

Article

Visa journeys and student outcomes

New analysis on people coming to the UK and holding multiple visas over time. Focus on students coming to the UK and what they do next, alongside workers, and the route to UK citizenship.

Contact:
Chris Stickney
pop.info@ons.gov.uk
+44 1329 444661

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1 . Main points

- Journeys made by people coming to the UK who use multiple visas are often all visas of the same type.
- For students whose visas ended in the academic year 2018 to 2019, 35% successfully applied for new visas and stayed in the UK.
- The majority of non-EU students who stayed in the UK went on to another study visa after their courses between 2015 and 2020.
- Most students who stay for work receive a T2 skilled worker visa.
- In the period observed, 5% of visa holders held citizenship visas.

2 . Introduction to visa journeys

Every year, people come to the UK for many reasons, including work, study, or to reunite with family. As a person's life changes, their reason for being in the UK may do so too. We explored this by looking at the different "visa types" an individual may hold during their time in the UK. Examples of these journeys can be (shown in figure 1):

- a student arriving in the UK who may go on to work in the UK after leaving education
- a family member joining their family in the UK who later may gain citizenship after living in the UK for several years

Figure 1: Visual examples of visa journeys

Example person 1



Example person 2



Source: ONS analysis of Home Office ISA data

Identifying these journeys helps us to understand the varied routes people take throughout their stay in the UK, rather than focusing solely on the numbers of people receiving different visa types.

We explore in depth two major journeys people make, their route to citizenship, and the outcomes of international students, as well as information on work visa holders. In future, we intend to investigate families and workers who move to the UK in greater detail.

Our analysis uses data from the Home Office [ISA \(Initial Status Analysis\) system](#), which combines data from different administrative sources to link an individual's travel in or out of the UK with their immigration history. At present this system only covers visitors from non-EEA countries, and therefore this is the focus of our analysis. Using these data, we learn about the behaviour of visa holders once they have begun their "journey" in the UK.

This research focuses on the period April 2015 to October 2020. The end of this period overlaps with the early months of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We expect that the pandemic will have impacted people's ability to migrate to and from the UK during this time.

The Home Office have looked at this question in their annual [Migrant Journey report](#), and reports figures on the number of people who [continue their stay in the UK](#).

More about the population and migration

- Research on [the way we produce population and migration statistics](#).
- Latest estimates on [migration into and out of the UK](#).
- View estimates of the [UK population by country of birth and nationality](#).
- Find out about the [future design of migration estimates](#).
- Latest research on [population estimates using administrative data](#).
- Research into [estimating the student population](#).

3 . Typical visa journeys

While there is a lot of research into how many people enter the country, what happens to people after their initial visa ends? We looked at all the visas belonging to an individual over time. Many people had one visa, but some had multiple. We looked at whether these visas were all the same type or if they changed between different visa types as someone's life in the UK changed.

Overall, 1.1 million people coming to the UK had at least two visas in sequence between 2015 and 2020. The most common patterns were multiples of the same visa type. Two visit visas in a row (57%) were most common, followed by two study visas (18%), or two family visas (6%), or two work (6%) visas in a row. Of those who had three or more visas in a sequence, 50% of these journeys were three visit visas in a row.

The most common demographic to have two subsequent work visas are people from South Asia aged 20 years and over and 30 years and over (frequently accompanied by their children on dependant work visas). People from East Asia aged 30 years and over and 40 years and over are most likely to have two subsequent visit visas, followed by people from the Middle East and Central Asia aged 20 years and over. Most students with two subsequent study visas are from East Asia, followed by a substantial number from the Middle East and Central Asia or European countries outside of the EU, like Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine.

4 . Non-EU students: an overview

In this research we focus on students who were not from EU countries (70% of international students). Understanding student travel patterns, and their likelihood of staying long term, is important, as study is one of the two most common reasons for people to move to the UK. Data from [HESA](#) show that every year, hundreds of thousands of international students come to the UK to take degree courses at universities, and that every 10 non-EU students [generate £1m](#) worth of net economic impact for the UK economy over the duration of their studies. [Graduate outcomes data](#) show that non-EU graduates employed in the UK five years after graduation have median earnings higher than UK domiciled graduates over the tax years between 2014 to 2015 and 2018 to 2019.

Our analysis shows that for the 2015 to 2019 academic years, a total of 532,400 people from non-EU countries were granted a student visa. The highest number of visas granted to non-EU students were for London universities, while the lowest number were for universities in Northern Ireland. During 2015 to 2019, numbers of non-EU student visa holders grew in most regions of the UK. The biggest increase was for London, where non-EU student visa holders increased by 27% from 27,200 in 2015 to 2016 to 34,600 in 2018 to 2019. This increase is part of a wider trend, shown in [Home Office data](#), of increasing numbers of study visas being granted between 2005 and 2019.

Across the four years, the biggest proportion of non-EU student visa holders (47%) held visas for Russell Group universities, of which 4% were for Oxford or Cambridge, 21% were for former polytechnics and the remainder (31%) were for other universities.

5 . What students did next

Spotlight on students with visas ending in 2018 to 2019

Updating work initially carried out in [August 2017](#), we look at the outcomes for non-EU students whose study visas ended in the academic year 2018 to 2019. We examined at least the following year from the end of their student visa to see whether they fell into one of the following groups:

- those who departed the UK without applying for another visa
- those who remained in the UK, or left and returned within a year, on either a short-term or long-term visa; some of these individuals may have their study visa extended, whereas others may have switched to a new visa type
- those with no identified departure or inconclusive evidence of remaining in the UK; this does not mean that these individuals have necessarily overstayed their visas, but that the information required to categorise them into the stayed or departed groups is insufficient

Figure 2: Outcomes for non-EU students with a leave expiry date between 1 September 2018 and 31 August 2019

Notes:

1. Figures rounded to the nearest 100. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

Download this chart

[.XLSX](#)

The results in Figure 2 showed that over half of non-EU students (61%) left the country at the end of their study visa. At the end of the data collection period 95% of those students who departed had been out of the country for at least a year (versus 5% who left but had not been out of the country for a year at the end of the data period). A smaller proportion (35%) of students were granted new visas allowing them to remain in the UK. The majority of these remaining students (77%) held long-term visas (versus the 23% who held short-term visas). For a small amount of the students (3%) their outcome is unknown. This is because some students have missing or inconclusive travel information.

Visas after the first student course

As student migration patterns are typically difficult to analyse, understanding more about the nature of their stay after study can help inform wider Office for National Statistics' (ONS) aims to use administrative data to understand total migration to and from the UK.

Many international students complete a short pre-session English Foreign Language course before their main course begins. Almost 10% of all courses completed at a university by non-EU students are English Foreign Language courses. This is part of the reason [short-term study visas](#) (11 months or less) like these are excluded from this analysis to avoid skewed results.

As in the typical journeys section, many people have the same second visa type as their first visa. Between 2015 and 2020, 59% of students who remained in the country following their degree went on to further study after their first course. Visit visas accounted for 22% of next visas, while 10% went on to a work visa, and 3% went on to a family visa after their first study course. In future, we would like to evaluate how many students had two study visas then went on to work, but at present the data period is not long enough.

For those students whose second visa was a work visa, the "tier" can provide some insight into the kind of work that they went on to do. The main work visas are:

- tier 1 (T1) visas for "High Value Migrants"
- tier 2 (T2) visas for "Skilled Workers"
- tier 5 (T5) visas for "Temporary Workers"

Of those students who went on to a work visa after their first study visa, 8% held a T1 visa, 73% held a T2 visa, 8% held a T5 visa and a further 5% held another type of work visa. We will see the impact of the [new graduate visa](#), introduced in July 2021, in coming years. Future data linkage may allow us to not only analyse the type of work visa that non-EU graduates later hold, but also their salary and industry area. [Graduate outcomes \(LEO\)](#) data analyses this for UK students.

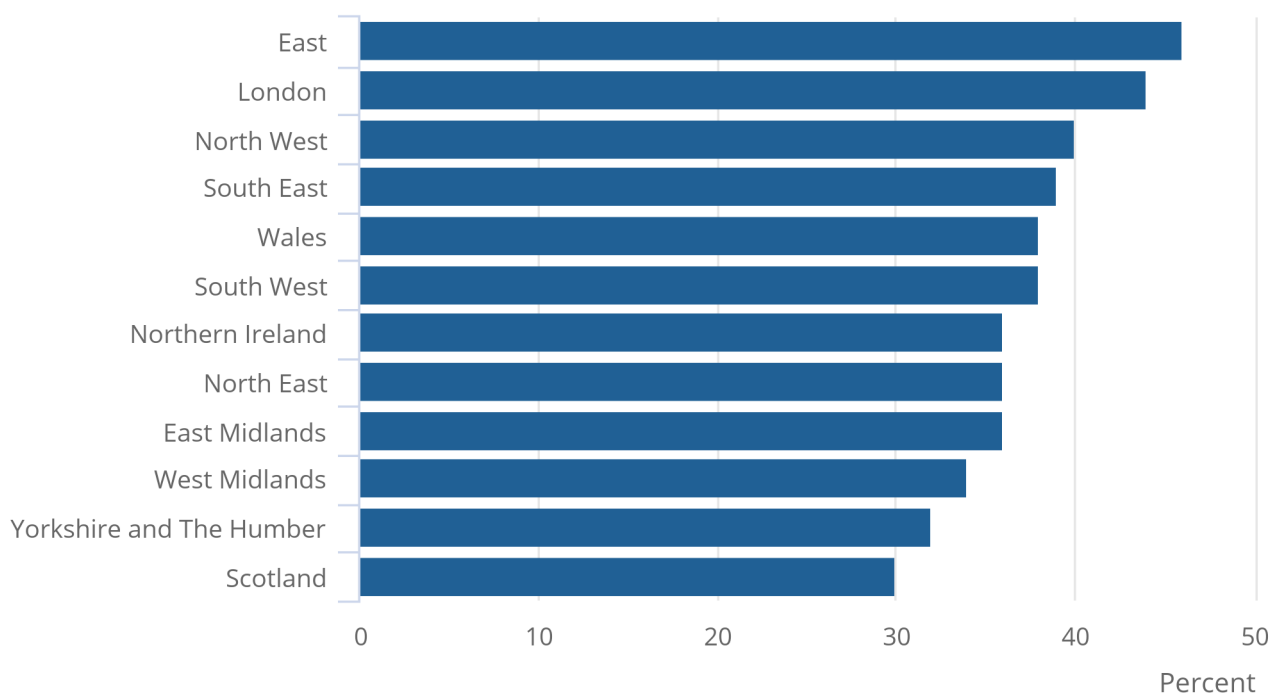
Demographics of students

The majority of non-EU students are from China, India, Nigeria, the United States, and Thailand. Patterns of students who leave the country and those who stay varies by nationality. For instance, 75% of Syrian students and 71% of students from Qatar remain in the country after study compared with just 14% of those from Namibia, Panama, or Liberia.

Students having a second visa after study also varies a lot between UK regions of study. Figure 3 shows the proportions of students staying in the country after their first study course. Those in the East of England (46%) and London (44%) are the most likely to stay after their first study visa, whereas students in Yorkshire and The Humber (32%) and Scotland (30%) are the least likely to do so.

Figure 3. Proportion of students who have a second visa after their first course, by region, 2015 to 2020

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Source: Office for National Statistics' analysis of Home Office Initial Status Analysis data

The regional distribution also varies by visa type too. Of the students who have a work visa following their first study visa, 42% studied in London and 10% in the South East. Only 6% studied in Northern Ireland, Scotland, or the North East in total. Further breakdowns can be found in Figure 4. More detailed analysis could help inform the levelling-up agenda in terms of the graduate population and skills retention at a local level.

Figure 4: Proportion of study, work, or visit visas following first student course, by region, 2015 to 2020

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Source: Office for National Statistics' analysis of Home Office Initial Status Analysis data

Notes:

1. Figures rounded to the nearest whole number.

6 . Worker journeys

We looked at people with multiple work visas and found that people tended not to change work tiers often. For instance, 91% of those on a Tier 2 visa had a second Tier 2 visa and 9% changed to a non-work visa. Tier 5 visas were most likely to move to a different work visa type with 26% moving to a Tier 2 visa following their first visa. Those on a Tier 1 visa are more likely to move on to another type of visa (33%); 64% of those on a Tier 1 visa have a second Tier 1 visa. Again, future data linkage could provide much more insight into worker journeys.

Figure 5: Second visa type after having a work visa, by work visa tier

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Source: ONS analysis of Home Office Initial Status Analysis data

Notes:

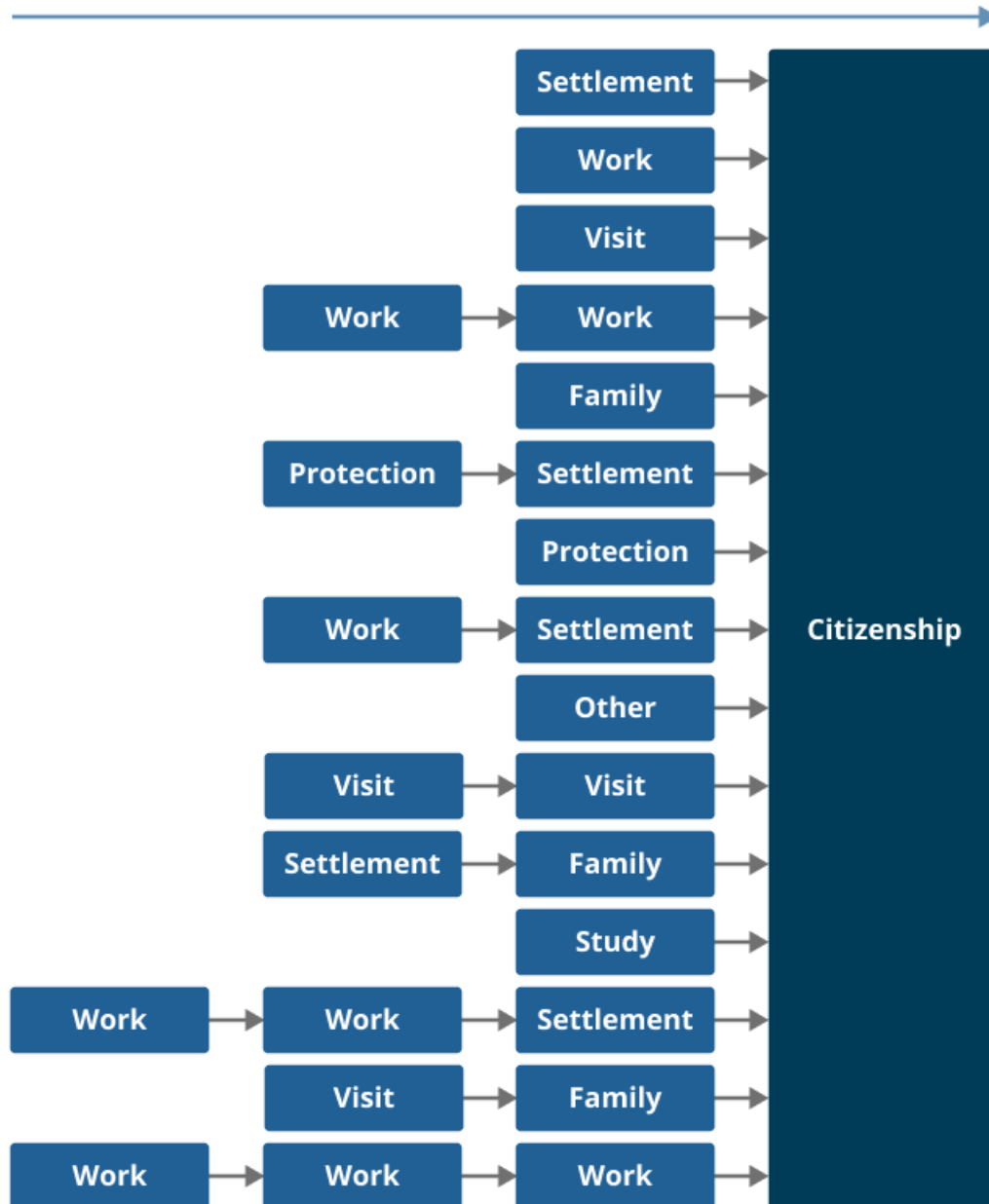
1. Figures rounded to the nearest whole number.

7 . Routes to citizenship

We explored the visa routes people have taken on their way to receiving UK citizenship. Once granted citizenship, an individual is naturalised and has permanent rights to live in the UK.

Citizenship visa holders are a small subgroup of all people receiving UK visas, accounting for less than 3% of visas during the visa period looked at (2015 to 2020) and being held by around 5% of visa holders. However, their length of time in the UK and potential impact is greater. Figure 6 shows the journeys of individuals who received UK citizenship.

Figure 6: Diagram showing the sequences of visa types on the journey to citizenship



Source: Office for National Statistics' analysis of Home Office Initial Status Analysis data

Notes:

1. Only the most common 15 routes are shown. Further routes are available to download in the accompanying data.

We can see from the data that over 40,000 people received a citizenship visa (70% in our subset of citizenship holders), with no prior visa being held. The other routes had many other visa types before people received citizenship. Settlement visa types were also the most common by citizenship holders, occurring in 15% of sequences, followed by work (10% of sequences). All other visa types were also found in the journeys of those who received citizenship, though less frequently (visit, 3.5%; family, 2.5%; protection, 2%; other, 1%; and study, 0.5%).

The longest sequence of visas seen here is nine visas. Though, as these data only show individuals with completed journeys within the five-year study period, it is likely that there are individuals with longer sequences that go on to receive citizenship.

8 . Glossary

Administrative data

Collections of data maintained for administrative reasons, for example, registrations, transactions, or record-keeping. They are used for operational purposes and their statistical use is secondary. These sources are typically managed by other government bodies.

Home Office ISA (Initial Status Analysis) system

Combines data from different administrative sources to link an individual's travel in or out of the UK with their immigration history. This system has data for all non-EEA visa holders.

Visa journeys

The sequence of visas an individual has that permits them to be resident in the UK.

9 . Data sources and quality

Our analysis uses data from the Home Office [ISA \(Initial Status Analysis\) system](#), which combines data from different administrative sources to link an individual's travel in or out of the UK with their immigration history. This system has data for all non-EEA visa holders, so this research only includes information on non-EEA citizens. For all the analysis we looked at the period from April 2015 to October 2020; this is from the start of the ISA system to the end of the data that we have access to.

Journey methods

For a visa to be within a journey, the visa had to be within one year of the end of the previous one. This is in keeping with the [Home Office's definition](#) of a migrant journey. This is also consistent with the UN definition of migration where an individual is an emigrant if they have left the UK for a year or more.

We also only included people whose complete visa history was within the April 2015 to October 2020 period, to avoid commenting on incomplete data. Because of the length of the data period, this article reports on a subset of all people who have received visas from the Home Office during this period.

Students

The cohort included students with any type of study visa expiring between 1 September 2018 and 31 August 2019 (academic year 2018 to 2019) in the Home Office data. Travel data was analysed to identify whether each student had left the UK and not returned, or if they stayed with a new visa. Those who did not fit into these categories were classed as having no identified departure if they had no additional visas and their final visit to the UK in the data had no departure information. The [Fifth report on statistics relating to exit checks: 2019 to 2020](#) states that an individual's departure information may be missing because their departure may not have been recorded, or does not match to the individual's arrival information, or their departure was via the Common Travel Area. Otherwise, they were classed as having inconclusive evidence if the travel and visa information available was insufficient to place the student into a departed or remained category.

Although this research is based on the Sankey diagram published in our [August 2017 update](#), methodological differences are present between the two pieces of analysis. While they remain comparable, the main differences users should be aware of are:

- inclusion of students who have a visa other than Tier 4 study visa, including short-term study visas (who were not included in the previous work)
- changes in category names and groupings
 - previously students who returned to the UK on a short-term visa were categorised as departed; here they are categorised as "remaining in the UK" as they have been in the UK with an additional visa since the end of their initial study visa
 - previously, students with a status "departed but inconclusive evidence of return" were classed as departed, but in this analysis they are in the unknown category
 - previously there was a group within the "remaining in the UK" category called "granted valid leave to remain, study, work, or other"; this category has been removed in the current work and all students with a new visa have been categorised by whether they have a short-term or long-term visa

10 . Future developments

This research aids us in the [development of administrative based migration estimates](#). We can link together visa journeys of an individual and learn about their choices and behaviours once they have entered the UK. We intend to further explore visa journeys, including student outcomes, by looking at changes over time and more detailed demographic breakdowns. We also plan to expand the current analysis by analysing the journeys of families and workers who move to the UK. Additionally, because of the UK's exit from the EU, EU nationals now require a visa to enter the UK, and we will be able to analyse their visa journeys, too.

11 . Related links

[Exploring international migration concepts and definitions with Home Office administrative data](#)

Article | Released 14 February 2020

Research article investigating additional concepts and definitions for measuring international migration using Home Office administrative data.

[Measuring migration: the story behind the headlines](#)

Article | Released 17 September 2021

In this interactive article, we take you behind the headlines and use the latest data to answer questions about international migration. We also explain why measuring migration is harder than you might think.

[What can administrative data sources tell us about the patterns of presence of non-EU students?](#)

Article | Released 14 February 2020

Research article investigating the patterns and length of non-EU student presence in England and Wales using linked Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Home Office administrative data.

[How we are improving population and migration statistics](#)

Article | Released 15 November 2021

Find out more about our population and migration statistics transformation journey.