

## Attracting international students to the UK

International students are a key source of funding for UK universities and beneficial for the wider economy, with a government estimate of over £5 billion in income excluding tuition fees. Declining student numbers could be reversed with targeted policies.

### About the research

International students have become a key source of funding for UK universities, and provide a significant contribution to the UK economy through tuition fees, living expenses and associated income such as parents' visits to the UK. For example, tuition fee income from non-EU students alone accounted for £4.2 billion in 2014-15 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

International students have also helped to maintain overall student numbers at a time of declining enrolments within the UK. The total number of students (domestic and international) has over the last four years dropped by 200,000 (from 2,497,000 in 2010/11 to 2,266,000 in 2014/15), and is set to decline further.

A working paper from the ESRC Centre for Population Change (CPC) has analysed the trends in international student mobility to the UK. It was based on a large CPC survey of international students (gathering over 3,300 responses), parallel surveys at universities in Austria and Latvia, in-depth interviews with international students and university staff, and analysis of datasets from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA).

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### Policy implications

- A more favourable post-study work visa system should be re-introduced to make UK higher education institutions more competitive against international study schemes offered by other major destination countries such as Canada, Australia, the US, Germany and Ireland.
- International student migration policy should be developed with regards to pathways for post-study mobility – such as Canada's Postgraduate Work Permit programme or Experience Class programme.
- International students should be removed from the UK's net migration target, to avoid reductions in student visas and loss of revenue for universities and the wider economy.
- Greater devolved powers to the Scottish government for recruitment of international students would be beneficial, due to the particular demographic challenges facing Scotland and the importance of the higher education sector for the Scottish economy.
- A post-Brexit migration policy that offers EU students more favourable access to UK higher education institutions than non-EU students would prevent further reduction in EU student numbers.

## Key findings

- There were many factors driving international students' decision to enrol at a UK university. The most cited reason was the desire to enrol at a world-class university (82% of survey respondents), followed by the opportunity to pursue an international career (61%).
- The assumption that student mobility either leads to return migration to the country of origin or longer-term integration in the place of study is too simplistic. Other outcomes such as migration to a third country after studies are also common.
- While 40% of international students in the survey expected to return to their country of origin, around 37% had plans for onward migration to other international destinations. The third option, staying in the UK, was the least likely outcome.
- Income from international student fees is a very important source of funding for UK universities, although the effect is uneven across the sector.
- A small number of countries are important sources of international students coming to the UK, in particular China. By 2014-15 China sent around 90,000 students, accounting for nearly 29% of all non-EU students enrolled in UK higher education institutions.
- Many countries show a consistent pattern of decline in sending students to the UK over the 2011/12- 2014/15 period covered by the HESA dataset, particularly EU countries, with the largest reductions in student numbers coming from Greece, Ireland and Germany. These trends emerged prior to (and hence unaffected by) the EU referendum campaign.
- There is also evidence of the UK becoming less attractive as a study destination from outside the EU. Over the last four years international student migration from India has collapsed (from 39,090 students in 2010/11 to 18,320 students in 2014/15); other countries with similar reduction include Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Centre for Population Change paper *An audit of international student mobility to the UK* by Laura Prazeres and Allan Findlay examines the numbers, profiles and trends of international students to the UK in relation to characteristics such as gender and region of origin, influencing factors driving student mobility, and implications for UK higher education. The research was based on secondary data analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency datasets and research previously carried out within CPC.

Web: [www.cpc.ac.uk/docs/2017\\_WP82\\_An\\_audit\\_of\\_international\\_student\\_mobility\\_to\\_the\\_UK3.pdf](http://www.cpc.ac.uk/docs/2017_WP82_An_audit_of_international_student_mobility_to_the_UK3.pdf)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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The ESRC Centre for Population Change (CPC) is investigating how and why our population is changing and what this means for people, communities and governments. The centre is a joint partnership between the Universities of Southampton, St. Andrews, Edinburgh, Stirling and Strathclyde.  
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The views expressed in this evidence briefing are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the ESRC.

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