

20 May 2026

Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
Home Office, 2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

Via email: ps.homesecretary@homeoffice.gov.uk

Cc: Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education
Rt Hon Yvette Cooper, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing on behalf of the Russell Group and ResearchPlus, representing 34 of the UK's leading research universities, to express our shared concern about the application of the "visa brake" policy to Chevening scholars. While we strongly support maintaining a robust and effective immigration and asylum system, we do not believe it is fair or proportionate to apply restrictions to these individuals who have already undergone rigorous, government-led assessment.

Our universities take their compliance responsibilities seriously and support appropriate measures to protect the integrity of student visas. The vast majority of international study applicants are genuine, and it is in all our interests that the system remains credible. We recognise that the number of asylum claims from individuals who previously held student visas has prompted concerns about potential misuse of the student route. While Home Office data indicates this number has fallen by 21% in the most recent year, this remains a complex issue that requires carefully targeted and proportionate policy responses.

We are concerned that the visa brake, as currently designed, operates as a blunt measure and does not differentiate between applicants based on any measure of assessed "asylum risk". This is particularly relevant in the case of Chevening Scholarship applicants. These candidates are selected through a global competitive process overseen by the UK government which assesses academic merit, leadership potential, and their intention to return to their home countries following their studies. As with any scholarship, whilst the process is competitive, the scheme is open to applications from all who meet the criteria.

Chevening has, for over 40 years, played a central role in advancing the UK's international partnerships and national interests. It is a highly competitive and well-regarded scheme that attracts exceptionally talented individuals from across the world. As Ministers have highlighted themselves, the programme plays a significant role in boosting the UK's soft power and global influence, as well as contributing to the economic and societal development of the Chevening scholars' home countries. 22 Chevening Alumni have gone on to be heads of state and 15% of Chevening Alumni hold prominent positions in government, despite the scheme operating at a relatively small scale within the overall student route.

Given the scale of the Chevening scheme, the robustness of its selection process, and the conditions attached to awards, a narrowly defined exemption for Chevening scholars would be a limited and proportionate intervention. In this context, an exemption would not undermine the principle of fairness but would reflect the additional level of scrutiny already applied to this cohort. More broadly, we would welcome ongoing engagement as policy in this area develops, as universities have direct operational insight into the student route and can support the design of targeted policy.

We would be pleased to discuss this further and to work constructively with you to ensure the continued integrity of the system while supporting the UK's ability to attract genuine, talented international students that is in the national interest.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Libby Hackett
Chief Executive
The Russell Group



Professor Andrew Jones and Professor Sasha Roseuil
Co-Chairs
ResearchPlus