

# Student perspectives on international students

**NUS research into UK students'  
views on their international peers**

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# Introduction

International students have become a target of political focus throughout recent debates on immigration in the UK. Recognised by the general public as a welcome and vital part of our education landscape<sup>1</sup>, international students are seen as integral to connecting our students, academics and communities with the wider world.

Politicians and pundits have spoken for the students of the UK, on the impact international students make on their learning, wider student experience, and their graduate prospects. Following the announcement of another consultation on immigration rules for international students at Conservative Party conference in 2016, NUS sought to ask students themselves their thoughts on international students studying and working in the UK.

In December 2016, we launched a survey to capture the importance of international students in UK Higher Education from the perspective of UK students. We looked specifically at UK students' perspectives on immigration regulations and how they felt this impacts their fellow international students. We also asked questions about what students think the impact international students have on the quality of their learning experience and the viability of and finance for their courses.

This research aims to ensure students' voices are included in the upcoming debates about international students. In September, the Government announced its intention to further vary the rights international students have in the UK dependent on where they study.

This move from the government, is not only at odds with the Department for Education's reforms to create a level playing field amongst UK higher education providers, but will place many institutions at risk of losing or giving up

<sup>1</sup> In a 2015 report by Universities UK and British Future it was revealed that 59% of the public thought the UK should not reduce international student numbers, even if it limits the government's ability to cut immigration overall. 75% felt that international students should be able to stay and

their license to recruit international students, and significantly damage the ability of others to recruit.

In light of this possibility, we designed this survey to also capture how this move might impact UK students, from their perspective.

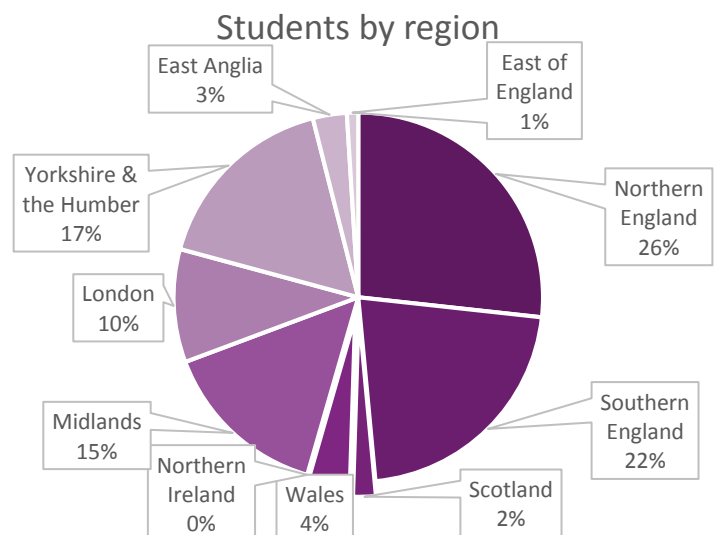
This piece of research received a response of over 4600 students. This is a nationally representative sample of the UK higher and further education sectors. It allows UK students to speak for themselves on international students in the immigration debate.

## Who responded?

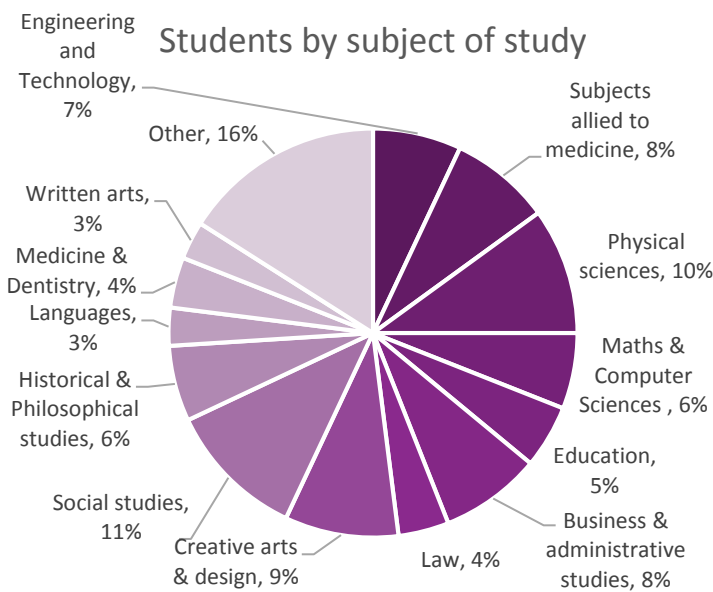
UK undergraduate students made up 75 per cent of respondents, with 43 per cent of all respondents being first year undergraduates.

We also collected responses from students in Northern Ireland, Scotland (2%) and Wales (4%) to give us a better understanding of the importance of international students across the UK. With the numbers collected we can provide a view from students in Scotland and Wales, but sadly the response rate from students in Northern Ireland was too low to publish the data.

Students from a diversity of subjects responded, with the strongest responses from students in physical (10%) and social sciences (11%) and students on art and design courses (9%).



We were very interested in understanding the importance of international students in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), and on postgraduate courses. International students make up 30% of students studying postgraduate taught courses, and in some courses more than 50%. According to Universities UK, this is particularly the case for STEM subjects and Business where International student populations are most concentrated<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>2</sup> International Taught Postgraduate Students: The UK's Competitive Advantage (2016). [http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/International/international-taught-postgraduate-Students-uk-competitive-advantage.pdf)

[analysis/reports/Documents/International/international-taught-postgraduate-Students-uk-competitive-advantage.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/International/international-taught-postgraduate-Students-uk-competitive-advantage.pdf)

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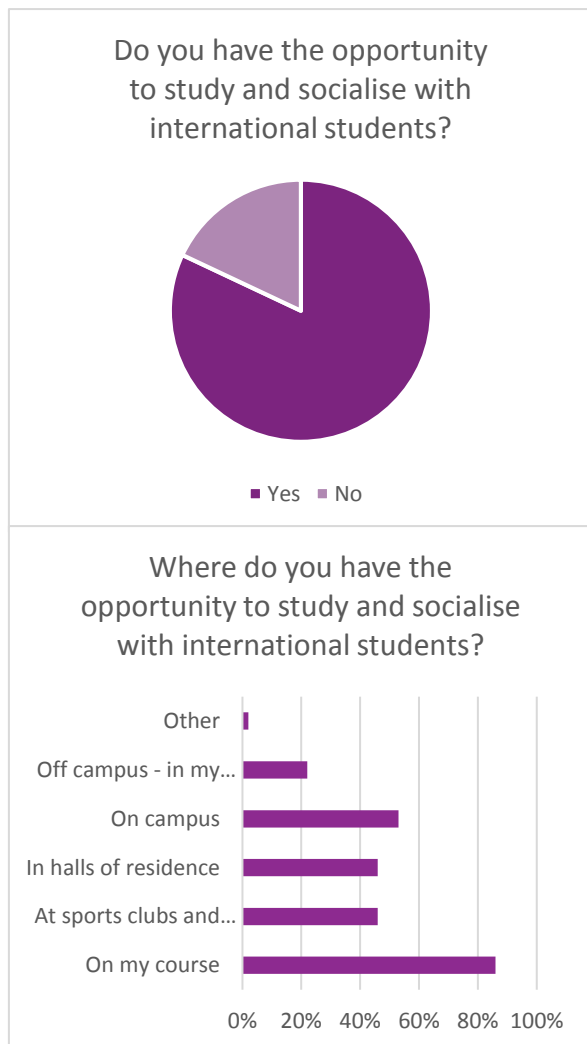
# Places and spaces

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## Where do UK and international students meet?

As part of this research, we were interested in understanding the extent to which UK students have opportunities to engage and interact with their international counterparts. The data showed that 82 per cent of UK students engage with international students as part of their educational and social experience.

- Undergraduates are significantly more likely than postgraduates to study and socialise with international students at sports clubs and societies, in halls of residences and on campus.
- Postgraduate students are significantly more likely than undergraduates to study and socialise with international students off campus.



**“I come from somewhere with very little ethnic/cultural diversity so I like that there is much more diversity here at university; I feel international students are valuable as they are interesting to get to know. I appreciate the range of people here.”**

**Undergraduate Engineering student**

Looking more closely at the data we found:

- Those studying STEM subjects are significantly more likely than those studying other subjects to have the opportunity to study and socialise with international students.

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# A level playing field?



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## Attitudes towards rules and regulations for international students

There have been a number of significant changes to the rules and regulations for international students over the past 10 years. Alongside their general views on studying with international students we asked students what they thought of the core principles that underpin these changes.

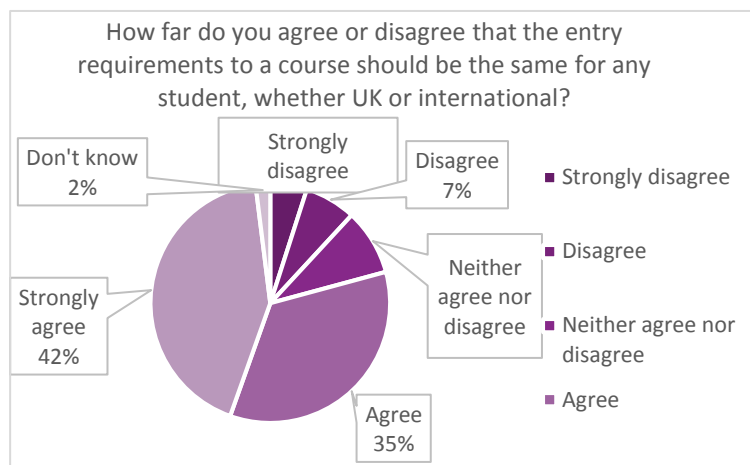
### Different entry requirements

The current immigration system means that international students can be subject to different entry requirements to UK or EU students. For some this means expensive English-language tests, and for others it means that they cannot gain access to a course if they have studied at the same level before. We asked students if they felt that entry requirements should be the same for all students.

Our data showed that 78 per cent of UK students either agreed or strongly agreed that entry requirements to a course should be the same for both UK and international students.

Postgraduate students are significantly more likely (51 per cent) than undergraduates (43 per cent) to strongly agree that the entry requirements to a course should be the same for any student.

There was strong support, however, in the comments that English-language was an important aspect of entry requirements to ensure students could be successful at their course. But most felt that students who were here had high levels of English.



**“As much as I agree that all people, no matter what ethnicity or nationality, have the right to study where they please I do think that a good level of the English spoken and written language should be had in order to study.”**

**Undergraduate Creative Art & Design student**

**“It’s great to share cultural experiences but I think the most shocking thing is how well they speak English, and don't mind at all that we are completely incompetent at speaking other languages.”**

**Further Education student**

## Different immigration rules for different students

Since its inception, the Tier 4 system has developed a model where students have different immigration rules, depending on where they study. With the current immigration rules this means that students at Further Education Colleges or private institutions have fewer rights than those at universities, even if they study the same course. The proposed consultation will look at how to expand this, by possibly giving greater rights to students at some universities, or taking them away from students at other universities or colleges.

We asked students to reflect on this under-lying principle to UK immigration policy and if they felt that rights such as the different visa requirements, the right to work while studying and the right remain in the UK to find a job after studying should be different for different students. An overwhelming majority (83 per cent) of students agree that all international students should have the same immigration rights.



We also wanted to understand if this view was different depending on where students studied.

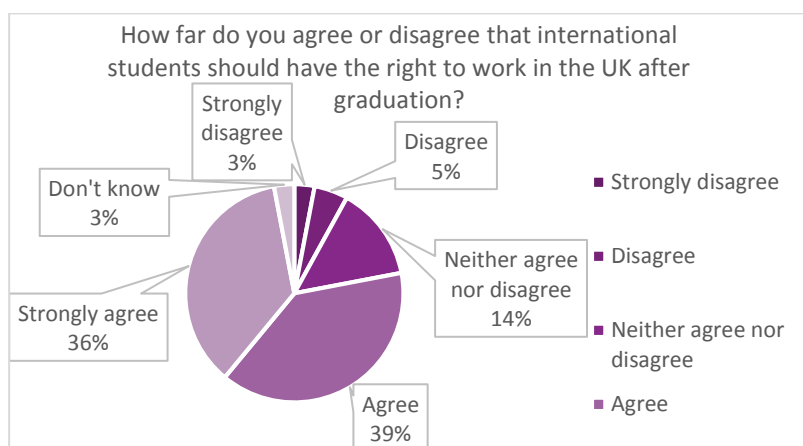
Students across the regions strongly agreed that all international students should have the same immigration rights. Students in Yorkshire and the Humber were most likely to feel this way, where students in the East of England were marginally more likely to feel there should be different immigration rules for different students.

**“I think the UK have a backward way of thinking when it comes to immigration, we are all too happy to holiday, live or study abroad ourselves but don't want people to come here and do the same!”**

**Postgraduate student, South West England**

### Post-study work

One of the most hotly debated topics has been the ability for international students to work in the UK after study. We wanted to know how UK students felt about sharing the graduate job market with their fellow students from outside the EU. The answer was resounding: 75 per cent of students either agree or strongly agree that international students should have the right to work in the UK after graduation.



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**“Students ought to be given longer to find work in the UK after graduation. I have a friend who had to move back to India before he had found work here, and is now struggling to find a job here because of the geographical gap. I think the Home Office mess ups should be sorted out better too, especially deporting students; it’s awful.”**

**Undergraduate student,  
Yorkshire and the Humber**

**“Making international students leave after studying in the UK is poor policy because high skilled people contribute more than their share to the economy, rather than taking away resources. If they cannot work in the U.K. they will happily take their skills elsewhere!”**

**Postgraduate student, Historical  
and Philosophical Studies**

**“I think in the current climate surrounding Brexit many students are feeling unsure and maybe unwelcome. These students are crucial to the economic and academic dimensions of universities in the UK so need to be made to feel welcome and supported in their future post-university.”**

**Second year student,  
University of East Anglia**

Students in the UK already experience different immigration rules based on where they choose to study. For example, if a student chooses a Further Education College or a private college they are not permitted to work part-time during study; they must complete a different test of their English and they must go home to apply to extend their visa or to apply for a work visa after study.

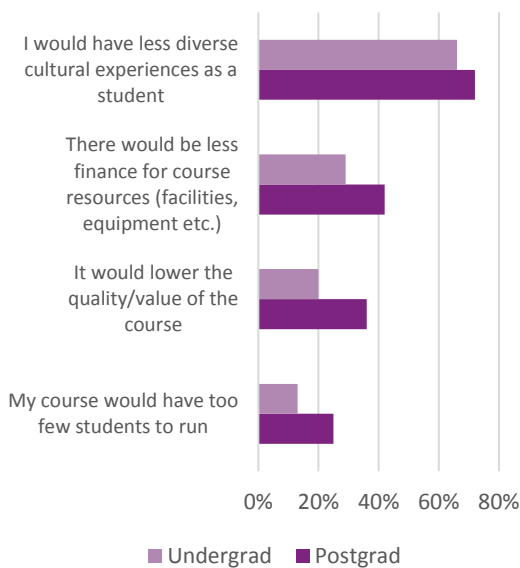
These rule differences have had a profound impact on the number of students choosing to study at colleges, even though many provide the same courses as those at universities.

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# A numbers game

We are concerned about the effects of reduction in international student numbers and we wanted to understand what students felt the impact would be if they dropped significantly or if there were no international students at all on their courses.

Impact of 50% reduction in international student numbers on course

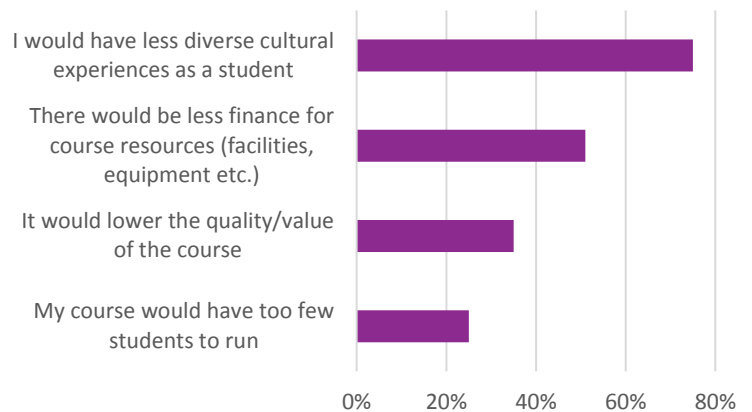


We asked students what they felt the impact would be if 50%, or if all international students were removed from their courses.

Students on postgraduate courses are significantly more likely to be concerned that if their course were to have half the number of international students it would have too few students to run. They were also more likely to feel the quality and value of the course would decrease and almost half felt there would be less money available for course resources.

Both undergraduate and postgraduate students felt strongly that they would have a less diverse cultural experience if there was a 50% drop in international students, although this was slightly higher in postgraduate students.

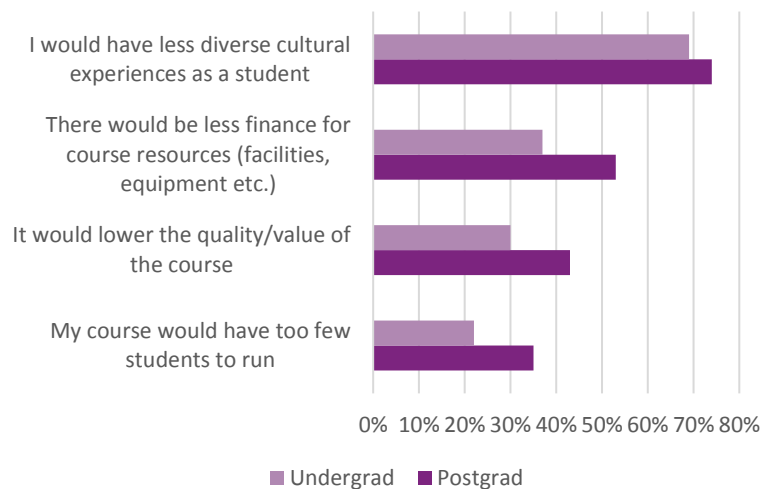
Impact of 50% reduction - postgraduate STEM students



Students on postgraduate courses in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) were more likely to be concerned about a 50 per cent drop in international students than their counterparts in other courses. Over half felt there would be less money for their courses to run on and a quarter felt their course would no longer run if half of the international students were no longer there.

Students felt more strongly when we asked what the impact would be if there were no international students on their course.

Impact of 100% reduction in international student numbers on course



Students across subjects and levels had significant concerns about the viability and quality of their course if all international students were removed. A quarter of students felt their course could not run without international students. This rose to 35 per cent for postgraduates.

Over 30 per cent felt it would lower the quality and value of their course, which also rose to 43 per cent for postgraduate students. Most worrying was that 53 per cent of postgraduate students felt there would be less money for course resources. This rose to 57 per cent for postgraduate students studying STEM subjects.

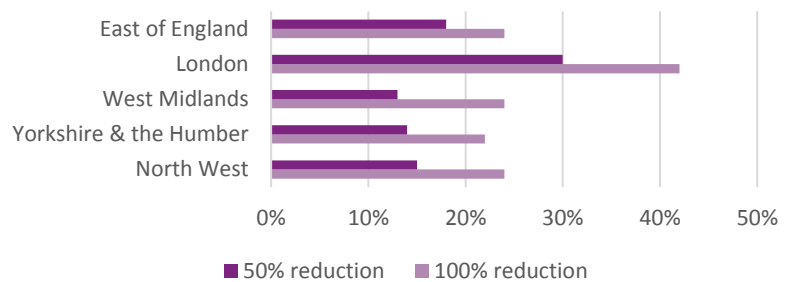
The greatest impact of both a 50 per cent and a 100 per cent drop in international student numbers was the diversity of cultural experiences. Students across all subjects and levels felt strongly that any reductions of international students would impact their cultural experiences. Around 70 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement, regardless of which scenario they were responding to.

### Regional impact

With the highest concentration of international students in the UK, London-based students are more likely to be on a course with international students<sup>3</sup>. One in 5 international students are based in London universities. It is therefore unsurprising that these students have the most concern over course viability if international student numbers dropped or disappeared. 30 per cent of students studying in London believe that if their course had half the number of international students it would have too few students to run. This rises to 42 per cent if all the international students are removed.

<sup>3</sup> <http://londonfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/London-Calling-report.pdf>

My course would have too few students to run – top 5

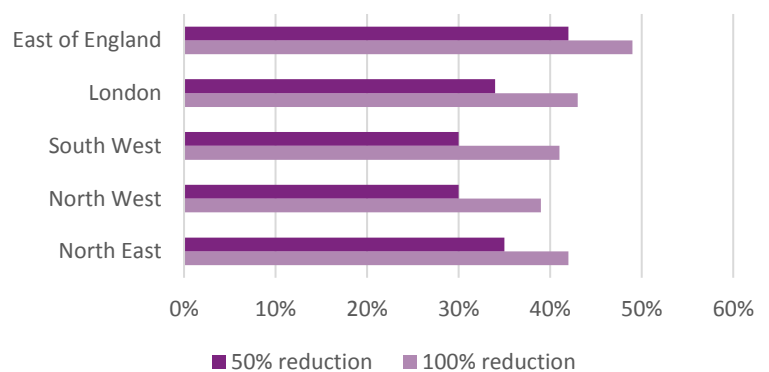


When we asked students to look beyond course viability, students in regional centres expressed considerable concern over the financial resources for their courses, if international student numbers were reduced or all the were students removed.

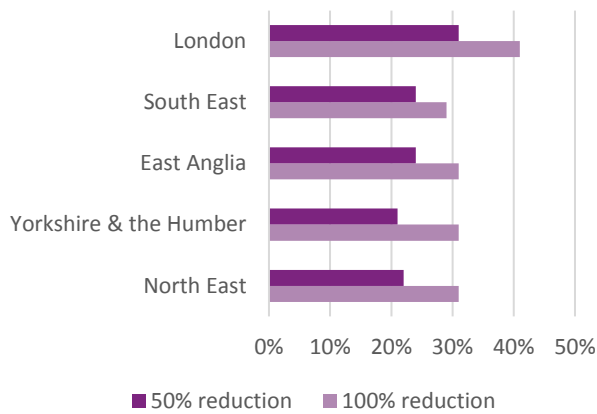
Almost half of the students in the East (42 per cent) and 35 percent North East of England were concerned that their course would have less money for course resources.

One of the greatest concerns for students was the impact on the quality and value of their course if half or all of the international students were removed. Over 30 per cent of students in the North East, Yorkshire and East Anglia said that removing international students from their courses would lower the quality and value of that course. This rose to over 40 per cent for students in London.

There would be less finance for course resources (facilities, equipment etc.) – top 5



It would lower the quality/value of the course – top 5

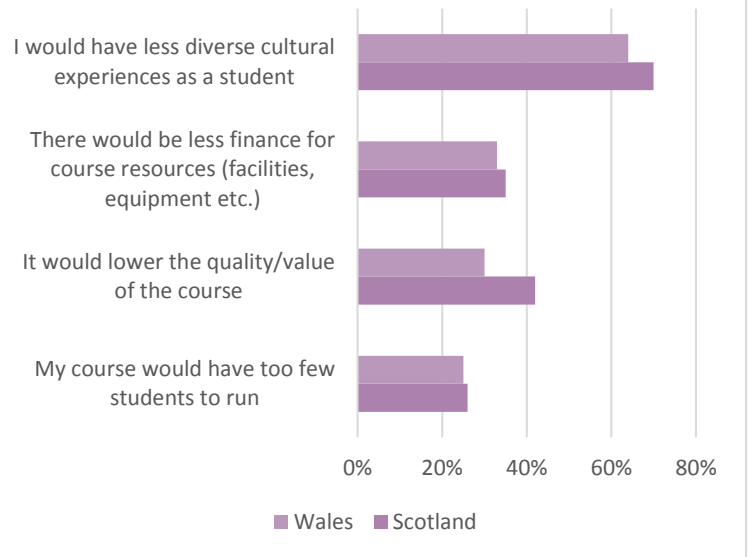


**Scotland and Wales<sup>4</sup>**

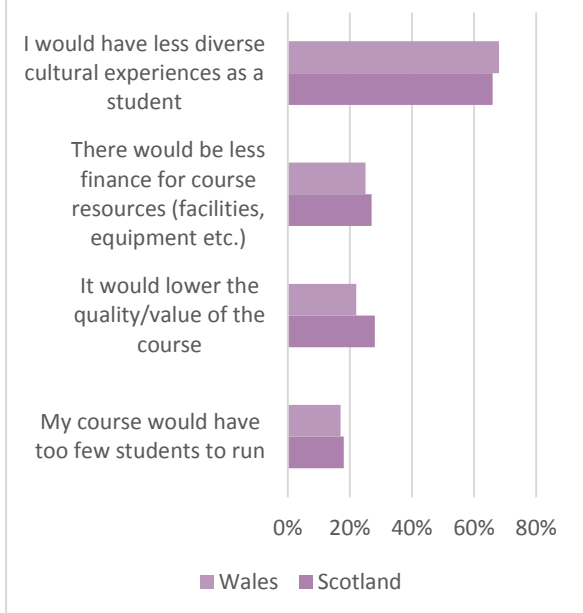
The students surveyed from Scotland and Wales shared similar views to their counterparts in the rest of the UK about the importance of international students to the diversity of cultural experience in their education. They felt more strongly than most other parts of the UK that removing

international students from their courses would lower the quality and value of the course.

Impact of 100% reduction in international student numbers on course by region (nations)



Impact of 50% reduction in international student numbers on course by region (nations)



**Change in international student numbers 2010/11–2015/16<sup>5</sup>**

Our analysis of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) since 2010 shows that many universities have already seen a reduction of 40% or more international students. This is most pronounced in some of the regions in England where students are most concerned about drops in international student numbers with one exception – London. The largest rises in student numbers have been seen in universities based in London and the South East, while the largest drops can be seen across the Midlands, Yorkshire and in the North East.

<sup>4</sup> Fewer students from the devolved nations responded to the survey than those in England.

From these small samples we can only provide data for survey respondents from Scotland and Wales.

<sup>5</sup> HESA 2015/16

University	2010/11 FT & PT non EU	2015/16 FT & PT non EU	% change
University of Hull	2925	1755	-40%
Teesside University	2195	765	-65%
University of Bradford	1980	1090	-45%
University of Wolverhampton	1910	1205	-37%
Staffordshire University	1335	640	-52%
Derby	1090	610	-44%
Bedfordshire	5255	1805	-66%
Oxford University	4500	5385	+20%
Imperial	3915	5755	+47%
UCL	6250	10,790	+73%
University of Sussex	1855	3885	+109%
Kings College London	3855	5340	+39%

Many universities rely on international students to run key courses, particularly postgraduate courses in Engineering, Math, Computing and Business. According to a 2014 report by Universities UK that for the UK and its competition more than 50 per cent of all students on postgraduate taught courses in Computer Science, Engineering & Technology, and Mathematical Sciences are from outside the UK (including EU). These international students play a clear role in supporting the availability of courses at universities across the UK for local students.

“In certain areas, demand from international students is therefore vital to the continued sustainability of postgraduate courses – significant proportions of entrants and qualifiers are from overseas, thus their presence can support the provision of subjects which are of strategic importance to the UK economy, such as engineering and computer science. ...fluctuations in demand from overseas can leave institutions vulnerable or affect their ability to plan strategically in the long term.”<sup>6</sup>

Students in the UK have gone a step further in this survey to say that these changes impact more than just sustainability of courses. International students are vital to the quality, and to the diversity of students’ experiences. Proposed moves by the Home Secretary Amber Rudd to give some universities advantages when recruiting international students, at the expense of others, will leave UK students as a whole, worse off<sup>7</sup>.

### The economic impact of declining numbers

Students broadly agreed that international students make a significant financial contribution to their university, local area and national economy, in the same way as local students do.

A reduction in their numbers would have a significant impact on the funding available to institutions to run courses for all students, UK and international. Looking again at Figure 9, we can see the cost of reducing international student numbers to the universities suffering most from a decline in numbers:

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2014/international-students-in-higher-education.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/04/rudd-announces-crackdown-on-overseas-students-and-new-work-visas>



<b>University</b>	<b>% change</b>	<b>Economic impact<sup>8</sup></b>
University of Hull	-40%	-£24,570,000
Teesside University	-65%	-£30,030,000
University of Bradford	-45%	-£18,690,000
University of Wolverhampton	-37%	-£14,805,000
Staffordshire University	-52%	-£14,595,000
Derby	-44%	-£10,080,000
Bedfordshire	-66%	-£72,450,000

While the UK overall has seen small reductions in international student numbers to universities, it has seen substantial drops in further education colleges, independent colleges and some of its most vital regional universities.

Students who study at universities outside of London are most likely to have experienced a reduction in funding for course resources following the significant drops in international students described in the above table.

None of these universities experienced an equivalent rise in domestic student numbers, which would have provided some of the funding needed to support courses.

<sup>8</sup> Average value of each student in HE in 2011/12, in terms of tuition fees and living expenses, was

£21K - see pp14/15 in [International Education: Global Growth & Prosperity](#)

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# Conclusion

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We set out to create a student voice in the current debate on international students within the immigration system. We found tremendous support for international students from all parts of the UK, many thinking strongly and deeply about the UK's position on immigration.

Many comments reflected students' fears of the consequences of the Brexit negotiations on international students and on their colleges and universities. Proposals to change the immigration rules to further divide international students and create structures which would turn students away from their chosen course or institution would go against this strength of feeling, and exacerbate the problems we are already seeing from the decision to leave the European Union.

UK students want to ensure their voice is heard in decisions about international students and we urge the Government to carefully consider how their upcoming proposals on immigration rules will impact students, their courses, and their communities.

**International students should have the same rights, regardless of where they study or where they are from**

Students have made themselves clear in this survey that the current system that gives some international students the right to work and not others is unfair. The suggestion by Home Secretary Amber Rudd that international students at some universities will get greater rights than others will not sit well with students, and risks leading to further declines in international student numbers at many universities.

We saw such a decline of international student numbers in further education when the Home Office lowered working hours to 10 hours or less and then removed them all-together.<sup>9</sup>

The data from HESA which shows the current flow of international students away from regional universities and to more urban centres will be exacerbated by moves to change the rules for some universities and not for others.

**Students fully support post-study work for international students**

Many UK students reported in the comments to this survey that they knew international students struggling with the current post-study work system. They feel strongly that barriers which prevent international students from having the same access to jobs post-study, should be removed.

We urge the UK government to remove the requirement of a Tier 2 visa for graduates and move to a system where international students have the same rights to a job at any employer, as UK students.

The current Tier 2 system makes it more expensive and burdensome to employ and international student and many are being turned away from jobs where they are the best candidate. International students develop skills and knowledge identified in the Government's own Industrial Strategy as key to a successful economy. In light of this, and the overwhelming support from UK students, the Government should reconsider its decision to remove the post-study work visa option.

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<sup>9</sup> Exporting Education UK. Supporting International Education in the UK (2016) [http://exeduk.com/wp-content/uploads/ExEd\\_Parthenon-](http://exeduk.com/wp-content/uploads/ExEd_Parthenon-)

[EY Supporting International Education 062016 WEB.pdf](#)

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**Reduction or removal of international students from college or university threatens courses, quality and finance**

If changes to the immigration rules allow for different rules for different universities, it is likely that the trends in student numbers will follow what has happened in further education and some institutions will risk closing courses all-together. Students know many of their courses rely on international students to remain on offer from their university or college. This is particularly an issue for postgraduate students and students on STEM courses.

Students also made it clear that reduction in international students threaten the quality and value of their course and most importantly the diversity of their student experience.

We urge the Government to listen to students and not create immigration rules that would reduce or remove international students from universities, like it has already done to colleges.

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