

## Article

# Reason for international migration, international students update: May 2025

International student migration to the UK, 2019 to 2024. Analysis relates to non-EU+ throughout unless stated otherwise. These are official statistics in development.

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# 1 . Main points

- Immigration of non-EU+ migrants initially arriving on a study-related visa decreased from 423,000 in year ending (YE) December 2023 to 266,000 in YE December 2024; a decrease in student dependants following government policy changes accounts for around two-thirds of this change.
- In YE December 2023 study-dependant visas accounted for 29% of all non-EU+ migrants initially arriving on a study-related visa (121,000); this fell to 6% (17,000) for YE December 2024 arrivals.
- Emigration of non-EU+ migrants initially arriving on a study-related visa increased from 114,000 in YE December 2023 to 135,000 in YE December 2024; this may in part reflect higher levels of study immigration since 2021 as these students finish their courses.
- Since 2022, decreasing study-related immigration and increasing study-related emigration resulted in lower long-term net migration of non-EU+ international migrants initially arriving in the UK on a study-related visa; this decreased to 131,000 in YE December 2024 compared with our updated YE December 2023 estimate of 309,000.
- The proportion of non-EU+ students and their dependants who had transitioned to a different visa type after three years increased for arrivals in YE December 2021 (46%) compared with arrivals in YE December 2019 (18%).

These are official statistics in development, and we advise caution when using the data. The methods are currently under development, which means estimates may be revised and updated as improvements are introduced and as further and more recent data become available. More information can be found in [Section 9: Data sources and quality](#).

## 2 . Overview

This article provides further insights into our [Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2024 bulletin](#), focusing on estimates of long-term international students and their dependants, including analysis of their characteristics and migration patterns. This publication builds on our [Reason for international migration, international students update: November 2024 article](#).

We provide new insights into international migrants immigrating into the UK on a study visa between July 2022 and June 2023 in [Section 6: Subjects studied and geographical location of international students in higher education](#). Using Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data we provide an interactive chart for selected nationalities, showing our investigation so far. This displays the interaction between:

- main subject
- level of study
- sub-national location of the international students in term time

We use Home Office Borders and Immigration data (HOBID) to provide further detail on long-term international migrants who come to the UK for study purposes. At this stage in our research, we can only apply our methods to non-EU+ nationals. Non-EU+ migrants account for the majority of long-term study immigration to the UK in recent years. Those on a study-related visa (study visas and study-dependant visas) make up 35% of non-EU+ nationals who immigrated in year ending (YE) December 2024. A full definition of non-EU+ can be found in [Section 8: Glossary](#).

Methods to estimate migration of EU+ nationals using HOBID are still in development. More information can be found in our [International migration research, progress update: February 2025 article](#). A definition of EU+ can be found in [Section 8: Glossary](#).

Estimates for YE December 2024 are released with the expectation that they may be revised and updated as further, more recent, data become available. More information on revisions is available in [Section 6 of our Provisional long-term international migration estimates bulletin](#).

### 3 . Overall long-term migration for those on a study-related visa

#### Figure 1: Net migration levels for non-EU+ nationals whose initial reason for immigration was study decreased in YE December 2024

Total number of non-EU+ nationals who initially immigrated long-term into the UK on a study-related visa by flow type, for year ending (YE) December 2019 to YE December 2024

#### Notes:

1. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest thousand. The sum of individual numbers may not equal totals seen elsewhere.
2. Emigration includes those who initially immigrated on a study-related visa but may have subsequently transitioned to a different visa type.
3. These estimates are for long-term international migrants only.
4. Includes study-dependant visas.
5. Non-EU+ nationals only.

Higher emigration and lower immigration resulted in lower net migration for non-EU+ nationals in YE December 2024. The same trend can be seen for those initially arriving on a study-related visa, for which estimated net migration for YE December 2024 is 131,000, compared with 309,000 in YE December 2023. Increasing emigration may reflect patterns of higher immigration in recent years, as students finish their courses and leave the UK. People arriving on study-dependant visas accounted for 67% of the total decrease in study-related immigration between YE December 2023 and YE December 2024.

On 1 January 2024, [government policy changes](#) came into effect meaning that international students can now only bring dependants on postgraduate research courses and courses with government-funded scholarships.

More non-EU+ nationals who initially arrived in the UK on a study-dependant visa emigrated, rather than immigrated, in YE December 2024; this means that net migration for study dependants was negative 3,000, compared with positive 111,000 in YE December 2023.

Home Office [quarterly immigration system statistics](#) (published 27 February 2025) show that 85% fewer study-dependant visas were issued in YE December 2024 than in YE December 2023.

## 4 . Study-related visas and length of stay in the UK

In this section, we use Home Office Borders and Immigration (HOBI) data to analyse migration patterns over time and characteristics of long-term international migrants arriving on a study-related visa in years ending (YE) December 2019 to December 2023. The [methodology](#) behind this is described in more detail in our Reason for international migration, international students update: November 2023 article.

### **Figure 2: More non-EU+ nationals who arrived on study-related visas are remaining in the UK and transitioning to other visa types, rather than emigrating at the end of their studies**

The migration status to the UK of the years ending (YE) December 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 cohorts, between YE December 2020 and YE December 2024

#### **Notes:**

1. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole percentage. The sum of individual numbers may not equal totals seen elsewhere.
2. Study-related visa arrivals include those who arrive on study and study-dependant visas.
3. Non-EU+ nationals only.
4. These estimates are for long-term international migrants only.
5. Emigrated in previous years refers to those who have emigrated in a different year.
6. A small number of records for year ending (YE) December 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 arrivals could not be categorised because of the use of updated Home Office Borders and Immigration data for the latest two time periods to maintain consistency with published long-term international migration estimates.
7. We advise caution when comparing data on visa transitions after one year. Migration behaviours are impacted by visa duration, which is linked to course length for study-related visas and is not visible in these data.

Figure 2 shows the trend in more recent cohorts of non-EU+ nationals arriving on study-related visas transitioning to other visa types and remaining in the country for longer.

Non-EU+ nationals on study-related visas emigrated less in more recent years. Overall, 62% of those who arrived in YE December 2019 emigrated in the four years after arrival, compared with 47% of those who arrived in 2020. A similar trend is seen in subsequent cohorts after two years, with fewer emigrating in the 2022 cohort (19%) than in the previous cohorts. It is too early to say whether these students and their dependants will remain in the UK permanently, or whether they are just staying longer than earlier cohorts.

Conversely, the proportion of non-EU+ students and their dependants who had transitioned to a different visa type increased. After three years, 46% of arrivals in YE December 2021 had transitioned compared with 18% of YE December 2019 arrivals.

## **Study-related visas and transitions to other types of visas**

### **Figure 3: A higher proportion of non-EU+ nationals who initially arrived in the UK on study-related visas transitioned onto work-related visas in more recent years**

All visa transitions for those who arrived in the UK on a study-related visa in the years ending (YE) December 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 cohorts, between YE December 2019 and YE December 2024

#### **Notes:**

1. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole percentage. The sum of individual numbers may not equal totals seen elsewhere.
2. Study-related visa arrivals include those who arrive on study and study-dependant visas.
3. Work-dependant visas and graduate visas are included in work visas.
4. Humanitarian visas include asylum, protection and resettlement scheme visas.
5. Other visas include visit, administrative and settlement visas.
6. Estimates are for non-EU+ nationals only.
7. These estimates are for long-term international migrants only.
8. We advise caution when comparing data on visa transitions after one year. Migration behaviours are impacted by visa duration, which is linked to course length for study-related visas and is not visible in these data.

Those who initially arrive on a study-related visa transition onto a work-related visa (including the Graduate visa) more than any other visa route.

The proportion of those who had transitioned to a work-related visa after three years in the country increased for YE December 2021 arrivals (36%) compared with YE December 2019 arrivals (15%). The proportion of YE December 2021 arrivals who had transitioned to work-related visas after three years was similar for study visa holders (35%) and study-dependant visa holders (39%).

The proportion of those initially arriving on a study-related visa who had transitioned to family, humanitarian or other visa types, after three years in the country, increased from 4% of YE December 2019 arrivals to 10% of YE December 2021 arrivals. A higher proportion of study-dependant visa holders arriving in YE December 2021 had transitioned to family, humanitarian and other visa types after three years (30%) than study visa holders (7%) in the same cohort.

More information can be found in [Section 7: UK international students' data](#) and in our [Reason for international migration, international students update: November 2023 article](#).

## **5 . Nationalities of those arriving in the UK on a study-related visa**

We look at the migration patterns over time for the top nationalities of long-term international migrants initially arriving on a study-related visa in years ending (YE) December 2019 to December 2023.

### **Nationalities of students arriving in the UK on a study visa**

Indian (103,000), Nigerian (39,000) and Chinese (53,000) remained the top three nationalities of students arriving in YE December 2023, although all three nationalities saw a decrease in the number of students arriving compared with YE December 2022. Numbers decreased by 12,000 (19%) for Chinese nationals, by 8,000 (7%) for Indian nationals, and by 6,000 (14%) for Nigerian nationals.

### **Nationalities of those arriving in the UK on a study-dependant visa**

The split of study-related visas between students and dependants varied by nationality but remained relatively stable for each of the top three nationalities from YE December 2022 to YE December 2023. The ratio of dependants to students was highest for Nigerian nationals (122 per 100 students) and lowest for Chinese nationals (1 per 100 students) for arrivals in YE December 2023. The overall ratio was 40 dependants per 100 students of all nationalities.

### **Nationalities transitioning onto different visa types**

The proportion of those on a study-related visa who had transitioned to a non-study visa after three years in the UK increased in recent years, and the size of the changes varied by nationality.

For Nigerian nationals, 38% of those who arrived in YE December 2019 had transitioned to non-study visas after three years, compared with 80% of YE December 2021 arrivals. There was a smaller increase in the proportion of Indian nationals who had transitioned to a non-study visa after three years (39% of YE December 2019 arrivals compared with 64% of YE December 2021 arrivals), while the proportion of Chinese nationals grew by 9 percentage points (from 5% of YE December 2019 arrivals to 14% of YE December 2021 arrivals).

More information is available in [Section 7: UK international students' data](#), and in our [Reason for international migration, international students update: November 2023 article](#).

## 6 . Subjects studied and geographical location of international students in higher education

Our [November 2024 article in this series](#) included analysis using published Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data to provide additional insights into international higher education (HE) students. Using HESA microdata, for 2022 to 2023, we improved the coherence of these insights with long-term international migration (LTIM) estimates.

Our bespoke population of international (non-British national) HE students closely matches our definition of a long-term international migrant on a study visa. This population is referred to in this section as the "international student population" or "population" and contains students beginning HE courses in the 2022 to 2023 academic year. Further information on the methods for this are given in [Section 9: Data sources and quality](#).

The majority of students in our population had a non-EU+ nationality. Nationals from India, China and Nigeria made up 65% of our total international HE student population. This is consistent with the top nationality groups seen in Home Office Borders and Immigration data (HOBID) (find more information in [Section 5: Nationalities of those arriving in the UK on a study-related visa](#)). Nationals from EU+ countries accounted for 7%, and the French nationality was the most common (1% of the total international student population). London was the most popular destination for both non-EU+ (29%) and EU+ (43%) nationals in our international student population. Nationals from Nigeria were an exception as they were more evenly dispersed throughout Great Britain (Table 1).

Table 1: London was the most popular location for international students  
Top five destinations in Great Britain for international students, EU+ and non-EU+ nationality groups and selected nationalities, academic year 2022 to 2023

Destination Popularity	Total Non-EU+	Total EU+	Indian	Chinese	Nigerian
1st	London 29%	London 43%	London 36%	London 28%	North West 13%
2nd	Scotland 11%	Scotland 13%	East Midlands 10%	Scotland 16%	Scotland 12%
3rd	South East 10%	South East 12%	West Midlands 9%	Yorkshire and The Humber 12%	Yorkshire and The Humber 11%
4th	Yorkshire and The Humber 9%	South West 6%	North West 8%	South East 12%	North East 11%
5th	West Midlands 8%	North West 5%	South East 8%	West Midlands 8%	London 11%

Source: HESA microdata supplied by Jisc

### Notes

1. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest percentage.
2. Records where the student is resident in Northern Ireland are not included in the calculation of the proportions in the table. Further details on why they are excluded are given in Section 9: Data sources and quality.
3. Copyright Jisc 2023. Jisc cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from its data.

The level of study and choice of main subject was distinctly different between the non-EU+ and EU+ nationality groups. Master's level of study was chosen by 75% of non-EU+ nationals, with another 22% choosing an undergraduate course and 3% studying for a doctorate.

For those with EU+ nationality, there was an even split between those studying for an undergraduate level qualification (50%) and those studying for either a master's (43%) or doctorate (8%) qualification.

**Figure 4: Nigeria had the highest proportion of students studying for a master's degree, while nationals from the USA had a more even split between undergraduate and master's levels of study**

Level of study by nationality groups and selected nationalities, UK, 2022 to 2023 academic year

**Notes:**

1. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest percentage. The sum of individual numbers may not equal totals seen elsewhere.
2. This population of international (non-British national) Higher Education (HE) students was designed to closely match our definition of a long-term international migrant (LTIM) on a study visa.
3. Undergraduate level of study includes honours degrees, ordinary degrees and higher diplomas, as well as those studying for a foundation degree.
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Around two-thirds of undergraduate or master's students studied non-STEM subjects. Business and management, a non-STEM subject, was the most popular subject overall, with 40% of non-EU+ students and 26% of EU+ students choosing it as their main subject. The popularity of other main subject areas varied by nationality and level of study (Figure 5). A definition of STEM can be found in [Section 8: Glossary](#).

**Figure 5: The most popular subjects of study at all levels varies by nationality**

Subjects studied by nationality groups, selected nationalities and level of study, UK, 2022 to 2023 academic year

**Notes:**

1. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest percentage. The sum of individual numbers may not equal totals seen elsewhere.
2. This population of international (non-British national) higher education (HE) students was designed to closely match our definition of a long-term international migrant (LTIM) on a study visa.
3. "Other subjects" includes all subjects outside of the top five most prevalent subjects for that nationality.
4. Undergraduate level of study includes honours degrees, ordinary degrees and higher diplomas, as well as those studying for a foundation degree.
5. Postgraduate level of study includes doctoral and master's degrees and postgraduate certificates.
6. Copyright Jisc 2023. Jisc cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from its data.



## 7 . UK international students' data

[Long-term international student migration, provisional estimates](#)

Dataset | Released 22 May 2025

Long-term international student migration to the UK, 2019 to 2024, including status of migration and visa, age, sex and nationality. These are official statistics in development.

## 8 . Glossary

### Cohort

A group of student and student dependant long-term migrants that arrived in the UK in the same year ending (YE) period.

### Dependant visas

International migrants that have entered the UK on a visa may be eligible to bring their dependant partner or child with them through a dependant visa, depending on the type of visa the main applicant holds. A dependant partner or child is any of the following of an international migrant:

- a husband, wife, civil partner or unmarried partner
- a child aged 18 years and under, including those born in the UK during the international migrant's stay
- a child aged 18 years and over if they are currently in the UK as the international migrant's dependant

### EU, EU+ and non-EU+

EU is the European Union. It is the sum of EU14, EU8, and EU2, plus Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 1 July 2013). British nationals are not included in these numbers at any time point. The European Union groups are:

- Romania and Bulgaria (EU2)
- Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (EU8)
- Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden (EU14)
- "Other EU" is Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (joined from 2013)

"EU+" is all current EU countries plus Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland.

"Non-EU+" is the sum of the rest of the world, including the rest of Europe, not included in the EU+ category. British nationals are excluded from these numbers.

### Humanitarian reason for migration

For non-EU+ nationals, the reason for migration is based on their visa type. The "humanitarian" category includes people who immigrated into the UK under visas classified as:

- protection
- British national (overseas) (BN(O))
- Ukrainian support schemes
- asylum applicants

## **International student**

An international student is currently defined as someone who arrives in the UK to study and remains for a period of 12 months or more. In line with the current United Nations (UN) definition of a long-term migrant, international students are included in our estimates of long-term immigration.

## **Level of study**

Level of study indicates the level of the higher education course on which a student is engaged.

Undergraduate level of study includes honours degrees, ordinary degrees and higher diplomas, as well as those studying for a foundation degree.

Postgraduate courses include doctoral and master's degrees and postgraduate certificates.

More information on determining level of study is available in Higher Education Statistics Agency's [\(HESA\) student definitions](#).

## **Long-term international migrant**

Someone who recently migrated into the UK on a study related visa and started a new higher education course that they expect to last for 12 months or more.

## **STEM**

Subjects classed as science, technology, engineering or mathematics. HESA defines STEM subjects as:

- medicine and dentistry
- subjects allied to medicine
- biological and sport sciences
- psychology
- veterinary sciences
- agriculture, food and related studies
- physical sciences
- mathematical sciences
- engineering and technology
- computing
- geography, earth and environmental studies (excluding human geography)

Further information on subject groupings is available within the [HESA bulletin on subjects studied from April 2025](#).

We defined the other terms we have used in this article in our [Reason for international migration, international students update: November 2024 article](#).

## 9 . Data sources and quality

### Official statistics in development

These statistics are labelled as "official statistics in development". Until September 2023, these were called "experimental statistics". Read more about the change in the Office for Statistics Regulation's [Guide to official statistics in development](#).

Estimates for the most recent time period in our data series (year ending (YE) December 2024) are provisional and provide users with an early indication of migration during this period. Our [Population and International Migration Statistics Revisions Policy methodology](#) shows they are released with the expectation that they may be revised and updated as further, and more recent, data become available. We are also continuing to develop and refine our methods for measuring long-term international migration, including international students.

More information on revisions is available in our [Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2024 bulletin](#).

### Higher Education Statistics Agency data

In [Section 6: Subjects studied and geographical location of international students in higher education](#), we used record level data supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The broad range of information collected by HESA provides additional detail and insight into the behaviour and characteristics of students studying at higher education providers within the UK.

Using record level data for the 2022 to 2023 academic year, we filtered the HESA student population to match, as closely as possible, our definition of a long-term international migrant (LTIM). We have filtered out records where the student:

- has any form of British citizenship
- previously studied at another institution within the UK, or were permanently living in the UK prior to starting their current course
- did not expect their course to last 12 months
- did not require a study visa for the course (applying eligibility rules for study visas from the [gov.uk website](https://www.gov.uk))
- was not in the first year of their course
- was recorded as not being actively engaged in the course
- was engaging in the course as a distance learner outside the UK
- was missing information on their nationality (3.5% of all records)

Allocation of students to countries of the UK and regions in England was by the postcode or local authority district of their term time address or, if this was unavailable, their higher education provider.

Analysis of the location of international students during term-time is for Great Britain, not the UK, because of high levels of missing nationality data of those international students resident in Northern Ireland.

Each record is an instance of a student engaging on a course. The proportion of students in our filtered population with more than one engagement is less than 0.01%. The number of records is therefore considered to be an excellent proxy for the number of students in our population.

The bespoke definition of our international student population prevents direct coherence between our findings and [statistics on the HESA website](#).

## 10 . Future developments

We will continue to update estimates of international student migration as we receive more data, improve methods and provide more insights. This includes:

- extending the use of Home Office Borders and Immigration (HOBI) data for EU+ nationals once methods are fully developed
- building on new analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data to provide further insights

We have undertaken an engagement exercise to understand user needs regarding an additional international net migration estimate which excludes students. There was mixed feedback on the need for this, but the overall preference was to not introduce such an estimate. It also highlighted areas where additional information on international students would be useful.

Following this exercise, a decision was made not to publish an additional estimate of international net migration excluding students at this time. We will review the suggestions provided by users and look for opportunities to take them forward through our research and development work. More information can be found in our [consultation response document](#).

### We want your feedback

Your feedback is important. We want to hear what our users need from the development of these statistics to ensure we are providing the best insights on population and migration.

Please get in touch with any feedback by emailing [pop.info@ons.gov.uk](mailto:pop.info@ons.gov.uk).

## 11 . Related links

[Long-term international migration, provisional: year-ending December 2024](#)

Bulletin | Released 22 May 2025

UK international migration for year ending (YE) June 2012 to YE December 2024. These are official statistics in development.

[Quality report for the Student Record \(22056\)](#)

Report | Released 8 August 2024

An overview of the data quality and methodology for the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2022 to 2023 student record data collection.

[International migration research, progress update: February 2025](#)

Article | Released 26 February 2025

An update on international migration methods and research to further develop admin-based migration estimates (ABMEs).

[Understanding user needs: additional international net migration estimate excluding international students](#)

ONS consultation response | Released 14 May 2025

An update following our consultation on an additional estimate of international net migration.

[Migrant journey](#)

Article | Released 22 May 2025

A series of publications that explore migrants' journeys through the UK's immigration system.

[Monthly entry clearance visa applications, April 2025](#)

Article | Released 8 May 2025

Statistics on visa applications for people coming to the UK for work and study.

## 12 . Cite this article

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