

International Student Workforce Integration in the United Kingdom's Tech Sector: Insights and Future Outlook

Seyi Hameed Musibau

Faculty of Business and Technology, University of Sunderland, England, United Kingdom

sheyihamed@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0007-9835-1237

Okeoma John Paul Okeke

Faculty of Business and Technology, University of Sunderland, England, United Kingdom

Okeoma.Okeke@sunderland.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-8365-9326

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Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of technology companies in the Northeast United Kingdom on the employability of international student graduates, with a focus on aligning human resource (HR) strategies with business needs. The research aims to identify the key skills and attributes valued by employers, assess how international graduates meet these expectations, and analyse the challenges associated with recruiting and integrating them into the workforce. Using a qualitative methodology, six semi structured interviews were conducted with HR managers and business leaders from the regional tech sector. The findings reveal persistent barriers related to communication skills, CV customisation, and visa regulations, with sponsorship costs disproportionately affecting small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Employers often favour local candidates due to administrative and financial constraints linked to immigration compliance. In response, the study proposes a multi stakeholder framework involving universities, employers, and policymakers to support international graduate integration. The findings contribute practical insights for improving employability outcomes and strengthening the alignment between higher education and labour market needs in the UK's regional tech ecosystem.

This study explores the perspectives of tech companies in the Northeast United Kingdom on the employability of international student graduates, with a focus on aligning human resource (HR) strategies with business needs. The research aims to identify the key skills and attributes that these companies value, assess the international graduates' skills in meeting these expectations, and analyze the challenges in recruiting and integrating these graduates into the workforce. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study involved conducting six semi-structured interviews with HR managers and business leaders from the Northeast UK tech sector. The findings reveal significant

challenges, including difficulties with CV customization, cultural differences, and the complexities of visa policies. In particular, the study highlights several barriers to employability, such as stringent visa regulations and the financial burden of sponsorship, which particularly affect small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The findings reveal that tech companies often prefer local candidates due to the administrative and financial challenges associated with sponsoring international graduates. Based on these insights, the study recommends a more integrated approach to addressing employability challenges. A three-tier framework is proposed involving universities, employers, and policymakers to support the integration of international graduates into the UK tech workforce, thereby fostering a diverse and competitive industry. These findings can inform more effective HR strategies, improve the alignment between higher education and industry needs, and ultimately lead to better employment outcomes for international graduates in the regional tech sector.

Keywords: *International students, employability, human resources, technology sector, immigration policy*

JEL Classification: F22, J15, J24, J61, J68, M51, R23

Introduction

Recently, the United Kingdom (UK) has experienced a significant increase in international student enrolment in higher education, rising from 556,225 in 2019/2020 to 679,970 in 2021/2022, with 559,825 students originating from outside the European Union (Bolton et al., 2024). International students are attracted by the UK's academic reputation and the opportunity to enhance employability through global exposure (Birindelli, 2023). Their economic contribution is substantial, with international students contributing approximately £25.9 billion to the UK economy in 2021 alone (London Economics, 2021).

The Northeast of England has emerged as a growing technology hub, attracting investment and skilled labour (UKTN, 2023). However, despite skills shortages in the technology sector, international graduates continue to face structural barriers to employment, including visa restrictions, cultural adjustment challenges, and limited access to local professional networks (Universities UK International et al., 2023). This study investigates these barriers from the employer perspective, focusing on the Northeast tech sector.

Motivation of the Study

Existing research examines international student employability at a national level, but region-specific insights, particularly within the Northeast tech ecosystem remain limited. The region's high concentration of SMEs and startups creates distinct recruitment dynamics that are insufficiently addressed in current literature. In addition, post Brexit immigration reforms continue to reshape graduate labour market access, disproportionately affecting international students (Imran et al., 2025). This study responds to these gaps by providing employer led insights and proposing actionable interventions.

Literature Review

Immigration Laws and Technical performance of international student in IT

The Graduate Immigration Route allows students to stay for two years post-graduation; uncertainty remains about securing long-term employment and visa stability. (Levitt, 2022) highlights that international students frequently struggle with communication styles, professional etiquette, and teamwork. While many students excel in academic English, they may lack proficiency in business or technical English. However, (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021) emphasize the critical importance of business communication, noting that difficulties in this area can hinder job prospects and interview performance. Professional networking is also crucial for employment, yet many international students lack the local networks necessary for job hunting. In contrast, local students benefit from job leads, references, and guidance from established family, friends, and alumni networks. Another study by (Alho, 2020) reveals that international students are disadvantaged in connecting to local networks compared to their peers. Cultural differences, time constraints, and academic obligations further complicate their ability to establish these essential connections.

Barriers to Employability of International Student in the UK

According to (Aktas, et, & al., 2021), UK visa restrictions hinder international students' career prospects, thereby, impacting their ability to secure lasting employment after graduation. (Sturge, 2022). Additionally, companies in the area typically favour local candidates or those with existing work authorisation, further diminishing job opportunities for international graduates (Farndale, Thite, Budhwar, & Kwon, 2021). Figure 1 depicts the summary of the identified barriers to international students' employability in the literature.

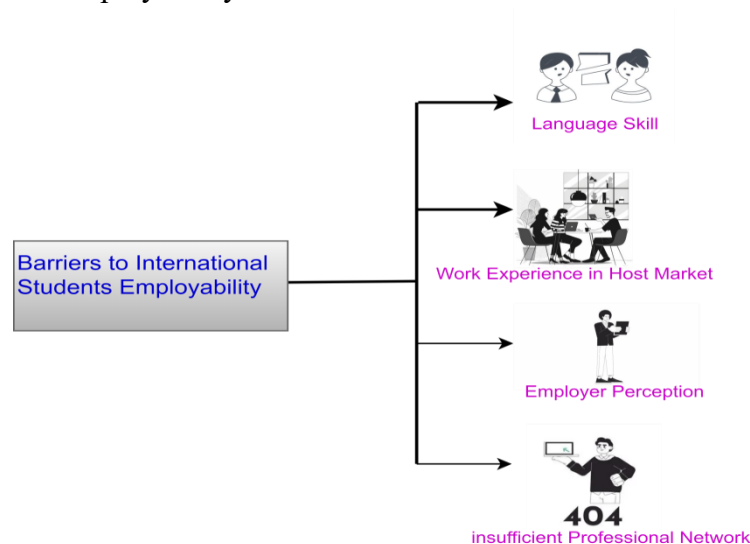


Figure 1: *Barriers to international student employability*

Source: authors' own illustration

Figure 1 synthesises the principal barriers identified in the literature and served as an analytical framework for interpreting the themes that emerged from the employer interviews. The categories

depicted- including visa restrictions, cultural adjustment, and networking deficits, directly informed the coding structure applied to the empirical data and the organisation of findings.

Foreign students often struggle with job searches due to unfamiliarity with local networking and employment practices. Differences in application processes, including resume formats and interview styles, pose additional challenges compared to their home countries (Han, D., & GJ., 2022). In the words of (Kim & Kim, 2021), cultural differences and language barriers can hinder international students, especially non-native English speakers, despite language proficiency not being essential for many roles, (Himmatova, 2023). Thus, this poses a challenge the international students face to effectively showcase their talents and accomplishments, invariably hindering their career opportunities in foreign job markets.

Cultural differences

Cultural Capital Theory highlights key obstacles for international students seeking employment abroad which include cultural differences, workplace biases, language barriers and work permit requirements. These factors collectively impede foreign graduates' job prospects in host countries (Yu, 2020). According to (Chiang, A., & H.C, 2020), international students can overcome these obstacles by leveraging their cultural background, knowledge, and experience to enhance their employment opportunities. Cultural Capital Theory suggests that embodied cultural capital, which refers to the cultural assets incorporated in a person through socialisation and personalization, plays a crucial role in this process (Korkeila H. & Hamari, 2020). By utilizing their unique cultural capital, international students can better navigate the job market and improve their employability in the United Kingdom.

Social differences

According to (Sasnal, 2023), the difficulties international students encounter when seeking employment in major tech cities can be examined through social capital theory. This theory highlights the significance of social networks, relationships, and connections in accessing resources and opportunities. However, (Beard, 2021) stress that social capital theory is valuable in understanding the employability challenges faced by international students, as it helps identify the barriers preventing these students from fully utilizing their skills and knowledge in competitive job markets. Additionally, language barriers further complicate their job search efforts.

As stated by (Fortanet-Gómez & Beltrán-Palanques, 2022), communication skills are crucial for job seekers, encompassing everything from crafting an impressive resume and cover letter to articulating qualifications in interviews. International students who lack proficiency in the language may struggle to compete with fluent classmates, despite possessing the necessary skills and abilities for the job. Furthermore (Kerwin, 2020) suggests that immigration rules and restrictions on work visas can also make it hard for international students to find jobs. This adds more stress and uncertainty to their job search. Consequently, employers may also be hesitant to hire international students because they are worried about how to sponsor their visas and make sure, they follow immigration rules (Tran, Bui, Tan, & Rahimi, 2022).

Research Methodology

In this research, a qualitative method was employed to obtain and examine the views, experiences, thoughts and understanding of international students' employability held by human resources and talent acquisition managers in the Northeastern tech sector of the United Kingdom. This study's objective is to assess the obstacles to employment and offer practical suggestions for improving the employability of foreign students in the area. A symbolic inductive technique served as the foundation for this work (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014; Liu et al., 2025). This data-driven, open-ended, and flexible approach allowed for an in-depth exploration and understanding of the employability experiences of Human Resources and Talent Acquisition Managers, as well as the interpretations and meanings they attributed to those experiences.

Research Approach

The study employed an inductive approach to investigate the barriers to international students' employability as it aligns with interpretivism philosophy. This technique involves collecting and evaluating data to develop theories or generalizations based on observed themes or patterns (Pearse, 2021). By avoiding preconceived ideas or theories, this methodology allowed us to explore the diverse experiences and perspectives of recruiters. It provided detailed insights into employability obstacles that may not have been previously recognized or understood. Similarly, the study leverages the approach to analyze the data and identify significant themes and patterns related to the barriers international students face in securing employment. These themes encompassed various factors, including visa regulations, cultural differences, networking challenges, language barriers, and discrimination in the job market.

By carefully and systematically reviewing the data, we gained a deeper understanding of the unique challenges impeding the employability of international students in the tech industry within this region. Building on the identified themes and patterns, we developed a comprehensive framework to understand the factors hindering international students' employment prospects in these global hubs (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Through the integration of diverse observations into a cohesive framework, we were able to obtain a significant understanding of the multifaceted elements that impact employability (Arikan & Shenkar, 2022).

Research Strategy

The study assessed the employability of international students through employers' perspectives using a qualitative research approach with semi-structured interviews. As (Finn, Phillipson, & Goff, 2020) noted, this strategy effectively captured the complex viewpoints and experiences of employers regarding international students' employability. It enabled a thorough examination of the obstacles these students encountered in their job searches, whether related to industry, universities, or government policies. To determine when theoretical saturation was reached, we conducted data analysis concurrently with recruitment (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). We achieved this saturation after five interviews and professional transcription services transcribed the

interviews verbatim.

Research Population

This study explores the perspectives of tech companies in Northeast UK on the employability of international graduates. Although this region is smaller compared to major tech hubs like London, it experienced significant growth with 645 newly incorporated tech firms as of 2022, marking a 26% increase from 2021 (TechBlast, 2023). The purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture the most relevant insights, thereafter, selecting individuals with specific knowledge and experience relevant to the research question. The sample consists of professionals who actively participate in hiring graduates, such as HR managers, directors of operations, and executives within the tech industry. This approach ensures that the data collected is rich and pertinent, providing a thorough understanding of the challenges and advantages considered by these companies.

It is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of purposive sampling which was applied in this study. While this strategy enables the selection of information-rich participants with direct relevance to the research question, it is not designed to produce a statistically representative sample. The six interviews conducted, though sufficient for thematic saturation in this focused qualitative inquiry (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Guest et al., 2006), reflect the perspectives of HR managers and business leaders within a specific regional tech ecosystem. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution in terms of broader generalisability. The results offer transferable insights rather than universal claims, and future research employing larger or more geographically diverse samples would be valuable in testing and extending the themes identified here.

In qualitative research, the concept of data saturation is essential for ensuring the credibility and completeness of the findings. Saturation occurs when additional data collection no longer yields new themes, insights, or information (Saunders et al., 2018). Recent studies have refined earlier understandings, emphasizing that saturation can often be reached with a relatively small number of interviews, particularly in narrowly focused studies. For instance, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) found that thematic saturation was commonly achieved within four to six interviews when the participant group was relatively homogenous. This aligns with earlier work by Guest et al. (2006), who observed that key themes often emerged within the first six interviews, with saturation typically reached by the twelfth. In the context of this study, a substantial number of themes emerged by the third interview, with full saturation achieved by the fifth, consistent with findings from recent qualitative research.

Sample

Six participants were recruited through face-to-face meetings, LinkedIn, and a purposive sampling technique. They were selected based on their roles related to recruitment in the industry. The criteria included:

- Human Resources/Talent Acquisition and Senior Managers in Northeast tech firm.
- Full-time employees of their respective firms.
- At least 2 years of experience.
- Willingness to share and articulate their employability experiences.

This selection ensures that their insights are rooted in solid professional practice, supporting the objective of identifying diverse perspectives on the employability barriers faced by international graduates. Table 1 gives detail information about the respondent.

Table 1: Interviewed participants in the northeast tech industry

Participants	Position	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Human Resources Manager	5 years
Participant 2	Talent Acquisition Adviser	3 years
Participant 3	Talent Acquisition Adviser	6 years
Participant 4	Human Resources Manager	3 years
Participant 5	Startup and Growth Manager	8 years
Participant 6	Business Development Manager	3 years

Source: authors' own illustration

Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is particularly suited to this research. It allows for the selection of participants based on specific criteria that are crucial to the research objectives (Cash et al., 2022). Within purposive sampling, various methods can be applied: maximum variation sampling, which seeks out participants with diverse backgrounds, and homogeneous sampling, which focuses on individuals with similar traits or experiences (Pace, 2021).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with human resources and business managers within the Northeast Tech Sector as the primary source of data for this study. The experience viewpoints of the participants were gathered, comprehended, revealed, and thoroughly explored (Kvale, 2007). This approach allows for in-depth discussions about the challenges international students face when seeking employment, enabling the researcher to capture a wide range of opinions and experiences from different employers (Trevisan et al., 2023).

Six interviews were conducted with tech industry experts, including a Startup and Growth Manager, a Business Development Manager, and a Talent Acquisition Managers. The interviews were conducted via Teams to ensure data authenticity and were carried out in English at a mutually convenient time. The duration of the interviews ranged from 25 to 40 minutes.

This qualitative method is essential for uncovering the complexities of these challenges, which may include cultural differences, visa-related issues, industry-specific requirements, and networking difficulties (Jacobs, 2022). Through these interviews, the research will gather rich, detailed information that illuminates the multifaceted barriers faced by international students seeking employment in the Northeast Region.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that facilitates the identification, examination, and reporting of patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Labra et al., 2020). This approach is particularly effective for exploring both the common barriers to international student employability and the unique individual experiences of the participants (Wang et al., 2025).

Thematic analysis follows a systematic process of coding, where data is categorized into meaningful units. Initially, this involves familiarizing oneself with the data, followed by generating initial codes that capture significant elements related to the research question. As coding progresses, these codes were refined and grouped into broader themes that highlight recurring challenges and influential factors related to employability (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method also respects the diversity of experiences among human resources managers, allowing for an exploration of both shared and distinct perspectives.

Time Management Plan

As (Riazi & Nawi, 2020) suggest, an effective time management strategy for this project requires meticulous planning for the various phases of data gathering, analysis, and reporting. We carefully considered these factors when developing our project time management plan. We ensured adequate time allocation for connecting with participants, conducting interviews and focus groups, recording and analyzing data, and consolidating findings into a cohesive narrative (Schiele, Krummacker, & Hoffmann, 2022). A robust time management plan also allowed us to address potential obstacles, such as scheduling conflicts with participants or the need for additional data collection to ensure a comprehensive understanding throughout the project.

Ethical Considerations

For this research, ethical considerations were prioritised. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Sunderland Research Ethics committee (Ref Num: 027380). All ethical issues were followed before and during the interviews. The interview sessions lasted from between 30 and 45 minutes, and all sessions were recorded and transcribed. Our research method followed key principles such as respect for participant autonomy, confidentiality, and informed consent (Xu, Baysari, Stocker, Leow, & Day, 2020). We made sure participants were fully informed about the study's nature, their rights, and how their data would be used. Additionally, we stored the collected data in password-protected files, accessible only to the research team. Moreover, we exercised cultural sensitivity when engaging with employers.

In the context of semi-structured interviews, particular care was taken to protect participant confidentiality throughout all stages of the research process. Participants were assigned anonymized codes (P1–P6) to prevent identification in any disseminated materials, including this article. No identifying information, such as employer names, job titles beyond general role descriptions, or organisational details, was disclosed without explicit consent. As evidenced in Participant 1’s transcript, at least one participant voluntarily declined to share specific incident details citing data protection obligations, and this boundary was respected without probing. All audio recordings and transcripts were stored in encrypted, access-controlled repositories, and raw interview data will be destroyed following the completion of the research project in accordance with the University’s data retention policy. These measures align with established best practice in qualitative research ethics (Xu et al., 2020) and reflect the sensitivity inherent in exploring employer hiring practices, which may carry legal and reputational implications for the organisations involved.

Findings and analysis

The presentation of findings from the interviews conducted with six participants representing different tech companies in the Northeast of the United Kingdom is presented. The data was analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach, which led to the identification of three key themes: communication barriers and cultural fit, challenges with CVs and recruitment documentation, and visa policies and sponsorship difficulties. These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles faced by both international graduates and tech companies in the region.

Coding and Categorization of Themes and Sub-Themes

The key finding of the limitations to the international students’ employability in the UK Tech companies is majorly classified into 3 which are visa policies, communication differences and CV customization. The graphical representation is given in Figure 2.

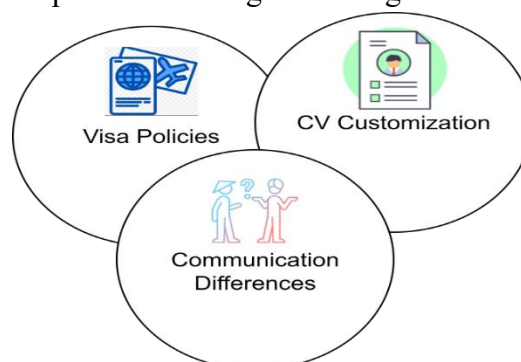


Figure 2: *Barriers to International Student Employability in the UK Tech Sector*

Source: authors’ own illustration

Figure 2 presents a consolidated visualisation of the three dominant barriers—visa challenges, communication differences, and CV customization, identified through the thematic analysis of

employer interviews. It guided the interpretive process by providing a comparative overview of how these barriers interact and reinforce one another and directly informed the structure of the proposed solutions discussed in Sections 4.3 and 5.2.

Table 2 shows a summary of the coding of key findings, categorization of themes and sub-themes.

Table 2: summary of the coding and categorization of themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Participant Codes	Key Findings	Conceptual Dimension	Evidence Source
Communication Skills and Barriers	Language Proficiency and Adaptation	P1, P3, P4	Emphasis on communication skills during recruitment, focusing on how language proficiency can affect international students' ability to integrate into the workplace.	Organizational Environment	Interview Transcripts
	Cultural and Linguistic Challenges	P1, P2, P4, P5	Cultural and linguistic differences create temporary communication gaps, which disadvantage international graduates compared to locals.	Workplace Integration	Interview Transcripts
	The Need for Communication Skill Development	P2, P3, P5	Importance of communication skill development, including participation in activities like public speaking to improve proficiency.	Skills Development and Integration	Interview Transcripts
CV Presentation and Content	Importance of CV Presentation	P3, P4, P5	A well-prepared CV is crucial for standing out in the recruitment process; international students need to tailor their CVs to meet local expectations.	Recruitment Practices	Interview Transcripts

	Location and Relocation Issues	P3, P5	Omitting location or willingness to relocate on CVs often leads to applications being overlooked, particularly in the Northeast UK.	Recruitment Documentation	Interview Transcripts
	Differentiation and Content Challenges	P3, P5, P6	Including specifics like projects and extracurricular activities is essential for standing out in a competitive job market, but formatting can be challenging.	Recruitment Practices	Interview Transcripts
	The Role of Skills Verification	P2, P5, P6	Verification of claimed skills through practical tests is necessary to ensure candidates possess the competencies outlined in their CVs.	Skills Assessment	Interview Transcripts
Visa Challenges in International Student Recruitment	The Impact of Changing Visa Policies	P1, P4, P5, P6	Frequent changes in visa policies create uncertainty and challenges for both international graduates and employers, complicating long-term planning.	Immigration Policies and Employment Practices	Interview Transcripts
	Sponsorship and the Cost of Hiring International Graduates	P1, P2, P3, P4	The financial burden and short duration of post-study work visas are significant barriers to sponsoring international graduates.	Recruitment and Financial Management	Interview Transcripts

	Lack of Awareness and Education on Visa Processes	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6	There is a need for better education on visa processes among recruiters and HR teams, with universities playing a key role in bridging this knowledge gap.	Organizational Awareness and HR Strategy	Interview Transcripts
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Source: Field data

Some Notable Identified Barriers to International Student Recruitment:

Communication skills

Communication skills and barriers emerged as a significant theme, as many participants emphasized the influence of communication on the recruitment process and the day-to-day integration of international graduates into the workplace.

This theme is supported by participant quotes from Participants 1 and 2, who directly addressed communication as both a screening criterion and an ongoing integration challenge. It is further corroborated by the literature on intercultural communication in professional settings (Levitt, 2022; Fortanet-Gómez & Beltrán-Palanques, 2022). The most salient finding within this theme is that while communication competence is universally applied to all candidates regardless of origin, international graduates face a higher baseline adjustment burden due to cultural and linguistic differences, with practical implications for onboarding design and inclusive hiring practices.

Language proficiency and adaptation

A major concern raised by several participants was the impact of language proficiency on effective communication. Participant 1 noted that while their organization does not prioritize specific skills for international students, communication is a key focus. He explained, "We understand that international students are coming from different regions, and it will take them some time to fully adjust. We check their communication skills because it's crucial for them to understand the locals and communicate effectively". He added that while the organization may tolerate minor communication gaps, these gaps must be minimal before the candidate can progress to the next stage of recruitment.

Cultural and linguistic challenges

Cultural and linguistic differences also emerged as noteworthy barriers to communication. Participant 1 highlighted that local colleagues often use slang or idiomatic expressions, which may not be understood by international students. He remarked, "Sometimes the British locals use slang unconsciously, and they expect the international students to understand. This creates a temporary

communication gap and makes the international students feel like they're not part of the system." However, he noted that over time, international graduates typically adapt to the language and cultural nuances.

Participant 2 discussed how this communication challenges can disadvantage international students, particularly when compared to local graduates. She observed, "Local graduates often have an advantage because English is their native language, which helps in building rapport more easily. This is always important in roles like marketing, where communication is key." The participant added that most of the time, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Northeast of the UK prefer to hire locals due to these factors.

Visa challenges in international student recruitment

Visa-related issues represent a major challenge for both international students and the organizations that seek to hire them. This theme explores the complexities surrounding visa policies, the additional costs associated with hiring international graduates, and the need for greater awareness and education about visa processes within organizations.

This theme is substantiated by direct testimony from Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 and is reinforced by national-level literature on post-Brexit immigration policy (Sturge, 2022; Aktas et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2022). The most salient finding is that the two-year Graduate Route visa creates a structural misalignment with employer investment timelines, and that sponsorship costs disproportionately affect SMEs, a pattern particularly pronounced in the Northeast UK tech ecosystem where smaller firms predominate. This finding directly informs the policy recommendations in Section 5.2.

Visa Policies

Several participants highlighted the difficulties posed by the frequently changing visa regulations. Participant 1 expressed concern about the need to stay informed about government policies, stating, "These policies keep changing so fast that you need to keep up to date with the government policies in terms of the immigration status of international graduates." This rapid pace of change creates uncertainty for both international graduates and employers, complicating long-term planning and decision-making. Participant 4 echoed these concerns, particularly noting the challenges for smaller companies that may struggle to keep up with the evolving rules. He remarked, "It is difficult keeping up with the ever-changing visa rules, and most companies are also trying to cut costs at every opportunity." This underscores the complexities and financial burdens associated with visa management, which may discourage companies from hiring international graduates.

Sponsorship and the cost of hiring international graduates

Participant 3 revealed that the limited duration of post-study work visas can be a barrier for international students seeking employment in roles that require longer-term commitments. He

explained, "If somebody only has the right to work for a two-year period, organizations will invest a lot of time and effort into upskilling and providing training, only to get no benefit from it at the end." This underscores a major concern where the visa duration does not align with the long-term needs of businesses, making it challenging to justify the investment in international graduates.

Lack of awareness and education on visa processes

Participants also discussed the lack of awareness and understanding of visa processes among many organizations. Participant 6 highlighted the need for an "education piece" within companies, noting that many recruiters and HR teams do not fully grasp the visa process. She commented, "I don't think recruiters, in the average company, fully understand the visa process...It's an education piece on the company's side rather than a particular challenge that the graduates are posing." This lack of understanding can result in missed opportunities for both employers and international graduates.

CV presentation and content in international student recruitment

The presentation and content of CVs emerged as a major theme in the recruitment of international students. Participants highlighted various issues related to how international graduates often present their qualifications, skills, location, and readiness to relocate, which can lead to disadvantages during the recruitment process.

This theme is directly supported by participant accounts from Participants 3, 4, 5, and 6, who collectively identified location omission, poor tailoring, and inadequate differentiation as recurring issues in international graduate applications. These findings align with existing literature on how application format norms differ internationally and disadvantage foreign applicants (Han et al., 2022). The most salient point across sub-themes is that CV localisation is a practical, correctable barrier, one that universities and career services are well-positioned to address through targeted pre-application coaching.

CV overview

Participants underscored the critical role that a well-prepared CV plays in the recruitment process. Participant 4 emphasized this by stating, "The CV is super important, so make sure it's top-notch and fits what local companies want." This highlights the necessity for international students to tailor their CVs to meet local expectations, ensuring that their qualifications and experiences align closely with the requirements of the job they are applying for.

Similarly, Participant 5 elaborated on the importance of a standout CV, noting, "It doesn't necessarily matter where they come from as long as their CVs or skill sets stand out." This suggests that despite the inherent challenges faced by international students, a well-crafted CV can serve as a significant advantage, potentially offsetting other disadvantages.

Location and relocation issues

A recurring issue discussed by participants was the omission of location information on CVs. Participant 3 pointed out that many international students fail to include their current location or indicate their willingness to relocate. She explained, "If there's not a location on the CV, a lot of the time in the recruitment industry, they just won't be considered for the position." This omission can be particularly detrimental in a competitive job market, where recruiters often prioritize candidates who are either locally based or have clearly stated their intent to relocate.

Differentiation and content challenges

Participants also addressed the challenge of standing out in a competitive job market. Participant 5 emphasized the importance of including specific details, such as projects and unique experiences, on a CV to differentiate oneself from other candidates. She remarked, "You have to stand out from others by putting down projects or things that you've been involved in to show there's something different about you." This is particularly important for international students, who need to demonstrate how their unique backgrounds and experiences can add value to potential employers.

Proposed Remedial Solutions Improving International Students' Employability

Communication skill development

Participants also highlighted the importance of international students developing their communication skills. Participant 3 noted that while some international students possess strong communication skills, others need to focus on improving these skills to remain competitive. He suggested that students engage in activities such as public speaking to enhance their proficiency, stating, "There's a side of international students who have extremely strong communication skills, but it's important for all of them to actively work on these skills, as they are crucial for building rapport and succeeding in the workplace."

CV presentation and content in international student recruitment

The presentation and content of CVs emerged as a major theme in the recruitment of international students. Participants highlighted various ways by which the international graduates could present their qualifications, skills, location, and readiness to relocate, which can lead to their advantage during the recruitment process. Participants underscored the critical role that a well-prepared CV plays in the recruitment process. Participant 4 emphasized this by stating, "The CV is super important, so make sure it's top-notch and fits what local companies want." This highlights the necessity for international students to tailor their CVs to meet local expectations, ensuring that their qualifications and experiences align closely with the requirements of the job they are applying for.

Visa and work authorization guidance

Participant 6 highlighted the need for an "education piece" within companies, noting that many recruiters and HR teams do not fully grasp the visa process. She commented, "I don't think

recruiters, in the average company, fully understand the visa process...It's an education piece on the company's side rather than a particular challenge that the graduates are posing." This lack of understanding can result in missed opportunities for both employers and international graduates. Given the significance of visa and work authorization challenges highlighted by participants, universities should provide clear and up-to-date information on visa regulations and post-study work opportunities. This could be achieved through ongoing partnerships with employers, offering practical insights into the recruitment process and visa requirements, and ensuring that students are well-informed about their options.

Role of UK Universities in Supporting International Students' Entry into the Tech Industry

The findings of this study indicate that employability barriers faced by international graduates are not solely individual level deficits but are structurally reinforced by gaps between higher education provision, employer expectations, and immigration systems. Universities therefore occupy a central position in mitigating these barriers by acting as intermediaries between international students, employers, and policymakers.

Targeted career development and employability support

Universities can improve international graduates' transition into the UK tech workforce by delivering tailored career services that explicitly address sector specific recruitment practices and visa related constraints. Evidence shows that international students often engage less effectively with generic careers provision due to time limited programmes and unfamiliarity with UK recruitment norms (Universities UK International, 2023).

Consistent with the findings of this study, where employers emphasised CV quality and localisation, universities should provide structured CV and application workshops focused on UK tech sector expectations, including project-based evidence, location clarity, and demonstrable technical competencies. Targeted interventions of this nature improve alignment with employer screening criteria and increase short listing success (Han et al., 2022).

Work based learning and industry exposure

Employers in this study repeatedly cited the absence of UK based work experience as a key limitation when recruiting international graduates. Universities can address this gap by embedding short, assessed work-based learning opportunities into technical programmes. Even limited industry exposure has been shown to enhance graduate confidence, professional communication, and employer trust (Fakunle, 2020).

Short term placements, micro internships, and employer led project modules are particularly suitable for one-year postgraduate programmes, where extended placements are impractical. These initiatives enable SMEs to evaluate candidates with minimal financial risk while supporting the accumulation of social and cultural capital essential for labour market integration (Yu, 2020; Beard, 2021).

Visa literacy and employer facing guidance

A key contribution of this study is the identification of limited visa knowledge among recruiters as a barrier to international graduate employment. Universities can reduce this constraint by providing accurate, accessible guidance on post study work options to both students and employers. Clear communication around the Graduate Route and Skilled Worker visa pathways reduces uncertainty and perceived risk in international hiring decisions (Sturge, 2022).

This intervention is particularly relevant for SMEs, which often lack dedicated HR or legal expertise (Tran et al., 2022). Employer briefings, policy summaries, and facilitated dialogue with immigration specialists can therefore improve employer confidence and expand opportunities for international graduates (Bright Network, 2023).

Communication skills and workplace integration

Communication challenges emerged as a persistent employability barrier in both the empirical findings and the literature. While international students often demonstrate strong academic English, employers emphasised the importance of contextual communication, professional interaction, and interview performance.

Universities can address this gap by embedding communication development within technical curricula rather than treating it as an ancillary skill. Employer led mock interviews, team based problem solving activities, and workplace simulations improve recruitment readiness and cultural fluency (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021; Fortanet Gómez & Beltrán Palanques, 2022).

Employer aligned micro credentials and skills verification

Participants also highlighted difficulties in verifying technical competencies claimed on CVs. Universities can strengthen graduate signalling by introducing employer aligned micro credentials and assessed technical projects. When co designed with industry, micro credentials provide granular, credible evidence of job ready skills and improve employer confidence in graduate capability (Wang et al., 2025). Embedding these credentials within degree programmes ensures academic rigour while aligning graduate output with rapidly evolving technology sector requirements.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined employer perspectives on the employability of international graduates within the Northeast UK tech sector. Three dominant barriers were identified: communication challenges, CV localisation issues, and visa related constraints. Addressing these barriers requires coordinated action across universities, employers, and policymakers. Supporting international graduates is not only an equity concern but a strategic necessity for sustaining innovation and skills growth within the UK technology sector.

The barriers identified in this regional study are broadly consistent with national-level findings on international graduate employability in the UK. Wang et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of the employability of international postgraduate taught students and similarly identified communication, cultural capital deficits, and immigration complexity as the primary obstacles to labour market entry. Likewise, the Universities UK International et al. (2023) report on international graduate outcomes highlights that employers across the UK express reluctance to sponsor visas, particularly among smaller firms, corroborating the patterns observed in the Northeast sample. However, the regional dimension of this study adds granularity not captured at the national level: the disproportionate concentration of SMEs and early-stage tech startups in the Northeast amplifies the financial impact of sponsorship obligations and magnifies the structural disadvantage facing international graduates relative to larger urban tech centres such as London or Manchester. Future research comparing outcomes across UK regional tech ecosystems would further refine these insights.

A notable distinction emerging from this study concerns differential practices between SMEs and larger organisations with respect to sponsorship and integration. Participants representing larger or more internationally experienced firms described more systematic onboarding strategies, established diversity programmes, and greater familiarity with visa compliance processes. In contrast, participants affiliated with SMEs consistently reported cost constraints, limited HR expertise, and a preference for local candidates as mechanisms for avoiding sponsorship obligations. This divergence has important policy implications: generic interventions such as employer briefings on the Graduate Route may be insufficient for SMEs without accompanying financial incentives or administrative simplification. Tailored support structures, including subsidised visa application assistance or streamlined sponsorship pathways for small employers, warrant serious consideration by policymakers seeking to improve international graduate employment outcomes across firm sizes.

Following are the recommendations:

UK Universities shall:

- Develop dedicated international graduate employability streams within careers services, with sector-specific advisers and UK-standard application support (Universities UK International et al., 2023).
- Embed short, assessed work-based learning opportunities within tech programmes to provide verifiable UK industry exposure (Omolabake Fakunle, 2020).
- Actively educate employers—particularly SMEs—on visa pathways and post-study work options to reduce hiring reluctance (Sturge, 2022; Tran et al., 2022).
- Integrate communication skill development and interview simulation into technical curricula to address cultural and linguistic barriers identified by employers (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021).
- Co-design micro-credentials with industry partners to strengthen skills verification and

labour market signalling (Wang et al., 2025).

Employers, particularly in the tech industry, can benefit from adopting the flexible recruitment processes, embrace diversity and supportive onboarding programs for new intake with minimal experience; and

Policymakers could create a more supportive environment by enhancing visa policies to consider extending the duration of post-study work visas and simplifying the sponsorship process for SMEs. These changes would reduce the burden on employers and make it easier for international graduates to secure long-term employment.

The policy implications of this study are particularly pressing in two interconnected areas. First, regarding visa duration, the current two-year Graduate Route visa was repeatedly cited by participants as a structural barrier to employer investment. Participant 3's observation that organisations are reluctant to invest in upskilling staff who may only be authorised to work for two years reflects a broader mismatch between graduate mobility timelines and employer training return horizons. Extending the Graduate Route to three years, as has been considered in policy discussions, would more closely align post-study work rights with employer planning cycles and reduce the perceived risk of international hiring. Second, with respect to SME sponsorship support, the financial and administrative burden of the Skilled Worker visa sponsorship process is disproportionately borne by smaller firms. Many of the participating SMEs lacked dedicated immigration expertise and reported that sponsorship costs deterred them from pursuing otherwise suitable international candidates. Targeted policy interventions, such as subsidised sponsorship fee waivers for SMEs below a defined threshold, simplified compliance guidance, or regional enterprise partnerships that pool sponsorship resources, could meaningfully expand employment opportunities for international graduates in underserved regional tech ecosystems such as the Northeast of England.

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