

International Students in the UK: Perspective and Plans

International students make up nearly one in five of all students in UK Higher Education Institutions. Still, little is known about the drivers and impacts of student migration. Why do students choose the UK as their destination? What do they plan to do after they finish their studies? Do they want to stay or leave the UK after graduation and why? This policy brief provides an overview of a new survey of final-year international students carried out by a joint team at the ESRC Centre for Population Change, Office for National Statistics and Universities UK.

Key Points

- Less than a third of international students studying in the UK are from EU countries.
- International students are motivated to choose the UK for study due to the global reputation of UK qualifications and universities.
- The majority of students do not intend to stay in the UK for more than a year after finishing their studies.
- Less than one in ten international students plan to stay in the UK indefinitely and find a job.
- International students tend to travel outside the UK during vacations.

Introduction

International student migration, and in particular its impact on net migration, is an area that has received considerable media, political and public attention in recent years. The UK is the second most popular destination in the world for international students, after the USA. As seen in Figure 1, the UK has attracted substantial numbers of EU and non-EU students over the last decade, bringing student migration to the centre of the policy debate.

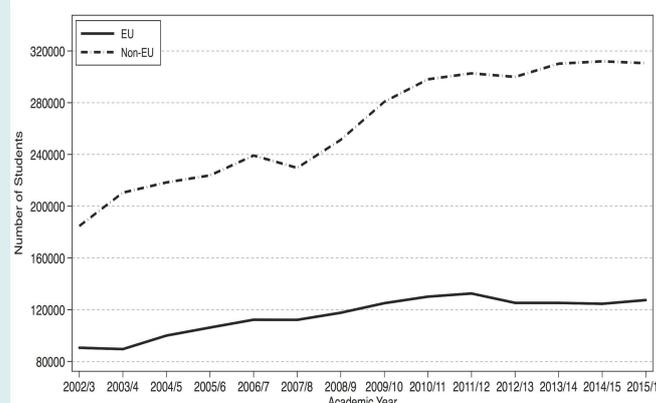


Figure 1: Number of International (EU and non-EU) Students Enrolled in UK HEIs, 2002/03-2015/16.

Source: HESA.

The Study

The *CPC-ONS-UUK Survey of Graduating International Students 2017* (SoGIS) is a collaborative effort between the ESRC Centre for Population Change (CPC), the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Universities UK (UUK). The online survey, conducted in March-April 2017, collected detailed information from international students in their final year of study at UK Higher Education Institutions. It included non-UK undergraduate and postgraduate students at UK HEIs who expected to graduate in the academic year 2016/17.

The aim of the research was to better understand (i) what international students intend to do at the end of their studies and how sure they are of their post-study intentions; (ii) travel patterns of international students; and (iii) the extent to which international students engage with public services and the labour market.

The survey collected data from 3,560 people from more than 130 countries. About 29% of respondents were EU nationals and the remaining were non-EU. China was the largest non-EU student group (15% of the total), and Germany was the largest EU student group (3%). Tier 4 Student visas were held by 62% of the sample, 32% did not need study visas, and the rest were on a variety of other visas (e.g. family, work, visitor). The survey participants covered a range of subjects and levels of study, including postgraduate research students (10%), postgraduate taught students (50%), undergraduate students (30%) and exchange students (7%). The majority of students (90%) came to the UK for purposes of study. The great majority (96%) were studying full time, and only 28% worked whilst studying. Female students represented 56% of the total, male students 34%, and the remaining 10% preferred to not state their gender. Our sample is representative of the overall international student population in the UK, though it over-represents postgraduate students and under-represents undergraduate students.

The full technical report, codebook and data is available at;

http://www.cpc.ac.uk/publications/CPC-ONS-UUK_Survey_of_Graduating_International_Students_2017.pdf

Main findings

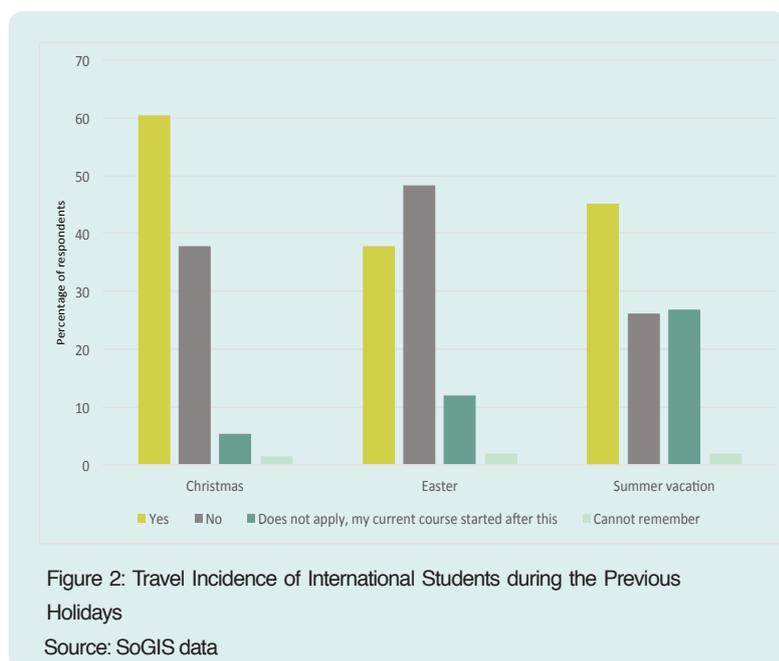
UK as a study destination

The three main reasons international students stated that they chose the UK were (1) the international recognition of UK qualifications, (2) the reputation of the university and (3) the language. The majority of international students relied on self-funding (including help from family) to finance their studies in the UK. Around 40% of students lived in university halls or private student halls, while 54% lived in rented accommodation.

Travel Patterns of International Students

International students often travel outside the UK during vacations (Figure 2). Non-EU students, in particular, tend to visit other European countries during their holidays.

In general, students tend to visit countries other than their own. Table 1 shows the most popular destinations of international students during vacations.



	Christmas	Easter	Summer vacation
EU students			
	Germany	France	France
	France	Germany	Italy
	Italy	Spain	Spain
	Spain	Italy	Germany
	Greece	Republic of Ireland	Greece
Non-EU students			
	France	France	United States
	Germany	Italy	France
	United States	Germany	Italy
	Spain	Spain	Spain
	Italy	Netherlands	Malaysia

Table 1: "Top 5" Travel Destinations of International (EU and non-EU) Students during the Previous Holidays.

Source: SoGIS data

Intentions to stay in the UK

The majority of students do not intend to stay in the UK after finishing their current course of study (Figure 3); 33% of respondents said that they would leave the UK immediately and 36% reported that they would leave the UK within 12 months of graduating. Only 15% of international students indicated that they would like to stay in the UK for longer than a year and 16% intended to stay permanently (22% EU and 13% non-EU).

More than half of the students we surveyed were certain of their plans, although about one quarter were not certain (Figure 4). Those who planned to stay longer than 6 months after graduating were the least certain. Both EU and non-EU students had similar patterns regarding the certainty of their future plans.



Figure 3: Intention to Stay in the UK (%)

Source: SoGIS data.

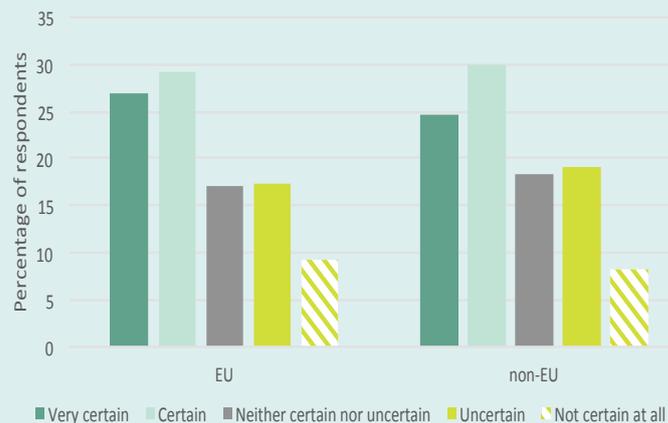


Figure 4: Certainty about Intention to Stay in the UK (%)

Source: SoGIS data.

Plans after Finishing Current Studies

We asked international students what activities they plan to do after they finish their current educational course (Figure 5). About 15% of respondents (14% EU and 15% non-EU) said they intend to go on to further studies in the UK, whilst 11% planned to do so outside the UK. About one in five (26% EU and 19% non-EU) wanted to look for a job in the UK, only slightly more than the 19% who intended to search for jobs elsewhere. Among those who were planning to search for a job in the UK, three quarters were expecting to stay for a year or more. Just 6% (9% EU and 5% non-EU) had already secured a (post-study) job in the UK.

Students who plan to stay indefinitely

We looked in detail at the group who said they would like to stay in the UK indefinitely (16% of all our respondents). We found that just under one in five (21% EU and 16% non-EU) planned to continue their studies in the UK. Over half of this group (52% EU and 60% non-EU) said they would look for a job in the UK while 18% EU and 15% non-EU in this group already had UK job offers. In other words, overall, less than one in ten of all our respondents (12% EU and 8% non-EU) planned to stay indefinitely and find a job in the UK. Among this group who planned to remain in the UK to look for jobs, EU students were more certain of their plans than non-EU students (60% EU vs. 28% non-EU).

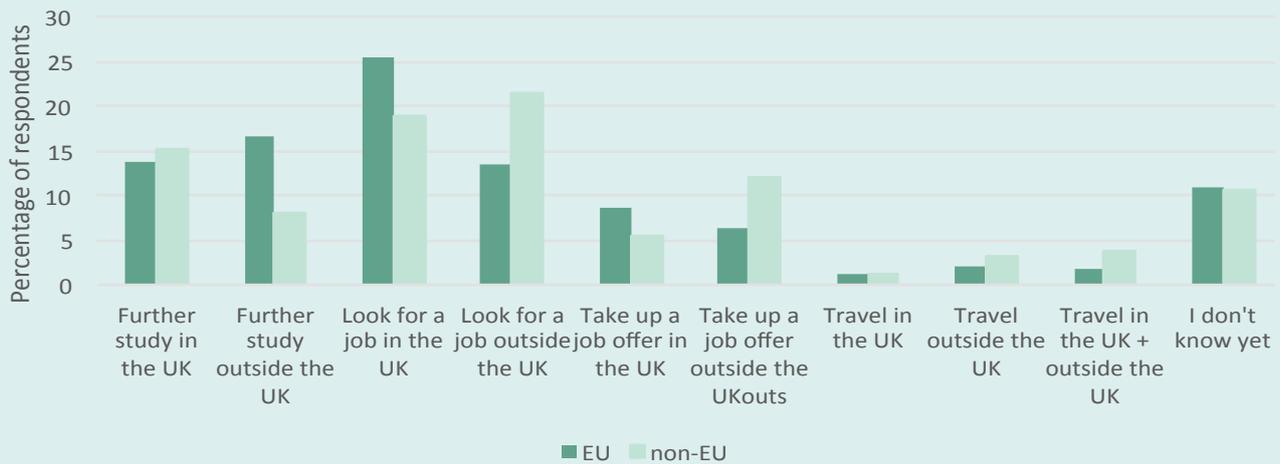


Figure 5: Plans after Finishing Current Studies (%)
Source: SoGIS data.

Policy implications

Despite increased global competition, thousands of international students continue to choose the UK as their study destination because of its reputation for high-quality education. Motivated by the belief that large numbers of international students are staying in the UK after completing their studies, the UK government may further tighten visa regulations.

The evidence from this survey indicates that only a minority of final-year students plan to stay in the UK for a year or more in order to find a job. Furthermore, students who planned to stay longer

than a year are generally not sure of their post-study plans, especially non-EU students. These findings raise questions about the effectiveness of restrictive policies towards international student migration and about the long term impact that such interventions could have on the attractiveness of UK Higher Education.

The research team has planned a follow-up survey to compare students’ actual migration outcomes with their intentions. This will provide a more reliable picture on how many students remain in the UK after completion of their studies and on what they do.

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