

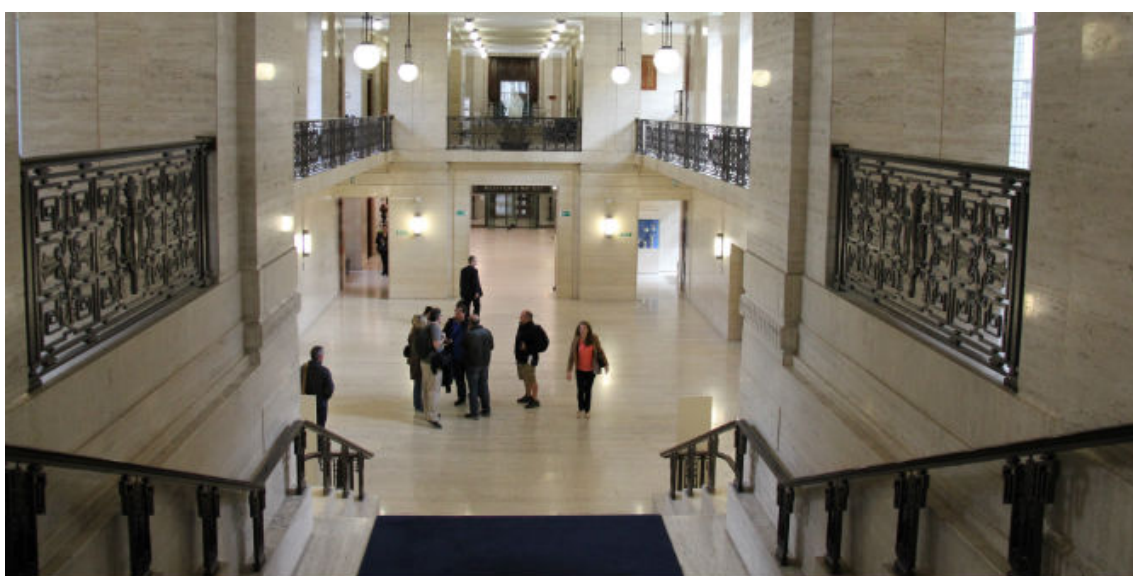
# EU students at UK universities: patterns and trends



*What Brexit will mean for UK universities varies from institution to institution. Much data on Brexit's impact focuses on sector-wide aggregates, the forest that hides the trees. The UK provides excellent teaching and research, as illustrated by the number of its universities ranked in the top 10, 50 or 100 in the world. Yet despite its world-class reputation, the UK's higher education sector is hierarchical, and various layers will be affected differently. **Ludovic Highman (UCL)** explores the sector's diversity in this regard.*

The diversity of the student fabric of UK universities, so crucial to the overall student experience, depends on a healthy number of non-UK based students interacting with domestic students.

Internationalisation starts at home, on UK campuses. The presence of EU students is essential, both quantitatively and qualitatively. EU students graduate from rigorous secondary school systems and their drive to study abroad, most often in a language that is not theirs, makes them attractive to UK universities.



Senate House, University of London. Photo: [Frank Steiner](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

EU students are particularly vulnerable after Brexit, especially in England. Currently they are treated as home students, but in all likelihood EU students enrolling in the UK after its withdrawal in March 2019 will be treated as overseas students. They will no longer benefit from the protection of EU law and the principle of non-discrimination between home and other EU nationals, they will pay higher fees, and they will no longer be eligible for the pay later UK tuition loans that soften high fees. Their position might be more favourable in Scotland, where free tuition for non-UK EU students was extended by the Scottish government to the 2019-2020 academic year.

While the London Russell Group universities have the highest numbers of non-UK EU students (with UCL ahead, followed by King's), and Oxbridge remains firmly cemented within the top 10, the data also demonstrate the attractiveness of Scottish universities, and the subsequent relative drop in the number of non-UK EU students in English universities that are not located in global cities such as Birmingham, London, or Manchester, or academic powerhouses such as Oxford and Cambridge. Rare exceptions include Coventry and Warwick, which are geographically close to Birmingham. Scottish universities are attractive to non-UK EU students in absolute numbers, with Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen attracting more than Oxbridge and competing with the top London universities. Strathclyde and Edinburgh Napier also attract significant numbers, an unprecedented characteristic in any city outside London, as both Edinburgh and Glasgow are already home to universities attracting higher numbers of EU students (see table 1).

Three Scottish universities have some of the highest percentages of enrolled non-UK EU students, with the University of Aberdeen topping the ranking (see table 2). This is partly explained by the lack of tuition fees for non-UK EU students in Scotland. It is possible that higher concentrations of EU students will further relocate to Scotland, though this depends on the level of fees charged beyond 2020. Under the current tuition fee system, Scottish universities will remain attractive to prospective EU students, while many of their English counterparts (outside London and Oxbridge) that already have lower proportions of EU students will be less attractive if non-UK EU students lose their current status, comparatively-speaking.

EU students tend to enrol in Russell Group universities. Their numbers are both higher in absolute terms and proportionally-speaking in the most research intensive Russell Group universities. This suggests the added value of a UK degree for EU students is reputational. The tuition fee regime seems to have an impact on the choice of destination, as suggested by the high numbers and ratios of EU students in Scottish universities, while London as a global city attracts the most EU students.

**Table 1: Universities with >5,000 students with highest number of non-UK EU domiciled students FPE (full-person equivalent), 2016-2017 (data extracted from HESA, policy analysis CGHE)**

University	Number of non-UK EU domiciled students	Total number of students	National university membership (other than Universities UK & Universities Scotland)	% of non-UK EU domiciled students
UCL	4,470	37,905	Russell Group	11.8%
King's College London	3,725	30,565	Russell Group	12.2%
University of Edinburgh	3,630	31,910	Russell Group	11.3%
University of Glasgow	3,005	28,615	Russell Group	10.5%
Imperial College	2,865	17,690	Russell Group	16.2%
Coventry University	2,795	31,690	University Alliance	8.8%
University of Aberdeen	2,710	14,150	n/a	19.2%
University of Oxford	2,695	24,650	Russell Group	10.9%
University of Manchester	2,585	40,490	Russell Group	6.4%
University of Cambridge	2,555	19,955	Russell Group	12.8%
University of the Arts London	2,360	18,290	n/a	12.9%
University of Warwick	2,310	25,045	Russell Group	9.2%
University of Westminster	2,185	19,650	n/a	11.1%
City University	2,125	19,405	n/a	11%
LSE	1,970	11,210	Russell Group	17.6%
Queen Mary	1,830	18,890	Russell Group	9.7%
University of Birmingham	1,820	34,835	Russell Group	5.2%
(equal) University of Essex	1,815	14,585	n/a	12.4%
(equal)				

University	Number of non-UK EU domiciled students	Total number of students	National university membership (other than Universities UK & Universities Scotland)	% of non-UK EU domiciled students
University of Kent (equal)	1,815	20,200	Russell Group	7.2%
University of Southampton	1,815	25,180	Russell Group	7.2%
Middlesex University	1,735	19,505	Million+	11.8%
University of Bath	1,690	16,910	n/a	10%
University of Strathclyde	1,675	22,955	n/a	7.3%
University of Nottingham	1,625	32,515	Russell Group	5%
Edinburgh Napier	1,520	12,910	Million+	11.8%
Ulster University	1,505	24,640	n/a	6.1%
University of Exeter	1,475	23,175	Russell Group	6.4%
University of Leeds	1,440	33,300	Russell Group	4.3%
Cardiff University	1,430	31,595	Russell Group	4.5%
University of Sheffield	1,405	28,715	Russell Group	4.9%

**Table 2: Universities with >5,000 students with highest percentages of non-UK EU domiciled students FPE (full-person equivalent), 2016-2017 (data extracted from HESA, policy analysis CGHE)**

University	% of non-UK EU domiciled students
University of Aberdeen	19.2%
LSE	17.6%
Imperial College	16.2%
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	14.9%
SOAS	14%
University of the Arts, London	12.9%
University of Cambridge	12.8%
University of Essex	12.4%
King's College London	12.2%
(equal) Edinburgh Napier	11.8%
(equal) UCL	11.8%

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It as originally published as a [Centre for Global Higher Education policy briefing](#).*

*Dr Ludovic Highman is a Senior Research Associate at the ESRC/HEFCE-funded [Centre for Global Higher Education](#), based at the [UCL Institute of Education](#).*