

The UK immigration system must keep attracting exchange students

We're calling on the UK government to reform the Visitor immigration route by increasing the length of time short-term exchange students are permitted to stay in the UK from six months to one academic year.

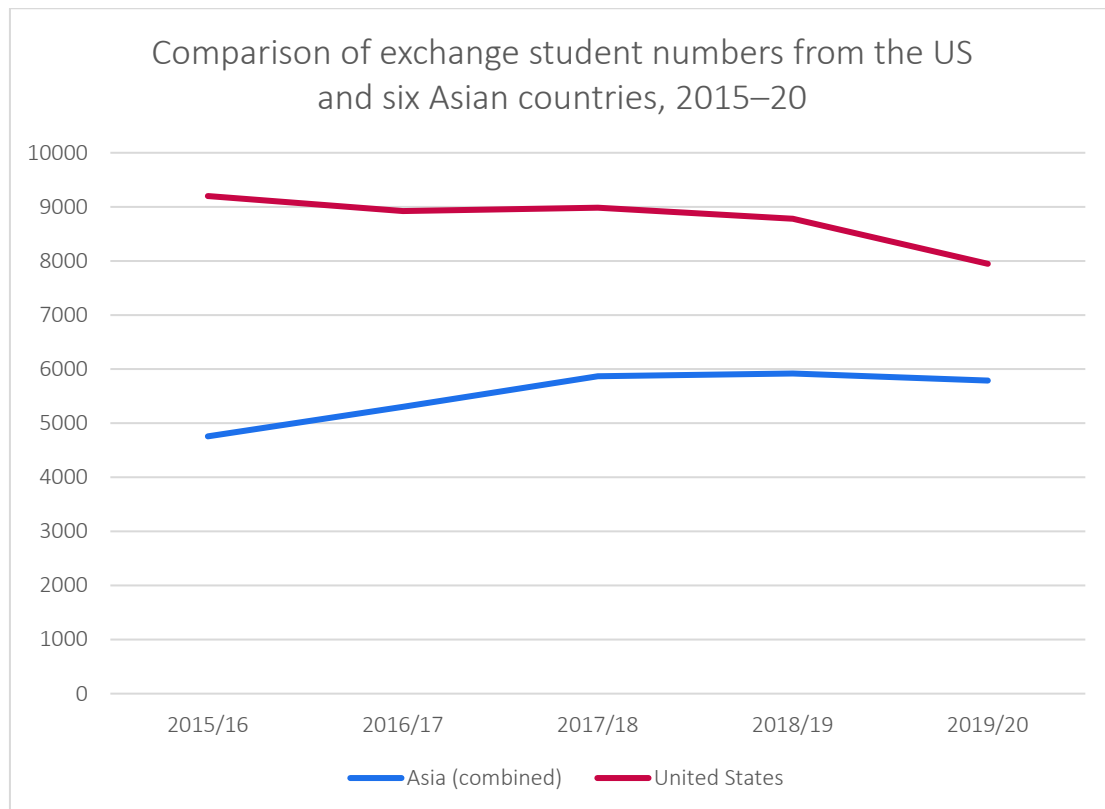
The contribution of international students to the UK is – quite rightly – celebrated and discussed within the higher education sector. However, not as much attention is sometimes given to another important cohort of overseas student visitors: exchange students. These students are those registered at a university overseas who choose to spend a short period of that time studying at a UK university.

We've looked at who these students are, how they contribute to the UK, and how the UK's immigration system can best attract them. In turn, this will set the UK up for success in the Turing Scheme, through positioning us as an attractive partner destination.

Who comes to the UK as an exchange student?

Between 2015–2020, an average of 38,800 exchange students came to study in the UK each year. Countries sending the greatest number of students in this period were the USA, France, Germany, China and Spain, with just under half (47%) of all students coming from the EU. 39% were part of the Erasmus+ programme.

The overall number of exchange students coming to the UK stayed roughly the same each year. However, the number of those coming from top markets in Asia grew significantly, by 22% in five years. This trend is even more pronounced in certain markets: student numbers from Hong Kong increased by 71%. There were also indications of growth in the number of students coming from India, Thailand, Taiwan and Indonesia, although the total numbers remain small.



What do exchange students do in the UK?

The vast majority (91%) of exchange students are undergraduates, and our data suggests that most are in the UK solely to study. However, a smaller proportion also undertake a work placement or internship alongside their studies.

Universities surveyed by [UUK International](#) noted that exchange students are often highly engaged academically and valued by their tutors, and are active participants in other campus activities.

[Incoming exchange students] are generally excellent students who engage wholeheartedly with their studies/placements and get great results. Our academics love teaching them!

International exchange and study abroad professional, English university

The engagement of exchange students in activities, societies and cultural programmes has been remarkable.

International exchange and study abroad professional, English university

What are the benefits of exchange students to the UK?

We know that international mobility has lots of benefits, and exchange students will gain academically, professionally, and personally from their time spent in the UK. But there are benefits to the UK, too.

New opportunities

Exchange students bring opportunities for UK-based students. Because of how exchange partnerships typically work, the more incoming students that are hosted in the UK, the more spaces there will be to send UK students abroad. **Maintaining or increasing the numbers of students coming to the UK on exchange will be crucial to the success of the Turing Scheme, the UK government's new global mobility programme for UK-based students.**

...the biggest benefit for us is that incoming students means we can send students out. If we cannot host students, our partners are unlikely to carry on hosting ours.

International exchange and study abroad professional, Scottish university

Receiving exchange students secures study placements for our students' semester or year abroad.

International exchange and study abroad professional, English university

A student's length of study in the UK is also important here: one UK student going abroad for a year would need to be balanced by either one student coming for a year, or two students coming for one semester each.

Global links and perspectives

Exchange students bring global perspectives to academia and campus life, which makes universities more international. Many exchange students make lifelong connections, creating strong links between the UK and many countries abroad, and

helping students to act as informal ambassadors for the UK on their return home. By coming to the UK on exchange as an undergraduate, overseas students may also be more likely to return to the UK as fully-enrolled postgraduates.

Boosting the economy

Exchange students spend money in the UK, which contributes to the economy and increases the value of the UK's education related exports. As well as everyday living costs, students are often keen to 'make the most' of their time in the UK, and are visited by family and friends from overseas. Our modelling, based on DfE modelling of the economic benefit of Erasmus students, suggests that exchange students contribute up to £470 million to the UK economy each year.

Levelling up

Exchange students study in all regions of the UK, meaning these benefits are widely distributed throughout the country, and can make an important contribution to regional levelling up.

Where does the immigration system come in?

Since the introduction of the points-based immigration system on 1 January 2021, all students coming to the UK from overseas require a visa (although EU nationals may be exempt for shorter trips). A comparison of different visa types can be seen below.

	Standard Visitor visa	Student visa
Length of stay	Up to 6 months	Duration of studies
Application fee	£95	£348
Immigration health surcharge	N/A	£470 a year
English language requirements	None	At least <u>CEFR B2 level</u>

Our evidence suggests that fewer immigration requirements are associated with exchange students staying longer in the UK. Over the past five years, almost three-quarters (73%) of EU exchange students (at that time, not subject to immigration requirements) came to the UK for between 24 weeks and a year, compared to 55% of non-EU nationals. This suggests that current immigration arrangements may be acting as a barrier to growing exchanges from global partners, especially those outside the EU – who represented 53% of exchange students between 2015-20.

So, reducing immigration requirements for all such students will encourage them to undertake a longer placement in the UK.

To illustrate the potential benefits:

- If five of the top sending countries increased the proportion of exchange students studying in the UK for over 24 weeks to 65% (the 2015–20 average of all exchange students), 2,340 more students would come to the UK for longer each year.
- If the proportion of these students staying for over 24 weeks increased to 73% (ie the average from the EU before immigration restrictions were introduced), this would rise to 3,445 more students.

	Average student numbers staying longer than 24 weeks (2015-20)	Student numbers if 65% stayed longer than 24 weeks	Student numbers if 73% stayed longer than 24 weeks
USA	3800	5700	6400
China	1665	1880	2115
Canada	735	815	915
Singapore	250	340	380
Malaysia	215	270	300
Total	6665	9005	10110

In addition, as these figures are calculated on the basis that numbers of students remain static, they could easily be higher if key markets, especially in Asia, are encouraged to continue growing.

The introduction of the points-based system also represents a major change in immigration requirements for EU nationals coming to the UK for placements of over six months. It introduces barriers similar to those only previously in place for non-EU nationals. The expense and bureaucracy of applying for the Student visa makes a placement of over six months much less attractive to an EU student than previously.

This is significant, because:

- As outlined above, almost three-quarters (73%) of EU exchange students came to the UK for between 24 weeks and a year.
- A number of universities surveyed by [UUK International](#) in summer 2021 stated they are already experiencing a notable shift among EU exchange students from year-long placements, to shorter, single-semester placements.
- Some universities had experienced this group dropping out of coming to the UK altogether.

Our analysis suggests that, on average, 12,900 EU students would now need a Student visa to come on exchange to the UK each year. This group – a third of all exchange students coming to the UK each year - are now at risk of reducing the length of their exchange, or not coming at all.

Maintaining numbers of students and increasing their length of stay in the UK would increase all the benefits outlined above: the ability to send a greater number of UK students overseas, students' economic contribution, and a longer period of time to develop their deeper, long-lasting connection with the UK.

Our proposal

We're therefore calling on the UK government to reform the Visitor immigration route by increasing the length of time short-term exchange students are permitted to stay in the UK from six months to one academic year.

The Visitor visa is significantly less expensive and bureaucratic than the Student visa, with fewer evidence requirements. This change would boost the UK's offer as an attractive exchange destination and would fall in line with the route for academics, who are permitted to come to the UK for up to 12 months under the terms of the Academic Visitor visa.

Conclusion

Exchange students are valued by universities, and bring significant benefits to the UK, including creating global mobility opportunities for UK students. With the right immigration conditions, there is potential to boost exchanges from around the world, as well as limit an expected reduction in EU exchange students. This can only increase the benefits that all exchange students bring to the UK.

The data in this publication has come from our analysis of HESA data relating to incoming exchange and visiting students between 2015–20. We also carried out a qualitative survey of 32 UK universities in summer 2021. Thank you to all those who participated.