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Should I Stay or Should I Go? Barriers to Retention of High-Skilled Student Migrants in Slovakia and Recommendations for Policy Change

Lucia Mýtna Kureková, Terézia Zemeníková and Lucia Kováčová

Institute for Forecasting, Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences,
Slovak Academy of Sciences

PACES project Policy Brief No.5
June 2026

Key points

“The number one determinant was that the school was affordable, it was cheaper than any other school in the EU. I saw the structure of the program, I liked it”.

—Male student, 42, Nigeria

- Decades of high student emigration have left the country with one of the highest rates of outward degree mobility in the OECD. One in five Slovak university students now studies abroad, while fewer than half return after graduation, and those who do tend to be the lower-achieving graduates.
- At the same time, Slovakia has quietly become a more attractive destination for international students: the foreign student population has nearly tripled since 2011, reaching 25,800 foreign students in 2024/2025, with non-EU students now making up nearly three-quarters of enrolments (Ukrainian students making up the highest number - 13,843). The number of students of African origin increased by 30% between 2019 and 2025. Approximately one in four foreign graduates stays in Slovakia after completing their studies.
- Several interconnected barriers drive the post-graduation decision not to remain, including (1) poor accessibility of the Slovak language; (2) complex visa and residence permit procedures with no dedicated post-study work pathway; (3) low salaries and weak professional networks; (4) barriers in accessing social services, such as healthcare and social assistance; and (5) absence of state integration support.
- The barriers do not operate in isolation. Language difficulties compound social isolation, reducing professional networks, limiting job prospects, and making leaving a more rational choice. Effective retention, therefore, requires coordinated action across all levels of governance simultaneously. Retention is not simply a function of individual preferences, but of the institutional environment that shapes the feasibility of staying.
- Despite the obstacles, students value Slovakia’s safety, affordable EU-recognised education, and low cost of living—indicating genuine retention potential if institutional barriers are removed.

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world, international student migration has become a cornerstone of higher education institutions, driving information exchange, economic progress, innovation potential and cultural diversity (Alves & King, 2022; OECD, 2019). While global student migration flows remain concentrated in high-quality education countries, Slovakia has been attracting growing numbers of foreign students pursuing higher education opportunities in recent years. This trend is less known and, in public discussions, is overshadowed by very high numbers of Slovak students and young professionals seeking study and work opportunities abroad (Martinák & Varsik, 2020; Martinák et al., 2025). The rising attractiveness of Slovakia as a study destination represents a valuable opportunity to counterbalance the negative demographic trends, address skill and labour shortages and contribute to the country's competitiveness and innovation potential (VAIA, 2023). Yet, the integration of foreign-born students and graduates is currently characterised by numerous policy challenges and low retention.

Based on research conducted in the Horizon project PACES - *Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst societal transformations* - a research project funded by the European Commission, we present new evidence on the key barriers to foreign students' retention in Slovakia and propose a set of policy recommendations to strengthen migration pathways and talent acquisition. Evidence is gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with foreign students of African origin who study or have recently graduated in Slovakia. Findings elucidate students' interactions with national institutional and policy frameworks and highlight how these shape their decisions to stay or leave the country.

The country currently lacks clear strategic objectives and a coherent framework for migrant integration, leading to fragmented governance and a legal vacuum for international students (NKÚ, 2025; Kováčová et al. 2024). Unlike several EU peers, Slovakia has no legislative framework specifically designed for international students as a distinct migrant category, leaving them in a grey zone between general immigration law and higher education policy, with no single authority tasked with their integration. Structural and legislative barriers hampering migrants' socio-economic inclusion persist. This is evidenced in the MIPEX index placing Slovakia among the worst-performing countries in Europe in the past 20 years, without much overall improvement in immigrant integration (Yavçan & Gorgerino, 2025; Solano & Huddleston, 2020).

The uncertainties and integration obstacles stemming from the lack of a coordinated approach translate into low motivation of foreign graduates to stay in the country, which limits the country's ability to retain skilled individuals in the Slovak labour market and tap into valuable foreign talent. Efforts to retain foreign talent in the country and create proper conditions that would enable long-term economic and civic integration should be enhanced.

Student migration to and from Slovakia

For most of its history, Slovakia has been a country of emigration. In its migration patterns, student mobility and high-skilled migration have represented a sizeable share (Kahanec & Kureková, 2016; Kureková & Žilinčíková, 2020). While the general workforce outflows from Slovakia have in general declined in recent years, Slovak students are increasingly emigrating to pursue university education abroad. Between 2010 and 2013, around 12 - 14% of Slovak university graduates left the country, mainly in technical and medical fields, representing a significant loss of educational investment (Chrančoková et al., 2020; Haluš et al., 2017); in 2018, this figure had risen to about 20%, far above the EU average of 4% (Bahna, 2018). Their motivations include dissatisfaction with domestic educational quality, the pursuit of better English-language proficiency, and enhanced career prospects (Drozd et al., 2012; MESA10, 2019). Slovakia is facing a brain drain of young people: those who leave are the most talented, while fewer than half of Slovak students who have gained their education abroad return to Slovakia in the medium term (Bahna, 2018). Slovak universities, academic institutions, and the economy lose talent with measurable negative consequences on the country's economic development, innovation potential and growth (Martinák & Varsik, 2020; Martinák et al. 2025). The continued emigration of the educated population means foregone investments and a loss of tax revenue for the state. In addition, the outflow of young workers worsens the ratio between young and older people, which can strain public finances and undermine the sustainability of pension and health systems (Martinák et al., 2025). It is estimated that the departure of one university-educated person costs the state approximately 2.8 million euros, and thus Slovakia may cumulatively lose tens of billions of euros in added value (Martinák et al., 2025).

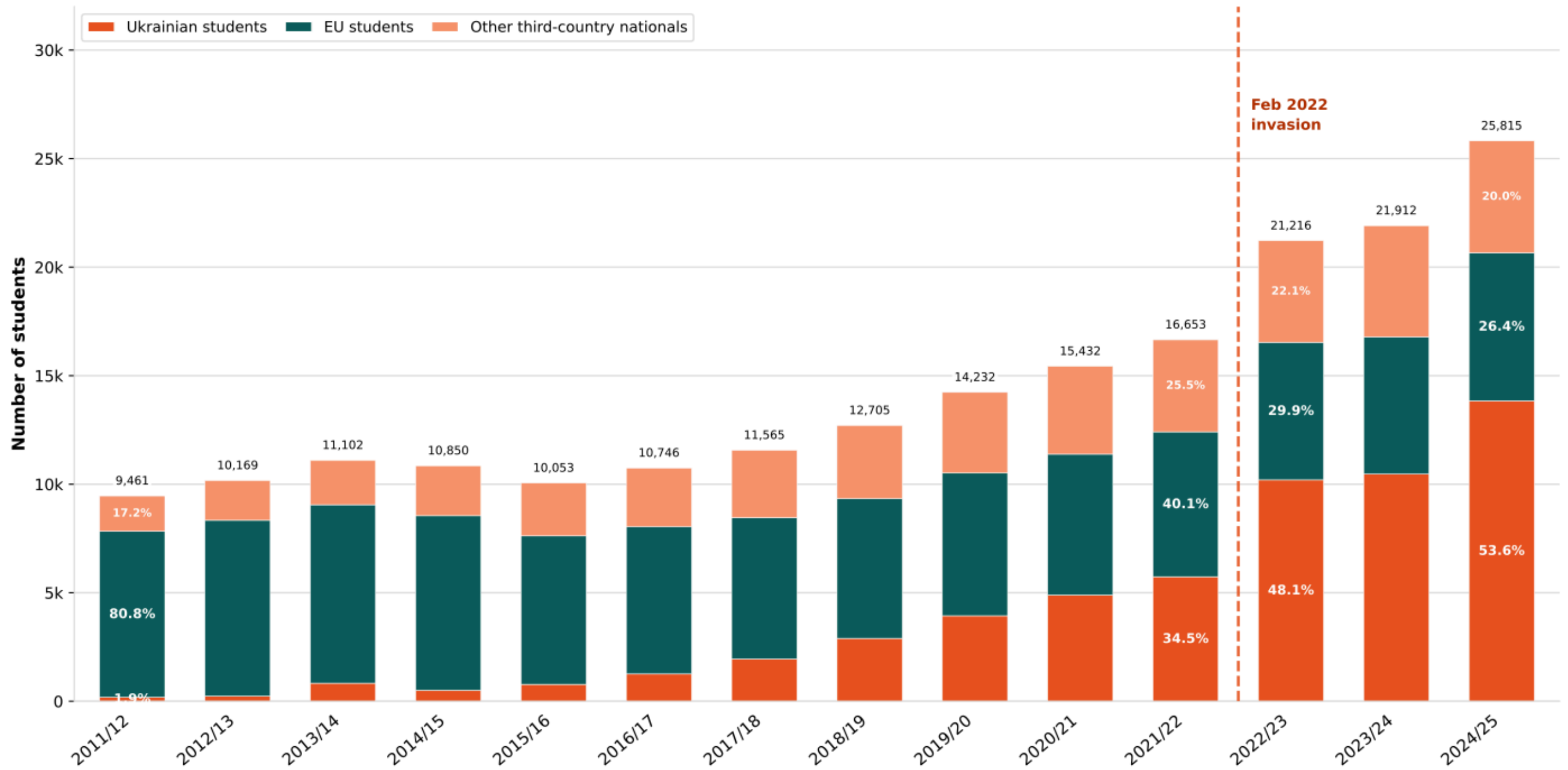
However, Slovakia has become a more popular destination for international students, particularly over the last decade.

The Slovak accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, the entry into the Schengen area in 2007, and the gradual opening of EU labour markets for Slovak citizens have resulted in a significant increase in international mobility, both in terms of transnational migration and cross-border commuting (Perchinig et al., 2018). The number of international students, both from the EU/EEA and outside the European Union reached about 25,815 in the academic year 2024/2025, a triple rise compared to 2010/2011 (Figure 1). A significant spike occurred in 2022/2023 due to the war in Ukraine, which led to the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian students.

The national composition of international students at Slovak universities has changed significantly over time (Figure 1). European students for most of the 2010s represented a dominant share of student migration to Slovakia, the number oscillating between about 6,000 – 8,000 students between 2011 and 2025. The share of non-European students has grown gradually since the mid-2010s, and by 2025, non-EU students represent nearly three-quarters of all foreign students in Slovakia. The largest group are Ukrainians, who come in large numbers, especially since the outbreak of the war. Slovakia is a country with one of the highest populations of Ukrainian students; higher numbers can be found only in Poland, Germany, and the Czechia (Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024). This reflects geographic and linguistic proximity as well as past Ukrainian migration to Slovakia and the existing networks.

A steady growth of other foreign nationalities is evident (Figure 2), signalling that Slovakia is increasingly on the radar for student migration. This is also the case for student migration from African countries. While the numbers are small compared to other countries, the rising trend is apparent: between 2019 and 2025, the number of students from Africa has risen by 30%. Despite increasing numbers, structural and institutional barriers limit these students' social integration and post-graduation retention, threatening Slovakia's ability to harness their long-term contributions.

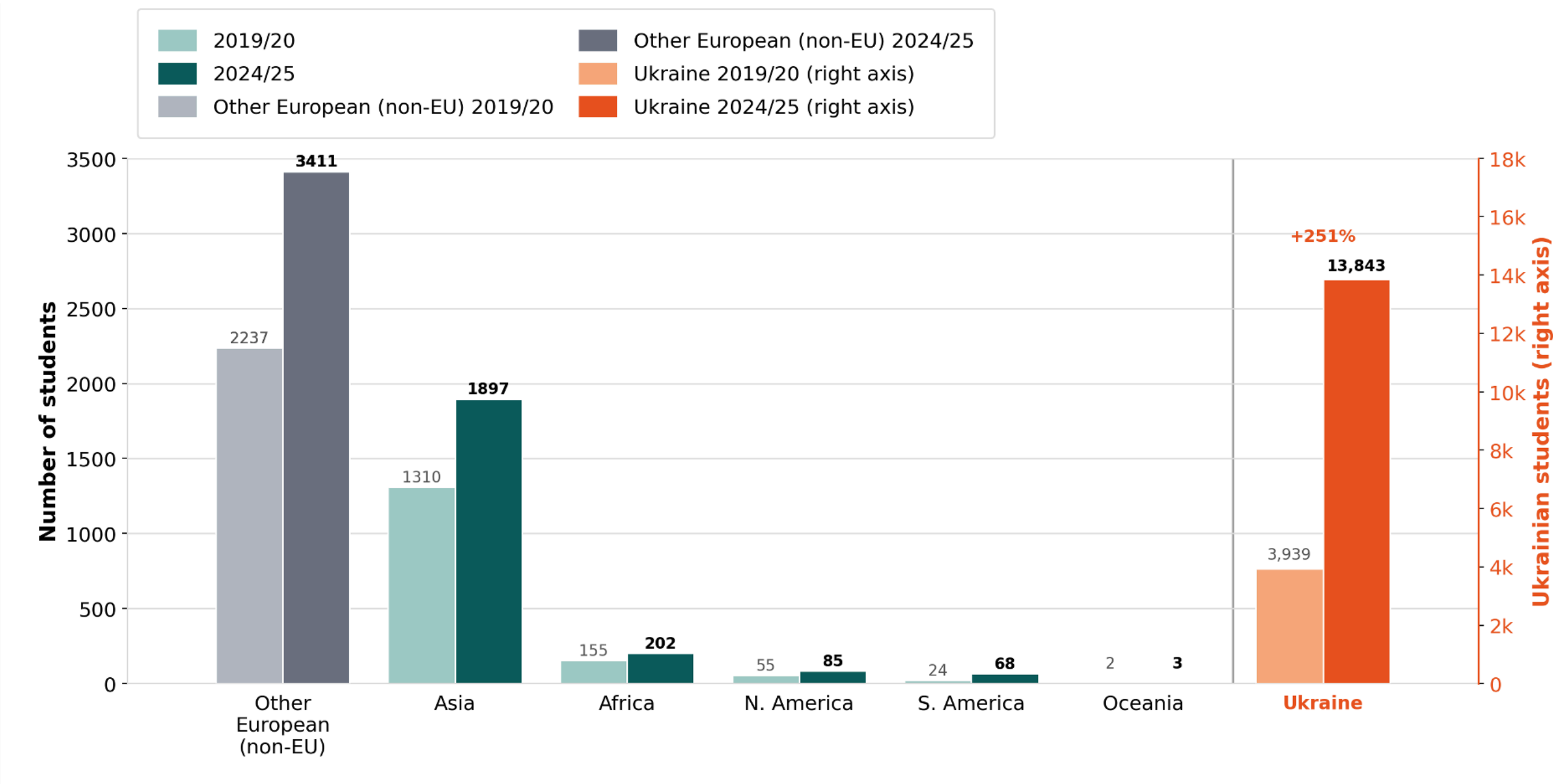
Figure 1. The number of foreign students in Slovakia (2011-2025)



Source: CVTI SR (2025), authors' calculations.

Note: Data include higher education students of all study levels and forms of study (BA+MA+PhD)

Figure 2. Number of non-EU foreign students studying in the academic year 2024/2025 vs. 2019/2020



Source: CVTI SR (2025), authors' calculations.

Note: Data include higher education students of all study levels and forms of study (BA+MA+PhD)

Policy developments in attracting and retaining international talent

The attraction and retention of global talent has been a part of several strategic national policy documents since 2020. The most comprehensive policy instrument is the Resilience and Recovery Plan (RRP) Component 10 (Prilákanie a udržanie talentov/Attracting and Retaining Talent), which sets a quantified ambition to double the share of highly qualified foreign workers in the Slovak workforce from 0.5% to 1%, and to balance the outflow and inflow of students at Slovak universities. From July 2024, several changes for labour migrants were introduced in the EU Blue Card system, with a reduction of the required wage to 1.2 times the average wage, and for persons who completed university studies in the last three years, to the level of the average salary. Thus far, the Blue Card has been strikingly underused in Slovakia; between 2021 and 2023 only 62 individuals used the EU Blue Card, compared to over 15,000 in Poland, nearly 7,000 in Lithuania and 2,000 in Czechia (NKÚ, 2025). PACES research helps explain this gap: the administrative and language barriers identified through qualitative fieldwork with third-country nationals in Slovakia mean that even a formally liberalised instrument remains practically inaccessible to many skilled workers (Cerna, 2013; Antoons & Ghimis, 2020).

The internationalisation of higher education has been anchored in Slovak policy since the adoption of the Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy 2030 (Stratégia internacionalizácie vysokého školstva do roku 2030), approved by the Government of the Slovak Republic in December 2021 (MŠVVŠ SR, 2021). The Strategy is the first dedicated framework to treat the attraction and retention of international students and researchers as a structural response to Slovakia's demographic decline and skill shortages, with core commitments including expanding English-language programmes, reducing administrative barriers for foreign applicants, and developing targeted recruitment in priority countries. Implementation is supported through Component 10 of the Recovery and Resilience Plan, which allocates funding for language and socio-cultural integration programmes for incoming students and highly qualified workers. The barriers that PACES respondents identified as the primary drivers of their post-graduation departure intentions, including language access, administrative complexity, and the absence of structured post-study pathways, are precisely those that the Strategy sets out to address.

This suggests that implementation has yet to translate strategic ambition into meaningful change on the ground. Moreover, while in other countries international student recruitment is often a coordinated effort with clear tools, this remains fragmented across universities and research institutions, making study options and specific conditions difficult to map (Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024).

Because of their language learning, familiarity with administrative procedures, and alignment of their credentials, foreign students typically integrate into local labour markets more successfully than migrants coming through other pathways (Behúnová et al., 2019; Kahanec & Králiková, 2011). In general, student migration is considered among the most efficient and effective forms of labour mobility with high benefits for individuals and countries. Slovakia's ability to retain foreign graduates is below the OECD average of 30%, with approximately one quarter of graduates remaining in the country after completing their university studies (OECD, 2022; Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024). Students from Ukraine, Russia, and Serbia have the longest-standing tendency to apply to change their residence status after graduation; in recent years, there has also been increased interest from India, Iraq, and Kazakhstan (Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024).

To date, there is very limited research on the attraction of foreign students and the factors contributing to their retention in Slovakia. Skřivánková and Turnerová's study (2024) offers the most comprehensive mapping to date. They argue that graduate retention is influenced by the time required to obtain long-term residence, employability in the labour market, and support from regions and cities. Based on a survey conducted among foreign students, they find that 80% of foreign students chose Slovakia primarily in order to obtain an EU degree. The overwhelming majority study at public universities (90%), in programmes taught exclusively in Slovak (57%), provided to them free of charge. Foreign students already in the course of their studies encounter significant barriers in communicating with public authorities, entering the labour market, and navigating the healthcare system and social security system. This directly reduces the prospect of staying after graduation. PACES research provides further evidence that students in Slovakia face many barriers, and although they may have resided in the country for a considerable period of time, they are not necessarily integrated. This hinders their sustainable staying and living a good life in Slovakia.

Findings of PACES research

The main objective of PACES was to study decision-making of migrants as a complex process shaped by an interaction of personal, institutional, and macro-level factors. It adapts a multilevel, multi-method and interdisciplinary approach to studying and understanding people's decisions to migrate and explores how this knowledge can better inform migration policies. Within PACES, 34 semi-structured interviews with African migrants living or working in Slovakia were conducted with the aim of studying their decision-making about settlement versus onward migration, with a specific focus given to their access to social services (health, education, housing, social assistance, public employment support) and broader integration support (language support, access to information). The questionnaire consisted of more than 70 questions mapping individual migration histories, including the decision to come to Slovakia, values, experiences with accessing basic services (social rights), perceptions of the future, and medium-term migration plans.

Data

The evidence presented in this Policy Brief draws on 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between September 2024 and May 2025 with foreign students from different African countries currently studying or recently graduated in Slovakia. The sample represents 8,4% of African students enrolled in Slovakia (n=202 in 2024/2025). The research participants come from three African countries (7 from Kenya, 7 from Nigeria, and 3 from Ghana); two-thirds were men. Economics, business, and mathematics were the most common programmes of study among the respondents; two students have studied dentistry or medicine. They were based at different institutions: five at Comenius University, two at Matej Bel University, three at the Economics University in Bratislava, one at the Slovak Technical University, and four enrolled in doctoral studies at the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The other two did not specify their programme; however, they studied in Košice. Three African students interviewed had received a scholarship from the Slovak government, seven PhD students were granted a monthly stipend; the remaining seven were identified as self-paying students or did not mention any form of support.

Factors contributing to attraction and retention

PACES identified three main factors for attraction and retention mentioned by African students in Slovakia. They counter the often-portrayed narrative that Slovakia is not an attractive destination for foreign citizens offering limited opportunities, and can be used to form a more positive narrative about Slovakia as a study destination.

1. Safety, stability and EU status

Slovakia is broadly perceived by international students as a safe, calm, and peaceful country. This sense of security, combined with a generally positive atmosphere, makes it an appealing place to settle long-term. For graduates weighing their options across Europe, the country's stable, low-stress living environment stands out as a genuine pull factor, encouraging them to consider building their future there. In line with past research (Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024), this is the primary reason third-country nationals chose Slovakia over other destinations, ranking above wages or career opportunities. EU membership confers a specific practical advantage, and residence in Slovakia opens pathways to broader EU mobility, which makes settling in Slovakia a strategically rational choice even when it is not the first-choice destination.

2. Affordable, EU- recognised education

Slovakia offers competitive tuition fees compared to most other EU Member States, making it an accessible entry point into European higher education. Universities offer a range of programmes at viable tuition rates, and the country's EU membership ensures that degrees earned are recognised across Europe. Additionally, Slovakia's safe environment, relatively low cost of living, and growing international student support contribute to this appeal. From the PACES research perspective, this factor is particularly relevant for African student migrants: the combination of affordability, safety, and EU-recognised credentials creates initial conditions that are conducive to staying, provided that integration barriers do not subsequently override these pull factors.

3. Social networks and access to some services

Slovakia's relatively low cost of living compared to Western EU peers acts as a tangible retention facilitator, particularly for early-career professionals and students.

Bratislava offers affordable housing, efficient transport, and proximity to Vienna, just an hour away, while smaller towns like Košice, Nitra, and Žilina offer cheaper living and friendly communities, with housing available for €200-400 per month in shared accommodation. Personal ties, friends, or relatives already living or studying in Slovakia also play a meaningful role in encouraging graduates to stay. These networks provide both practical support and a sense of belonging. Combined with generally good access to services, especially when contrasted with origin country conditions, these factors help reduce the sense of isolation that might otherwise push international graduates toward leaving, making the prospect of long-term settlement feel more manageable and worthwhile.

However, it is important to note that despite these positive factors, almost half of the students in the sample still plan to leave Slovakia after graduation. This suggests that while the above factors do contribute to retention, they are not yet strong enough to outweigh the persistent barriers, such as language difficulties, limited job opportunities, and legal uncertainties, that continue to push international talent away.

Should I stay or should I go?

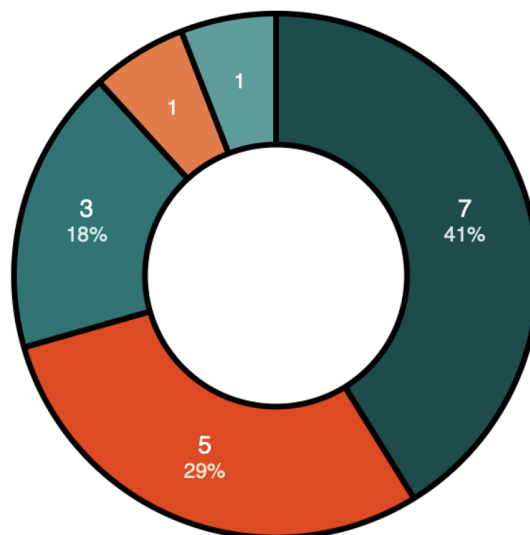
When asked about their intention to stay, move onward or return to their country of origin, five foreign students (29%) plan to stay in Slovakia post-graduation (Figure 3). This aligns with broader trends where half view remaining in Slovakia as likely, countering its image as a transit country, though the actual retention falls below the OECD's 30% average (OECD, 2022). Motivations for staying include affordable EU-recognised degrees, networks of friends and relatives, and programmes such as the 9-month job-search extension for graduates. Safe, calm environment, good access to social services, and a welcoming atmosphere have also been mentioned as important factors. Other motivations include a positive mindset about job opportunities in Slovakia, given the country's ongoing development, and a vision of a better future.

Seven (41%) expressed a plan to move onward to another country and one intended to return home. A considerable number were unsure or refused to answer (four people), which indicates uncertainty and volatility in migration decisions, often exacerbated by an unpredictable and complex legal framework.

The push factors behind the intended exit decisions include poor integration into the social system, expected low salaries, a lack of proper job opportunities and expectations of weak prospects to pursue desired career pathways. Further issues included difficulties and uncertainties in visa processes and, most importantly, language barriers that hindered their social inclusion among locals. Those factors reinforce one another. Language difficulties compound social isolation, which in turn reduces professional networks and job prospects, ultimately making the departure feel like the more viable path. This interconnectedness suggests that effective retention requires coordinated action across multiple barriers.

Figure 3. Preference to stay in, leave Slovakia, return to home country or move onwards

■ Migrate onward/further — 41% ■ Stay — 29% ■ I do not know — 18% ■ Return — 6%
■ Refused to answer — 6%



Source: Own data based on semi-structured interviews (N=17).

Note: The question in the questionnaire is formulated as follows: If you had the opportunity, would you like to go somewhere else to live or work during the next five years, return to your country of origin or would you prefer to stay here?

Main obstacles to retention and integration

The following section presents the core empirical findings of the PACES qualitative fieldwork, drawing on in-depth interviews with 17 third-country national students of African origin who have studied at Slovak universities.

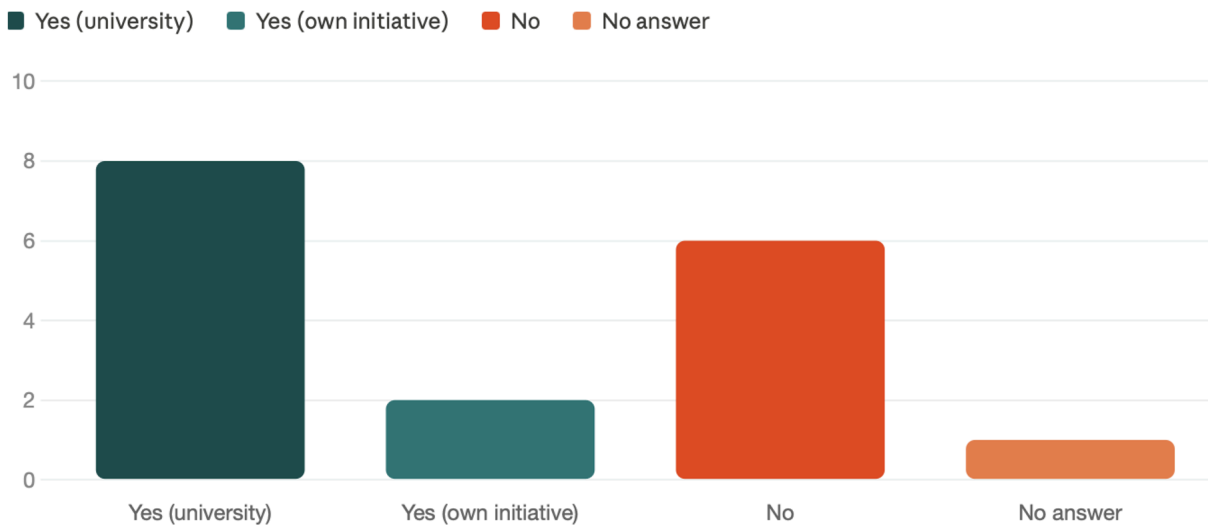
The analysis identifies five interconnected barriers that systematically shape and, in most cases, undermine the decision to remain in Slovakia after graduation: language, administrative and legal complexity, labour market access, housing, and healthcare. While each barrier carries its own distinct logic, they reinforce one another in ways that make it feel structurally inevitable rather than individually chosen. Taken together, the evidence points not to a failure of individual will or ambition, but to a malfunction of the institutional environment to make staying a viable and rewarding option.

1. Language barrier as a major impediment

The Slovak language barrier is the most mentioned obstacle to retaining international graduates and is repeatedly described as central to integration, yet difficult to acquire under current conditions. 16 of 17 respondents identified language as a significant difficulty, and 5 of 17 named it as the primary factor in their decision regarding staying or leaving Slovakia. Only 8 respondents had access and took free language courses offered by their university[AG1] [LM2] ; 6 had no access or opportunity to follow any free language instruction (Figure 4). Respondents frequently contrasted Slovakia with previous host countries, where language learning had been more institutionally supported and embedded in everyday interactions. In Slovakia, opportunities to practice Slovak were described as limited. Its impact extends well beyond the classroom, affecting access to healthcare, public services, and the ability to build meaningful social ties with local communities. Even students who want to stay are structurally prevented from integrating, as available language courses tend to be short-term and basic, making departure feel like the more reasonable choice.

From the PACES analytical perspective, this illustrates a core conceptual finding of the project: retention is not simply a function of individual preferences, but of the institutional environment that shapes the feasibility of staying. When language infrastructure is absent, the decision to leave is not a free choice; it is a structurally induced outcome.

Figure 4. Use of free language courses



Source: Own data based on semi-structured interviews (N=17).

This finding is directly relevant to policy design: while recent policy efforts commit to supporting the development of language and socio-cultural skills for foreign students and highly qualified workers, PACES evidence suggests that implementation remains insufficient to reverse departure intentions among this group.

2. Complex visa and work permit pathways

Navigating residence permits, foreign police procedures, and administrative requirements is perceived as demanding specialised knowledge. Of the 17 respondents, four have experienced linguistic barriers when accessing the Foreign Police^[1] services that issue visas and residence permits to foreign nationals. In most cases, the respondents acquired a visa for the duration of their studies and, after completing their studies, for a duration of two years^[2].

^[1] The Bureau of Border and Foreign Police is responsible for managing the visa and residence permits of third-country nationals. Their role and responsibilities are regulated by the [Act No. 404/2011 on Residence of Foreigners and Amendment and Supplementation of Certain Acts](#).

^[2] To study in Slovakia, non-EU/third-country nationals need to apply for a visa and a temporary residence permit for the purpose of study by submitting their application to the Foreign Police and/or a Slovak Embassy or Consulate at their home countries. After completing their studies, they need to apply for a visa for a work purpose and temporary residence permit.

In the process of applying for and acquiring a prolongation of visa and associated permits, foreign students experience language barriers since public officials often lack proficient English language skills to effectively communicate with non-Slovak language speakers. The respondents often used interpreters to communicate with the officials; however, those are not available at all public offices in Slovakia, despite the legal right of a foreigner to an interpreter in official communication and asylum procedures (Act No. 404/2011 Coll. on the Residence of Foreigners; Act No. 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum; Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, 2025).

Despite the 2024 reforms - including the 2024 reduction of employment permit processing times from 90 to 60 days and the June 2026 amendment to Act No. 404/2011 (effective 15 July 2026), which introduces electronic submission of residence applications, extends the national visa from 90 to 120 days, and transposes the EU Single Permit Directive, the system remains document-heavy and slow compared to peer destinations (MI SR, 2026). The analysis from PACES qualitative fieldwork shows that migrants frequently consider Slovakia a transfer destination rather than a final migration destination, partly because bureaucratic obstacles make long-term settlement feel precarious and administratively burdensome. Some foreigners faced barriers already when applying for a student visa at a Slovak Embassy or Consulate in Africa. Even self-paying students were rejected, with indications that decisions are not transparent. Potential student migrants coming to Slovakia face large financial barriers already before coming due to limited availability of consular services across African countries, lengthy procedures and ambiguous outcomes.

„I had to make sure my documents were legalised by my Ministry of Education in my country and the Embassy of Slovakia. And then I had to send them here. My uncle also had to do some legal process that I didn't really understand. It was quite a tedious process. And it was also very expensive because I have to keep sending documents to him and they have to be original copies and he has to send them back to me again. And also, for the visa, it was very hard for me to get a visa because it was during COVID. But later I got it.“

—Female student, 26, Kenya

3. Job opportunities available only at arm's length

Complex visa and work permit procedures create significant uncertainty during the school-to-work transition. The absence of a clear post-study pathway means graduates face an abrupt cliff edge after finishing their degrees: no dedicated post-study work visa exists in Slovakia, and switching from a student residence permit to a work permit requires securing a job offer first. This might push talented graduates toward countries with more accommodating transition frameworks.

Even graduates who successfully navigate legal hurdles are deterred by poor labour market prospects and professional isolation. PACES fieldwork reveals that jobs aligned with international graduates' qualifications are scarce in Slovakia, salaries are low relative to the tax burden and to those in neighbouring countries, and structured opportunities for career development remain limited. One of the most structurally significant gaps in Slovakia's talent retention framework is the absence of a clear, dedicated post-study work pathway. Germany, for instance, offers an 18-month-long job-seeker visa after graduation.

Under the current framework in Slovakia, a non-EU graduate may stay a maximum of 9 months to look for a job or start a business, but then must either leave or secure a work permit to stay in Slovakia. This creates a major problem and disadvantages those without a pre-existing employer network (IOM, n.d.). Professional networks are difficult to develop as social life for international students largely stays within international student circles, which hampers the interactions needed to find quality employment, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that makes staying feel unrewarding. Transitioning from school to work may be the moment when departure decisions are shaped: graduates who might otherwise remain in Slovakia face a legal rift at the point of graduation, with insufficient time and resources to explore the labour market, prepare for an interview, start the application process, or network.

„The problem was companies don't want to go through the change-the-work-permit stuff with the labor office, so they were like... we need someone who already has the work permit, because I was transitioning from student to work. The only company that was willing to go through that journey with me was this company that I'm working for (company name). They waited and actually I got the job in May, and I just started in end of September. “

—Female student, 28, Kenya

4. Issues with the accessibility of housing

As there is no universal housing or accommodation policy for students in Slovakia, universities provide accommodation according to their own rules. Fourteen respondents have had access to public housing in the form of student dormitories that were administered by the universities or a church organisation (in one case). One respondent indicated that, despite applying for student dormitory accommodation, she was not granted a placement. The problems arise for students who have had to transition from university-type housing to private housing or live in their own rented places since the beginning of their studies. Those students claim that finding housing in Slovakia is difficult, and often inaccessible to foreigners who report facing various discrimination practices, such as dual pricing, refusal to rent out to foreigners, prioritisation of Slovak citizens, and racial discrimination.

"It happened to me, or you might find housing, and once they realize you are a foreigner, either the prices are changed, or the terms of the contract change, or they just refuse... like we don't accept foreigners."

—Male student, 34, Kenya

Access to adequate housing is not only a basic need but also a legal requirement. Students are typically required to provide proof of accommodation when applying for or renewing a temporary residence permit. Discriminatory practices can directly jeopardise students' legal status in the country.

5. Issues with the accessibility of healthcare

Health insurance entitlements for international students in Slovakia vary significantly depending on scholarship type, age, and bilateral agreements. Doctoral scholarship holders are covered only up to age 30; students from countries with bilateral agreements (such as Kenya) are covered under those arrangements. For students outside these categories, access is significantly more difficult; they must independently identify a general practitioner while navigating language barriers and limited information about the Slovak healthcare system. Five of 17 respondents had no effective access to healthcare or were forced to pay out of pocket in emergencies. Notably, some of those respondents who also held formal entitlements, through commercial insurance or bilateral agreements, still reported being refused services by practitioners.

“If you are not on a scholarship, it is very hard for you to get insurance. So, the worst thing happened last year from October to 19th November, I was hospitalised again because of a mental relapse. And I do not get insurance. I was charged €2 600 for three weeks. So, the thing is... it is not possible for these insurances to give you public insurance. If you are not employed on scholarship or on permanent residence or a citizen.”

—Male student, 28, Kenya

As the language barrier was most often cited as the main limitation in accessing social services, it also affects students' access to healthcare, as four students reported problems accessing basic healthcare due to the language barrier.

“There was a time I went to one hospital, I met with the doctor and the doctor opened the door, and I said that I speak English, that I have a problem, I asked her if she speaks English, and she said only Slovak and closed the door. It was really very bad. I didn't know where to go. I had to leave the hospital, I had to go home, and I was just thinking. After some weeks, I had to find a new hospital, but it could have been brutal if my situation was an emergency. It's quite challenging.”

—Male student, 35, Nigeria

6. Limitations in social and community integration

Even students who manage the administrative and service-access barriers often remain socially isolated. 11 of 17 respondents had not accessed any state-provided integration support. Most socialise within African diaspora communities, church groups, or circles of other international students rather than integrating into Slovak student life or local communities. University-organised cultural events, rated positively by roughly two-thirds of international students in the broader VAIA survey (Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024), are insufficient on their own to produce genuine inclusion. NGOs working with migrants play a meaningful supplementary role, mentioned positively by four respondents, but cannot substitute for a coherent state framework.

In fact, most participants were unaware of the support that they could gain, such as the provision of free language courses or other integration support.

This is confirmed by other research pointing to large information asymmetry common to living in a foreign country and the need for low-threshold services and active outreach to students and young people in the places where they spend their time (university or school) (Gallová Kríglerová et al. 2026; Kováčová et al. 2024).

Policy recommendations

While PACES research focused on a selective sample of students of African origin, its implications are applicable to the wider community of non-EU foreign students in Slovakia. Based on the presented findings and reflecting on past academic and policy research in this area, the following structured recommendations can be made, distinguishing between the national, university, and local governance levels. Several of the barriers identified in this brief are acknowledged in the Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy 2030 (MŠVVŠ SR, 2021), which sets out measures to reduce visa barriers, support language integration, and promote Slovakia as a study destination. However, PACES evidence suggests that implementation has remained insufficient, pointing to a gap between strategic intent and the lived experience of international students.

National Level

- 1. Develop a National Strategy for international students' retention:** Create a clear and comprehensive national strategy focused on increasing the retention of international students, including enhancing research on student migration, advocating for simplified post-study pathways, and proposing concrete measures to support academic, social, and labour market integration. This integration strategy should define the roles and coordination mechanisms of key stakeholders in integration efforts, including national ministries, educational institutions, employers, local authorities, and more.
- 2. Establish a structured post-study residence pathway:** Within the strategy, the government should clearly establish pathways for foreign graduates to remain in Slovakia, including streamlined work permit procedures. Processing timelines, clear document requirements, and clear communication about the visa options for graduates are essential. Streamlining these processes will encourage graduates to transition smoothly from education to employment within Slovakia, helping to fill vital skills shortages and strengthen the country's talent base.

- 3. Support language and integration programs nationally:** Within the National Strategy, ensure adequate funding and coordination of Slovak language and integration courses across the country, as language proficiency is essential not only for academic success but also for navigating public services and social environments. While language and integration support for foreigners is being partially provided through established civic organisations, this provision is insufficient in scope and not systematically tailored to the specific situation of international students. Language learning should be embedded directly into the student journey, primarily through integration programmes (rec. 9) offered at the beginning of studies at universities, creating a structured, free, and accessible environment that motivates foreign students to develop Slovak language proficiency.
- 4. Enhance personal capacities of the Foreign Police:** The June 2026 amendment to Act No. 404/2011 (effective 15 July 2026) introduces electronic submission of residence applications and digital residence permits via the eDoklady app, which are positive steps. Building on this momentum, further action is needed, including the implementation of a transparent appointment booking system to streamline the booking process and reduce waiting times. In addition, English language training should be provided to public servants to ensure effective communication with visa and residence permit applicants.
- 5. Create a centralised online information platform or update the current portal:** Building, for example, on the existing Study in Slovakia portal (governed by SAIA), the platform should be hosted and maintained by a reputable institution with structured input from universities, municipalities, and NGOs. The platform should provide comprehensive, up-to-date information in Slovak and English on labour laws, residency permits, housing, healthcare options, and available support services. This user-friendly platform should also guide users to relevant organisations and assistance providers.
- 6. Provide universal access to healthcare for all foreign students regardless of status:** Access to healthcare is a universal social right and a key precondition for sustainable living and staying in Slovakia.

Currently, many foreign students have to pay for private insurance, facing not only language barriers but also real access difficulties. Universal access, similar to the public health insurance coverage currently extended to Slovak citizens, EU students, and third-country national students on bilateral scholarships (e.g. National Scholarship Programme, Erasmus+, CEEPUS), should be granted to all registered foreign students, regardless of study path, type of residence, or country of origin.

Universities and research institutions

7. **Develop and implement structured support networks for foreign students:** Universities and research institutions such as the Slovak Academy of Sciences should offer mentoring programs, counselling centres, or peer support groups to assist foreign students with academic and social integration. Such structured networks help reduce students' feelings of isolation and empower them to overcome cultural and institutional barriers, thus strengthening their engagement and retention.
8. **Provide practical administrative assistance:** Following recommendation 2, create dedicated offices at universities to assist foreign students with paperwork related to visas, residence permits, and employment, including personalised guidance on documentation and timelines. Provide foreign students with personal assistance to help them navigate the healthcare and social insurance systems, language course options, and other services.
9. **Integrate Slovak language courses into curricula:** Implement optional, free Slovak language courses within academic programs for international students. Offering language instruction within the curriculum ensures that all students have the opportunity to develop the proficiency necessary for effective communication, academic success, and social inclusion. Encouraging language learning in a structured and supportive environment also promotes cultural understanding and integration.
10. **Guarantee access to university accommodation for international students:** Universities should prioritise guaranteed dormitory placements for all incoming international students for at least the first year of their studies, regardless of their citizenship status, nationality, or mode of arrival.

By ensuring that international students are not immediately exposed to the private rental market, where discriminatory practices such as dual pricing and refusal to rent to foreigners have been documented, universities can provide a protected transition period during which students can orient themselves, build networks, and search for longer-term housing from a position of stability rather than urgency.

Local and community level

11. **Promote local integration initiatives, including social and cultural programmes:** Successful integration of international students and graduates extends beyond academic achievement and legal pathways; it requires active inclusion into the social and cultural fabric of local communities. To foster a sense of belonging and mutual understanding, local governments should prioritise two flagship approaches: intercultural workshops that bring foreign students and local residents together in structured settings, and community volunteering programs that create ongoing, meaningful contact between newcomers and the wider community. Funding for these initiatives should be clearly designated, drawing on municipal budgets, EU funding mechanisms such as ESF+ or AMIF, or formal partnerships with universities and NGOs. Without a sustainable financing mechanism, even well-designed programs rarely move beyond the planning stage.
12. **Facilitate cooperation between local employers and universities to create internship and employment opportunities for graduates:** To improve international student retention and support their smooth transition from education to the labour market, it is essential to establish effective partnerships between higher education institutions and local employers. However, employer participation, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises that often lack the capacity or incentive to engage, should not be left to form organically. The following incentive mechanisms could be considered: tax breaks for businesses that provide accredited placements, co-funded internship programs backed by regional development funds, and the creation of a regional coordination body to actively match graduates with employers who are a good fit. These measures actively connect graduates with employers, rather than simply hoping partnerships will form on their own. Such measures can have a universal design and improve the retention of Slovak talent as well.

13. Develop and support low-threshold services and active information campaigns: Research shows that an active effort is needed to inform students and young people about available services and support. Students and young foreigners can be most effectively reached in their natural environments. Critically, the credibility and reach of information depend less on its content than on who delivers it and where: peer ambassadors from the same communities, trusted NGO intermediaries, and existing group networks (such as student WhatsApp or Telegram groups) consistently outperform official portals and written materials. Digital outreach should prioritise short video formats on platforms students already use (e.g. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) over text-heavy PDFs. Information campaigns should be timed to key transition moments: arrival, the start of the academic year, and the approach of graduation, when students are most actively seeking orientation and are most receptive to support.

By clearly defining responsibilities and strengthening support mechanisms at all levels, Slovakia can become a more attractive destination for international students, offering viable, long-term opportunities and smoother transitions into the workforce. Importantly, many of the barriers and obstacles that we raise are limitations of migration and integration framework in general (Bahna et al. 2025; Guzi et al. 2024) and relate not only to a specific group of young people but cut across the life-course (Gallová Kríglerová et al. 2026). Their improvement could therefore contribute to better integration and retention for all migrants, not only to the specific group of foreign students covered in this study.

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Contact Details

Policy Brief: Lucia Mýtna Kureková, lucia.mytna-kurekova@savba.sk
PACES Project: Simona Vezzoli, vezzoli@iss.nl

Suggested citation:

Kureková, L. M., Zemeníková, T., & Kováčová, L. (2026). Should I stay or should I go? Barriers to retention of high-skilled student migrants in Slovakia and recommendations for policy change. *PACES Policy Paper No. 5*. Bratislava: Institute for Forecasting, Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Acknowledgements

The PACES project has received funding under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, grant agreement N 101094279. Views and opinions expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

We acknowledge the contribution of our numerous research participants who donated their time to share their life and migration experiences, their life aspirations, expectations and their dreams of a better future. In the PACES project, we seek to give them a voice with the objective of creating more equal societies and to contribute to evidence-based policy-making.

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