

Overview

In May 2023, the Home Secretary announced¹ her intention to impose new limits on overseas students bringing family with them to the UK. Whilst the decision was expected, it nevertheless represents a major challenge to universities' business model.

Under the new limits, only students on courses designated as research programmes will be able to bring dependants. This could lead to a reduction in the numbers of international students coming to the UK to study taught postgraduate programmes, particularly amongst smaller providers. These students make a significant contribution to the UK economy in general terms (estimated² at £41.9bn over the entire period of their studies) and are also vital in cross-subsidising home fees and research programmes within the UK's higher education sector. This is particularly true of those studying social sciences, whose tuition fees often help underpin the costs of STEM subjects and research.

The Academy of Social Sciences argues that international students represent one of the most controlled, most monitored, most law-abiding, and most skilled sections of the migrant community. Without their economic contribution, UK universities and research would be severely hamstrung. We argue that dependents should be welcomed but with safeguards explored to ensure that any dependents can be accommodated locally, and that the UK Government should remove international students from its migration figures altogether.

Key facts

- **The policy lacks public support:** Polling³ by Public First for Universities UK indicates that the public understand and support the contribution of international students to the UK economy:
 - 64% of respondents believe the UK should host the same or more international students, with only 9% saying that students and researchers should be discouraged from coming to the UK;
 - 62% recognise that international students are net contributors to the economy;
 - Only 32% of the public believe that international students should be classed as immigrants in official figures;
 - 43% think that that British diplomacy benefits from hosting international students who leave with positive impressions of the UK after studying here, with only 11% disagreeing.
- **The policy undermines the UK's soft power:** The Home Secretary's announcement is likely to damage to the UK's reputation as a welcoming and supportive environment offering world class higher education⁴. This 'soft power' of international students provides the UK with significant dividends – something acknowledged⁵ by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, who argued that international students should not be included in net migration figures. The same call has been made by the Chair of the Education Select Committee⁶.

¹ Braverman, S. (2023) [Written statement, 23 May 2023: immigration update](#), Westminster: UK Parliament.

² Universities UK (2023) [International students boost UK economy by £41.9 billion](#), UUK website (accessed 25 May 2023).

³ Public First (2023) [Public First poll for UUK](#), London: Public First / Universities UK.

⁴ Coe, J. (2023) "[Braverman bans PGTs from bringing in dependants](#)", WonkHE blog (accessed 25 May 2023).

⁵ Kearns, A. (2023) [Twitter, 25 May 2023](#) (accessed 25 May 2023).

⁶ Williams, T. (2022) "[Ministers 'unlikely' to remove students from migration statistics](#)", Times Higher Education website (accessed 30 May 2023).

- **International students cross-subsidise the rest of the HE sector:** Westminster’s Public Accounts Committee has noted⁷ that as a sector England’s universities make a loss on publicly-funded teaching and research once the full economic costs of those activities are taken into account. Universities’ financial viability depends on subsidising these activities from the surplus generated by non-publicly funded teaching – primarily fees from overseas students. Recent data⁸ indicates that universities recorded a deficit of nearly £2bn in 2021-22 – but this would have looked significantly worse without international students, who generated a surplus of around £2.7bn. Each international student in the UK pays an average of £5,100 more than it costs to educate them – this has been critical over recent years in making up a shortfall in research funding from other routes⁹. There is no indication in the Home Secretary’s announcement that this financial gap will be filled by UK Government if international student numbers fall.
- **The UK Government’s policy is inconsistent:** In 2019, the UK Government signalled its intention¹⁰ to increase the number of international students studying in the UK by more than 30%. Announcing the strategy, the UK Government acknowledged “*the education sector generates approximately £20 billion per year through education exports and transnational activity... The strategy sets out an ambition to grow the total number of international students... and generate £35 billion through education exports by 2030 – a rise of 75%. The plans focus on not only retaining existing markets such as Europe, but raising the profile of the education sector in global markets such as Asia, Africa and Latin America*”. The new restrictions on dependents undermine this stated aim.
- **The policy will damage our world-leading social sciences:** International students are critically important for social science disciplines. The most recent HESA data¹¹ show that the UK has 179,545 international students across all subjects, with 73,910 (41%) studying across the breadth of social sciences¹² (with 47% studying STEM subjects and 12% arts and humanities). The value of those students cannot be measured in economic terms alone – they also bring a rich diversity of experiences and perspectives to our academic disciplines, and have been instrumental in helping the UK’s social science communities to build and foster global links.

Recommendations

The Academy of Social Sciences calls on the UK Government to:

- 1) Reconsider its the decision to restrict international taught postgraduate students from bringing dependents to the UK. Instead, it should explore a process by which universities’ recruitment strategies could involve local authorities and nearby institutions assessing accommodation availability and any requirements for school and nursery places, factoring that into plans for growth and diversification.
- 2) Remove international students from its migration figures, in order that the issue can be depoliticised and universities can operate in a way which fulfils their desire (and that of the UK Government) to increase the UK’s education exports and soft power.

⁷ Public Accounts Committee (2022) [Financial sustainability of the higher education sector in England](#), Westminster: UK Parliament.

⁸ Office for Students in England (2023) [Transparent Approach to Costing \(TRAC\) published data, 2021-22](#), OfSE website (accessed 26 May 2023).

⁹ Hillman, N. (2020) “[Why the UK will miss the R&D targets if we cut funding for students](#)”, Higher Education Policy Institute website (accessed 25 May 2023).

¹⁰ UK Government (2019) “[Plans to boost international student numbers and income](#)”, Westminster: UK Government.

¹¹ Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023) “[What do HE students study? Types of subjects and courses](#)”, Cheltenham: HESA.

¹² This figure includes all social science disciplines, including business & management, human geography, education, psychology and law.