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Universities and social care depend on immigration. The UK government's plans could be an economic own goal

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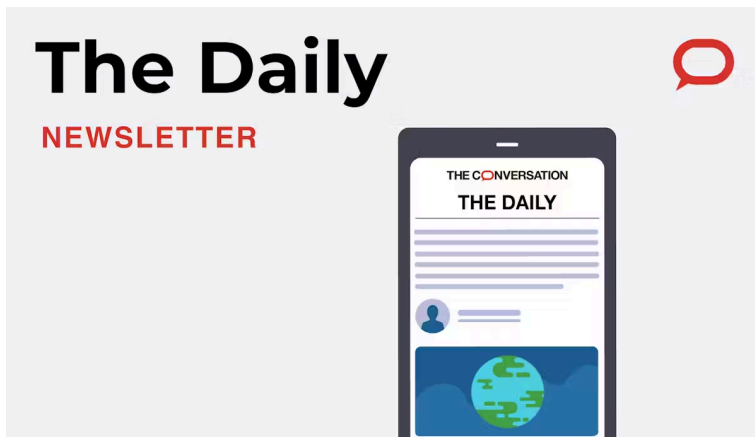
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The recent launch of [plans to reform the UK's immigration system](#) reflects the government's effort to regain the initiative on this issue. But looking at the finer detail of migration to the UK [shows restrictions](#) introduced by the previous government, particularly around visas for social care workers and international students, have already led to fewer people arriving in the UK.

What's more, these latest proposals risk worsening crises in these key sectors. In adult social care and higher education, accelerating the decline in the numbers of migrants could create, rather than solve, problems for the government.

The government argues there is a need to move away from the reliance on migrant workers in the UK's adult social care sector. It has announced the closure of a visa route to new applications.

But in its new white paper laying out its policy changes, the government acknowledges that following the tightening of the [health and care worker visa](#) route (particularly in terms of bringing dependants to the UK) the number of these visas granted for both main applicants and dependants [fell by 68%](#) in 2024 compared to the previous year. This means that, even before any new restrictions, fewer workers were arriving to plug the staffing shortages in the sector.



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Keir Starmer's government rightly points out that there have been longstanding issues of recruitment and retention in the social care sector across the UK. After all, it is often associated with poor pay and conditions.

The government also highlights initiatives to address worker shortages, such as the independent commission into adult social care as well as proposed fair pay agreements. But care sector bodies such as Care England say the measures will not arrive in time and that international recruitment is being cut off before a solution is in place.

Trade unions in the sector, including Unison, have also highlighted how migrant workers have been crucial for the sustainability of delivering care across the UK.

 female care worker with a disabled woman in a wheelchair

Pay remains stubbornly low in the social care sector. Pressmaster/Shutterstock

This points to the potential destabilising effect the white paper may have for a sector already in crisis. Attracting UK citizens to work in social care will also be difficult considering the stubbornly low pay for what can be a challenging job.

Added to this, opportunities for pay progression are often limited. Care workers in England with five or more years' experience are on average earning only around 10p more per hour than those with less than a year of experience. Research also indicates how attracting young people to a career in care is particularly difficult.

The crisis in higher education

Just as Starmer could blame the crisis in social care on the previous government, the same could be said for the emergency that is engulfing higher education.

Over the past 15 years there has been a clear shift in the balance of funding for universities away from government grants and towards income from fees. Fee income from international students has been declining, especially since January 2024 in part due a tightening of restrictions by the previous government, such as students bringing family members with them.

Debates around funding in the sector are taking place against the backdrop of institutions across the UK facing budget deficits and announcements of thousands of redundancies.

The UK sector is clearly in a fragile state, and dependent on income from overseas students. But the government has indicated it wants to tighten requirements for recruiting international students and reduce students' ability to remain in the UK after their studies to 18 months.

It is also exploring a levy on UK higher education providers' income from international students. These moves were said to be in response to the "misuse and exploitation" of student visas.

These new measures have understandably caused alarm in the sector. Many institutions are still trying to convince students from around the world that the UK should be their destination for study, particularly when political developments may have made the US less attractive.

Representatives such as the sector body Universities UK have asked the government to consider the damage a levy could do to the appeal of the UK higher education market. The University and College Union has also warned that moves to deter international students could lead to UK "universities going under".

In these ways, the white paper may have sought to see off political challenge, but it could instead expose the government to risk. The restrictions proposed in the white paper in relation to social care and higher education could easily worsen the crises in these sectors.

Thousands of redundancies in the higher education sector and the shrinking of these institutions could also have a huge negative effect on local economies across the UK given the economic benefits that universities bring.

And the measures will also have implications for Wales and Scotland, both due to hold elections next year. Recent polling indicates that support for pro-independence parties is surging, as Plaid Cymru and the SNP position themselves as the counterweight to further restrictions on immigration

The immigration white paper has been an effort by the prime minister and his advisers to seize short-term political advantage. In the long term it could prove to be an economic own goal.