

Understanding International Students - Common Myths and Questions

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Student migration has been in the spotlight recently, with a number of myths and misconceptions have appeared in the media. Here we address a few which have hindered sensible debate on international students.

MYTH: There has been no decline in international student numbers since the introduction of the Tier 4 system.

There are several statistics which attempt to show how many international students come to the UK each year – all of which show a significant decrease in students from 2010. These declines are in the context of a 6-7% increase in students around the world who are seeking a tertiary-level education overseas, which the UK should be capitalising on.

- One statistic commonly used is the number of visas granted. In 2010 there were 253,786 visas granted according to ONS figures. By June 2015 there were only 204,527. The problem with visa statistics is that not all those granted visas translate into a student enrolling at a UK institution.
- The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects data on international student enrolments, but only at universities who subscribe to their database. Their data suggests that new student enrolments declined by 2% in 2014/15 and have fluctuated between -1 and +4 per cent over the past five years.
- Further education and independent colleges have seen their numbers drop by as much as 25% in one year (2014). These colleges offer a substantial number of foundation programmes and routes into university study which will impact the university sector in years to come. They also offer vocational courses which have seen a significant surge in demand worldwide.
- Many English Language students have altered their study routes to use the more flexible short-term student visa, which are not included in the ONS figures above, as they are not Tier 4 visas. This means these students are not counted as migrants in the visa statistics as they will spend no more than 11 months in the UK.

QUESTION: Do many International Students leave the UK after they study?

Recent headlines have suggested many international students stay on after they study. Where do these headlines come from? Some sources have used the International Passenger Survey (IPS) to suggest that high numbers of international students remain in the UK after study.

- According to the Home Office's internal case management data from 2015, 15% of students remained in the UK on a visa five years after they started study (this includes their initial study term which can be up to 5 years for a degree level course). Only 1% had indefinite leave to remain.
- In 2012 for the first time the IPS asked people leaving the country why they had originally come to the UK, generating the estimate that 67,000 of those leaving had originally come to study.
- In 2014 the estimates derived from the IPS showed 135,000 people coming to the UK to study, **plus or minus 17,000** (due to the margin of error described below).
- Both estimates were generated from a survey of just 5,000 passengers considered to be migrants.
- The Treasury Committee, Public Administration Select Committee, Home Affairs Committee, the Committee of Public Accounts and the UK Statistics Authority have expressed concern over relying upon estimated figures of this type. The margin of error on a sample of 5,000 is too high for this data to be used as an evidential basis for designing immigration policy.
- It is anticipated that exit data may become available in the coming years as the UK implements a system of mandatory advance passenger information and exit checks which should enable more accurate data to be collected and analysed.

QUESTION: Can International Students come to study intending to settle in the UK afterwards?

Student visas for courses over a year in length may be captured as part of the long-term migration statistics, but they are considered temporary by the immigration rules: any student hoping to settle in the UK could not use their time on a study visa to support their application. This is similar to those who come on short term business or under the Tier 5 route for temporary migration.

MYTH: The Government has shut down 800 bogus colleges which were fronts for immigration abuse

A Freedom of Information request shows that between May 2010 and October 2014, 836 institutions were removed from the register of international student sponsors. During this period significant changes to the sponsor rules required institutions to submit to additional quality assurance processes and apply for 'highly trusted status' (HTS) (which has since been removed). It is disingenuous to suggest that all institutions which lost or surrendered their licence were 'bogus' or attempting to defraud students or the immigration system.

- 223 found the process to attain HTS too difficult and costly so did not apply.
- 237 failed to meet a later application deadline or applied for this process and were refused.
- By March 2015, 70 institutions from the list of 836 had reapplied for a licence and were reinstated to the register. This does not include those who may have changed their name before reapplying.
- A number of publicly funded Further Education Colleges, were also included in this list. The number of FE Colleges eligible to teach international students fell considerably between 2014-2015, depriving local colleges regulated by Ofsted of valuable internationalisation opportunities and critical revenue.
- Many more continue to operate and teach UK and EU students to high quality standards.

MYTH: Other countries include international students in their net migration targets

*None of the UK's major competitors, such as Australia, Canada or the US, have a net migration target. While it may be useful to count all migrants for local planning purposes and advantageous to count students so as to understand the value of the international education export, the challenge does not lie in the counting. The challenge for the UK's international education export growth is not in including international students in net migration **figures**, but in setting a **target** to reduce them (in clear opposition to the BIS export growth target).*

- None of the countries in the top 10 for recruiting international students have set a maximum number on the amount of international students which can enter their country.
- Most countries have developed evidence-led strategies to increase their international student numbers in line with or above the estimated 6-7% annual growth in mobile tertiary-level students worldwide.
- Many countries use the United Nations definition of a migrant for their migration statistics: "A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence." (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesM/SeriesM_58rev1e.pdf)
- For the past five years, numbers migrating for work and for study have competed to take the top spot in the immigration figures. It would be incorrect to say that a target to reduce net migration to numbers below 100,000 could be possible without reducing international student numbers.