Sunak faces Cabinet revolt

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Fresh trouble over plans to scrap the Graduate Route scheme, the definitive factor for choosing UK universities among Indian students

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Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is considering restrictions to the UK’s post-study visa which allows graduates to stay on and work for up to two years after their degree course as part of efforts to curb soaring legal migration figures despite strong opposition from some of his ministers, a report claims on Sunday.

According to ‘The Observer’ newspaper, Sunak is facing a Cabinet revolt over plans to scrap the Graduate Route scheme, the definitive factor for choosing UK universities among Indian students who have topped the tally of these post-study visas since it was launched in 2021.

Downing Street is said to be considering “further restricting or even ending” the route despite the independent Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) declaring it was not being abused and that it should continue as it helps UK universities make up for financial losses on the domestic front.

“Sunak is now finding himself caught between the demands of right-wingers with one eye on the Tory leadership and Conservative moderates who fear the consequences of a lurch to the right on the party’s reputation and election chances,” claims the newspaper, quoting sources close to ministers who oppose scrapping the visa.

Sunak’s Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt and Foreign Secretary David Cameron are among those in the Cabinet said to be leading a revolt over the issue. It comes as university and business chiefs have warned that any curtailment of the post-study offer would make the UK less attractive to overseas students, including Indians.

“Studying at university is one of our biggest export successes. Attracting international students boosts local economies and losing competitiveness would put support for undergraduate teaching and innovation at risk,” said John Foster, Chief Policy and Campaigns Officer for the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

“With the MAC finding that the Graduate Visa is achieving the government’s own policy objectives and is not being abused, it’s time to put its future beyond doubt and end this period of damaging speculation,” he said.

Universities UK (UUK), the leading representative body for UK universities, has also called upon the government to end the “toxic” uncertainty caused by the government’s decision to review the visa route.

“We hope and expect that the government now listens to the advice they have been given and provides categorical reassurance that the Graduate visa is here to stay,” said UUK chief executive Vivienne Stern.

MAC Chair Professor Brian Bell, who concluded the rapid review into the scheme earlier this week, has said that “our evidence suggests that it’s the Indian students that will be most affected by any restriction on the Graduate Route”.

The influential committee which advises the UK government on migration found that Indians accounted for 89,200 visas between 2021 and 2023 or 42 per cent of the overall grants, and the visa was stated as the “overwhelming decision point” for their choice of a higher education destination.

“The uncertainty caused by the review has been chaotic. We urge the government to accept the MAC’s findings and ensure the Graduate Route remains a stable and permanent fixture in the UK’s immigration system,” said Vignesh Karthik from the National Indian Students and Alumni Union (NISAU) UK.

In a general election year, expected in the coming months, the Sunak-led government sees curbing high legal and illegal migration figures as a priority area and with the latest set of quarterly immigration statistics due next week, further clampdowns are on the horizon.

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Pressure on Sunak to act on student visas has come from potential future challengers for the party leadership, including the former home secretary Suella Braverman. A recent report by former Home Office minister Robert Jenrick, seen as another potential leadership contender, and Tory MP Neil O’Brien, for the Centre for Policy Studies, called for the abolition of the graduate route to a visa.

At the start of this year the government introduced tighter rules meaning that international students could no longer bring family members to this country unless they were on postgraduate research courses and courses with government-funded scholarships. This has already led to a drop in numbers.

Dr Michael Spence, president and provost of University College London, said further curbs on international student visas would be “an extraordinary act of national self-harm”.

“A single cohort of international students brings £37bn of economic benefit to the UK and this is directly felt by local businesses and communities in towns and cities in every part of the country,” he said.

“But the value of our international students is not just economic. These are people who take the brave step to travel thousands of miles around the world to get a world-class education in the UK. They bring their ideas and perspectives and build a profound connection with our country which lasts long after they leave.”