MIGRATION
POLICY
SCOTLAND

International Students in Scotland

Monitoring Report

NOVEMBER 2026



About Migration Policy Scotland

Migration Policy Scotland is Scotland's migration think tank, offering a home for open dialogue and informed responses to migration. We harness insights from lived and learned experience to drive work that is grounded in the realities of migration to Scotland. Our mission is to build a better migration future for everyone.

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Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Cover image: Vishnu Prasad, 'Through the cloisters at the University of Glasgow. And a pretty cherry blossom to brighten the day', 4 May 2022. Accessed via Unsplash

Executive summary

- Scotland hosts a large number of international students considering its population size and more than any European country besides England, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. In 2024/25, they accounted for around 1 in 79 people in Scotland's general population.
- As of 2024/25 (the academic year), there were around 70,000 international students in Scotland, who made up around 26% of the total student population.
- This was a historically high figure, up from 51,000 in 2015/16, but below the peak of 84,000 international student enrolments in 2022/23.
- The rise in international students since 2015/16 is solely due to increased numbers coming from non-EU countries. In contrast, the number of EU-origin students in Scotland has declined steadily since the Brexit referendum.
- China has consistently been the most common origin country for international students, now followed by India, the USA, Pakistan and Nigeria.
- International students account for the majority of enrolments on postgraduate courses (55% in 2024/25).
- In 2024/25, the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow took the largest numbers of international students, accounting for around four in ten of the total number of international students in Scotland.
- The University of the West of Scotland, which took the third highest number in 2024/25, has seen the biggest relative growth in its international student population.
- In 2024/25, the fee income from international students made up 27% of Scottish HEIs' total income.
- Most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have experienced growth in fee income from international students which has more than offset a decline in income from other sources since 2015/16.
- International students tend to be older than UK students, more likely to be married or living with a partner, and less likely to be working alongside their studies.
- Scotland is slightly underrepresented in applications to the post-study Graduate Visa route, compared with its share of international students out of the UK total.
- A lack of data on outcomes after studying and the economic activity of international students' dependants leave some blind spots in our understanding of this broader topic.

1. The wider context

The history and significance of foreign students in Scotland

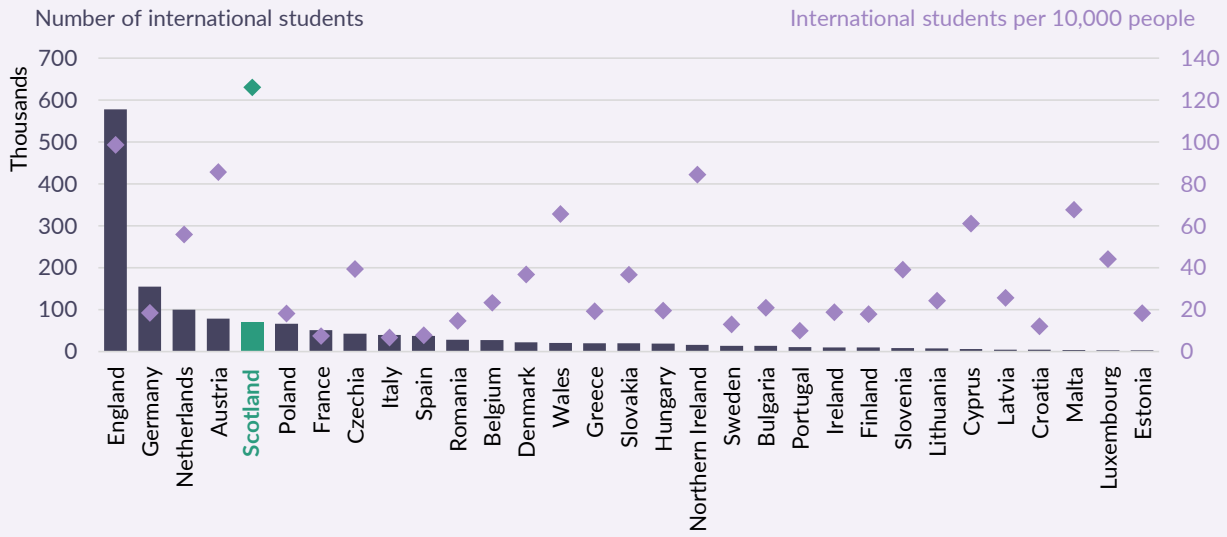
1.1 A popular destination for foreign students

Scotland's higher education institutions (HEI) have long welcomed students from overseas, with the numbers growing considerably in the last two decades. As of 2024/25 (the academic year), there were around 70,000 international students in Scotland or around 26% of the total student population. Postgraduate courses are a particular draw for international students, who made up 55% of those enrolled on such courses in the same year. These figures do not include students at overseas campuses of Scottish HEIs, such as Heriot-Watt's campus in Dubai. Students at these overseas facilities are not included in any of the statistics in this briefing.

Scotland takes an unusually high number of students considering its population size. With around 1 international student per 79 people, Scotland hosted more international students per capita than England in 2024/25 (1 per 101 people). The UK as a whole attracts the most international students of any country in Europe, and Scotland's universities alone had more enrolled in 2024/25 than any European country besides England, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. Notably, the international student populations are far smaller in larger countries such as France and Italy.[1]

International students in European countries, compared with Scotland and other parts of the UK

Academic year 2024/25



Source: Eurostat, 'Mobile students from abroad enrolled by education level, sex and country of origin', data table educ_uoe_mobs02. Note: Includes 'short-cycle tertiary education' which corresponds to non-university tertiary education. The types of course included may vary across countries.

[1] Eurostat, 'Mobile students from abroad enrolled by education level, sex and country of origin', data table educ_uoe_mobs02

1.2 Role in university funding and the wider economy

Scottish universities benefit financially from recruiting international students, who typically pay full tuition fees. In 2024/25, the fee income from non-UK students made up 27% of Scottish universities' total income, and 78% of the income the sector raised from tuition fees.[2] Concerns have been raised about vulnerability in the sector from this reliance on international fee income.[3]

International students also represent a significant revenue stream for the wider Scottish economy, estimated at around £4.2 billion in 2021-22.[4] In the same year, Scotland's higher education sector is estimated to have had a total economic impact of around £28 billion.[5] Although many international students do not stay long-term, their presence helps to some extent to balance out Scotland's ageing population. Students can work in paid employment up to 20 hours per week and their dependants can take up any job with no visa restrictions on working hours or types of employment.

1.3 Student recruitment and retention policy

Immigration is a reserved policy area, with decisions made at the UK level. Policy on international students has been a mix of restriction and liberalisation over the last two decades. A major policy change in 2008 was to require all students to be sponsored by a specific HEI and this was followed by the ending of a post-study work visa route in 2012. In 2019, the UK government set out an ambition to increase the number of international students, with a view to increasingly the value of education exports, although liberalising policies were not brought in until 2021.[6] While Brexit made it harder for EU nationals – who previously did not need a visa or to pay tuition fees above home student rates – to study in Scotland, the introduction of the two-year post-study Graduate Visa in 2021 created a significant incentive for non-EU students to choose the UK.[7]

In January 2024, in an effort to reduce numbers, the decision was made to no longer allow most international students to bring dependants (a spouse/ partner and/or children). Nor are those joining the Graduate route allowed to bring over dependants who were not already with them while they were students. The Graduate route is also scheduled to shorten to 18 months' residence for those applying on or after 1st January 2027. From 2028/29, a new International Student Levy will require higher education providers in England to pay a flat fee of £925 per international student per year.

The Scottish government has previously signalled a desire to retain more students post-study. In 2025, it suggested a Scottish Graduate Visa with a lengthier residence period than the UK-wide one, to make it more realistic for graduates to work up to the Skilled Worker salary threshold, however the UK government at the time was not amenable to the idea.

[2] HESA, What is the income of HE providers?, 14 May 2026
[3] Hussain, S. and Elliot, D. L. (2025) The Impact of Tightening Finances on Scotland's Universities. SPICe
[4] Scottish Government, Scotland's international education strategy, 7 February 2024
[5] London Economics (2024) The economic impact of higher education teaching, research, and innovation, p. 48
[6] Department for International Trade and Department for Education, International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth, 16 March 2019
[7] During this period, undergraduate tuition was free in Scotland for Scottish and EU students while postgraduate fees were lower for UK and EU students than for non-EU students.

1.4 Data sources

The main producer of data on international students is the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which annually publishes comprehensive statistics on students enrolled in higher education. The way international students can be identified in this dataset is by country of permanent residence, with those domiciled abroad being considered international students, for the purposes of this analysis. A major limitation to the HESA data is that it does not include nationality. There will be cases where students coming from abroad are British and wrongly classified as non-British in our analysis. Further data on the characteristics of students comes from the Scottish census (last carried out in 2022). These sources – as well as the data landscape more broadly – have further limitations which are detailed in the appendix.



Chanbora Chhun 'People walking on a bridge' 20 November 2025, Accessed via Unsplash

2. International student numbers

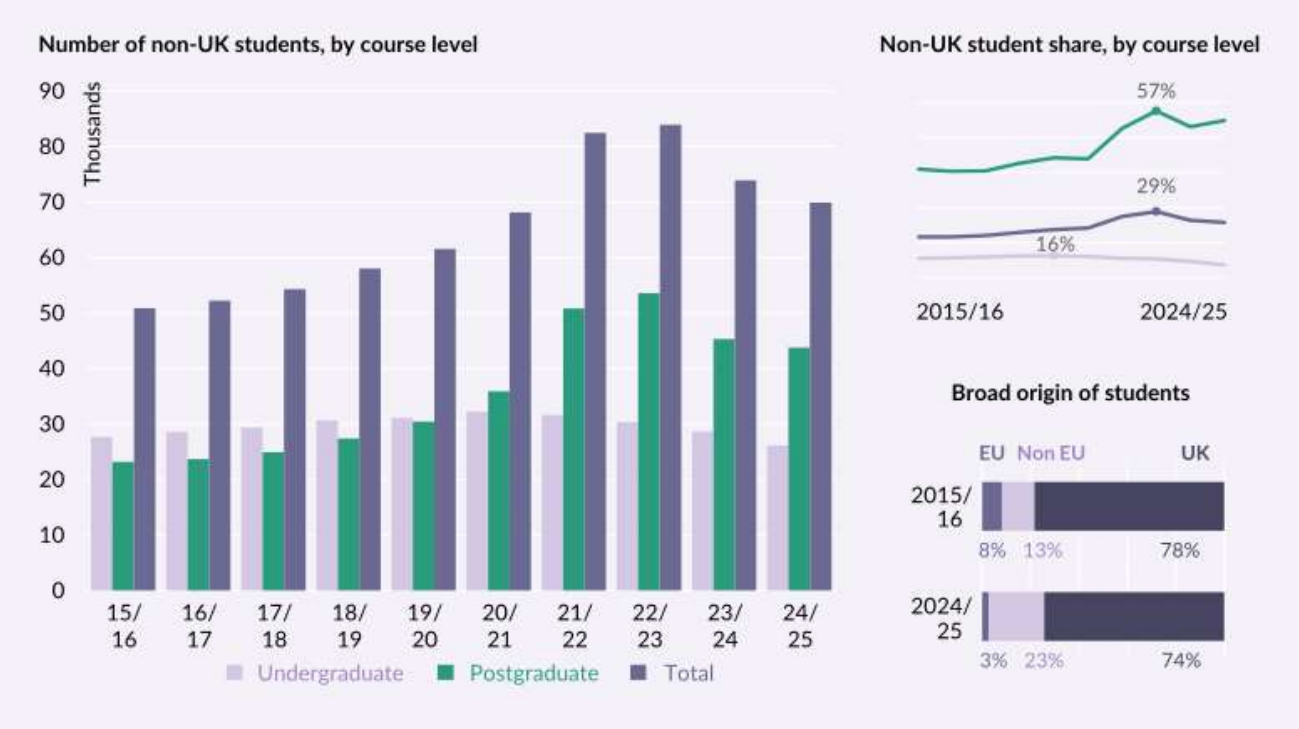
Trends in foreign student enrolments and a breakdown by HEI

2.1 Recent trends

Between 2015/16 and 2022/23, the number of international students in Scottish higher education grew steadily from around 51,000 to 84,000 and their share of the total student population increased from 11% to 29%[8] This growth was almost entirely driven by postgraduate students, whose numbers nearly doubled and came to exceed the number of non-UK undergraduate students. At the peak, in 2022/23, international students accounted for 57% of students on postgraduate courses.

Since 2022/23, the number of non-UK students has fallen. In 2024/25, the overall number was down to 70,000 or roughly on par with 2020/21. The fall comes from a decline in the numbers of both postgraduate and undergraduate students.

The rise in non-UK students since 2015/16 is solely due to increased numbers coming from *non-EU* countries. In contrast, the number of EU-origin students in Scotland has declined steadily since the Brexit referendum.



Source: HESA, HE student enrolments by HE provider and permanent address, 2024/25.

[8] HESA, HE student enrolments by HE provider and permanent address, 2024/25.

2.2 Reliance by HEI

In 2024/25, the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow took the largest numbers of international students, accounting for around four in ten international students in Scotland and ranking fifth and seventh respectively across all UK HEIs for number of non-UK students.

The University of the West of Scotland, which took the third highest number in 2024/25, saw its international student intake grow most sharply, from 9% of the student population in 2015/16 to 30% in 2024/25.

The University of St Andrews had the largest share of international students out of its total student population, at 47%. The University of Aberdeen went against the general trend, with its non-UK student intake declining since 2018/19.

On average in 2024/25, Scottish HEIs received roughly a quarter (24%) of their total income from international student tuition fees. This proportion tended to be higher at those HEIs with more international students. Heriot-Watt University was the most reliant on non-UK fees, which made up 41% of its total income, in 2024/25. Universities' other main sources of income include UK fee income, research grants, investment and donations.

2.3 What the recent changes mean

Scottish universities are generally operating with more students and higher budgets than they were ten years ago, even if these numbers have decreased slightly from their peak in 2022/23. The rise in students and overall income is down to the increased recruitment of non-EU students. Most universities have experienced a fall in non-fee income (such as research grants and investment) since 2015/16 which has been more than compensated by an increase in non-UK fee income.

There are a few cases which suggest HEIs are relying on international students to sustain the size of their operation – as opposed to them contributing to growth. For example, at the University of the West of Scotland, the number UK students enrolled decreased between 2015/16 and 2024/25, which was compensated by an increase in non-UK enrolments. In the case of the University of Dundee, the overall student population is now smaller than ten years ago, as UK student enrolments have decreased and non-UK enrolments, after increasing to a peak in 2022/23, are now back to their previous level.[9]

At Aberdeen, despite a decline in international student numbers there was a slight increase in income from non-UK tuition fees between 2015/16 and 2025/25. Nonetheless, overall income decreased over the same period, so the increase in non-UK fee income could better be described as partially offsetting the shortfall rather than contributing to growth. It should be noted that a university's financial health also depends on whether income matches expenditure commitments. In 2024/25, most Scottish HEIs ran an operating budget deficit in terms of income and expenditure within the year.

[9] The University of Dundee experienced a budget deficit in the financial year 2025/26 partly as the result of anticipating a higher number of international postgraduate student enrolments than were recruited.

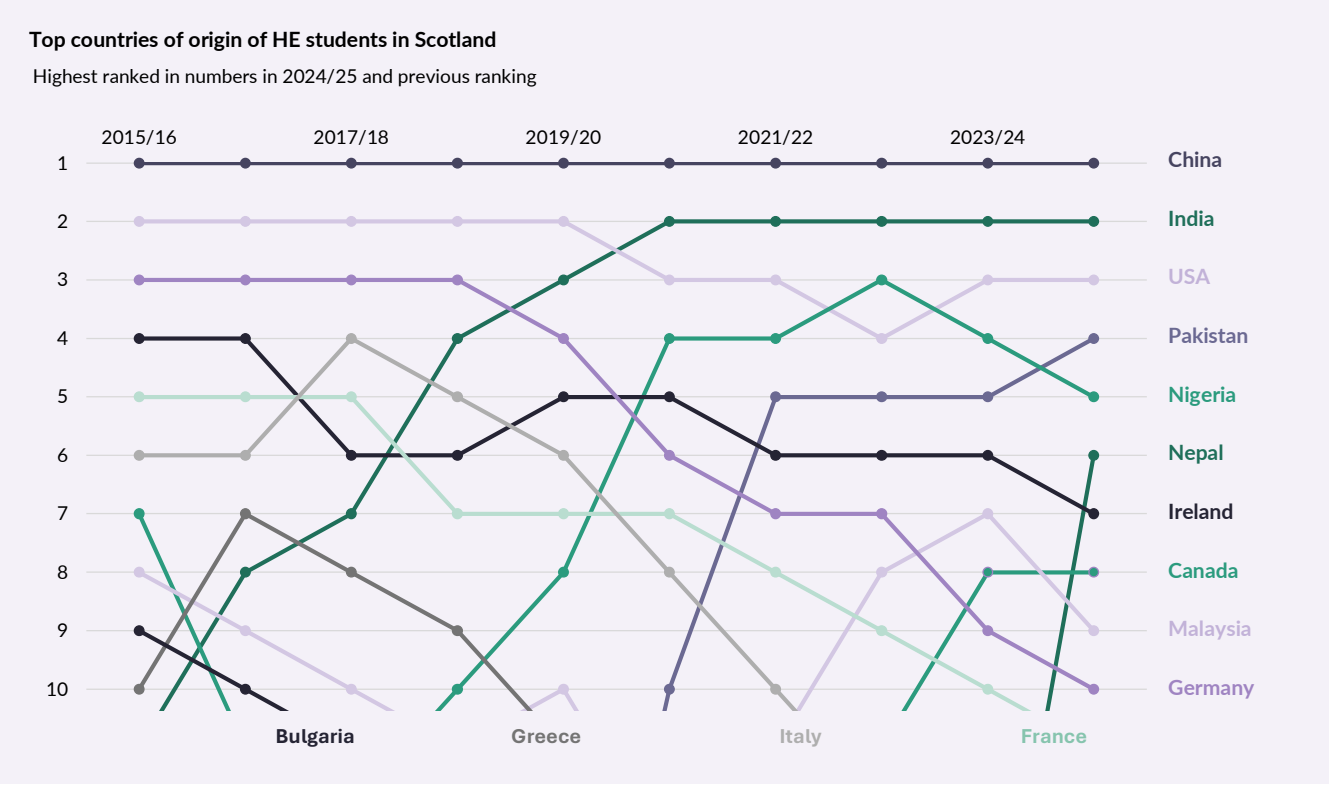
3. Characteristics of students

Origin, whether working, dependants, staying on afterwards

3.1 Origins

Most international students in Scotland come from non-EU countries. This was the case even before the UK left the EU in 2021, although since then the number of EU students has decreased and the number of non-EU students has increased, making the difference more pronounced. In 2024/25, 89% of international students came from countries outside the EU.

China is the most common specific country of origin, and this has been the case in every year for which data is available. As of 2020/21, India has been the second most common country, following a tenfold rise in Indian students enrolling at Scottish universities since they ranked as the 11th most common origin country in 2015/16. Bulgaria, France and Germany, which were all among the top 10 origin countries in 2015/16, have seen their student numbers in Scotland fall by two thirds since then and drop out of the top ranking. Pakistan, Nigeria, Canada and Nepal have entered the top ten in recent years, having not sent significant numbers of students in the past.



Source: HESA, HE student enrolments by HE provider and permanent address, 2024/25.

3.2 Demographics and work

The 2022 Scottish census recorded around 82,000 full-time higher education students in Scotland who only had a non-UK passport. Non-UK citizens in higher education in Scotland tended to be older on

average than UK students, with close to half (41%) aged 25 or older, compared with nearer to a quarter (27%) of UK students. Likely as a partial result of this age difference, non-UK students were more likely to be living in a couple (12% compared with 3%) and were more likely to be married than UK students (8% versus 3%).

Non-UK full-time students were slightly less likely to be working alongside their studies than UK students. Thirty-one per cent of non-UK students were working, with most (three quarters of that sub-group) working part-time. This reflects the fact that students on sponsored study visas can only work up to 20 hours per week, although some non-UK students are on other types of leave with different conditions. Non-UK students who were working were most likely (41%) to be in the distribution, hotel and restaurant sectors, which was also the most common sector for UK students (57%). Over a quarter (28%) of working non-UK students were in the public administration, education and health sectors, which likely reflects paid teaching work at HEIs and paid placements in health and care and which was higher than the equivalent figure for working UK students (19%).

3.3 Continued residence and outcomes after study

The Scottish Government has, in the past, signalled an intention to retain more non-UK students in Scotland after graduation. The primary route for international students to stay in the UK after graduating is via the Graduate Visa (GV), which allows but does not require them to work (at any skill level).

Analysis by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) tentatively suggests that students who studied in Scotland are under-represented among GV route applicants. Scotland's share of GV applicants was 7.5% between 2021 and 2023, while its share of international students was 8.8%.[10] The figures imply that around 5,000 to 6,000 non-UK graduates have stayed in Scotland on the GV annually in recent years.

This MAC data (gathered by the Home Office) captures the location of the applicant at the time they apply to the GV route, and it is possible that some apply after having moved away from the place where they studied. Once someone has been granted a visa under this scheme, there is also no requirement for them to stay in the same part of the UK. London was particularly over-represented, accounting for 39.5% of GV applicants compared with 30.8% of students, which could indicate a higher propensity of students there to apply for the GV or a tendency for graduates to move there from elsewhere – or indeed, a combination of both factors.

[10] Migration Advisory Committee, Graduate route: rapid review (accessible), updated 16 May 2024, p.17

Appendix: Data availability and limitations

The extensive and detailed data published by HESA on higher education students provides an invaluable source of data on this topic. That said, it is a major limitation that this data does not include a direct indicator of whether a student is a UK or non-UK national. The 'country of permanent residence' variable is likely not perfect as a proxy for nationality, and there is also no way of knowing how much measurement error it may include.

The Scottish census, which gives us information on the population of full-time students, is also limited in not containing a direct nationality variable. Passports held is likely to be an adequate proxy for most non-UK students, although there is some risk of dual-British nationals being wrongly categorised as non-UK only.

The UK Labour Force Survey/ Annual Population Survey also captures data on migrant stocks which, in theory, can tell us how many foreign nationals and foreign-born people are studying, as well as the number that initially arrived for the reason of studying. However, the fact that the survey does not capture most people living in student halls of residence means, in practice, non-UK students are under-represented. The Scottish sample has also suffered from high non-response in recent years and has not been useable for detailed analysis on this topic.

Another gap relates to outcomes for students who stay in Scotland after graduating. The HESA data on activities after studying, although detailed, has a high rate of non-response and may not be representative. For example, of non-UK graduates of Scottish universities who responded to the most recent HESA survey (2023/24), three quarters (74%) were in employment. This proportion was slightly lower than among UK graduates from Scottish universities (83%), with the main difference being the proportion who said they were unemployed: 12% of non-UK graduates compared with 4% of UK graduates. Because the sample may not be representative – particularly for non-UK students – we do not know whether these figures can be used to draw any general conclusions.

Data on GV applicants from the Home Office (as analysed in the MAC's 2024 review) is not sufficiently broken down to provide figures for Scotland. It would be useful to have data on which UK university a GV applicant graduated from, as this would provide a clearer indication of how many studied in Scotland than the current figures which are based on location at time of application.

A further gap concerns the impact of students and their dependants on local economies. A central gap within this is what the dependants of students do in terms of economic activity. Some Scotland-level evidence of the economic and public service impacts of student migration was included in a 2018 Scottish Government submission to the MAC but without a local breakdown, or indeed any follow-up since.

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