



Is the UK still top of the class when it comes to international education?

by [Matt Ingham](#) Published: 16 June 2021

Will the UK remain a world leader in education following recent government immigration announcements and the pandemic?

In this article we explore the education system in the UK and how it will continue to be an attractive prospect for students and parents.

UK as a world-leading education provider

One of the reasons for the success of the UK education system is its high standards that are thoroughly regulated and audited by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency who review and ensure quality of teaching and academia.

There is no limit on the number of international students who can come to the UK to study, and the UK is seeking to increase the number of international students in higher education as part of the government's new Points-Based Immigration system, as announced on 31 December 2020.

Being part of the education system in the UK not only creates opportunities to learn from leading scientists and teachers, but to take part in developments that affects the quality of knowledge worldwide. This is supported by the latest figures from the Research Excellence Framework, which reveals that 30% of university research in the UK is classified as world-leading and 46% as 'world-class excellence'. This has been especially apparent this year with the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine produced in association with the University of Oxford.

International Interest

According to the latest update from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the number of international students in the UK reached a record high of 538,600 in the 2019/2020 academic year. It was forecasted that the EU student admissions would significantly decrease due to the loss of their home fee status post-Brexit, but the overall figures were set to rise, driven by continuing growth of students from China and India.



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The UK government is looking to ensure more students move to the UK for university. They recently announced that, in the summer of 2021, they are re-introducing a “Graduate route” visa. This will provide international students with the opportunity to stay in the UK to work or look for work after they graduate. Undergraduate and master’s degree students will be able to stay for two years under the route, whilst PhD students will be able to stay for three years.

It is worth noting, however, that EU students are now be treated in much the same way as non-EU students, with some exceptions, under a new immigration system that came into effect in January 2021.

EU students are given benefits not available to non-EU students. EU student’s are not required to provide their fingerprints for biometrics and instead are permitted to upload their photograph online and receive an electronic visa to allow them easier travel between the UK and the EU.

Impact of the pandemic

In 2020, there were 232,192 Sponsored study visas granted (including dependants), an 18% decrease compared to 2019. There was a noticeable dip of visas granted in 2020 Q 1, with the implementation of Covid-19 restrictions. However, this downward trend dramatically reversed in Q 4 2020, with a large recovery in the number of sponsored study grants. In addition to those coming on sponsored visas, there were 21,502 short-term student visas granted in 2020, 82% lower than in 2019, which can also be attributed to the pandemic.

The UK government published its Covid-19 roadmap in February 2021 and, ahead of the next main student intake in September 2021, UK universities are processing international UCAS applications allowing normal teaching to return.

There has been an impact by the pandemic on international students moving to the UK, but with the rollout of vaccinations in the UK currently taking place and government proposed incentives, we expect the statistics for 2021 to return to their 2019 heights.

Incentives to entice students to the UK

As well as the new Graduate route proposed by the UK government, a new Global Talent Visa, supplementing the points-based immigration system, has recently been introduced in February 2020. It is designed to make it easier and quicker for a relatively small number of top researchers, scientists, and mathematicians to come and work in the UK, even if they do not have a job offer.

The benefits of the new route is not exclusive to the applicants; employers look to benefit as well. Compared to its predecessor, Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent), the responsibility for the application process falls on the applicant, which means that no sponsor licenses are required from employer’s side. The Global Talent has also expanded the sectors from which potential candidates may apply from and now includes research, science, engineering, medicine and humanities as opposed to previously selected digital technology, arts and culture. This could potentially lead to more global professionals coming to the UK to pursue careers, as well as bringing their own unique expertise into academia.

Whereas Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) had a cap of 2,000 applications a year, there is no cap for the number of applications for Global Talent visa route. Because of the pandemic there have been only a little more than a 1,000 entry clearance Global Talent visas granted so far.

Why the UK?

The UK has always been a major hub for a world-class education offering one of the best selection of education facilities in the world. Renowned, independent fee paying schools remain first choice for many parents who seek to provide their children with the best chances of progressing to reputable higher education including Oxford, Cambridge and other Russell Group universities. The Independent Schools Council (ISC) revealed in its annual report for 2020 that there were over 15,000 pupils whose parents remained outside the UK. Further, there were more than 30,000 non-British pupils at ISC schools whose parents had relocated to the UK.

During their student years, international students who are pursuing a bachelor's or master's degree from a recognised university are allowed to work part-time during the semester for up to 20 hours per week and full-time during vacations. It is also very common for universities to assist students with employment or their own business development during and after the completion of courses.

This influx of students presents many opportunities to the UK, from hosting international students and being a go-to destination for higher education. Although there are immediate financial benefits for the education ecosystem, from student towns to research centres - many of which, for example, are responsible for fighting and preventing future pandemics- there are greater incentives for the UK to maintain this reputation in the future. For example, international students from a variety of backgrounds also bring new insights and knowledge from their countries of origin, enriching British culture as a whole. Further, personal relationships built during student years later translate into commercial and political partnerships in the years to come, made stronger by the common experiences and shared values of the UK education system.

Academic standards in UK higher education are generally regarded as excellent and retain a high level of prestige; many international families therefore feel that a UK education will provide students with a solid foundation to excel and maximise their potential.

Kathryn Bradbury and **Matt Ingham** at Payne Hicks Beach are recognised leaders in immigration and able to assist prospective students with Student Visa applications as well as other UK immigration matters. Once a school/university is chosen we can oversee the entire visa process.

Navigating the UK system

There are some aspects that each international student should prepare before coming to the UK. Choosing to engage an “education consultant” a popular option, as the variety of studies and institutions within the UK education system might can be daunting without advice and guidance.

For those who feel confident in their choices and preferences, the application process should not pose an inconvenience. Admissions to UK universities take place via the online UCAS platform where students specify the subjects they currently study at school and submit a personal statement- an essay detailing the student’s interests, extracurricular activities and career plans. Using this information, universities will decide whether to offer the candidate a place.

Concerns

For most students their time in school and university is a happy one, one they will look back

on with fond memories. However, no one can cater for the unexpected and students and their families may need legal advice in dealing with disagreements with the school or university, or sensitive issues involving other students. We offer specialist advice relating to a variety of issues that can occur during a student's life. **Ane Vernon** leads the firm's education team. She is a Partner in the Dispute Resolution department with vast experience in disputes in the education sector.

Students and their parents have come to rely on Ane's advice and calm guidance when finding themselves in stressful and emotionally charged situations. The team have established a record of accomplishment in resolving disputes through litigation or by identifying workable solutions in a variety of issues, such as admission arrangements, exclusions, allegations of misconduct or discrimination. The team regularly advise in connection with procedures and policies, examinations and appeals.

Social media and smart phone technology have become a central challenge for educational institutions; sensitive and potentially very damaging issues arise from their use and abuse, both for staff and pupils. PHB Partners **Dominic Crossley** and **Hanna Basha**, experts in privacy law and reputation management, work closely with the firm's education team and have extensive experience in handling such issues for both institutions and private individuals.

Conclusion

Despite the UK suffering a significant decline in student visas during 2020 due to the pandemic, its educational sector remains an attractive prospect for both parents and students. In 2021, the Times World Rankings decided that the seven of the top 50, and 26 of the top 200 universities were in the UK. With the new routes to remain in the UK after education has finished, there is more incentive than ever to study here with an eye to settling. This is unlikely to change any time soon, with the UK government intending to create a high wage, high-skill, high productivity economy, for which they need international students.

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