

Exploring the experiences and attitudes of Graduate visa holders in the UK

Migration Advisory Committee
Revealing Reality

July 2024

REVEALING REALITY



About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent, multi-disciplinary research agency, working with regulators, government, charities and private sector organisations. We provide insight to inform decision-making, policy recommendations and service design and to help drive change. We conduct detailed qualitative and quantitative research into services and their users – observing how systems function and capturing a range of different perspectives to understand user experience and unmet needs. Our work also includes the exploration of people's behaviours and motivations, with an emphasis on understanding these within the context of people's real lives. <https://www.revealingreality.co.uk>.

Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	6
Background to the research	6
Methodology and sample	6
Motivations to study in the UK	8
Attitudes towards and experiences of the Graduate visa	12
Attitudes towards proposed changes to visa routes	17
Annex I: Sample table	21

Role of the MAC in producing this report

Members of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) and the MAC secretariat worked with the research team at Revealing Reality to develop, conduct and steer this research project. However, the robustness of the analysis is the responsibility of the authors, and the findings and views presented in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the MAC.

Anonymity within this report

Anonymity and confidentiality are important in the reporting of this work. Throughout the report we have taken an approach to attribution that ensures respondents are non-identifiable. Every respondent has been given a pseudonym, and we have not included people's universities to ensure anonymity. We have included information on where respondents are from, and their course, as we feel this is important information for the reader.

Executive summary

As part of their Rapid Review into the Graduate visa (published in May 2024¹), the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) commissioned Revealing Reality to conduct a series of 40 qualitative interviews with recent graduates from UK universities who were currently on the Graduate visa. The research involved remote, one-to-one interviews with those on the Graduate visa route. It aimed to provide the MAC with a clear picture of how the route worked in practice and a better understanding of the views and experiences of people currently on the Graduate visa route.

This qualitative research approach was used because it is more exploratory and was considered appropriate to meet the project objectives of understanding people's actual experiences and the potential impact of changes on their decisions. **As a result, this research has a relatively small sample size and therefore cannot be said to be representative of all those using the route.**

Below is a summary of the findings from the research.

Career advancement was cited as an important reason for choosing to study in the UK

Within the sample, an important pull factor for graduates to study in the UK was the perceived prestige and global recognition of UK degrees, which they believed would enhance their career prospects. Some also viewed studying in the UK as a potential pathway to long-term settlement, especially those with dependants.

The existence of the Graduate visa was an important factor in the decision to study in the UK

The availability of the Graduate visa was a key factor in the decision of many participants to study in the UK. This visa route was seen as valuable for providing an extended period to explore work opportunities and to experience living in the UK in general. The route was also seen as a valuable 'bridge' between graduating and the requirement for sponsorship, which they believed would be easier to gain once they had experience of working in the UK.

Third party agencies had a strong influence over some people's motivation to study in the UK

Third party agencies played a significant role in the decision-making process for some graduates who chose to study in the UK. These agencies, often free for students and sometimes funded by universities, provided assistance with applications, course selection, and accommodation. However, their influence sometimes led to misaligned expectations about the content of people's courses, university rankings, or the location of universities. Reportedly, these agencies occasionally used the Graduate visa as a selling point.

Employment outcomes did not always align with people's expectations

Post-graduation employment outcomes were mixed, with a notable gap between expectations and reality. Few participants secured roles directly related to their field of study, and some were unemployed. Most who were unemployed were either looking for work, applying for further studies or looking into alternative visa routes to allow them to remain in the UK. Some of those who had not secured work related to their studies reported some disappointment and surprise at being unable to do so. The few involved in this research who worked in care did so as a fallback option after struggling to find positions more aligned with their qualifications.

¹ [MAC \(2024\) Rapid Review of the Graduate route.](#)

Many participants said they would still have come to the UK even if they had known the salary threshold for the Skilled Worker visa was increasing

Proposed increases to the Skilled Worker visa salary threshold would not have dissuaded most current Graduate visa holders within the sample from their decision to study in the UK. They remained confident in their ability to meet the higher earning requirements within their visa period. However, concerns were raised about potential negative impacts on the employability of Graduate visa holders if employers became hesitant to invest in them due to stricter long-term stay requirements.

Absence of the Graduate visa would have dissuaded many prospective students from coming to the UK

In a hypothetical scenario without the Graduate visa option, many of the participants indicated they would have been less likely to choose the UK for their studies. This is reflective of the fact that many participants saw the value of studying in the UK as interlinked with the ability to gain UK work experience and advance their careers.

Introduction

Background to the research:

The Graduate visa route – introduced in 2021 - is one of the UK’s legal migration routes, and it gives people studying in the UK permission to stay for at least two years after successfully completing a university course. The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) was [commissioned](#) to review the Graduate route to “ensure it works in the best interests of the UK, to prevent abuse and protect the integrity and quality of UK higher education”.²

This project was commissioned to provide the MAC with a clear picture of how the route worked in practice and a better understanding of the views and experiences of people currently on the Graduate visa route. This was to feed into the MAC’s wider rapid review of the route, which has since published.³

The key objectives of this project were to explore graduate visa holders’:

- Decision-making processes and motivations that led them to study in the UK;
- Current experiences of being on the Graduate visa route (e.g. type of employment) and their plans for the future;
- Perceptions of working in the UK and attitudes towards the proposed visa changes.

The MAC’s wider rapid review was announced alongside changes to the Skilled Worker and Student routes. As of April 2024, the baseline minimum salary for a UK Skilled Worker visa increased from £26,200 to £38,700.⁴ From January 2024, international students studying in the UK are only able to bring their partner and children to the UK if they are studying either a PhD, other doctorate, or a research-based higher degree.⁵ The researchers investigated how these changes have affected international graduates’ attitudes and might have influenced their choice to study in the UK. While the changes to the Skilled Worker and Student route were not directly in scope of this project, they may have impacted people’s decision-making to come to the UK in general, so were explored during interviews.

Methodology and sample:

To achieve these objectives, the project used a qualitative research approach. This approach was used because it is more exploratory and was considered appropriate to meet the project objectives of understanding people’s actual experiences and the potential impact of changes on their decisions. **As a result, this research has a relatively small sample size and therefore cannot be said to be representative of all those using the route.**

The research consisted of remote, in-depth interviews (approximately one hour long) with 40x respondents. The topics covered included:

- The reasons for studying in the UK
- Awareness of the Graduate visa route

² [Home Office \(2024\). Reducing Net Migration Factsheet – February 2024 - Home Office in the media.](#)

³ [MAC \(2024\) Rapid Review of the Graduate route.](#)

⁴ [GOV.UK. \(n.d.\). Skilled Worker visa.](#)

⁵ [GOV.UK. \(n.d.\). Student visa.](#)

- Influences on decision-making to study in the UK
- Experiences while on the Graduate visa route
- Challenges and successes in seeking employment
- Attitudes towards proposed changes to the Skilled Worker visa.

Sampling

All participants are referred to with pseudonyms throughout the report. University and employer names have been removed to protect the anonymity of participants.

*Note on sample – given the recency of the Graduate visa being introduced, many of our sample were among the first cohorts using it.

A sample breakdown is provided in the annex. Key sampling criteria included:

- A mixture of Russell and non-Russell Group universities. This categorisation was chosen to capture a range of experiences across participants. When sampling for Russell Group and non-Russell Group university students there is an understanding that this is a self-selecting group and does not demonstrate specific differences between participants.
- A spread across vocational, arts and STEM courses including undergraduate, Masters and other levels of qualification.
- A spread of respondents across England and the inclusion of participants from all of the devolved nations.
- A range of employment statuses, including those who are working, not working and underemployed, meaning that although they were working, they were in an entry level role that is unrelated to their skills and experience.
- A range of industries that graduates were working across a range of industries including hospitality, education, IT, business and care.

Motivations to study in the UK

Researchers asked respondents what had prompted them to choose to study in the UK, and what factors they had taken into account when making their decision to do so.

Carrer enhancement was often reported as a reason graduates came to the UK

Within the sample, a view was often expressed that studying at a UK university carried a certain prestige, especially those with an international reputation. Moreover, many research participants thought that earning a degree from a UK university would increase their employability in other countries, including their home nations.

For example, Greta, a 26-year-old from Luxembourg, had similar offers from two UK universities but chose the one she perceived to have a more prestigious name.

Jinshuo, 26, a graduate from Malaysia who studied civil engineering, emphasised the importance of obtaining a degree in English from a UK university, as it would carry more weight when seeking employment both in the UK and elsewhere.

Hafida, a 28-year-old from Pakistan who studied film studies, explained: "*The reason for choosing US and UK was plainly because of the degree that I was doing. And I knew that if I did film from these two countries, chances of me getting work in the similar field would be high because [UK or American] degrees are accepted worldwide.*"

Similarly, Jin, a 25-year-old Chinese national who studied fashion marketing, explained the benefits of studying in the UK.

"Finding a job in China is very competitive and if you have an overseas educational experience, it's going to help you in your work application." **Jin 25, China, Fashion marketing (MA)**

Participants who particularly focused on their career prospects often hoped to work in the UK for an extended period to gain experience.

"My plan has been always, I just wanted to stay here for a few years, just to get experience ... I'm originally from India, but my parents went to Africa, so I grew up there. I don't want to continue living outside. I've stayed a lonely life. I want to go back. But what I wanted to do was get an experience from a first world country so that when I go back, at least I can take my skills there. And it will also give me an opportunity, an edge when I'm looking for work." **Kabir 38, India, Health informatics (MSc)**

Likewise, Surya, a 39-year-old Indian national who studied international business management valued work experience in the UK to improve his career prospects.

"I was thinking just, you know, after getting my postgraduate visa, I will work for there two years and having a two year of work experience in UK, you know, it, it is worth a lot and, you know, kind of career-wise, it will boost the more opportunities when I come back to go back to my country, India." **Surya, 39, International business management (MA)**

At least one person mentioned choosing the UK over the US because the Graduate visa provided them with more time to secure a job and further their career.

"I decided to move to the UK mostly because of the post-study work visa being available. In the US they let you stay six months maximum after you're done with your degree and in the UK it's two years. So that was a good incentive."

Arya, 22, India, Gender studies (MA)

Note that the above quotation is verbatim, but may not be accurate in what it claims about the visa time periods in the US.⁶

Many participants conducted their own research into courses and universities, often relying on the advice of friends and family, including those who had already studied in the UK.

Some graduates came purely to experience life in the UK

For some individuals in the sample, the primary motivation to apply for the student and Graduate visa was not centred around their career prospects, but rather the opportunity to live in the UK for a period of time. The UK was seen as an interesting and fun place to live while studying, and often these people had friends or family in the UK who had shared positive experiences about living there.

Samaad, a 47-year-old from India studying finance, shared how his uncle's experience influenced his decision.

"My uncle, he was in Derby... They came to England and he came to my father. Whenever he goes back to India after six or seven months, he came to me, he came to us as well in the India. And he talked to my father that you can send your child it's a good life and we can take care of it." **Samaad, 47, India, Finance (MSc)**

Some individuals simply wanted the opportunity to leave their native country and experience something new. These people often tended to come from wealthier backgrounds, with families better able to support them abroad.

"I was born and grew up in Nigeria. That's all I have known. I would come [to the UK] because I have family here, but I never actually stayed. I moved here in May of 2022 because, you know, I just wanted to leave my parents' house."

Ngozi, 26, Nigerian, Managing innovation and IT (MSc)

Similarly, Sadiquoon and Ravi, explained how the experience of living abroad was a key motivator.

"I mean, to be honest, it was mostly the experience. I really wanted to live alone. I wanted to live abroad. [...] If nothing works, I'm going to have to go back to Algeria. I mean it's fine, like, I live comfortably in Algeria... I mean, we're well off. It's not a financial problem, it's a cultural problem." **Sadiquoon, 24, Algeria, Computer science (MA)**

"I am from India. I have a family back in India. I always stayed with them, but I needed the exposure. I needed the independence, which I was lacking in my life." **Ravi, 30, India, Business administration (MBA)**

A few reported long-term settlement in the UK as their primary motivation for opting to study here

For a small number of people in the sample, the primary motivation for studying in the UK and obtaining the Graduate visa was to move to the UK on a long-term basis, for some with the goal to raise their children here. Some of these people saw studying as a potential pathway to secure a visa and bring their dependants with them.

For example, Sola, a 39-year-old from Nigeria moved to the UK with her husband and two children after working in the Nigerian banking industry for 15 years. Sola came across advertisements for a university on her Instagram and was drawn to the idea of living in the UK, believing it would provide a better quality of life for herself and her family. She was also aware of the support available for families in the UK.

⁶ [Hastings-Woodhouse, S. \(2024\). Working in the USA: How to Find Work During and After Your Studies.](#)

Before deciding on the UK, Sola considered other options such as Canada and the United States. However, she ultimately chose the UK due to the straightforward admission process and the proximity to family and friends already living in London. As Sola explained, "I wanted a better life for myself and my family... I've seen how life is in the UK and have family and friends here so knew I should try it."

For individuals like Sola, studying in the UK was not just about educational opportunities or career prospects, but a way to settle in the country on a long-term basis and provide a better future for their families.

In some cases, third party agencies had a strong influence on people's motivation to study in the UK

Some graduates mentioned using agencies when applying for university in the UK. Agents offered advice about courses and universities, supported with applications such as UCAS and helped source accommodation in some cases.

The agencies were often free for people to use, sometimes funded or subsidised by UK universities.

"They help people that want to study in the UK, they help with everything from, like, the application process, going through UCAS, finding accommodation, like settling in, everything like that. But when I used them, I used them to help me with application process, because when it was my first time studying in the UK, there was so many documents I needed to supply and there was a timeline and I was 18 years old. I didn't really know how to do it" **Sana 27, Malaysia, Bar practice course (BPC)**

"So back then I did find an agency kind of work on like studying abroad and basically they help with a few [...]. Honestly, when I look back, it was not that necessary, but it's more like I'm familiar with it and they helped me through some of my master application. [...] They [agencies] got some social media posts about how things look like so I watched quite a lot of vlogs to see how my life looks like." **Yan, 25, Public health (MA)**

A few people reported using paid for agencies to support them.

"They charged around £500, or maybe £400. They applied for me and I didn't do anything, to be honest. The only thing I did was the IELTS, and I gave them my documents. I think I had to do a personal statement, telling them [the university] why I wanted to do the course, but I think the agency wrote it for me." **Sadiqoon 24, Algeria, Computer science (MSc)**

"I had to pay them. The one I used is a London based agency. They help a lot of Chinese students applying for UK based universities. The one I paid is very affordable. It's only like £1,500. It's a very cheap one compared to other agencies because the way they earn money is not from my payment. They have a relationship, a partnership with the university. So I got in the school, so the school will pay them the commission to the agency." **Jin 25, China, Fashion marketing (MA)**

In some cases, agencies influenced students' choices regarding their studies, and individuals felt that agencies had mis-sold the course, location or university. Hafida, a 28-year-old Pakistani studying film studies, was led to believe she was going to a university in a big, bustling city, and some of the promotional materials included photos of London. But she later discovered her university of choice was in a remote location that did not suit her needs or meet her expectations.

"But gradually I was like, what is this? Why here? I wanted to go to a city and explore that side of me. But then coming to a town [here] where you barely see people on the high street," **Hafida, 28, Pakistan, Film studies (MA)**

It was also reported that agencies sometimes used the Graduate visa as a selling point. For example, Ada, 43, from Nigeria, highlighted that agents informed her about the benefits of the Graduate visa before she applied for university, presenting it as one of the advantages of studying in the UK.

Within our sample, participants that had used agencies often ended up doing less competitive courses or attending less highly ranked universities. Sadiqoon, for example, paid £13,000 to study a course as advised by an agency, which they said would help him prepare for his Masters, for which he paid another £21,000.

"It was a useless course. It was basic maths and computer science stuff and it was mainly stuff I already knew. I came here through an agency, so they advised that I do a pre-Masters just to get used to the city, to get used to the education here. [...] That's what they advised me to do so that's what I did. But I think I regret it I shouldn't have done it, I should have gone straight to my Masters," **Sadiqoon, 24, Algeria, Computer science (MSc)**

Anat, a 24-year-old Egyptian studying business, was connected to an agent through a UK university admissions team. He was also considering studying in Germany, but the agent made the application process so easy, so he decided to go to a UK university. He had friends who had done the same course and were also on the Graduate visa.

"I didn't really do any research to be honest. I had no idea where I was going. I was booking accommodation without knowing anything," Anat 24, Egyptian, Business (MBA)

For over half the sample, access to the Graduate visa was a key factor in deciding to come to the UK

Most of the sample were aware of the Graduate visa before applying to study in the UK (some came to the UK before it was introduced so couldn't have been aware of it). Some had discovered the visa while researching study opportunities, and these respondents had often also heard about the Skilled Worker visa.

"I knew from the start that there were two routes. So the Graduate visa that you get yourself or the sponsorship one. And I was hoping to jump on the sponsorship from a job, but then when I was looking for a job, I realised that it's hard to get sponsorship when you're entry level. So in the end, I was like, I want to stay and I want to have a work experience here, so I'm going to pay for my Graduate visa." Maria 37, Italy, Public relations (MA)

For those who knew about the Graduate visa, access to the Graduate visa was a key factor in decision making. Many saw the Graduate visa as a selling point, due to the opportunity to live and gain work experience in the UK.

"I would've just gone to Germany but then I saw that Graduate visa, it's the main reason I chose the UK" Anat, 24, Egypt, Business (MBA)

"It played a major decision in coming here, because I just felt like, oh, that was like an extra two years of me learning about another country that is different from mine and then learning their ways and learning how things are done outside, which I can actually incorporate it back into my life and into my country if eventually or when I am ready to go back" Obiona, 31, Nigeria, Environment and change (MA)

"So yeah, that did play an important role, and I think it's something that plays an important role for everybody who has come after the changes in law, after Brexit and two years." Ravi, 30, India, Business administration (MBA)

Attitudes towards and experiences of the Graduate visa

Having explored people's initial motivations to come to the UK to study, this chapter looks at how people were using the Graduate visa specifically.

The Graduate visa was viewed as an opportunity to gain work experience in the UK

Within the sample, the Graduate visa was widely viewed as a valuable opportunity to gain work experience in the UK, which could enhance someone's skillset and employability elsewhere in the world. For some, it represented a way to earn a return on their investment in pursuing education in the UK, as wages tend to be higher compared to their home countries.

Even those who did not initially plan to stay in the UK long-term recognised the benefits of the Graduate visa once they learned about it, appreciating the flexibility, security, and lack of immediate pressure to secure a job after completing their studies.

"I'm very lucky to have come when the Graduate visa is there, so I can stay here without restriction and for two years and keep exploring my future. So for me, I feel it's totally worth it." **Jin, 25, Chinese, Fashion marketing (MA)**

For individuals who were less certain about remaining in the UK, the Graduate visa offered a trial period to explore job opportunities without committing long-term.

"But again, if I do find a company where I can ride out the rest of my Graduate visa and upskill, then that would be fine. But if I'm not able to, I'm not going to be like extra stubborn and say, oh I must stay, it was never that deep." **Ngozi, 26, Nigerian, Managing innovation and IT (MSc)**

The prospect of earning in the UK played a significant role for some, who saw the Graduate visa as a means to recoup the costs of their education and benefit from higher wages.

"I definitely wanted to work for like, two years because I would have been able to kind of earn back the money that I had spent on the education" **Misha, 25, India, Organisational and social psychology (MA)**

"Imagine you invested 20,000 pounds. And after one year, they said it should go back to your country. You know, one thing about investment is once you invest, there should be return of investment after a particular years. So I believe that the two year visa is, you know, you need to leverage, you need to look for job. Once you look for a job, then you, you know, start making your own money." **Yele 34, Nigeria, Mechanical engineering (MSc)**

Individuals within the sample often aimed to make the most of the Graduate visa opportunity, even if they had not initially planned to remain in the UK before arriving, recognising its value in gaining experience, exploring job prospects, and potentially earning a return on their educational investment.

After completing their studies, participants often remained in the regions of the UK where their universities were located. However, there were some exceptions, driven by factors such as career opportunities, the desire to be closer to family, or an interest in exploring different parts of the country.

One example was Sadiquoon, a 24-year-old from Algeria who studied computer science. He relocated from Glasgow to Birmingham and then to London, seeking to be based in a larger city with more job opportunities. He felt that being in London made it easier to secure job interviews.

Similarly, Mo, 28, made the decision to move from Nottingham to Birmingham, as he wanted to explore another city and was able to do so due to the flexibility of remote lessons.

These two examples were exceptions within the sample.

The Graduate visa was sometimes seen as a 'bridge' to sponsorship

The Graduate visa was viewed by some as an opportunity to bridge the gap between being an unattractive and an attractive employee eligible for sponsorship in the UK or the global job market. Participants were usually aware that in order to work in the UK longer terms, they would need to be sponsored by an employer in

order to obtain a Skilled Worker visa. For those hoping to obtain sponsorship, being on the Graduate visa in the UK provided a chance to prove themselves to employers and demonstrate that they should be sponsored. This included gaining UK experience and knowledge, increasing the likelihood of earning the minimum salary threshold within the two-year period.

"It's quite difficult to be sponsored straight away from being a student onto a Skilled Worker visa, so I thought the Graduate visa would be a good middle ground, to get more experience in the UK and show employers I have UK experience and am worth being sponsored" **Sana, 27, Brunei, Law, currently working as a paralegal earning £23,500**

"Before I had the Graduate visa, and I thought I could get a role straight away.. two years without the need for sponsorship, in my mind it made a lot of sense, it takes the stress off the employer." **Arlo, 23, American, Anthropology (MA)**

Some people had taken jobs in which employers did not offer sponsorship, but assumed that after working for a few years, their employers would be more likely to sponsor them, or it would be easier to obtain sponsorship elsewhere.

"My mind was like, oh, after the contract, then obviously when they see how awesome I am they would say, oh we have to keep you, we can't let you go. But no, they did let me go, even before the 12-month period. So that's good." **Ngozi, 26, Nigerian, Managing innovation and IT (MSc), hired on a 12-month maternity leave contract by a large TV company and was made redundant a couple months into the role.**

"So they have a visa sponsorship licence. But when I started working there, they told me that they can't sponsor me, no way. But since I've been working there so long, for two years, maybe this will change." **Yolanda, Russia [some detail removed for additional participant confidentiality].**

Many within the sample seemed optimistic about how easy it would be to obtain sponsorship and meet the salary threshold.

"There's no opportunity for sponsorship in my current role but the company does do sponsorship, but it's through specific roles. My manager has given me a few to apply to and he said he'd put in a good word." **Anat, 24, Egyptian, Business (MBA)**

Few were currently going through sponsorship at the time of interview

While many participants were hoping for sponsorship or in the stage of finding out about the possibility, few were currently undergoing the sponsorship process at the time of the research.

Anat had conversations with his managers at his company about sponsorship, and they informed him that it wasn't available in his current role, but possible for other internal roles. He was in the process of applying for those other roles and was relatively confident he'd secure one of them.

Maria had previously discussed the possibility of sponsorship with her employer, and when she initially applied, they had mentioned it could be a possibility. However, at the time of the interview, she was having doubts about whether she wanted to stay there.

"I had previous conversations with my manager and they always told me that they were going to consider sponsoring me. But lately I don't know if I'm going to actually ask for a sponsorship because thinking about it, I don't know if it's worth it to stay in a place that makes me really like, unhappy with my life just for the sponsorship." **Maria, 37, Italy, Public relations (MA)**

Tyla had been told when she joined her company that she would be considered for sponsorship, and she was now confident she would obtain it.

"So when I was hired, they had told me verbally that they would sponsor me when the time comes. And recently, because I have about just under a year left on the Graduate visa, I approached my head of HR business partner, and she said that they would talk, that they will be discussing this more closely in the fall, which I think means they'll still sponsor me, I'm hoping. I'm pretty sure they will." **Tyla, 27, Canada, Psychology (MA)**

Similarly, Kamal was in the process of asking his employer whether they would consider sponsoring him at the time of the interview.

"My visa expires in August. So I actually had a chat with the HR department, like, a couple of weeks ago about doing it, and they were very happy to get the process started, but they were also like, do you have any plans to go on holiday?"

And I was like, well, I might go to New York in April, so I think we're waiting until after I'm back in the country to do it because you can't leave while obviously, you're waiting for the visa to be processed." **Kamal, 24, USA, Biology (MSc)**

Suriya, at the time of the interviews, had been in negotiations with her employer about sponsorship, and they had recently agreed to sponsor her.

Few were working in roles they wanted to be in or which were related to their studies

Within the sample, participants had often applied for numerous jobs but had not yet been successful in finding the employment they wanted, though a few were applying for roles they were probably underqualified for. For example, Ju, 32, from China, applied for two jobs at the United Nations related to the environment and human rights, which she admitted did not relate to her previous experience and her MA in photography and urban planning.

A few people reported using the time on the Graduate visa to apply for alternative visa routes. Ju, mentioned above, applied for the partnership visa and got a civil partnership with her partner after the salary threshold changes for the Skilled Worker visa were announced so that she was not at risk of having to leave the UK.

Many of those employed were not working in roles they wanted to be in. For example, Taylor was working in retail and struggling to find a job in her desired field.

"So working in [retail] is quite tricky in all aspects because I think I'm the oldest one. I have colleagues that are 16, they're not pursuing a university degree... I feel like a failure." **Taylor, 32, Philippines, Management consultancy (MA)**

Participants were often not in roles that linked to their university course or their preferred longer-term career trajectory. Some felt they were in job roles or were applying for opportunities for which they were overqualified.

"I don't want to do all these jobs. Maybe in a restaurant or, you know, sales jobs and all of these jobs, blue collar jobs, there is nothing wrong with them. I respect every job I've done, every job. However, I did not study for that." **Ravi, 30, India, Business administration (MBA)**

Some were optimistic about the job prospects their degree could bring, while others felt misled about the potential of their university course.

"Four months into my degree and I realised getting a job in this industry would be hard. I still haven't found anything that I can say – this is what I can do." **Hafida, 28, Pakistani, Film studies (MA)**

A few reported that their immigration status and visa rules created a barrier to securing employment. After an international graduate's Graduate visa has expired, to continue living and working in the UK, they must secure another visa. One visa is the Skilled worker visa, which has various requirements for employees and employers. Notably, skilled workers must be sponsored by their employers, who must obtain a license to sponsor workers. More details about this can be found on the government website.⁷ Some on the Graduate visa felt their status as an international worker without the guaranteed right to work in the UK long-term made them less attractive candidates.

Sylvester, a 26-year-old graduate of mechanical engineering said that *"most companies are taking it as a big headache to hire an international."* He related this to his own experience:

"I applied more than a thousand jobs in which I got all rejected because of the sponsorship because whenever I'm applying for interview and all, at the end of the day, the talk will be like, 'Oh, you need a sponsorship? It's very hard for us to give you a sponsorship.' Even if the company is considering sponsorship also, they say, 'We're not willing to provide sponsorship.'"

⁷ [GOV.UK. \(n.d.\). Skilled Worker visa.](https://www.gov.uk/skilled-worker-visa)

In his current role as a mechanical engineer earning around £30,000, Sylvester had a conversation about his employer about sponsorship however, it was not guaranteed.

“By the time I finished my grad, they might do it [sponsor me]. They told me that they have the licence [to sponsor skilled migrant workers] and they will look ahead when it's a requirement and they want to assess my performance and all other things before that. “

Likewise, Zainab and Temi reported that some employers told them they would be unable to hire people on the Graduate visa at this time because they are not currently planning to sponsor employees within the next two years.

Deciding to work in the care sector after struggling to find roles related to academic backgrounds

Among the four participants in the sample who worked in care, three - Yele, Samaad, and Obiona - had only pursued careers in the care sector after struggling to find roles related to their respective academic backgrounds in mechanical engineering, finance, and environmental change.

All three were heavily driven by the opportunity of the Graduate visa and described how they would have been unlikely to come to the UK if this was not available. They faced difficulties in finding jobs aligned with their academic qualifications, leading them to explore roles in the care sector. Samaad and Obiona specifically mentioned the challenge of lacking relevant work experience to get into sectors related to their degree. This speaks to a wider theme within the sample. Some people seemed to have high expectations of the kind of work that would be available to them related to their academic backgrounds, only to find it difficult to find such jobs due to an apparent lack of skills and experience.

Yele had volunteered with the NHS, picking up medicine for people, and thought it was easier to secure a job in care due to staffing shortages and the perceived undesirability of the work. However, he did not believe he would be able to obtain sponsorship through this route.

Samaad's wife, who was already working in care, suggested that he also look into roles in this area.

"I was not ready myself to join [my wife in the] care home because I have in my mind that I am going for finance because I came here for job in finance or banking, something like that. But after I was applying I was disappointed with the jobs rejections. So she motivated me to do it. And then I go for it. I joined it and I like it now." Samaad, 47, India, Finance (MSc)

Obiona had started working in care part-time and then transitioned to full-time after finishing her studies. She was aware of the possibility of obtaining sponsorship but did not want to remain in the job. Instead, she was studying for an additional qualification, believing it would increase her chances of finding a job more related to her degree in environmental change. She talked about how many people she knows are left with care as their only option.

"So they [her friends] just feel like, oh, okay, they're not able to secure jobs in maybe what they've read in school and all of that. So they are just left with the option of care, which I think that's why most people are taking the option."

Obiona, 31, Nigeria, Environmental change (MA)

Yele and Samaad openly discussed the challenges and downsides of working in care, including low pay, or poor treatment from patients and staff. However, Samaad and Obiona also expressed that they have come to enjoy and appreciate the care work they are doing.

Like Samaad and Obiona, Chetana, a 28-year-old graduate of project management and Indian national, enjoyed working in care. She began working in care while studying and chose to continue to do so after graduating, partially because she enjoyed the work. She had made limited efforts to obtain a job related to her degree, because she was put off by employers asking for experience she did not have.

While Samaad was planning to obtain sponsorship to remain working in care, Yele and Obiona hoped to find jobs more closely related to their academic backgrounds. Chetana was open to the possibility of sponsorship from her current workplace because she enjoyed her work, however she also considered returning home upon the expiration of her Graduate visa, to be closer to her family and partner who is currently based in the UK as an Indian national on the Graduate visa, but has no plan to secure sponsorship.

The Graduate visa as a route to self-employment, either in the UK or elsewhere

Jin, who came to the UK from China, was using the Graduate visa to build new connections and expand her social network across various platforms, with the intention of returning to China after three years, having established a substantial following. During her time in the UK, she hosted fashion-based events in London as part of her effort to grow her social media presence.

Others, like Zainab, had established a startup with friends from his master's course. He has since completed an accelerator programme but has yet to secure the desired funding. As a result, he is maintaining his efforts on the startup while simultaneously working a job in UX (user experience). Zainab is considering applying for the Tech Talent part of the Global Talent visa.

Ngozi, originally from Nigeria, has the ultimate goal of owning and running her own company.

"The end goal for me was to actually have my own thing. So...when I'm ready to start pushing that, I can get like maybe advice and then, you know, information and all of that." **Ngozi, 29, Nigeria, Managing innovation and IT (MA)**

The unemployed participants in the sample were either looking for work, applying for further studies or applying for alternative visas

Among the 40 participants, eight were currently unemployed. Most were either actively job-seeking, applying for further studies, or pursuing alternative visas such as a Family visa.

Radhika, for example, is currently unemployed while applying for PhD programmes, the application processes has taken a few months. She is considering applying for part-time work.

"But right now I'm looking for some part time. Also, I did some part time earlier, but I had to stop it because of my research work, which I was doing. So right now, I'm actually unemployed." **Radhika, 23, India, Mathematical physics (MSc)**

Sola, 39, financed her own studies from money she made from her own business in Nigeria. She is currently undertaking a course through her local council to gain additional UK work experience and skills to secure a job.

"I was a graduate of accounting from Nigeria, and I had experience working in the bank in my home. So I had a business I was running myself before relocating to United Kingdom for Master's in business analytics and consultancy skills." **Sola, 39, Nigeria, Business analytics (MSc)**

Participants commonly used family money or savings from previous work to fund their stay in the UK while not working. Across the sample, those who were unemployed or in roles they did not want to be in were more likely to have attended non-Russell group universities.

Those who were working described it taking a considerable amount of time to find a job, typically between four to six months from when they started applying.

"I was thinking that I will find a job sooner. I started to look for jobs since last October. So it means it happened like maybe six months." **Eliana, 29, Turkey, Masters in international policy (MA)**

Some people were working part-time while applying for full-time roles, while others described the difficulty of securing even part-time work.

"And it was so difficult to get a part time job, even if it's a job as sales advisor or barista. Yeah, it took me months to find one even." **Taylor, 32, Philippines, Management consultancy (MA)**

Most of the unemployed participants had a Graduate visa that expires in 2026, so they were still hopeful about finding a job. However, one person, Misha, had recently moved back to India after struggling to secure a job related to their Psychology degree in the UK.

It is not necessarily unusual for graduates to need some time before securing the ideal job for their career, so it cannot be determined whether this would differ from the experiences of UK-born graduates after university. The length of time it took employed participants to find their jobs varied.

Attitudes towards proposed changes to visa routes

From April 2024, the baseline minimum salary to be sponsored for a Skilled Worker visa in the UK was increased from £26,200 to £38,700⁸. Researchers asked participants about their awareness of these changes, and, hypothetically, how this may have impacted their decision to study in the UK.

Participants were often unsure whether the increase in salary threshold for the Skilled Worker visa would impact them

Most of the people in the sample were aware of the changes to the Skilled Worker visa; however, a few people were not aware of the specifics of the proposed changes or had inaccurate information. For example, Ada, studying risk management and insurance, had not heard about the changes and immediately had questions about them and who they would apply to.

A few people highlighted the potential implications these changes might have, including how employable someone is on the Graduate visa.

"So it just makes me think, kind of puts doubts if I have a long term future or career future in the UK, if I can't really utilise the Graduate visa fully. Because if a company doesn't want to sponsor, why would you bring on an employee for only a year or a year and a half?" **Arlo, 23, USA, Anthropology (MA)**

However, most participants did not mention the impact of these changes on employers' willingness to hire them. A few even believed they might benefit from the visa changes, as their employers would have to pay them more. This, again, may highlight a gap between some of this cohort's expectations for their prospective careers versus the reality.

"You know, if we see regard relating to the salary, the increase in salary is good, it's good for us. But if we see from the other perspective that employer had to pay much, then why he go to sponsorship, go to sponsor. So there are two perspectives. In one perspective, it's good. On the other side, it's bad. It has both pros and cons." **Samaad, 46, India, Finance (MSc)**

Some people on the Graduate visa did not seem to think that the salary threshold changes would have a large impact on them, as they felt confident that they would be earning above the threshold after their Graduate visa came to an end. Even some of those who were towards the end of their Graduate visa, were far from the proposed salary threshold, and had no direct plan to be sponsored spoke confidently about the chance of being sponsored.

Greta, a 26-year-old from Luxembourg completed a Masters in construction, economics and management. She is currently working as a project manager at a construction firm earning £31,500 and said: *"You have to earn £38,500 a year to be eligible, that is all I know... I think I would be [earning that much in two years] as they [employer] has to sponsor me and I would also hope that I would be on that salary by then."*

Ngozi also mentioned that she would be aiming to have a salary of over £40,000 at the end of her Graduate visa and did not feel it was an unattainable salary.

⁸ [GOV.UK. \(n.d.\). Skilled Worker visa.](#)

People's optimism about their ability to get sponsored may be related to recent success stories of families and friends settling down in the UK, a limited knowledge of the job market, and unrealistic salary expectations.

"Because I always came for the holidays, I had an idea of what living in the UK would be like. We have family here and they've always been here." **Ada, 43, Nigerian, Risk management and insurance (MA)**

Coming to the UK to study even if the salary threshold for sponsorship had already increased

Despite the proposed changes to the Skilled Worker visa, many participants in the sample were confident about their ability to get sponsored. However, it is possible that people's confidence may have changed over time, as they heard examples of others struggling to get sponsored or meeting the salary threshold.

Regardless of the potential changes to sponsorship, most people tended to see the Graduate visa combined with their studies as valuable in and of itself. They often perceived their studies and time working in the UK as an investment that opened up the UK and international job market. The Graduate visa was seen as an opportunity to establish a foundation in the UK workforce and demonstrate their skills and potential in the 'global market'.

"I guess even if I was fully aware of the salary threshold, I probably still would've applied. Because there's no threshold on the Graduate visa so in my mind I could have just still worked two years and figured it out afterward" **Arlo, 23, USA, Anthropology (MA)**

"I'm very lucky to have come when the Graduate visa is there, so I can stay here without restriction and for two years and keep exploring my future. So for me, I feel it's totally worth it." **Jin, 25, Chinese, Fashion marketing (MA)**

Anat, a 24-year-old Egyptian studying business, valued the Graduate visa itself rather than the possibility of obtaining a Skilled Worker visa.

"I don't know if anything about the Graduate visa has changed, but if it did, I don't think I would've come here at all." For him, as long as there were no proposed changes to the Graduate visa, he would still have come to the UK."

If it becomes harder to find work on the Graduate visa due to the changes to the Skilled Worker visa, people may perceive the two to three years on the Graduate visa as less valuable. It is also important to recognise that people are more likely to justify the decisions they have made and may struggle to accurately reflect on things they might have done differently.

People who had planned to settle longer term in the UK were more likely to say that their decision to come to the UK would have been affected

Within our sample, those who were less motivated to settle in the UK anyway were less concerned about the proposed changes to the Skilled Worker visa. For most, they were happy to move elsewhere or return home if they were not able to get sponsored. However, some people were particularly motivated to stay in the UK, including those with dependants, people with loved ones in the UK, and people who had a difficult relationship with their home country for political, cultural, or other reasons.

"Because of the war in Russia, I want to stay. I feel this freedom in the UK. I like this democracy, I feel safe." **Yolanda, Russia** [some detail removed for additional participant confidentiality].

Some had made concrete plans which secured, or they perceived would secure, their stay in the UK. For example, some who were career-motivated had obtained sponsorship or the promise of sponsorship from their current employer.

Others who were more motivated to settle in the UK had plans to secure, or had secured, alternative visa routes on the Family or Dependent visa. Ju, a 32-year-old Chinese national who graduated with a Masters in photography and urban planning, had obtained civil partnership with her partner after the salary threshold changes for the Skilled Worker visa were announced so that she could stay in the UK on a Family visa.

Ada, a 43-year-old Nigerian studying risk management, explained her situation: *"They're not offering sponsorship on my current role, but we'll be now be dependants on my husband's Masters degree."*

Among the participants who believed their decision to study in the UK would have been influenced by the proposed changes to the Skilled Worker visa, most attended universities that were not Russell Group.

These examples demonstrate how individuals with a strong desire to remain in the UK have sought out various means to secure their stay, whether through employment sponsorship, partnerships, or dependant visas, in light of the proposed changes to the Skilled Worker visa.

Of the five people who had dependants, two felt changes to dependant rules would have affected their decision

From January 2024, international students studying in the UK are only able to bring their partner and children to the UK if they are studying either a PhD, other doctorate or a research-based higher degree.⁹ Researchers asked participants about their awareness of these changes, and how this may have impacted their decision to study in the UK.

The sample included five people with dependants in the UK. Two of these people felt that these changes to the dependant rules would have impacted their decision to study in the UK.

Verdaan mentioned that he might have chosen to go to Australia instead of the UK because Australia also has a dependant visa policy. He initially did not choose Australia because it is further to travel from India. However, the availability of a Dependant visa was a serious consideration for him, as he emphasised the importance of not staying far from his family for an extended period.

"I think it could have been different [if I couldn't bring my wife and daughter to the UK on a Dependant visa], because, as I mentioned, UK was one choice out of a few countries. I could have, gone with Australia because they have a dependant visa policy as well. And, as I mentioned, I can't stay, far from my family for a longer period of time,"

Verdan, 40, India, Digital marketing (MA)

Kaan was able to bring his partner with him to the UK when carrying out his one-year Masters. He secured his partner a one-year course at an English language school because he realised he was unable to get a Dependant visa due to not being married. However, when pursuing his PhD in Psychology, he applied for a Dependant visa for his partner, who has never had a job in the UK due to the language barrier.

"If I were applying for a PhD now, and couldn't bring my partner [as a dependant] I wouldn't have applied." **Kaan, 37, Turkey, Psychology (PhD)**

However, there were some people who did not think changes to the dependant rules would have impacted their decision. Kabir, a 38-year-old from India studying health informatics, lives in the UK with his wife and children. His wife wasn't planning on joining him in the UK initially, so he didn't think that changes to the dependant rules would have impacted his decision-making. He was more motivated by gaining UK work experience. He reported that if there were changes to the duration of the Graduate visa, he would not have come because he viewed work experience in the UK as crucial to gain experience and skills for his career in India.

For both Ada and Sola, they did not completely understand the changes. Ada, a 43-year-old from Nigeria, expressed uncertainty and confusion regarding the changes to the dependant rules. She was not aware of the specific details of these changes or how they would affect her and others already in the UK. Sola, a 39-year-old from Nigeria who has just moved onto the Graduate visa in February 2024, was not concerned as she knew she could have dependants in the UK for at least two more years.

⁹ [GOV.UK. \(n.d.\). Student visa.](#)

Participants said they would have been less likely to decide to study in the UK if the Graduate visa did not exist

Researchers in the interview asked participants how their decision making would have been impacted if the Graduate visa had not existed. This was to further understand the role the Graduate visa had on people decision making and motivations to study and work in the UK.

Many participants said their decision to study in the UK would have been affected as the Graduate visa was one of the main reasons it was appealing to study in the UK. Many reported that they might have considered studying in another country if the Graduate visa was shortened or removed. Other countries they were considering for their studies included, notably English-speaking, Western countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada. Some were aware of the time limits for graduates to find work in other countries, such as the six-month limit in America.

Anat, a 24-year-old from Egypt studying business, stated: *"I would've just gone to Germany but then I saw that Graduate visa, it's the main reason I chose the UK."* Similarly, Sadiquoon, a 24-year-old from North Africa studying computer science, emphasised the importance of the Graduate visa: *"To be honest, if that [Graduate visa] wasn't included in the package, I wouldn't have applied if that was not included."*

Others described feeling that it might not have been worth the investment to study in the UK if they were not able to earn money in a foreign country afterwards.

"Yeah, definitely, it [the changes] would change my decision, because I can't invest £20,000 coming down here. The reason coming down here, one is one to learn from the UK system, and secondly, so, you know, look for job after your study." **Yele 34, Nigeria, Mechanical engineering (MSc)**

"Yeah, definitely it would have. Because just the degree without some experience is not going to help me. I need that experience." **Kabir 38, India, Health informatics (MSc)**

"Yeah, I guess, yeah, it would have. Because, see, I know that once I complete my studies, I do need to earn, I need to make use of those studies, I need to make money in a foreign country" **Ravi, 30, India, Business administration (MBA)**

These perspectives reflect the fact that many see the Graduate visa as a necessary step towards getting sponsored and a valuable opportunity to gain UK work experience, even if they do not want to stay in the UK long-term. Suriya, a 24-year-old from India pursuing a Masters in Organisational and Social Psychology, who was highly motivated to develop a career in the UK after her studies, reported: *"If the Graduate visa wasn't in place, and if it was the case of, like, I have to find a sponsored job with a 38k salary, I feel like it would have made an impact on my decision. I would definitely have to think twice about it, or I would maybe think about how I can invest less."*

Annex I: Sample table

N = 40 respondents

Quota	Total	
Studies prior to Graduate visa	Undergraduate	2
	Masters	35
	Other	3
University	Russell Group	12
	Non-Russell Group	28
Area of studies	STEM	11
	Arts	12
	Vocational	17
Region of studies	England	33
	Wales	3
	Scotland	2
	Northern Ireland	2
Employment status	Working	31
	Unemployed	9
Dependants in the UK	Yes	7
	No	33
Industry working in (if working)	Hospitality	4
	Retail	3
	Education	1
	IT	3
	Business	7
	Engineering	1
	Care	4
	Other	8
Gender	Male	17
	Female	23