Open for Business? Survey of International Student Perceptions of Post-Study Opportunities in the UK

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Executive Summary

This report details the findings from a groundbreaking survey on international student perceptions of the UK as a place in which to engage in further study, skilled employment or entrepreneurial activity. It expands on a two page briefing produced on 09 January 2013 by the project team[1]. The UK immigration system has undergone significant reform, accompanied by intense debate as to its purpose and the 'value' specific categories of migrants add to the country (Ho, 2011; Home Office, 2012a; Martin, 2012). In the case of Higher Education, there has been criticism that recent changes to UK government policy are making the UK a less attractive destination for international students (APPG Migration, 2012).

Given this concern, our study investigated international student perspectives on the UK as a country in which to participate in skilled activity on graduation. An electronic survey was emailed to all 165 Higher Education Institutions based in the UK in October 2012. By the time the survey closed in December 2012, the research team had received 694 responses. Of those, 585 respondents were considered to be 'international' students i.e. to be from states whose nationals were not eligible for UK 'home' fees (UKCISA, 2013). Our analysis of the feedback from this group highlights the following key messages:

1. When electing to study in the UK, international students set particular importance on the high reputation of UK universities;
2. Yet, over half of international students wished to leave the UK after graduation, with the vast majority intending to return to their home country;
3. Of those who intended to remain in the UK, the majority wanted to work, with a significant minority seeking to engage in further study;
4. Approximately one third of international students wished to set up a business, although the majority intended to do so outside of the UK;
5. International students were frank in describing their mixed experiences of studying, seeking skilled work and engaging in entrepreneurial activity whilst in the UK.

Therefore, whilst UK universities remain highly regarded and international students continue to recommend the UK as a place of study, respondents are less likely to stay in the country after graduation to engage in skilled employment or private enterprise. This represents a potentially significant loss to UK Plc of migrant talent which continues to make a considerable contribution to advances in science, technology and engineering, among many other fields, in countries across the world.

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[1] This is available on request. Contact Dr Warren as corresponding author.

1. Introduction

UK immigration policy has been transformed in recent years, as successive governments have sought to manage migrant inflow whilst continuing to attract 'the best and the brightest' (HM Government, 2011). Significant reforms have included the introduction of the Points Based System (PBS) in 2008, the establishment of an annual limit on immigration numbers for skilled migrants, and the closure of immigration visas for skilled applicants not linked to job offers. Over a similar period, the UK Higher Education (HE) sector has generated considerable export earnings for the national economy. The total value accumulated annually from overseas students, including tuition fee income, finance from research grants procured overseas, and revenue from internationally-located spin-out companies, has been estimated at almost £8bn (BIS, 2011). However, this income is under threat, with the number of people arriving in the UK for formal study declining by over 10% between 2010 and the year to March 2012 (ONS, 2012). Concerns have been expressed about the impact of specific regulatory changes, in particular, the closure of the Tier 1 Post Study Work (PSW) route, reduced entitlement of international students to work in the UK and more stringent Higher Education Institution (HEI) accreditation procedures (APPG Migration, 2012). A study by the British Council (2012) into the impact of similar policy changes by the US and Australian governments during the previous decade indicated that comparable initiatives resulted in a decline in international student enrolments. In our view, recent visa reforms place the UK in an equally vulnerable position.

Given this situation, it is surprising that there has been little systematic research into the perceptions of international students on recent changes to the UK immigration system. This matters as international students make a contribution beyond enrolling, studying and spending money when in their host country. Research in the US suggested that, if permitted to remain in their country of study to work or engage in entrepreneurial activity, overseas graduates will use specialised services, establish companies and, importantly, develop networks of contacts (Saxenian, 2006; Wadhwa et al, 2009). These interactions contribute to the economy of the host country and, equally, enhance the circulation of knowledge and skills with individuals and institutions within the graduate's country of origin. In recent years, the top three 'sending' countries for international students enrolled at UK HEIs have been China, India and Nigeria: key markets in which the UK is seeking to expand (UKCISA, WWW).

As such, this survey into the future plans, including entrepreneurial intentions, of international students based at UK HEIs is timely and relevant. In order to inform national economic and policy imperatives, it is important that research captures, and raises awareness of, views from this significant migrant group on the UK as a place to study, work or support enterprise. There have been indications that the UK government is beginning to adopt a more flexible approach to the retention of international student talent, through initiatives such as the Graduate Entrepreneur visa and enhanced work opportunities proposed for specific categories of students (Home Office, 2012b). However, our findings suggest that a more holistic approach is required to improve international student perceptions of the UK.

2. Methods

An electronic survey was emailed to all 165 HEIs based in the UK in October 2012 (UUK, WWW). The HEIs included elite global institutions (e.g. Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh), newer universities (e.g. Sunderland, Northampton, Edge Hill) and specialist colleges (e.g. Royal Veterinary College, Royal College of Art, Royal College of Music). The questionnaire covered six topics, with the respondents being asked about:

- Biography;
- Educational details;
- Visa application process;
- Future plans;
- Entrepreneurial intentions;
- Perceptions of the UK.

The survey was sent to the International Offices, and equivalent, at each HEI, with the request that it be disseminated to relevant students. In addition, it was publicised via distribution lists, social media and engagement with HE interest media groups such as UUK, National Union of Students (NUS) and Times Higher Education (THE). The research team followed up the initial contact with HEIs with further emails in November and early December 2012. International students who completed the survey were entered into a prize draw for one of five £50 Amazon vouchers. The survey was closed on Friday 21 December 2012.

In total, we received 694 responses, of which 585 were considered to be from 'international' students i.e. they reported their country of origin to be states whose nationals were not eligible for UK 'home' fees[2]. In this report, we summarise the feedback from the 585 international students. Where appropriate, presentation of our findings include comments entered into free text sections of the questionnaire by respondents.

This study is systematic, in that responses have been sought from every UK HEI. However, we accept that results from a sample of 585 respondents may not be generalisable to UK international student population as a whole. In addition, not all participants answered every question. Nevertheless, the results give a valid, and important, insight into the perspectives of a sizeable sample of overseas scholars enrolled at UK HEIs.

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[2] The definition of international student is complex. In general terms, international students will have been resident in countries outside of the EEA, Switzerland and various overseas territories (e.g. Bermuda, French Polynesia, Greenland). Under certain circumstances, children of Turkish workers may qualify for 'home' fees, although for the purposes of this report any Turkish nationals have been categorised as international students. For detailed guidance, refer to UKCISA (2013).

3. Findings

3.1 The International Students

The international students originated from a wide variety of countries, although just over half the sample came from four states: US, China (Mainland), Malaysia and India (Figure 1). A sizeable number of students (numerical value = 21) also originated from Nigeria, the third highest source of UK international student enrolment (UKCISA, WWW). The gender divide of respondents was 60% female and 40% male.
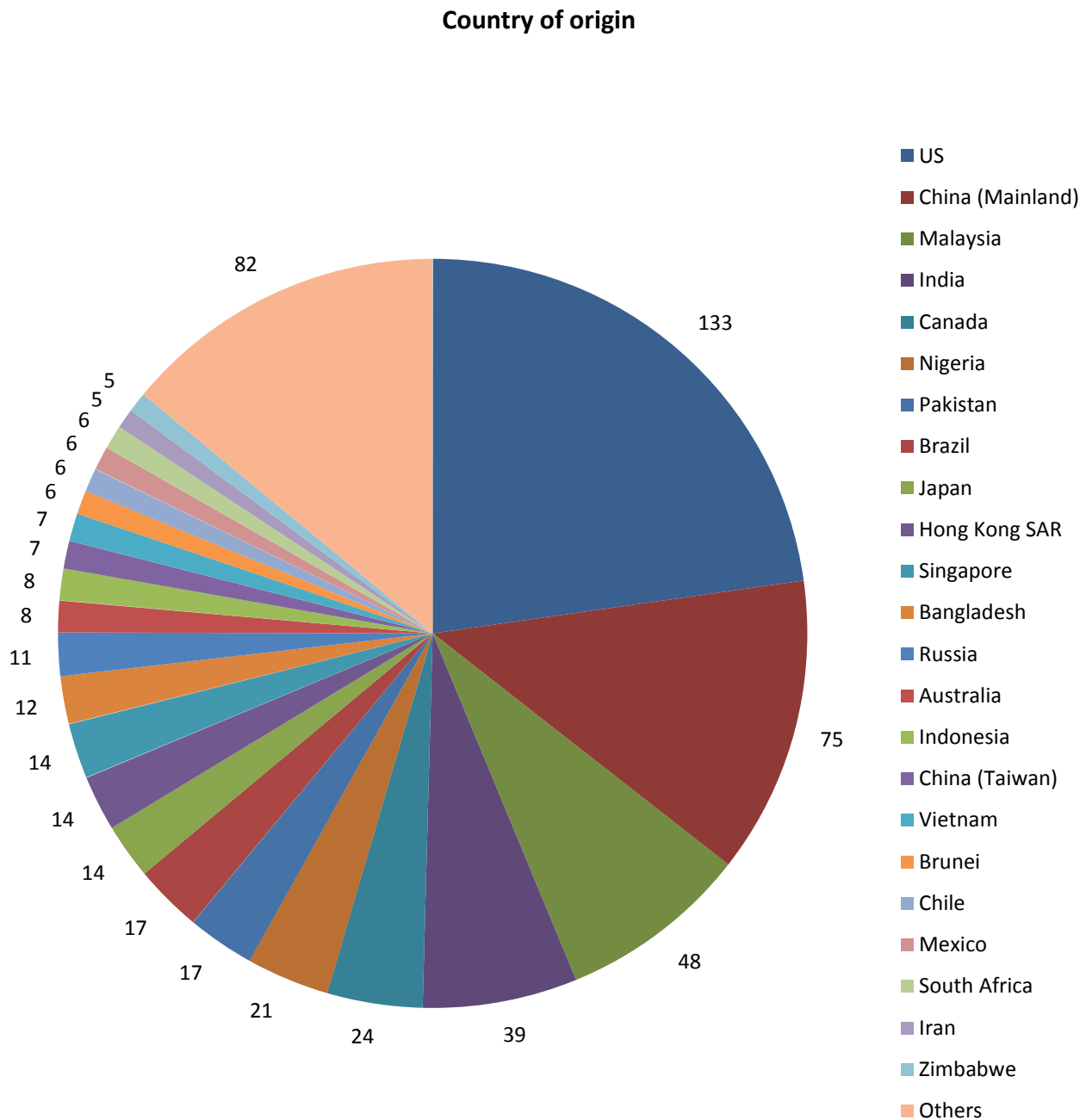
Country of origin

Figure 1: Country of origin of international students, by numerical value (n=585)

3.2 Education

The vast majority of international students (96%) were studying full-time. Over half the sample (52%) expected to graduate by the end of 2013, and 91% expected to do so by 2015 (Figure 2).
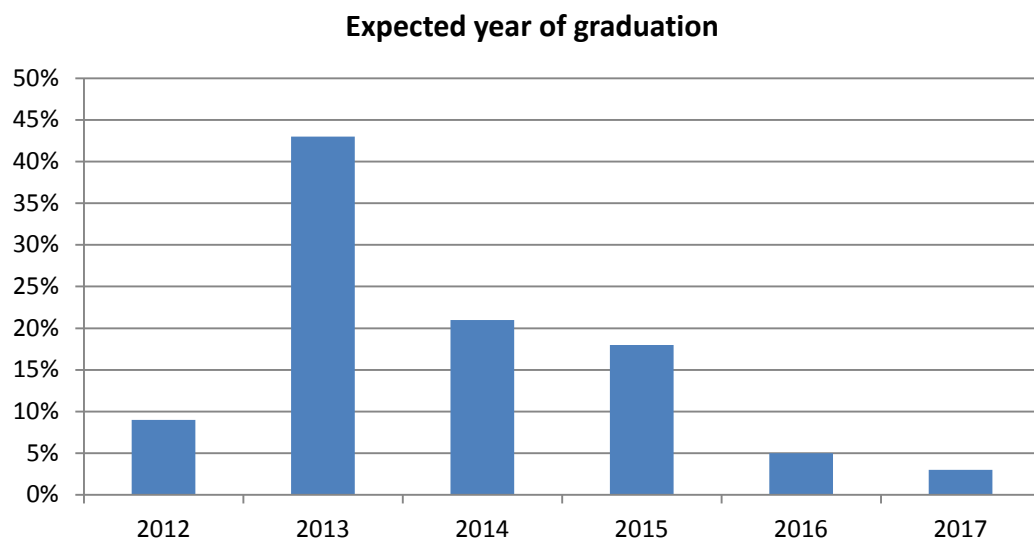
Expected year of graduation

Figure 2: Expected year of graduation of international students (n=580)

Respondents described their level of study as undergraduate (38%), masters (31%) and postgraduate research (31%) (Figure 3).
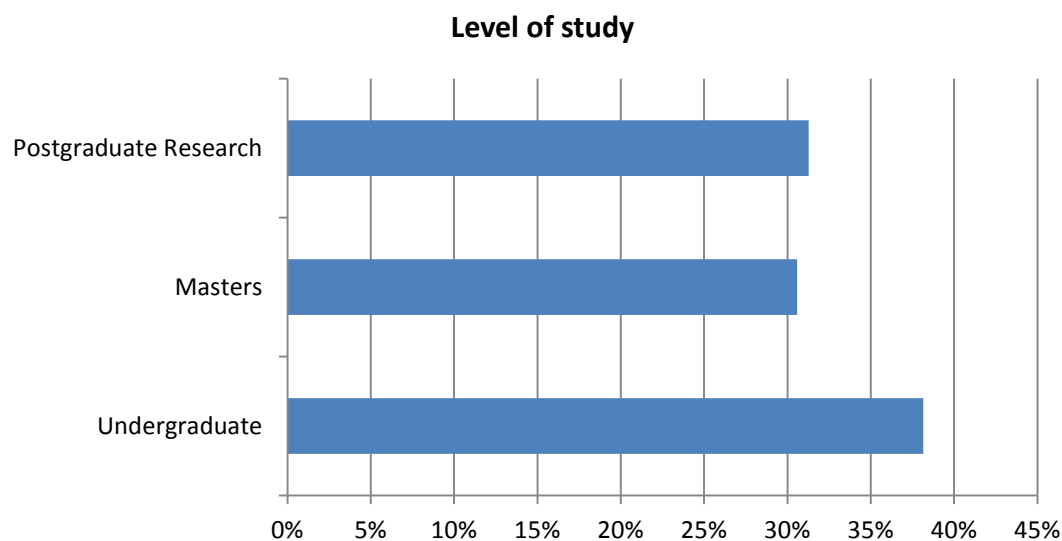
Level of study

Figure 3:International student level of study (n=582)

International students studied across diverse subjects, including medicine, environmental engineering and drama. Two thirds (66%) of the sample were enrolled on courses in five broad fields: Arts and Humanities; Business and Economics; Engineering; Medicine; and Veterinary Medicine (Figure 4).
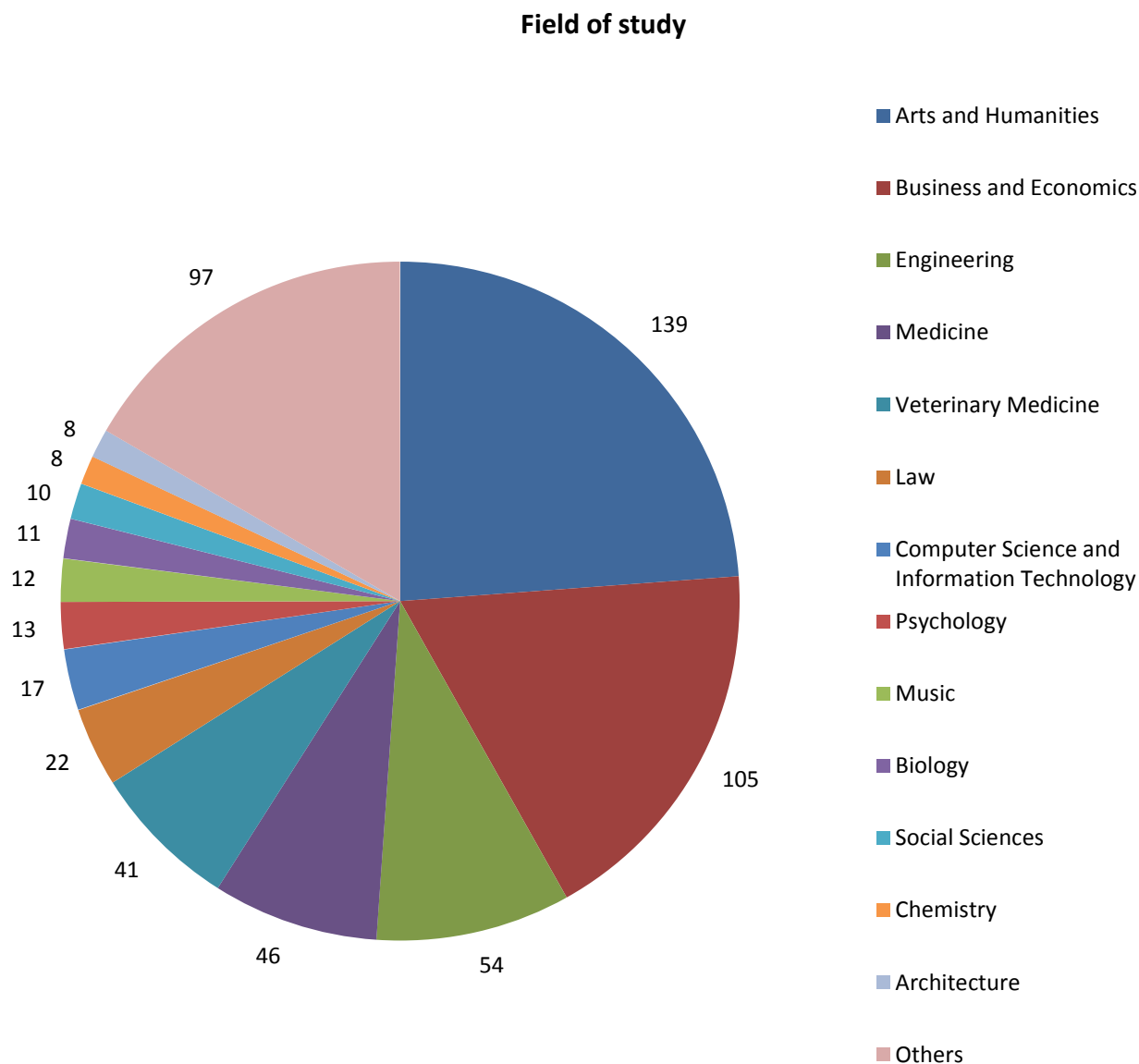
Field of study

Legend:
- Arts and Humanities
- Business and Economics
- Engineering
- Medicine
- Veterinary Medicine
- Law
- Computer Science and Information Technology
- Psychology
- Music
- Biology
- Social Sciences
- Chemistry
- Architecture
- Others

Pie chart values: 139, 105, 54, 46, 41, 22, 17, 13, 12, 11, 10, 8, 8, 97

Figure 4: International student field of study, by numerical value (n=583)

Reasons for studying in the UK

Respondents were asked to assess the significance of a number of factors in influencing their decision to study in the UK. The most important pulls to the UK were (i) the experience gained by studying overseas (65% scored as 'most important' or 'important') (ii) the reputation of UK universities (64% rated as 'most important' or 'important'). International students were also asked about the importance of other criteria influencing their decision to study in the UK. Almost half (47%) perceived post study work opportunities as an important, or the most important, factor influencing their decision to enrol at HEIs based in the UK, whilst the opportunity to improve English language skills and the lack of high quality study opportunities in the respondent's home country both featured less prominently (Figure 5).

> *'In summary, the reason for my attendance here in the UK is the subject matter rather than job opportunities.'*
>
> *'One major reason I came to study in the UK was because of this post study visa.'*
>
> *'It is extremely shameful for them to cancel the PSW, since it was the main reason I chose UK over US. Now I regret my choice.'*
>
> *'I was drawn to the UK thanks to the excellent reputation of UK universities in my area of study…'*
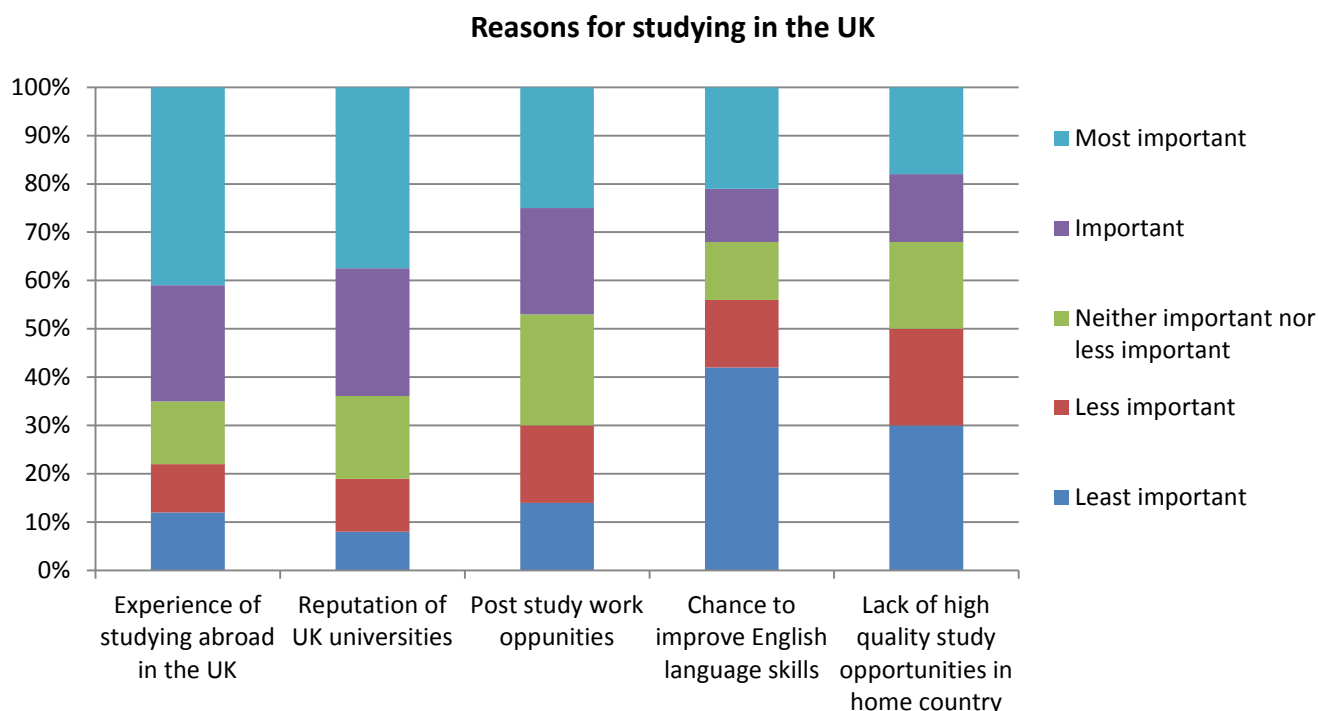
Reasons for studying in the UK

Figure 5: Reasons for international students to study in the UK

Respondents: experience of studying abroad (n=574); reputation of UK universities (n=581); post study work opportunities (n=580); improve English language skills (n=574); lack of high quality study opportunities in home country (n=576).

3.3 Visa Application Process

When describing their experiences of applying for a visa to study in the UK, exactly half (50%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a good level of service was provided by officials in their home country. A similar proportion (47%) thought a good level of service was provided by agents in their home country, whilst 50% of the sample agreed that clear information was provided on the UKBA website. However, fewer students (36%) were in agreement regarding the clarity of information provided by UKBA staff over the telephone. The area of strongest disagreement was with the statement that the cost of the visa application represented good value for money. This statement was disputed by 55% of respondents (Figure 6).

'Applying for a visa is such a hassle. It is costly, inconvenient and time consuming. Banking services are also not very helpful to students.'

'The student visa application was a bit of a nightmare, and it is uncertain how easy/hard it will become graduation to stay.'

'I would advise people to avoid coming to the UK for any matter if they don't want to struggle with visas, there are many other countries were people can either study, start businesses or other activities successfully and enjoy their experiences.'

'The UKBA was very helpful with my visa however, my university was unbelievably unorganized!'
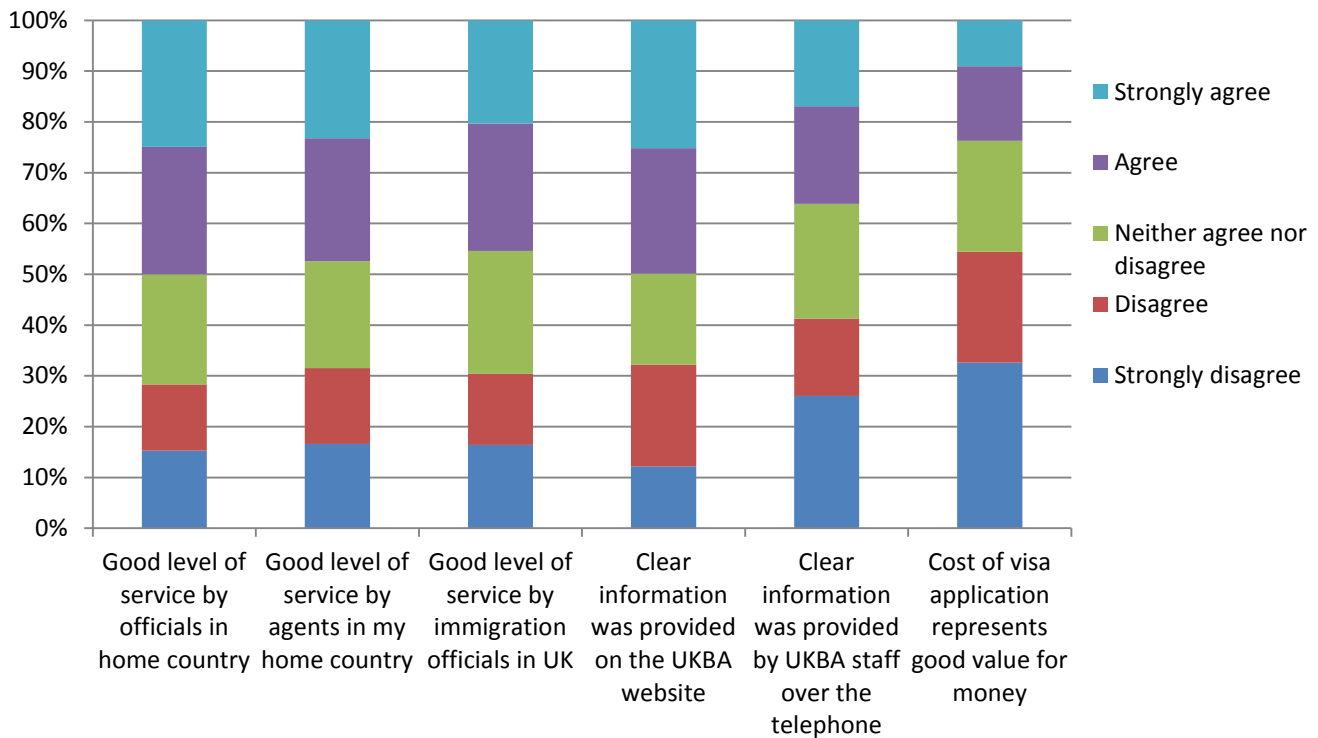
Experiences of applying for UK study visa

Figure 6: International student experiences of applying for UK study visa.

Respondents: level of service by officials in home country (n=498); level of service by agents in home country (n=422); level of service by immigration officials in UK (n=487); clear information provided on UKBA website (n=525); clear information provided by UKBA staff over telephone (n=296); visa application good value for money (n=531).

A relatively small proportion (34%) of survey respondents had used advisors and agents to assist with visa applications (Figure 7a). Of those who had not sought help from agents or advisors, just one third (33%) reported that they believed their experience of applying for a visa would have been better had they done so (Figure 7b).

Use of advisor or agent to assist with visa application
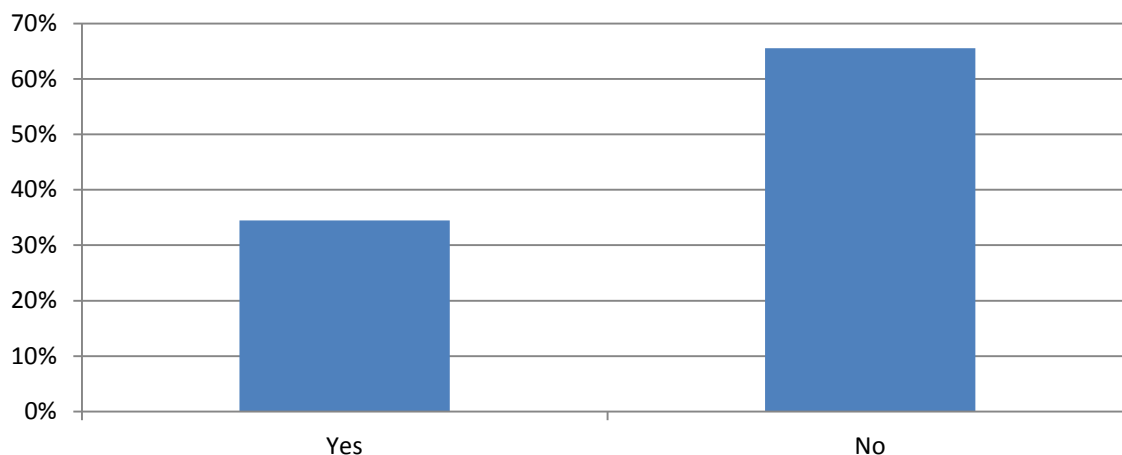

Figure 7a: International student use of advisor or agent to assist with visa application (n=577)

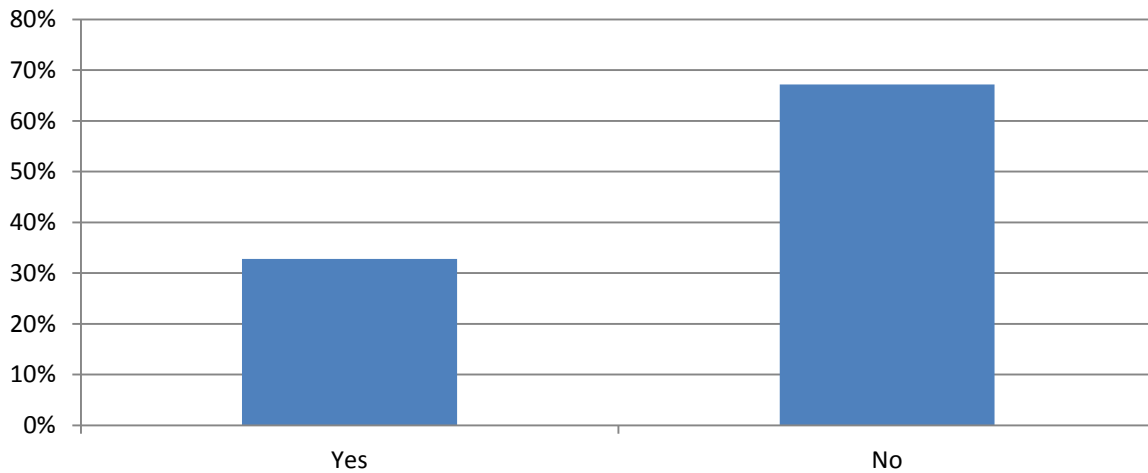**Would visa application experience have been better with an advisor or agent?**

Figure 7b: Would international student visa application experience have been better with an advisor or agent? (n=378)

3.4 Future Plans

A sizeable minority (42%) of the 585 international student respondents planned to stay in the UK after graduation. Of the 58% (numerical value = 337) who intended to leave the UK, the overwhelming majority (84%) stated that they would return to their home country.

Reasons for leaving the UK

Students wishing to leave the UK were asked further questions about factors influencing their decision (Figure 8). The most important reason was to be with family and friends (51% rated as 'extremely important' or 'very important'). A substantial proportion of the students also cited their nationality or status as an international student (44%) and personal experience of difficulty in getting a visa to remain in the UK (41%) as significant 'push' factors. Nevertheless, 38% of respondents reported that difficulty in acquiring UK visa was not important in their decision to leave the UK. The least significant factor in individual decisions to leave the UK was the refusal of a UK visa application, with two thirds (66%) of international students stating that this was 'not at all important'.

> *'I feel that university does not offer enough support to students who have just come here alone with no form of family or friends around…'*
>
> *'It's so beautiful and amazing and I wish I could stay here forever, even though I miss my family, friends, and certain things back home.'*
>
> *'Being away from home, without friends and family is hard enough.'*
>
> *'I also don't really have any future plans, I just got here! I think I'll head back home though, my family is there after all.'*
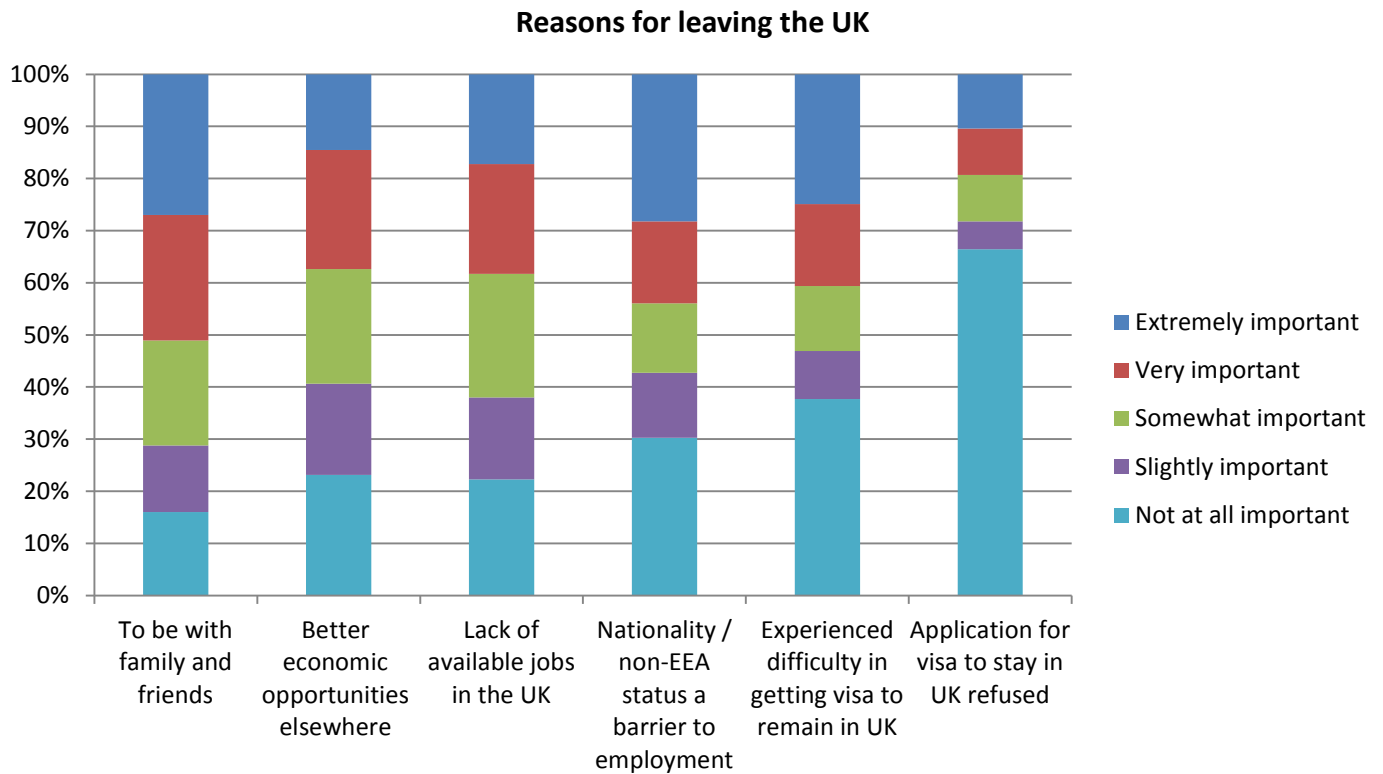
Reasons for leaving the UK

Figure 8: Level of agreement on reasons for leaving the UK (n=337)

Reasons for remaining in the UK

A clear majority of the 243 international students who wished to remain in the UK intended to work (62%). A little over a quarter of respondents to this question (26%) wanted to pursue further studies, whilst just 2% of those intending to stay wished to set up a business in the UK (Figure 9).

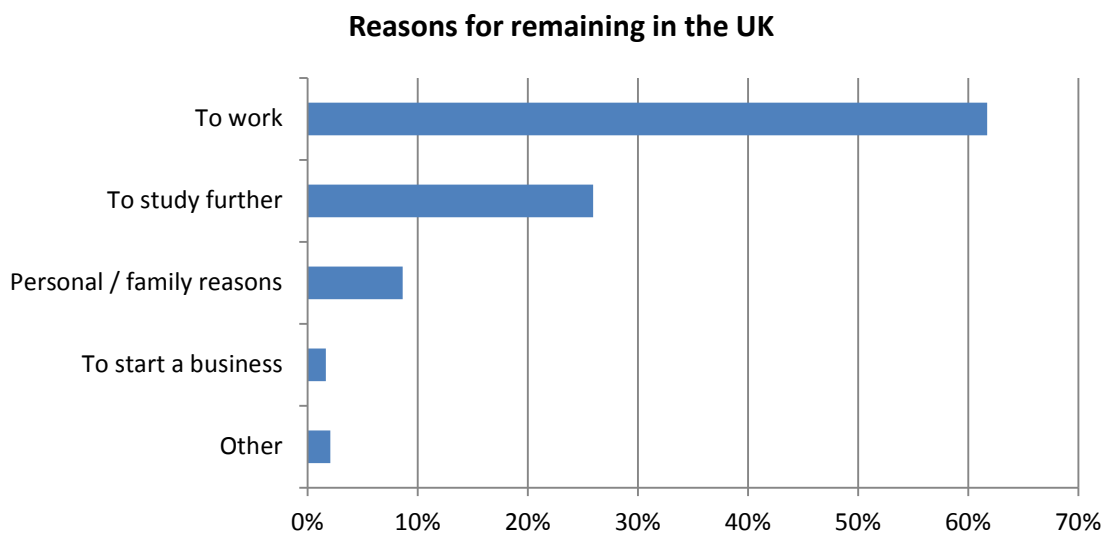## Reasons for remaining in the UK

Figure 9: Reasons for international students wishing to remain in UK (n=243)

A significant minority of international students who intended to remain in the UK to work (44%) believed it would be 'extremely difficult' or 'very difficult' for them to find employment in a relevant field (Figure 10). A substantially higher proportion (63%) thought that obtaining a work visa would present considerable difficulty.

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'After the exemption of PSW it has become very difficult for non-EU international students to get a job in their desired field…'

'Difficult as a non-EU citizen (American) to get work visa; I suspect I would need a job to sponsor my visa.'

'I assume it will be difficult to achieve employment after graduation and am unlikely to apply unless I already have an organization willing to support the process.'

'I was repeatedly told that I did not speak 'British' and that it would be difficult to find me a permanent role because of my visa status.'

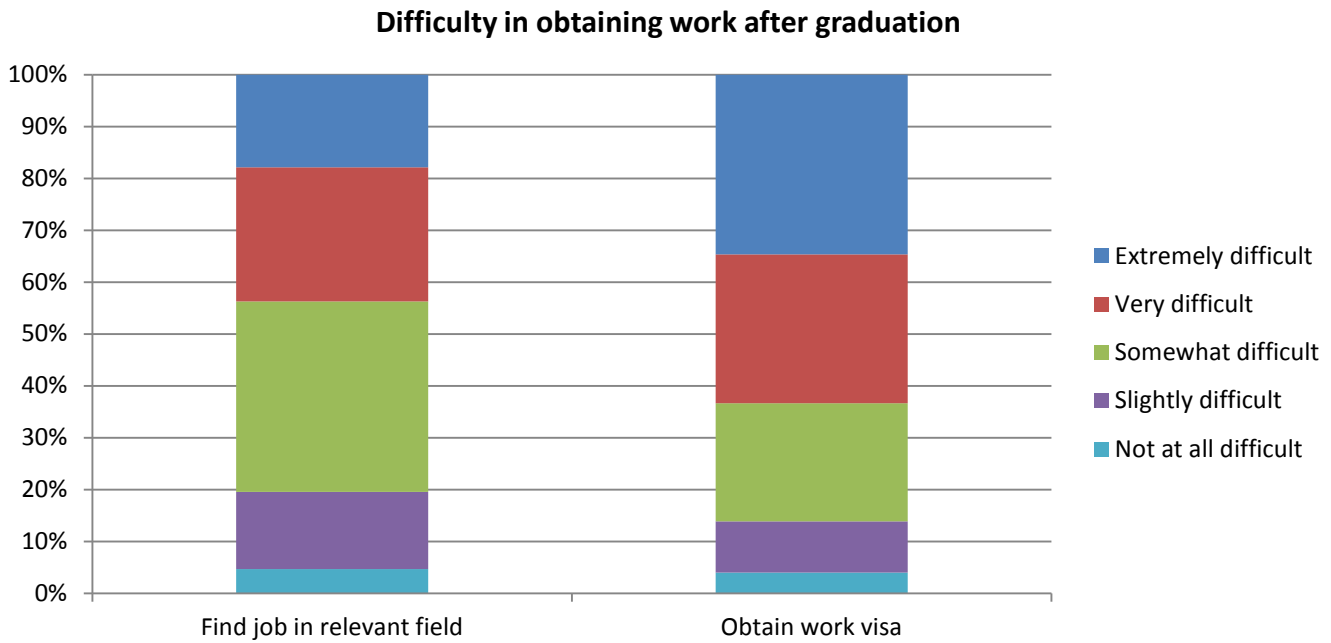**Difficulty in obtaining work after graduation**

Figure 10: International student perceived difficulty in obtaining appropriate UK-based work and UK work visas after graduation (n=150)

When asked how long they would like to stay in the UK after graduation, a significant minority of participants (31%) wished to stay for just one to two years (Figure 11). In total, two thirds (67%) of international students wanted to remain in their host country for four years or less following completion of their studies. One third (33%) of respondents reported that they would like to stay in the UK for five years or more.
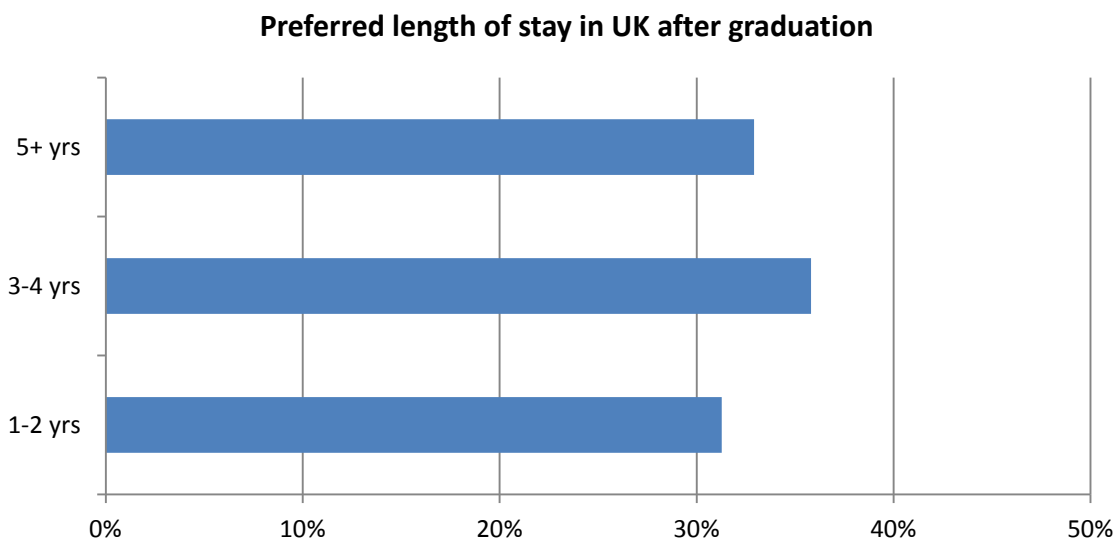
Preferred length of stay in UK after graduation

Figure 11: Preferred length of international student stay in UK after graduation (n=243)

3.5 Entrepreneurial Intentions

Almost one third (31%, numerical value = 183) of respondents wished to set up a business, regardless of location. Of that number, 64% intended to do so within the next five years (Figure 12). A further 21% planned to do so during the next six to ten years. In addition, 7% of respondents declared that they had already started an enterprise.

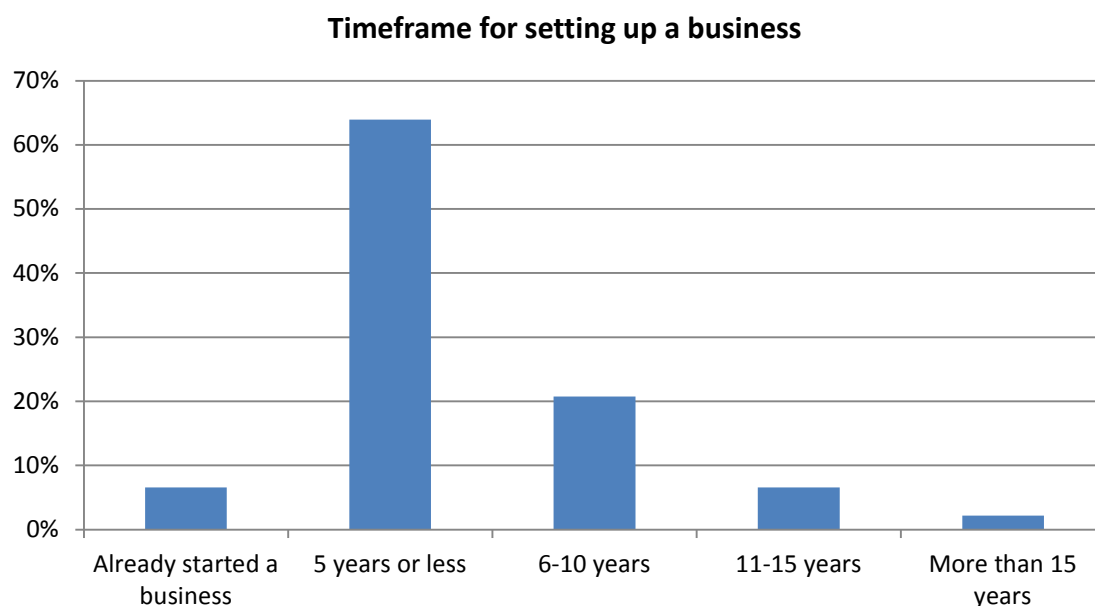**Timeframe for setting up a business**

Figure 12: Timeframe for international students to set up a business (n=183)

International students perceived the most likely location of their business start up to be their home country (51%), whilst less than a quarter wished to set up in the UK (23%). One fifth (20%) of respondents were uncertain (Figure 13).

Likely location of business start up
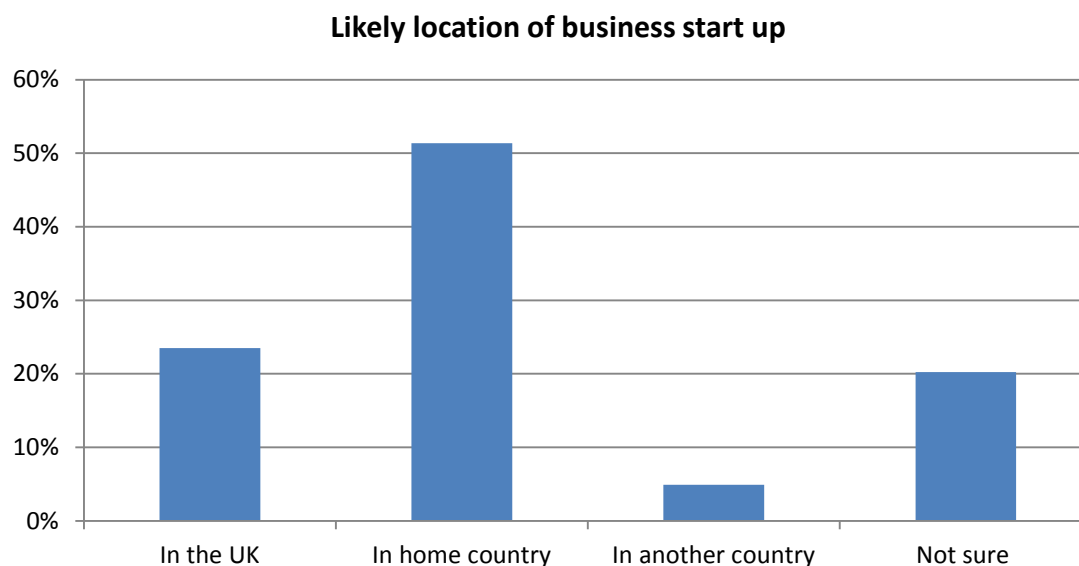
Figure 13: Likely location of international student business start ups (n=183)

International students wished to establish, or had established, businesses in a variety of sectors (Figure 14). The top four economic sectors given by students were technology, retail, healthcare and travel and leisure. Together, they accounted for 42% (numerical value = 76) of the responses to this question. A notable number of students also wished to set up in veterinary practice (7%, numerical value = 13) and engineering (7%, numerical value =12).

'It is much easier to start up a business here, with a simpler tax system, less bureaucracy and several different agencies to support entrepreneurship, which is hard to find back home.'

'It is very hard to begin to think in an entrepreneurial fashion when one's visa only permits half-time work.'

'…I think that the government will provide a good platform for non European student to establish their business and use their skills to improve the UK economy.'

'Whereas back home, you can easily start your own business thereby helping to create job opportunities… Setting up in the [UK] is one hell of a task, you have to go through different spending, payments and others.'

'…I planned to start a business in the UK, the visa being offered now requires a person to invest 50k - not everyone is Richard Branson's offspring.'

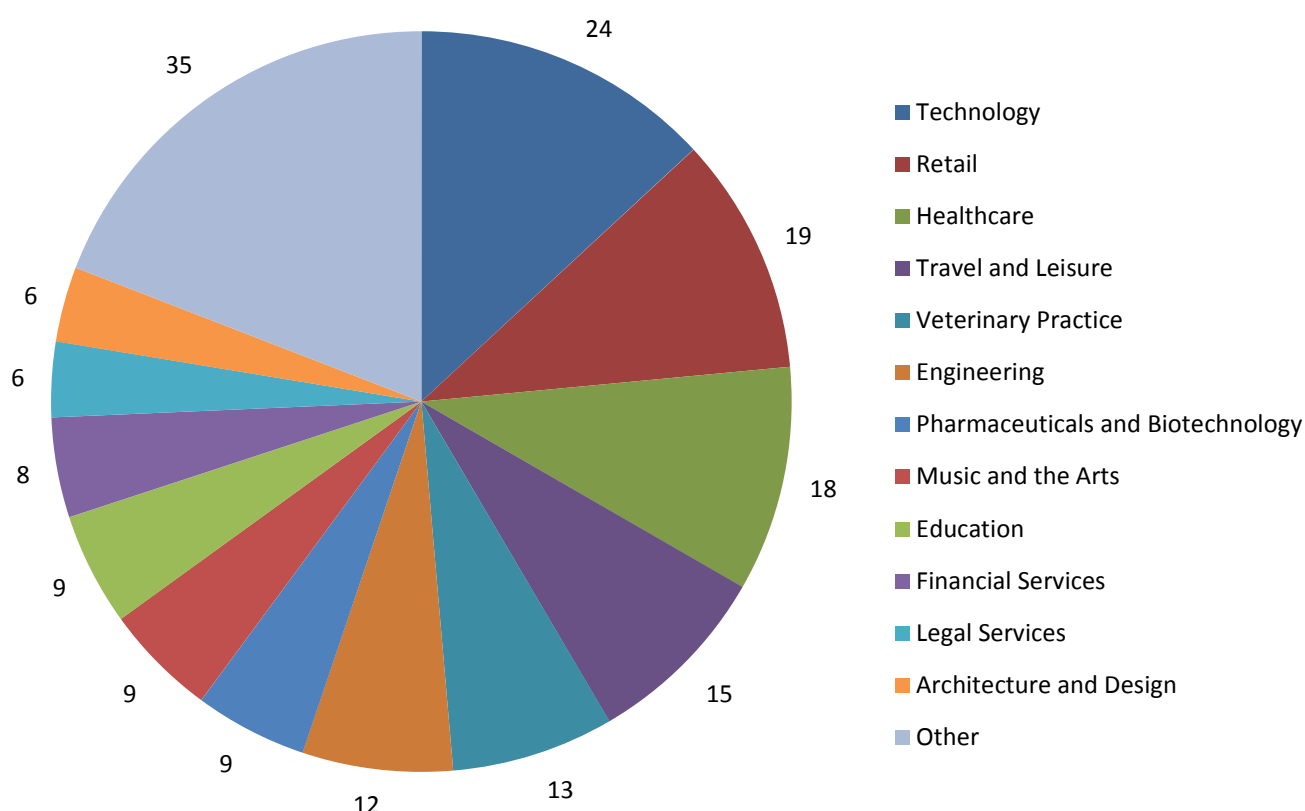## Sectors in which international students wished to establish / had established a business

Figure 14: Sectors in which international students wished to establish, or had established, a business, by numerical value (n=183)

3.6 Perceptions of the UK

International students perceived their home country to provide both the best job opportunities (54%) and to be the best place in which to start a business (68%) (Figure 15). A quarter (25%) of respondents saw the UK as having the best job opportunities, whilst 21% of participants mentioned other countries, of which the US accounted for approximately one quarter. A smaller proportion of international students (19%) viewed the UK as being the best place to start a business, whilst 14% of respondents believed other countries - particularly the US, with almost a third of the total in that column - to be preferable locations.

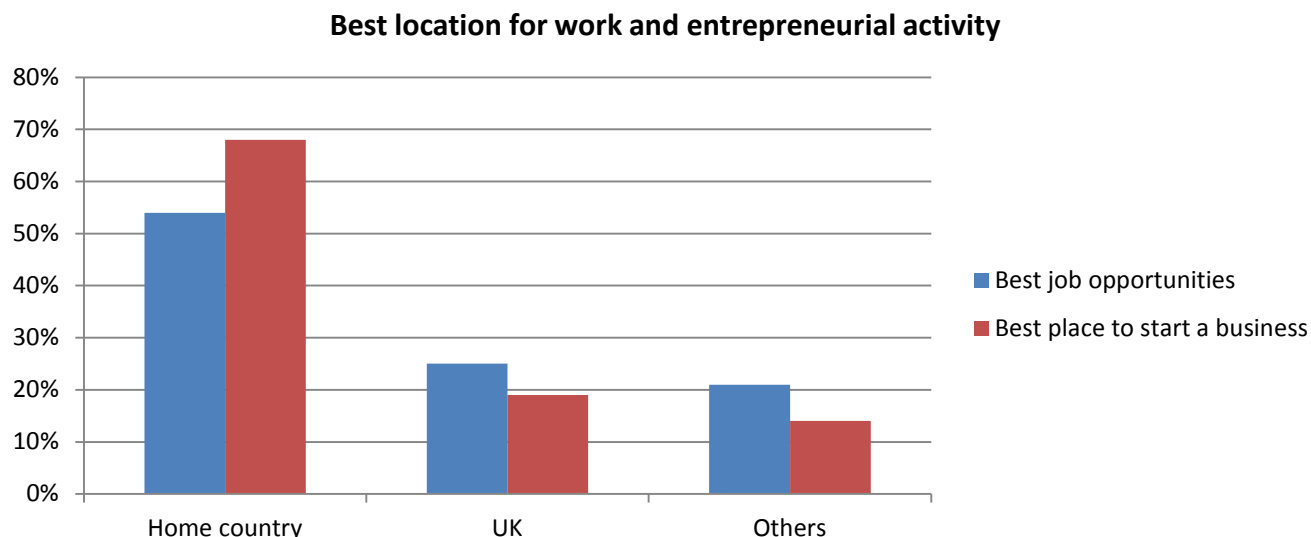**Best location for work and entrepreneurial activity**

Figure 15: International student perceptions of best location for work (n=574) and entrepreneurial activity (n=575)

International students were positive about the quality of life in the UK, with almost half of respondents (49%) stating that it was better or much better than expected and just 17% reporting it to be worse or much worse than expected (Figure 16). On the whole, students did believe reasonable opportunities existed in the UK to start a business (57% rated this statement 'as expected', 'better than expected' or 'much better than expected'), even if the majority considered better opportunities to occur in their home country. International students also thought circumstances existed in the UK for migrants to achieve success (53% rated this assertion 'as expected', 'better than expected' or 'much better than expected'). Nevertheless, the view was mixed, with over 40% of respondents finding the situation within the UK in both instances to be worse or much worse than they had expected.

Views were slightly more negative regarding support to *enable* migrants to achieve success, with 53% of respondents believing the environment in their host country to be worse or much worse than expected. However, the most negative perspectives regarded the availability of visas to enable international students to work in the UK. Over two thirds (68%) of respondents perceived the situation to be worse or much worse than expected and just 15% reported it to be better or much better than expected.

> 'Good experience of studying in the UK, my university has some form of international orientation which enabled me to begin to understand the local culture.'
>
> 'Blatant racism/prejudice by individuals, university and politicians in the news. I've felt alone, unwelcome and hated since day 1 even in places like the NHS where my care is supposed to be the number 1 priority. If the UK was a plate of food served to me in a restaurant, I would send it back.'
>
> '…it is fun n [sic] good experience. But at the same time it is also scary as some local being racist and lately there are break ins to my friends houses…'
>
> 'Back in HK, we understand that foreigners have a different culture and we appreciate that. But here, people would just think you are weird just because you behave or do things differently. Alcohol would be a good example. Not drinking on a daily or weekly basis doesn't mean one is socially awkward.'
>
> 'During my study here in [name of HEI] the staffs (lecturers) were racist and marks were been allocated based on your skin colour/nationality and same was applicable in the search for job.'
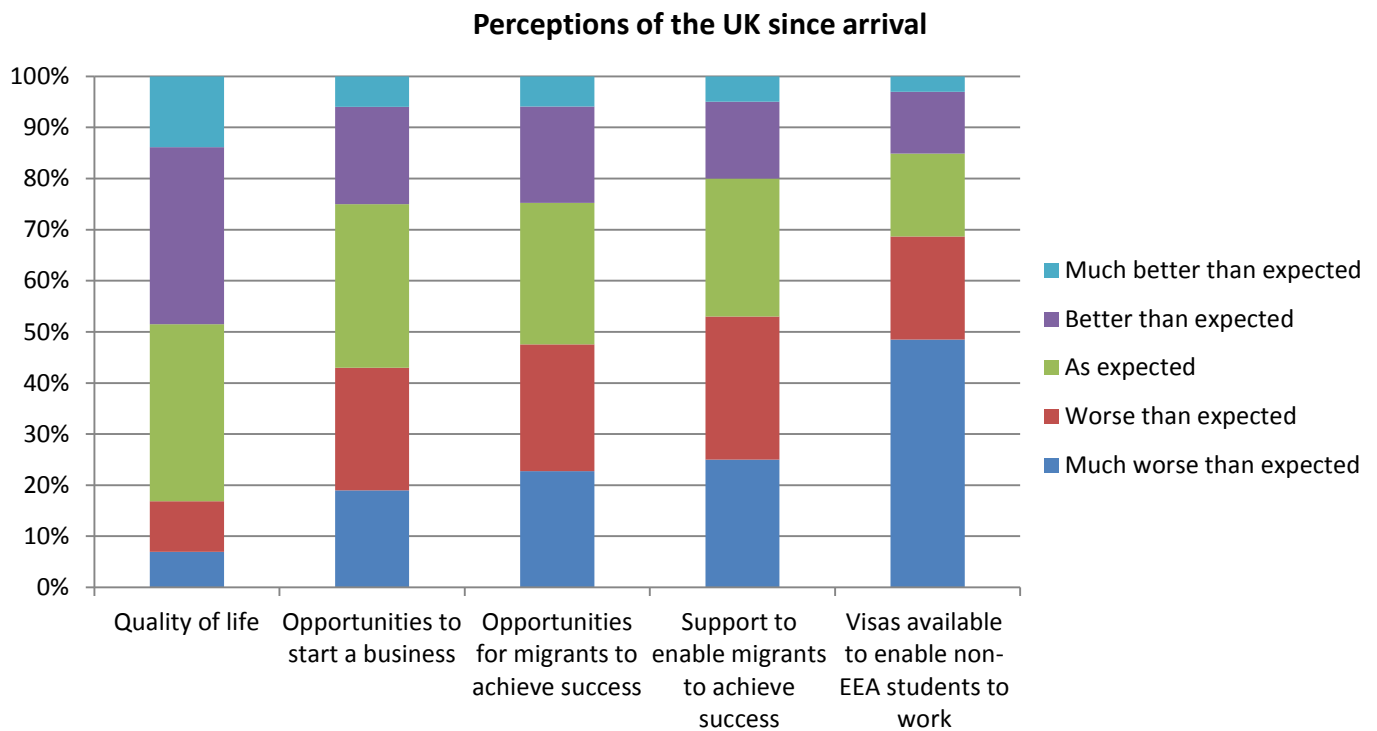
Perceptions of the UK since arrival

Figure 16: International student perceptions of the UK since arrival.

Respondents: quality of life (n=568), opportunities to start a business (n=356), opportunities to achieve success (n=492), support to enable achievement of success (n=487), available work visas (n=469).

Student Support
UK universities received high levels of satisfaction from international students for their assistance in helping them achieve their future goals (Figure 17). Two thirds of respondents (66%) rated support from their HEI to be either satisfactory or highly satisfactory, and just 16% assessed it to be unsatisfactory or highly unsatisfactory. Satisfaction with other service providers was lower. Nevertheless, a substantial minority (40%) of international students who used non-governmental or charitable organisations (such as the Immigration Advisory Service) deemed support to be satisfactory or highly satisfactory. International student assessment of law firms was more even split with 32% of respondents who used their services declaring themselves to be satisfied or highly satisfied and 31% to be dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied. The UKBA, with its enforcement role, received a lower satisfaction rating, with 29% satisfied or highly satisfied and 45% unsatisfied and highly unsatisfied.
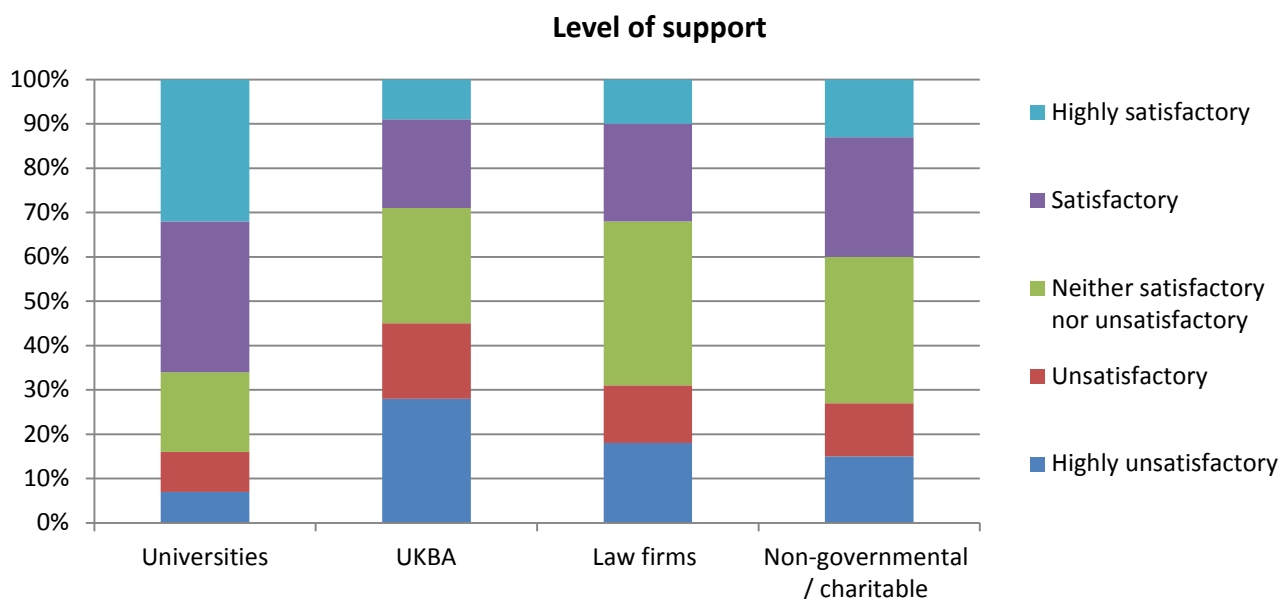
Level of support

Figure 17: Level of support in assisting international students to achieve their future plans from universities (n=531), UKBA (n=424), law firms (n=178) and non-governmental / charitable organisations (n=214)

> *'…the university has been extremely helpful in assisting me to develop new skills and network, so that I may be able to find paid employment in the future.'*
>
> *'I really liked the facilities in the University I am attending, better than I expected.'*
>
> *'…during my undergraduate course [name of HEI] failed to help me with any useful information about extending my visa. The university failed to provide reasonable help. Eventually, I spend a lot of money employing a specialist solicitor to help me after the refusal to extend my student visa.'*
>
> *'…teachers are all nice and helpful. The university also gave us great support for setting up in the UK, e.g. held a lot of events for us.'*
>
> *'I found there were no resources at the university or through other means that could assist me in renewing my visa in the UK.'*
>
> *'Immigration staff - uneducated on proper procedures/visa stamps for student visitor visas; university was unprepared for this as well…'*

Advice to friends or relatives

An overwhelming majority of international students (71%) would recommend friends or relatives in their home country come to the UK to study, with just 12% advising against it (Figure 18). Views on the UK as a place to engage in skilled work or to start a business were far more mixed. One third (33%) of respondents stated that they would advise friends and relatives to travel to the UK to engage in skilled work, whilst only 11% would recommend the UK as place to start a business. Although the high proportion of people answering 'maybe' to the questions on these two activities means this data needs to be treated with caution, it is a finding that is broadly consistent with results presented elsewhere in this report, for example, in Figures 15 and 16.

Recommend the UK to engage in study, skilled work or entrepreneurial activity
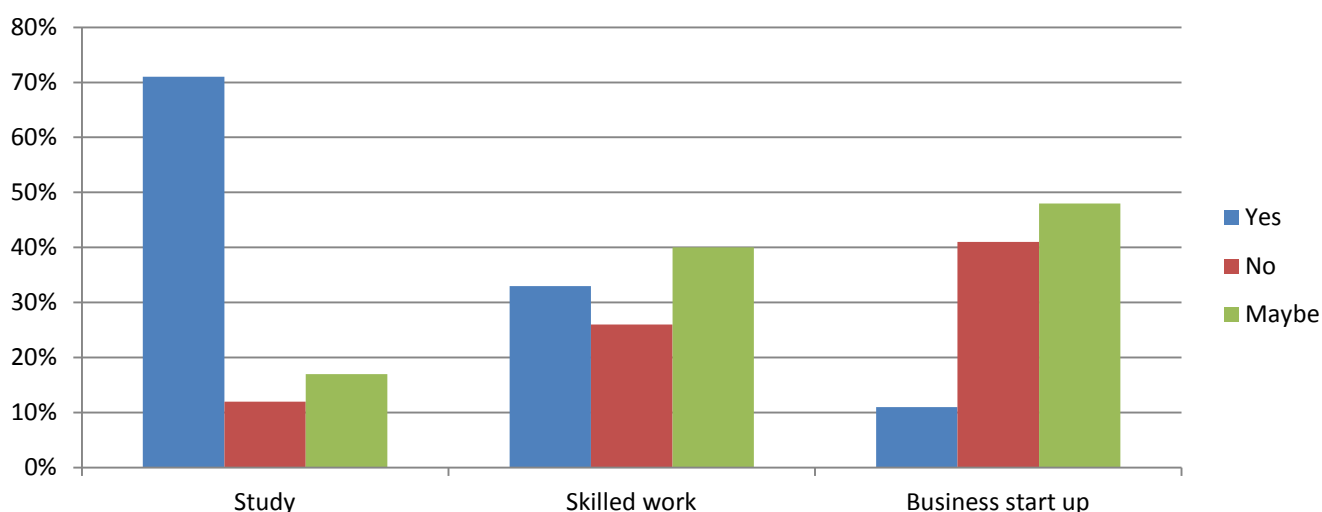

Figure 18: International students recommendation of UK as place to study (n=581), engage in skilled work (n=581) and set up business (n=582)

> *'I would advise people to avoid coming to the UK for any matter if they don't want to struggle with visas, there are many other countries were [sic] people can either study, start businesses or other activities successfully and enjoy their experiences.'*
>
> *'Though I love living here and have been active in my community, I could not in good conscience advise anyone to come to a country so clearly motivated on narrowing opportunities for foreign nationals.'*
>
> *'I have advised my younger brother to look elsewhere for postgrad studies. UK is definitely not sending out good signals and it will harm the universities in the future.'*

4. Conclusions

International students make a considerable contribution to ensuring the UK remains a diverse and dynamic environment in which to study, work and engage in enterprise. Our investigation shows that this migrant group continue to value their experience of studying in this country and hold UK universities in high regard. Moreover, a significant proportion of international students wish to remain in the UK for a short period following graduation to further enhance their skill set. For many respondents, the experience of post study work or entrepreneurial activity in the UK is seen as an important initial step on the career ladder. It is also beneficial to the host country, not only through increased revenue from tax receipts and migrant spending, but equally in fostering collaboration and knowledge transfer between the UK and its trading partners.

However, international students feel constrained by recent changes to UK immigration policy. We recognise the expectations on the UK government to manage migration, reduce the potential for fraud and promote opportunities for UK nationals. Nevertheless, measures such as the closure of the PSW route, combined with difficulties experienced by respondents to our survey in applying for visas, accessing support services and starting up businesses, give international students the impression that they are unwelcome in this country.

Based on the views presented by participants enrolled at HEIs across the UK, we highlight the following areas for further consideration by the UK government, policymakers, higher education and business communities:

1. Use the good reputation of UK higher education to promote work, study and entrepreneurial opportunities in UK following graduation. Very few international students wish to remain in the UK for a lengthy period. However, our research indicates that a significant number would value the opportunities to gain meaningful work and business experience in their host country. A more holistic approach to migration would benefit not just international students, but the UK more broadly through the utilisation of overseas talent and the formation of contacts, in particular with emerging economies;

2. Develop, and actively promote, the entrepreneurial landscape of the UK. Whilst opportunities do exist for international students to remain in the UK to set up a business, awareness appears to be low. Many respondents mentioned barriers to enterprise, including limited work opportunities, expense of the visa application process and the view that the UK is becoming increasingly hostile to migrants. There is a need for government, and stakeholders within business and higher education, to tackle these perceptions and transmit the message that the UK is indeed open for business;

3. Modify rhetoric on migration, whilst continuing to curb abuses to the existing system. Respondents to this survey were aware of their capabilities and of the opportunities that existed elsewhere, particularly in the US, Canada and Australia. Consequently, UK authorities need to project a more positive, and less divisive, image of the country to existing and prospective international students. This could be assisted by a shift from an emphasis on welcoming only the 'best and brightest' to also valuing the contribution of 'qualified and capable' and 'hardworking and enterprising' students who wish to remain in the country to work, study or set up a business.

Our research highlights much that is positive about the UK from the perspective of international students. Yet, recent changes to UK migration policy and perceived animosity from certain quarters towards migrants, has resulted in some unease amongst survey respondents. A decline in the number of students arriving for formal study suggests that UK risks losing the goodwill of hardworking and enterprising individuals who have much to contribute to the country.

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