

## PRESS RELEASE

**Under embargo until  
00:01, Friday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2026**

### **INTERNATIONAL STUDENT NUMBERS DROP AHEAD OF TOUGHER VISA RULES**

Seventy percent of UK universities reported a fall in the number of international students starting postgraduate courses in January 2026, according to a new survey by the British Universities International Liaison Association (BUILA). On average, enrolments were down 31% compared with January 2025.

The findings suggest that the decline is being driven in part by universities taking proactive recruitment decisions ahead of tighter visa compliance measures, but there are also concerns that the Home Office is refusing visas for reasons outside the control of higher education institutions.

The sector body warns that this risks driving away large numbers of genuine students, undermining the long-term resilience, competitiveness and global influence of the UK higher education sector.

Falls were most pronounced in markets perceived as higher risk under the new policy environment. Eighty-two per cent of universities reported a decline in enrolments from Pakistan, with numbers down by an average of 75%. Seventy-six per cent reported declines from India, and 65% from Bangladesh.

From June, the Government will introduce a new traffic light system for measuring universities' compliance against stricter visa controls for international students in a bid to clamp down on applicants who may be using the visa as a route to seek long term settlement. Institutions must retain a visa rejection rate of less than 4% to retain a 'green' status. Those ranked 'amber' will not be able to increase their future numbers of international students.

Ahead of these measures coming into force, many universities reported taking pre-emptive action to ensure they remain within the new thresholds. Around a third said they had restricted recruitment in certain markets to reduce risk, 58% reported enhancing credibility checks or interview thresholds, and a third introduced higher deposits or stricter financial checks.

Despite these increased internal controls, 60% of universities reported higher than usual levels of visa refusal from UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) during the January intake. Forty-one per cent raised concerns about unexplained delays or interview scheduling problems, and over a third cited less convincing reasons for refusals, which were inconsistent with applicant quality.

Half of universities responding said that they currently expected to receive at least one non-green rating under the new compliance framework, raising concerns about the potential impact on institutional growth and global reputation if the system is implemented without further refinement.

Ahead of the measures coming into force, BUILA is urging the Government to use 'amber' ratings as an internal warning measure rather than the point at which recruitment sanctions are applied. It is also calling for the traffic light system to better distinguish between factors within

an institution's control and those driven by external or systemic issues, such as visa processing delays.

In addition, the Association is calling on UKVI to provide more detailed reasons for visa refusals, greater transparency in decision-making, and early-warning intelligence on emerging market trends so that institutions can respond proportionately and in real time.

Andrew Bird, Chair of BUILA, said:

“The UK already operates one of the toughest student visa compliance regimes in the world, and our members fully support protecting its integrity. But the Government keeps shifting the goalposts. The proposed traffic-light system is being implemented far more harshly than originally intended. An ‘amber’ rating should serve as a warning, not trigger recruitment sanctions.

“This survey shows universities narrowing recruitment simply to manage risk, at a time when they are also facing higher refusal rates from UK Visas and Immigration, delays and inconsistent decision-making outside their control.

“If introduced as currently proposed, the new system risks significant reputational to our world leading higher education sector. It could deter genuine students from applying and signal a problem to global markets where none exists, at a time when competition for international students is intensifying.

“That is why BUILA is calling for a more proportionate and transparent framework, so standards are upheld without undermining the UK's long-term competitiveness and global standing.”

-ENDS-

## Notes

- The British Universities' International Liaison Association (BUILA) is a UK-wide, membership-led organisation supporting the work and professional interests of staff working in international recruitment at 149 UK Higher Educational institutions.
- A total of 49 institutions submitted responses between 5<sup>th</sup> March 2026 and 25<sup>th</sup> March 2026. This is broken down by mission group as follows: Million Plus (4), Russell Group (7), The Cathedrals Group (1), University Alliance (4), Unaffiliated (30), GuildHE (3).
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