

Hard Evidence: how many foreign students stay in the UK?

By Carlos Vargas-Silva

11/08/2015

Published at: <https://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-how-many-foreign-students-stay-in-the-uk-45506>

The UK government has placed extra restrictions on non-EU students staying in the UK after finishing their studies and there are reports that the home secretary, Theresa May, plans to restrict student migration even further. The restrictions have been adopted as part of the UK government's attempt to reduce annual net migration – the difference between the number of people coming into and leaving the UK – to fewer than 100,000.

Students who arrive or leave the UK for more than 12 months are counted as migrants in official net migration statistics in the same way as those who come and go for other reasons. Unsurprisingly, there has been significant opposition to students being included in the migration target from universities, further education institutions and public figures.

In light of potential new restrictions on student migration, with leaked proposals suggesting students may need to show more evidence of financial savings when they arrive, it's worth evaluating the recent trends in student migration to the UK.

There are two key questions: is there evidence of a recent downward trend in international student numbers, particularly non-EU students? And are non-EU students “temporary” migrants or do they tend to stay in the UK and add to the overall population?

How many students come and go

There are two key sources of student migration data to the UK: administrative visa data from the Home Office and International Passenger Survey (IPS) data from the Office for National Statistics.

The sources diverge as to the actual number of students arriving, but are consistent in two findings: student migration comprises a significant share of international migration to the UK, and it has declined since 2009.

In 2014, there were 200,000 study-related visas granted to main applicants, according to the Home Office. This is a slight increase (+0.4%) compared to 2013, but lower than the peak of 273,000 in 2009. The IPS data suggests a similar trend, as the graph below shows.

Estimates of number of non-EU students in the UK



Source: Home Office and Office for National Statistics [Get the data](#)

There is also substantial annual variation across student groups, including type of course, which correlate well with restrictions and clampdowns on “bogus colleges” imposed by the government during the previous parliament. These have been particularly restrictive on non-university students, such as those going to further education colleges.

In 2014, the number of university-sponsored study visa applications was 169,000, a slight increase from 2013. This was higher than the 2010 total of 143,000. But the biggest drop was in the further education sector – any education after secondary school that isn't university. There was a 10% decrease in the number of study visa applications in the further education sector in 2014, which dropped to 19,000 from 65,000 in 2010.

It's important to place all these numbers into the context of the government's push to reduce net migration. If 100% of students left the country within a few years, then over the long run they would not contribute to net migration, even under the current statistical measures. This is because students would add to immigration numbers when they arrived and add to emigration numbers when they left, with a net impact of zero over time.

Switching visas

Student visas expire shortly after the course ends. However, student visa holders may be able to stay legally in the UK if they switch to another category, such as work or family.

Switching from study to work has become harder in the past few years because of the elimination of the post-study work programme in 2012. Some policies that facilitate students' transition into the labour market after graduation using what are called Tier 2 visas do still remain in place.

People switching from study to work are currently not subject to the cap on the number of Tier 2 sponsorships, which is set at 20,700 a year, divided monthly. This means they currently do not have to meet newly increased salary requirements that kick in if this monthly cap is met.

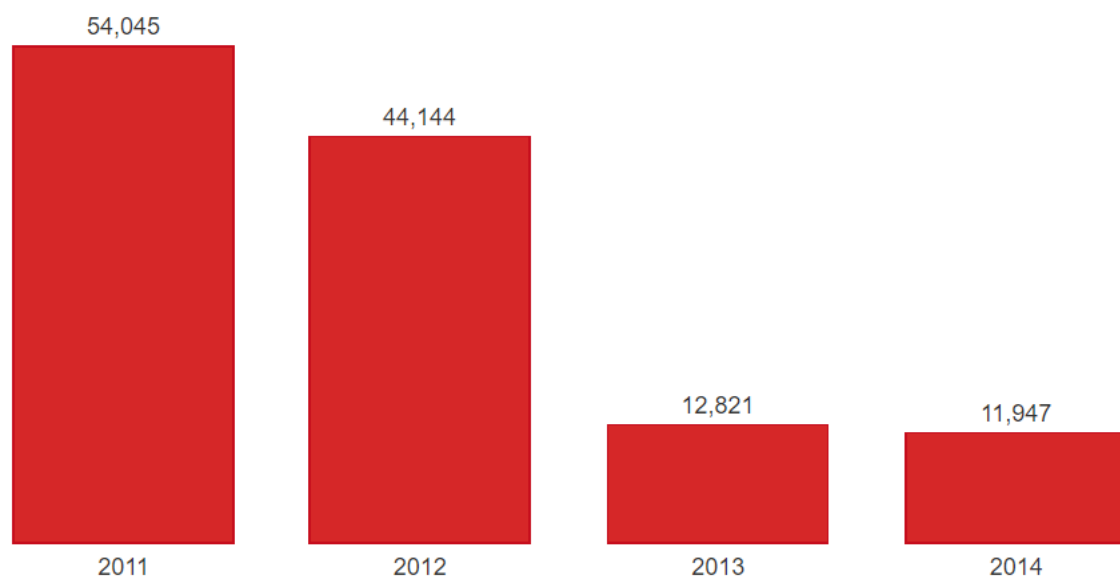
In June 2015, the first time the monthly cap was met, and people earning less than £46,000 per year were refused visas. Employers who take on a student who has switched to a work visa are also exempt from the requirement to show they have looked for UK or EEA candidates.

But the UK government has recently announced further restrictions on the rights of students to stay in the UK after finishing their studies.

The number of people switching from study into other categories fell substantially between 2011-12 and 2013-14, as the graph below shows. In 2014, fewer than 12,000 people extended their stay in the UK by switching from study to another category. The majority (59%) switched into work, while 33% switched into the family category.

Students switching from study to a different visa category

(main visa applicants only)



The annual number of students granted entry visas to the UK (as main applicants) has fluctuated around 200,000 over the past few years. In other words, the vast majority of people who enter on student visas are not switching into other categories.

Adding to the net migration target

The IPS asks respondents why they are coming to the UK, allowing us to identify students on their way in. Since 2012, respondents who are surveyed on the way out of the UK are also asked why they originally came. This allows an estimate of the number of people who come as students and – eventually – the number of them that leave.

The IPS suggests that 135,000 non-EU students entered the UK for study in 2014. The number of people who had previously arrived as students and who are estimated to have emigrated from the UK in 2014 was 44,000.

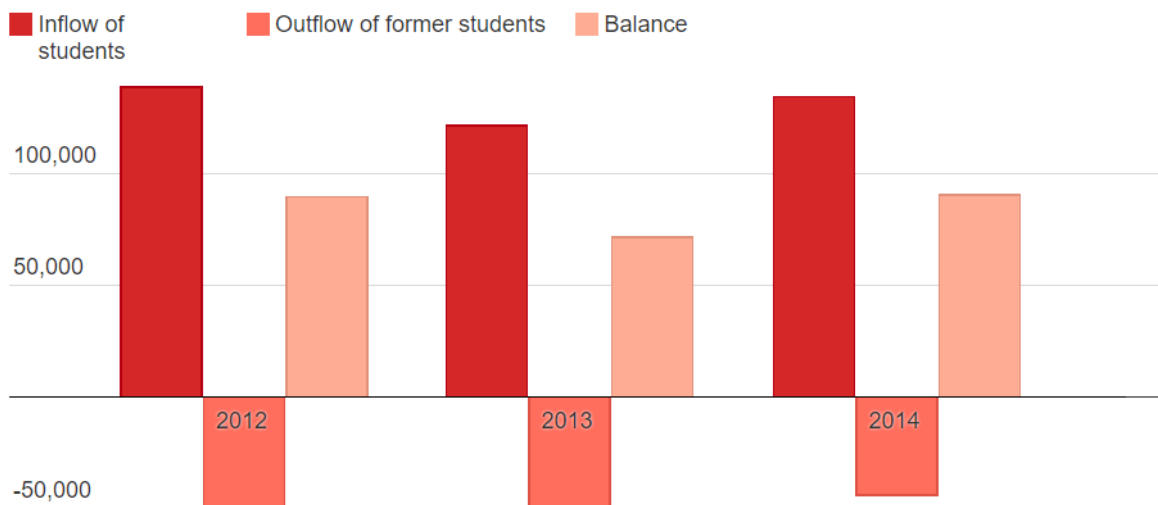
Taken together, this suggests that in 2014, net migration of students according to the IPS was 91,000 – that is, 91,000 more new students arrived than former students left. This snapshot must be interpreted carefully, because the people arriving and leaving are part of different cohorts. We do not yet know how many of the 2014 student cohort will leave, as many are not expected to do so for a few years.

Also, survey respondents must recall their initial reason for coming to the country a few years earlier. Since mixed motivations for migration are common, it is possible that respondents may have been systematically less likely to say they arrived as a student when leaving – especially if they also worked for a couple of years after graduation.

However, if the current number of student inflows and outflows remained stable at these levels for several years, it would suggest that a majority of students were not going home. For the past three years the estimated inflows of students has been significantly higher than the number of self-reported former students estimated to be leaving, as the third graph below shows in the balance column.

Inflows of students and outflows of former students

(non-EU citizens only)



Those fighting the restrictions on student migration often argue that students bring economic benefits, are not seen as migrants by the public and only stay in the UK temporarily. There seems to be substantial evidence in favour of the first two points. However, data sources on the extent to which students remain in the UK after their studies point in different directions and students could be adding to the UK population. The next few years should provide more insights on this possibility.