



COMMENTARY

Pulling students out of the net: Should they be excluded from the net migration target?

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Students come up repeatedly in discussions about migrants in the UK, but are they actually “migrants” and can and should they be removed from the Government’s net migration target?

Defining what makes someone an international migrant is more complicated than it seems. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) uses the definition of “a person who moves to a country other than his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year”, which corresponds to the United Nations definition. But many people understand the term differently: often migrants are seen as people who move with the intention of settling in another country permanently, as in the dictionary definition of the word. Differing definitions can create confusion and disagreement, and at the heart of one of these disagreements in the UK is the question of the status of international students and whether or not they should be excluded from the government’s “tens of thousands” net migration target.

International students make the single biggest contribution to non-EU immigration to the UK, and as such have been a key focus of policies aimed at reducing overall net migration to under 100,000 – a key Conservative Party election promise in 2010. See our previous commentaries on student migration:

- Student visas and long-term immigration estimates: A simple relationship?
- A degree of confusion – what do people in the UK think about international students?
- International students: A+ or D- for the UK?

The arguments for and against removing students from the target have been discussed regularly in media and policy debates, but bear repeating. Arguments for removing students note that (limited) available evidence suggests that most students don’t tend to settle in the UK (according to the Home Office’s Migrant Journey III report); they are likely to be among “the best and brightest” and are therefore important to the nation’s long-term competitiveness; and they support the UK’s world-class (and multi-billion pound) higher education sector.

Counter arguments include the view that that students who come to the UK for more than a year are migrants and that to remove the largest group of non-EU migrants from the target would amount to “fiddling the figures”; that not all students do leave the UK; and that while the Migrant Journey report suggests that most students leave the UK within five years it does not provide concrete evidence, and the actual number that remain illegally is unknown.

But quite aside from the perceived “rights and wrongs” of the issue, there is a fundamental technical issue that has, so far, meant that efforts to remove migrants from the net migration target would have been impossible.

Net migration is the difference between immigration and emigration, calculated by subtracting the number of people leaving the UK for a year or more from the number arriving for a year or more. The data used to calculate net migration comes, primarily, from the International Passenger Survey (IPS) – a survey undertaken at airports and other ports of entry to the UK, in which a sample of people entering or leaving the UK are asked a series of questions about themselves and their reasons for travelling.

But until January 2012, the IPS did not ask migrants who were leaving the UK about the purpose for which they originally came to the UK. This has made it impossible to disaggregate net migration into component categories such as students, labour migrants, and family migrants in a way showing the contribution of each to net migration.

For example, in the year to September 2012, we can see from the IPS that an estimated 190,000 migrants moved to the UK for the primary purpose of formal study, while 20,000 left the UK for the same reason. The difference

between those two numbers does not show the impact of students on net migration. Those who migrate to the UK for study reasons in the first place will be likely to leave for other reasons, such as work, later on. This means that they will be in one category upon entry (i.e. study) and a different one upon exit (i.e. work).

To evaluate the impact of international students on net-migration, one would need to know the original reason for immigration of those who are leaving the country. The Migration Observatory called attention to this gap in the data more than two years ago in its report on the Top Ten Problems in the Evidence Base on Immigration in the UK. There is currently no data measuring the contribution of students to net-migration figures.

Fortunately, this is about to change. In January 2012 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) introduced a new question on the IPS to record the original reason for immigration of those migrants who are leaving the country. The first wave of data from this new question will become available in August 2013 and will cover the period January-December 2012, providing - for the first time - direct information about the impact of students on net migration estimates. This will include, it is planned, the presentation of net migration data disaggregated by category, which means that anyone who wants to see what the net migration figures would look like without students will be able to access that information.

What to expect?

Current data on the migration trajectory of students suggests that most do not stay in Britain, but this evidence is very limited. The Home Office's Migrant Journey III report suggests that (from a study of non-European students granted visas in 2006) approximately 82% of non-European students no longer have legal permission to remain in the UK after five years. What is missing is definitive information on what proportion of that 82% actually leaves the country and what proportion "overstay" their visas and remain in the UK without legal permission- It is also possible that some students leave before their visas expire.

The new estimates on the net-migration of students will provide some insights here, by estimating actual emigration among student immigrants. It's important to be clear, though, that this will not provide absolute certainty about overall student net-migration. The numbers will be estimates subject to considerable margins of error, as they come from a survey. Also, migrants will be asked to recall their original purpose for immigrating; this may seem straightforward but could be more complicated for people who had mixed motivations for migrating in the first place.

Relatedly, the new data will help examine what we at the Migration Observatory have called the "net migration bounce". The bounce effect characterises the relationship between short-term cuts to immigration and their subsequent long-term impacts on net migration. It occurs because some migration to the UK is temporary: many migrants currently coming to the UK will leave again after a few years. A migrant who comes to Britain and later leaves will not have added to net migration in the long-term. Likewise, preventing this hypothetical temporary migrant's initial trip to Britain will not reduce net migration in the long-term either. The initial reduction to immigration is cancelled out by a reduction to emigration later on.

Since students seem particularly likely to be temporary migrants, a relatively large proportion of any drop in student immigration today will evaporate in the long-term net migration figures. However, the extent of this depends on the actual emigration rate of international students. If the new data - when published - suggests that emigration rates of students are lower than expected, then the recent decrease in student numbers could have a bigger long-term impact on net-migration. Such a finding would also suggest a significant level of visa overstaying among student migrants.

What is the UK government going to do with the new evidence on students and net migration?

The government has said that it will not remove international students from its net migration target, or from the immigration statistics as a whole. As discussed above, data limitations have so far made it impossible to remove international students from the target or the statistics, but that is about to change. Improved data will enable anyone to calculate net migration with and without students included. Regardless of any changes in targeting immigration policy toward students, the public will be able to get a sense of how much students affect net migration as a whole – at least over the last year. This, in itself, will be extremely interesting and will allow the debate to be based more on evidence than assertion, which can only be a good thing.

Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing – Who Counts as a Migrant: Definitions and their Consequences <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/who-counts-migrant-definitions-and-their-consequences>
- Parliamentary briefing – Backbench Business Debate: (i) Motion relating to student visas <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2013/Backbench%20Debate%20Student%20Visas%206-6-13.pdf>
- Migration Observatory commentary – Student visas and long-term immigration estimates: A simple relationship? <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/student-visas-and-long-term-immigration-estimates-simple-relationship>
- Migration Observatory commentary – A degree of confusion – what do people in the UK think about international students? <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/degree-confusion-%E2%80%93-what-do-people-uk-think-about-international-students>
- Migration Observatory commentary – International students: A+ or D- for the UK? <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/international-students-or-d-uk>
- Home Office report – Migrant Journey III <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migrant-journey-third-report>
- BBC news – Immigration: Damian Green rejects call to exempt foreign students from figures <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18259626>
- Migration Observatory report – Top Ten Problems in the Evidence Base on Immigration in the UK <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/top-ten-problems-evidence-base-public-debate-and-policy-making-immigration-uk>
- BBC news – Overseas students: Change to UK migration figures planned <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-19579923>
- Migration Observatory commentary – The net migration bounce <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/net-migration-bounce>



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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