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This evidence draws on two published peer-reviewed studies:

1. “The Impact of Political Factors on International Student Mobility” (British Educational Research Journal, 2023) — based on interviews with 40 PhD students from Turkey in the UK, focusing on structural, and capability factors influencing mobility.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3846>
2. “From Mobility to Migration: The Impact of Socio-Cultural and Professional Factors on International Post-Doctoral Capabilities” (Studies in Higher Education, 2025) — a longitudinal study following the same cohort six years later, identifying post-PhD migration and settlement trajectories and the capability factors shaping long-term decisions.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2025.2552824>

ABSTRACT

Our research consists of two studies examining the mobility, settlement trajectories, and capability development of international PhD students during and subsequent to their programme of study, published in two peer-reviewed articles. These articles include a detailed analysis of the experiences of international PhD students from Turkey in the UK and explore how political, socio-cultural, professional, and migration-policy factors shape their decisions whilst studying and having obtained their doctorates.

Across both studies, settlement is not simply an individual preference but the outcome of conditions that either enable or constrain individuals’ capabilities to build stable and rewarding futures. Our published evidence indicates that:

- Restrictive or unclear settlement policies reduce the UK’s ability to retain highly educated individuals and weaken its competitiveness within the global higher education sector.
- Professional environments, safety, lifestyle freedoms, and inclusive social norms strongly influence post-doctoral settlement intentions.
- Migration policies — including visa rules, post-study work rights, and perceptions of welcome or hostility — play a decisive role in shaping whether international researchers consider long-term settlement in the UK.
- Although many participants initially viewed the UK as an unattractive place for long-term settlement due to visa uncertainty and restrictive migration policies, both studies show that over time professional opportunities, inclusive working environments, and socio-cultural freedoms became more influential in shaping their long-term intentions to remain.

1. Background and Context

International PhD students are widely recognised as important contributors to UK's academic and research fields, and many progress into roles in universities, research institutions, and other highly skilled sectors. This broader context highlights why retaining doctoral-level talent is valuable for the UK.

While this forms the wider policy landscape, our own published research focuses specifically on how political, socio-cultural, professional, and migration-policy factors shape settlement intentions among international PhD students and postdoctoral graduates from Turkey in the UK. Both studies demonstrate that settlement outcomes are not solely individual choices but are shaped by structural conditions that either support or constrain the capability to build long-term futures.

Across our two studies, participants described how the attractiveness of the UK as a place for long-term settlement is strongly influenced by factors such as:

- the clarity and predictability of post-study visa and settlement routes,
- employer sponsorship requirements,
- and perceptions of welcome or hostility arising from migration policies and the broader political climate.

Together, the studies provide insight into how mobility intentions develop during and after doctoral study, and how political, socio-cultural, and professional environments shape the capability to plan for long-term settlement.

2. Key Findings Relevant to UK Settlement Policy

2.1. *UK migration policies strongly shape initial intentions to stay*

Our first published article reveals that restrictive post-study visa rules, limited settlement routes, and uncertainty around long-term options were major reasons why many international PhD students did not initially plan to remain in the UK after graduation. Participants frequently described the UK as an unwelcoming policy environment and compared it unfavourably with countries offering clearer and more predictable routes to settlement, particularly Canada, Australia, and the United States:

“They just want you to come, pay the fees, get your diploma, and go back. But in Canada, if you do a PhD, you can get citizenship.” (BERJ, 2023)

These perceptions shaped early intentions to leave the UK after completing their studies.

However, our second published article shows that long-term settlement intentions were influenced by a wider set of socio-cultural and professional factors. Over time, participants emphasised:

- the strength of professional and academic opportunities in the UK,
- access to stable and good employment and working conditions,
- socio-cultural freedoms and personal safety,
- and overall quality of life.

These broader factors became highly influential in shaping long-term settlement preferences, sometimes outweighing initial concerns about migration policies.

2.2. Post-PhD settlement increasingly hinges on socio-cultural and professional capability factors

Our second publication shows that long-term settlement intentions are strongly shaped by socio-cultural and professional capability factors. Participants placed particular importance on:

- opportunities for professional and academic development,
- safe and inclusive social environments,
- lifestyle freedoms and the ability to live authentically,
- and the overall quality of life available in the UK.

These socio-cultural and professional conditions play a central role in how individuals assessed their well-being, sense of belonging, and potential for long-term stability in the UK.

2.3. Capability development is central to settlement decisions

Across our two studies, we found that individuals stay or leave based on whether a country enhances or restricts:

- employment capability — the ability to convert skills and qualifications into good employment and working conditions,
- academic capability — freedom to conduct research, think critically, and pursue professional development,
- active citizenship capability — the ability to participate socially and feel part of a community,
- lifestyle capability — the freedom to live authentically without discrimination,
- safety and security capability — physical, social, and emotional protection.

The capability to “live the life one values” was central to how participants evaluated whether the UK could support their well-being, sense of belonging, and long-term stability.

2.4. Perceptions of welcome significantly influence settlement outcomes

Both of our studies highlight the importance of perceived welcome in shaping settlement intentions. The 2023 article shows that participants often described the UK’s migration environment as unwelcoming, particularly in the political climate surrounding Brexit, which was associated with stricter visa rules and reduced clarity around long-term options. This perception affected how international PhD students evaluated the possibility of remaining in the UK.

The 2025 article further demonstrates that socio-cultural conditions played a crucial role in shaping long-term settlement intentions. Participants who expressed interest in staying highlighted:

- supportive academic environments,
- inclusive and welcoming workplaces,
- and diverse, tolerant communities.

These positive socio-cultural experiences helped counterbalance the negative effects of restrictive policy environments and contributed to a greater sense of belonging and stability.

2.5. The UK risks losing highly educated individuals without clearer routes to settlement

Our longitudinal data reveal the following:

- 27 of 36 participants remained abroad after graduation.
- 20 of these settled in the UK, mostly in academic roles.
- The remainder moved to the US, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Latvia, or the Netherlands — countries perceived to have more stable settlement routes.

Participants described the inefficiency and uncertainty of UK settlement routes as a deterrent.

Given that the UK aims to strengthen its position as a global research leader, losing highly qualified PhD graduates to competitor nations represents a long-term strategic risk.

3. Implications for UK Settlement Policy

Based on our findings, we identify the following implications for UK policy on routes to settlement.

3.1 The UK should view PhD graduates as high-qualified personnel

International PhD graduates are:

- highly skilled,
- fluent in English,
- already integrated into UK academic and professional communities,
- contributing immediately to the UK economy.

Many already fill shortages in higher education and STEM fields.

Clearer settlement routes would enable the UK to retain this talent pool.

3.2 Uncertainty around settlement creates complexities

The complexity of navigating:

- Skilled Worker visas,
- Graduate visas,
- sponsorship requirements,
- and ILR timelines

creates barriers that discourage many from planning their futures in the UK.

A more transparent and streamlined policy would improve retention.

3.3 Socio-cultural integration and perceptions of safety matter as much as visa rules

Participants repeatedly indicated that:

- diversity,
- inclusion,
- personal safety,

- and freedom from discrimination

are essential to long-term settlement decisions.

UK policies that support integration, community cohesion, and labour protections indirectly strengthen settlement outcomes.

3.4 Professional capability is a key retention factor

In the second study, the attractiveness of the UK higher education sector was a major reason why the majority of participants ultimately settled in the UK.

Policies that support:

- academic career progression,
- research funding stability,
- lecturer recruitment pathways,
- and postdoctoral opportunities

will enhance the UK's ability to retain global talent.

4. Recommendations

Based on our evidence, we recommend the following to the Home Affairs Committee:

4.1. Provide a clearer and more streamlined settlement route for international PhD graduates

Most work-route migrants must complete five years before applying for ILR. Only a small number of specialist visas allow earlier eligibility.

Both studies show that unclear and restrictive migration rules make it difficult for international PhD graduates to plan long-term futures in the UK. Participants described uncertainty around settlement as a major deterrent, particularly when comparing the UK with countries offering more predictable routes.

To support retention of highly skilled researchers, we recommend that the Government consider:

- creating eligibility to apply for ILR after three years of skilled work,
- applying lower salary thresholds for academic and early-career research roles,
- and recognising a UK PhD as strong evidence of suitability for settlement.

A clearer and more predictable route to settlement would strengthen the UK's ability to retain global research talent and enhance its academic competitiveness.

4.2. Maintain and strengthen the Graduate Route

Both studies show that international PhD graduates need time, stability, and clarity to enter skilled work and develop the capabilities necessary for long-term settlement. The Graduate Route provides a crucial transition period that enables graduates to secure appropriate roles, gain professional experience, and demonstrate their value within universities and research-intensive sectors. Academic appointments often involve lengthy recruitment processes, making the flexibility of this route essential.

Reducing or removing the Graduate Route would increase uncertainty and limit graduates' ability to convert their skills into good employment and working conditions. This would weaken the UK's capacity to retain highly skilled researchers and negatively affect the higher education and research sectors.

4.3. Improve clarity and communication around visa and settlement routes

Our research shows that participants frequently describe UK migration rules as confusing, inconsistent, and difficult to navigate. Uncertainty about post-study options and settlement routes limit their ability to plan long-term futures and reduce the UK's attractiveness compared with countries offering clearer systems.

To support informed and confident decision-making, government guidance should be:

- clear,
- simple,
- transparent,
- and easily accessible through universities and official channels.

Improved communication would reduce uncertainty and strengthen the UK's capacity to retain highly skilled doctoral graduates.

4.4. Expand institutional partnerships and scholarship pathways

Our research shows that institutional environments — including access to funding, supervision, academic networks, and professional development opportunities — play an important role in shaping international PhD students' capabilities and long-term mobility decisions. Scholarship schemes and collaborative research partnerships help students develop academic networks, gain early professional experience, and build lasting connections to the UK higher education sector.

Expanding institutional partnerships and scholarship pathways would:

- strengthen recruitment of high-quality international PhD candidates,
- support more equitable access to postgraduate study,
- and increase the likelihood that graduates remain connected to the UK through long-term academic and professional pathways.

Such partnerships would enhance the UK's position as a supportive and attractive destination for global research talent.

4.5. Strengthen socio-cultural integration and foster a welcoming environment

Our research evidence that long-term settlement is shaped not only by migration policy but also by everyday experiences of safety, inclusion, and belonging. Participants in both studies emphasised that supportive professional environments, positive social interactions, and a sense of being valued played an important role in their decisions to remain in the UK.

To support successful integration and retention, we recommend that the Government:

- invest in mentoring and career-development programmes within universities,
- provide targeted support for early-career researchers,

- encourage community and integration initiatives,
- promote inclusion and address discrimination,
- and communicate clearly that international researchers are welcome and valued in the UK.

Strengthening socio-cultural integration while fostering a more welcoming national environment would help international graduates build stable and fulfilling lives in the UK and contribute fully to the UK's research and higher education sectors.

5. Conclusion

Our research shows that international PhD graduates contribute significantly to the UK's research capacity, but face barriers caused by restrictive and unclear post-study migration rules. While professional opportunities, supportive academic environments, and socio-cultural freedoms encourage graduates to remain, uncertainty around settlement limits their ability to plan long-term futures and reduces the UK's attractiveness compared with countries offering clearer routes.

Long-term settlement decisions are shaped not only by visa policy but also by wider capability factors such as employment, safety, inclusion, academic development, and a sense of belonging. Where these conditions are present, participants see the UK as a viable place to build their lives; where they are absent, they look to countries with more supportive policy environments.

Strengthening the clarity, predictability, and accessibility of the UK's settlement system—while fostering socio-cultural inclusion and supporting professional capability development—would better enable the UK to retain highly skilled PhD graduates who are already integrated into its academic and research communities. Doing so would reinforce the UK's position as a global leader in higher education and ensure that the benefits of international doctoral talent are fully realised for the long term.

Further information can be found ['Freedom and fairness' concerns drive PhD scholars to stay abroad](#)

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