

Dame Emily Thornberry MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0PW

14 April 2026

Dear Chair,

Thank you for your letter regarding the visa brake that has recently been implemented for nationals of Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar, and Sudan.

The number of asylum claims from people who arrived in the UK on a visa or other documented leave has nearly tripled over the last three years. The Government takes this trend very seriously, both because of the pressure it places on the asylum system and because of the need to maintain confidence in the integrity of our immigration routes. While I recognise that most people who come to study in the UK do so for genuine reasons, the evidence is clear that the Student route for these four nationalities has been a sustained source of a particularly high number and high proportion of visa-linked asylum claims relative to the number of visas issued. By year ending September 2025, asylum applications by students from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar and Sudan had risen to over 470% of their 2021 level. Introducing these brakes, therefore, was a data-driven and evidence-based decision, taken to safeguard the fairness, credibility and sustainability of the immigration system as a whole and to reduce further strain on our asylum system.

I understand this decision may be disappointing to nationals of these countries, including those who wished to join the Chevening Scholarship programme, however, the visa brake was introduced on account of the high numbers and proportions of visa-linked asylum claims by these nationalities. While the terms and conditions of the Chevening Scholarship require scholars to return home for at least two years following the completion of courses, there have been instances of asylum claims made by Chevening scholars for each of the affected nationalities in recent years. I appreciate the request for data on these asylum claims, but the Government does not publish this information as doing so could risk identifying individuals' asylum status within this small cohort.

In light of this continued asylum risk, the Government considers that introducing exceptions from the visa brakes for Chevening scholars of these nationalities would be unfair, and we have no current plans to do so. Additionally, any such exception would leave the Chevening programme as the only UK student route available to nationals of the affected countries and therefore could serve to further increase the asylum risk among these cohorts.

I note your concerns regarding the potential implications for the UK's soft power. In this context, it may be helpful to set out the position in relation to the overall scale of the Chevening programme. Each year, the UK awards approximately 1,500 Chevening Scholarships, of which only around 8 per cent are allocated to nationals from the four

countries concerned. Set against the global reach of the programme as a whole, the impact is therefore extremely limited. Chevening continues to represent a significant and enduring component of the UK's soft power offer, enabling exceptionally talented individuals from across the world to access our world-leading higher education sector and to build lasting ties with the UK.

It may also be helpful to note that Chevening Fellows from the eligible nationalities will still be able to take up their awards. This is because they will not apply for the sponsored study route but will travel to the UK on either Government Authorised Exchange (Temporary Work) visas or Standard Visitor visas. I would also like to clarify that no Chevening scholarship offers for these nationalities have been revoked due to the visa brake because none have yet been awarded. While interviewing for the programme had begun for the 2026 academic year, scholarship allocations are usually not made until June, meaning only applications rather than actual scholarships have been revoked.

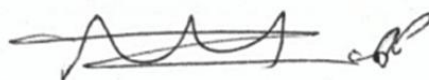
I am conscious of the wider humanitarian context that nationals of these countries are facing, including the severe restrictions placed on education for women and girls, especially in Afghanistan. As such, I should like to make clear that the decision to apply a visa brake was not political, but purely a proportionate, data-driven measure to protect UK border security from visa-linked asylum claims. In recognition of the wider context, the Home Secretary has recently announced the development of new safe and legal routes to offer sanctuary to those fleeing war and persecution from around the world. This system will include a community sponsorship model, allowing local groups and charities to identify and welcome refugees and support their integration. Alongside this, there will be specific routes for skilled workers and students, giving those with the right qualifications a chance to build a future here. Home Office officials are already working closely with community sponsor groups, neighbourhood housing officers and the UN Refugee Agency to design the new routes with the intention that they will be open as soon as is feasible. We will ensure that these routes will be sustainable, well-managed and in line with UK capacity to support new refugees.

The UK also remains deeply committed to supporting vulnerable communities across Afghanistan, Myanmar, Cameroon, and Sudan through significant humanitarian aid and diplomatic efforts. This includes: £151 million in assistance to Afghanistan, with a particular focus on women and girls; over £190 million to Myanmar since the 2021 coup, which has provided vital humanitarian and health services; £146 million in aid to Sudan in this year alone, where the UK remains a major humanitarian donor; and continued engagement with the Cameroon Government across a range of issues including trade and climate and nature.

The visa brake is not intended to be permanent and the Government will keep it under review. It will, however, only be lifted once the Government judges it is appropriate to do so.

I am also copying this letter to the Foreign Secretary.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mike Tapp', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mike Tapp MP
Minister for Migration & Citizenship



**Foreign Affairs
Committee**

Friday, 27 March 2026

Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
Home Office

[via email]

Chevening Scholarships

Dear Shabana

I write to you setting out my concerns regarding the recently announced changes to the UK visa system, which will affect applicants to the Chevening Scholarship from Myanmar, Sudan, Afghanistan and Cameroon.

This will have a detrimental impact on the UK's soft power influence, whilst significantly impacting vulnerable women in conflict states from pursuing educational attainment. The decision not to exempt Chevening Scholarships from the temporary visa break is short sighted. Parliamentarians, stakeholders and in particular Chevening alumni have expressed their concerns at this decision, including in correspondence to the Committee. We note that the Government has explicitly told Parliament that it has ruled out providing an exception for Chevening Scholars.¹

As such, I wish to set out several points that we hope will explain why the Home Office should reconsider applying a carve-out for Chevening Scholars.

First, the Scholarship has an acceptance rate of approximately 2% from tens of thousands of applicants globally—hardly a significant vector for later asylum claims that the Government argues it is concerned about.²

Second, Chevening has a stated aim that its "scholars return home to use the knowledge, skills and networks they gain in the UK to influence positive change".³

¹ [Overseas Students: Sudan](#), PQ 119436, 17 March 2026

² Chevening, [What to expect next from the application process, as told by a Chevening Scholar](#), 16 November 2022

³ Chevening, [About Chevening](#) (accessed 18 March 2026)



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Indeed, the terms and conditions of the Chevening Scholarship state that scholars “must return home for a period of at least two years following the completion of your scholarship” and “must not apply to switch to any other visa category or extend your current visa on completion of your studies”.⁴ In the case of conflict in the Scholar’s home country rendering the return for two years impossible, the terms and conditions state that “[a]pplications to return to third countries for the two-year period may be considered in exceptional circumstances”.⁵ Provisions are therefore already made for the types of situations the Government intends to address.

Third, the Government’s current approach works against the stated aims of its own policymaking regarding soft power. The Chevening Scholarship is one of our most impactful soft power tools. It leans into the UK’s strengths in higher education and leverages that strength to support the world’s best and brightest and help them build better opportunities for their communities when they return home.

The profile of prospective Chevening Scholars are “people who demonstrate the potential to become future leaders, senior decision-makers and opinion formers”.⁶ Of Chevening’s roughly 60,000 alumni network, 15% hold prominent positions in government and 22 are current or former heads of government.⁷ This is an important contributor to the global impact of our education system, with 58 current world leaders educated in the UK (second only to the United States, with 70).⁸ Others become prominent practitioners in the fields of international development, research, law, medicine and finance.⁹

The benefits of the scheme are also felt in the UK. The FCDO’s own submission to our ongoing soft power inquiry noted that “£217 million of additional business investment into the UK could be attributed to the Chevening programme between 2002 and 2014”.¹⁰ Programmes such as Chevening, Turing and the Commonwealth Scholarships additionally help attract exceptional researchers, staff and students to UK universities.¹¹

The impacts of this decision are therefore incongruent with, if not contradictory to, the Government’s ostensible ambitions for a “renewed approach to soft power” to “bring tangible economic benefits to the people of the UK” and “strengthen our reach and

⁴ Chevening, [Terms and conditions for Chevening Scholarships](#) (PDF), 3 September 2025, section 13

⁵ As above

⁶ FCDO, [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office international scholarship programmes](#), 1 September 2023

⁷ Chevening, [Chevening's impact](#) (accessed 18 March 2026)

⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office ([SFT0051](#)) para 6

⁹ Cheving, [2022-2023 Impact Report](#) (PDF), 6 February 2026

¹⁰ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office ([SFT0051](#)) para 48

¹¹ Imperial College London ([SFT0100](#)) para 16



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reputation by building partnerships at home and abroad”.¹² This is even more imperative given that the UK has fallen in back-to-back years in the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index from 2nd to 4th overall, having been overtaken by China and Japan.¹³

Finally, removing educational pathways for applicants from Myanmar, Sudan, Afghanistan and Cameroon—countries that are most affected by political instability and conflict—does not help mitigate or address the root causes of insecurity in those countries. The FCDO has told us that in education (as a development sector), “the UK is a clear global leader” and can “carve out a new thought leadership niche”.¹⁴ We agree, and as such it is imperative we keep playing to our strengths where we can continue to contribute to building peace and prosperity abroad.

Given the benefits of the scheme and the relatively low risk to the Government’s asylum policy, a blanket ban that excludes the Chevening programme appears disproportionate and contrary to the Government’s policymaking on soft power and international development.

I hope you will reconsider your decision in light of this and would be grateful if you would respond to these points by 9 April 2026. In your response, we hope that you would be able to provide the number and proportion of Chevening Scholars who have either applied for asylum and absconded, to help us understand the rationale of your decision.

I have also sent a copy of this letter to the Foreign Secretary and the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Dame Emily Thornberry MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee

¹² FCDO, [UK Soft Power Council: membership and terms of reference](#), 26 January 2026

¹³ Brand Finance, [Global Soft Power Index 2026](#), 20 January 2026

¹⁴ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office ([SFT0051](#)) para 11