The United Kingdom is the world’s second largest host of international students, with over 670,000 currently studying in the country. In recent years, the topic of international students has become increasingly politicized through contradictory migration and education policies. On one hand, the United Kingdom’s 2023 International Education Strategy outlines social and economic benefits of hosting international students, claiming that “continued export growth is welcome.” On the other hand, the home office’s restrictive migration policies include international students in net migration figures, and the Conservative Party is pushing for “the biggest ever cut in net migration.” The tension between these two policies is the key focus for this article, highlighting how international students are impacted by the United Kingdom’s so-called “hostile environment,” which is described next.

**Abstract**
The United Kingdom hosts the world’s second largest number of international students, with recruitment encouraged through national education policies. Yet, restrictive migration policies contradict this narrative. Recent oppressive migration policies have been dubbed in the United Kingdom as a “hostile environment.” This article reflects on how the hostile environment politicizes migration, specifically for international students, considering how international students are positioned as both desired and unwanted by the national government.

**The United Kingdom’s Political Migration Environment**
In 2012, the United Kingdom’s then home secretary Theresa May declared that “the aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants,” building upon the strict immigration policies initially introduced by the Labor Party government in 2007. This phrase—“hostile environment”—has come to symbolize the United Kingdom’s oppressive immigration policies that aim to make life and access to public services purposefully difficult for migrants, with the ultimate aim that they may leave or choose not to immigrate in the first place. In response, scholars and activists have demonstrated how the hostile environment is frequently structured through xenophobia and racialization, particularly considering the United Kingdom’s colonial history and its impact on modern migration structures. An illustrative example of this was the 2018 Windrush scandal, which brought to light the mistreatment, harassment, and deportation of predominantly Black residents and citizens who arrived in the United Kingdom in the 1940s–1970s from the colonies via the British Nationality Act.

Brexit is also intertwined with British migration policies, both as a catalyst and an outcome. On the one hand, antimigrant policies were a leading campaign promise for politicians urging the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (EU). On the other hand, Brexit has led to significant decreases in migration to the United Kingdom from the European Union, including international students, whereby students from EU countries now pay international rather than home student fees. This has resulted in shifting conceptualizations of “international” and “migrant” categories, spurred on by public debates about the fates of those already in the United Kingdom with EU settled status at the time of Brexit. The tendency for some not to see European citizens as “migrants” despite their moving across borders has resulted in bifurcated understandings of who has the “right” to remain in the United Kingdom and who is expected to be impacted by the hostile environment.

**International Students in the United Kingdom’s “Hostile Environment”**
One symbol of international students’ entanglement within the hostile environment is rising visa costs, including the introduction of a National Health Service (NHS) surcharge argued to offset costs of accessing health services. Student visa application fees have risen from GBP 115 to GBP 490 in 10 years. The NHS surcharge was introduced in 2015 at GBP 150 per year of study (paid up front), which has since risen to GBP 776 per year. This means the full cost of a student visa application for a three-year undergraduate
program has risen from GBP 115 in 2014 to GBP 3,798 in 2024 (without additional fees such as translation costs, biometric appointments, etc.). These costs are astronomical in comparison to countries such as the United States, where a F-1 type student visa application costs USD 510 (approximately GBP 398).

The inclusion of international students and their dependents in net migration figures also sees them targeted by attempts to reduce their numbers. Most recently, a changing home office policy no longer allows international students to bring dependents (spouses, children, etc.) into the United Kingdom during their studies (postgraduate research students being the only exception). The impacts this will have on international student mobility to the United Kingdom remains unknown. Regardless of the outcome, though, there are wider human concerns about the ethics of not allowing students to live with their families and dependents during their studies.

Another example is the attendance monitoring that international students experience upon arrival. Higher education institutions, as sponsors of student visas, were one of the first instances of the home office “outsourcing” immigration checks. Shifting this onus toward institutions comes with strings, with the threat of universities losing their status as student visa sponsors should an audit render their monitoring insufficient. Given the UK higher education sector’s reliance on international students’ high fees for survival, this has led to uneven reactionary policies, including spot checks, check-in stations, electronic monitoring, and fingerprint scanning. Other hostile environment policies have shifted migration policing towards everyday citizens, rendering it illegal, for example, for housing, banking, or health industries to provide services to “illegal” migrants. This has led to increased “right to remain” checks of migration paperwork for everyday acts such as renting housing or opening bank accounts.

The hostile environment is also present in the shifting politics around whether and how international students can remain in the United Kingdom after their studies. The United Kingdom’s poststudy work visa (currently existing as a two-year graduate visa) has a long on-and-off political history, its form shifting and shaping depending on existing migration policies. These changes make long-term planning difficult for international students. For example, the current graduate visa, introduced in 2021, is already under discussion by the Conservative Party to be potentially axed in 2024. Minimum salary thresholds for sponsored skilled worker visas have also risen significantly, from GBP 20,500 in 2014 to GBP 38,700 in 2024, despite a national median salary of GBP 35,000. These examples show how international students are caught within political whims and increasingly unlikely to find routes for remaining in the country after their studies.

The Hostile Environment and Current Pressing Issues

The above outlines an environment of growingly hostile and oppressive migration policies towards international students in the United Kingdom, despite education strategies which aim to increase their numbers. Within this fraught political environment, a number of so-called “scandals” have come to light in the British press regarding international students, leading to growing negative public sentiments. Most recently, a Sunday Times article has critiqued unequal admissions criteria between home and international students, claiming that international students can “buy their way in through secret routes.” Yet, the data reflected in the article was not like-for-like, comparing entrance criteria for full degree programs with foundation courses aimed at supporting international students with developing English proficiency and academic skills prior to applying for a full degree program. This has led to calls from within the higher education sector, including from Universities United Kingdom, to denounce the “poorly researched” claims. Nonetheless, sentiments such as this continue to be used by politicians as evidence for greater migration restrictions.

Together these issues highlight the growing politicization of international students in the United Kingdom, where pivots toward the hostile environment significantly impact students’ lives. This further entrenches the ethical treatment of international students with the treatment of all migrants, whereby antimigrant policies create a need for greater solidarity between those with different reasons for migration. At present, the future of international students in the United Kingdom remains unclear in light of contradictory government policies which render them caught in the middle.