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as part of LSE GROUPS 2025.**

LSE GROUPS takes place during the final fortnight of the LSE Spring Term. Undergraduate students are placed in small groups; these are cross-year, interdisciplinary, and group members do not know one another in advance. Each group must then devise its own research question and carry out every stage of a small-scale research project, in less than two weeks.

LSE GROUPS is part of the LSE commitment to students learning through enquiry and developing the skills needed for knowledge creation.

The overall theme of LSE GROUPS 2025 was *Visions for the Future*

This paper was submitted on the final Thursday afternoon of the project. Students then presented their work at a conference, on the closing Friday.

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Papers are presented as submitted by the students, without corrections.

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Title

Entry Granted, Future Denied: How have changes in UK visa policies from 2024 onwards affected the job prospects and employment experiences of international students?

Abstract

This research paper aims to explore this research question: How have changes in UK visa policies from 2024 onwards affected the job prospects and employment experiences of international students? Employing a mixed-methods approach combining the 65 survey responses from current and recent international students with secondary data (Change in Skilled Worker Visa, Change in Application by Industries, Application by Occupation, UK employment by occupation in 2024) on visa trends and sector-specific employment patterns, this paper will explore how these policy changes reshape the experiences and decisions of international students after graduation. The analysis has an interdisciplinary foundation including Geography, Migration studies and Economics. It draws on a combination of theories, including Push-Pull Plus, Supply and Demand and Job Market signalling to understand both the systematic barriers and cognitive impacts these policy changes have had. These frameworks help show how visa policy changes have not only influenced the employment market, but also influence international students' perceived value of their education and how they make future decisions regarding their career. We find that international students are aware of changes to visa policy, and that these changes have made them reconsider their future trajectory and decreased their confidence in finding post-grad employment in the UK. The analysis will also showcase the compounding effect of structural and social barriers due to policy change. In particular, these changes disproportionately affect the outcome of international students when navigating the post-labour market job.

Keywords: Immigration, visa, policy change, international students, employment, behavioural economics, human geography, higher education, United Kingdom.

Introduction

As early as 2012, changes to the UK's immigration policies began to place international students at the centre of national debates about migration control. (The Migration Observatory, 2012). This trajectory intensified further in 2024, when the then-Conservative government introduced new restrictions designed to reduce net migration (Home Office, 2024). This includes raising the minimum salary threshold for Skilled Workers from £26,200 to £38,700 (Home Office, 2024). In 2025, the Labour government published a White Paper detailing further reforms (Home Office, 2025), including a reduction in the post-study stay period from 2 years to 18 months (Home Office, 2025). These developments have prompted concern among legal and policy experts. Richmond (2025) describes the changes as “the most sweeping reforms” in over a decade, warning they create “a significantly narrower range of options” for new international graduates seeking work in the UK. UKCISA (2025) echoes these concerns, emphasising the detrimental impact these policies may have on international students' experience.

Existing literature has explored international student experiences broadly (QAA, 2023; UKCISA, 2024), but with limited focus on how international students feel about their employability (Gedye & Beaumont, 2018) and outcomes in light of evolving visa policy. Our literature review includes classical economic frameworks, such as Marshall's supply and demand theory (1890) and Spence's Job Market Signalling theory (1973). Moreover, Post-colonial and critical migration theories (Hear et al., 2017) offer a broader lens, positioning international students as actors navigating layered migration systems. Our research addresses this gap by focusing on how international students perceive their employment prospects in response to the 2024 and proposed 2025 visa reforms. By conceptualising students as migration actors, our study reframes employability as a process shaped by a diversity of factors. Our findings suggest that past and proposed visa changes are reshaping how students view their chances of finding work in the UK. While some remain optimistic, many perceive their visa status as a liability, regardless of their education. Ultimately, our study contributes to current debates by evidencing how immigration policy reforms can both restrict access to employment and distort perceptions of international graduates in the labour market.

Literature Review

Economic Theory

These policy consequences can be analysed through a macroeconomic lens using the framework of supply and demand from the orthodox economic canon. According to Marshall (1890), the labour market works like any market, with jobs being the supply, and international students looking for work being part of the demand. When post-study work opportunities are limited by immigration policy, the supply of eligible international graduate roles is effectively reduced. This imbalance limits international students' job prospects not because of a lack of qualifications or skills, but because of external policy barriers.

From a mesoeconomic perspective, we can examine the potential interactions between international students and employers. Michael Spence outlines that employers act as investors under uncertain

conditions, unable to confirm if a prospective employee will perform well. He then argues that there are certain “Signals” like education utilised by potential employees to demonstrate value. The signal adjusts with new market information (Spence, 1973). Changes in the visa act as new market information; they can alter the employers' beliefs on the educational signal of international students. Furthermore, immigration status can also act as a signal. This would make employers view international students as a more risky investment compared to other groups who have the full right to work in the UK. This theory is supported by research which states international students often rely on their UK degree to signal their value to employers (Universities UK International, 2024). However, the utilisation of just economic frameworks is limiting. It neglects the agency of international students and their own experiences. A more holistic interdisciplinary framework is needed to capture the diverse array of interacting variables towards the perceived employability prospects of international students. Pure economic framing marginalises the diversity of motives and experiences that influence why students choose to migrate and how they navigate post-study transitions. This is why we adopted an interdisciplinary approach.

Critical and Post-Colonial Migration Theory

The critical and post-colonial contemporary migration paradigm builds upon neoclassical migration studies, which argue that the core driving force of migrants' decisions is economic incentives and deterrents in source and destination countries (Ravenstein, 2009). Migrants undertake a rational, mental cost-benefit analysis when deciding where and how to move (Lee, 1966). However, post-colonial migration studies recognise the significance of economic incentives but segment into a push-pull plus framework. Rather than a static list of factors, this dynamic approach reframes migrant behaviours as driver complexes. These are made up of predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers. (Hear et al, 2017). For example, predisposing economic factors such as lack of employment opportunity, as identified in neoclassical migration theory, can trigger departure. But a precipitating factor, such as conflict, will trigger departure rapidly. However, the journey complex may also be “moderated” by mediating factors such as available transportation.

Applied to international students, this framework extends their decision-making beyond economic rationality. For many, predisposing drivers may include limited access to quality higher education and underemployment in home countries. These are intensified by proximate drivers such as competitive admissions cycles or scholarship availability. However, in the current UK context, precipitating drivers now include the shrinking post-study work options and visa barriers, due to the current and proposed visa changes. These create strong shifts in the perceived attractiveness and accessibility of the UK. Mediating factors such as institutional sponsorship status, compliance ratings and changes in English language requirements also shape international students' experiences and opportunities. This provides a framework to understand that migration behaviour among international students is a dynamic process shaped by a diverse array of forces.

Research Gap and Our Contribution

There have been numerous studies which have focused on the lived experiences of international students, such as by UKCISA & Russell Groups Student's Union (2025) and QAA (2023). However, the scope of both studies is broad. Moreover, they have a limited temporal focus, which neglects aspects of the student's future. Employability has no set definition but has been defined by York (2006) as a set of achievements that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. (York, 2006). Furthermore, a more contemporary perspective from Gedye & Beaumont (2018) stresses the intersubjective nature of how employability may be understood between students.

In this study, we are seeking to address a gap in research on employability and perceptions. We focused on visa policy as a variable and conceptualised international students as migration actors. Using an emergent framework allows us to capture the complexity of migration influences beyond the linear push and pull framework. While acknowledging economic factors, it positions them within a network of differing drivers that influence the agency of international students' employment destination. Recognising the layered influences that underpin graduate outcomes, we have the potential to draw more informed policies and their connection to the wider labour market dynamics. The next section will outline our mixed methods methodology, including analysis of government data on visas and employment, as well as findings from our survey.

Methodology

Qualitative method: Surveys

The questionnaire included a mix of multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. The multiple-choice items gathered basic information such as demographics, visa type, and current job search status, while the Likert scales helped us explore how respondents feel about the new 2024 visa rules and how these changes may be shaping their career plans (see Appendix). To reach participants, we used convenience and snowball sampling, sharing the survey through email, social media platforms and WhatsApp. With a limited timeframe, we were unable to generate a random sample and received 65 responses in total.

Quantitative method

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine what the recent shifts in UK immigration and employment are, with a focus on skilled worker visas. The analysis is based on publicly available data drawn from the UK Government's Immigration System Statistics. The dataset was cleaned (and visualised the changes) using Python (to help identify any shift in preference in industry and occupation related to the visa policy change). It was then used to create several visual and numerical summaries relevant to the study's focus. These include: count of Skilled Worker visa applications and granted by quarter from Q1 2021 to Q1 2025, and the changes in labelled industry and occupations by visa category from Q1 2021 to Q2 2025. This is important to confirm what the current macroeconomic conditions and trends are.

Ethics

Our research topics address potentially sensitive issues such as immigration status and future security. Therefore, we emphasised the ethical importance of ensuring participants' anonymity to help them feel comfortable. To support this, we conducted an anonymous online survey where informed consent was gained before completing the survey. Minimal demographic data (e.g., nationality, year of study and department) was collected to ensure responses could not be linked back to individuals while providing enough data for effective analysis. Questions were designed to be neutral and easy to understand, as some of the topics, such as feeling pressure to leave the UK, can be emotionally sensitive.

Limitations

The short, two-week timeframe restricted the depth of our analysis. Our use of convenience and snowball sampling, while practical, resulted in a non-random sample, limiting the generalisability of our results to the wider population of international students. The possibility of response bias, where participants with particularly strong views were more likely to take part, may have influenced responses. Despite our efforts to write clear and neutral survey items, we recognise that unintentional biases may have shaped how questions were framed, potentially leading to effects such as social desirability.

Our analysis, which relied on secondary macro-level data, was constrained by the availability and granularity of publicly accessible data. In many cases, the data lacked the level of detail needed to isolate the specific effects of visa policy changes on international students' employment outcomes. Furthermore, it was challenging to disentangle whether changes in migration patterns were primarily driven by the visa policy changes or other “push” and “pull” factors. This ambiguity limits the strength of the causal inferences we can make from the findings.

Results & Key Findings

See Appendix for Full Results

Q4 - What factors encouraged you to seek employment in the UK?



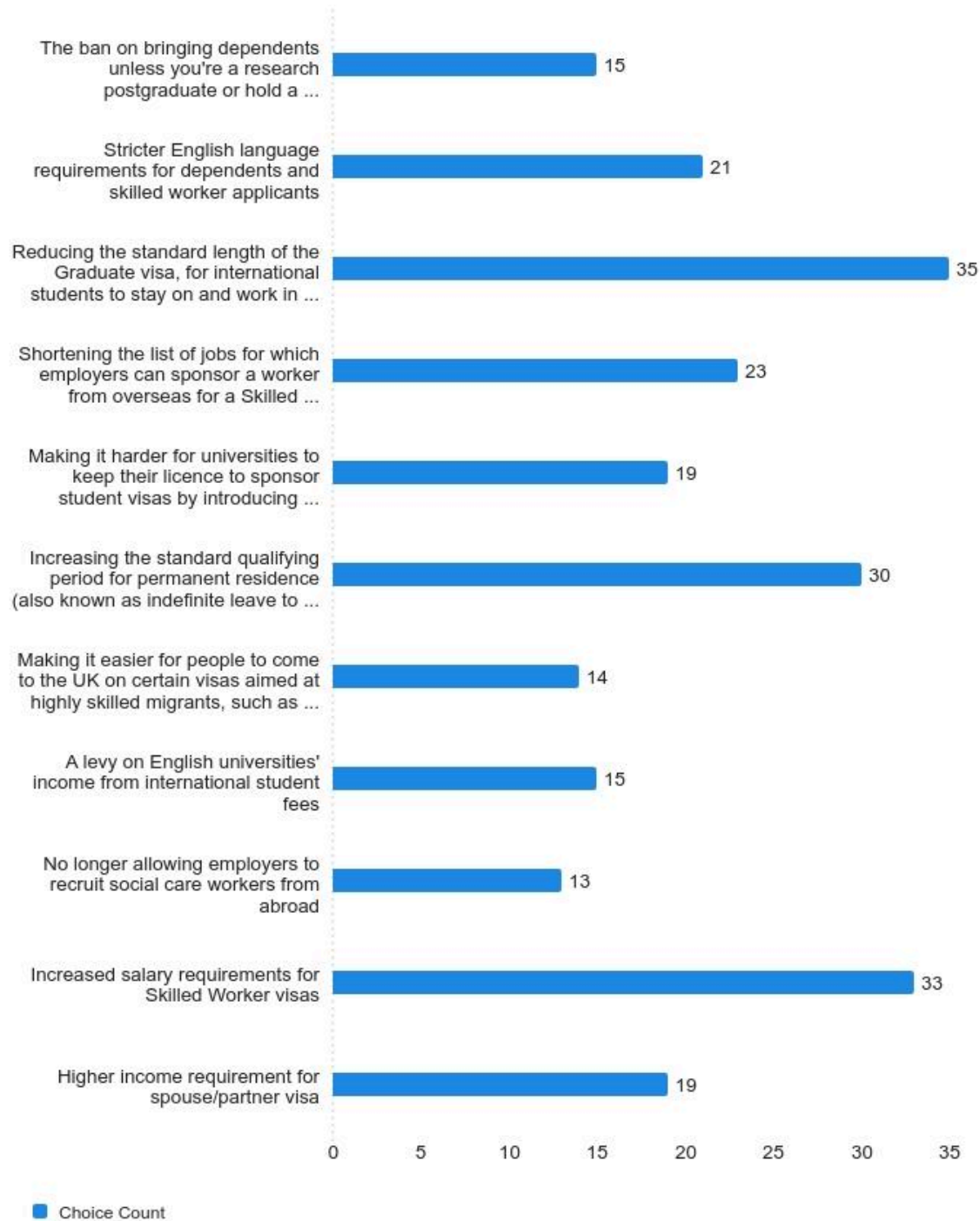
In question 4, which looked at the factors that encouraged students to seek employment in the UK, words such as “experience,” “opportunity,” and “a better environment” appeared the most frequently. These responses suggest that international students are primarily driven by the desire to improve their career prospects and benefit from higher earning potential.

Q5 - What factors have deterred you from seeking employment in the UK?



In question 5 asking about factors deterring students from seeking employment in the UK, several significant factors were highlighted, such as visa-related challenges, competition in the job market, cultural differences, and the increasingly limited timeframe in which graduates have to secure employment to remain in the UK. Words such as “visa,” “time,” “competition,” and “culture” all appeared frequently, showing the multifaceted nature of the deterrents.

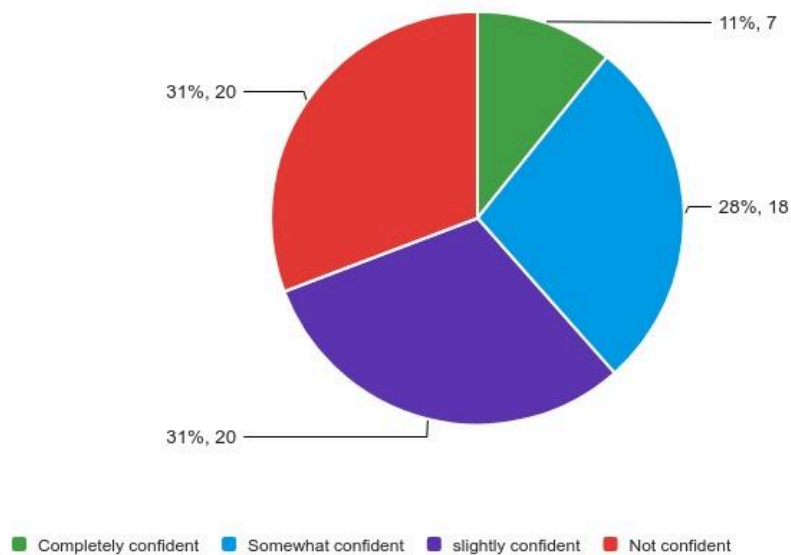
Q8 - Which of the following changes or proposed changes to UK Visa policy are you aware of?
(Select all that apply)



In Question 8 our survey found low levels of awareness among students regarding the 2024 visa changes and proposed changes for 2025, with the exception of three policies. These were “Reducing the standard length of the Graduate visa for international students to stay on and work in the UK” (53.8%), followed by “Increased salary requirements for Skilled Worker visas” (50.7%), and then “Increasing the standard qualifying period for permanent residence” (46%). This suggests that

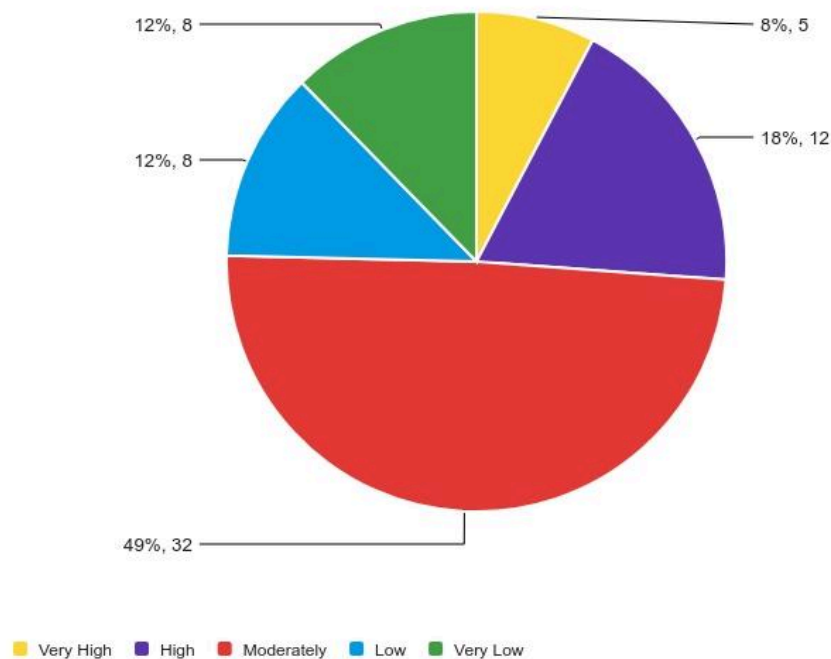
international respondents are more likely to be aware of visa policies that directly impact employment prospects.

Q10 - How confident do you feel in securing employment in the current UK job markets, given the recent changes in visa policies?



Results from question 10 on the confidence of securing employment in the current UK job markets showed that a majority of respondents reported low levels of confidence, with 61% of responses stating they were either “Not confident” or “slightly confident.” When asked to explain their attitudes, respondents pointed to a perception that firms would be less likely to seek international students because of the new restrictions. One respondent stated, “*Firms seem extremely reluctant to invest in international students and don’t even prolong the application process anymore*”. Others, who were more confident in their prospects, point to their LSE education as likely having a positive, offsetting effect on changes to visa policy.

Q14 - How does the visa policy trajectory influence your perception of finding a job in the UK?



The results of Question 14 show that 75% of participants reported that visa changes did alter their perception of finding a job in the UK, with 26% reporting a high or very high effect on their perception. This suggests that visa changes have a prevalent impact on students' opinions about the UK job market. However, the evidence also suggests that a sizable minority of students are not largely affected by the visa policy change (24% reporting low or very low impact).

Discussion

Survey Key Findings & Discussion

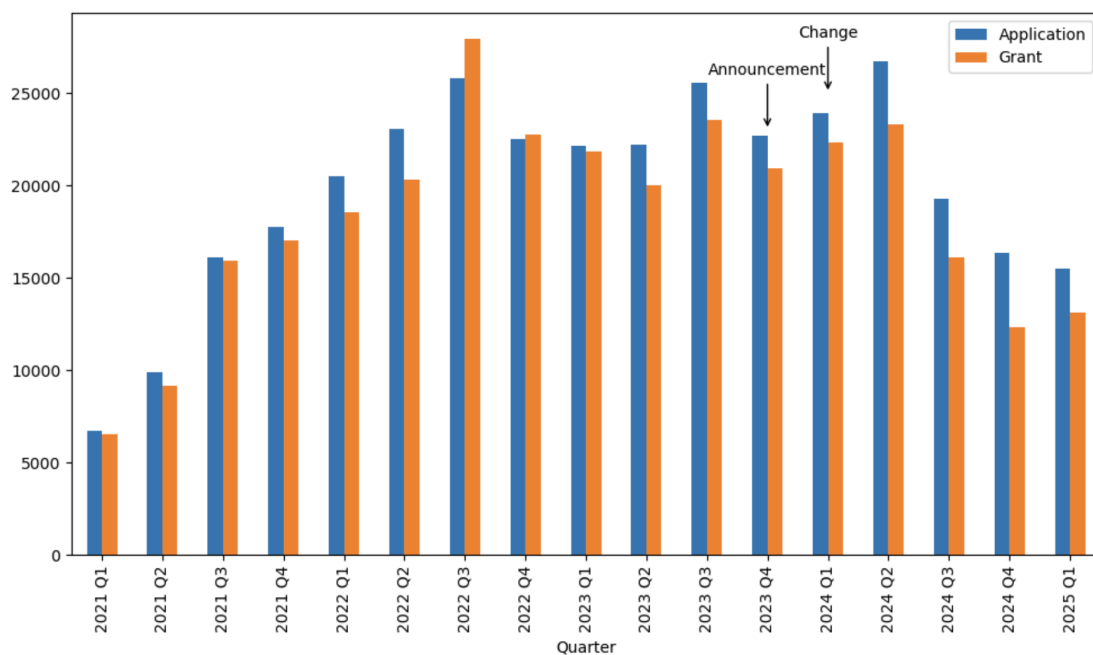
One key observation from survey responses was how students perceived their visa status as an obstacle for securing a job in the UK, linking directly to Spence's (1973) Job Market Signalling theory. Responses to the survey show that participants feel as if their visa status now overshadows their skills, stating that *"The tightening visa policy trajectory makes finding a job in the UK feel more uncertain and competitive, as fewer companies are willing to sponsor international graduates,"* and that *"I have secured a job after graduation, but I had many conversations that started off positive, but after discussing my visa status, I was told that that was essentially the only reason they wouldn't progress with me. It was very hard to get an employer to see past my visa status."* These responses state that while a UK degree might still be a strong signal of ability, changes to visa policies are interfering with the strength of the signal, making international students seem like a riskier investment regardless of the value they bring to an organisation.

We found Spence’s Job Market Signalling theory helpful in explaining how international students can still face employment barriers despite having strong qualifications. This explains why students in our survey felt that their visa status was being treated as a red flag, like a signal with negative connotations. One way the push-pull-plus framework (Hear et al., 2017) helped interpret our survey data was by situating individual decisions within a wider web of socio-economic influences. For instance, participants cited gaining work experience as a key incentive, which did not act in isolation but was linked to other mediating factors such as income and perceived environment. The most common deterrents or push factors were visa issues and time constraints. This framework enabled us to read motivations as layered and interacting, rather than linear. However, a limitation we observed was its limited capacity to account for broader market dynamics, particularly concerning whether perceptions affect the supply of roles.

Macro Data Results

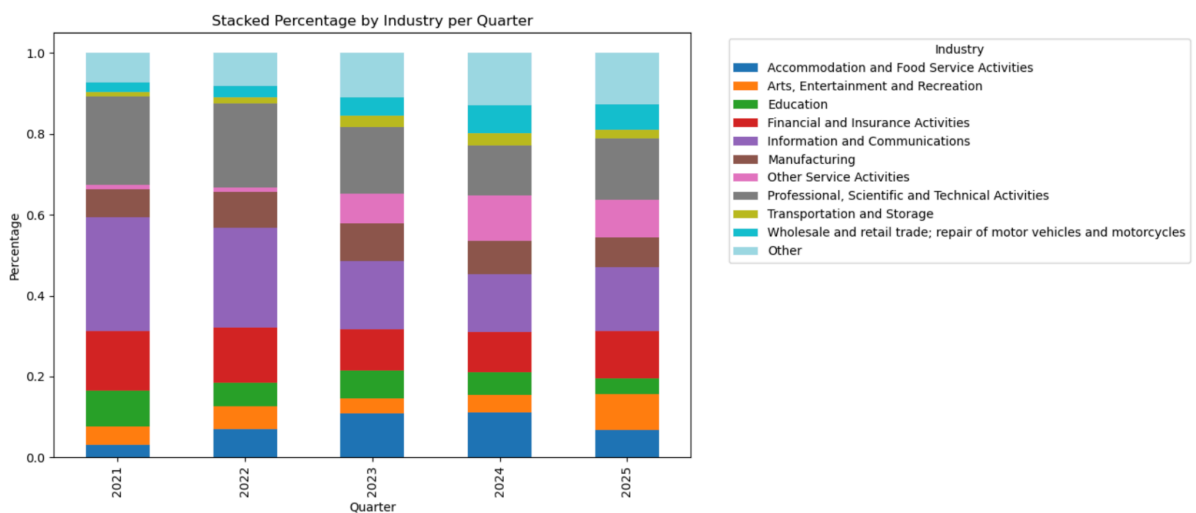
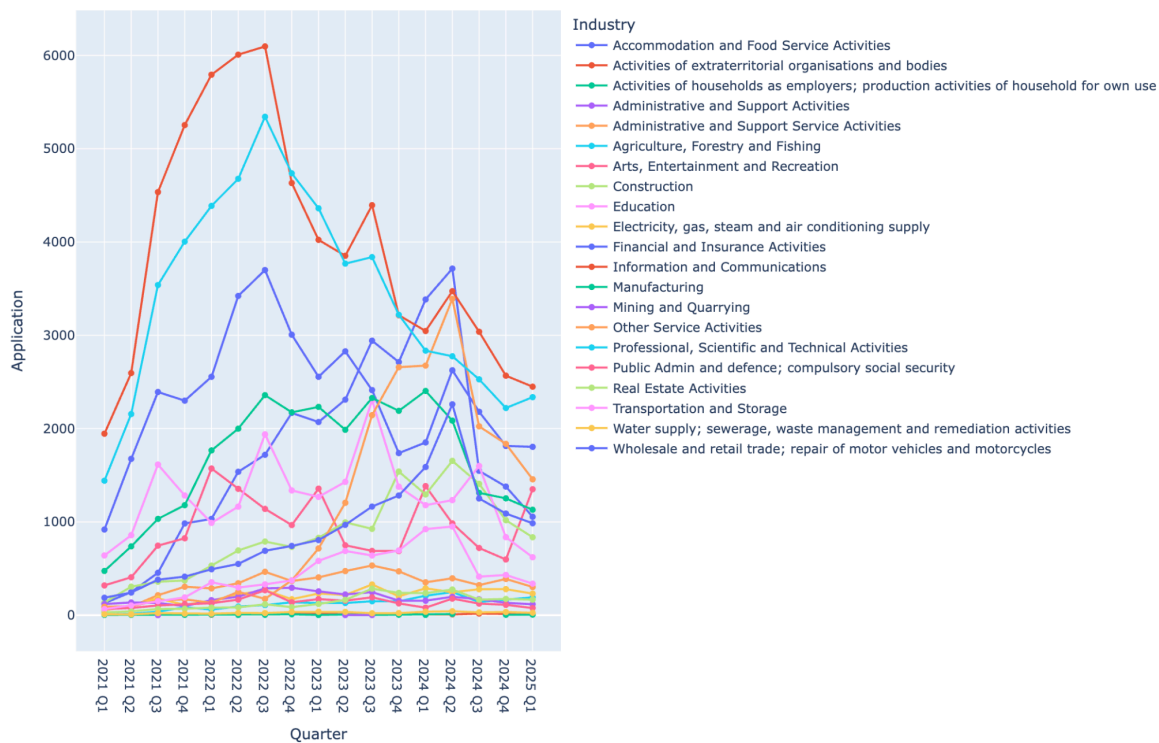
Dataset 1 (Sponsored work entry clearance visas by occupation and industry (SOC 2020))

Graph 1: Change in Skilled Workers Visa Applications:



Graph 2: Change in Application by Industries

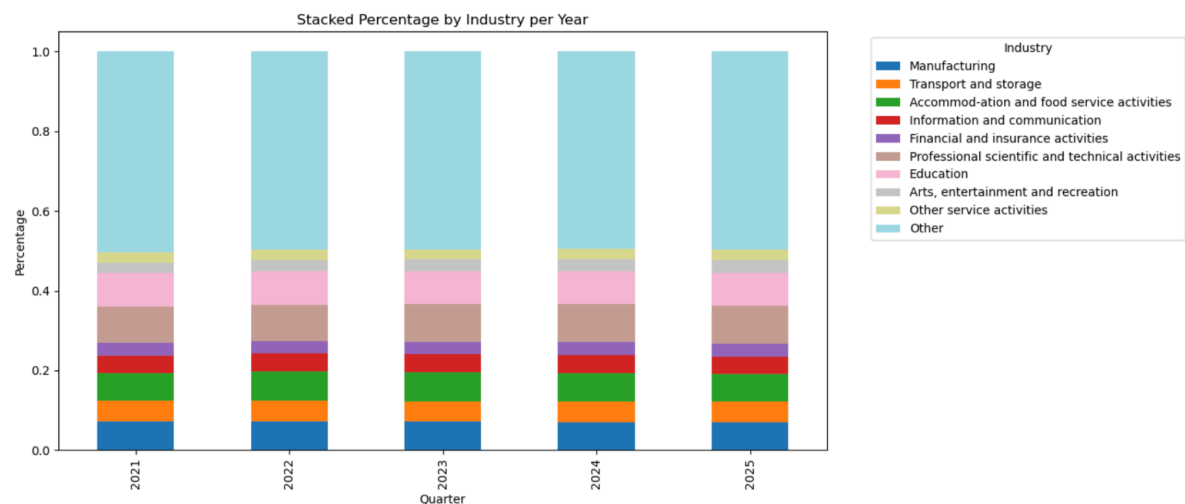
Application by Industry between 2021 Q1 to 2025 Q1



Graph 3: Applications by Industry as a Proportion of Total Skilled Worker Visa Applications

Dataset 2 (Employment by Industry)

Graph 4: UK Employment by Industry as a Proportion of Total Jobs



NB: 2025 data is provisional

Macro Data Findings & Discussion

Graph 1 shows a clear upward trend from 2021 to a peak in 2024 Q2, where applications reached 26,743. This spike likely reflects a rush ahead of the April 2024 salary threshold increase and the December 2023 policy announcements. Applications continued rising into 2024 Q1, but from Q3 onwards, both applications and grants declined sharply, falling to 15,483 and 13,116, respectively, by 2025 Q1. This aligns with the implementation of new restrictions and supports supply and demand theory: while graduate demand remains, immigration reforms reduce accessible roles by raising structural barriers. Graph 2 shows that most industries saw a rise in Skilled Worker visa applications, peaking around 2022. Numbers declined post-2022, especially after 2024, coinciding with tighter immigration policies. Still, sectors like Information and Communication, Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities, and Financial and Insurance Activities consistently attracted high applications. These fields align with offering salaries that meet visa thresholds. Comparing Graph 3 with Graph 4 shows that visa pattern shifts are not due to structural labour market changes. Instead, they reflect immigration policy, sector recruitment practices, and visa success perceptions. This trend reflects the strong economic appeal of certain sectors, where the high likelihood of securing well-paid employment and visa approval serves as a major pull factor for international skilled workers. Although total visa applications have declined since 2022, these industries remain the most viable and attractive pathways into the UK labour market.

In summary, by bringing both the macro and survey data together in dialogue with existing literature, we address the research gap using a multi-faceted perspective. The use of government data on visa policy and employment outcomes allows us to address the need for focus on policy context (QAA, 2023; UKCISA, 2025). The survey then emphasises the intersubjective first-person nature of employability post-graduation. By combining these sources, we can see the interplay of structural conditions and student agency to find a nuanced way of how international students perceive their future in the UK.

Conclusion and Further Research

In this study, we examined how changes in UK visa policy from 2024 onwards have affected the job prospects and employment experiences of international students. Our quantitative analysis revealed a notable decline in both Skilled Worker visa applications and grants beginning in the third quarter of 2024, showing macroeconomic trends. Our qualitative analysis revealed that despite a general low awareness of the specifics of the legislation, the majority of participants did feel that visa changes affected their perception of finding employment in the UK. Despite the insights gained, several questions remain unanswered. For example, we still lack detailed longitudinal data on the actual transitions international students make into the UK labour market. There is also a need to explore how fields of study and social capital mediate the effects of policy change. Future research should also consider conducting comparative studies across different destination countries to examine how international students respond to different post-study work regimes globally, particularly between EEA and non-EEA students.

Word Count: 2991

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