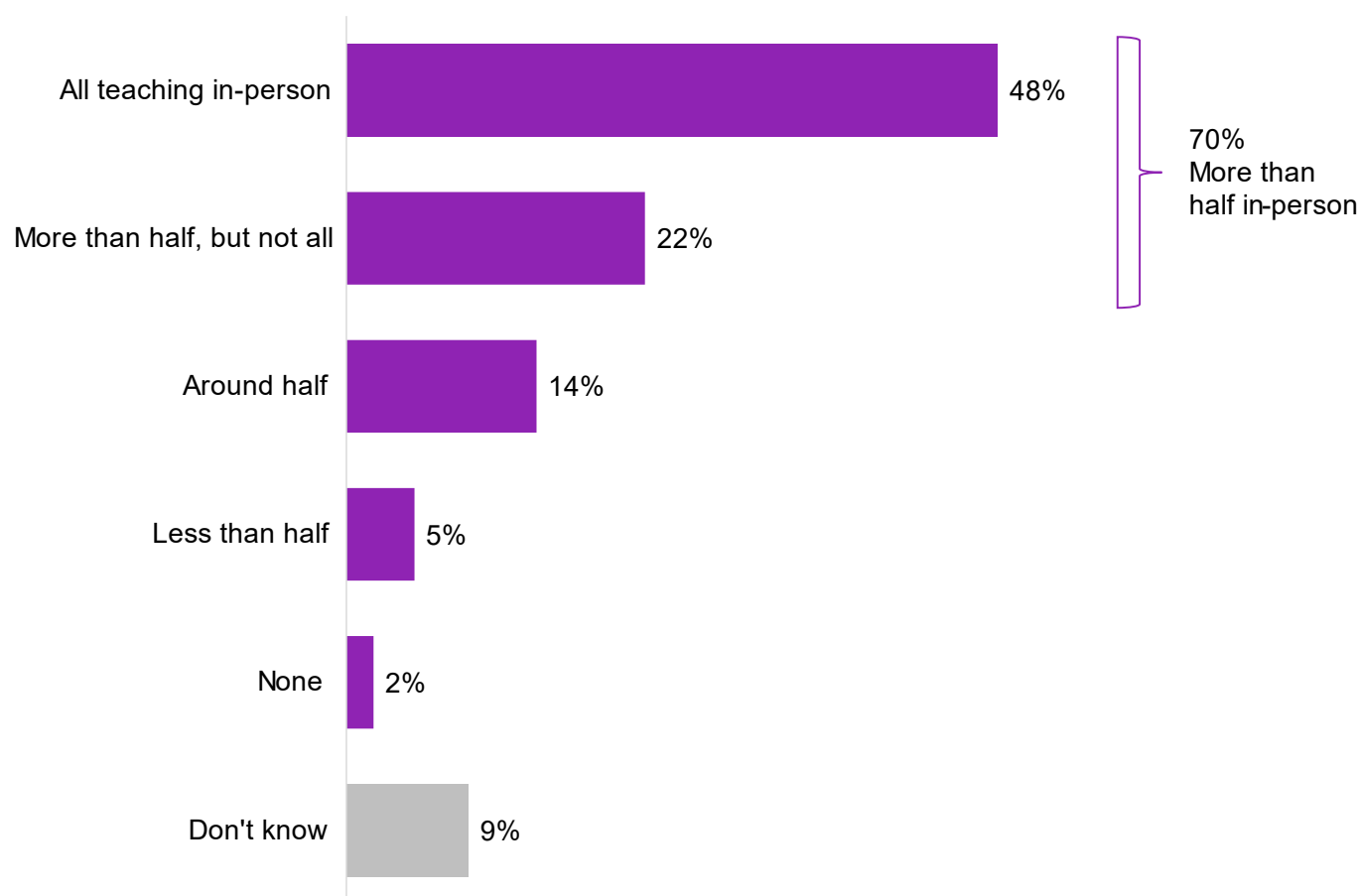
Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

11. Experiences of remote learning

This wave of the research included some new questions about students' and HEIs' experiences of remote and in-person learning to help better understand students' educational experience in the UK. As part of the new compliance standards HEIs must meet to maintain their licence (discussed further in section 3 below), HEIs should set limitations on how much of a course can be delivered online.

Students were asked what proportion of their course's taught elements they would like to attend in-person if they were freely able to choose. Overall, as shown in Figure 11, international students were very positive about attending lectures and seminars face-to-face. Around half (48%) said they would choose to attend all taught elements in-person, while a further one-in-five (22%) would attend most of their course in-person. Just one-in-eight (14%) would choose to attend half in-person, 5% less than half and only 2% would choose not to attend in-person at all.

Figure 11: Student visa holders' preferences for in-person teaching



Base: Visa Holders Survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Student visa holders more likely to choose to attend all taught elements in-person included those from Nigeria (69%) and India (53%) and older students (72% aged 35 to 44).

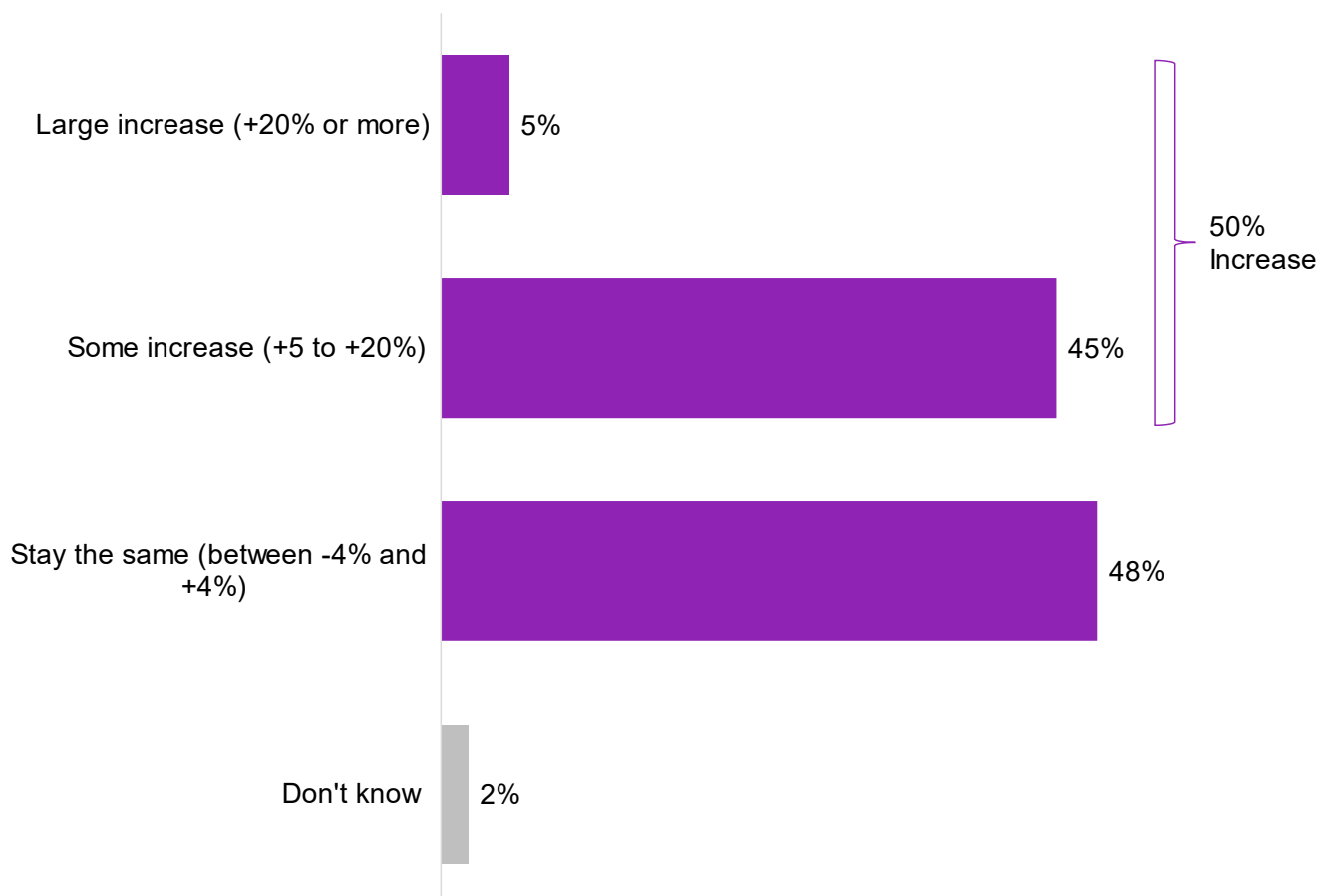
Survey respondents who preferred to attend half or more of their teaching remotely were asked what factors were preventing them from attending them in-person. The top responses were physical or mental health related reasons (25%), the location of in-person lectures (20%), their university does not offer everything in-person (17%), and issues with paid work overlapping with studies (14%). Only 2% said they prefer to study remotely.

HEIs were asked the proportion of their courses that could accommodate non face-to-face attendance. Nine-in-ten HEIs (91%) said between 0% to 25% of their courses accommodate remote learning, while 3% reported that it was between 26% to 50% of courses and 5% were unsure.

Most HEIs did however have the technology in place to deliver teaching remotely. Seven-in-ten (71%) said they have the technology in place either to a full extent (29%) or a large extent (41%). A further one-in-eight (14%) had the technology in place to some extent and the same proportion said to a little extent (14%).

As shown in Figure 12, half of HEIs in the survey (50%) anticipated their use of remote delivery increasing in the future, including 45% who expected it to increase to some extent (between 5% to 20% increase) and 5% who expected a larger increase. Almost half of HEIs (48%) anticipated that their use of remote delivery would not change.

Figure 12: How HEIs see their use of remote delivery methods changing in the future



Base: HEIs Survey, All HEIs (58).

In qualitative interviews, some HEIs did not use remote teaching at all while others described using appropriate levels for different types of course. One said that undergraduates generally needed in-person teaching as 18 to 21 year-olds haven't developed the skills required to study on their own. Others mentioned certain courses such as languages and dance that either benefit from being in-person or have to be in-person.

Courses with a remote element tended to be those with a lot of students, where the lectures were online followed by in-person seminars. Some HEIs also mentioned wanting to stay current and use technology to deliver learning in a different way. In some cases, remote learning was available as an option to support students who may struggle to get to campus, rather than the default mode of teaching.

Some HEIs planned to increase remote learning while many planned to keep the balance of remote and in-person learning roughly the same in future and said this was how students preferred it.

"We also survey our students every semester, and one of the questions we ask them in that survey is whether they feel the proportion of remote versus in person

works for them and by and large we know they don't want more than 20% remote."

HEI, London.

"Students are paying to be in full time face to face education, so if you increase it by much more than that [20%] you're going to have to start restructuring courses in a very different way."

HEI, North of England.

12. Cost of living and spending behaviours

Student visa holders were asked in the survey about their spending on accommodation and living expenses, which was a new question for this wave designed to help understand their experiences of life in the UK outside of their studies. There was quite a broad range of spending across both categories.

In terms of the cost of accommodation, one-in-five Student visa holders spent £500 or less per month (22%) and almost one-in-five spent between £501 to £800 (18%). Around a quarter of Student visa holders (24%) said they spent more than £800 per month on accommodation. A similar proportion (23%) declined to give an answer and one-in-eight did not know (13%).

Student visa holders from Nigeria, Pakistan, and India were more likely to live in accommodation costing £500 per month or less (37%, 36%, and 35% respectively). Male students were more likely to pay the cheapest price range for accommodation than female students (27% compared to 17%). Students from China and those studying at Russell Group universities were much less likely to be in cheaper accommodation (both 9%).

There were also differences in the amount spent on accommodation in different regions of the UK. Those studying in Wales and Northern Ireland, the Midlands and the North of England were more likely to find accommodation for £500 per month or less (34%, 29% and 28% respectively). Student visa holders in London were more

likely to pay the higher price bands for their accommodation.

Looking at living costs, two-fifths of Student visa holders typically spent between £201 to £500 per month (39%), while one-in-five (22%) spent less than this and a further two-fifths spent more than £500 per month (38%).

Students from Nigeria and India were particularly likely to spend £200 or less per month on living costs (39% and 37% respectively). Non-Russell Group students were more likely to spend less (26% spending £200 per month or less, compared to 17% of Russell Group students). Again, students from China appeared to have higher spending and were less likely to report the lower end of living costs (only 6% spending £200 or less per month).

As well as having more expensive housing, Student visa holders living in London were also more likely to report higher monthly spending on living costs. Only one-in-ten London students (10%) reported the lowest spending bracket, compared to almost a quarter of those studying in the North of England (22%) or in Wales and Northern Ireland (23%).

In qualitative interviews, there were clear differences in experiences of the cost of living in the UK between different Student visa holders. Some had no concerns about their living expenses.

“Rent is less than half what it would be [in the USA]”

Student visa holder, USA, undergraduate, no dependants.

“It’s affordable. For me, it’s affordable.”

Student visa holder, Spain, undergraduate, no dependants.

On the other hand, several Student visa holders had found life in the UK to be more expensive than they had anticipated. Some admitted struggling with their finances, with more than half their monthly budget going on rent, and very little left after paying for food and bills. In some cases, bills were paid from their savings and Student visa holders reported cutting down on food and clothing. One had used food banks.

“I know that I cannot afford many things ... that I would like to, so that’s why I’m looking for a part time job, and then when I look at the payment of a part time job

I get a bit disappointed because it's, for me, it's not enough. ... The rent is very expensive."

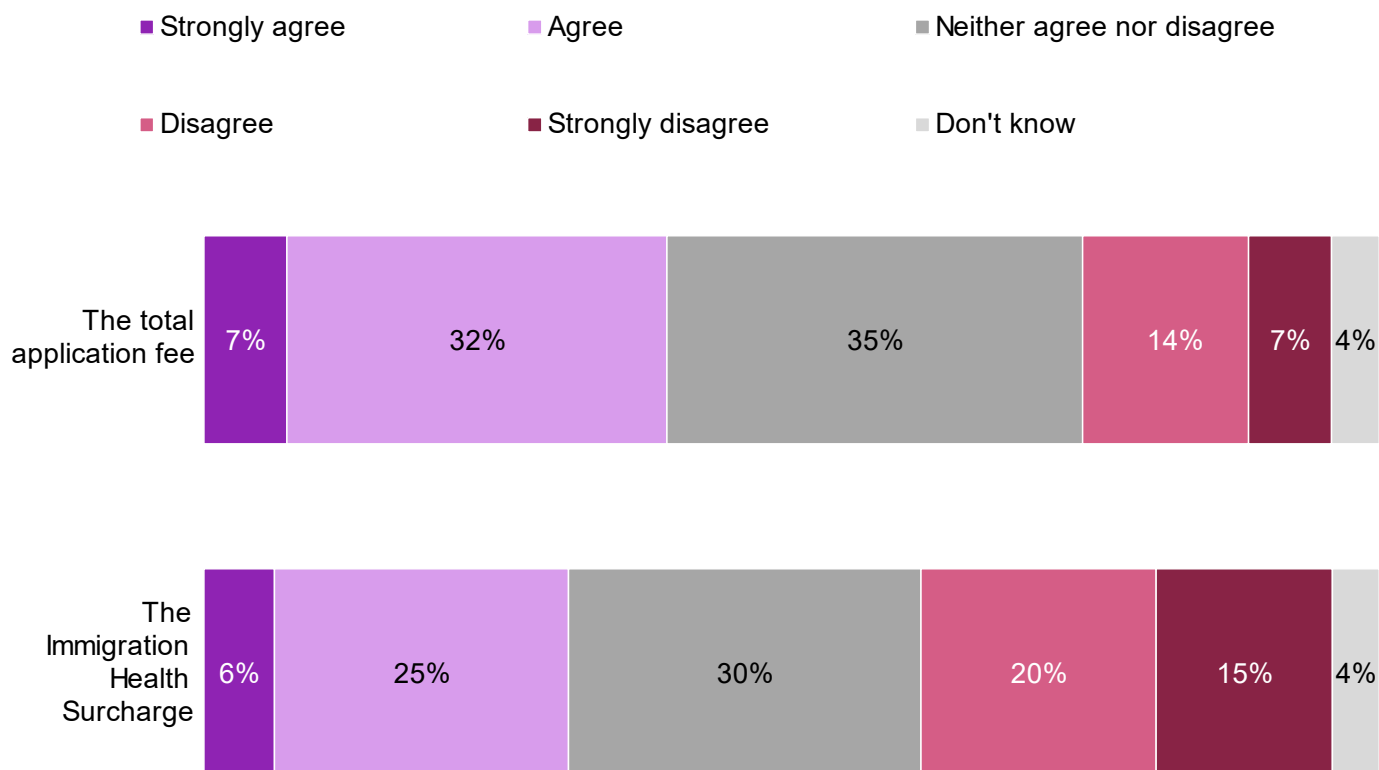
Student visa holder, Brazil, doctorate, no dependants.

"The big [expenses] are the fees, then rent which they prepared you for from your application. But you still feel shocked."

Student visa holder, Nigeria, doctorate, has dependants.

Student visa holders in the survey were asked the extent to which they felt the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) fee and total application fee represented good value for money. Overall, two-fifths (40%) agreed that the total application fee represented good value for money and one-fifth (21%) disagreed. Somewhat fewer international students agreed that the IHS represented good value for money (31%), and a higher proportion disagreed (35%). Further details are shown in Figure 13 below.

Figure 13: Agreement that fees are good value for money



Base: Visa holders survey, All respondents (3,060).

Those more likely to consider the application fee good value for money included students from India, Nigeria, and Pakistan (59%, 56%, and 52% respectively), older students (48% aged 35 to 44), and those who were working while studying (52%). Similarly, students from India, Nigeria, and Pakistan were also more likely to consider the IHS to be good value for money (44%, 41%, and 40% respectively), as were those who were working whilst studying (37%).

International students also mentioned the cost of the IHS in qualitative interviews. Several mentioned that having to pay for several years upfront was a shock.

“The amount of money I had to pay for the visa and the health surcharge kind of shocked me.”

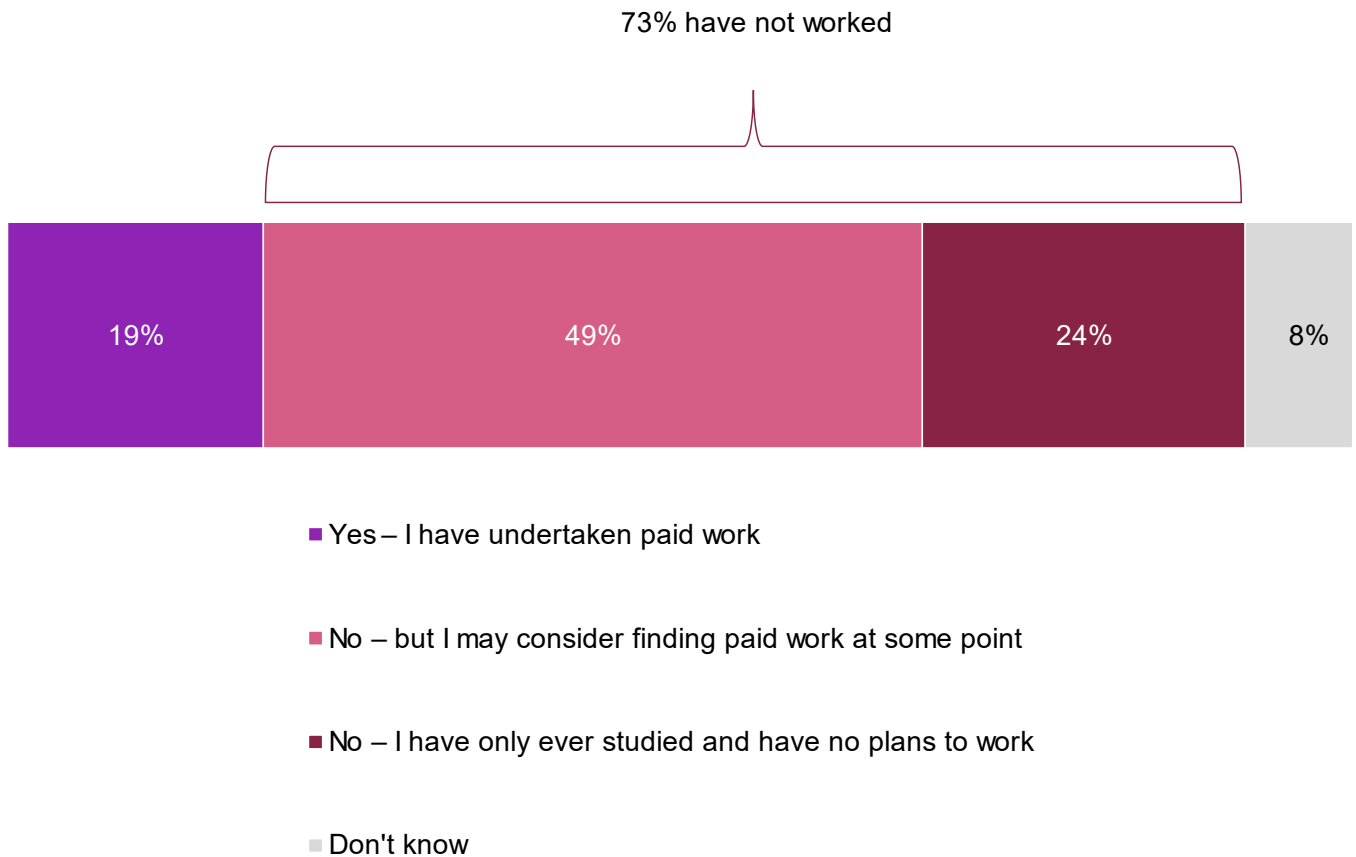
Student visa holder, Nigeria, doctorate, has dependants.

13. International students' paid work

One way in which Student visa holders can support their living costs in the UK is through paid work. However in many cases this was not the primary reason visa holders were working alongside their studies, and the majority of Student visa holders were not working.

Overall, one-in-five Student visa holders (19%) had undertaken paid work while studying in the UK. A further half of international students said they may consider finding paid work at some point (49%), while a quarter (24%) had no plans to work while studying in the UK, as shown in Figure 14. In total, almost three-quarters (73%) had not worked while studying in the UK. This is an increase since the last survey, when 68% of Student visa holders had not undertaken any paid work.

Figure 14: Student visa holders' experiences of paid work



Base: Visa Holders Survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Student visa holders more likely to have undertaken paid work included those from Nigeria (54%), Pakistan (27%), and India (26%). Students from China were very unlikely to have worked (only 3%). Postgraduate students were twice as likely to undertake paid work compared to undergraduates (22% and 11% respectively), and older students were more likely to work (42% aged 35 to 44 compared to 14% aged 16 to 24).

Three-in-ten of those undertaking paid work (29%) were in study-related work placements, while for the majority (71%), their paid work was not study-related. Study-related work was more common among students from India (35% of those working) and less usual among students from Nigeria (20%).

The top reasons for Student visa holders taking on paid work, other than study-related work, were to gain work experience (69%) and to meet new people (56%). Around a third reported that they wanted to practice their English language skills (34%) or to support themselves in the UK (32%), while one-in-five wanted to support themselves or their family outside the UK (21%).

Student visa holders undertaking paid work were most likely to be working in the 'Hospitality' (34%) and 'Wholesale and Retail' sectors (27%), followed by 'Health and

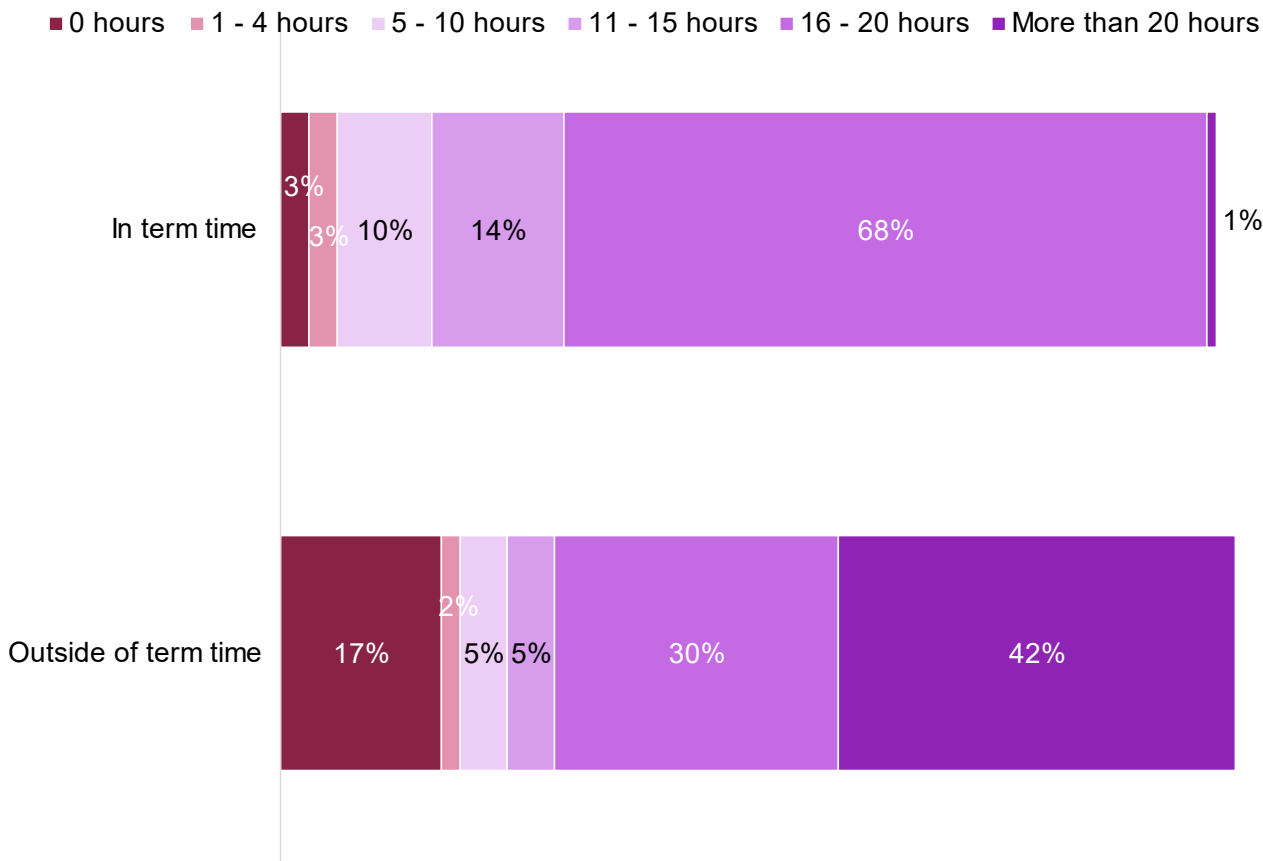
Social Work’ (16%) and ‘Education’ (12%). Student visa holders from Nigeria were more likely than students from other countries to be working in ‘Health and Social Work’ (37%).

The sectors in which international students worked were very similar to those reported in the first wave of the survey, when the top sectors were also ‘Hospitality’ (36%), ‘Wholesale and Retail’ (23%), ‘Health and Social Work’ (22%) and ‘Education’ (15%).

Common job titles for those undertaking paid work included retail / sales assistants (16%), wait staff / bar staff / food servers (14%), warehouse operatives (11%), chefs / kitchen staff (8%), and carers / support workers (7%).

Among those working, around two-thirds (68%) were working 16 to 20 hours per week in term time. On average, students were working 16.3 hours per week in term time. Working hours rose outside of term time to an average of 20.8 hours per week. Two-in-five of those working (42%) worked more than 20 hours per week in the university holidays. More detail is shown in Figure 15 below.

Figure 15: Hours worked by students in and outside of term time



Base: Visa holders survey, All who have undertaken paid work (687).

In terms of hourly pay, four-fifths (83%) of students working were being paid between £11.44 and £14.99 per hour. Around one-in-ten Student visa holders (9%) earned less than £11.44 per hour (the current National Living Wage for those aged 21 and over). Undergraduates who worked were more likely to earn below £11.44 per hour (18%) as they were more likely to be aged 20 and under. One-in-twenty (6%) Student visa holders who were working earned £15 or more per hour.

The types of paid work undertaken by Student visa holders in qualitative interviews varied and included cleaning jobs, working in a poultry processing factory, and crowd management at events. Some were employed by their university, for example in sports coaching and in events management for university jobs fairs. One qualified teacher studying for a masters in education was working as a supply teacher in local schools.

Several international students expressed that it had been more difficult to find paid work than they had expected. Some were frustrated about the 20 hour per week term-time limit on paid work and felt that this had restricted their ability to get a job in the UK.

“They [employers] see your visa, right to work, and immediately it flags them and tells them that you can only work 20 hours.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, masters, no dependants.

“Jobs that would help my course are 24 hour, 30 hour contracts and I can’t apply. ... I feel disadvantaged compared to the UK students because they already have those [work] experiences.”

Student visa holder, Mauritius, masters, no dependants.

Other Student visa holders said they preferred to work 10-15 hours per week or less so that they had sufficient time for their studies, or felt that they did not have the time to undertake any paid work during term time. Some did not need to work because their scholarship covered their expenses, or they were self-funded and had sufficient funds.

“As a sponsored student, you have to ensure that you are always meeting your targets in terms of studies ... The opportunities are there for you to work if you

want to work your 20 hours in a week. It's really up to you. But just be mindful that you stay focused on what took you to the UK."

Student visa holder, Uganda, masters, has dependants.

HEIs were also asked in qualitative interviews about students working during term time. Some institutions collected data on this, but most did not. Several interview participants suggested that it would be difficult for students to work more than 20 hours during term time as their courses require a lot of their time.

"We obviously remind visa students that they can only work 20 hours. But I don't know if there's an official process as to them registering their work."

HEI, North of England.

One performing arts institution raised a specific issue affecting their students, that international students cannot work as entertainers or performers under the terms of their visa, but they can teach or perform as part of a course or placement.

"The UKVI could really help the performing arts if they were to relax the type of work students can do, particularly around music and dance."

HEI, London.

14. Scholarships and financial assistance

In addition to paid work, some Student visa holders received scholarships to support their study in the UK. Students in qualitative interviews reported receiving scholarship offers from particular HEIs based on either their first degree grade or their English language exam score (IELTS) for undergraduates, which was often a key factor in deciding where to study. These scholarships could be in the region of £2,000 to £3,000, or a 20% discount on tuition fees.

"I did have a £3,000 Vice Chancellor's scholarship, and then I did have a £2,000 early [payment] discount. So I ended up paying £15,000. It was supposed to be

£20,000.”

Student visa holder, masters, Nigeria, no dependants.

Several postgraduate students received scholarships that covered 100% of their tuition fees plus, in some cases, a monthly living allowance. One was also funded by their employer (an oil and gas industry employer in Libya) to undertake a one-year masters’ course in the UK. The contribution towards living expenses was a significant factor in deciding to study in the UK for those who received such payments.

“It influenced it [the decision to study here] 100%. I wouldn’t be able to be here if it wasn’t for that scholarship. I couldn’t afford a university here. Also, living costs are way higher compared to what they are in my country.”

Student visa holder, doctorate, Argentina, no dependants.

15. Integration and the use of public services

Student visa holders were asked about how well they were integrating into the UK and their use of public services, in order to fully capture their experience of living and studying in the UK.

Almost nine-in-ten Student visa holders (88%) reported that they were integrating and accommodating to life in the UK well, including three-in-ten who said they were integrating very well (29%). Just one-in-ten (9%) felt that they were not integrating well.

International students from India and Nigeria were more likely to report integrating very well (both 38%). Older students were also more likely to report integrating very well (34% aged 35 to 44 and 32% aged 25 to 34 were integrating very well, compared to 27% aged 16 to 24). Students from China were slightly more likely to say they were not integrating well (12%) and were also more likely to say ‘quite well’ (71%).

In qualitative interviews, most Student visa holders reported enjoying their life in the UK and felt that they had settled in well. Just a few mentioned homesickness or feeling that they did not have enough opportunities to integrate with UK students, and some mentioned that they did not enjoy the cold weather.

“I could not point to you a single negative experience I’ve had so far in [the UK] other than an occasional dose of homesickness.”

Student visa holder, India, doctorate, no dependants.

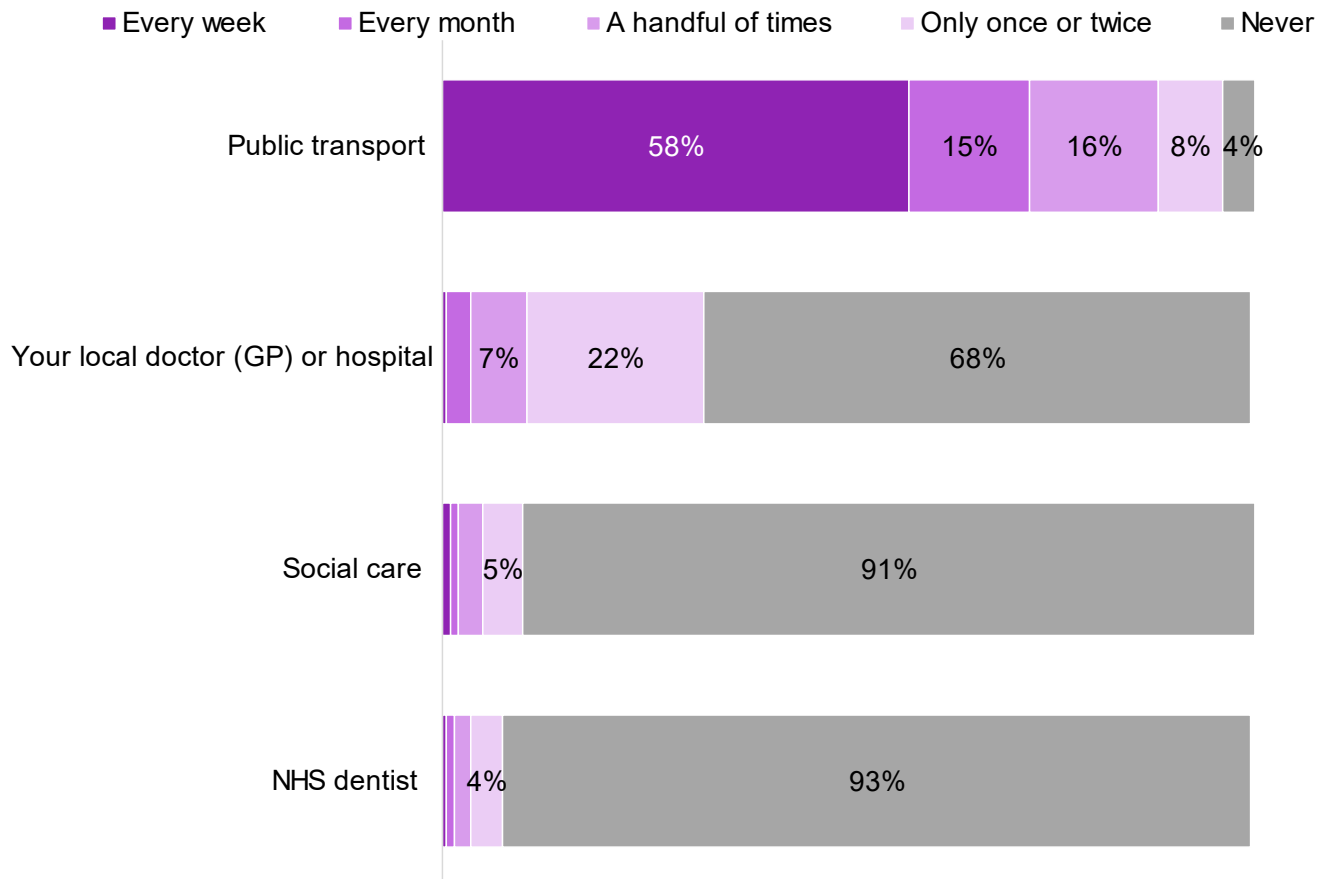
“I would like to interact with a ... wider group, diverse group.... If there’s possible events or some kind of student gathering. I would like to get to know them [UK students] well.”

Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

Survey respondents were asked about their use of public services in the UK, including the GP, NHS dentist, social care services and public transport. While public transport was particularly widely used by international students, most had not used the other services, as shown in Figure 16 below.

Nine-in-ten Student visa holders had never used an NHS Dentist (93%) or social care services (91%), and around two-thirds had never used a GP (68%). In contrast, only a small minority (4%) had never used public transport, and more than half were using it weekly (58%).

Figure 16: Use of public services by Student visa holders



Base: Visa Holders Survey, All visa holders (3,060).

Notes:

1. Responses less than 1% not shown.

Student visa holders more likely to use public transport more often included those from Nigeria and Pakistan (72% and 64% every week respectively), as well as older students (70% aged 35 to 44 used public transport weekly). Student visa holders from Nigeria and Pakistan were also more likely to have used local GP or hospital services (46% and 45% respectively, compared to 32% overall).

Students from India were the most likely to say they had used social care services, although still only 13% had done so (compared to 9% overall), while those from Pakistan were more likely to have accessed an NHS dentist (11%, compared to 7% overall).

In qualitative interviews, public transport was generally noted as a positive aspect of living in the UK. The other public services were not really mentioned, except in the context of the cost of the IHS.

“The existence of public transit is magic”

Student visa holder, USA, undergraduate, no dependants.

“Even the money we [students] pay for transport is not the same as the money those that are non-student are paying.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, doctorate, has dependants.

16. The impact of dependants on doctoral students' decision-making

Of those studying at doctorate level, around one-in-eight (13%) had a dependant associated with their current Student visa, and a small proportion (6%) planned to have dependants join them in the UK in future. Among those with dependants on their Student visa, the majority of dependants were partners.

When asked for their most important consideration when applying for the UK Student visa, doctoral students without dependants were more likely to say that they wanted to pursue a particular course at a particular institution (80%) compared to those with dependants (69%). Those without dependants were also more likely to have considered countries other than the UK (74%) compared to those with dependants (54%). As these figures are based on a very small sample of respondents, they should be considered as indicative.

Interviews with doctoral students with dependants on their Student visa highlighted the importance of being able to bring dependants with them to the UK, especially considering the length of time they would be undertaking their research or studies. However, they largely saw this as removing a barrier that would have prevented them from undertaking their preferred course, rather than a motivating factor for studying or conducting research in the UK. The extent to which the institution catered to their specialism and had a good reputation remained their primary considerations.

“As far as research is concerned, the UK is better than all other countries in my area”

17. Maintaining sponsor licences and third-party support

In terms of the experiences of HEIs sponsoring Student visa holders, a key activity is maintaining their sponsor licence. Maintaining the licence is approached differently across HEI sponsors – with some maintaining their licence independently and others receiving some kind of support. Experiences of this support varied for sponsors.

HEIs were asked in the survey whether their organisation had ever received any third-party help to manage their sponsorship licence and the type of help they used. Overall, one-third used third-party help (34%) and almost two-thirds did not (64%). Among the 20 HEI survey respondents who had used third-party help, almost all of these (18) had used immigration law firms, one had used a consultancy firm and one an education agent.

In the survey, HEIs said third parties generally provided legal and compliance support and help with audit preparation. A range of other functions was each mentioned by just one HEI, including help with using the Sponsorship Management System, assigning CAS, applying for sponsorship status, and support with Basic Compliance Assessments.

Among qualitative respondents, around half had used third-party help when sponsoring students. Some HEIs used third parties consistently, for example agents that helped to recruit international students. Others used third parties only occasionally, such as legal advice used for clarification. Those who did not use third parties noted that UKVI guidance was good, so they felt they did not need to.

Experiences of using third parties were mostly positive, however some had poor experiences with agents. Negative points included the time and energy needed to set up and maintain relationships with agents.

“We have a lot of due diligence that we do when we take on agent partners. So we do a lot of background checks, we do a lot of training with them.”

HEI, Wales.

—

One HEI put in place new payment processes after a bad experience with certain agents, and said they now followed the government's best practice guidance.

“We had in one year a situation with two or three agents where the number of students who came and enrolled and actually, they did not engage very well, and we had to report them to the Home Office. And what we have done, and this is also in the good practice guide, we now don't pay the agent's fees until the 1st semester, so we pay a little bit of it up front, but then we pay the rest of it after we are convinced the students are engaging with us.”

HEI, London.

Impact of policy changes and future plans

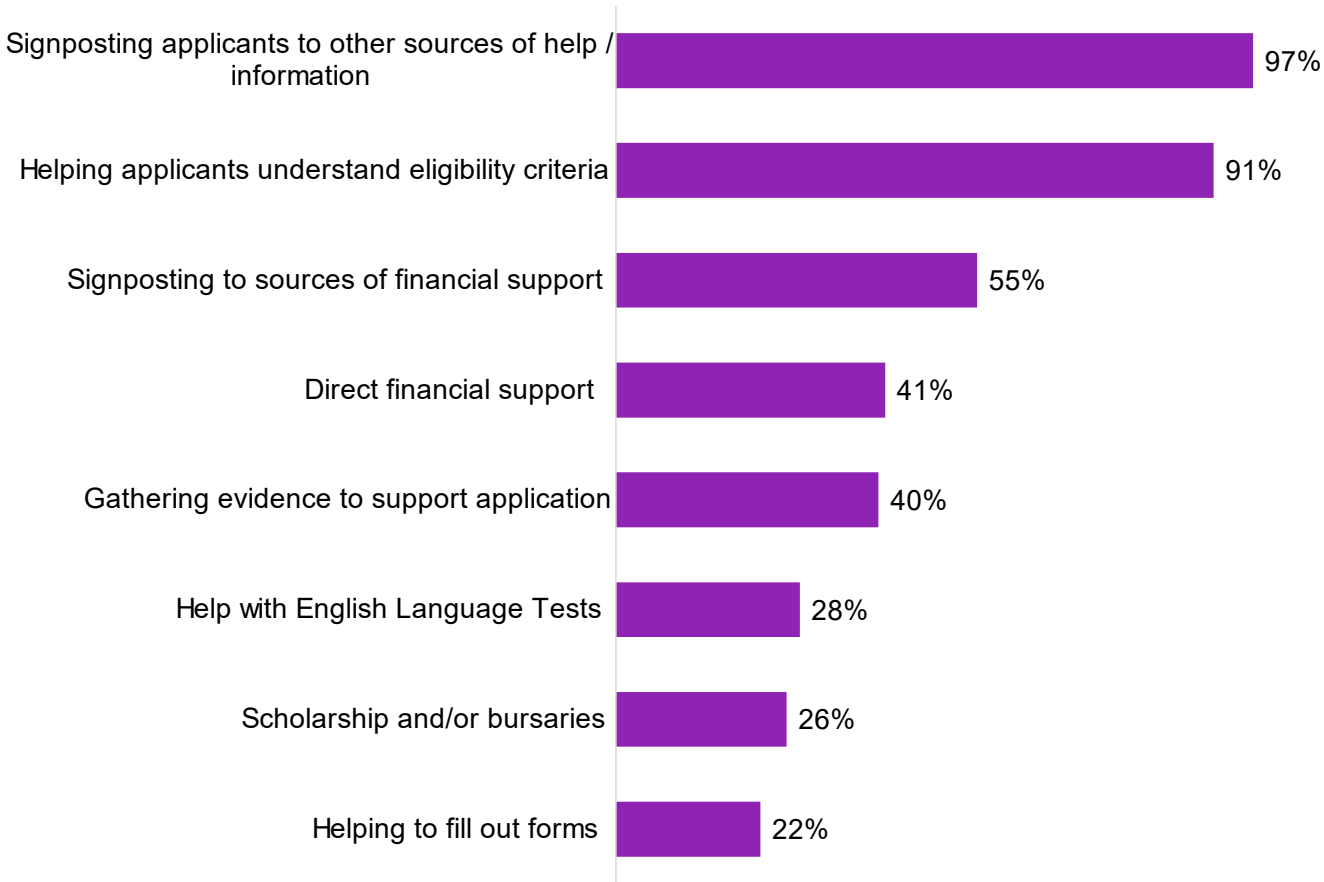
This chapter explores the interactions between the higher education sector and Student visa holders, addressing the extent of the sector's reliance on sponsored international students, the potential impact of restrictions of Student visas, HEIs' engagement with students across the visa application process, and HEIs' English language self-assessment. It also covers the impact of policy changes on HEIs, as well as possible instances of misuse or non-compliance. Finally, the chapter explores visa holders' and HEIs' future intentions and provides an overview of HEIs' overall experience of being a sponsor.

18. Interactions between the HE sector and Student visa holders

18.1 Engagement with students around the visa application process

HEIs were asked about their engagement with students around the visa application process. In terms of the support HEIs provide to applicants, virtually all reported offering some form of help, most commonly signposting applicants to other sources of help or information (97% of HEIs), helping applicants to understand eligibility criteria (91%), and signposting to sources of financial support (55%).

Figure 17: Help provided by HEIs for applicants when they are completing their Student visa application



Base: HEI Survey, All HEIs (58).

Notes:

- 1. Percentages <20% are not included in this chart due to low base size.
- Among qualitative respondents, most HEIs said that contact with applicants throughout their visa application process was largely intermittent, usually limited to answering quick questions via email exchanges and signposting to sources of support. Contact was mostly reported to be candidate-led, with students reaching out as needed. Some HEIs also noted that the agents sourcing Student visa holders would usually also support applicants through the visa application process.

“If [applicants] are coming through the agents, most of the initial support comes through the supports they have. If they are independently approaching us, we support them with questions they may have.”

HEI, London.

Some HEIs, however, reported a more active approach to engagement. Activities mentioned ranged from providing resources on their websites or working to develop a better applicant portal, to running open days to discuss applications or even proactively calling applicants to make sure they have the information they need. HEIs also mentioned applicant management systems, which help gather data and guide applicants through the process. One HEI mentioned they offered to review applicants' applications.

“We are as hands on as we can. We provide different resources on the website. I know they're looking to develop an applicant portal which again will be better than what we're doing at the moment, which is just hosting the apply links on the website. (...) With the outsourcing of the inquiry management [to agents], we're also making proactive calls to applicants. I think we give them three calls just to make sure they've got all of the information they need.”

HEI, The North.

HEIs reported that students were generally happy with the level of support they received in completing their visa applications. They reported applicants' negative feedback referred rather to delays in visa processing, and, mentioned less often, the speed with which the HEI issued their CAS number. A couple of respondents mentioned that applicants from the USA tend to be quite anxious about the process and require more support.

“[The feedback on the support provided has been] pretty positive. There are a few that obviously would like their CASes quicker than they get them, but obviously we've got to do our due diligence (...). But we converse with them a lot, and they seem quite positive, they seem quite grateful.”

HEI, London.

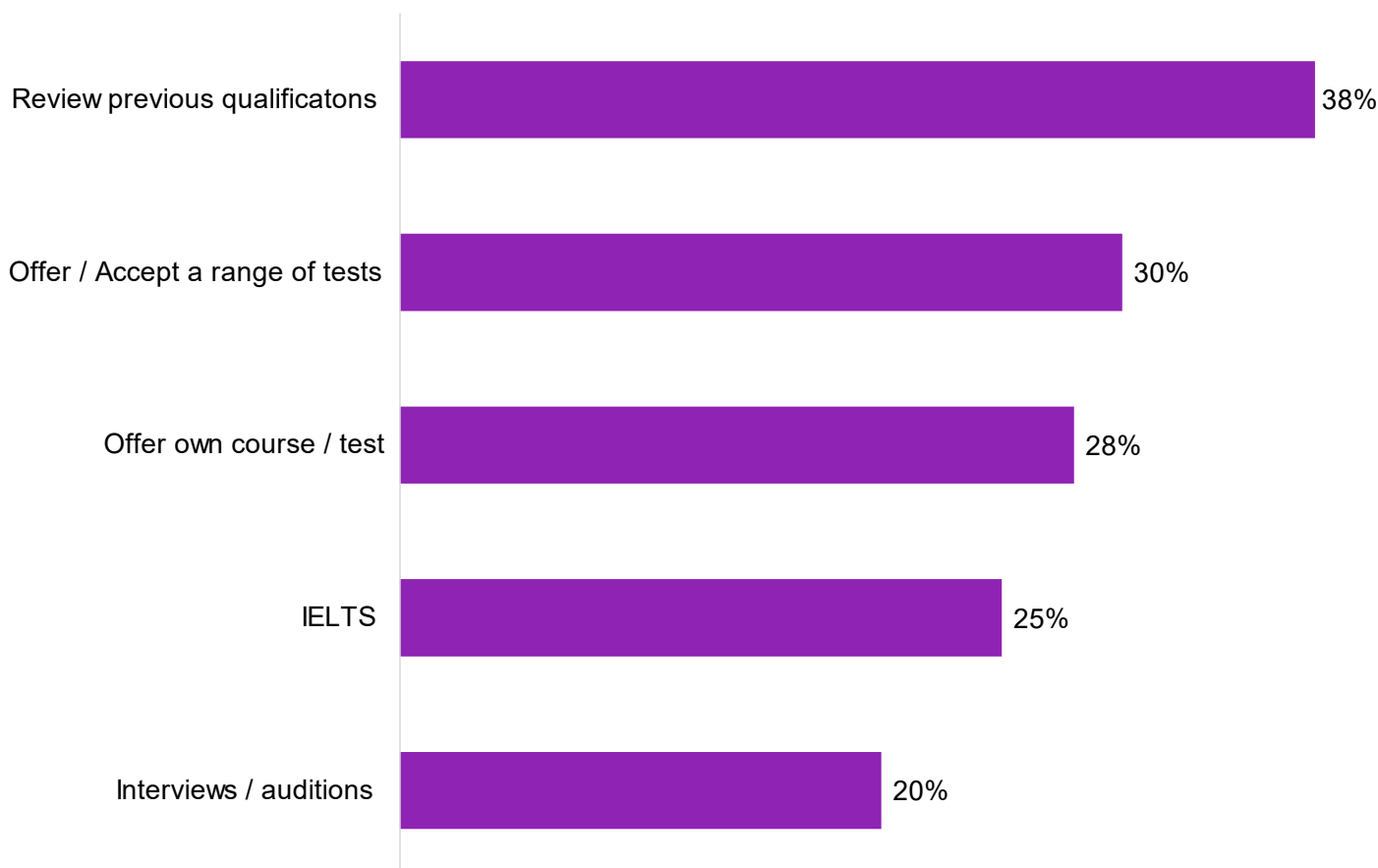
18.2 English language assessments

Applicants must prove their knowledge of the English language when applying for the Student visa. They can satisfy this requirement by coming from a majority English speaking country, by possessing a school or degree qualification obtained through English-language study, or by passing a Secure English Language Test (SELT).

Some HEIs are eligible to self-assess their applicants' English language ability. Surveyed HEIs were asked if they had eligibility to self-assess applicants' English language ability. Overall, over two-thirds (69%) said yes, less than three-in-ten (28%) said no, and 3% did not know.

In terms of the methods HEIs used for self-assessment, a variety of mechanisms were reported, with the most common being: reviewing previous qualifications (38%), accepting a range of tests (30%), offering their own course / test (28%), and accepting the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test (25%).

Figure 18: Methods currently used by HEIs to self-assess English language requirements



Base: HEI Survey, All HEIs eligible to self-assess English language requirements (40).

HEIs reported the proportion of prospective students who do not meet English language assessment standards. Overall, the majority were not sure, with just over three-in-five (63%) answering 'don't know' at this question. A further one-in-five (18%) said that none of their students failed to meet the English language assessment standards, one-in-ten (10%) said that 5% of their students did not meet the requirements, and one-in-twenty (5%) reported that 10% of their students did not meet the requirements.

In the qualitative research, some HEIs mentioned using the UKVI guidance around English assessments. Overall, HEI respondents appeared very thoughtful and engaged with the topic of English language eligibility self-assessment. HEIs recognised the importance of these checks both for students' ability to engage with their course of study and for the institution's legal compliance.

HEIs largely reported taking great care in distinguishing the differing levels of risk for different countries and offering language waivers only to applicants from those deemed low risk. One HEI considered regional differences within countries, with varied requirements for different Indian states. Many HEIs mentioned using SELTs, usually the IELTS, while others reported having their own in-house testing instead. A couple of HEIs noted the IELTS scores don't necessarily replicate the reality of the applicant's English language ability, mentioning the danger of someone fraudulently sitting the test on the applicant's behalf. As a result, they explained, they require applicants to pass both a SELT and the institution's in-house test or interview.

"It's important to have students who can have a conversation and understand the language. So it's quite a bit of extra work for us, but it's most helpful for us and for the students who come in and can have a degree of language at school, which is needed for them to complete their programme."

HEI, London.

A couple of HEIs mentioned offering some leniency. Namely, where students were slightly under the requirement in one component of the test, but had the overall minimum score, one institution arranged for provision in the form of weekly classes and tutorials.

"We have weekly classes, we also have tutorials, but what we do during the

admissions stage is identify who would have mandatory classes, and who would have more voluntary classes.”

HEI, London.

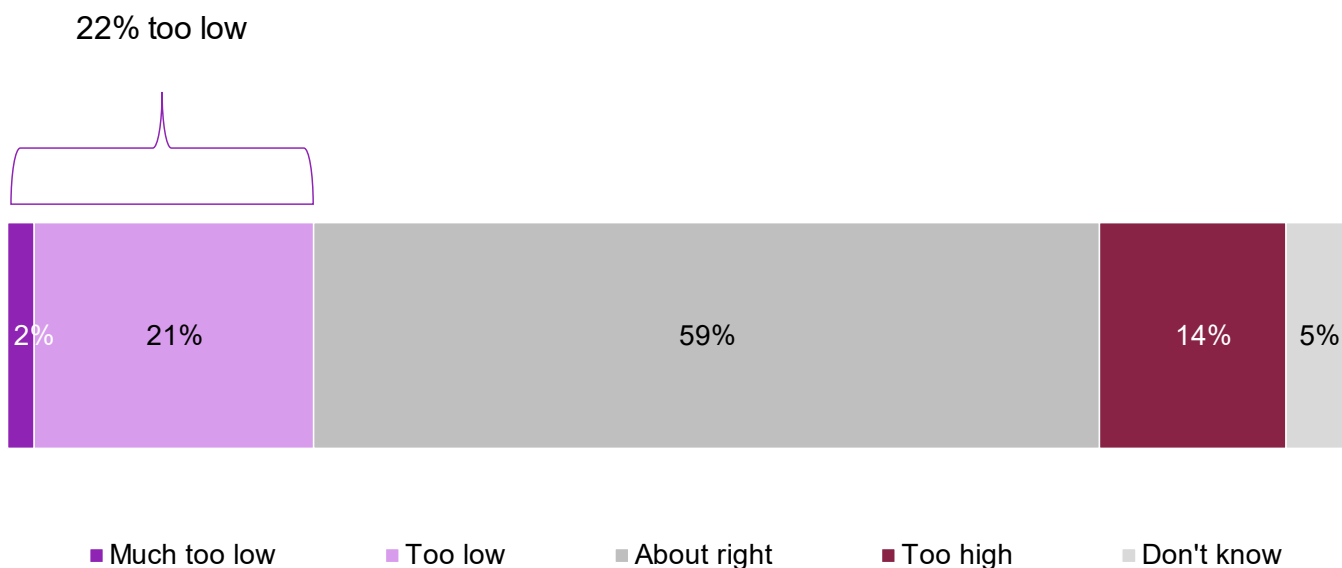
18.3 Financial maintenance and costs of the Student visa

As previously mentioned, the cost of living in the UK often seemed high to Student visa holders in the research, with accommodation costs taking up a significant proportion of their budget.

When students apply for a Student visa, they may be asked to show they have the minimum funds needed for maintenance costs by depositing a relevant sum in a bank account. This proves they have enough money to pay for living expenses during the duration of their studies. These minimum cost requirements can vary depending on where an individual is studying. At the time of data collection, the financial maintenance requirements for sponsored international students were set at £1,334 per month for those studying in London and £1,023 for those studying outside of London. They have since risen to £1,483 and £1,136 respectively, effective January 2025.

HEIs were asked how they would rate the financial maintenance requirements for ensuring students' self-sufficiency. The majority felt the requirements were about right (59%), around one-in-five (22%) felt they were too low, and one-in-seven (14%) felt they were too high.

Figure 19: How HEIs rate the financial maintenance requirements for ensuring self-sufficiency of sponsored international students



Base: HEI Survey, All HEIs (58).

When the 8 HEIs who considered the requirements too high were asked for the reasons why they said this, the most common two answers given were that the threshold was more than students needed to support themselves (given by 3 HEIs) and that students / families do not have proof in advance (also given by 3 HEIs). One HEI stated that they thought it was too high as students are unable to work to support themselves. However, in research with Student visa holders, several mentioned finding that living costs in the UK were higher than expected, and a number did undertake paid work in order to support themselves.

Among those HEIs who thought the maintenance requirements were too low, the main reason, stated by over nine-in-ten respondents (92%), was that the increase is not in line with the cost of living.

Students were asked whether the minimum funds requirements were a difficulty when applying for a visa. Overall, just over three-in-five students (61%) thought the requirements presented difficulty when applying to some extent (10% to a great extent, 31% to some extent, and 20% hardly at all). One-in-four (25%) felt that the minimum fund requirements did not present any difficulty at all. Less than one-in-ten (7%) had not been asked to prove their funds.

As part of their application for a student visa, applicants are asked to pay an application fee as well as the IHS. Students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that these fees are good value for money. Two-in-five (40%) agreed the application fee represented good value, with just over one-in-five (21%) disagreeing. The IHS was seen as less fairly priced however: a similar proportion of students, around one-in-three, agreed and disagreed that the fee was good value for money (31% agreed, 35% disagreed).

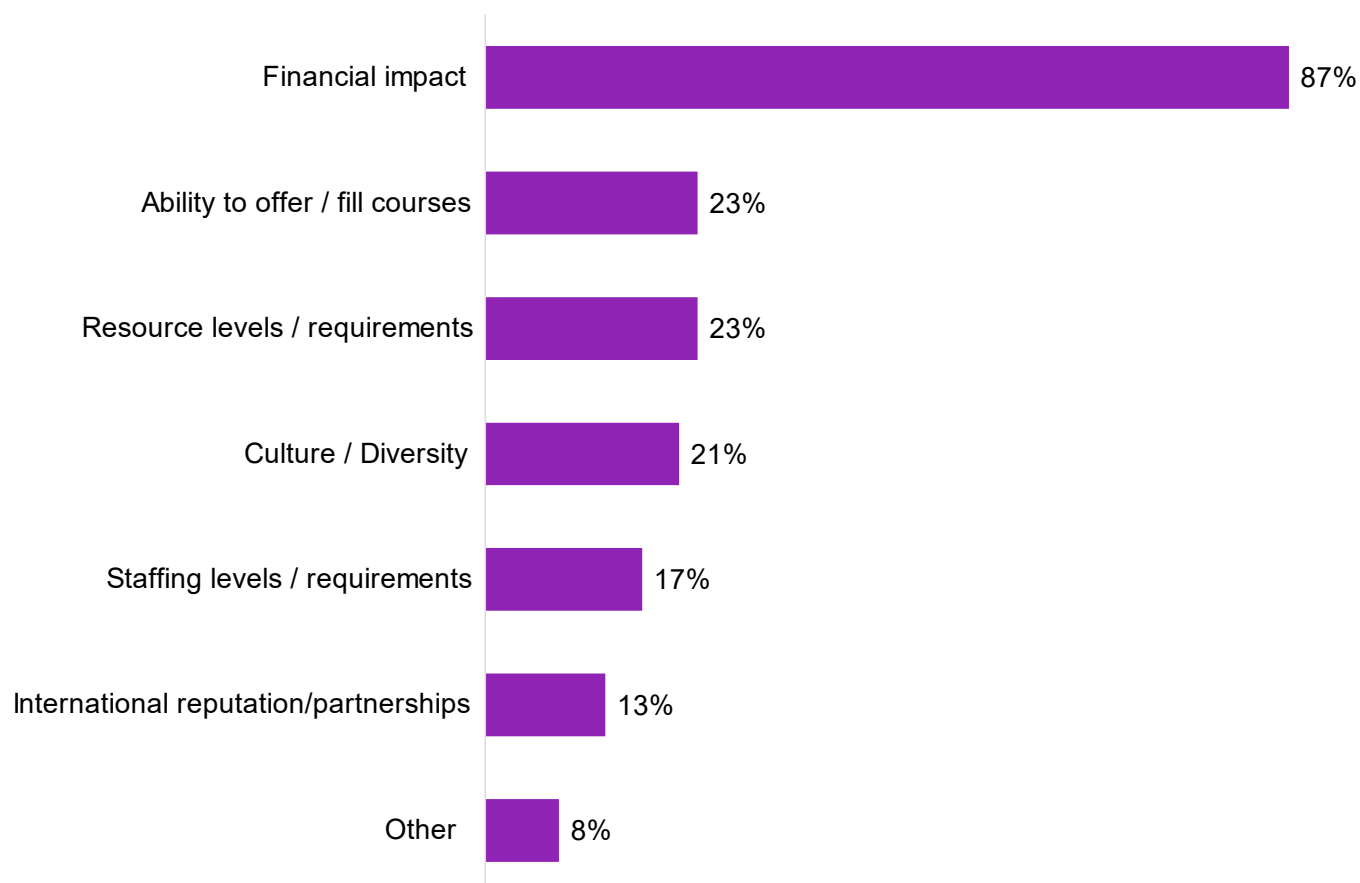
19. Policy changes and sponsor restrictions

19.1 Impact of potential restrictions on student visas

As outlined previously, all HEI survey respondents said that sponsored international student recruitment was important to their strategy. As a result, changes that impact on the number of students applying to study in the UK have the potential for a significant impact on HEIs.

Overall, 91% of HEIs said that fluctuations in sponsored international student numbers would affect their institution. The most common effect reported was financial impact (cited by 87% of HEIs), followed by resource levels / requirements (23%), the institution's ability to offer or fill courses (23%), and impacts on the culture and diversity (21%). A further one-in-five (17%) believed it would impact staffing levels and requirements and 13% felt fluctuations would impact their international reputation and partnerships.

Figure 20: How fluctuations in sponsored international student numbers would affect HEIs



Base: HEI Survey, All HEIs who think fluctuations would affect their institution (53).

Notes:

1. Percentages <20% are not included in this chart due to low base size.

In the qualitative element of the research, HEIs were asked how a decrease in or elimination of sponsorship would affect their institution. In line with the survey responses, HEIs elaborated on the financial impacts cited in the survey. HEIs outlined that with home tuition fees gradually depreciating over the past years, they are increasingly reliant on international recruitment as a means of balancing their finances. It was noted that the recent rise in home fees was minimal and would not alter this trend. A decrease in or elimination of sponsorship would financially impact virtually all institutions, in some cases requiring the financial regulator to take action on the HEI's financial position. Some HEIs also mentioned there might be a need to discontinue certain courses and make staff redundant.

“In common with every other university in England and Wales, we’re dependent, to an extent, on recruiting those international students to balance out the reduction in the value of the home tuition fee.”

HEI, The North.

“The financial income in international tuition fees and commercial spend on campus, we’re talking tens of millions of pounds. Quite simply, without that, the university wouldn’t operate.”

HEI, London.

One respondent felt that the financial impact would be especially felt by post-1992 universities. They explained that with the downturn of postgraduate taught applications from China and India in recent years, Russell Group universities have been taking in increased numbers of home students, further increasing post-1992 universities’ reliance on international applications as they receive fewer home applicants.

HEIs also outlined how potential restrictions would impact on the atmosphere of the institution and the cultural diversity of student population, and, as a result, the student experience.

“Having sponsored students brings a different dynamic to the courses and classes. Even the PhD students are all part of research forums, and hearing different views, world and cultural views, has a very significant impact. The UK student experience would be much less.”

HEI, Northern Ireland.

19.2 Factors influencing increase or decrease in number of sponsored students

In the qualitative interviews, HEIs reported on the factors restricting their ability to increase their numbers of sponsored students. While some reported their CAS allocations to be sufficient, many reported them as a significant restricting factor. To mitigate loss of CAS allocations to unsuccessful visa applications, one institution reported asking applicants to send them their application beforehand to assess whether they are likely to pass.

Other factors restricting HEIs' ability to increase sponsorship were mainly of operational nature. HEIs cited issues with UKVI, for example, their loss of a designated contact at UKVI due to the removal of premium customer service for sponsors, leading to a fragmentation of the service provided. However, the most common operational restricting factor mentioned related to widespread delays in visa processing times. For example, one respondent mentioned the UKVI's decision to do en-masse in-person credibility interviewing for the Pakistani market leading to significant delays in processing times. As a result, they explained, many students were unable to enter the UK in time for their course start date.

"My experience and opinion(...) is that is that quite often it's more the sort of operational implementation that causes difficulties rather than rather than the legislative and regulatory. (...) We could have lost probably several hundreds of students from the last February and the last September intake because of delays in visa processing that were operational."

HEI, Wales.

Some HEIs also mentioned financial barriers for students, with the combination of high tuition fees, cost of living, and restrictions on students' ability to work acting as a deterrent for potential international applicants.

In 2023, the government restricted international students' ability to bring dependants to the UK on their Student visa. For courses starting on or after 1st January 2024, students can no longer do so unless they are on a postgraduate research-based programme.

HEIs were asked in the qualitative interviews whether the policy changes restricting dependants have affected their recruitment. HEIs noted that they had mainly noticed this at postgraduate level. HEIs commonly mentioned drops in the numbers of international students of between 30 and 60%.

"We've noticed a drop in the number of international post-graduate students applying to study with us... the removal of the dependants visa in particular affected the markets in West Africa."

HEI, Scotland.

However, others reported not – or in some cases not yet – noticing any changes.

For example, a couple of HEIs mentioned they mainly recruit American undergraduates, who would only rarely have dependants. A few HEIs mentioned only one or two applicants deciding not to apply.

Those HEIs who did notice a decrease in sponsored international recruitment commonly also noted other factors influencing the downturn in international students' sector wide, both prior to and in parallel with the restrictions on dependants. For example, a few HEIs mentioned the Nigerian financial crisis and resulting devaluation of currency, which prevented many applicants from passing the financial maintenance requirement.

Another factor mentioned was the impact of the uncertainty around the Graduate Route. For example, one institution reported they had anticipated a 75% decrease in applications following the restrictions on dependants. In the end, they experienced a 50% decrease, having received many late applications following the announcement that the Graduate Route visa would remain in its current form.

Several institutions mentioned the government's unwelcoming rhetoric towards international students as a factor influencing the decrease of sponsored international students.

“International students did not feel welcome. And partly the reason for the reduction in international students was the change in the rules, but partly was the rhetoric that was around, in the zeitgeist, of ‘the UK doesn’t want and doesn’t like international students.’ And you can see the articles in the Indian press where that was having an effect.”

HEI, Wales.

Some HEIs said that they understand the complexity of such policymaking decisions and are cognizant of the pressures which dependants were applying to local services. One HEI reported the change as positive as it removed those applicants who would rely on their spouse working in the UK but for whom finding work would often be a challenge.

“It’s affected numbers in a way that makes it more realistic. And I think the applications are more credible.”

HEI, The North.

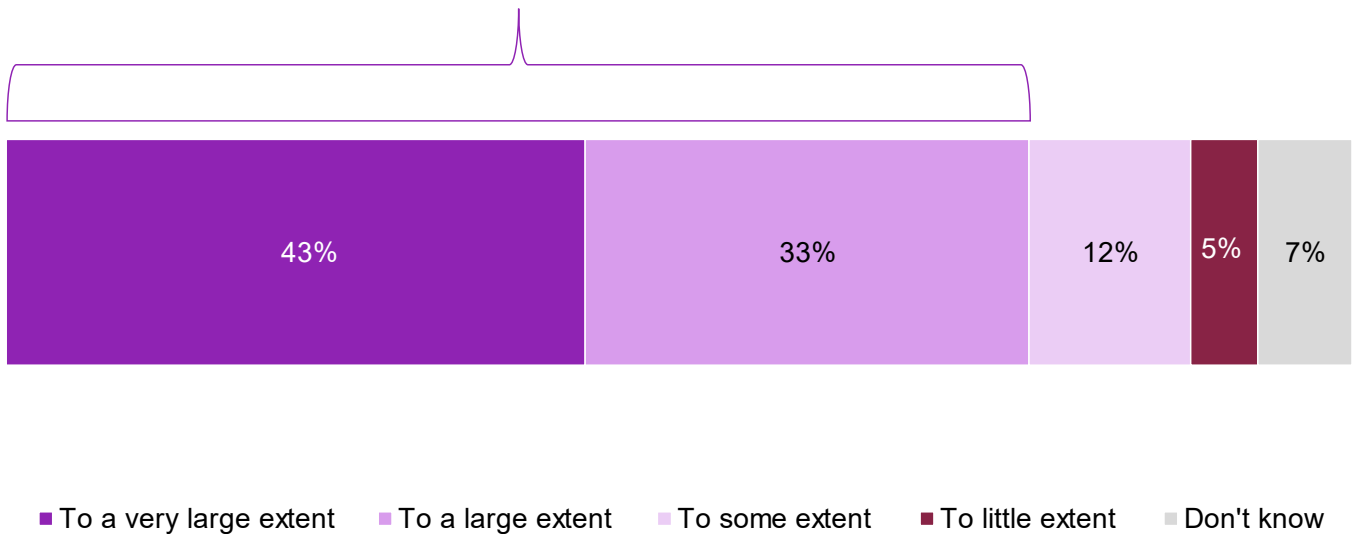
19.3 Possible instances of route misuse/non-compliance

HEIs were asked if they had encountered any misuse of the Student visa, or non-compliance from students, recruitment agents, or representatives. Just under half had experienced this (48% responding yes), and just over half had not (52%). The main types of misuse encountered included false documentation (encountered by 50% of HEIs who encountered any misuse), students not enrolling on the course or enrolling but never attending (39%), and students working in breach of conditions (18%); however, this was based on a small sample of survey respondents (28).

The majority of HEIs, however, felt that the HE sector was vigilant to the characteristics (that is, nature and intention) of breaches and misuses. Over three-quarters (76%) felt the sector was vigilant to these breaches/misuses to a very large extent (43%) or to a large extent (33%). A further 12% felt it was to some extent, and 5% to a little extent, and 7% didn't know.

Figure 21: Extent to which HEIs feel the HE sector is vigilant to the characteristics (i.e. nature and intention) of breaches and misuses of the visa

76% to a large or very large extent



Base: HEI Survey, All HEIs (58).

In the qualitative interviews, HEIs were asked to explain why they thought the sector was vigilant to the characteristics of breaches and misuses of the visa. HEIs reiterated that compliance is important and taken very seriously by the sector, further explaining that institutions cannot afford to lose their license.

“Because there’s a lot at risk for institutions. If they lose their licence to sponsor the students, you know, I don’t think many could afford it.”

HEI, London.

“Our staff are very aware of all aspects of honouring our sponsorship licence. We would say that managing and protecting our licence is a high, top priority for us.”

HEI, Wales.

HEIs noted that the annual Basic Compliance Assessment is quite straightforward.

Some HEIs mentioned the Home Office-led workshops on compliance to be helpful.

HEIs reported using the following mechanisms for monitoring of students' compliance at the application stage:

- a rigorous pre-acceptance screening of applicants from high-risk countries or regions
- using data management programmes to check the veracity of students' documents
- conducting checks via video interview to probe an applicant's motivations prior to issuing them a CAS
- monitoring agents and ending collaboration if compliance issues are encountered; some HEIs also mentioned following the government's best practice guidance on HEI collaboration with recruitment agents

"We have a lot of due diligence that we do when we take on agent partners. So, we do a lot of background checks, we do a lot of training with them. They sign an agent agreement which is reviewed every 2 years. We monitor their performance and if we are unhappy with agent performance, and particularly if we feel that they might be being deceptive or assisting students making fraudulent applications or anything, we terminate those agreements immediately. And then we also notify the UKVI of those terminations."

HEI, Wales.

"We believe that our students are very genuine and they come here for their education. (...). For certain states we require them to pay 100% of their fees upfront minimise bogus students."

HEI, Wales.

Once students are enrolled on their courses, HEIs reported using the following activities to monitor their compliance:

- running compliance workshops for students, where the consequences of non-compliance are explained. HEIs mentioned running these at the beginning as well as throughout the academic year

- offering support services to answer any student questions
- using an academic engagement monitoring system to identify patterns of absences
- asking students to notify the HEI and send evidence when they leave the country; similarly, one HEI reported asking for evidence if a student has applied for a Graduate Route visa
- if a student is being withdrawn from the HEI, notifying UKVI

“As an institution, we do all we can in our capacity, in terms of making sure that they understand what their responsibility is, what ours is, just guiding them, prompting them.”

HEI, London.

Some HEIs mentioned that there are some issues which they are unable monitor, such as students' compliance with the restrictions on the number of hours they are allowed to work during term time. A couple of respondents said they can only monitor those students who work at the university to ensure they are not working in breach of visa conditions. However, one small HEI which knows all students personally reported requesting to see a student's contract when they find out a student is working.

“The work aspect can be a bit harder to monitor and maybe needs something a little bit more in place.”

HEI, London.

“We're not the police. We're not intelligence officers, so we're doing the best that we can under the circumstances.”

HEI, The North.

In May 2024, the government announced new compliance standards for HEIs. The new measures included tougher checks on the numbers of students passing visa applications and enrolling on and completing their courses; raised financial maintenance requirements; and restrictions on remote delivery.

In the qualitative interviews, when asked about their experience with the new compliance standards, HEIs largely reported they had not noticed many or any changes. Many HEIs said that had already complied with these requirements, that is, they had always had to do visa or course completion checks, and they had already complied with the 20% maximum for online delivery previously. As seen in an earlier report section, most HEIs (91%) could accommodate remote learning for 25% of courses or less.

“We don’t sponsor international students for any online courses that we do offer, so we haven’t really been affected by the remote delivery policy.”

HEI, London.

Some HEIs reported they had only noticed the raised financial maintenance requirements, with one respondent adding that these had only impacted a small number of students. One respondent perceived the new compliance standards to have been more a part of pre-election rhetoric rather than a substantive policy change.

20. Post-graduation plans and impact of the Graduate Route

20.1 Intentions to apply for another visa

Over half of Student visa holders intended to apply for a further visa in order to stay in the UK once their current visa expired (55%), which is slightly lower than the 58% who said they would apply for a further visa in the first wave of the survey. Around a third (32%) did not know if they would apply for a further visa, and 13% did not plan to apply for one.

Postgraduate Student visa holders were more likely to intend to apply for a further visa than undergraduate Student visa holders (59% and 47% respectively). Doctorate students were least likely to intend to apply for a further visa (33%). Undergraduate and doctorate students were less clear of their future plans

compared to postgraduate students, with 38% of undergraduate and 47% of doctorate Student visa holders not knowing if they would apply for a further visa, versus 29% of postgraduates.

Visa holders aged 35 to 44 were more likely to plan to apply for a further visa (72%) than those aged 25 to 34 (63%) and 16 to 24 (50%). Younger students aged 16 to 24 were more likely to be unsure of their future intentions (35%), compared to those aged 25 to 34 (28%) and those aged 35 to 44 (19%).

Student visa holders attending a Russell Group university were less likely to report intending to apply for a further visa (39%) compared to 62% attending a non-Russell Group university.

There were also differences in Student visa holders’ plans by nationality. As seen in Table 4, Nigerian students were the most likely to intend to apply for a further visa (77%), followed by Indian students (67%). Just 1% of Nigerian students said that they would not be applying for a further visa with the remaining 22% answering ‘don’t know’. Chinese students were more unsure of their future intentions, with two-in-five (41%) not knowing if they would apply for a further visa. Just under two-fifths (38%) of Chinese students reported intending to apply for a further visa, the lowest of all nationalities.

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

| | Overall | India | China | Nigeria | Pakistan | Other |
|------------|---------|-------|-------|---------|----------|-------|
| Yes | 55% | *67% | *38% | *77% | *62% | 55% |
| No | 13% | *8% | *21% | *1% | *8% | 14% |
| Don’t know | 32% | *25% | *41% | *22% | 31% | 31% |

Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders (3,060), India (682), China (743), Nigeria (351), Pakistan (334), Other (950).

Notes:

1.*indicates a significant difference when compared to the total for all Visa holders.

Of those who planned to remain in the UK, two-thirds (67%) intended to work, and 44% intended to enrol in further study. Around one-in-ten planned to stay on to do other activities other than study or work (12%), and a similar proportion were unsure

of their future intentions (10%).

In terms of nationality, Nigerian students who intended to stay in the UK were the most likely to plan to work here (81%), followed by Indian students (72%). Pakistani students were less likely to intend to work (56%), and more likely to be unsure of their future plans (22%). Student visa holders completing a higher level of education were also more likely to plan to work (73% studying at postgraduate level, compared to 54% studying at undergraduate level). Additionally, older students aged 25 to 34, and 35 to 44 were more likely to intend to work (72% and 82% respectively) than students aged 16 to 24 (64%). Those who had worked whilst studying were more likely to plan to continue working than students who did not work (79% compared to 64%).

Chinese students who planned to apply for a further visa were more likely to intend to enrol in further study (59%) than students of other nationalities. Furthermore, Student visa holders who were studying at an undergraduate level were more likely to intend to continue studying (76%). Younger students were also more likely to intend to study (48% aged 16 to 24 compared to 37% aged 25 to 34). Type of institution and subject also had an influence on students' future plans to study, as over half of students studying a STEM subject or attending a Russell Group university reported intending to enrol in further study (both 52%).

In the qualitative interviews, most of those who were planning to stay in the UK expressed interest in working here, and some said that they wanted to continue to study at a postgraduate level.

"I would really like to gain professional experience...but in the long term I do plan to go back home because I want to apply what I've learned in my home country."

Student visa holder, India, masters, no dependants.

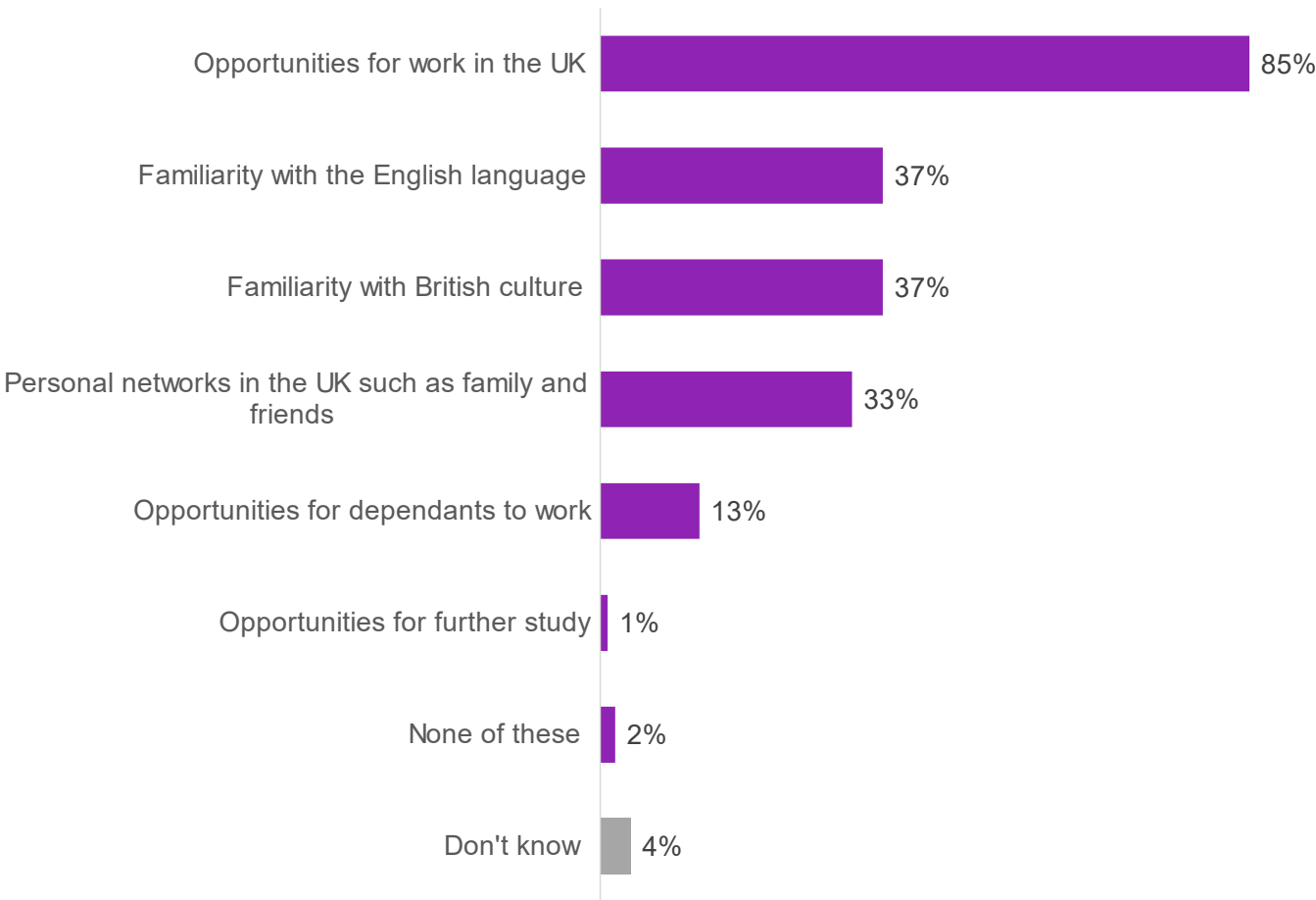
"If I am doing a masters' degree then it will definitely be in the UK, nowhere else."

Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

As seen in Figure 22 below, factors cited as important when considering remaining in the UK included work opportunities (85%), familiarity with both the British language and culture (both 37%) and personal networks in the UK (33%).

Student visa holders from different nationalities had different reasons for intending to remain in the UK. While opportunities for work were the top reason across all nationalities, it was more likely to be reported by Nigerian students (92%). Nigerian students were also more likely to report familiarity with British culture (50%) and personal networks in the UK (47%) as important factors. Chinese students were more likely to report familiarity with the English language as an important factor (56%), while this was less important for Nigerian students (25%).

Figure 22: Importance of factors when considering remaining in the UK



Base: Visa holders survey, All visa holders intending to stay in the UK (1,758).

Notes:

1. Percentages <1% are not included in this chart.

Student visa holders who were studying at a postgraduate level were more likely to consider opportunities for work in the UK as an important factor when considering remaining in the UK (87%). Undergraduate students and those studying below degree level were less likely to consider this (79% and 66% respectively).

Student visa holders who had worked whilst studying were more likely to report

opportunities for work and familiarity with the British culture as important (93% and 41% respectively).

These factors were explored further in the qualitative interviews. The majority of Student visa holders who planned to stay in the UK wanted to work, the main reason for this being the reputation of the UK job market. Those currently studying at undergraduate level were more likely to plan to continue to study in order to gain a masters or doctorate qualification.

“I want to use that experience to better my business in Nigeria. I want to see how it is done in the UK. When you go back to your country there will be this respect and reputation for you...you have a UK certificate and UK work experience.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, masters, no dependants.

“I want to apply for the postgraduate visa and work full time with that permission.”

Student visa holder, Mexico, masters, no dependants.

These students were then asked if there was anything that might change their plans to stay in the UK. Concerns regarding affordability were most commonly cited as students were unsure if they would be able to secure employment that would adequately support them. One student said that if further visa restrictions were implemented which meant they had fewer rights, for example restricting the ability of family members to visit, then this could change their plans.

“I do have a concern there isn't a lot of jobs...if I can't really find a job, I'll probably have to leave”

Student visa holder, China, masters, no dependants.

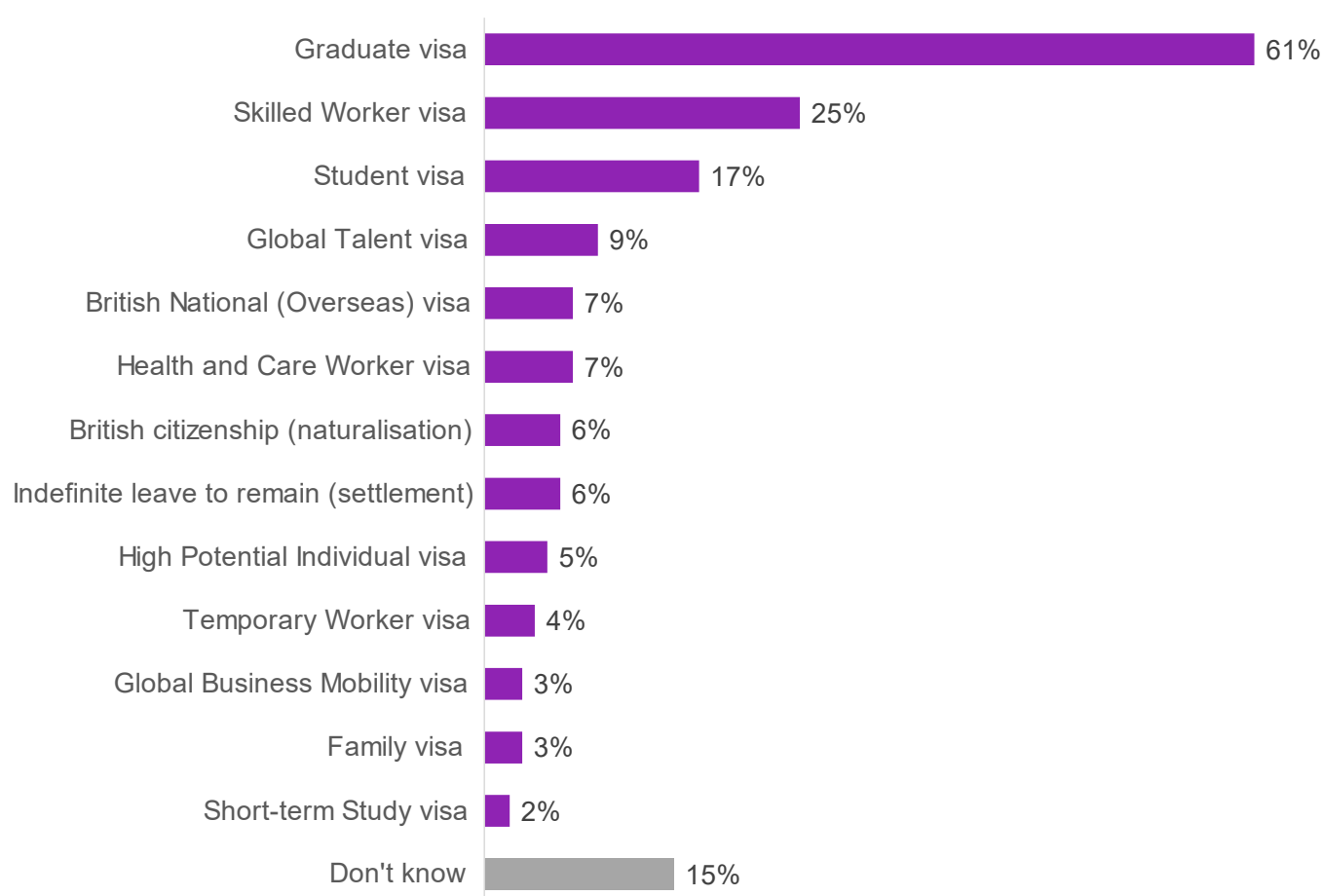
However, some Student visa holders did not envisage any factors changing their plans to remain in the UK.

“If there is something that changes my decision and I no longer want to do a masters, that's a completely different scenario. If I am doing a masters degree then it will definitely be in the UK, nowhere else”

Student visa holder, India, undergraduate, no dependants.

Student visa holders who intended to stay in the UK were asked which visa route they thought they might apply for. As seen in Figure 23, the Graduate visa was the most popular route, with three-fifths (61%) of students considering it. This was followed by the Skilled Worker visa (25%) and the Student visa (17%).

Figure 23: Visa routes being considered for application after studies are finished



Base: Visa holders Survey, All visa holders intending to stay in The UK, (1,758).

Notes:

1. Percentages <1% are not included in this chart.

These findings are similar to the first wave of the survey, when the Graduate Route was also the most popular among those intending to stay (62%). In the previous survey, a third (34%) of those intending to stay said they were considering the Skilled Worker visa and one-in-ten were considering the Global Talent visa (10%).

Nigerian Student visa holders were more likely to consider applying for multiple types of visa, including the Graduate Route visa (76%), Skilled Worker visa (42%) and Health and Care Worker visa (24%). Chinese students were more likely to consider the Student visa (30%) and Global Talent visa (19%), but less likely to consider the Skilled Worker visa (6%).

By level of study, postgraduate students were more likely to consider applying for a Graduate Visa (65%) than undergraduate students or students studying below degree level (54% and 27% respectively). Postgraduate students were also more likely to consider applying for a Skilled Worker visa (27%). Students studying below degree level or at an undergraduate level were more likely to consider applying for a Student visa (29% and 28% respectively).

Older Student visa holders aged 35 to 44 were more likely to consider applying for the Graduate visa (75%), Skilled Worker visa (34%) and the Global Talent visa (16%). One-fifth of Student visa holders aged 16 to 24 considered applying for the Student visa (21%). Younger students aged 16 to 24 were more likely to be unsure of which visa route they would take (17%).

Student visa holders who did not plan to apply for another visa were asked how long they intended to stay in the UK after their course finishes. Most intended to leave immediately after the end of their course (56%), 17% intended to leave when their visa expired and 27% did not yet know what they planned to do.

Reasons why Student visa holders did not want to stay in the UK were explored in the qualitative interviews. Some students discussed wanting to return home to commitments such as a job or family, and some expressed concerns surrounding the affordability of remaining in the UK.

“Anything that would separate me from my family after the one year programme will be impossible.”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, masters, no dependants.

“It depends on if I can afford it. When I’m done with my university, then yeah, maybe. But if not, I’ll just go back [to Nigeria].”

Student visa holder, Nigeria, masters, no dependants.

Student visa holders who had planned to leave the UK were asked if there was anything that would make them change their mind and stay in the UK. Of those who said that their mind could be changed, the most common reason for this was being able to secure adequate employment. One student mentioned that being able to have a visa 'in principle' to facilitate their job search would support them in doing this. Another student said that the reason they intend to leave the UK is due to unfair treatment towards international students, but that if that changed they would consider remaining in the UK. They felt disadvantaged in terms of work and accommodation opportunities compared to UK students.

"I would probably most definitely stay if it was like more equitable"

Student visa holder, Mauritius, masters, no dependants.

"If I got a position that would actually give me the opportunity to live a good life, with a decent salary then I would look for it"

Student visa holder, Brazil, doctorate, no dependants.

20.2 HEIs' future intentions

All HEIs reported that they would continue to be a student route sponsor in the next 1 to 2 years. Almost all (98%) said they were very likely, and 2% said they were fairly likely to continue.

Similar results were found in the qualitative interviews, as all but one HEI said that they intended to increase the number of sponsorships they offer. There was a wide variety of countries that HEIs were looking to target, including the USA, China, Australia, and South-East Asian countries.

HEIs were asked why they wanted to increase sponsorships. The most frequent reason discussed was the financial benefit. Some HEIs mentioned the importance of having collaborative partnerships globally, and a few said that they hoped to recoup the reduction in sponsorship numbers that they have experienced in recent years.

“It’s also about the collaboration and networking, especially for a small institution in [redacted], just to have that connection globally - it allows courses to grow, for example, new partnerships, new projects that might happen.”

HEI, London.

“What we’d like to see is some element of bounce back, some recovery... Nothing like what we would have had before, but we hope that we’ll make up some of the numbers that we have lost in the next year or 2... But I don’t think we see ourselves being able to grow beyond anything like or even to recover the position that we had before.”

HEI, Wales.

The strategies that HEIs planned to use to increase the number of sponsorships offered included using agents to assist with recruitment in international markets and marketing campaigns. Some had a dedicated country manager focusing on key markets, while others had financial rewards available for students from specific countries.

“Just general marketing, obviously trying to expand our marketing network and the use of agents... we’ve got a, we call them international recruitment team that go overseas to schools and colleges and recruitment fairs.”

HEI, London,

For institutions that required an audition, some mentioned changing the way that this was done, for example by holding these auditions in different countries.

“We are trying to have more presence in our desired locations, so this year we have auditions in Norway, Belgium, Hong King and Singapore.”

HEI, London.

20.3 Overall experience of being a sponsor

HEIs were asked about their institution's overall experience of being a sponsor, including what is working well and any common issues they have encountered. Several HEIs reported the overall experience of being a sponsor as positive and quite seamless. In some cases, this was related to HEIs being a sponsor for a longer period of time, meaning they were familiar with the processes, and had a routine in place. Others said that the experience was straightforward due to their low student and CAS numbers.

"We're very clear about what's expected of us; we have very clear documented processes and [know] how to manage that and we have the relevant staff resource to make sure it's implemented well and that's reflected in our inspection reports."

HEI, The North.

Many of the HEIs raised issues that they have faced. By far the most frequent issue experienced was communication with UKVI. Some institutions found that it took a long time to get a reply and found it difficult to get in contact with the right person. Some mentioned that the absence of a named contact at UKVI was a challenge.

"The main issue is communication... I find it hard to actually get in touch with somebody from UKVI."

HEI, London.

"It would be good if universities could have a dedicated point of contact or some service level agreements as to when they could expect responses."

HEI, Scotland.

A couple of HEIs also reported that students received late decisions regarding their visa, which was a major issue. It meant that students were unable to be in the country for the start of their course, and so extra teaching needed to be provided to bring the student up to speed.

“Students who apply for their visas in good time don’t get here for the intake ... They miss the first 2 or 3 weeks of teaching and then they’re immediately at a disadvantage and a poor student experience.”

HEI, London.

Some HEIs also reported dissatisfaction with the lack of data sharing from UKVI, particularly regarding the status of students’ visas. HEIs found that there was a lack of clarity as this data was only shared with students. For the data that UKVI does make available, some found that further context was needed. Furthermore, some HEIs encountered technical issues, particularly regarding the CAS portal. They found that it was very time consuming to use, requiring a lot of manual work.

“It’s silly little things that could easily be resolved. When an applicant has been refused a visa, we don’t get the refusal letter or any notification. It’s the same with withdrawals - the student will get notification from the HO that their visa has been curtailed, but we don’t know when it’s been curtailed, and yet we’re sponsoring them. They say it’s GDPR - which is a common frustration - everything stops with GDPR.”

HEI, Leeds.

21. Conclusions

21.1 Decision-making and prior awareness of visa routes

Most Student visa holders were attracted to the UK by its reputable, high-quality higher education system, offering courses they felt met their academic interests and enabled them to develop professional skills for employment.

Three-fifths (61%) of international students reported that studying a particular course at a particular university was most important when applying for the Student visa, while

a further one-third (33%) said this was equally as important as the motivation to live in the UK. Living in the UK was more important than the course for only 4% of Student visa holders.

Just over half of Student visa holders (52%) had considered other countries as alternatives to the UK. Among those who had done so, the most considered destinations were the USA (48%), Australia (36%), Canada (32%), Germany (20%) and France (16%).

International students' top reason for ultimately choosing the UK over the other destinations was because they thought the course or institution in the UK were better (62%), followed by the desire to experience living in the UK (41%). More than a third (37%) mentioned that the UK course was shorter, and around a third (32%) wanted to move to an English-speaking country. Fewer than one-in-five (18%) cited the UK Student visa as a reason for choosing the UK over other destinations.

In qualitative interviews, there was a sense that the Student visa itself was a necessary requirement to facilitate studying the course they wanted to in the UK for most international students, rather than being attractive in and of itself.

The Graduate Route also influenced the decision to apply for the Student visa for some international students. Of all Student visa holders surveyed, two-thirds (66%) had heard about the Graduate Route before completing the survey and, of these, three-fifths (59%) had heard about it before applying for their Student visa.

The majority of those who were aware of the Graduate Route when they applied for their Student visa said that it had at least some influence on their decision to apply (83%). Nearly a third (32%) said that it had influenced them to 'a great extent'.

Half (49%) of those that said the Graduate Route had influenced their decision reported that they would still have chosen to study in the UK even if the Graduate Route was not available. However, three-in-ten (29%) said they would not have chosen to study in the UK if the Graduate Route was not available.

Of those studying at doctorate level, around one-in-eight (13%) had a dependant associated with their current Student visa, and a small proportion (6%) planned to have dependants join them in the UK in future. Among those with dependants on their Student visa, the majority of dependants were partners (93%, though this is based on a very small sample of 14 Student visa holder).

Qualitative interviews with doctoral students with dependants on their Student visa highlighted the importance of being able to bring dependants with them to the UK, especially considering the length of time they would be undertaking their research or

studies. However, they largely saw this as removing a barrier that would have prevented them from undertaking their preferred course, rather than a motivating factor for studying or conducting research in the UK. The extent to which the institution catered to their specialism and had a good reputation remained their primary considerations in coming to the UK.

21.2 Visa application experience

Satisfaction with the UK Student visa application process was high. Overall, four-in-five visa holders (80%) were satisfied and only 4% dissatisfied with the application process.

Satisfaction with different aspects of the process was somewhat lower. Around half of Student visa holders (51%) said it was easy to navigate and complete the online application forms, and almost half (49%) reported that it was easy to get updates about the status of their application. Just over two-in-five (43%) found it easy to locate the necessary information or documents for their application.

Students were also asked whether the requirement of proving minimum funds presented any difficulty when applying for a UK Student visa. More than half of visa holders (61%) experienced some element of difficulty, including one-in-ten who said they experienced difficulty 'to a great extent', a third (31%) 'to some extent' and one-in-five (20%) 'hardly at all'.

Over three-quarters of international students (77%) had received some kind of help to complete their application. The top sources of support were education agents (50%), friends and family (28%) and their place of study (13%).

HEIs were asked about their engagement with students around the visa application process. In terms of the support HEIs provide to applicants, virtually all reported offering some form of help, most commonly signposting applicants to other sources of help or information (97% of HEIs), helping applicants to understand eligibility criteria (91%), and signposting to sources of financial support (55%).

The majority of Student visa holders (80%) were asked to prove their English language ability when applying for their visa. The top method for proving English language ability was passing a Secure English Language Test (SELT) from an approved provider at Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level B2 or higher (38%) or at level B1 (30%). A further one-in-ten (10%) had to take a test set by their Higher Education Provider.

HEIs were asked if they had eligibility to self-assess applicants' English language ability. Overall, over two thirds (69%) said yes, less than three-in-ten (28%) said no, and 3% did not know. The most common methods used by HEIs were: reviewing previous qualifications (38%), accepting a range of tests (30%), offering their own course / test (28%), and accepting the IELTS test (25%).

21.3 Educational experience

Most students were positive when asked how their experience of being in the UK on a Student visa compared with their expectations. A third (31%) said the experience had exceeded their expectations, and more than half (55%) reported that it had matched their expectations.

Around one-in-ten students (9%) reported that their experience in the UK had not met their expectations. The three main reasons for this were a lack of opportunity for work or further study, that the cost of living or fees were too high, and issues with the course being too difficult or not meeting their needs.

Student visa holders and HEIs were asked some new questions this wave about remote and in-person learning. Overall, international students were very positive about attending lectures and seminars in-person. Around half (48%) said they would choose to attend all taught elements in-person if they were freely able to choose, while a further one-in-five (22%) would attend most of their course in-person.

HEIs were asked the proportion of their courses that could accommodate non face to face attendance. Nine-in-ten HEIs (91%) said between 0% to 25% of their courses accommodate remote learning, while 3% reported that it was between 25% and 50%.

Half of HEIs in the survey (50%) anticipated their use of remote delivery increasing in the future, including 45% who expected it to increase to some extent (between 5% to 20% increase) and 5% who expected a larger increase. Almost half of HEIs (48%) anticipated that their use of remote delivery would not change.

Student visa holders were asked about how well they were integrating into the UK and their use of public services, in order to fully capture their experience of living and studying in the UK. Almost nine-in-ten Student visa holders (88%) reported that they were integrating and accommodating to life in the UK well, including three-in-ten who said they were integrating very well (29%). Just one-in-ten (9%) felt that they were not integrating well.

In terms of public services, public transport was particularly widely used by international students, but most had not used the other services. Nine-in-ten Student visa holders had never used an NHS dentist (93%) or social care services (91%), and around two-thirds had never used a GP (68%). In contrast, only a small minority (4%) had never used public transport, and more than half were using it weekly (58%).

21.4 Economic impact of international students in the UK

Student visa holders were asked in the survey about their spending on accommodation and living expenses. There was quite a broad range of spending across both categories.

In terms of the cost of accommodation, one-in-five Student visa holders spent £500 or less per month (22%) and almost one-in-five spent between £501 to £800 (18%). Around a quarter of Student visa holders (24%) said they spent more than £800 per month on accommodation. Looking at living costs, two-fifths of Student visa holders typically spent between £201 to £500 per month (39%), while one-in-five (22%) spent less than this and a further two-fifths spent more than £500 per month (38%).

In qualitative interviews, there were clear differences in experiences of the cost of living in the UK between different Student visa holders. Some had no concerns about their living expenses while others had found the UK to be more expensive than they had anticipated.

Student visa holders in the survey were asked the extent to which they felt the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) fee and total application fee represented good value for money. Overall, two-fifths (40%) agreed that the total application fee represented good value for money and one-fifth (21%) disagreed. Somewhat fewer international students agreed that the IHS represented good value for money (31%), and a higher proportion disagreed (35%).

One way in which Student visa holders can support their living costs in the UK is through paid work. However in many cases this was not the primary reason visa holders were working alongside their studies, and the majority of Student visa holders were not working.

Overall, one-in-five Student visa holders (19%) had undertaken paid work while studying in the UK. A further half of international students said they may consider finding paid work at some point (49%), while a quarter (24%) had no plans to work

while studying in the UK. Student visa holders undertaking paid work were most likely to be working in the 'Hospitality' (34%) and 'Wholesale and Retail' sectors (27%), followed by 'Health and Social Work' (16%) and 'Education' (12%).

In addition to paid work, some Student visa holders received scholarships to support their study in the UK. Students in qualitative interviews reported receiving scholarship offers from particular HEIs based on either their first degree grade or their English language exam score (IELTS) for undergraduates, which was often a key factor in deciding where to study. These scholarships could be in the region of £2,000 to £3,000, or a 20% discount on tuition fees. Several postgraduate students received scholarships that covered 100% of their tuition fees plus, in some cases, a monthly living allowance.

Over half of Student visa holders intended to apply for a further visa in order to stay in the UK once their current visa expired (55%). Of those who planned to remain in the UK, two-thirds (67%) intended to work, and 44% intended to enrol in further study. Around one-in-ten planned to stay on to do other activities other than study or work (12%), and a similar proportion were unsure of their future intentions (10%).

Student visa holders who intended to stay in the UK were asked which visa route they thought they might apply for. The Graduate Route visa was the most popular route, with 61% of students considering it. This was followed by the Skilled Worker visa (25%) and the Student visa (17%).

21.5 Interactions between the HE sector and Student visa holders

All HEI survey respondents (100%) said that sponsored international student recruitment was important to their strategy and 85% said that it was 'very important'. The vast majority of HEIs (91%) actively recruited sponsored international students.

Student recruitment agents were the most common way that HEIs were actively seeking to attract international students (57%), followed by directly approaching students via overseas outreach (53%) and via open days and recruitment fairs (40%). Many HEIs hoped to expand the countries or regions they recruited international students from (64%).

All HEI survey respondents (100%) said they were likely to continue being a student route sponsor over the next 1 to 2 years, with 98% 'very likely'. Most (76%) were looking to increase their intake of international students over the next 1 to 2 years.

When asked why they wanted to increase sponsorships, the most frequent reason discussed was the financial benefit. Some HEIs mentioned the importance of having collaborative partnerships globally, and a few said that they hoped to recoup the reduction in sponsorship numbers that they have experienced in recent years.

Nine-in-ten HEIs (91%) believed that fluctuations in international student recruitment would affect their institution, 87% of whom said this would have a financial impact.

In the qualitative elements, HEIs reported on the factors restricting their ability to increase their numbers of sponsored students. While some reported their CAS allocations to be sufficient, many reported them as a significant restricting factor. Other factors restricting HEIs' ability to increase sponsorship were mainly of operational nature, including delays in visa processing times.

Some HEIs also mentioned financial barriers for students, with the combination of high tuition fees, cost of living, and restrictions on students' ability to work acting as a deterrent for potential international applicants.

HEIs were asked in the qualitative strand whether the policy changes restricting dependants have affected their recruitment. HEIs noted that they had mainly noticed this at postgraduate level. HEIs commonly mentioned drops in the numbers of international students of between 30 and 60%. However, others reported not noticing any changes.

HEIs were asked about their institution's overall experience of being a sponsor, including what is working well and any common issues they have encountered. Several HEIs reported the overall experience of being a sponsor as positive and quite seamless. Among those who raised issues, the most frequent issue experienced was communication with UKVI. Some HEIs also reported that students received late decisions regarding their visa, which meant that they missed the start of their course.

21.6 Tackling misuse and non-compliance

HEIs reported the proportion of prospective students who do not meet English language assessment standards. Overall, the majority were not sure, with just over three-in-five (63%) answering 'don't know' at this question. A further one-in-five (18%) said that none of their students failed to meet the English language assessment standards, one-in-ten (10%) said that 5% of their students did not meet the requirements, and one-in-twenty (5%) reported that 10% of their students did not

meet the requirements.

In the qualitative research, some HEIs mentioned using the UKVI guidance around English assessments. HEIs recognised the importance of English language checks both for students' ability to engage with their course of study and for the institution's legal compliance. HEIs largely reported taking great care in discerning the differing levels of risk for different countries and offering language waivers only to applicants from those deemed low risk.

When students apply for a Student visa, they may also be asked to show they have the minimum funds needed for maintenance costs by depositing a relevant sum in a bank account. This proves they have enough money to pay for living expenses during the duration of their studies. HEIs were asked how they would rate the financial maintenance requirements for ensuring students' self-sufficiency. The majority felt the requirements were about right (59%), around one-in-five (22%) felt they were too low, and one-in-seven (14%) felt they were too high.

HEIs were asked if they had encountered any misuse of the student visa, or non-compliance from students, recruitment agents or representatives. Just under half had experienced this (48% responding yes), and just over half had not (52%). The main types of misuse encountered included false documentation (encountered by 50% of HEIs who encountered any misuse), students not enrolling on the course or enrolling but never attending (39%), and students working in breach of conditions (18%); however, this was based on a small sample of survey respondents (28) so caution is advised when interpreting these results.

The majority of HEIs, however, felt that the HE sector was vigilant to the characteristics (that is, nature and intention) of breaches and misuses. Over three-quarters (76%) felt the sector was vigilant to these breaches/misuses to a very large extent (43%) or to a large extent (33%).

HEIs reported using a variety of mechanisms for monitoring of students' compliance at the application stage, including rigorous pre-acceptance screening of applicants from high-risk countries or regions, using data management programmes to check applicants' documents, conducting checks via video interview and monitoring recruitment agents.

Once students are enrolled on their courses, HEIs reported using the following activities to monitor their compliance: Running compliance workshops for students, offering support services to answer any student questions, monitoring patterns of absences and asking students to notify the HEI and send evidence when they leave the country. Some HEIs mentioned that there are some issues which they are unable

monitor, such as students' compliance with the restrictions on the number of hours they are allowed to work during term time.

In the qualitative strand, when asked about their experience with the new compliance standards, HEIs largely reported they had not noticed many or any changes. Many HEIs said that had already complied with these requirements, that is, they had always had to do visa or course completion checks, and they had already complied with the 20% maximum for online delivery previously.

Annex 1: Methodology

Student visa holder method

The study with Student visa holders comprised of an online survey of over 3,000 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 September 2023 was sent securely and saved on the IFF internal secure access servers. 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 mainstage survey was launched on the 26 of November 2024 and closed on the 17 of January 2025.

A sample of 40,000 records was 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 6 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. Regular 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 3 reminders.

The survey was completed by 3,060 students during the mainstage fieldwork period. 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 5.

Table 5: Weighting grid profile for the Student visa holder survey, country of origin by age

| | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55+ | Total |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| China | 24% | 4% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 29% |
| India | 16% | 7% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 24% |
| Pakistan | 4% | 5% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 10% |
| Nigeria | 1% | 3% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 6% |
| United States of America | 3% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 3% |
| Nepal | 2% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 3% |
| Rest of countries | 16% | 8% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 25% |
| Total | 66% | 30% | 4% | 0% | 0% | 100% |

The number of international students surveyed was split across the different demographic categories as represented in the Table 6 through to Table 11.

There were some notable differences in the sample profile in this year's survey compared to the first wave:

By nationality, there were proportionately more Student visa holders from China (24%) and Pakistan (11%) in wave 2 of the survey compared to wave 1 (21% and 6% respectively). The proportion of students from Nigeria responding to the survey decreased from 18% in wave 1 to 11% in wave 2.

The profile of Student visa holders in wave 2 was younger than the wave 1 sample. Three-in-five respondents (60%) were aged 16 to 24, compared to half (50%) in last year's survey. There were also more male students in the sample for wave 2 (55%) compared to wave 1 (48%).

Almost one-in-five (18%) Student visa holders responding to the wave 1 survey had dependants on their visa, compared to just 1% in wave 2. This is due to the change in policy whereby only doctorate level students are able to bring dependants to the UK on a Student visa. The vast majority of wave 2 survey respondents (96%) were studying below doctorate level and were not therefore eligible to bring dependants.

Looking at type of course and institution, there were slightly fewer Russell Group students in wave 2 (25% compared to 27% in wave 1), and fewer students studying STEM subjects (32% compared to 41% in wave 1). While the level of study was broadly similar across both waves of the survey, there was a slight increase in wave 2 among those studying below undergraduate level (3% compared to 1% last time) and at Doctoral level (2% compared to 1% in wave 1).

Table 6: Achieved student survey responses by country and age

| Age | Total | % | India | China | Nigeria | Pakistan | Other |
|--------------|-------|-----|-------|-------|---------|----------|-------|
| 16-24 | 1,825 | 60% | 454 | 641 | 104 | 126 | 500 |
| 25-34 | 995 | 33% | 214 | 96 | 155 | 191 | 339 |
| 35-44 | 224 | 7% | 14 | 6 | 88 | 17 | 99 |
| 45+ | 16 | 1% | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 12 |

Table 7: Achieved student survey responses by country and gender

| Gender | Total | % | India | China | Nigeria | Pakistan | Other |
|---------------|-------|-----|-------|-------|---------|----------|-------|
| Male | 1,670 | 55% | 413 | 331 | 185 | 255 | 486 |
| Female | 1,389 | 45% | 269 | 412 | 166 | 79 | 463 |
| Other | 1 | 0% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

Table 8: Achieved student survey responses by country and level of study

| Level of study | Total | % | India | China | Nigeria | Pakistan | Other |
|---------------------------|-------|----|-------|-------|---------|----------|-------|
| Below degree level | 83 | 3% | 4 | 32 | 5 | 8 | 34 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Undergraduate | 724 | 24% | 79 | 230 | 43 | 35 | 337 |
| Postgraduate | 2,118 | 69% | 590 | 445 | 287 | 287 | 509 |
| Doctorate | 113 | 4% | 7 | 33 | 10 | 4 | 59 |

Table 9: Achieved student survey responses by country and university type

| University type | Total | % | India | China | Nigeria | Pakistan | Other |
|--------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Russell Group | 771 | 25% | 76 | 487 | 12 | 5 | 191 |
| Non-Russell Group | 2,289 | 75% | 606 | 256 | 339 | 329 | 759 |

Table 10: Achieved student survey responses by country and subject of study

| Subject of study | Total | % | India | China | Nigeria | Pakistan | Other |
|-------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| STEM | 992 | 32% | 237 | 258 | 109 | 85 | 303 |
| Non-STEM | 2,001 | 65% | 442 | 460 | 239 | 248 | 612 |

Table 11: Achieved student survey responses by country and whether they have dependants

| Dependants | Total | % | India | China | Nigeria | Pakistan | Other |
|------------------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Have dependants | 23 | 1% | 0 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 15 |
| No dependants | 90 | 3% | 7 | 32 | 4 | 3 | 44 |
| Not asked (below PhD level) | 2,947 | 96% | 675 | 710 | 341 | 330 | 891 |

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 12 below.

Table 12: Qualitative interviews achieved with students, by category

| Age | Total | % |
|-------|-------|-----|
| 16-24 | 11 | 44% |
| 25-34 | 6 | 24% |
| 35-44 | 7 | 28% |
| 45+ | 1 | 4% |

| Nationality | Total | % |
|-------------|-------|-----|
| India | 4 | 16% |
| China | 2 | 8% |
| Nigeria | 6 | 24% |
| Other | 13 | 52% |

| Level of study | total | % |
|----------------|-------|-----|
| Undergraduate | 7 | 28% |
| Postgraduate | 11 | 44% |
| Doctorate | 7 | 28% |

| Dependants | Total | % |
|------------|-------|-----|
| Yes | 6 | 24% |
| No | 19 | 76% |

| Working | Total | % |
|---------|-------|-----|
| Yes | 14 | 56% |

| | | |
|----|----|-----|
| No | 11 | 44% |
|----|----|-----|

| Institution type | Total | % |
|-------------------|-------|-----|
| Russell Group | 6 | 24% |
| Non-Russell Group | 19 | 76% |

| Post-study intentions | Total | % |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----|
| Stay in the UK | 15 | 60% |
| Not stay in the UK / undecided | 10 | 40% |

The qualitative interviews covered students’ decision-making process for coming to study in the UK, their experience with the UK Student visa application process, their experience of working and studying, and their plans for after they finish their current studies.

Eight interviews were conducted by telephone and 17 via Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes on average and took place between 6 December 2024 and 27 January 2025.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) method

The study with HEIs comprised a telephone survey of 58 institutions, and follow-up qualitative interviews with 20 institutions.

The sample for HEIs comprised 164 institutions, with up to 2 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 2 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 was conducted between 19 November 2024 and 22 January 2025.

The profile of achieved HEI interviews by geographical region and Russell Group status is shown in Table 13 and Table 14 below.

The sample profile for HEIs was very similar to wave 1 of the HEI survey in terms of geographical region. However, 10% of wave 1 HEIs were Russell Group universities compared to none in this year’s survey.

Table 13: Achieved HEI survey responses by geographical region

| Region | Total | % |
|-------------------------|-------|-----|
| Midlands | 4 | 7% |
| East of England | 4 | 7% |
| London | 18 | 31% |
| North of England | 10 | 17% |
| South East & South West | 10 | 17% |
| Northern Ireland | 2 | 3% |
| Scotland | 7 | 12% |
| Wales | 3 | 5% |

Table 14: Achieved HEI survey responses by Russell Group/Non-Russell Group status

| Institution type | Total | % |
|-------------------|-------|------|
| Russell Group | 0 | 0% |
| Non-Russell Group | 58 | 100% |

For the qualitative interviews with HEIs, soft quotas were used to ensure coverage across some areas as outlined in Table 15.

Table 15: 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 | 5 | 25% |
| Medium | 6 | 30% |
| Low | 7 | 35% |
| Unknown | 2 | 10% |

| Planning increase of international students | Total | % |
|---|-------|-----|
| Yes | 19 | 95% |
| No | 1 | 5% |

| Used third party service | Total | % |
|--------------------------|-------|-----|
| Yes | 7 | 35% |
| No | 11 | 55% |
| Unknown | 2 | 10% |

The qualitative interviews covered in more detail HEIs' reasons for sponsoring international students, experience of being a sponsor and renewing licences, use of

third-party support, and their thoughts on the impact of recent policy changes.

One of these interviews was conducted by telephone and 19 via Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes on average and took place between 6 December 2024 and 30 January 2025.

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