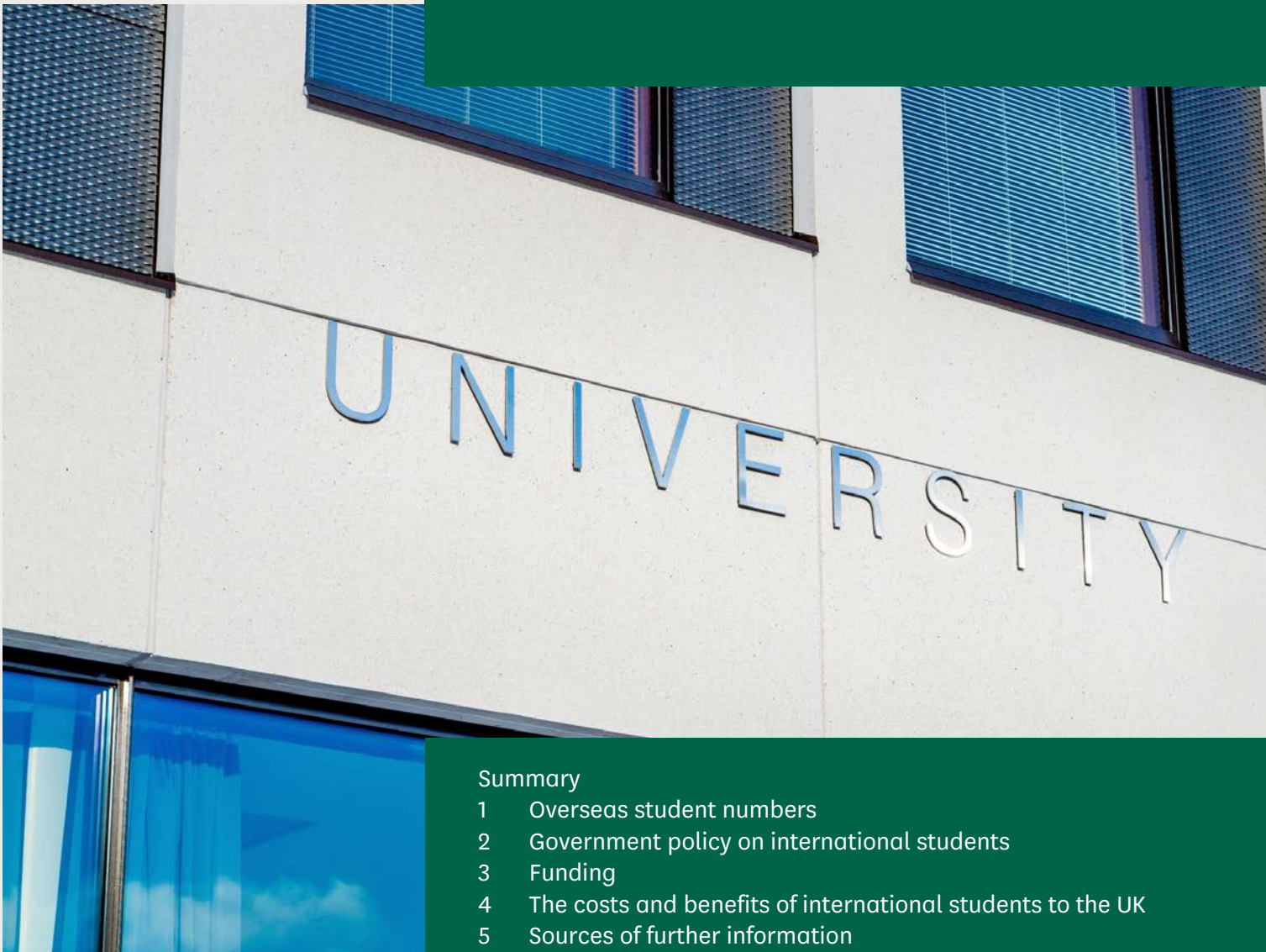


Research Briefing

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15 July 2022

International students in UK higher education: FAQs



Summary

- 1 Overseas student numbers
- 2 Government policy on international students
- 3 Funding
- 4 The costs and benefits of international students to the UK
- 5 Sources of further information

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Summary

Overseas student numbers

Including alternative providers

In 2020/21, there were **605,100** overseas students across all types of UK higher education institutions. This was **an increase of 109,000 since 2018/19** and meant the Government's target of 600,000 international students by 2030 was met 10 years early. This figure includes around 21,000 overseas students who were studying at [alternative providers](#). These are institutions which do not receive direct public funding.

Excluding alternative providers

In 2020/21 there were **584,100** overseas students studying at UK universities, **148,100** from the EU and **436,000** from elsewhere. This was another new record total and 22% of the total student population.

In 2015/16, the number of new overseas entrants to UK universities was just over **230,000**, increases in the last five years saw overseas entrants numbers reach a new high of **318,400** in 2020/21.

The top sending countries for overseas students have changed over the last few years.

- China currently sends the most students to the UK, just over **97,000** in 2020/21; this number has risen by 82% since 2011/12 despite a fall in 2020/21.
- The number of students from some major 'source' countries has declined, for example, numbers from Malaysia and Thailand have fallen by around **50%** since 2011/12.
- There has been a general drop in entrants from the major EU countries since 2011/12; Cyprus down by **37%**, Ireland **35%**, Germany **34%**, Greece **31%**, and France **19%**. Italy and Spain were exception with numbers up by **41%** and **62%** respectively.

In recent years, the UK has been the second most popular global destination for international students after the US. In 2019, it was overtaken by Australia and fell to third. Other English-speaking countries, such as New Zealand and Canada, are also seeing substantial increases in overseas students, as are European countries which are increasingly offering courses in English.

Government policy on international students

International Education Strategy

The UK Government's [International Education Strategy](#) sets out actions to meet ambitions to:

- increase the value of education exports to **£35 billion** per year by 2030;
- increase the total number of international students choosing to study in the UK higher education system (in universities, further education colleges and alternative providers) each year to **600,000** by 2030

The latter ambition was met for the first time in 2020/21, with **605,130** international higher education students studying in the UK.

Brexit

There was a sharp decline (**40%**) in applications for undergraduate study in the UK from EU countries in 2021/22. The number of EU accepted applicants fell by **50%** in 2021/22. EU Applications for 2022/23 up to the 30 June pre-clearing deadline were down again by a further **18%**.

New students arriving from the EU to start courses from August 2021 are [generally no longer eligible for home student status](#), which means they must pay international fees and will not qualify for tuition fee loans. Students who started courses on or before 31 July 2021 remain eligible for support for the duration of their course.

In September 2021, [the Turing Scheme](#) replaced the Erasmus+ programme in providing funding for participants in UK universities to go on international study and work placements. The decision not to fund students coming to the UK as part of the Turing Scheme has prompted concern there will be a decrease in international students and the benefits they bring to the UK.

Student and graduate visas

In October 2020, a new '[student route](#)' for international students applying for visas to study in the UK opened, replacing the previous Tier 4 (General) student visa.

In July 2021, a new post-study work visa for international students, the '[Graduate route](#)', opened. The graduate visa gives international graduates permission to stay in the UK for two years after successfully completing a course in the UK. For graduates who completed a PhD or other doctoral qualification, the visa lasts for 3 years.

Funding

Research income from the EU was worth **£883 million** to UK universities in 2019/20, or **14%** of total research income. It included grants and contracts from EU Government bodies, charities, and the private sector.

Research income from non-EU overseas sources was **£591 million**, or **9%** of all research income in the same year.

The costs and benefits of international students to the UK

A [September 2021 London Economics report](#) estimated the 2018/19 first-year cohort of international students would bring a net economic benefit of **£25.9 billion** to the UK over the course of their studies.

The report estimated the **£2.9 billion** economic cost of international students (from the teaching grant, student support for EU students, and cost of providing public services to students and their dependents) was outweighed by the **£28.8 billion** brought in through tuition fees, living cost expenditure, and the related knock-on (or 'indirect' and 'induced') effects of this spending throughout the UK economy.

Alongside these economic benefits, surveys have shown international students benefit the UK higher education experience by bringing an outward-looking culture to campuses and preparing students for working in a global environment.

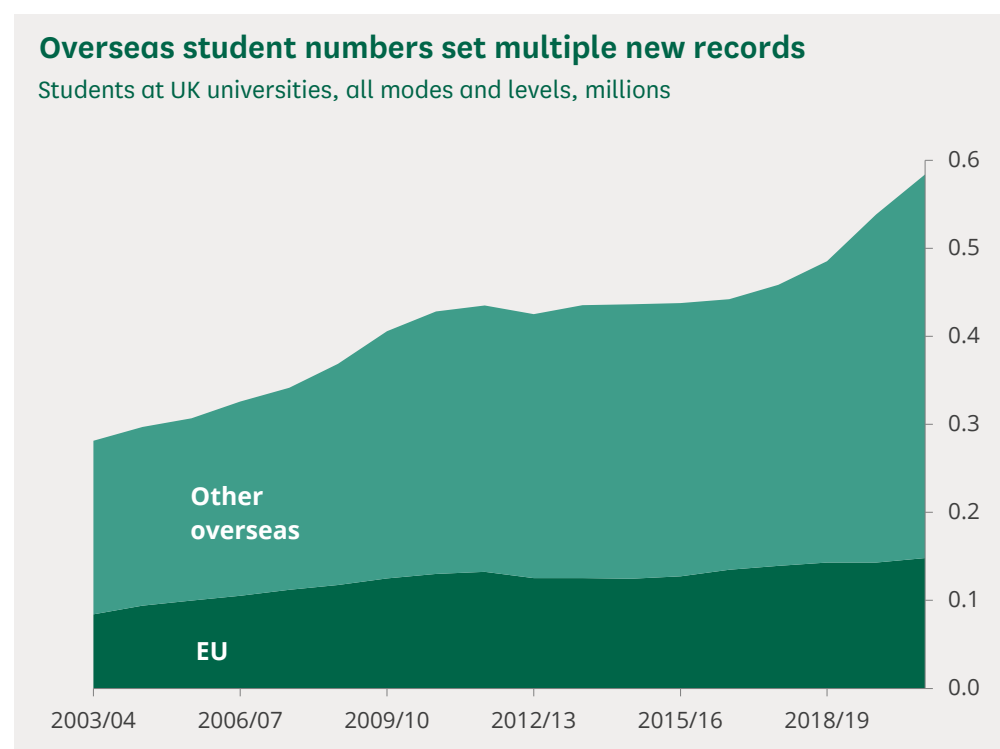
1

Overseas student numbers

How many overseas students are at UK universities?

In the 2020/21 academic year, there were **584,100 overseas students** studying at UK universities; 22% of the total student population. 148,100 were from the EU and 436,000 from outside the EU.¹

New overseas entrants to UK universities peaked at 238,000 in 2011/12. Their number fell by 10,000 in 2012/13 largely due to a drop in entrants from the EU in the first year of higher fees in England. Since then, increases in the last five years, mainly from outside the EU, have seen overseas entrants reach a new high of 318,400 in 2020/21. The 2020/21 total was 36% of all first-year students at UK universities. 64,300 were from the EU and 254,100 from outside the EU.²



Source: HESA, [Higher education student data \(Where do they come from?\)](#) -and earlier editions

¹ The figures in this briefing on student numbers do not include higher education students who study at further education colleges or students at alternative (private) providers. There were 21,000 overseas students at alternative providers in 2020/21.

² HESA, [Higher education student data \(Where do they come from?\)](#).

Which countries send the most students?

The top ten countries are shown opposite. China clearly dominates with almost as many entrants as the rest of the top ten combined.

Top 10 countries of origin

First years 2020/21

China	97,200
India	50,065
Nigeria	13,980
United States	9,455
Pakistan	7,360
Hong Kong	6,845
France	6,290
Romania	5,970
Italy	5,765

Change in 1st years

11/12-20/21: Major non-EU countries

India	+206%
China	+82%
Nigeria	+40%
Hong Kong	+29%
Canada	-2%
Saudi Arabia	-2%
United States	-6%
Malaysia	-49%
Thailand	-53%

Change since 2011/12 are shown opposite. Some of the key recent trends are:

- Chinese student numbers fell slightly in 2020/21, but were still up by 82% since 2011/12.
- Numbers from the increased steadily to 2018/19, but have since fallen and in 2020/21 were lower than at any time in the last decade.
- Indian student numbers fell by 44% between 2011/12 and 2015/16. They increased steadily for the following few years before increasing dramatically in 2019/20 by 120% and by a further 27% in 2020/21..
- There has been a consistent decline in numbers from Malaysia since 2013/14. New students from Nigeria fell rapidly in 2015/16 and 2016/17 before stabilising, then increasing by more than 150% between 2018/19 and 2020/21.
- There has been a general drop in entrants from the major EU countries since 2011/12; Cyprus down by 37%, Ireland 35%, Germany 34%, Greece 31% and France 19%. Italy and Spain were exception with numbers up by 41 and 62% respectively.
- Overall first year EU student numbers are broadly similar to their level a decade ago. There was a noticeable drop in 2012/12, but numbers have generally recovered since then.

What impact did the coronavirus pandemic have on international students coming to the UK?

There was a general fear across the higher education sector that the pandemic and associated lockdowns across the world would lead to a substantial drop in international student numbers. However, despite a fall in entrants from some countries, notably China, the US, and Thailand, the total number of overseas students increased by more than 45,500 to a new record level in 2020/21. The largest increases in new students were from India, Nigeria, and Pakistan.³

Data from the admissions service UCAS covers new students on undergraduate courses. These also show an increase in overseas applicants and the number accepted in 2020/21 to a new record. There was a sharp Brexit-related decline in applicants and acceptances from the EU in 2021/22. Numbers from outside the EU increased again in 2021/22.⁴

³ HESA, [Higher education student data \(Where do they come from?\)](#).

⁴ [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021](#).

A Library briefing, [Coronavirus: Financial impact on higher education](#), discusses the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on international students. The latest data on international student numbers are included in the briefing [Higher education student numbers](#).

What is the UK's share of the overall international higher education market?

In 2019, the US took 23% of international students who were studying overseas at universities in the OECD. Australia moved into second place in 2019 with 12%, followed by the UK in third place also with 12%.

The next largest destinations were Germany (8%), Canada (7%) and France (6%). In the same year the UK had one of the highest rates of international students⁵ in the OECD with 19%. This was more than double the EU average and behind only Luxembourg (49%), Australia (28%) and New Zealand (21%).⁶

How do international students choose where to study?

A survey of prospective international students in 56 countries revealed employment prospects (**64%**), followed closely by an institution's reputation (**61%**), were the top factors influencing where they choose to study.⁷ Language, culture, and a country's post-study visa policy were the next three most important factors.

What level courses do overseas students study?

Overseas students are much more likely than home students to study full-time and/or follow postgraduate courses. In 2020/21, 55% of non-EU students were on postgraduate courses compared to 29% from the EU and 21% of home students. At undergraduate level, overseas students were more likely to be on first degree courses than home students. Overseas students were also more likely to be studying full-time; 92% of those from the EU and 93% of non-EU entrants compared to 75% of home students.⁸

In 2018/19 58% of Chinese students were studying at postgraduate level (mainly taught courses), a similar rate to those from the US (54%) and slightly below the proportion of Indian postgraduates (68%). The majority of EU students were undergraduates (69%).⁹

⁵ As a proportion of all students at tertiary level

⁶ OECD, [Education at a Glance 2021](#), Indicator B6.1

⁷ QS Quacquarelli Symonds, [QS Higher Education Briefing: Is COVID-19 still impacting student decision making?](#), 27 May 2022.

⁸ HESA, [HE student data -Where do students come from?](#)

⁹ HESA, [HE student data -Where do students come from?](#)

How many UK universities have overseas campuses?

The UK higher education sector is involved in various types of transnational education (TNE) and a number of universities have established branch campuses overseas to increase their global reach.

According to a report produced for Universities UK International in 2018, 84% of universities deliver TNE to over 700,000 students worldwide. The number has increased year on year since 2007/08.¹⁰

A publication by Universities UK and the British Council in 2016 gave information on some of these campuses:

Over the last decade a number of universities have opened branch campuses. A very well known example for the UK has been the University of Nottingham campus in Ningbo, China and in Semenyih, Malaysia. Manchester Business School and Middlesex University are other notable players, as well as Lancaster and Strathclyde universities that signed agreements in May 2009 to establish campuses in Pakistan. Aberystwyth University followed Middlesex University in opening a campus in Mauritius in 2014. The University of Liverpool and Xi'an Jiaotong University in China formed a partnership for setting up Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), an independent university based in Suzhou, Jiangsu, China. The UK's existing and currently planned branch campuses are concentrated quite heavily in the UAE, China, Malaysia and Singapore, though single campuses have been established in less well known locations such as Uzbekistan (Westminster).¹¹

Other universities have created institutional partnerships with overseas universities, or set up validation and franchising arrangements.

Which universities have the most overseas students?

Which Unis have the most overseas students?

Overseas students in UK universities 2020/21: Top 10

rank	By absolute number	Number	% of students	rank	By % of students	% of students	Number
1	University College London	23,360	51%	1	London Business School	80%	1,965
2	The University of Manchester	17,625	39%	2	Royal College of Art	79%	2,155
3	The University of Edinburgh	15,590	41%	3	LSE	67%	9,030
4	King's College London	15,550	40%	4	Royal College of Music	55%	510
5	Coventry University	13,760	35%	5	Imperial	53%	11,265
6	The University of Glasgow	13,245	36%	6	London Sch of Hygiene & Tropical Med.	48%	530
7	Imperial	11,265	53%	7	Royal Academy of Music	48%	385
8	The University of Sheffield	11,260	37%	8	Cranfield University	43%	2,160
9	University of the Arts, London	11,230	53%	9	King's College London	40%	15,550
10	The University of Leeds	10,455	28%	10	Courtauld Institute of Art	40%	230

Source: HESA, [Where do HE students come from?](#), HESA

¹⁰ Universities UK International, [Transnational education: Global location, local innovation](#), September 2018.

¹¹ HE Global, [The Scale and Scope of UK Higher Education Transnational Education](#), Universities UK and the British Council, June 2016.

How many staff at universities are from overseas?

In 2019/20, there were 70,195 academic staff from overseas at UK universities. This was 31% of all academic staff and 20% more than in 2015/16. 38,410 were from the EU and 31,785 from elsewhere.¹² In 2018/19, Engineering & technology and the sciences had the highest overseas staff rates with 46% and 39% respectively.¹³

1.1

UK students abroad

How many UK students study abroad and where do they go?

In 2019, an estimated **2%** of UK students in higher education were studying abroad. This rate was half the EU average and well below levels in Germany and France (both 4%).¹⁴ In 2018 the most popular overseas destinations for UK students were the US with 29% of home students studying abroad, followed by Germany (14%), the Netherlands (9%), Australia (7%) and Canada (5%).¹⁵

¹² HESA, [Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#).

¹³ HESA, [HE staff data: Where do they work, come from and go to?](#)

¹⁴ OECD, [Education at a Glance 2021](#), Indicator B6.1.

¹⁵ OECD, [Education at a Glance 2020](#), Indicators B6.3 and B6.5.

2 Government policy on international students

2.1 International Education Strategy

What is the Government's strategy for international education?

In March 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for International Trade (DIT) launched the [International Education Strategy \(PDF\)](#).¹⁶

The strategy set out the UK Government's ambition to:

- increase the value of education exports to **£35 billion** per year by 2030;
- increase the total number of international students choosing to study in the UK higher education system each year to **600,000** by 2030.

The strategy also set out five cross-cutting strategic actions, which were developed through consultation with the education sector:

- Appoint an International Education Champion to spearhead overseas activity.
- Promote the breadth and diversity of the UK education offer more fully to international audiences.
- Provide a welcoming environment for international students and develop an increasingly competitive offer.
- Establish a whole-of-government approach by implementing a framework for ministerial engagement with the sector, as well as formalised structures for coordination between Government departments, both domestically and overseas.
- Provide a clearer picture of exports activity by improving the accuracy and coverage of annually published education exports data.

¹⁶ HM Government, [International Education Strategy: Global potential, global growth](#) (PDF), March 2019.

What progress has there been?

On 5 June 2020, it was announced that Professor Sir Steve Smith, who was previously Vice-Chancellor at the University for Exeter, would be the UK's International Education Champion.¹⁷

The DfE has said the champion will work to open up export growth opportunities for the whole UK education sector, in order to attract international students and establish global connections.¹⁸ He will particularly focus on promoting growth for the higher education sector in India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Nigeria, as well as Brazil, Mexico, Pakistan, Europe, China and Hong Kong.¹⁹

On 6 February 2021, the Government launched an [update to its International Education Strategy](#). It restated the ambitions set out in the original strategy and highlighted progress since 2019, including:

- the appointment of the International Education Champion;
- the introduction of a new Graduate route for international students;
- the introduction of new Student routes;
- the Turing Scheme.²⁰

A progress update in 2022 said the ambition to host 600,000 international students was met for the first time in 2020/2021, with **605,130** international students studying in the UK.²¹

In 2019, the total UK revenue from education-related exports and transnational education activity was estimated to be **£25.2 billion**, which was an increase of 8.1% since 2018 in current prices. From 2020 onwards, an average annual increase in export revenue of around **3% per year** would be needed to meet the ambition to increase the value of education exports to £35 billion £ by 2030.

¹⁷ [“Sir Steve Smith appointed UK’s ‘international education champion’”](#), Times Higher Education, 5 June 2020.

¹⁸ [HC Deb \[Universities: Foreign Students\] 2 July 2020](#)

¹⁹ DfE blog, [How the International Education Strategy is championing the UK education sector overseas](#), 8 October 2021.

²⁰ HM Government, [International Education Strategy: 2021 update: Supporting recovery, driving growth](#), February 2021.

²¹ HM Government, [International Education Strategy: 2022 progress update](#), May 2022.

2.2

Brexit

How have EU student numbers changed since Brexit?

There was a concern that following the result of the EU referendum in June 2016, international student recruitment would be affected by a perception the UK was now a less welcoming place for foreign students.²² However, there was no noticeable impact on EU student numbers immediately after the Brexit vote in 2016.

Data from UCAS on applicants to full-time undergraduate courses shows that there was a sharp decline in applications from EU countries in 2021/22, **down by 40%**. The number of EU accepted applicants **fell by 50%** in 2021/22. EU Applications for 2022/23 up to the 30 June pre-clearing deadline were down again by a further **18%**.²³

The Higher Education Statistics Agency data on student numbers across all levels and modes does not yet cover the period from 2021/22, when home student status and associated funding was ended for new EU students.

What impact has Brexit had on home student status?

Higher education providers across the UK allocate their students ‘home’ or ‘overseas/international’ status for the purpose of charging tuition fees. Undergraduate home fees are currently capped while overseas fees are set by providers and can be much higher depending on the course and provider.

To receive publicly funded student support, including tuition fee and maintenance loans, students must also be allocated home status by one of:

- [Student Finance England](#)
- [Student Awards Agency Scotland](#)
- [Student Finance Wales](#)
- [Student Finance NI](#)

New students arriving from the EU to start courses from August 2021 are generally no longer treated as having home student status, and thus no longer eligible for funding. Students who started courses on or before 31 July 2021 remain eligible for support for the duration of their course.

Following the UK’s exit from the European Union, some new categories of eligibility for home fee status and student support have been established across the UK.

²² [“Third of foreign students less likely to come to UK after Brexit”](#), Financial Times, 28 July 2016.

²³ UCAS, [2022 cycle applicant figures -30 June deadline](#).

See the relevant article in the Library casework article series on eligibility for home fee status and student support for more information:

- [England](#)
- [Scotland](#)
- [Wales](#)
- [Northern Ireland](#)

What support was previously available for EU students?

Under EU rules on free movement, European students studying in another EU member state must be given the same access to higher education as local students. This means that EU students have the same right to student support as local students in EU countries.

During the UK's membership of the EU, therefore, EU students studying in the UK had access to tuition fee loans on the same basis as UK students. Since EU students studying in the UK's regions had to be treated the same as home students of that region, EU students in Scotland did not pay fees. EU rules do not apply to a member state's own internal arrangements, so the devolution settlement meant English students could still be charged fees at Scottish universities.

EU students were not generally eligible for maintenance loans due to the residency criteria.

How much did EU students take out in loans?

In financial year 2020-21, a total of **£517 million** was lent to EU students at English universities. This fell in 2021-22 (which included EU students under the new rules for the first time) to **£458 million**. The amount had been increasing particularly due to higher fees from 2012. An estimated 69% of eligible EU full-time undergraduates took out fee loans in 2014/15.²⁴

A total of **£4.6 billion** was owed by EU borrowers at the end of financial year 2021-22; **2.5%** of the total outstanding student loan debt.²⁵

How many EU students repay their loans?

As EU students have only been eligible for tuition fee loans since 2006, there are a limited number of cohorts who have become liable to repay, and only

²⁴ Student Loans Company, [Student Loans in England: 2021 to 2022](#) (Table 1A)

²⁵ Student Loans Company, [Student Loans in England: 2020 to 2021](#) (Table 1A)

early evidence on any post-2012 cohort for whom loan amounts are much bigger.

Looking across all cohorts with at least one tax year processed,²⁶ **21%** had repaid their loans in full; **22%** were currently repaying; **26%** were earning below the earnings threshold (in the UK or overseas) and hence not repaying; and the remaining **30%** were either not in employment, defaulted on repayment, had not provided details of their income, were not traced, or were not liable to repay yet.

Compared to home students, EU borrowers were much more likely to have repaid in full, much less likely to be repaying (around half the rate for recent cohorts), more likely to be working, but earning less than the repayment threshold, and much more likely to be in one of the ‘other’ non-repayment categories.²⁷

How do EU students repay their loans?

EU students repay their loans directly to the Student Loans Company (SLC). SLC has arrangements in place to collect repayments from borrowers who move away from the UK. It establishes a twelve-month repayment schedule based on the borrower’s income and provides information on the methods of repayment available.

SLC sets up fixed repayment schedules for borrowers who do not remain in contact and will place those borrowers in arrears. It can also take further action, including legal action, to secure the recovery of loans.²⁸

2.3

Erasmus+ and the Turing Scheme

The Erasmus programme launched in 1987 as an education exchange with eleven participating member states, including the UK. In 2014, the programme became [Erasmus+](#) and expanded to include apprentices, jobseekers, volunteers, sport, and staff and youth exchanges.

More information on Erasmus is available in the Library briefing [The Erasmus Programme](#).

How many students came to the UK under the Erasmus+ programme?

29,797 higher education students came to the UK in 2018/19 under the Erasmus+ programme. This includes those on traineeships as well as those

²⁶ Up to the 2020 cohort who finished their courses in 2019 and first became liable to repay in April 2021

²⁷ Student Loans Company, [Student Loans in England: 2020 to 2021](#) (Table 3Bii).

²⁸ [PQ 66121 \[Students: Loans\] 1 March 2017](#).

studying at UK universities. The largest number came from France with 7,200, followed by Germany with 4,900 and Spain with 4,500.²⁹

How many UK students went on the Erasmus+ programme and where did they study?

10,133 UK students in higher education participated in the 2018 Erasmus+ ‘Call’ for study placements abroad. A further **8,172** were on traineeships through Erasmus.³⁰

In 2017/18, the most popular host countries for study placements were Spain (2,220), France (2,049), Germany (1,302), Netherlands (812), and Italy (711).³¹

A report by Universities UK International, [Gone International: Rising Aspirations](#) showed that Erasmus+ accounted for almost half (**49.2%**) of all instances of UK students going abroad during the 2015/16 academic year.³²

Will the UK participate in Erasmus+ after Brexit?

In December 2020, the Prime Minister [announced the UK would no longer participate in the Erasmus+ programme, and would establish the Turing Scheme](#), named after the mathematician Alan Turing, as a replacement.³³

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, universities, colleges, and schools that received Erasmus+ funding for projects in the 2014-2020 cycle have until May 2023 to use it.

Why did the UK leave the Erasmus+ programme?

The Prime Minister said leaving Erasmus had been a “tough decision”, but a new scheme would give students the opportunity “not just to go to European universities, but to go to the best universities in the world.”³⁴

According to the Government, the terms proposed by the EU for continued involvement in Erasmus+ included a participation fee and a GDP-based contribution.³⁵ The Government calculated this would have entailed a net cost in the region of £2 billion over the next seven-year cycle, and said it did not believe this offered value for money for the UK taxpayer.³⁶

²⁹ European Commission, [Erasmus+ annual report 2019 –statistical annex](#), Annex 18.

³⁰ European Commission, [Erasmus+ annual report 2019 –statistical annex](#), Annex 15.

³¹ [Erasmus+ statistics](#) (Higher education mobility statistics).

³² Universities UK International, [Gone International: Rising Aspirations](#), June 2019, p4.

³³ [“UK students lose Erasmus membership in Brexit deal”](#), The Guardian, 24 December 2020 (accessed 12 February 2021).

³⁴ [“UK students lose Erasmus membership in Brexit deal”](#), The Guardian, 24 December 2020 (accessed 12 February 2021).

³⁵ [PQ 132973 \[Turing Scheme\] 13 January 2021](#).

³⁶ [PQ 133977 \[Turing Scheme\] 15 January 2021](#).

Does the Turing Scheme allow international students to come to the UK?

The UK Government has said it considered whether to fund students coming to the UK as part of the Turing Scheme, but ultimately decided it would not provide value for money.³⁷

This decision has prompted concern there will be a decrease in inbound exchange students and the benefits they bring to the UK.³⁸

On 2 February 2022, the [Welsh Government launched Taith](#), an international learning exchange programme to run alongside the Turing Scheme.³⁹ £65 million has been allocated for the programme for 2022 to 2026. This will enable 15,000 participants from Wales to go on overseas mobilities, but also 10,000 participants to come from overseas to study or work in Wales.⁴⁰

The Scottish Government has said it will also [develop its own international exchange programme](#).⁴¹

More information on the Turing Scheme is available in the Library briefing [The Turing Scheme](#).

2.4

Immigration

Net migration means the number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants.

What was the net migration target?

In November 2010, the then-Home Secretary, Theresa May, made a commitment to “reduce net migration from the hundreds of thousands back down to the tens of thousands”.⁴² This net migration target was retained by successive Governments and was a commitment in the Conservative Party’s 2017 manifesto.⁴³

Following the election of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister in 2019, there was a shift in policy as the Government announced it was “not in a numbers game in respect of net migration.”⁴⁴

³⁷ [PQ 133977 \[Turing Scheme\] 15 January 2021](#).

³⁸ “[Five questions to ask about the Turing scheme](#)”, Higher Education Policy Institute, 11 January 2021 (accessed 15 February 2021).

³⁹ Welsh Government, [Taith: International Learning Exchange Programme](#), 2 February 2022.

⁴⁰ Welsh Government press release, [New International Learning Exchange programme to make good the loss of Erasmus+](#), 21 March 2021.

⁴¹ The Scottish Government, [A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22](#), 7 September 2021.

⁴² [HC Deb \[Controlling migration\] 23 November 2010, c169](#).

⁴³ The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2017, [Forward, Together: Our plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future](#) (PDF), 2017.

⁴⁴ [PQ 27057 \[Migration: Overseas Students\], 9 March 2020](#).

Are international students migrants?

The term ‘migrant’ is not defined under international law. For the purpose of collecting data on migration, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) defines an ‘international migrant’ as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence.”⁴⁵ A distinction is then made between short-term and long-term migrants. A ‘long-term migrant’ is “a person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year.”⁴⁶

The UN definitions are widely used in international migration statistics; for example, all EU countries report migration statistics using this definition under an [EU Regulation](#).

Students who come to the UK to study on courses lasting longer than one year are included in official estimates of net migration, while students studying on courses that are shorter than one year are typically not included, unless they expect to remain in the UK for other reasons.

Representative bodies for the higher education sector, such as Universities UK, campaigned to have international students removed from the net migration target.⁴⁷

A report in 2017 by the House of Commons Education Select Committee also [recommended that students be removed from the target](#), saying it would help to protect the UK higher education market following Brexit. It said:

International students should be removed from the net immigration target. The Government’s refusal to do so is putting at the risk the higher education sector’s share of the international student market. Removing international students from the target would be a simple way to offset some of the risks from leaving the European Union.⁴⁸

As Prime Minister, Theresa May said students would remain part of the net migration target:

Whether or not international students are included in the net migration target is not a message about our country and how we welcome people. We welcome students coming to this country—we are very clear about that—but in the statistics we abide by the international definition used by countries around the world. We want to ensure that the brightest and the best are indeed able to come to the United Kingdom and get the value of a UK education.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, [Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1](#), 1998, p9, para. 32.

⁴⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, [Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1](#), 1998, p10, para. 36.

⁴⁷ Universities UK, [International students and the UK immigration debate](#), August 2014.

⁴⁸ House of Commons Education Committee, [Exiting the EU: challenges and opportunities for the higher education sector](#) (PDF), 19 April 2017, HC 683 2016-17, para 28.

⁴⁹ [HC Deb \[Article 50\] 29 March 2017 c289](#).

See the Library briefing [Migration Statistics](#) for more information.⁵⁰

2.5 Student and Graduate Visas

What kind of visa do international students need to study in the UK?

On 10 September 2020, the Government [announced a new 'student route'](#) for international students applying for visas to study in the UK. The student route opened on 5 October 2020 and replaced the previous Tier 4 (General) student visa.

The Government said the new route would be “streamlined” and allow all international students, including those from Europe, to use the “same, simplified route”.⁵¹

Applicants for a student visa must:

- have been offered a place on [a course by a licensed student sponsor](#);
- have enough [money to support themselves and their course](#);
- be able to [speak, read, write and understand English](#).

How long students can stay depends on the length of their course and what study they have already completed in the UK. If they are 18 or over and studying a degree-level course, international students can usually stay in the UK for up to five years.

It currently costs £363 to apply for a student visa from outside the UK and students will also have to [pay the healthcare surcharge](#) as part of their application.

More information is available on GOV.UK at [Study in the UK on a Student visa](#).

Can international students stay in the UK after graduation?

In April 2012, the Tier 1 Post-Study Work Visa, which had allowed international students to stay on and work for two years after their studies, was abolished.

International graduates remained eligible to apply for a skilled work visa if they had secured a graduate level job or training offer from an approved employer before the end of their student visa. The change in visa policy was controversial, however, and a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute

⁵⁰ Commons Library briefing SN06077, [Migration Statistics](#).

⁵¹ Home Office, [New international student immigration routes open early](#), 10 September 2020.

in January 2017 said [it had resulted in a 20% reduction in enrolments](#) at UK higher education providers.⁵²

On 11 September 2019, the Government announced the introduction of a new two-year post-study work visa for international students, the '[Graduate route](#)'.⁵³

The graduate visa gives international graduates permission to stay in the UK for two years after successfully completing a course in the UK. For graduates who completed a PhD or other doctoral qualification, the visa lasts for 3 years. The graduate visa cannot be extended, but graduates may be able to switch to a different visa, for example a [skilled worker visa](#).

International graduates can apply for a graduate visa if all the following are true:

- they are currently in the UK;
- their current visa is a [Student visa or Tier 4 \(General\) student visa](#);
- they studied a UK bachelor's degree, postgraduate degree, or other eligible course for a minimum period of time with their student visa or Tier 4 (General) student visa;
- their education provider has told the Home Office they have successfully completed their course.

It currently costs £715 to apply for a graduate visa and graduates will also have to [pay the healthcare surcharge](#) as part of their application.

[More information is available on GOV.UK](#)

⁵² Higher Education Policy Institute, [The determinants of international demand for UK higher education](#), January 2017 p9.

⁵³ British High Commission New Delhi, [UK announces 2-year post-study work visa for international students](#), 11 September 2019.

3 Funding

3.1 Institutional income

What research income comes from overseas?

Research income from the EU was worth **£883 million** to UK universities in 2019/20, or **14%** of total research income. This was down from **£994 million** in 2018/19. It included grants and contracts from EU Government bodies, charities, and the private sector.

Research income from all non-EU overseas sources was **£591 million** or **9%** of all research income in the same year.⁵⁴

Which universities get the most research funding from overseas?

EU: Top 10 universities EU research income 2019/20				Non-EU: Top 10 universities Other overseas research income 2019/20			
<i>rank</i>		£ million	% of research income	<i>rank</i>		£ million	% of research income
1	The University of Oxford	104	17%	1	The University of Cambridge	95	17%
2	The University of Cambridge	63	11%	2	The University of Oxford	94	15%
3	University College London	52	11%	3	Imperial	49	14%
4	Imperial	45	13%	4	London Sch. of Hygiene & Tropical Med.	47	28%
5	The University of Edinburgh	38	13%	5	University College London	33	7%
6	London Sch. of Hygiene & Tropical Med.	36	21%	6	Liverpool Sch. of Tropical Med.	25	32%
7	The University of Manchester	26	10%	7	The University of Edinburgh	21	7%
8	The University of Exeter	23	24%	8	King's College London	19	10%
9	King's College London	22	11%	9	The University of Manchester	12	4%
10	Swansea University	20	35%	10	The University of Southampton	10	8%

Source: HESA, [What is the income of HE providers? \(Table 5\)](#)

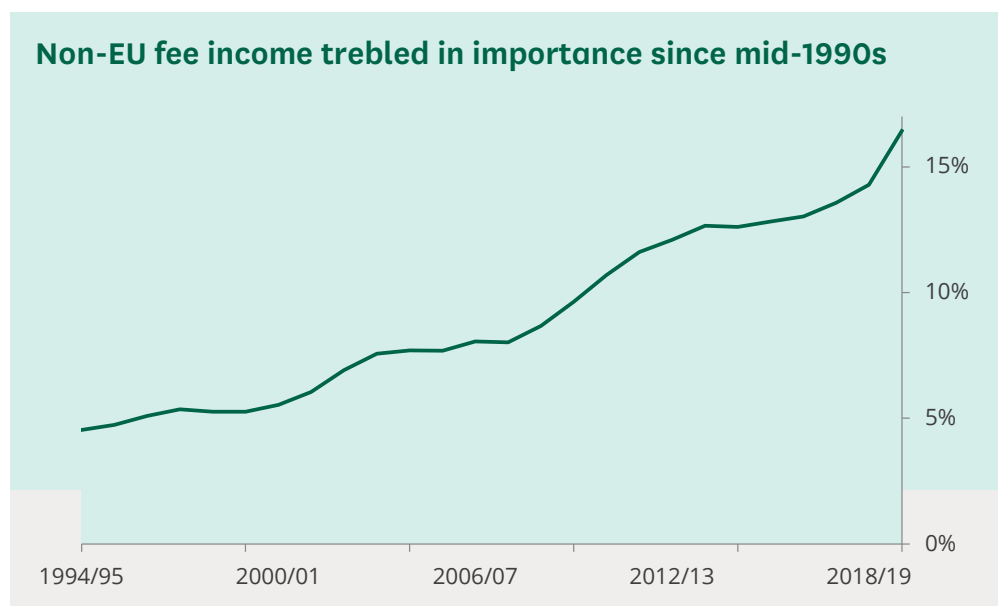
How much fee income comes from overseas?

Overall academic fees from non-EU overseas students were worth **£7.0 billion** to UK universities in 2019/20 or **16.4% of their total income**.⁵⁵ Trends are

⁵⁴ HESA, [What is the income of HE providers?](#)

⁵⁵ HESA, [What is the income of HE providers?](#)

illustrated below and show a sustained increase in the importance of overseas fee income, up from below 5% in the mid-1990s.⁵⁶



Source: HESA, [What is the income of HE providers?](#) (and earlier editions)

Undergraduate

Classroom £16,200

Lab-based £18,900

Postgraduate taught

Classroom £16,900

Lab-based £19,900

MBA £21,300

How much are fees for overseas students?

A survey of typical fees for overseas students at UK universities gave the averages shown opposite for different types of courses in 2021/22. Overseas fees for classroom-based courses have risen faster than the home rate in recent years at both undergraduate (where the home/EU rate is capped) and postgraduate levels.

Source: Complete University Guide, [Reddin survey of university tuition fees](#)

3.2

Student support

What support is available for international students?

Only students who are allocated home student status are eligible for publicly funded student support in the UK. This includes tuition fee loans (or in the case of Scotland, free tuition), maintenance loans, bursaries, and grants. See the Library casework article series [Eligibility for home fee status and student support](#) for more information.

For postgraduate international students, there are scholarships supported by the UK Government to cover course fees and the cost of living during study. These include Chevening Scholarships, Commonwealth Scholarships, and

⁵⁶ The 2019/20 includes alternative providers for the first time

Marshall Scholarships. Eligibility varies and [more information is available at GOV.UK](#).⁵⁷

Individual providers also offer scholarships and bursaries to attract students from overseas. These include:

- academic, merit, and excellence scholarships;
- subject-specific scholarships;
- performance-based scholarships related to extra-curricular activities;
- equal access or sanctuary scholarships for refugees and asylum seekers.

More information is available in a [guide produced by UCAS](#).⁵⁸

I am a British citizen so why have I been classified as an international student?

The student support regulations state students must meet two main criteria to be classified as a home student:

- the correct immigration status (right of abode, or indefinite leave to remain);
- three-year residency in the UK.

Students who do not meet either of these criteria can be classified as an international student even if they are UK citizens.

Following Brexit, however, UK nationals and their family members living in the EEA or Switzerland who start a course between 1 August 2021 and 1 January 2028 may also be eligible for home student status. See the Library casework article series [Eligibility for home fee status and student support](#) for more information.

⁵⁷ GOV.UK, [Postgraduate scholarships for international students](#).

⁵⁸ UCAS, [Scholarships, grants, and bursaries: EU and international students](#).

4 The costs and benefits of international students to the UK

4.1 Economic

How much is the international higher education market worth to the UK?

There have been various estimates over the years of the value of education and training 'exports' to the UK (overseas students studying in the UK and some training/consultancy abroad) carried out for the British Council, Universities UK, and the Government.

These cover a wide range of definitions, years, and methodologies. There is a substantial amount of uncertainty about these figures. They are highly approximate estimates only and are often made by groups with an interest in the sector. Estimates include:

- The Department for Education estimated that in 2019 higher education accounted for **£17.6 billion** out of a total £25.2 billion in international education exports and transnational education activity. **£7.4 million** of the higher education total was in tuition fees, **£8.4 billion** in living expenditure and **£1.6 billion** in research contracts.⁵⁹
- Data from the Department for Education revealed the living expenses of incoming Erasmus+ students amounted to **£440 million** in 2018, which was a 71% increase since 2010.⁶⁰
- In 2011, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) estimated that the total value of higher education exports to the UK in 2008/09 was **£7.8 billion**. It projected that this would grow to £10.4 billion by 2015 and £13.2 billion by 2020. In 2013, BIS put the total at **£10.2 billion** in 2011; 2.1% of UK exports.⁶¹

In 2017, Universities UK published research on the subject that put the total value in 2014-15 at **£25.8 billion**.⁶² As with the other estimates, this includes

⁵⁹ DfE, [UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity 2019](#)

⁶⁰ DfE, [UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity in 2018](#) (PDF), 17 December 2020, Table 2, p5.

⁶¹ BIS, [International Education – Global Growth and Prosperity: An Accompanying Analytical Narrative](#), (pp29-62 especially)

⁶² Universities UK, [The economic impact of international students](#), March 2017.

direct spending by students on and off-campus and the indirect ‘knock-on’ effect of this spending on the economy. It also includes an estimate of the impact of visitors to the UK linked to international students.

The report also estimated that international students were ‘responsible’ for **£10.8 billion** of UK export earnings and their spending supported just over 200,000 jobs. The component parts of the **£25.8 billion** are:

- £4.8 billion generated in fees;
- £5.4 billion off-campus spending by students;
- £0.7 billion on-campus spending (excluding fees);
- £13.5 billion in the knock-on economic benefit of this spending (‘gross output supported');
- £0.5 billion direct spending by visitors to international students;
- £1.0 billion in knock-on economic benefit from visitor spending.

A September 2021 [London Economics report](#) for Universities UK International and the Higher Education Policy Institute estimated the 2018/19 first-year cohort of international students in the UK would bring total economic benefits to the UK of **£28.8 billion** over the course of their studies.⁶³ 21% of this was generated by EU students with the rest from non-EU students.

The authors estimated the economic costs of these students at **£2.9 billion**. This included the teaching grant and student support for EU students, and costs of providing public services to international students and their dependents.

The net economic benefits of this cohort was thus estimated at **£25.9 billion**. The report also made estimates of the net economic benefit per student and used these, combined with data on where all students live, to estimate the benefit in each Parliamentary Constituency across the country.⁶⁴

4.2 Non-economic

Research conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute in 2015 revealed international students generated significant geopolitical benefits for the UK, with 55 world leaders (Presidents, Prime Ministers and monarchs) from 51 countries having attended higher-level education in the UK.⁶⁵

These personal connections are likely to be an important contributor to the UK’s ‘soft power’ (the ability to influence the behaviour of others to achieve

⁶³ London Economics for the Higher Education Policy Institute and Universities UK International, [The costs and benefits of international higher education students to the UK economy](#), September 2021.

⁶⁴ London Economics for the Higher Education Policy Institute and Universities UK International, [The costs and benefits of international higher education students to the UK economy](#), September 2021.

⁶⁵ HEPI, [Now that’s what we call soft power: 55 world leaders educated in the UK](#), October 2015.

preferential outcomes), and help to build long-term social, political, and trade links with other countries.⁶⁶

What do international students contribute to the UK higher education experience?

A survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute, '[What do home students think of studying with international students?](#)', asked students studying in the UK for their views on international students.

- 76% of students surveyed said studying alongside their peers from overseas would give them a better world view;
- 85% said it would be useful preparation for working in a global environment;
- 63% said it will help them develop a global network.⁶⁷

Alongside these benefits, however:

- 25% of students felt including students who did not have English as their first language slowed down the class;
- 12% felt academic discussions were of a lower quality due to the presence of international students in UK higher education.⁶⁸

Conversely, 65% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the latter statement.

In February 2019, the House of Lords European Union Committee detailed a number of the benefits that Erasmus+ participants brought to the UK, including:

- a “global, outward-looking culture” on campuses;
- a higher standard of UK education and training through international collaboration, and the sharing of innovation and best practice;
- “tangible economic benefits” through money spent in local economies.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ IPPR, [Destination Education. Reforming Migration Policy in International Students to Grow the UK's Vital Education Exports](#), September 2016, p8.

⁶⁷ HEPI, [What do home students think of studying with international students?](#), July 2015.

⁶⁸ HEPI, [What do home students think of studying with international students?](#), July 2015.

⁶⁹ House of Lords European Union Committee, [Brexit: The Erasmus and Horizon programmes](#), (PDF) 12 February 2019, HL 283 2017-19, pp19-20.

5

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