



BRITISH UNIVERSITIES' INTERNATIONAL LIAISON ASSOCIATION



**INDEPENDENT
HIGHER
EDUCATION**



BUILA, UKCISA & IHE Member Toolkit for Regional Political Engagement – Northern Ireland

March 2024

Checklist

- Invite your local MP to visit your university to hear first-hand from:
 - International students.
 - Colleagues dealing with recruitment and from popular courses among international students.
 - Local employers – on the value that international students (and the Graduate route in particular) brings to their business.

- Agree on key action points with MPs, potentially including:
 - Making representations to minister/shadow minister/party spokesperson on key asks.
 - Speaking in support of international students in Parliament.
 - Convening a regional roundtable with local businesses and mayoral/local authority skills leads to discuss how the graduate route can be better promoted in the region.

- Brief those standing to be MPs in the region using key messages.

- Report back to us so that we know which MPs are most supportive and can be asked to advocate for the sector in Parliament – buila@publicaffairsco.com

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Context

- As we head towards a UK general election, there may not only be change ‘at the top’ but also across the country as we see a substantial number of MPs stepping down and new constituency boundaries leading to significant churn in local representatives.
- The Conservative Party faces increasing pressure from the right of its own ranks and from Reform UK to double down on its tough stance on immigration.
- Labour is treading a difficult path as it seeks to avoid any action that the Conservatives might seek to use as a dividing line against it.
- With recent negative media reporting further throwing international students into the spotlight, there has never been a more important time to advocate for the sector.
- At the national level, BUILA, UKCISA and IHE are engaging with ministers, shadow ministers, their advisers, civil servants and others with influence to make the case for international students.
- MPs need to be hearing the same thing both in Parliament and in their constituency.
- As a local institution, MPs hearing from you about the specific impacts that the university, local students and employers are facing as a result of national policy will resonate with them far more than reading about this at the national level.
- Given that the key policy concerns and asks relate to issues that are the responsibility of the UK Government, the priority ahead of the election should be seeking to engage with MPs who can advocate for the sector at Westminster. However, the principles for engagement apply equally to MLAs and you should ensure that you also have relationships at this level. Given the increased reliance on international student fees in Northern Ireland compared with England, we would expect the MPs and MLAs you are engaging with to be more receptive to the arguments overall.

Purpose of this toolkit

The member toolkit provides all of the information needed to engage effectively with MPs.

Key Objectives:

- 1. Educate MPs and MLAs about the benefits of international students.**
- 2. Improve sentiment and understanding towards international students by addressing misconceptions.**
- 3. Secure support from your local MP to advocate for international students at the national level to input to future policy development.**

The best way to achieve these aims is to meet with your local MP or MLA in person at your institution. Visiting your university and meeting students will resonate far more than any written briefing, no matter how well worded it is! This guide outlines how to go about this and the key messages to deploy in communications with political representatives.

How to organise a visit with an MP

- MPs generally work in Westminster Monday – Thursday with Friday reserved for constituency matters. They receive hundreds of emails a day and have dozens of requests on their time for their limited availability in the constituency. To ensure that you get their attention your invite should be concise and give them a clear reason to say yes.
- Any visit will be most effective (and more of interest to them) if the MP can hear first-hand from:
 - **International students** – on their experience of studying in the UK, why they wanted to come to the UK over other countries, and to this university in particular, and their plans for post-graduation. On a more general level, MPs will be interested to know their thoughts on how easy or difficult the UK makes it for international students to come here and the impact that the recent policy changes and negative rhetoric towards international students has had on their views and others in their country considering studying abroad.
 - **Colleagues dealing with recruitment and from popular courses for international students** – to provide reassurance that there is no detrimental impact on domestic student recruitment and no discrimination.
 - **Local employers** – on the value that international students (and the Graduate route in particular) brings to their business.
- MPs have teams of staff in both Westminster and the constituency. It is beneficial to build a good relationship with the latter as they will be your primary contact day-to-day. They are the gatekeepers to an MP's time and how they frame meeting requests can influence an MP's decision on whether or not to accept them.
- Contact details for member MPs can be found in the corresponding toolkit database with an overview of any relevant positions or comments on international students.
- Once you have sent an invitation we would recommend a follow up call a week later, and then continuing to chase via phone or email. Given the huge volume of correspondence MPs receive, this is often necessary to ensure it isn't missed.
- The letter should come from the Vice Chancellor or someone very senior within the university.

Example invitation to visit

N.B. Some members may have already engaged with their local MP on international student recruitment following the recent media reports and if so, should frame any invitation to visit in the context of following on from these discussions rather than sending the below.

Subject: Invitation to visit to discuss importance of international students to [city/town]

Dear [MP Salutation or use first name if known to person signing],

As immigration and the role played in this by international students will be a major issue at the forthcoming UK general election with potential significant impacts for Northern Ireland, I would like to invite you to the University so that you may be briefed on the relevance of this to [name of city/town] including to local employers.

For example, in 2021-22 international students contributed [£Xm – look up the figure for your constituency in Table 26 [here](#)] to the local economy in [constituency name].

If they have recently said anything supportive of international students or have a role in the APPG, you can reference this here. For example, “We welcome your support for international students as a Vice Chair of the APPG and your recent comments that...”.

We will be happy to address any concerns you may have following recent media reports which have raised concerns that universities are prioritising the recruitment of international students at the expense of domestic ones. In fact, the reverse is true as international student fees provide vital funding to ensure domestic students have access to degree courses.

The UK is a leading global study destination, and we should be proud of this export. Our international alumni have gone on to... *[any notable international graduates that demonstrate the soft power benefit they bring]*.

We would welcome the opportunity for you to come and meet colleagues responsible for recruitment, course heads and some of our current international student intake to hear about why they chose to study at [University name] and their views on the impact of current policies and potential changes on future recruitment.

We will also be inviting local employers to talk about the important role that international students play in their skills supply chain and why it is vital that we keep the opportunity for post-study work open.

We would be pleased to find a Friday to suit your availability. I look forward to hearing from you and would be grateful if your office could please liaise with [contact name and details] to organise a suitable time.

I look forward to welcoming you to campus soon.

Kind regards,

Logistics for the visit itself

Fridays or during [Parliamentary recess](#) are the best times for a visit. Once you have agreed a date, to ensure the visit runs smoothly and to gain the most benefit you should:

- Ensure you are fully briefed on the issues they are likely to want to discuss and prepared for any questions. The key messages and data to back these up are below, **however having local data to hand is key. They are going to be most interested in how the national issues relate to their constituency.**
- **Prepare an agenda** for the event and share it with the MP's office at least a week in advance.
 - You can generally expect around an hour or 90 minutes of the MP's time but be sure to agree this with their team ahead of time. This could be extended if you offer lunch, possibly a light buffet allowing the MP to mix with colleagues, students and employers.
 - The agenda should include clear timings, location, details on what the arrangements for the visits are (such as car parking) and who the MP will be meeting, including a key contact number. It should also include a short (no more than 2 sides of A4) background briefing with a mixture of local and national facts and information (see the key messages section below for some material).
- Ask a member of the MP's staff will be attending the visit. They will be a key person to liaise with in terms of any last-minute questions. **Make sure you get their mobile number** in case of any changes on the day.
- Be prepared for the fact that MPs are prone to last minute changes – **ensure that you have a time buffer** in case the meeting overruns.
- Make sure that you **brief colleagues, students and employers** ahead of the meeting on the key points that you are hoping to cover.
- During the visit, if the MP asks any questions where you don't have the information to hand, offer to **follow up on this in writing.**
- MPs thrive on publicity and are generally keen to publicise local activity, however you should check that they are happy for you to do so. Ensure that on the day you take photos of the visit and share them on social media and your news page afterwards, tagging the MP. **The purpose of this is to help raise awareness of the support for international students; MPs have thousands of followers, including other MPs, advisers, commentators and those with influence.**

Example Agenda

[MP Name] Visit to [University Name]

Time, date, meeting location

Contact name and number for on the day: xxx

Car parking is available at xxx

- [Time] – Arrive at [location] to be met by [name] (we would recommend the VC)
- Introduction from [whoever is leading on the visit] on the role of international students at [x university].
- Hear from staff who teach courses popular with international students and from those responsible for recruitment.
- Meet with international students to discuss why the UK and [university name] appealed to them as a global study destination, their plans and views on policies that would attract/deter new recruits.
- Meet with local employers to discuss how international students are supporting their skills supply chain.
- Questions and discussion
- Agreement of next steps and any action
- Wrap up visit by [time]

Key background information

- Number of domestic and international students at the university and any data demonstrating that the latter does not displace the former.
- Case studies of international student alumni and what they have gone on to do.
- Case studies or links to local employers that demonstrate the value international students bring to the supply chain and, again, that they do not displace domestic graduates.
- Data on the wider economic benefit for the local economy (UUKI constituency data as included in the invite).

Arranging visits with MLAs

- The principles outlined above apply equally to MLAs, however the focus of the invite should not be on the forthcoming UK general election but instead on briefing them on the role international students play at the university and in the city/town.
- If your MLA is of the same party as your local MP (i.e. SDLP), you can invite them both to visit at the same time. If they are from different parties, you should invite them to visit separately.

General points to remember when speaking to an MP or MLA

- Keep things in simple, non-technical terms. For example, don't assume that they know what the Graduate route is or the purpose of a foundation course.
- Don't assume any prior knowledge (even if they have visited or met with you before!) – MPs have a large volume of issues they have to deal with and their days consist of back-to-back meetings jumping from one subject to another. Explain things concisely in a way that they can understand easily and see what is required of them.
- Ensure that you remain politically neutral in how you are presenting the key issues and avoid pre-judging the outcome of the next election. Similarly, don't say anything you wouldn't want to be printed in a paper. You never know who is linked to who and what they might deem newsworthy.

The 'Asks'

To ensure that the meeting is most effective, providing that it has gone well, you should agree key action points with the MP. These could include:

- Depending on their party, making representations to the minister/shadow minister or party spokesperson for higher education/immigration outlining the benefits of international students and the key policy asks (more detail on these is in the key messages section on page 16) of:
 1. Maintaining the Graduate route.
 2. Calling for a period of stability for the sector in respect of changes to migration and visa policy.
 3. Recording additional data on international students as part of migration statistics to ensure that there is a more accurate picture of their time in the UK.
 4. Raising awareness of the Agent Quality Framework and encouraging the Government to work with the sector to ensure appropriate data is properly shared so that the small minority of rogue agents are driven out of business.

- They should also be encouraged to raise these points and the impact of potential policy changes on universities in Northern Ireland with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and his Shadow.
- Speaking in support of international students and maintaining the Graduate route in Parliament (this will not be applicable for Sinn Féin MPs). For example, during Education, Home Office, Northern Ireland or Business oral questions.
- Convening a regional roundtable with local businesses and mayoral/local authority skills leads to discuss how the Graduate route can be better promoted within the region.
- Posting about the visit and their support for international students on social media.
- For MLAs, the AFQ should be highlighted with the ask being for them to raise awareness of it with the Minister for the Economy (Conor Murphy at the time of writing)/their relevant party spokespeople.
- You may also want to raise specific asks, such as around increasing direct flight availability to Belfast to better serve the universities.
- Bear in mind that whilst Northern Ireland has devolved powers over higher education, immigration is a matter for the UK government.

Reporting

- To ensure that the local work feeds into the national activity, we would be grateful if you could please let us know of any MP or MLA engagement by emailing buila@publicaffairsco.com.
- The key things that are useful to know are:
 - The overall sentiment of the MP/MLA on the visit – were they supportive, challenging, interested?
 - What were their key questions and concerns?
 - What action was agreed?
- By understanding this we can build an overview of the most supportive MPs who we can then call upon to support influencing at the national level, for example speaking to ministers or shadow ministers, or tabling questions or debates in Parliament.

Engaging with Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (those standing at the election)

- Regardless of the outcome of the election, Parliament is going to look significantly different – so far 94 MPs (14% of the total number with more to come) have confirmed that they are standing down.
- If your MP has confirmed they are standing down, this does not preclude you from inviting them to visit now and seeking their support for their remaining time in Parliament.
- However, in addition to this, you should be engaging with their potential successors. Most Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs – those who are standing to be the next MP) have now been confirmed and will be campaigning in the constituency. As a key local institution, you should ensure that you are developing a relationship with them now so that you are on the front foot should they be elected. Another factor to be aware of is the change in most parliamentary constituency boundaries. You may have new constituencies within your catchment area and their PPCs should be included in your contact list.
- We would suggest that in the first instance you send briefing material to your PPCs to introduce the university and provide a key contact. This should be no more than 2 sides of A4 and cover the same information that you would share with the MP on a visit, such as:
 - The number of domestic and international students at the university and any data demonstrating that the latter does not displace the former.
 - Case studies of international student alumni and what they have gone on to do.
 - Case studies or links to local employers that demonstrate the value international students bring to the supply chain and again, that they do not displace domestic graduates.
 - Data on the wider economic benefit for the local economy (UUKI constituency data).
 - How you work with other local organisations to plan for the impact of students on the local area (e.g. health, housing).
 - A named contact and email address to get in touch.
- It is very important as a public sector body that you remain politically neutral. This means that if you are sending briefing material to one candidate, you must send it to all. This also goes for visits, if you want to invite one candidate (excluding the sitting MP) to visit the university, you must extend the invite to those standing for all of the main parties. If you are approached by a PPC asking for a visit or meeting, the same answer must be given to all PPCs making an approach.

Key Messages and Evidence to Support Them

The data below outlines the strongest national statistics to support the key messages, however, wherever possible in communication with your MP or MLA you should **provide your own local data and case studies to back up these points**. For example, in addition to the general economic benefit points below you will want to include additional local information on the role of the university in research and development and attracting businesses to the region and how international students are crucial to funding this.

For nationalist parties the arguments should be linked to the redistribution of wealth i.e. how do international students support more places for local disadvantaged students, whereas for unionist parties the business linked messages will resonate more.

International students boost the UK economy and your constituency

- In 2021/22, international students contributed £41.9 billion to the UK economy according to [research](#) by Universities UK International, the Higher Education Policy Institute, and Kaplan International Pathways in collaboration with London Economics.
- In 2021/22, there were 12,615 international first-year students in Northern Ireland, nearly four times more than in 2018/19.
- **On average, each parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland is £53m better off because of international students, equivalent to approximately £500 per person.**
- **Constituency specific figures should be highlighted with your local MP and are available [here](#)**, in Table 26 on page 71. N.B. This data doesn't fully account for minor variances arising from delivery by UK-based partners which may not be in the same constituency as the home higher education institution.
- Even when accounting for the cost to public services, the economic benefits significantly outweigh these, with a total net benefit of £37.4bn to the UK economy.
- [Research from London Economics](#) calculates that in 2021/22, the annual cost per student or dependent to the health service was £232, making international students a substantial net contributor to the NHS.
- International students also make significant economic contributions if they remain in the UK labour market after graduation. The total post-graduation contribution to the UK Exchequer made by international students from the 2016/17 cohort is estimated to be £3.17 billion from income tax, national insurance and VAT contributions - London Economics/HEPI/Kaplan International Pathways [research on the UK's tax revenues from international students post-graduation](#).
- International students contribute significantly to the UK's soft power. 83% of alumni participating in the Chevening Programme, the UK's international scholarships programme for master's degrees, reported influencing the opinion of others in their network of the UK as

a place to do business – *Chevening Evaluation* conducted by KPMG for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The public supports international students

- [Polling](#) by Public First for Universities UK shows that the public have a positive perception of international students:
 - 68% of respondents in Northern Ireland believed the UK should host the same, or more, international students.
 - 73% recognised that international students give more to the economy than they take out.
 - 51% of respondents in Northern Ireland thought British diplomacy benefits from hosting international students who leave with positive impressions of the UK after studying here.

International students do not displace those from the UK; nor is there any detrimental impact on UK graduates' employment prospects

- The number of UK and international students applying to start an undergraduate course this September increased by the same amount (0.7%) compared to last year according to UCAS. – UCAS [statistics](#) on applicants to undergraduate courses for the upcoming academic year (2024-25) as of the January 31st 'Equal Consideration' deadline.
- In 2021/22, there were a record number of UK residents enrolled to study their first degree. In contrast, the number of non-UK students enrolled on their first degree fell by 10,000 compared to the previous year. – Higher Education Statistics Agency [data](#) on HE student enrolments by domicile.
- The majority (70%) of international students are undertaking postgraduate degrees rather than undergraduate degrees. – UUKli/HEPI [report](#) on 'The costs and benefits of international higher education students to the UK'.
- Rather than displacing UK students, the reverse is true; international students are vital to ensuring domestic students have access to degree courses. According to an analysis by PwC for Universities UK, if the expected growth in international students were to fall by 20 percentage points below university forecasts in 2024/25, around 80% of institutions in England and Northern Ireland would be in deficit by 2025/26 – PwC [report](#) on UK Higher Education Financial Sustainability.
 - The report finds that providers are increasingly reliant on cross-subsidisation from international student fees to fund places for domestic students, as real-term funding per UK student is at its lowest level in 25 years.
 - In England and Northern Ireland, international fee income is expected to account for between 33 – 66% of all course fee income by 2026/27.

- The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has noted that: “If the government wants to reduce the number of international students (in order to reduce the headline net migration figure), it must either find additional support for the university sector (e.g. by increasing tuition fees for home students) or accept that less money is available for the sector, perhaps reducing the quality of provision for home students or, in extremis, accepting that some institutions are no longer financially viable and allowing them to fail”. – *IFS report on ‘Constraints and trade-off for the next government’*.
- **There is no evidence of overseas students being detrimental for domestic students’ probability of graduating and for their degree classification, nor there is any significant impact on their labour market participation and the quality of their employment at six months after graduation.** In fact, studying alongside more international students meant that that higher-performing British students (those in the top third according to A-Level and equivalent tariff scores) on average earned higher salaries, 6 months after graduation, than they otherwise would have done. – *A study conducted by researchers at University College London, the University of Surrey and the University of Essex, published in November 2023.*
- “There are acute skills shortages in many sectors of the UK economy (in both the public and private sectors). Rather than displacing domestic graduates from these opportunities, international graduates play a key role in filling the vacancies available and reducing these labour market gaps.” – *London Economics/HEPI/Kaplan International Pathways research on the UK’s tax revenues from international students post-graduation.*

International students are not being admitted onto university courses with lower grades than their UK counterparts

- International students are not being admitted onto university courses with lower grades than their UK-born counterparts. Foundation programmes are offered to international students to help them get to the level of education they need to access full undergraduate degree programmes. For example, some international students may need a further year’s work to meet university entry requirements as they may have only undertaken 12 years of education in their home system, rather than the 13 years which UK students will have typically completed.
- UK universities offer many similar foundation programmes for domestic students with lower entry requirements than undergraduate degree programmes. These programmes are a key part of widening access to higher education for domestic students.
- Acceptance onto an international foundation programme does not guarantee progression to a full undergraduate degree – 20-25% of international students do not progress to a full undergraduate degree course at the partner university following completion of their foundation programme. – *Reports from pathway providers for UUKI.*

Key Asks and Evidence to Support Them

Raise awareness of the Agent Quality Framework

Action is already being taken to ensure confidence in the system for recruitment of international students.

- Last year, BUILA, together with the British Council, Universities UK (UUKI) and the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) developed the UK Agent Quality Framework. This is a charter to ensure the highest standards of robust agent management.
- The Framework includes a Code of Ethical Practice setting out standards agents should adhere to; rigorous training for agents; guidance for students and a formal complaints process for them; and a centralised communication hub and best practice guides for education providers.
- The British Council's training programme for agents is considered the most rigorous and comprehensive of any country, and the approach adopted by the UK has been cited by a parliamentary committee in Australia as a model to follow.
- Certified agents who breach the Code face termination by their UK partner education provider. This information is shared with other education providers and the British Council via the communication hub to drive them out of the sector.
- In less than a year, the programme has successfully certified over 5,000 education agent counsellors from more than 90 countries worldwide. As of 12th February, 93 UK institutions had pledged their commitment to the Framework including the Russell Group and some of the key providers of foundation courses. We are working with partners, including UUKI, to support wider adoption of the Framework across the education sector.
- Independent analysis by leading experts has shown that regulation and legislation has not eliminated the risk of student recruitment through un-contracted agents in other countries.
- Secure data sharing between institutions and government is the most effective way to ensure the highest standards of agent management and to identify and tackle rogue agents. This is a key component of the Framework in supporting legitimate students and institutions and maintaining the integrity of the UK visa system.
- BUILA is working with the DfE on how best to achieve secure data sharing and ensure that the system is most effective for driving unethical operators out and protecting students.

Maintain the Graduate route to ensure that the UK remains globally competitive

Demonstrating the benefits of international students for local employers is a key area that would benefit from local case studies in terms of any links you have with businesses in the region and how international students (and the Graduate route) have been invaluable in supporting their skills needs, alongside UK graduates.

A key missing link is that many employers are not aware of the Graduate route and the Government does not see it as its responsibility to engage the business sector. **In addition to engaging with MPs, it would be useful to engage with businesses in the region to promote the Graduate route. This could involve engaging with the local [FSB](#), the [Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce](#), [IoD Northern Ireland](#) and [CBI](#).**

One action from a successful MP visit could be seeking agreement to **convene a local roundtable with businesses to discuss the Graduate route** and how it can be better promoted in the region.

- The Graduate route is essential for meeting employer skills needs through providing flexibility and ease in recruitment. It is especially beneficial for SMEs, start-ups, charities and regionally based employers who would not be able to meet the skilled worker salary threshold. *This will be a key argument to make with Labour, which is keen to show it is now a pro-business party.*
- Since the launch of the UK government's International Education Strategy in 2019, which set the ambition to host at least 600,000 international students each year and announced that a new post-study work offer (the Graduate route) would be reintroduced, growth in international student recruitment to the UK has delivered a boost of more than £60 billion to the UK's economy. – [Analysis of London Economics data by UUKI](#).
- Employability is a key factor for international students in deciding where to study and the Graduate route is vital to the UK's attractiveness as a study destination. There needs to be enough post-study work opportunities to ensure that the UK remains competitive compared to other countries. Combined with other recent policy changes to migration, uncertainty over the future of the Graduate route is already risking the UK's position. The Graduate route must remain as part of a suite of post-study work offers.
- International education specialist IDP [found](#) in January that: "international students are highly attuned to the ongoing discussions regarding policy changes, and that this is impacting the standing of the top global study destinations at a time when competition between destination countries is at an all-time high." Of top global study destinations, it found that "the UK's standing among international students has been most impacted by the changing policy environment", with nearly half of the prospective student cohort (49%) reconsidering or unsure of their plans to study here.

- The survey also found that nearly half of applicants (45%) would likely change or consider changing their study destination if the post-study work period was shortened. A third (37%) said the Government's intention to review the Graduate visa has meant that they are now re-considering study abroad plans or inclined to choose another destination. – *The Voice of the International Student Pulse Survey*, conducted by international education specialist IDP Education in January 2024.
- Scrapping the Graduate route would have a significant economic impact, as demonstrated the last time post-study work was cancelled. “The adverse taxation impact suffered by HM Treasury associated with the restriction of post-study work rights for non-EU-domiciled students announced in 2011 is estimated to be £150 million per cohort”. – London Economics/HEPI/Kaplan International Pathways *research on the UK's tax revenues from international students post-graduation*.
- There needs to be a full and proper assessment of the Graduate route before any changes are made. The Graduate visa was only introduced in 2021 and the first cohort of students are only just benefitting from the route now; it would be irresponsible to make changes so early on in the route's existence before it is possible to assess its real impact. Stability is crucial for businesses and the education sector so that they have confidence in the route.
- International students are not dropping out of university so that they can work in the UK. Between 2014/15 to 2017/18, continuation and completion rates for international students are and domestic students were broadly similar. For non-UK students, continuation rates across all OfS registered providers were 90.3%, compared to 90.5% for UK students, and completion rates were notably higher at 91.4% for non-UK students, compared to 88.5% for UK students. – *Data from the Office for Students*.

Maintain stability in the sector to allow recent changes to bed in

- Both for the Graduate route and more widely, there is a need for a period of stability whilst recent changes to migration policy bed in. Restrictions to the dependent policy only came into effect in January and increases to the skilled worker minimum salary threshold will come into place in April. There needs to be at least 18 months to see what impact the new restrictions have had before making any further changes.
- The latest data shows that international student demand and enrolments are falling, with reductions at postgraduate level most significant. There has been a 44% drop in enrolments in January 2024 following a 0.4% drop in September 2023. When put into context against university forecasts and expectations, the September 2023 figure was 9.8% lower than forecast (11.3% lower at postgraduate taught level) and the January 2024 figure was 35.9% lower (41.3% at postgraduate taught level). – A [survey](#) of over 70 UUKI and BUILA members.
- Data from January 2024 shows that Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) issuance is down by 36% when compared to the same point in the January 2023 intake. The fall in CAS issuance is particularly pronounced among students from Nigeria, with a 71% reduction compared to January 2023. – [Data](#) from Enrolly, a platform that automates the onboarding and arrival process for universities, their students and agents.
- [Research](#) by the British Council found that international student numbers are expected to fall in 2024. It found that growth in the issuance of UK study visas had “essentially ground to a halt” by the third quarter of 2023 and “will likely go into reverse in 2024.” The report cites: “challenges including changes to migration policy and increasing costs of UK study” as having an impact.

Follow the example of competitor countries and ensure that international students are recorded differently within overall migration data

This is a very politically sensitive argument – neither the Conservatives nor Labour will publicly support this going into the election, however it is a point that should be being raised with MPs now as they consider the details of future policy should they win the election.

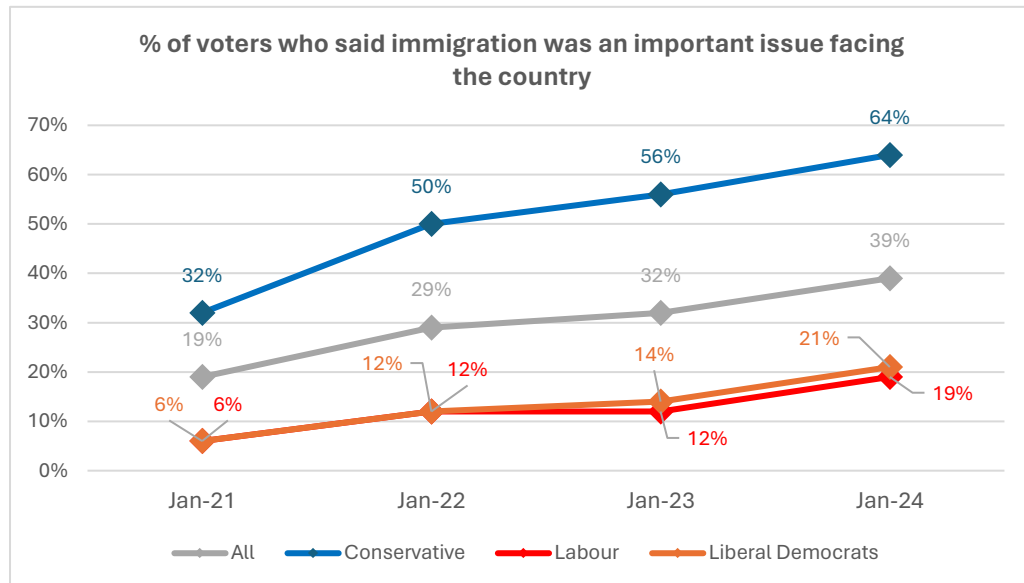
- International students are different from other migrants, their stay is typically temporary and as such they should be recorded separately so as not to be made the scapegoat for high net migration headline figures.
- Neither the study nor graduate visa can lead to permanent settlement. Students on these visas would need to switch into a work route to then be able to work towards staying in the UK permanently. It would make far more sense to consider net migration in the UK in terms of those on a route that can lead to settlement.
- All of the UK's main competitors have taken steps to remove international students from overall net migration figures in recognition of their unique status.
- There is a need for more detailed information and an accurate system which tracks when students leave or switch to other visas, as well as their economic contribution whilst they are in the UK. **This would support evidence-based policy making and help universities to work with local government and others to better support planning for public services such as housing and health.**
- *Polling conducted by Public First for UUKI finds that:*
 - o 68% of the public in Northern Ireland believes the UK should host the same or more international students.
 - o Only 23% believe that international students should be classed as immigrants in official figures, 47% of respondents believe international students should be able to stay in the UK between 1-5 years following completion of their studies and 22% believe they should be able to stay indefinitely.
- Of non-EU students with a leave expiry date between 1 September 2018 and 31 August 2019, the majority (61%) left the country at the end of their study visa. A smaller proportion (35%) of students were granted new visas allowing them to remain in the UK. – *Latest [data](#) available for 'Visa journeys and student outcomes' from the 2021 Census.*
- The APPG for International Students also has a [summary](#) of research supporting the visa.

Further information

- If you have any questions about how to engage with your local representatives, please get in touch with Mia Briggs, Director, The Public Affairs Company at: mia.briggs@publicaffairsco.com

Appendix 1 – Political drivers (Jan 24)

Views from the public on immigration



- Immigration has become one of the key battlegrounds ahead of the general election following rising concern about migration numbers and the highly publicised illegal boat crossings in the Channel. The Prime Minister has made ‘stopping the boats’ one of his five key pledges ahead of the next election and the resignation of his immigration minister, Robert Jenrick, at the end of last year, as well as the defeat of the Government’s Rwanda Plan in the courts, shows how politically damaging failing to meet immigration targets could be for the Conservatives.
- Current polls suggest that 83 per cent of voters believe the Government is handling the issue of immigration badly, including 85 per cent of Conservative voters. Meanwhile, immigration has steadily risen up the British public’s agenda over the last few years. This month 39 per cent of all voters named immigration as one of the top issues facing the country, up from 19 per cent three years ago. This includes 64 per cent of Conservative voters, up from 32 per cent in January 2021. That the Government is struggling to retain confidence within their own base on one of the issues they see as the most important helps to explain why rhetoric coming from ministers on the need to control all types of migration has become increasingly strident.
- A [report](#) from the centre-right think tank, Onward, found that 76 per cent of voters wanted immigration to be cut, including 86 per cent of Conservative voters, compared to just 9 per cent of Conservative voters who wanted it to be higher. The report found that 60 per cent believed there should be a limit on the number of people coming to study at university, compared to 33 per cent who believed there should be no limit. The report found that 88 per cent of constituencies supported tighter controls on immigration. Whilst other research (for

example the Public First polling for Universities UK from March 2023) suggests more favourable attitudes towards legal migration and strong support for the contribution made by international students, the significance is that Onward has the ear of ministers and Conservative MPs.

Political pressures on the parties

- The pressure is not just on the Conservative Party, although they are certainly feeling the brunt of the criticism as the sitting government. Labour needs to win back voters who backed the Conservatives, many for the first time, at the last general election. A lot of ‘Red Wall’ voters – voters in the North and Midlands who traditionally voted Labour, backed leaving the European Union and then switched to the Conservatives – tend to be socially conservative and more sceptical of any form of immigration. As such, Labour must look to appeal to this group too, which explains why they have tended to follow the path of the Conservatives on immigration in terms of broad direction, even if they have gone on to criticise their execution and specific policies.
- Indeed, Starmer has said that existing levels of legal immigration are too high and must come down to “sustainable levels”. Politically, Labour is aware that the Conservatives want to force it to oppose measures to reduce numbers and so appear ‘weak’ on immigration but it is seeking not to fall into this trap. The Party has supported the recent measures announced by the Government to reduce net migration, including the Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, agreeing in Parliament that the measures to limit the number of students who can bring family members with them are “sensible”.
- Labour has, however, spoken more about the importance of international students and is likely to be more receptive to arguments that migration from international students is not the same as other forms of migration and as such should not be included within the overall migration figures. The Party’s base includes younger and student voters, many of whom will have far more liberal views on immigration than those the Party is trying to target in Red Wall seats. There is a concern that the Party could lose some left-leaning voters to the Greens, or to nationalist parties such as the SNP or Plaid Cymru, if it pursues a less progressive platform under Keir Starmer.
- The driving priority for the Party is to build confidence in its economic competence, an area where it has traditionally struggled. If Labour wins later this year, it will inherit an economy which is growing very slowly, if at all, and where public services are in desperate need of investment without much fiscal headroom to invest in them. The Shadow Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is holding a tight reign on spending commitments, with any new policy pledges needing to demonstrate that they are fully funded and where this money would come from.
- All policies are being seen through the prism of economic growth and Labour will be reluctant to hit one of the UK’s most successful exports that is generating a significant amount of income. The Party recently published a campaign [document](#) for its prospective parliamentary candidates (those standing to be MPs) to use which included little mention of

immigration or higher education, but put economic growth front and centre of the party's key campaign messages.

- The Liberal Democrats could hold the balance of power if one of the two main parties fails to win an overall majority. The Party has always been more liberal and internationalist than the Conservatives and Labour so it is not surprising that it has a far more favourable policy platform on international students, immigration and higher education. Liberal Democrats are likely to be very receptive to BUILA's key messages.
- It is important to note that each of the parties are broad spectrums of political views, each with their own sub-groups of MPs. For example, the more liberal, 'one nation' group of Conservative MPs will be more receptive to the cultural and economic benefits of international students, whilst at the same time some Labour MPs representing less prosperous towns will be more alive to concerns from constituents about the impact of immigration on local jobs and services.

Positions on key policy areas – three main parties

Policy/Party		Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
Overall priorities		<p>The Prime Minister outlined five key pledges at the start of 2023, including one focused on immigration:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Halving inflation within 2023 2. Growing the economy 3. Cutting national debt 4. Cutting NHS waiting lists 5. Stopping the boats 	<p>Similarly, Labour outlined five key missions that it would aim to achieve if it entered government:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Getting Britain Building Again, by growing the economy and investing in homes and infrastructure 2. Switching on Great British Energy, establishing a new publicly-owned energy company 3. Getting the NHS Back on Its Feet, through cutting waiting times and GP waits 4. Taking Back the Streets, by increasing police numbers 5. Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity, by improving school outcomes. 	<p>The Liberal Democrats have titled their policy offering ‘Our Fair Deal’, which includes the following five aims:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A fair, prosperous and innovative economy that promotes opportunity and wellbeing. 2. Fair access to good public services and a strong social safety net. 3. A flourishing environment, with fair access to nature for all. 4. A strong United Kingdom and a fair international order. 5. A truly fair democracy, where everyone’s rights are respected and individuals and communities are empowered.
Immigration	Overall policy	<p>The Government has an overall aim to reduce legal migration from 606,000 in 2022 to 240,000 in 2024 and says that its new curbs on immigration would have reduced net migration by 300,000 last year.</p> <p>Its ‘plan to cut immigration’, published in December 2023, forms the basis of its current immigration policy, which includes the headline commitment to ‘stop the boats’. This includes returns agreements with third countries such as Albania and the Rwanda deportation plan.</p>	<p>Labour has committed its support for a points-based immigration system, but has pledged to reform it to ensure the UK has “the skills the economy needs” and that vacancies do not hold back growth. It argues consistently that the Government’s approach to immigration has not been working.</p> <p>The Party also says it will reform and strengthen the Migration Advisory Committee with appropriate input from across the UK so that it can review labour shortages more often.</p>	<p>The Party says it is committed to a “fair, effective immigration system”.</p> <p>It also says it will look to ease rules on asylum seekers being able to work and tackle the asylum backlog with a dedicated unit outside of the Home Office.</p>

		<p>Key elements of the plan included: a commitment to increasing the minimum income required to sponsor someone for a family visas (rising in stages from £18,600 to £29,000 and ultimately £38,700); increasing the Skilled Worker visa salary threshold from £26,200 to £38,700 (but not for the Health and Care Worker visa, which includes social care, or for education workers on national pay scales); banning social care workers from bringing dependents and removing the 20 per cent discount allowed for shortage occupations.</p> <p>In January, it was <u>reported</u> that the Government planned to consult on proposals to prioritise UK citizens for social housing.</p>	<p>The Party has long called for the 20 per cent discount in pay allowed for shortage occupations to be removed, which the Government has subsequently abolished.</p> <p>The Party has criticised the Government’s execution of its immigration policies and opposes its headline Rwanda Plan, describing it as unworkable.</p>	
	Visas	<p>The Government announced plans in May 2023 to ban international students from bringing family members with them to the UK. This resulted in the ability of all international students except those studying postgraduate research programmes to bring dependents to the UK, being removed. This came into effect this month.</p> <p>As part of its ‘plan for immigration’ announcement, the Government confirmed that it had tasked the Migration Advisory Committee with reviewing the Graduate Visa “to ensure it works in the best interests of the UK and to ensure steps are being taken to prevent abuse”.</p>	<p>The Party has voiced support for the Government’s direction on immigration, including the ban on undergraduates bringing dependants to the UK.</p>	<p>As part of its commitment to a “fair” and “effective” immigration system, the Party is committed to transferring powers over visas, asylum and overseas students to other departments, away from the Home Office.</p>
Higher education	Overall policy	<p>The party has sought to champion technical education over academic education in recent years, with ministers in the Johnson and Sunak governments raising concerns about the quality</p>	<p>The party’s National Policy Forum document – which will form the backbone of the manifesto – says the party will ensure the higher education system provides “excellent teaching and</p>	<p>The Party has said it would improve access to higher education by reinstating maintenance grants for disadvantaged students.</p>

		<p>of some HE courses and their value for money. There have been increasing concerns about 'less prestigious' universities offering poor quality courses and becoming increasingly reliant on income from international students for them. Related to this, there have been concerns <u>raised</u> about universities introducing lower entry requirements for international students compared to domestic students.</p>	<p>prepares graduates for successful careers." It should also be "accessible to people of all backgrounds."</p> <p>It also says it will ensure learners have a genuine choice of first-class higher education institutions.</p>	
	International students	<p>The UK International Education Strategy, published in 2019, introduced a target for the UK to host 600,000 international students by 2030, an aim that has already been achieved. Ministers have consistently emphasised their support for the strategy, even following recent moves to restrict dependants.</p> <p>In 2019, the Government re-introduced the post-study work visa for international students leaving higher education.</p>	<p>Shadow ministers have emphasised the important contribution international students make in their comments in Parliament and to the media. Nonetheless, they have voiced their support for the Government's immigration policies, with Yvette Cooper, the Shadow Home Secretary, describing the new dependant rules as "sensible".</p>	<p>The Liberal Democrats previously supported removing overseas students from the net migration figures and committed in their last manifesto to ensuring the UK is an "attractive destination" for international students.</p>
	Tuition fees	<p>The Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government raised fees to £9,000 in 2012 and in 2017 fees were frozen at £9,250 in England. The Party has made no commitments to review this at this stage, despite calls for it to do so from the HE sector which has argued that the current funding levels for domestic students are unsustainable and do not cover the costs of courses – the latest estimate is that universities lose approximately £2,500 a year per course for domestic undergraduates.</p>	<p>At the last election the Party was committed to abolishing tuition fees, but this commitment was dropped in May 2023 given the "economic situation". The Party has made no additional comments on tuition fees, aside from leader Keir Starmer pledging the party would introduce a "fairer" student fees system.</p>	<p>The Party's involvement in the 2012 fee rise was seen as one of the key factors behind the drop in their support at the subsequent general election – the Party lost a significant amount of support from students, who had traditionally been one of its base voter groups. The Party has not made any new commitments around fee levels however and senior Lib Dems have since argued that they had no choice but to increase tuition fees at the time.</p>
Business and skills		<p>The Party has had a strained relationship with business over the last few years following Brexit. It has introduced full expensing to help boost business investment and has looked to</p>	<p>The Party has overtly sought to adopt a more business-friendly stance, conscious that this is a sector which has been traditionally hostile to Labour in the past and capitalising on the fact</p>	<p>The Liberal Democrats have pledged to create an Industrial Strategy that incentivises businesses to invest in clean technologies. They've also pledged to, like Labour, reduce</p>

	<p>cut taxes for businesses and workers in order to help encourage growth. It also announced a business rates support package last year to help protect small businesses.</p> <p>On skills, the Government’s flagship change – the introduction of T-Levels, to place technical education on the same footing as academic education – will now be rolled into a new ‘Advanced British Standard’. The Party also spearheaded significant skills changes through legislation a couple of years ago, which created Local Skills Improvement Plans, broadened careers advice, supported flexible study options and increased powers to intervene when providers are failing.</p>	<p>that business has clashed with the Conservatives in recent years. It is seeking to park itself squarely on the Conservatives’ lawn as the new ‘party of business’ in the wake of the instability caused by the high turnover of Conservative Party leaders and the market turbulence of Liz Truss’ brief premiership. The positioning seems to be working, with the most recent Labour Party conference full of business types that wouldn’t have historically attended and business leaders taking the prospect of a Labour government seriously. Aligning with business bodies to promote the role international graduates fill in meeting their skills needs will be key to making the economic arguments.</p> <p>Central to the Party’s business offering is its Industrial Strategy published last year, which pledged to give business a reliable and stable forward plan. Labour has committed to reform business rates, reduce trade barriers for businesses and work with small businesses to ensure the skills system is responsive to their needs.</p> <p>On skills specifically, the Party has pledged to set up ‘Skills England’, a new expert body to ensure England has the skills it needs over the coming decade. It has also said it would reform the apprenticeship system and devolve adult education and skills budgets to metro mayors and combined authorities.</p>	<p>trade barriers, enable flexible working, invest in skills and careers advice and address labour shortages by negotiating small, quick-fire deals with countries to secure workers in key economic sectors. On skills, the Party has said it will create new Skills Wallets, giving adults £10,000 to spend on education and training through their lives.</p>
Tourism	<p>DCMS has described tourism as a “significant economic, cultural and social asset” to the UK. In an update to its Tourism Recovery Plan published in 2021, the Department noted that</p>	<p>The Party has made few commitments related to tourism, but the Shadow Tourism Minister has spoken in Parliament about the difficulties the tourism sector has faced, including on</p>	<p>The Liberal Democrats have said that the tourism industry contributes millions of pounds to the economy and has pledged to support tourism industries across the UK. One policy it</p>

	<p>the Government was focused on growing the economy and tackling inflation to help grow the tourism sector. It points to policies outlined above on the economy – such as business rates relief – as key ways to help grow the UK’s tourism sector.</p>	<p>energy bills and inflation. She spoke of the need to ensure places can “reap the rewards of thriving tourism” without becoming ghost towns when the holiday season ends through holiday lets and second homes.</p>	<p>has promised is to enable artists to travel to and from the EU with free and simple short-term travel arrangements.</p>
<p>Pressures on the party</p>	<p>The New Conservatives: This is a new group of Conservative MPs that sit on the right of the party. These MPs are social conservative and strongly in favour of controls on immigration. They have called for the number of visas being awarded to foreign students to be halved and prevent some students with lower grades from attending university. They have gone further in also calling for lower performing universities to be locked out of admitting international students, extending the closure of the student dependent route and closing the graduate route to students.</p> <p>Reform UK: The successor to the Brexit Party and UKIP is seen as a threat to the Conservatives’ control over the right-wing vote. They have called for a one-in, one-out immigration policy and said university fees are a “rip-off”.</p> <p>Election prospects: The Party is currently far behind in the opinion polls and is looking for ways to dramatically close the gap with Labour as a general election looms this year. Some Conservatives have suggested the way to do this is by being tough on immigration.</p>	<p>Target Conservative voters: As the party seeks to win over those who backed the Conservatives at the last election, they will be conscious that tackling immigration is a key interest for these voters.</p> <p>Core base of students and younger voters: Younger voters now overwhelmingly vote for the Labour Party, and younger voters, as well as students, tend to be more favourable towards looser immigration rules and policies that benefit higher education.</p> <p>Push for economic competence: The party has identified the economy as the most important issue for the general public and has been keen to build up a reputation for economic competence. The economy was <u>recorded</u> as the top concern for key demographic targets such as leave voters and homeowners in May 2023.</p>	<p>Target Conservative voters: The party is targeting socially liberal voters in southern England and metropolitan areas that have previously voted Conservative. These voters are generally more accepting of immigration and more likely to have backed remaining in the EU in 2016. <u>Analysis</u> of the new constituency boundaries show that the party’s top 25 target seats voted by 55 per cent to 45 per cent to remain in the EU.</p>

Positions on key policy areas – smaller parties

	SNP	Plaid Cymru	Green
Immigration	The SNP says the UK’s “one-size-fits-all” immigration policy is failing Scotland, which the party argues needs more immigration than the rest of the UK. The party has also called on the UK to introduce a fair and humane asylum policy and review family migration policies.	The Party has said it would end no recourse to public funds for asylum seekers and would expand eligibility for educational grants to migrant children and young people.	The Party says it would scrap the points-based immigration system and introduce a “humane” asylum system.
Higher education	Opposition to tuition fees has been a long-standing policy of the SNP and the Party has maintained free access to higher education for Scottish students in Scotland. However, Scottish universities face a cap on numbers, limiting access to HE in Scotland for domestic students. The Party has promoted international education alliances with other countries and Scotland through its International Education Strategy.	On education, the Party has said it would reduce tuition fees in Wales and look to increase the numbers of overseas students living there.	On higher education, the Party would abolish tuition fees, reintroduce maintenance grants and says it would ensure HE was better funded, including allowing universities to reduce international student fees.
	DUP	Sinn Féin	
Immigration	The Party has previously called for “effective immigration policy” which meets the skills, labour and security needs of the UK. It calls on the UK to enforce stronger border controls, but equally calls for a recognition of the contribution of migrants and support for local communities to help integrate migrants.	The Party has not expressed significant views on immigration policy in the UK, although it has been vocal on ensuring free movement between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is maintained. In Ireland, the party has tried to be position itself as responsive to concerns about immigration there, calling for the Irish	

		government to discuss concerns about immigration with communities.
Higher education	The DUP has spoken proudly of its record on skills and education, and has said it has worked collaboratively with universities to review careers education and ensure students are equipped with the right skills the Northern Irish economy needs.	Sinn Féin has emphasised support for easing barriers between Northern Ireland and the Republic in respect to higher education, including extending access to post-graduate tuition fee loans to those studying in the south.

Additional party-specific considerations

Party	Party-specific considerations
Conservative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main approach to take with the Conservatives would be to urge them to ‘wait and see’ – the changes to the student visa have only just come into effect and we have yet to see what difference this would make to migration numbers. It would be irresponsible to pursue further policies (i.e. scrapping the graduate visa) without fully assessing the impact of these first. Highlight the 40 per cent drop in applications in the winter window. From a political point of view, any further changes the Government makes now to the visa are unlikely to have an effect on migration numbers by the time of the election.
Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As stated above, the economic message is key for Labour – and this will be the key argument BUILA needs to make to deter the party from moving closer to the Conservatives on immigration. The UK’s higher education sector needs to be able to continue to make attractive offers to international students to ensure this key export keeps thriving and further restrictive immigration reform would put this at risk. Labour will be concerned about the big impact existing policies on immigration have already had on recruitment, such as the 40 per cent drop in applications in the winter window. Labour may also be more receptive to arguments around changing how migration numbers are reported. They will probably not be supportive of taking international students out of the migration statistics altogether, as this could be used as a criticism that they are ‘fudging’ the numbers but could be open to an Australian-style breakdown of which migrants are coming to the UK.
Liberal Democrats, SNP, Plaid Cymru and Greens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All four of these parties are broadly more supportive of immigration than the two main parties. For these four, the key message will be around ensuring the immigration system is fair and continues to support the UK economy and the higher education sector.

- It is important to note that both the SNP and Plaid Cymru will have little ability to make any changes at a UK level in terms of immigration policy, unless they are key parties a future minority Labour administration relies on after the next election. At a sub-national level, neither the Scottish nor the Welsh Governments have any real powers when it comes to immigration, as it is a reserved power for Westminster.
- Targets from these four parties are likely to be the 'lowest hanging fruit' for BUILA.