

12 October 2022

The Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP  
Secretary of State for the Home Department  
Home Office

*[Sent via email, CC: Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng MP, Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP, the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, the Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP, Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Minister for Equalities, and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, the Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP]*

Dear Home Secretary,

### **Recognising the contribution international students make to the UK**

We are writing to you on behalf of more than 150 universities and colleges to highlight the critical contribution which international students make towards UK prosperity and the wider economy.

Like you, we share the government's commitment to drive growth, boost exports, and spur innovation. To achieve this vision however, we must not underestimate the enormous contribution and success story that is our ability to attract international students. Research commissioned by Universities UK (UUK) has shown that international students make a net positive contribution of at least £25.9 billion per year to the UK economy and are the source of almost 70% of the UK's education export earnings. The benefits of this major export success story are felt across the UK's regions and nations, with every part of the UK benefitting financially – by, on average, £390 per person – from the presence of international students. Not only that, but the fee income from international students is invested back into a university's activity, including teaching UK students, and ensuring the viability of many postgraduate programmes. Those international students who then make use of the Graduate route to remain in the UK after their studies can help play a key role in filling domestic skills gaps and drive future growth.

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Vivienne Stern MBE

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This major economic and strategic benefit is why the government set an ambition to grow the number of international students choosing to study in the UK to at least 600,000 per year. This ambition was met last year, with growth coming predominantly from countries explicitly prioritised in the strategy (including India, Nigeria and Pakistan). Far from being a problem, an increased number of international students in the UK should be seen as a resounding success for the government and something to be celebrated. Now is the time to build on the UK's leading position in international higher education. That does not mean pursuing growth at any cost, but it does mean protecting our current position which the sector has worked hard with the government to achieve. We believe the focus should be on fostering sustainable growth, diversifying the pool of international students, and ensuring that the UK remains the second most popular study destination for international students after only the USA. To do so, we should continue to welcome international students to our country, and value the contribution that they – and their families – can make.

While the majority of international students study at postgraduate level – and therefore tend to be older and more likely to have a spouse or dependants – data from your department shows that the vast majority of student visas are for those coming to study, and not their dependants. Around one in six of visas granted go to a dependant on study routes – much lower than the roughly one third of grants going to dependants when looking at work routes. We also estimate that the total number of international students who bring dependants to be significantly lower than one in six given dependants are likely to be families – i.e., a spouse and children – but we are currently awaiting more granular data from your department to assess this. As you will no doubt be aware, international students on undergraduate programmes are not able to bring dependants with them to the UK. Further, those on qualifying postgraduate programmes must comply with all immigration rules, which includes paying the NHS surcharge up front and demonstrating that they have the necessary funds to support themselves and their families.

For example, an international student bringing a spouse and two children under the age of 18 would need to evidence in excess of £30,500 just in order to apply to come

to the UK.<sup>1</sup> This figure is at the lower end of the spectrum, with those applicants who are looking to study for longer, or live in London, and/or bring significantly more dependants – as has been suggested in the press – required to evidence tens of thousands more in order to make an application to come to the UK. With no other leading destination for international students placing restrictions on the ability of a partner, or their children, to accompany the main applicant, it would be wrong for the UK to go down this route and would risk undermining our ability to attract international talent as well as efforts to diversify international student recruitment.

Finally, it is worth noting that this rapid growth has been managed all while maintaining the very high-level levels of compliance seen across the student immigration system. As a sector, we know how important it is that the immigration system retains the confidence of the government and wider public. Where there are any issues or concerns, these should be acknowledged and addressed collectively by the sector and by government, and universities work closely with UKVI to ensure this is the case. Due to the hard work of staff working within our universities in collaboration with the Home Office and UKVI, visa refusal rates on the Student route have remained consistently lower than 5% in recent years. This reflects the fact that those who come to the UK are genuine and qualified students, with the money to support themselves, and who are looking to seize the opportunities which a UK university education affords.

The negative rhetoric suggesting a need to reduce international student numbers is unhelpful and counterproductive. It stands to directly impact on the continued success of one of the UK's premier export industries and restrict economic growth. Such rhetoric is also quickly reported on around the world, sending a message overseas that the UK is unwelcoming and hostile to international students. That is why we would urge the government to restate its commitment to the ambitions set

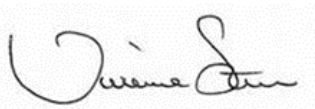
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<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on the cost of a main applicant coming to study a 9-month Masters programme and bringing with them a spouse and two children under the age of 18. The total cost for all, including visa fees, the Immigration Health Surcharge, and the financial requirement (assuming outside of London), is £30,648. This figure excludes other costs, such as the course fees which applicants are required to evidence, any translation services, or fees to demonstrate English language.

out in the International Education Strategy and to avoid language that suggests international students and their dependants may be unwelcome in the UK.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss this further and would urge that, in future, your comments reflect the enormous contribution that international students make to the UK.

Yours sincerely,



**Vivienne Stern MBE**  
Chief Executive, UUK



**Gordon McKenzie**  
Chief Executive, GuildHE



**Rachel Hewitt**  
Chief Executive,  
MillionPlus



**Vanessa Wilson**  
Chief Executive, University  
Alliance

