



CENTRE FOR POPULATION CHANGE



Intentions and outcomes of graduating international students

International students constitute around a quarter of all migrants to the UK. Little is known about what happens to these students after they graduate. Do they follow through on the migration plans they have before graduating? If they have left the country, do they want to return to the UK? This policy brief provides an overview of the key findings from a survey of international students after their graduation. You can find the full Technical Report at: http://www.cpc.ac.uk/docs/2018_SoGIS_Technical_Report_Wave2.pdf

Key Points

- Nearly 9 out of 10 students who, before graduating, said that they intended to leave the UK immediately after graduation actually left the country within 11 months.
- Among graduating students who left the UK, only a minority would like to return: 8% to pursue further education and 13% for work reasons.
- More than two-thirds of our sample of international students think that the results of the EU referendum have made the UK a less attractive place to live for non-UK nationals. Students also think that the UK will have worse employment prospects.
- Only a minority of the international students we surveyed said that the result of the EU referendum has decreased the value of UK higher education.

Introduction

Knowing more about what international students do after they graduate is important to help us better understand the impact of UK higher education (including its international competitiveness) and also to better inform policy-making. Obtaining information about international students after they graduate is challenging, especially if they have left the UK. This research sheds new light

on the issue by analysing a unique dataset which interviews international students before they graduate and then again eight to eleven months after they have graduated. This allows us to explore how many students stay and leave and whether these students' migration intentions as expressed before graduation match the reality.

The study

The CPC-ONS-UUK Survey of Graduating International Students (SoGIS) is a collaborative effort between the ESRC Centre for Population Change (CPC), the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Universities UK (UUK). The first wave was administered in Spring 2017, and a total of 3,560 international (non-UK) students due to graduate that year responded, with a mix of undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students. Of the wave 1 respondents, 1,517 agreed to be recontacted. These then formed the sampling base for wave 2 who were contacted between December 2017 and February 2018. At wave 2, there were 563 students (37% of the students contacted) who responded, providing the basis for the longitudinal analysis.

Main findings

Comparing migration intentions in wave 1 with the actual place of residence in wave 2, 84% of those who reported that they planned to leave immediately after graduation (within three months) had done so and were living outside the UK at the time of wave 2 (Table 1). Of those who planned to stay temporarily (between 3 and 12 months after graduation) 24% had already left by wave 2. Finally, amongst those who planned to stay permanently, 16% had also left the UK. These findings highlight two important issues. First, while in general migration intentions have not fully materialised within the short follow-up window, the evidence for international students suggests that they leave once they have finished their studies. Second, some of those who, before graduation, were planning to stay longer actually left straightaway. This may not be surprising given the uncertainty around the consequences of the EU referendum.

Migration intentions in wave 1	Residence in Wave 2	
	In the UK	Outside the UK
Leave immediately	15.81	84.19
Stay temporarily	76.4	23.6
Stay permanently	84.17	15.83

Table 1: Intention to stay vs. migration behaviour (%)

At wave 1, respondents were also asked about the certainty of their intentions to stay or leave the UK after graduating. In Figure 1, we compare two groups: students who were certain of their plans in wave 1 versus those who were uncertain of their plans. Not surprisingly, the majority of those who were more confident about their plans eventually stick to their intentions and have left the UK within 11 months (88%). However, amongst those who were uncertain about their future plans in wave 1, 24% decided to stay despite expressing the intention to leave immediately after graduating. Conversely, 31% of students who were planning to stay temporarily and 28% of those who wanted to stay permanently have left by wave 2.

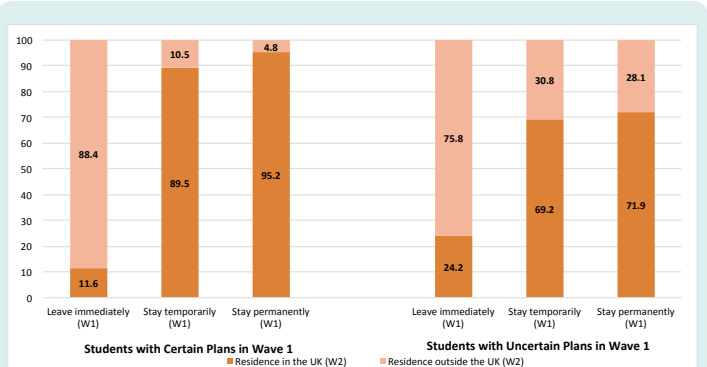


Figure 1: Intention to stay vs. migration behaviour by certainty of intentions (%)

Note: The number of observations are as follows: Students with 'Certain Plans' in Wave 1=301; Students with 'Uncertain Plans' in Wave 1=252

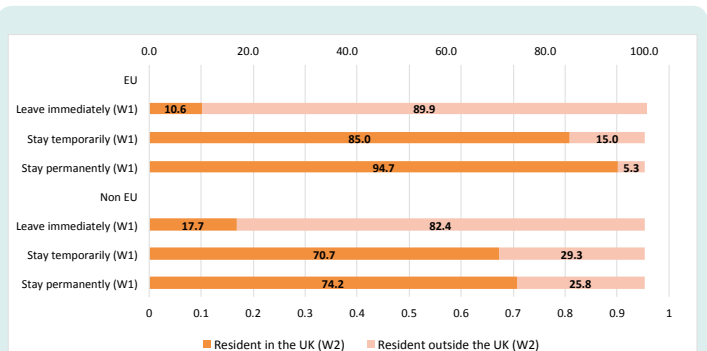


Figure 2: Intention to stay vs. migration behaviour by EU / non-EU Nationality (%)

Note: The number of observations are as follows: EU =183; Non-EU= 365

One might expect that visa expiry is an important determinant of the decision to stay or leave for non-EU students, while the prospect of Brexit is more important for EU students. However, Figure 2 shows that EU and non-EU students in our study had similar patterns of leaving the UK after graduating. Among those who planned to leave immediately, 90% of EU students and 82% of non-EU students in our sample left within 11 months. More than a quarter of non-EU students who were planning to stay temporarily or permanently had also left the UK. Furthermore, there is no difference by gender when it comes to fulfilling previous migration plans, as both male and female students show remarkably similar patterns. Finally, postgraduate students were more likely to have left the UK compared to undergraduate students even if they were not initially planning to do so (Figure 3).

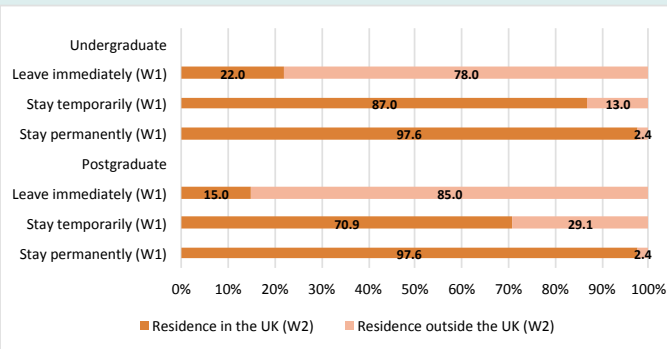


Figure 3: Intention to stay vs. migration behaviour by level of study (%)

Note: The number of observations are as follows: Undergraduates=137; Postgraduates= 361

Do students who have left the UK want to come back?

The majority of both EU and non-EU students not living in the UK at wave 2 were not planning to return to the UK, and if they were, it was to attend their graduation rather than for anything else (Figure 4).

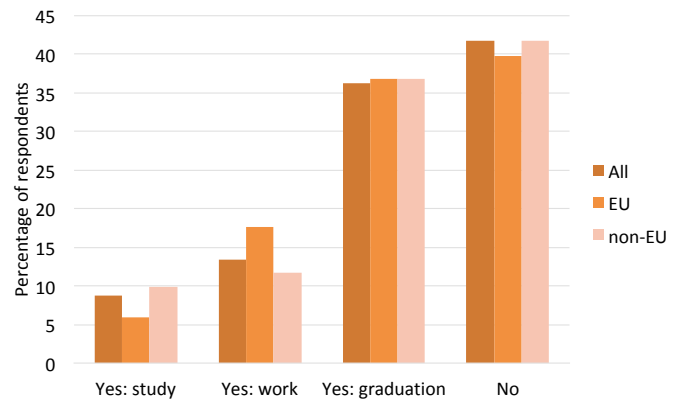


Figure 4: Those who have left and intentions to return by EU/Non-EU (%)

Note: The number of observations are as follow: All=276; EU=68; non-EU=204

Has the EU referendum affected students' perceptions about the UK?

Our findings reveal that international students who have studied in the UK think the EU referendum has negatively affected the attractiveness of the UK as a place to live, work or study. However, it is surprising that non-EU students exhibit more negative perceptions about the UK as a place to work compared to EU students (Figure 5). It is not surprising though that a large proportion of those with negative views left the UK by wave 2 (particularly non-EU). However, only a minority of those we surveyed report that the EU referendum has decreased the value of UK higher education.

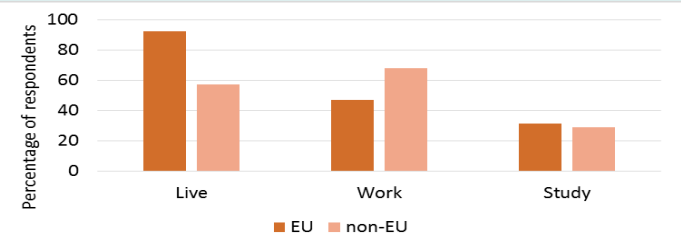


Figure 5: Percentage of respondents who agree that EU Referendum decreased the attractiveness of the UK

Note: The number of observations are as follows: Live=142; Work =141; Study=141

Policy implications

The evidence from SoGIS wave 2 shows that the vast majority of international students stick to the migration plans made before graduation.

Nearly 9 out of 10 students who, before graduating, said that they intended to leave the UK immediately after graduation have actually left the country 11 months later. This supports research from ONS and the Home Office that most non-EU international students do not overstay their visas.

Many, including UUK, argue that the Government should reintroduce the post study visa so that the UK can benefit from the investment in skills gained by these international students. Some of the students are working in the UK, suggesting that those who are highly skilled can and do find jobs here.

However, there is clear evidence that the prospects of Brexit have made our sample of students think that the UK is a less attractive place to live for non-UK nationals.

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