International Students: what the public thinks

Excerpt from the National Conversation on Immigration final report

Running over an 18-month period the National Conversation on Immigration comprised over 130 meetings with local citizens and stakeholders in 60 locations across every nation and region of the UK, together with an online survey completed by more than 9,300 people and nationally representative survey of 3,667 adults undertaken by ICM. In total 19,951 people took part in the National Conversation on Immigration.

The final report of the National Conversation on Immigration will be published on Monday 17 September 2018. This excerpt draws from the evidence we collected and presents a detailed picture of public attitudes to student migration in the UK.

Students, not migrants

Half of all international migration has come from outside the EU in recent years and international students are a large component of non-EU migration to the UK. In the academic year 2016-2017, some 442,375 students from outside the UK were studying in UK higher education institutions, 19% of the total higher education student body[i]. Citizens' panels across the UK generally saw internationals students as students and not as migrants. In Guildford we were told *"If they're studying you don't really think about that as immigration. It's when they start work, you start thinking that"*.

Almost all members of the public who took part in the National Conversation on Immigration believed that most international students return to their home countries at the end of their courses and do not remain in the UK - hence they are not 'migrants'. Participants in these discussions only expressed significant concerns about abuse of student visas in three of the 60 citizens' panels, with reference made to media coverage of bogus colleges. Overall, there seems to be a high degree of public confidence in the integrity of student immigration regimes and little concern about the risk of over-staying visas.

International students as contributors

Analysis undertaken by Universities UK suggests that international students generated £10 billion of export earnings and that on- and off-campus spending of international students produced £25.8 billion in gross output for the economy, supporting 206,600 full-time equivalent jobs across the UK[ii].

The citizens' panels generally saw international students as people who made a positive contribution to the universities in which they studied and to the wider community. Many participants knew that international students from outside the EU paid much higher tuition fees than UK and EU students. A few citizens' panels described how the fees of international students benefited the whole student body as it enabled the universities to provide better facilities. Some participants believed that if non-EU student numbers were reduced, UK students would have to pay higher tuition fees.

> *"They are paying £60,000 a year. So we need them to support the universities and the universities actually encourage them to come in, which is fine because they need an education."* Citizens' panel participant, North Tyneside.

The citizens' panels also saw the local spending power of international students. In Middlesbrough, where Teesside University is located, we were told: *"they're normally very wealthy so they do bring a lot of money to the area."* In many parts of the UK, citizens' panels felt that off-campus spending of international students was beneficial for local retailers and had led to the regeneration of high streets.

> *"I think any city which has a significant student population, those people do contribute. The only people I ever see spending the real money in town are the Chinese students in designer shops. It may not be what we're traditionally used to but now Loughborough it's a dynamic place, with all of its new eateries. Without the university, it would really be a bit of a dead town."* Citizens' panel participant, Leicester.

Some citizens' panels believed that student migration had helped universities to expand and bring additional skilled jobs to the area. In Aberystwyth we were the university had helped to reduce population decline in Ceredigion by providing skilled work in a county where much employment is low-skilled and low paid.

'National gain, but local pain' is a sentiment that many of our citizens' panels associated with EU migration. Most people felt that EU migration has brought benefits, but not enough has been done by business and the Government to manage the local pressures of EU migration. This contrasts with their views on student migration. Here, most of those who took part in the citizens' panels saw the *local* gains of international student migration and generally did not associate it with negative local impacts such as pressures on housing and public services. This view was consistent in all areas and tended to be held irrespective of a person's background, job or level of education.

The wider social benefits of student migration
In addition to economic benefits, a number of citizens' panels described other benefits to student migration. The citizens' panel we held in Exeter was aware of the 'soft power' of international students. Significant proportions of the world's political and business leaders have been educated in the UK and it is argued that this experience cements diplomatic good will and makes it more likely that a former student will invest in this country[iii].

> *"They're studying and enhancing their skills which could then be used if they come back to their home country. I also think it improves good will between our country and other countries and I assume the people who come here will end up with responsible jobs in their own country and will have a feeling of good will towards this country".* Citizens' panel participant, Exeter.

In a number of places, such as Aberdeen and Lincoln, participants felt that the presence of international students had enriched the everyday life in the UK's towns and cities. In Aberystwyth, one participant described eating food cooked for him by a group of Malaysian students. The majority of citizens' panels included some graduates, with some participants describing long-lasting friendships with international students.
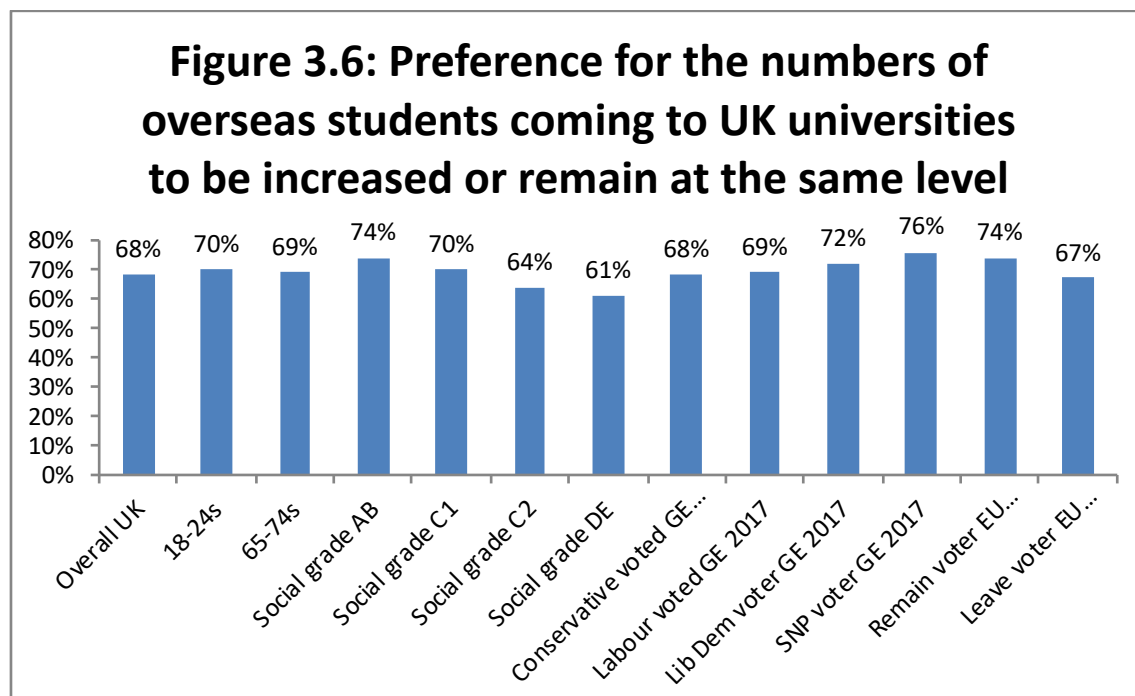
Citizens' panels and stakeholders in Aberdeen, Aberystwyth, Hull and Lincoln believed that the presence of international students had contributed to a more internationalist and outward-looking ethos in these places. Until the arrival of migrants from the EU, students were the main source of ethnic diversity in many of these places. The long history of student

migration made more recent cultural change seem less unusual and threatening, and helped towns and cities absorb newcomers.

We were also struck by the pride that some people took in their local university, with many of these institutions described as the "*finest in the world*" or excelling in particular subjects. This feeling was not only associated with the UK's leading Russell Group universities; participants also praised new institutions such as Central Lancashire, Lincoln, Nottingham Trent and Teesside universities. We believe that the presence of a university in a town can help generate a stronger and more inclusive sense of a local, civic identity which is capable of embracing newcomers.

From the evidence we gathered in our visits across the UK, we believe that the majority of the public believes that international student migration is beneficial to this country. International students are seen as bringing tangible benefits to local communities and there are few concerns about the abuse of the student visa system. This support for student migration was also shown in our two surveys. Although the open survey was largely taken by people who had the strongest opinions about migration, both positive and negative, only two negative comments (out of 9,337 responses) were made about international student migration. There was a significant number of participants in the open survey whose general views about immigration were largely negative, yet who nevertheless expressed no desire to reduce the numbers of international students.

In the nationally representative research by ICM, some 68% of respondents were happy for the number of international students to be increased or remain at the same level (24% increase and 44% remain at the same level). Only 21% of respondents wanted to reduce international student numbers. Support for international students was evident across all age groups, ethnicities, social grades, political affiliation and places (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6: Preference for the numbers of overseas students coming to UK universities to be increased or remain at the same level

Overall UK	68%
18-24s	70%
65-74s	69%
Social grade AB	74%
Social grade C1	70%
Social grade C2	64%
Social grade DE	61%
Conservative voted GE…	68%
Labour voted GE 2017	69%
Lib Dem voter GE 2017	72%
SNP voter GE 2017	76%
Remain voter EU…	74%
Leave voter EU…	67%

n = 3.267. Source: ICM poll for the National Conversation on Immigration, June 2018.

Dissenting voices and town-gown tensions
While there is broad public support for international student migration, there were some dissenting voices. A few participants who had recently been students felt that universities

had become too big as a consequence of increased recruitment from within and outside the UK. This made their experience of being a student less positive.

> *"In Southampton it was just really straining the town like the infrastructure. If I wanted to go to the library, you had to get there really early and leave really late as well. It was just so busy."* Citizens' panel participant, Bexley.

In four of the five citizens' panels we held in Scotland – in Aberdeen, Dumfries, Edinburgh and Paisley – some participants felt that international students were taking the place of Scottish students. This view was more surprising, given that these four citizens' panels held many positive views about other forms of migration. Students who live in Scotland (or are from EU countries) do not have to pay tuition fees in Scottish universities. This seems have fuelled a belief that Scotland's universities prioritise international students from outside the EU over Scottish students for financial reasons. However, our nationally representative poll did not indicate any statistically significant difference in the desire to reduce the number of international students in Scotland (22%) compared with all of the UK (21%). Some 69% of the respondents who lived in Scotland were happy for the numbers of international students to be increased or remain at the same level.

> *"I know with universities it's a strain, because they pay fees, and it can take away from Scottish students who don't pay fees. And then if you have international students who pay £38,000 you obviously want your university to boost them. I don't know how you would resolve this."* Citizens' panel participant, Paisley.

This view was also occasionally voiced outside Scotland, sometimes with the accusation that a particular university was not interested in local students and the local community. We also found tensions emerging in more isolated areas, usually places where low-wage, low-skilled jobs were now predominant and where traditional industries had declined. Berwick-upon-Tweed, Carlisle, Chesterfield and North Tyneside were among the places where participants shared concerns that there was insufficient skills training for young people and policy had become too focused on the higher education sector. Many people wanted to see greater investment in training to better equip local residents with the skills they need to find work, and lessen reliance on migrant workers.

> *"There is so much emphasis on going to university that we have forgotten about the 50% who don't."* Citizens' panel participant, North Tyneside.

There were also some significant town-gown tensions in some of the places we visited, particularly, Aberdeen, Durham, Edinburgh, Southampton and Swansea. Conflict over parking, pressures on GP practices, late night noise and poorly-maintained private rental accommodation appeared to be issues of concern for some people. In Durham, someone who was reasonably positive about migration and a graduate himself told us that he *"hated all students."* In some of these places, participants felt that new student accommodation had changed the character of some neighbourhoods. However, it was notable that in Durham and Swansea, where the town-gown conflict appeared greatest, the citizens' panel did not specifically see international students as a problem, rather the overall student body and the university institutions.

The 60 stakeholder meetings included representatives from universities. They were generally aware of these town-gown tensions and in some cases described initiatives that had been taken to deal with them. The City of Lincoln Council has brought in landlord licensing schemes in some areas to make sure that rental property is maintained. This helps prevent neighbourhoods with large amounts of such accommodation going into a spiral of decline. The council, together with the police, a number of neighbourhood associations and the two universities run an annual 'shush' campaign to reduce late night noise in the city.

Community links
Overall, the concerns that were raised about student migration and universities were minority views, apart from in Banbury, Durham and Swansea, where they appeared to be held by most citizens' panel participants. And as noted above, international students were not blamed for town-gown tensions; rather they were seen as the responsibility of all students and the university. Across the UK, support for international student migration is currently high and most people see the benefits that universities bring to towns and cities. But local residents do not have an endless supply of goodwill; already in some places there are signs that this support is starting to unravel. Academic staff, students and local communities are starting to ask questions about the size of universities and whether bigger always means better, both in terms of students' experiences and the impact on the local community. This suggests a case for reviewing the size of universities, moving to a landscape of more institutions that are smaller in size and more widely distributed across the UK so as to spread higher education's economic and social benefits.

We also believe that some universities need to renew their links with their local communities. Many already do much good work, through activities such as student volunteering and programmes to widen the participation in higher education of under-represented groups. But we feel that in some universities community links are weak and uncoordinated, being left to individuals or particular departments. In our visits we saw some universities making much of local commitments, but others who expressed ambivalence about these links. It was often the research-led universities that saw global reach and local engagement as an either/or issue, with an implicit contrast between globally and locally-engaged institutions. *Indeed,* one stakeholder from a Russell Group university said that local engagement "was the role of the other university", a post-1992 teaching university in the area.

Such renewal of community links is even more necessary since the EU referendum. In the months after the June 2016 vote, academics have been among the most vocal critics of Brexit, with some of our universities emerging as Remain islands in a sea of Leave voting communities. As the National Conversation on Immigration has progressed, we have become concerned that not enough is being done by universities to bridge these social divides. We are also troubled that some academic staff who have attended stakeholder events have sounded contemptuous of those who voted Leave or been unwilling to engage with those who voted differently, for example, accusing them of being *"misinformed Daily Mail readers".* If universities are to retain public support, including public consent for recruiting international students, they need to reach out and have strong links into their local communities.

Stakeholder views
The stakeholder meetings, citizens' panels and open survey asked participants about the policy changes they wanted, so as to make migration work better for everyone. It was notable that almost no-one in the citizens' panels or who took our open survey wanted changes to regulations on student migration, even in places such as Durham and Swansea where attitudes were less positive.

University staff attended stakeholder meetings in many places we visited, both academic staff and those responsible for international student recruitment and welfare. They raised five issues that they wanted changing, first and foremost the removal of international students from the net migration target and clarity on post-Brexit regulations for university staff and students. Stakeholders who attended our meetings argued that including students in the net migration target had impacted on Home Office and sent out the wrong message in countries from which the UK recruits international students.

> "*The debate about immigration and the net migration target means that students in India are now looking elsewhere, to our competitors.*"
> University stakeholder, London.

University stakeholders also wanted greater clarity on the Government's future intentions on student loans and tuition fees for EU nationals. Many university stakeholders were concerned that any move to significantly increase tuition fees for EU nationals either partially or to a full international fee would impact on student enrolment. There have been attempts to model the impact of EU and international fee harmonisation, with one paper suggesting that all UK universities apart from Oxford and Cambridge would experience a reduction in fee revenue as a consequence of such a scenario.[iv] The decrease in student enrolments and this tuition fee income would be most strongly felt by the post-1992 universities – often the institutions that have strong local links and tend to see their role as educating local students.

Many stakeholders wanted the re-opening of post-study work visas for non-EU graduates, a demand that was shared by NHS and business stakeholders as it would enable them to recruit people who are already living in the UK.

Stakeholders from higher education also felt that operation of the Tier 2 work visas system made it more difficult to recruit academic staff. There were many complaints about the administrative demands placed on universities by the Home Office. Higher education institutions are required to monitor the attendance of international students, in addition to the requirement for students to register with the police. While appreciating the need for immigration enforcement, university stakeholders wanted the Home Office to have more consideration for students' experiences in the UK which shapes their perception of this country. Given that compliance with visa conditions is now high among international students, stakeholders argued that regulations could be simplified.

> "*The whole system does not feel welcoming to students... It places huge demands on us* [the university]*. The Home Office guidance runs to 800 pages. A gargantuan amount of data is collected on each student, but is that ever used? I don't know.*"
> University stakeholder, Scotland.

Integrating international students

University stakeholders wanted the time that international students spent in the UK to be enjoyable and positive. They felt that universities needed to look at the experiences of international students in the UK, particularly in relation to their integration. They felt that more effort was needed to help Chinese students, in particular, to integrate into the wider student body and the life of the places where they study. This is an issue that has been highlighted in a number of recent studies, from the US, UK and elsewhere[v]. UKCISA is the organisation that advocates for international students and in 2004 its research suggested that just 15% of Chinese students said they had a British friend[vi]. We were also told about racial attacks on Chinese students in the UK.

Students from China comprise over one fifth of the non-UK domiciled student body and their numbers far exceed any other national group[vii]. Moreover, they tend to be over-represented in some subjects such as the sciences and economics and often tend to live in the most expensive halls of residence. There is obviously a financial risk to universities if recruitment from China falls due to student dissatisfaction. Although we were told about initiatives to help the social integration of Chinese students – for example, combining home and international student enrolment or having a conversation about integration with all students – stakeholders felt that these could be adopted more widely across the UK.

Policy recommendations

The citizens' panels did not see international students as migrants, because they believed that most of them returned home at the end of their studies. Participants also had very few concerns about the abuse of the student visa system. Generally, international students were seen as contributors, both culturally and economically. Moreover, the benefits of international student migration were felt tangibly and locally, and few of those who attended the citizens' panels wanted to reduce their numbers, a finding supported in the nationally representative survey. Policies that directly or indirectly discourage the recruitment of international students are simply not endorsed by most people in the UK.

The UK's universities are one of this country's greatest assets. Apart from the US, no other country has so many academic institutions in the world's top 100. Politics and policy needs to maximise the benefits that universities bring to the UK, both economically and in terms of soft power. International student migration, if well planned, benefits the whole student body, with the additional income generated by international students invested in new facilities, research, teaching and outreach.

There are many arguments in favour of increasing international student migration to the UK. With growth, however, comes a greater responsibility to local communities. Success should not mean complacency and a culture of expansion at any cost. Universities must be seen to serve local communities if they are to retain public support, including support for recruiting international students. We believe that any major expansion of student numbers must be led and coordinated by the Government, with the aim of spreading the economic and social benefits, that universities can bring, more widely than at present.

With these findings in mind, immigration and education policy should aim to reflect public views of the success of UK higher education in politics and policy. Specifically, policy should aim to:

- Make sure that the UK continues to be seen as an attractive and welcoming destination for international students.
- Increase international student migration in a sustainable manner over the next 10 years.
- Use international student migration and universities to boost regional and local growth in under-performing areas in the UK and to realise the local social benefits of universities.
- Renew the links that universities have with their local communities, in order to strengthen public support for the higher education sector and for recruitment of international students.

Noting the four aims set out above, we propose the following recommendations, which are addressed to the Government and to the higher education sector.

1. The Government should publish a three-year plan for migration, which should include measures to increase international student migration.
If the Government aimed to bring the number of international students up to 500,000, an increase of 13%, over a five year period, input-output modelling suggests that this would support 19,000 extra jobs and add £1.82 billion additional Gross Value Added (GVA) to UK GDP[viii][ix]. Although some of these benefits accrue nationally, increased international student migration also benefits local communities by generating employment and driving local economic growth.

2. The Government should provide immediate clarity on the status of EU students after the Brexit transition period.

3. The Home Office and universities should review the operation of the Tier 4 student visa system with the aim of simplification both for students and for universities.

4. The Government should establish a new regional post-study work visa for graduates of STEM subjects.
Although there are small and specific visa allocations for graduates, the UK no longer offers post-study visas. Its position on post-study visas contrasts with many other OECD countries. At the same time there is substantial evidence to suggest that post-study work visas are one of the factors that potential students take into account when choosing their destination country[x]. The UK's current stance puts it at a competitive disadvantage when it come to attracting students.

Reinstating a post-study work visa would help the UK attract international students. We recommend that the Government introduce a three-year, post-study visa for graduates of STEM open to those with post-graduate degrees, as well as those who gained first class and 2:1 degrees after undergraduate courses. We also recommend that the Government, with advice from the Migration Advisory Committee, puts in place quotas for post-study work visas for each region or nation of the UK. Those who held such visas would be obliged to work in a particular region, ensuring that the benefits of skilled migration are distributed across the UK.

5. All universities should produce a community plan, involving university staff and local residents in its development and implementation.
We recommend that all universities should be obliged to develop a community plan that sets out how they work with local communities. As well as university staff, the development of this plan should also involve local residents, sixth formers, businesses and councils. It would cover the university's cultural offer, activities to widen local participation, and also look at how a university can help local industry. Such a plan should also help reduce pressure or distortion of local housing markets brought by universities. It might also consider how international students could become better integrated into local communities.

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[i] HESA statistics HE student enrolment by HE provider and domicile 2016-17

[ii] Universities UK (2016) *International Students and Immigration: a parliamentary briefing,* London: UUK.

[iii] Hill, C. and Beadle, S. (2014) *The art of attraction: soft power and the UK's role in the world,* London: British Academy.

[iv] Conlon, G., Ladher, R. And Halterbeck, M. (2017) *The determinants of international student demand for UK higher education,* London: Higher Education Policy Institute.

[v] See, for example, Spencer Oatey, H., Dauber, D., Jing Jing and Wang Lifei (2016) 'Chinese students social integration into the university community: hearing students voices' in *Higher Education* Vol 74 (5): 739-756.

[vi] Cited in Oatey et al, 2016.

[vii] 95,090 Chinese students were studying in UK universities in 2017-2017.

[viii] See methodology used in Kelly, U. and McNicoll, I. (2017) *The Economic Impact of International Students in Wales,* Gordon, Scotland: Viewforth Consulting.

[ix] Universities UK (2017) *The economic impact of international students*, London: UUK.

[x] Bodycott, P. (2009) 'Choosing a higher education study abroad destination' in the *Journal of Research in International Education*, Vol 8: 349-373.