

Parliamentary Briefing
Student visa policy and migration numbers
6 June 2013

1. Introduction

million+ is a university think-tank which provides evidence and analysis on policy and funding regimes that impact on universities, students and the services that universities and other higher education institutions provide for business, the NHS, education and the not-for-profit sectors. In 2011 we published *International Higher Education: missing an opportunity?*¹. We welcome the further opportunity provided by this debate to examine the Government's approach to international students and the apparent reluctance of Ministers to take account of the views of five Select Committees that international student numbers should be removed from the migration numbers.

2. The Numbers

International (non-UK) students in UK higher education in 2011-12 totalled

- 435,230 compared with 428,225 in 2010-11 (an increase of 2%) with full-time undergraduate study up 8%, full-time research postgraduates up 5% and full-time 'other' postgraduates up 2%.

Ministers assert that international higher education student numbers have increased and there is no cap on student numbers. They also say that counting international students in the migration figures complies with UN guidelines².

These arguments fail to address the following crucial points:

- **In 2011-12 full-time *taught* postgraduate courses, the second largest category of non-UK students, declined by 2%.**
- **All other categories were static or fell.**
- **There has never been a cap on the number of international students who can be accepted; they pay (at a minimum) full cost fees. Facilities can therefore be expanded as numbers increase.**
- **In key competitor countries such as Australia and the US international students are not included in net migration figures.**
- **Overall the UK is now losing market share.**

3. The viability of courses

In 2011-12 international students made up

- 14% of full-time first degree students and 13% of all first degree students
- 69% of full-time taught postgraduates and 46% of all taught postgraduates
- 48% of full-time research degree students and 41% of all research postgraduates

¹ million+ http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/reports/INT_REPORT_Missing_an_Opportunity_FINAL.pdf

² In a written Parliamentary Answer on 20 May the Immigration Minister Matthew Hancock said 'Students will continue to count in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) net migration figures because students who stay for more than 12 months are long-term migrants, according to the UN definition. The ONS has recently changed its methodology so that in future it will be possible to identify students in emigration as well as immigration flows. This will begin to provide a more accurate measure of the contribution of students to overall net migration from August 2013'.

International students help sustain the UK's **research base** especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematics: they account for over 40% of UK postgraduate students, 50% of those doing full-time research degrees. Policies that undermine the vitality of the UK's international higher education market have a direct impact on the viability of courses offered to UK home students.

4. The value of the UK's international Higher Education market

A research paper from the Department for Business Innovation and Skills called [Estimating the value to the UK of Education Exports](#) (June 2011) estimates that in 2008-09 tuition fee income to the UK was worth **over £4 billion** - £2.4 billion for HE, £139 million for FE and £880 million for English language. The same [BIS research paper](#) estimates the total value of UK education and training exports to the UK economy at **£14 billion**, with a projection that this could rise as high as £26 billion by 2025. The policies of the Government and the Home Office are undermining a major UK export success story.

The UK also benefits from the **global connections** which international students generate. Many of the main 'source' countries are also key strategic partners for the UK.

Other positive impacts of international students on the UK are well-recorded:

- International **fee income** enables colleges and universities to invest in additional, enhanced or expanded facilities, and to offer specialist courses which would not be viable for the UK student market alone.
- There is **no element of subsidy for non-EU students** and no direct link between the numbers of places available for 'home' (UK and EU) students and 'overseas' students.
- Local economies are net beneficiaries from the presence of international students even taking into account the costs of any services which these students may use.
- The money that international students spend sustains thousands of **jobs** across the UK economy, both in colleges and universities, and in local economies.

Vice-Chancellor

'I estimate that my university has lost £15m in income in the last two years - to say nothing of the loss of income to local shopkeepers and businesses'.

5. Credibility Interviews and the counting of international student numbers

The Government has pledged to reduce overall net migration by 2015. By June 2012, 70,000 fewer student visas had been issued than in the previous 12 months. So long as international students are counted in migration figures they will remain a target by which the Government can seek to demonstrate that this ambition has been achieved.

The Home Office has now extended the use of 'credibility interviews' and will conduct 100,000 such interviews every year. A report by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) suggests that these interviews will provide a further means of reducing international student numbers further.

UKBA conducted pilot interviews between December 2011 and February 2012 prior to announcing the '100,000 interviews' policy. According to the Home Office this pilot found that almost a third of students could be judged as 'not genuine', although the proportion was 14 per cent for university applicants.

To gauge the impact of this first wave of interviews, UKCISA gathered responses from 83 institutions, including 57 in higher education. The findings were published in March 2013 in *Tier 4 Credibility Interviews: UKCISA Survey Report*³. This concluded that interviews resulted in "unpredictable and subjective" decisions.

³ http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/about/material_media/credibility-interviews-report.pdf

- One student was allegedly refused a visa because border staff thought that study in the UK was a bad use of her deceased father's money, although this decision was eventually overturned.
- One student was rejected because they had not previously travelled outside Pakistan and so could "not demonstrate any previous compliance with the immigration rules of another country".
- Officers were "sceptical" about the intentions of any student not going to study at a Russell Group university.
- Several students were refused visas because they could not give "specific module content" about an undergraduate foundation course.
- Visas to international students were refused on "arbitrary" grounds after the introduction of interviews to test applicants' English skills and genuineness (universities have to demonstrate that students have met comprehensive English tests but UKBA is using short interviews to make its own assessment of candidates English).
- It was unclear what training or qualifications the [officers] had to make them able to decide who was a 'genuine' student" and who could speak an appropriate level of English.

Recent reports suggest that students in one country are being required to travel to a small number of centres to undertake Skype interviews conducted from Sheffield.

The massive extension of credibility interviews will undermine the points-based system which was introduced to reduce the arbitrary decision-making which had undermined the probity of the student visa applications process previously. The number of visa refusals also impacts on UKBA's assessment of a university's Highly Trusted Status.

Dominic Scott, chief executive of UKCISA, has spoken of the fears that the measures were "yet one more administrative mechanism to reduce quite substantially the number of students coming to the UK in pursuit of net migration policies".

6. Conclusions

The Home Office has targeted a number of groups to achieve a fall in migration numbers between now and the end of the Parliament. These are:

- Dependants and family reunion
- Skilled workers
- International students.

Families outside of the EU constitute only 20% of the migration figures. Ministers should clarify the reduction in the number of international students that they are seeking to achieve by 2015 and explain how they expect this figure to be achieved. To remove all suspicions that international students are simply being used as an easy target to achieve the Government's ambition of reducing net migration by 2015, international student numbers should be removed from net migration numbers and the UK Government should adopt the same policy as the US and Australia - neither of which count international students in their migration figures.

For more information about this briefing or the work of million+ please email: info@millionplus.ac.uk or tel 020 7717 1655 or 07795645241 @million+ | June 2013