

## Update on international student migration statistics

November 2016

This article updates on ONS progress towards developing a better understanding on student migration to and from the UK.

1. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) produces statistics on international migration to and from the UK which contribute to our understanding of the make-up of society and the changing shape of the population. International migration figures are also used by government for informing immigration policy.

2. The main source of international migration data which ONS itself is responsible for collecting is the International Passenger Survey (IPS), but ONS also uses numerous other sources for producing its population and [migration](#) statistics.

3. The demand for more detailed information on international student numbers has increased as migration policy has become a prominent area of debate during recent years, and particularly in the context of the result of the referendum on EU membership. This report is an update on progress towards a more comprehensive measure of the impact of overseas students on migration to and from the UK. ONS has been working closely with other government departments to assess the quality of existing data sources and to develop new sources of information based on administrative data.

4. During 2016, there have been several published analytical reports from different organisations:

[Population Briefing: International Student Migration – What do the statistics tell us?](#) (ONS, January 2016)

[Non-European Student Migration to the UK](#) (Migration Observatory, August 2016)

[Destination education: Reforming migration policy on international students to grow the UK's vital education exports](#) (IPPR, September 2016)

5. All 3 reports have highlighted the difference between the official figures of international students immigrating and the estimated number of students who have emigrated. There are no official figures that show how many students do not emigrate and remain in the UK after their studies.

6. The International Passenger Survey (IPS) estimates migration flows – who is entering and leaving the UK. Latest estimates show that total long-term net migration was 327,000 in the year ending March 2016; total immigration for study was 164,000 and emigration of former students was 66,000.

7. The ONS report in January 2016 identified a number of potential reasons for the difference between students immigrating and those who were emigrating having previously arrived for the purpose of study:

- students staying longer than initially expected and obtaining extensions of stay in the UK, whether as a student or in other categories such as skilled work
- students finishing their courses and overstaying their visas

- the IPS not completely recording student flows, either due to sampling or non-sampling errors (such as not responding to the survey or responding incorrectly); this is a question of recent increasing prominence
- when student migration is in a period of growth, as it generally has been in the UK since the 1990s, then student numbers will make a positive contribution to net migration during that period because the numbers arriving in any year will tend to be larger than the numbers leaving (reflecting the lower number of previous years' arrivals); if student immigration were to decline, the opposite will be true

8. The net migration figures are used by ONS to calculate the size of the UK population in any given year and they include international students since they contribute to population growth. These population figures are used by national and local government to inform their planning and removing any key group would have consequences for this. When it would be helpful, ONS provides breakdowns of figures where data allows, including to assist policy departments with their decisions. We have identified how data sources could be improved to better understand student migration and what students do after their studies.

9. Our work this year has identified that the IPS is the only currently available data source that identifies when a student emigrates. We have investigated how the IPS is identifying emigrating students in more detail, including whether the intended length of stay stated by students when they arrive in the UK differs from their actual length of stay when they emigrate (for example, a student arrives stating 12 months or more, but leaves after 11 months). If this was occurring, it may explain why long-term emigration figures for students appear low compared to long-term immigration figures. However, our initial findings suggest there is a close match in the numbers of those who intend to stay less than 12 months and those who actually leave within 12 months. Additionally, we will make better use of administrative data sources by linking them together to provide a more reliable picture of how many students remain in the UK after their studies.

10. The above developments will provide better information about students while they remain in the UK and will not generate new information on student departures from the UK. When available, emerging data on Home Office exit checks (introduced in April 2015) will produce a more complete picture of how many non-EU students depart the UK by the time their visa expires. During 2016, the Home Office has further developed this source, and published a first [report](#) in August, focusing on the quality of work so far. These data will provide information on departures from the UK and not long-term emigration, since they do not record how long a departing person intends to live abroad, as some of them may return to the UK after a short period of time and so will not be emigrants.

11. ONS plans to publish an update containing results of investigations carried out during 2016. These are briefly described in Table 1 and more detailed results will be published in early 2017. When available, further work is planned to examine what the emerging Exit Check data show regarding departures of people on student visas. Additionally, ONS is considering a one-off online survey to collect information from international students approaching course completion. If this goes ahead, it is likely to take place in March 2017 and the results will be available in summer 2017.

**Table 1: Summary of ONS work on international student migration**

What we have done	What it has told us
<p>We have met with several universities, representing a cross-section of courses. This was to enable us to better understand the experiences of the universities regarding international student migration.</p>	<p>Their reports of the types of courses that students enrol on reflect administrative data held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Additionally, the universities informed us that in their experience, they believe international students are compliant with visa restrictions and that the majority return home after their courses, although there is no post-study evidence to support this.</p>
<p>We have compared data across different sources. These are the International Passenger Survey (IPS), Labour Force Survey (LFS), Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Home Office visa, asylum and settlement data (Migrant Journey). The first 2 sources are sample surveys whereas the last 2 sources are administrative data.</p>	<p>HESA, Home Office visa statistics and IPS estimates show broadly consistent patterns for student immigration once definitional differences are accounted for.</p> <p>Our investigations have shown that the LFS is not a suitable source for measuring international student migration flows for a number of reasons.</p>
<p>We have identified how data sources could be improved to better understand student migration and what students do after their studies. We have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• responded to the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE) consultation</li> <li>• considered which additional variables (such as National Insurance number and passport number) would be useful on HESA data (to enable linking with other sources)</li> <li>• supported the recording of country of birth and/or nationality on the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland school censuses</li> <li>• ensured we are aware of the progress of Exit Check data and that our requirements of these data for statistical purposes are specified</li> </ul> <p>We are considering whether a one-off, separate student survey might provide insight into international students' post-study intentions, how sure they are of these intentions, their travel patterns and how they might respond to particular IPS questions. If this were to go ahead, it would be undertaken in mid 2017, with results expected in the summer.</p>	<p>There is no single data source that provides a clear picture of what students do after their studies, particularly how many students remain in the UK.</p> <p>The IPS is the only available data source that identifies when a student emigrates. The only possible alternative data source currently available is the Destination of Leavers survey, which has very low response rates for non-UK nationals (34%).</p> <p>The Home Office's Migrant Journey data provide information on the number of expired student visas and the number who either extend their visas or switch to another visa type, such as work (for non-EU nationals).</p> <p>Future work linking sources together is planned and should show how many students work while studying and remain in the UK to work after their courses have completed (for example, linking HESA with Department for Work and Pensions data).</p>
<p>We have investigated how the IPS is identifying students in more detail, particularly whether students' actual patterns follow their intentions,</p>	<p>Initial findings suggest that there is not sufficient evidence to support the idea that some students are arriving as long-term immigrants, but are</p>

<p>which is what the IPS is based on. For example, whether it is possible that some students arrive as long-term immigrants, but when they leave they state they have been in the UK less than 1 year (thereby not identified as emigrants). These investigations have involved comparisons of short-term migration intentions with estimates of “actual” short-term migration flows for study.</p>	<p>being recorded as short-term immigrants as they depart the UK.</p>
<p>We have analysed quarterly data from the IPS and HESA to identify similarities between course end dates and emigration patterns.</p>	<p>This provides information about when we would expect students to leave the UK if they emigrated after their studies. The majority of students on undergraduate courses complete their studies in Quarter 2 (Apr to June), whereas the majority of postgraduate students complete their courses in Quarter 3.</p>