# Student unions warn Starmer’s immigration reforms threaten Scotland’s universities



The rising tide of concern surrounding immigration policy in the UK has prompted significant backlash from student organisations, particularly within Scotland. The National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland has condemned Prime Minister Keir Starmer's proposed reforms, labelling them a serious threat to the future of the education sector. With tightening immigration controls already causing a notable decline in international student enrolment—12% less than the previous year—the predictions for ongoing deterioration present a grim outlook for universities reliant on fee-paying students.

The catastrophic implications of these proposals are keenly felt by universities like those in St Andrews and Edinburgh, where over 40% of students come from abroad. The introduction of a potential foreign student tariff has raised alarms, with NUS Scotland president, Viswanathan, stating that it could mirror the "downfall" of the education sector. She expressed concern that a tightening immigration landscape would not only stunt the recruitment of international students but also lead to inevitable funding cuts.

Starmer's recent comments, warning against the UK becoming an "island of strangers," have drawn sharp criticism and notable comparisons to Enoch Powell’s infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech. Viswanathan was particularly vocal about this similarity, asserting that such rhetoric is deeply divisive and dangerous. She underscored that the Labour leader’s choice of words resonates poorly with those advocating for a more inclusive society. These comments have not only caused friction within the Labour party itself, but they also signal a troubling shift towards rhetoric typically associated with far-right politics.

The proposed reduction of the graduate visa's validity from two years to 18 months further complicates the situation. This visa currently permits international students to remain in the UK post-graduation to seek employment—a significant draw for many considering studying in Britain. The government's characterisation of this visa as being open to "abuse" was met with outrage from Viswanathan, who highlighted the substantial contributions international students make to the UK economy, estimated at £41.9 billion annually. This sentiment is echoed by educational leaders who warn that labelling migrants as a burden is not only morally repugnant but could also undermine the UK’s status on the global educational stage.

While Starmer’s government maintains that these reforms are necessary to balance public services and manage immigration effectively, the broader implications have raised eyebrows. Nationally, net migration is projected to drop, predicted to affect nearly one million migrants, yet the resultant economic and cultural consequences could be far-reaching. Critics argue that these measures primarily serve to increase home office revenues instead of addressing actual integration challenges faced by migrants.

The financial strain on universities is intensifying, with many expecting to report deficits due to dropping international enrolment numbers, exacerbated by ongoing inflation and static fee structures. If left unaddressed, this situation threatens to destabilise the educational landscape. Experts in the field have urged for cohesive support systems for international students, while the government is pushed to reconsider the implications of proposed levies on tuition fees that could deter prospective students from choosing UK institutions.

For Viswanathan and student groups, the imperative is clear: mobilise and advocate for change. As they prepare for elections in Wales and Scotland, the student demographic—representing diverse backgrounds—has been identified as a potent political force. With ongoing petitions aimed at influencing government policy, there is hope that a broader, more inclusive narrative around immigration and student contributions can emerge from the current contentious climate.

In conclusion, the ongoing evolution of immigration policy under Starmer’s leadership has sparked significant debate, reflecting deeper societal anxieties regarding diversity and inclusion. While intent on navigating these challenges, the government faces scrutiny over the potential implications of its decisions on vital sectors like education, which depend heavily on international engagement and support.

### Reference Map

1. [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25162919.student-union-slams-starmer-racist-white-paper/?ref=rss)
2. [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/7bad8cf9-e54b-4e98-aa40-3f4befa1b566)
3. [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2)
4. [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/9b916a14-95b3-435f-a79e-de1331153297)
5. [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/british-pm-starmers-new-policies-drive-down-net-migration-2025-05-12/)
6. [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/6dbdfc60-9d83-48ff-9b34-db3ddd08d5b1)
7. [[7]](https://apnews.com/article/d83661777617aae46a5cb6942f544e54)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25162919.student-union-slams-starmer-racist-white-paper/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/7bad8cf9-e54b-4e98-aa40-3f4befa1b566> - The UK government, under Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, plans to double the period migrants must reside in the country before applying for permanent settlement, extending it from five to ten years. This change, part of a broader migration reform package, could impact nearly one million migrants already in the UK, including skilled workers, refugees, and individuals from Hong Kong. While the Home Office initially indicated the new rules wouldn’t apply retrospectively, current plans suggest they will affect any settlement applications filed after the policy’s implementation, regardless of arrival date. The policy has sparked concerns about fairness, legal challenges, and integration prospects. Critics argue it mainly boosts Home Office revenues through prolonged fee collection while disrupting personal and family plans. Experts and legal professionals warn of potential hardship and career setbacks for affected individuals. The government has pledged to consult on the proposal and consider mitigations for those nearing eligibility. The reforms follow electoral gains by Nigel Farage’s anti-immigration Reform UK party, which is influencing policy direction amid rising immigration-related anxieties.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2> - Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer faced criticism after delivering a speech advocating for stricter immigration controls, in which he warned that the UK 'risk[s] becoming an island of strangers' without reform. Critics, including several senior Labour figures, noted that his language echoed Enoch Powell's 1968 'rivers of blood' speech, infamous for its anti-immigration sentiment. However, Downing Street strongly rejected any comparison, emphasizing that Starmer entirely disavows Powell's rhetoric. A spokesperson reaffirmed that Starmer supports immigration and acknowledges its positive contributions, but insists that migration should be regulated fairly as public services face mounting pressure. The government cited record-high immigration levels under previous Conservative leadership and pledged to reduce net migration through measures such as tightening English language requirements for visas, extending citizenship eligibility timelines, and raising skill criteria for foreign workers. While some Labour members, including MP Sarah Owen and London Mayor Sadiq Khan, criticized the phrasing, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper defended Starmer, stressing the distinction between his balanced approach and Powell’s divisive message.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/9b916a14-95b3-435f-a79e-de1331153297> - Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's government has introduced significant reforms to the UK’s post-Brexit immigration system, aiming to reduce migration and pivot towards attracting high-skilled graduate workers. The proposed changes, detailed in a government white paper, restrict work visas to graduate-level roles and significantly limit lower-skilled worker visas to temporary exceptions where labor shortages exist. Settlement pathways have also been extended, requiring migrants to prove societal contribution, while higher fees and salary thresholds will make the UK’s immigration process among the most expensive globally. The Home Office estimates a reduction of about 100,000 arrivals annually, although the net migration impact remains uncertain. Critics warn of negative effects on sectors dependent on foreign labor, particularly in social care, due to policy shifts including the closure of care visas and restrictions on family accompaniment. The higher education sector faces a contentious 6% levy on income from international students. Economists expect minimal GDP per capita impact, though public finances may benefit from a shift toward higher-earning migrants. Political observers have raised concerns that Starmer's messaging, blaming immigration for economic stagnation, might alienate voters and echo right-wing narratives rather than offering a balanced discussion on immigration’s benefits and challenges.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/british-pm-starmers-new-policies-drive-down-net-migration-2025-05-12/> - Prime Minister Keir Starmer of the United Kingdom announced comprehensive immigration policy reforms aimed at significantly reducing net migration, potentially by around 100,000 annually. Notably, while Starmer refrained from setting a specific migration target, his government has outlined several impactful measures. Key among these includes extending the residency requirement for citizenship from five to ten years, though earlier applications may be allowed for individuals contributing significantly to society or the economy. Recruitment of foreign care workers will be phased out by 2028, putting additional pressure on an already understaffed sector. Employers hiring overseas workers will face a 32% increase in immigration skills charges. Moreover, international students will have their post-graduation work period reduced from two years to 18 months, with potential tuition fee levies under consideration. English language requirements for visa applicants and their adult dependents will be tightened. Though focused on legal migration, the government also plans to introduce legislation limiting asylum seekers’ use of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights to streamline deportations. Further asylum reforms are to be introduced later in the year.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/6dbdfc60-9d83-48ff-9b34-db3ddd08d5b1> - Nearly half of England’s higher education providers anticipate reporting a financial deficit in 2024-25 due to lower-than-expected international student recruitment, according to the Office for Students (OfS). This marks a continued decline in financial health, with 45.2% of institutions forecasting losses, up from 29.6%. The OfS calls for significant structural reforms to restore sector sustainability. The government’s potential overhaul of the graduate visa route could further destabilize the sector by weakening its global appeal. Universities UK International urged the government to uphold support for international students. The 2023-24 academic year saw a 15.5% drop in overseas student numbers, with a further decline predicted. Despite financial strain, some institutions remain optimistic, projecting a 20% increase in international students by 2027-28. The OfS warns, however, that such projections may be overly ambitious, posing risks to institutional stability. Financial pressures are exacerbated by static tuition fees, inflation, and higher costs, prompting closures, redundancies, and expense reductions. Experts like Neil Smyth emphasize the urgent need for government intervention to provide financial stability. Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson acknowledged the troubling figures, reinforcing the need for further reforms and institutional financial accountability.
7. <https://apnews.com/article/d83661777617aae46a5cb6942f544e54> - UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has announced a new initiative to significantly reduce immigration numbers and make it more difficult to settle in the country, in response to increasing public concern and the electoral rise of the anti-immigrant Reform UK party. Speaking in Downing Street, Starmer pledged to tighten all areas of the immigration system—work, family, and study—emphasizing a controlled, selective, and fair approach. These measures include raising salary thresholds and English language requirements for employment visas, ending overseas recruitment for care home jobs, and requiring 10 years of residency for citizenship. Migration has long been a contentious issue in the UK, especially post-Brexit, with net migration reaching 900,000 in the year to mid-2023. Despite past Conservative efforts to curb immigration, numbers have remained high, fueled by international crises in Ukraine and Hong Kong and dangerous Channel crossings by small boats. Critics argue that eliminating low-skilled visas risks harming essential services like care homes, while refugee advocates and some Labour members caution against adopting rhetoric and policies resembling those of the far-right. Conservatives claim that Labour’s proposals are insufficient and demand a binding annual cap on immigration.