



Welsh Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Professor Paul Boyle
Chair
Universities Wales
Units 6 & 7
Suite B
One Central Square
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2 April 2024

Dear Professor Boyle,

The Welsh Affairs Committee is holding an inquiry into the [Impact of population change in Wales](#). Migration to Wales from other parts of the UK and internationally is an important part of population change in Wales, and we would like to understand the role of international migration in Wales's workforce. We are therefore reaching out to sector bodies and organisations to invite evidence about their perspectives.

We are particularly interested to learn more about the following:

- To what extent does international migration fill skills gaps in the higher education and research sector in Wales? We welcome any case studies you would like to share.
- Is the current immigration system, including the Skilled Worker visa, Health and Care Worker visa and Seasonal Worker visa, fit for purpose for both employers and prospective employees in Wales?
- What impact will announced changes to the immigration system, including the move to the Immigration Salary List and an increase in the general salary threshold for the Skilled Worker visa, have on employers and recruitment in Wales?
- Should there be a made-for-Wales immigration pathway to enable businesses in Wales to more effectively recruit people from outside the UK, which addresses Wales-specific skills gaps and reflects median salaries in Wales?
- What is the role of international migration in the higher education and research sector in Wales in future?
- How has Brexit impacted the recruitment of EU citizens to work in the higher education and research sector in Wales?
- Is Wales effectively promoting its opportunities overseas, to attract people coming from outside the UK to Wales as a place to live and work?

The Committee would be grateful if responses to the questions above could be provided by **Friday 19th April**.



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Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP



Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP
Chair, Welsh Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

19 April 2024

Dear Chair

Thank you for your letter dated 2 April 2024. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into the impact of population change in Wales. Please see below our responses to the Committee's questions.

- **To what extent does international migration fill skills gaps in the higher education and research sector in Wales? We welcome any case studies you would like to share.**

According to [HESA data for 2022/23](#), 15.5% of the workforce in Welsh universities is from overseas.

The ability to recruit and retain talented academics from across the international research and innovation sector is vital to ensure Wales continues to be at the cutting edge of research and remains globally competitive. This cannot take place in isolation – in order to be world-leading, Welsh universities must operate in a global talent environment, attracting the brightest and best researchers from across the globe. Without the involvement of international academics, our research and innovation activity across Welsh universities would be significantly hindered.

In the latest Research Excellence Framework assessment, [REF 2021](#), Welsh universities led the UK for the proportion of research whose impact is considered internationally excellent or world-leading, with 89% of Welsh research awarded 3 or 4 stars.

According to REF data, Welsh universities are home to 3.9% of the UK's researchers, despite Wales making up 4.7% of the UK population. Based on our comparative size, Wales has a lower proportion of researchers than the wider UK, meaning it is even more important that we are able to draw in talent and expertise from international partners to bolster our research base.

- **Is the current immigration system, including the Skilled Worker visa, Health and Care Worker visa and Seasonal Worker visa, fit for purpose for both employers and prospective employees in Wales?**

- What impact will announced changes to the immigration system, including the move to the Immigration Salary List and an increase in the general salary threshold for the Skilled Worker visa, have on employers and recruitment in Wales?

Changes to the immigration system, including the increase in the general salary threshold, and the review of the Graduate Route, could have a significant impact on Welsh universities' ability to recruit international students and academics.

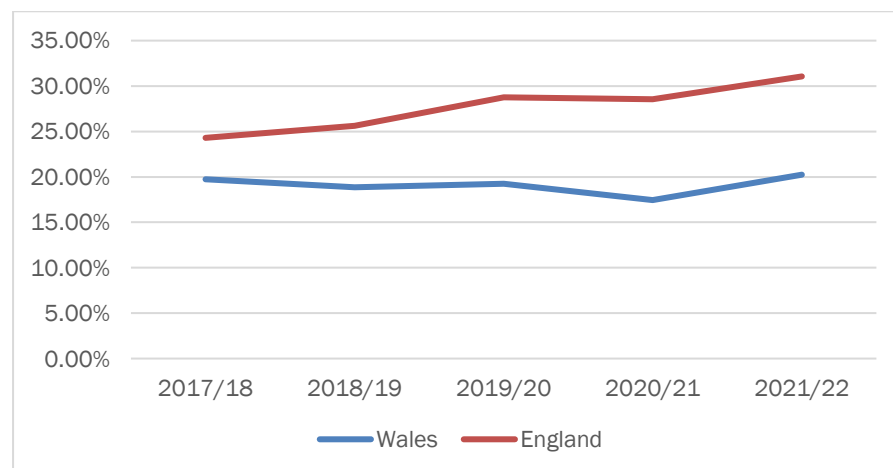
Universities across the UK (including Wales) are already reporting a significant decline in international recruitment. Data shows uncertainty over post-study work opportunities is an important factor in international student decision making, while a recent survey undertaken by UUK suggests that international student numbers are now declining, following a peak in 2022/23. The results, from over 70 universities, reveal a significant decline in enrolments, especially of postgraduate taught students – which were reported to be down by more than 40% in January 2024.

This picture is reinforced by the latest data from Enrolly, a platform used by around 60 universities. It suggests that international student demand for the UK is down significantly on last year, with overall deposits [down by more than a third on the same point in 2023](#).

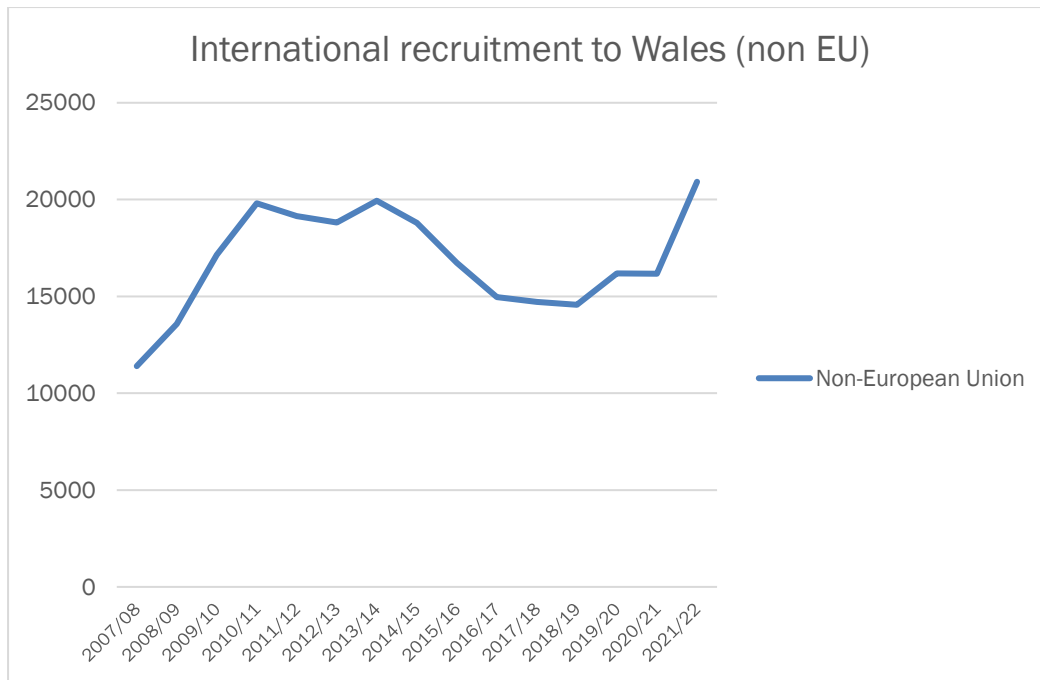
The Graduate Route has enabled universities to significantly diversify their student population.

As the chart below (Figure 1) demonstrates, the impact of any changes to the Graduate Route will be magnified in Wales, as international student growth in Wales has not matched that of the UK, and stagnated after the removal of the Post-Study Work visa in 2012 before increasing again more recently.

Figure 1: international student enrolments as a % of higher education enrolments in Wales and England



Source: HESA



The table below (Figure 2) demonstrates a recovery in recruitment from non-EU countries, particularly from Africa and Asia, since the introduction of the Graduate route in 2021. Enrolments had dipped after the post-work study visa was abolished in 2012.

Figure 2. Changes in enrolments in Wales

Domicile (conti..	Academic Year														
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Africa	1,705	2,025	2,340	2,420	2,485	2,535	2,885	2,890	2,515	1,705	1,285	1,110	1,270	1,730	3,185
Asia	7,335	8,680	11,150	13,535	12,660	12,040	12,635	11,210	9,670	9,050	9,410	9,870	11,230	11,020	13,935
Australasia	70	80	90	70	75	80	105	90	85	65	55	65	70	75	75
Middle East	965	1,170	1,685	1,895	1,970	2,190	2,435	2,655	2,765	2,550	2,375	2,095	2,090	1,955	2,045
North America	760	830	845	830	880	955	865	955	860	860	955	805	855	785	1,095
Not known	860	540	370	125	170	55	15	25	5	0	0	0	5	0	10
South America	160	255	365	340	235	180	195	220	135	125	110	105	100	75	75
Grand Total	11,855	13,575	16,850	19,210	18,475	18,035	19,135	18,045	16,035	14,355	14,190	14,055	15,620	15,640	20,415

Source: HESA

The change in **salary thresholds** on the Skilled Worker Route (now £38,700) will also have a disproportionate impact in Wales, where the average graduate starting salary is ~£25,000. Furthermore, in 2020, Universities Wales was a signatory to a [joint position paper developed by Welsh Government](#), which suggested the salary threshold should be capped at £20,000 to avoid restricting opportunities for graduates in some parts of Wales. £38,700 is hugely prohibitive by comparison.

- Should there be a made-for-Wales immigration pathway to enable businesses in Wales to more effectively recruit people from outside the UK, which addresses Wales-specific skills gaps and reflects median salaries in Wales?

It is clear that the current immigration system should better reflect the needs of the Welsh economy. However, it not certain whether a made-for-Wales immigration pathway is the best way to achieve this. Further consideration of available evidence is needed.

- **What is the role of international migration in the higher education and research sector in Wales in future?**

International migration of students and academics is already a vital component of the higher education and research sector in Wales. It ensures Wales has a role on the world stage, and contributes to our [soft power](#).

International collaboration across research and innovation activity is fundamental in ensuring Welsh universities remain globally competitive. The UK's participation in Horizon Europe enables collaboration with world-leading academics based across Europe.

The latest REF exercise demonstrated the impact of research conducted at Welsh universities with international academics and partners, including [understanding the implications of emotional artificial intelligence](#), [pioneering new ways of tackling bacterial contamination](#), and [developing an ultra-lightweight camera for high-altitude use](#). The Welsh economy and society benefits significantly from research activity undertaken by Welsh universities. Universities in Wales generate [£5bn of output in the Welsh economy every year](#).

Further to this, in increasingly challenging economic circumstances, universities depend upon income from international student income to support teaching for domestic students (inflation means the domestic fee no longer covers the cost of teaching) and to make the delivery of research and innovation projects viable.

Universities are fundamental to the future economic productivity of Wales. More than 400,000 extra graduates will be needed in Wales by 2035 in order to respond to skills gaps and workforce challenges of the future, according to the findings of a [report by UUK](#). By 2035, 95% of *new jobs* in Wales will be at graduate level, with 88% of UK jobs set to be at graduate level. As Welsh universities currently provide around 40,000 graduates each year, and account for nearly three quarters of the UK graduate workforce in Wales, this means increasing the number of graduates from Welsh universities very significantly. Immigration will have a key role to play in plugging skills shortage vacancies.

- **How has Brexit impacted the recruitment of EU citizens to work in the higher education and research sector in Wales?**

Brexit has affected the recruitment of EU citizens to work in our higher education and research sector in a number of ways, including adding to the workload of HR staff processing immigration requirements for a wider range of employees. There are also considerable costs associated with migrating to the UK, including the cost of visas and the NHS surcharge, which are now payable by EU citizens.

Longer term, the issue will be around the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for an academic career when we are outside the EU. For now, our association to Horizon Europe is positive, and we would like to see the UK Government signal its intent to join FP10.

- **Is Wales effectively promoting its opportunities overseas, to attract people coming from outside the UK to Wales as a place to live and work?**

The [Global Wales](#) programme is a partnership between Universities Wales, ColegauCymru, Welsh Government, British Council Wales, and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. The programme provides a strategic, collaborative approach to

international higher education and further education in Wales. Its objectives include increasing the awareness and reputation of Welsh universities and further education colleges in priority markets increasing student numbers from those markets, and maintaining and growing partnerships. The priority markets are North America, India and Vietnam. The programme is funded to the end of July 2025.

As part of the Global Wales programme, the [Study in Wales](#) brand partnership works collaboratively with Study UK to promote Wales as a place to study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P Boyle', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Professor Paul Boyle

Chair, Universities Wales