Office for
National Statistics

Population Briefing

International student migration

What do the statistics tell us?

January 2016

Population Briefing

Student migration - what do the statistics tell us?

1. Introduction

1.1   International migration is a topic that is attracting a significant level of interest in current political debate and is high on the agenda for policy makers in central and local government. One area of debate is the impact of student migration, for example, on net migration.

1.2   This briefing sets out what the latest student migration figures show, the impact on net migration, potential traps when interpreting the figures and possible future developments of data sources.

2. Summary

- The UK attracts large numbers of students with a higher number of overseas residents coming to study in the UK for a year or more (provisionally 192,000 in the year to June 2015) than UK residents studying abroad (24,000). In recent years, the UK was the second most popular global destination for international students after the USA[1].
- Overseas students coming to the UK are included in immigration, emigration and net migration figures, in line with international best practice, meaning that they are included in the figures used to produce national and local population estimates and to monitor the government's aspiration to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands.
- Although it is sometimes argued that net migration figures should exclude overseas students since students are normally 'temporary migrants' and would be counted out in subsequent emigration statistics, available data suggest that some of those people who say they come to study do not actually leave the UK at the end of their courses.
- The International Passenger Survey (IPS) shows a gap between the numbers of immigrants arriving to study and the numbers of emigrants who had previously immigrated to study. 184,000[2] students immigrated to the UK in the year ending June 2015, compared with 57,000 emigrants who had immigrated to study in a previous year. This gap has been fairly consistent since 2012 when these data first became available, which shows that international students have contributed positively to net migration and UK population growth.
- For the last 3 years, around three-quarters of international students were non-EU nationals and the gap between the number of non-EU students immigrating and non-EU former students emigrating has averaged around 84,000 each year (and was 93,000 in provisional estimates for the year ending June 2015).
- The gap could be as a result of a number of factors:
  - Students staying longer than initially expected and obtaining extensions of stay in the UK, whether as a student or in other categories such as skilled work;
  - Students finishing their courses and overstaying their visas;

[1] Education at a Glance OECD 2014: http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm

[2] The 184,000 refers to provisional estimates from the International Passenger Survey (IPS), which records an emigrant's main reason for previously immigrating to the UK. The earlier figure of 192,000 is the more complete 'Long-Term International Migration' (LTIM) figure, which includes adjustments for people who change their migration intentions and cross the land border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. LTIM is not available for previous reason for immigration, so IPS figures are used for comparison.

o The IPS not completely recording student flows, either due to sampling or non-sampling errors (such as not responding to the survey or responding incorrectly).

There are some data sources that provide information to address these possible causes but the statistics in this area have limitations and would benefit from the greater use of administrative data, including the linking of data sources. There may also be a case for changes to administrative systems so that they can provide a clearer picture.

3. Latest figures

Figure 1: Long-Term International Migration (LTIM) for formal study, 1991 to 2014, UK
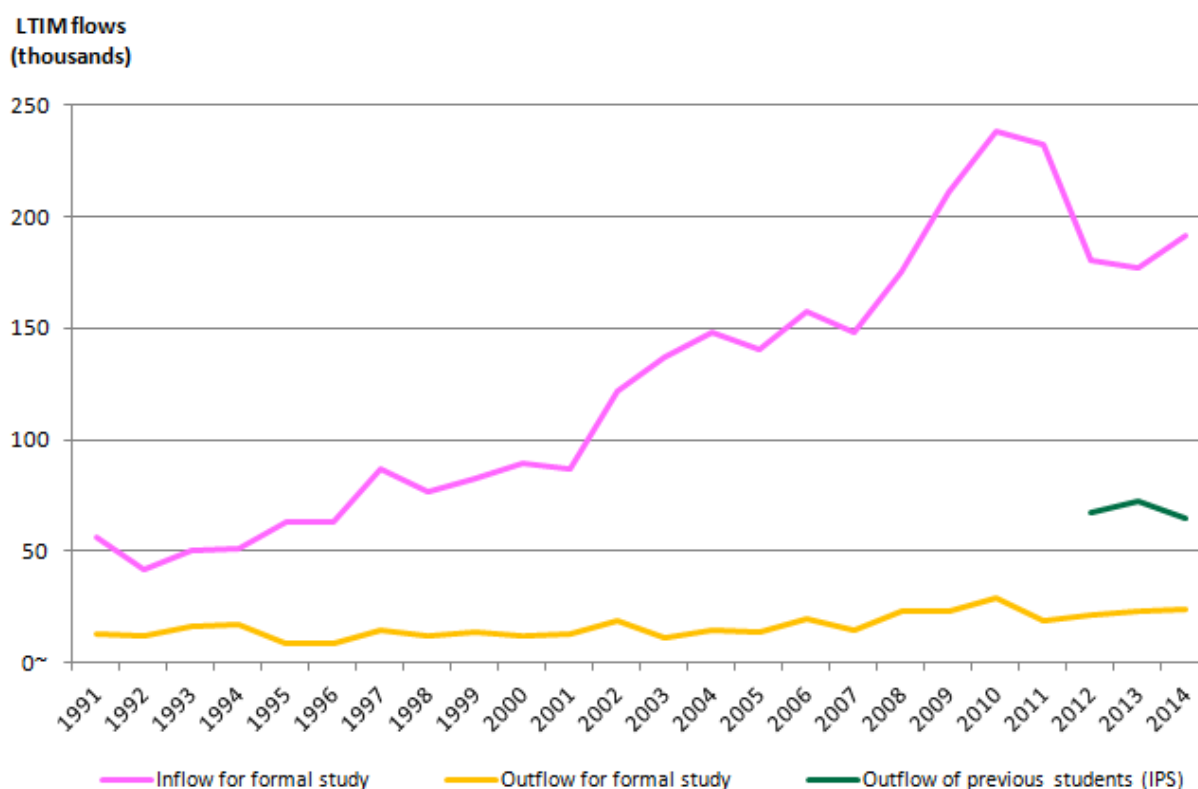
Source: ONS

Note: The above shows calendar years only, however the latest available figures are provisional estimates for the year ending (YE) June 2015 that show 192,000 immigrated for study, 24,000 emigrated for study and 57,000 emigrated who had immigrated for study in previous years.

Immigration for study in the UK has increased over the last two decades

3.1   During the 1990s, immigration for study by long-term migrants (those who stay for a year or more) was between 40,000 and 90,000.

3.2   Since the early 2000s, long-term immigration for study steadily increased, reaching a peak of 238,000 in 2010. Since then, immigration for study has fallen but has recently increased again to 191,000 in 2014 and in the year ending June 2015 was 192,000 (provisional estimate). These patterns are consistent with the trends shown in the Home Office visa and Higher Education system data, once the different coverage of those statistics is taken into account (Section 6). The fall in immigration from 2011 has been concentrated in the Further Education sector as a result of tighter immigration rules, particularly those in relation to ensuring compliance by sponsors.
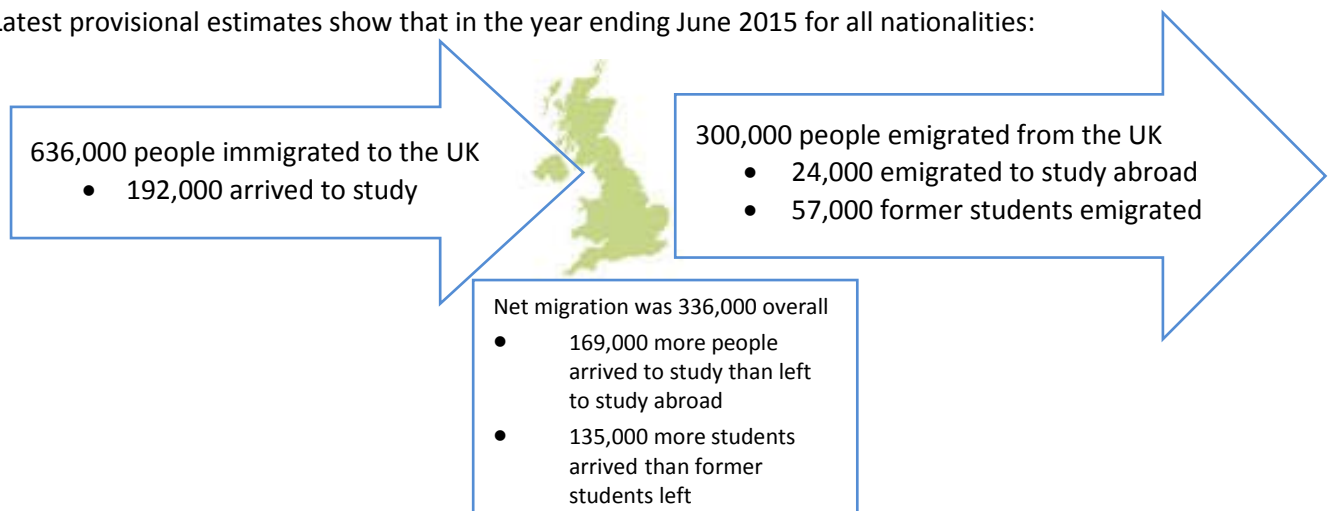
3.3   These changes mean that currently almost three-quarters of international students are non-EU nationals and of these over 80% arrive for Higher Education (HE). Provisional IPS data show that in the year ending June 2015, 131,000 non-EU nationals, 47,000 EU nationals and 7,000 British nationals immigrated to study. Visa statistics show that most non-EU student immigrants now arrive for HE rather than Further Education (FE). In the same period, 167,425 visas were granted for HE and 17,172 were granted for FE. The rest of the visas were granted for independent schools and English language schools.

3.4   Home Office visa data and the IPS long-term immigration estimates for student migration show broadly similar trends overall (see Section 6). There has been a decline in South Asian (including Indian) students and an increase in East Asian (including Chinese) students.[3]

4. Impact of students on net migration

4.1   It is important to note that in any year, student immigrants and student emigrants will be discrete groups of people - non-UK residents coming to the UK to study and (mainly) UK residents moving abroad to study. There will be some immigrants who come to the UK to study for a year or more and then subsequently leave to study abroad but these are a small number - most of those who immigrate to study and subsequently leave will do so for another purpose, such as to work.

Latest provisional estimates show that in the year ending June 2015 for all nationalities:

636,000 people immigrated to the UK
- 192,000 arrived to study

300,000 people emigrated from the UK
- 24,000 emigrated to study abroad
- 57,000 former students emigrated

Net migration was 336,000 overall
- 169,000 more people arrived to study than left to study abroad
- 135,000 more students arrived than former students left

4.2   Total net migration figures include all people who intend to migrate for 12 months or longer. This is based on the UN definition[4] of long-term migration, which is widely accepted and used internationally.

4.3   The impact of overseas students on overall net migration will be affected by how many students remain in the UK beyond their term of study. If all student migrants leave after completing their studies then removing them from the net migration figures would, over the long-term, have no overall impact on long-term net migration figures. This is because each migrant coming to the UK to study for a year or more should be counted as an immigrant on entry and as an emigrant on exit with a net long-term change in population size of zero. Any more permanent impact of student migration on overall net migration figures therefore largely relates to the extent to which those coming to the UK to study stay beyond their course length for additional years. If all students coming for a year or more stayed permanently and none

---

[3] The number of study visas issued (excluding student visitors) to Indian nationals fell from a peak of 68,238 in the year ending June 2010 to 11,864 exactly 5 years later, whereas the number of visas to study issued to Chinese nationals rose from 39,695 to 68,294 over the same period. Latest figures are available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2015/study.
[4] http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesM/SeriesM_58rev1e.pdf (page 18)

left then the UK would experience an annual increase in population equal to the number of students who arrive.

4.4   When student migration to the UK is in a period of growth, as it generally has been in the UK since the 1990s, then student numbers will also make a positive contribution to net migration during that period because the numbers arriving in any year will tend to be larger than the numbers leaving (reflecting the lower number of previous years' arrivals). If student migration were to decline, the opposite will be true and the net impact would be negative for a period.

5.   The gap between numbers of students immigrating and former students emigrating

5.1   After immigrating to study and completing their initial studies, there are 3 main outcomes for students:

(i)   They emigrate;

(ii)   They remain in the UK legally. For non-EU students, this means they will have obtained an extension to their visa for study or another purpose (such as to work or marry). It is expected that they will emigrate at some point unless given further leave to remain or allowed to settle permanently;

(iii)   They overstay their visa and remain in the UK illegally (non-EU).

Emigration of former students

5.2   In 2012, a new question was introduced to the International Passenger Survey. The aim of this question was to estimate how many emigrants had previously arrived to study in the UK. Table 1 shows the latest provisional data for the year ending June 2015 and comparisons for the previous 2 years.

Table 1: IPS estimates of emigration flows for those whose former reason for immigration was study, by nationality, UK

Year ending	Total	EU Nationals	Non-EU Nationals
June 2013	70,000 (+/- 10,000)	16,000 (+/- 7,000)	50,000 (+/- 6,000)
June 2014	72,000 (+/- 11,000)	18,000 (+/- 9,000)	51,000 (+/- 6,000)
June 2015 (provisional)	57,000 (+/- 8,000)	16,000 (+/- 5,000)	38,000 (+/- 5,000)

Source: ONS

Note: Figures in brackets show the 95% confidence interval for each estimate. Please see our International Statistics First Time User Guide for more information on confidence intervals.
The total emigration figures include British former students and do not match the sum of EU nationals and non-EU nationals.

5.3   When these data are viewed alongside numbers immigrating to study, it is clear to see that these numbers are of a different order of magnitude. For non-EU, immigration to study in the year ending June 2015 was provisionally estimated to be 131,000. Although the data will refer to different cohorts of students, there is an implied net difference of 93,000.

5.4   The gap could be as a result of a number of factors:

o   Students staying longer than initially expected and obtaining extensions of stay in the UK, whether as a student or in other categories such as skilled work.

o Students finishing their courses and overstaying their visas.
o The IPS not completely recording student flows, either due to sampling or non-sampling errors. For example, upon arrival to the UK a Masters student may say they are intending to stay 1 year, but as their course ends before this time, they leave within 1 year, making them a short-term migrant upon departure.

Data sources are available that can provide some information on these factors, but they cannot fully explain the difference (see Section 7).

Students who remain in the UK

5.5   For non-EU students, data are available on extensions of stay in the UK. The number of students who are granted an extension is a useful figure when considering how long students will be in the UK before they leave. In 2014, 75,000 were granted an extension of stay in the UK to study. Of these, 63,000 were granted to former students and the remainder were granted to those previously in non-study categories. The 75,000 extensions is lower than the average for the previous 3 years of 127,000 a year (90,000 for those previously a student). The Home Office 'Migrant Journey'[5] statistics show that there was a fall (from 24% in 2004 to 16% in 2008) in the proportion of non-EEA arrivals with a student visa who still had valid leave to remain in the UK after 5 years. However, these data are based on legal extensions and so do not identify whether the remaining 76% to 84% have all left the UK, or indeed whether those with valid leave continue to live in the UK.

5.6   Some non-EU nationals may remain illegally in the UK after their studies and not apply for an extension of stay in the UK. Available data sources cannot currently provide a measure of this.

5.7   There are more data sources available on what non-EU students do following their studies than sources on EU students. This is because EU students do not require a visa to live in the UK and freedom of movement within the EU means that EU nationals can travel between the UK and other EU countries many times within a year.

Section 7 outlines how administrative data sources might be used to provide better statistical information on migrant activity within the UK.

6. Comparability of data sources on student migration

6.1   There are a variety of data sources for student immigration and these tend to follow similar trends. There is no single source that covers all aspects of student immigration since each data source is collected for a different purpose.

6.2   This section compares:

- the International Passenger Survey (IPS), which estimates the flow of international students into and out of the UK;
- Home Office Visa data, which is collected as part of the visa administrative system; and
- Higher Education Statistics Agency data (HESA), which collects information on the number of international students in Higher Education Establishments.

6.3   Currently, the IPS is the only source that measures the emigration of people who previously immigrated to study. Therefore it is currently difficult to validate the IPS estimates with other data

---

[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/migrant-journey-fifth-report.

sources. However, since April 2015, the Home Office has carried out additional exit checks when people depart the UK. These data, along with greater administrative data linkage, may help in the future to produce a clearer, more comprehensive picture of non-EU student emigration.

6.4   There are more data sources available for comparison when focusing on non-EU student immigration, since non-EU nationals are subject to immigration control.

Figure 2: Comparison of IPS immigration for study and Home Office study visas granted for non-EU nationals, years ending June 2006 to June 2015, UK
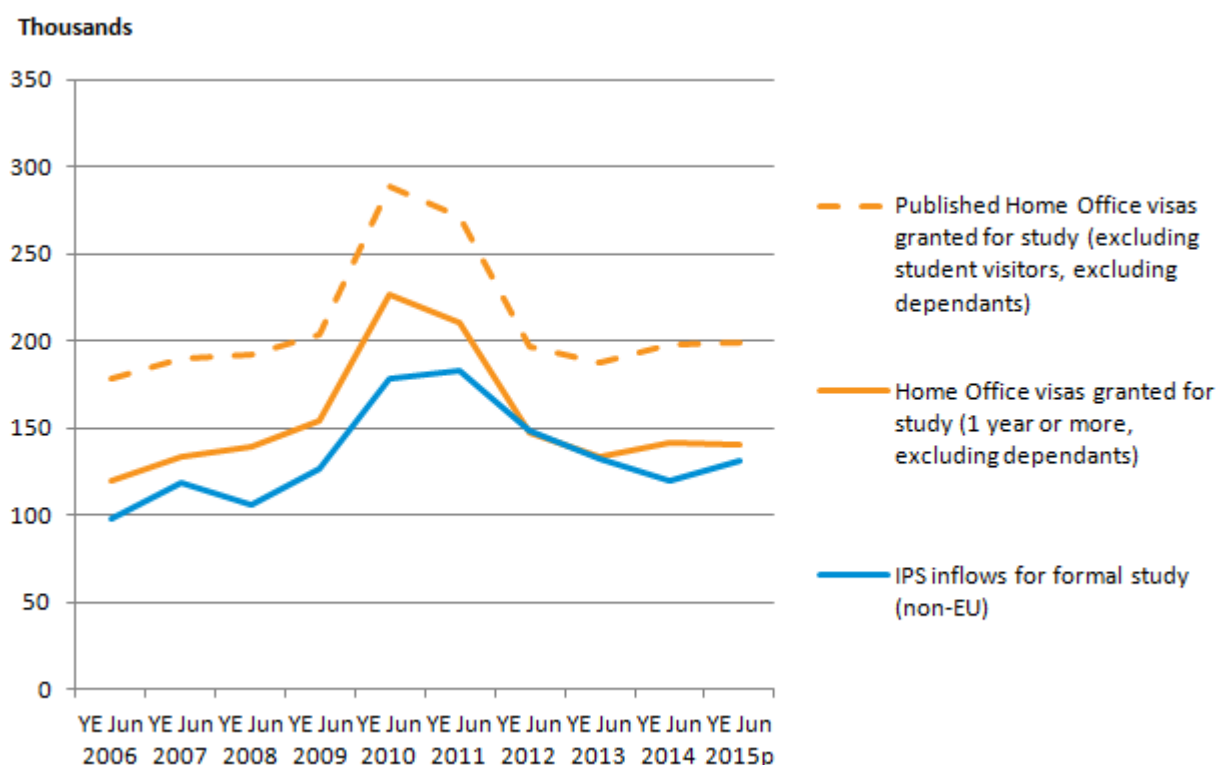
Sources: ONS and Home Office[6].
Note: 'p' means provisional IPS data.

6.5   Although published data are of all visas granted for study, visa grants of 1 year or more have better comparability with IPS estimates, since these are based on intended immigration for 1 year or more. Dependants have also been excluded from the Home Office figures, since any dependants of international students arriving in the UK are likely to state 'Accompany / Join' as their main reason for immigrating to the UK.

6.6   Figure 2 shows that Home Office visa data and IPS estimates have been similar for the last 10 years and were particularly close between YE June 2012 and YE June 2013. The largest differences are seen prior to 2011. The introduction of the Certificate of Acceptance to Study (CAS) sponsorship system in mid-2010, alongside a range of other efforts to tighten the rules for students, led to a drop in fraudulent applications within the further education sector. This is evident from falls in visa applications (and sponsored applications data) after 2011. The fall in sponsored applications for Further Education since 2010 was almost entirely accounted for by institutions that have since had their licenses revoked (see

---

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2015/study (Chapter 3)

Annex, Figure A3). This mostly affected English language schools and Further Education providers, rather than universities. Theoretically, the increase in the Higher Education sector's share of sponsored applications might be expected to result in a closer relationship between intentions and visa lengths issued.

6.7   Although they follow broadly the same patterns, there are some differences between Home Office student visas granted and IPS estimates of immigration for study. These are likely to be due to differences in what the two data sources measure. Figure 3 illustrates the comparability between the two sources.

Figure 3: Illustration of the comparability of IPS estimates for study for non-EU nationals and Home Office student visa data
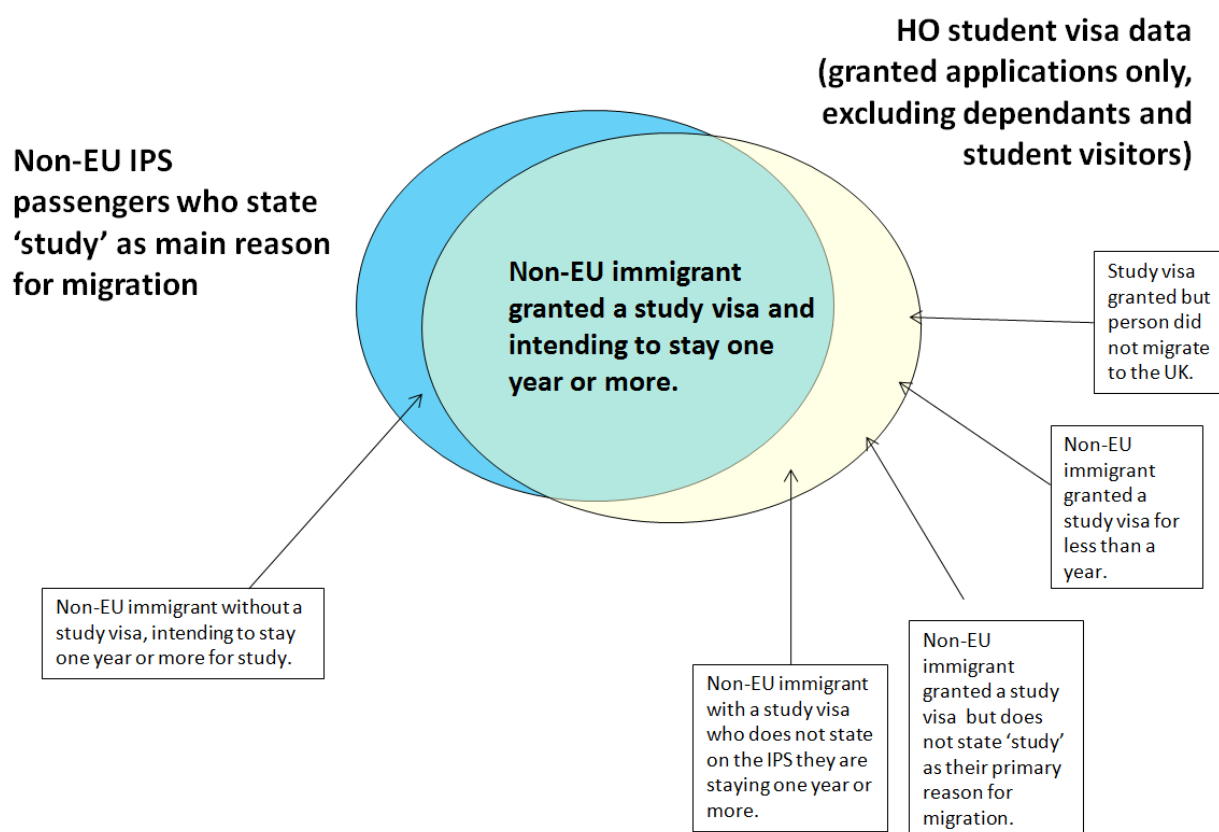
Note: Not to scale

**Comparing data sources for higher education**

6.8   The IPS and Home Office data can be compared with HESA data for first year entrants to Higher Education. Although we would expect these sources to show broadly similar patterns, there are some differences between these sources:

- HESA records data by domicile, which is not the same as nationality and refers to academic years rather than calendar years;
- The IPS separates 'university' from other education. Therefore it will miss some HE students who did not specify 'university';
- HESA and Home Office data will include student migrants who are living in the UK for less than 1 year;

- Sponsorship data will include those who may not make the journey to the UK, whereas HESA and IPS data is collected upon arrival in the UK;
- The IPS includes all non-EU nationals who actually arrive in the UK and state that their main reason for migrating is to study. This will include those who study with alternative providers and those who may have arrived on non-study visas (as shown in Figure 3).

6.9   Figure 4 shows that the HESA and Home Office data for 2012 and 2013 are almost identical. The IPS data are generally lower because the IPS records students who state they intend to stay in the UK for 12 months or more (in line with the UN definition of a long-term migrant). The numbers of students on 1 year Masters' courses increased between 2011 and 2013 and these students may not state an intended duration of 12 months or more when they arrive to the UK (for example if they arrive in September and leave in July the following year).

Figure 4: Comparison of IPS, Home Office and HESA data for higher education, 2011 to 2013, UK
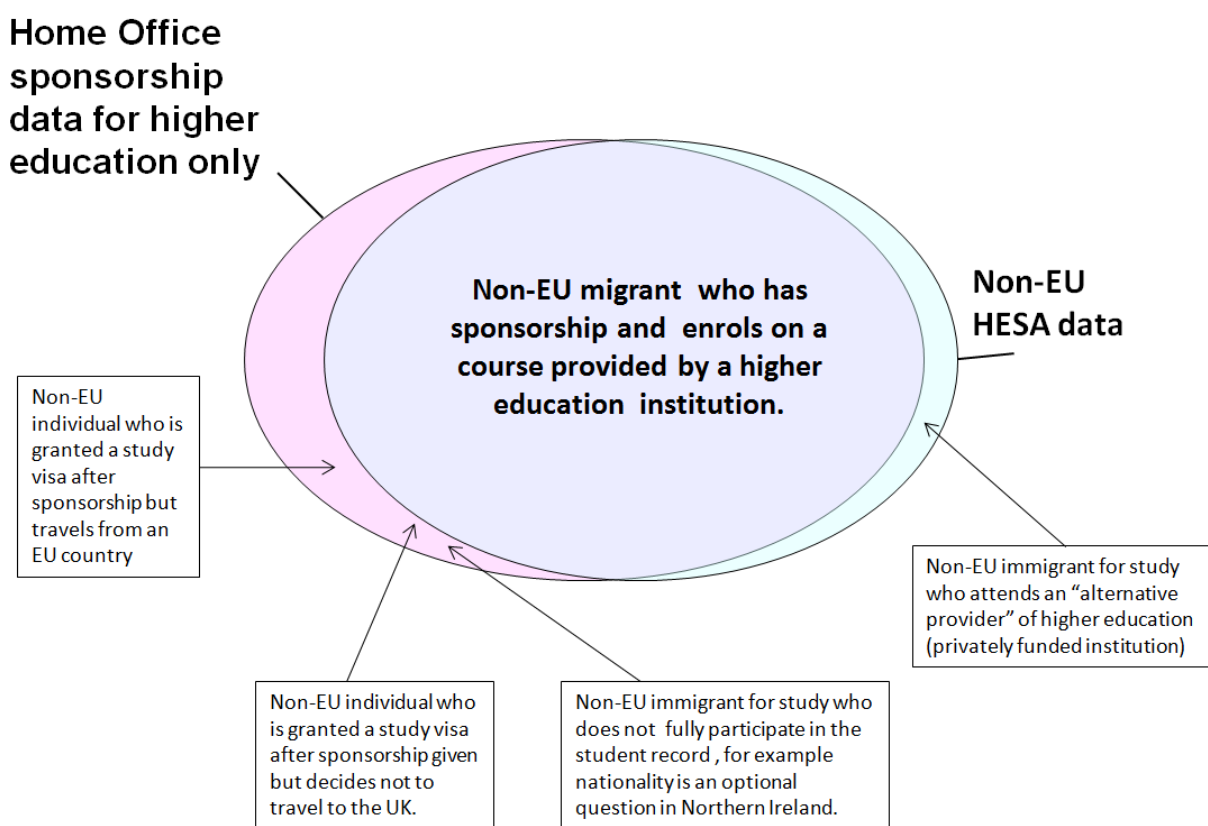
Thousands
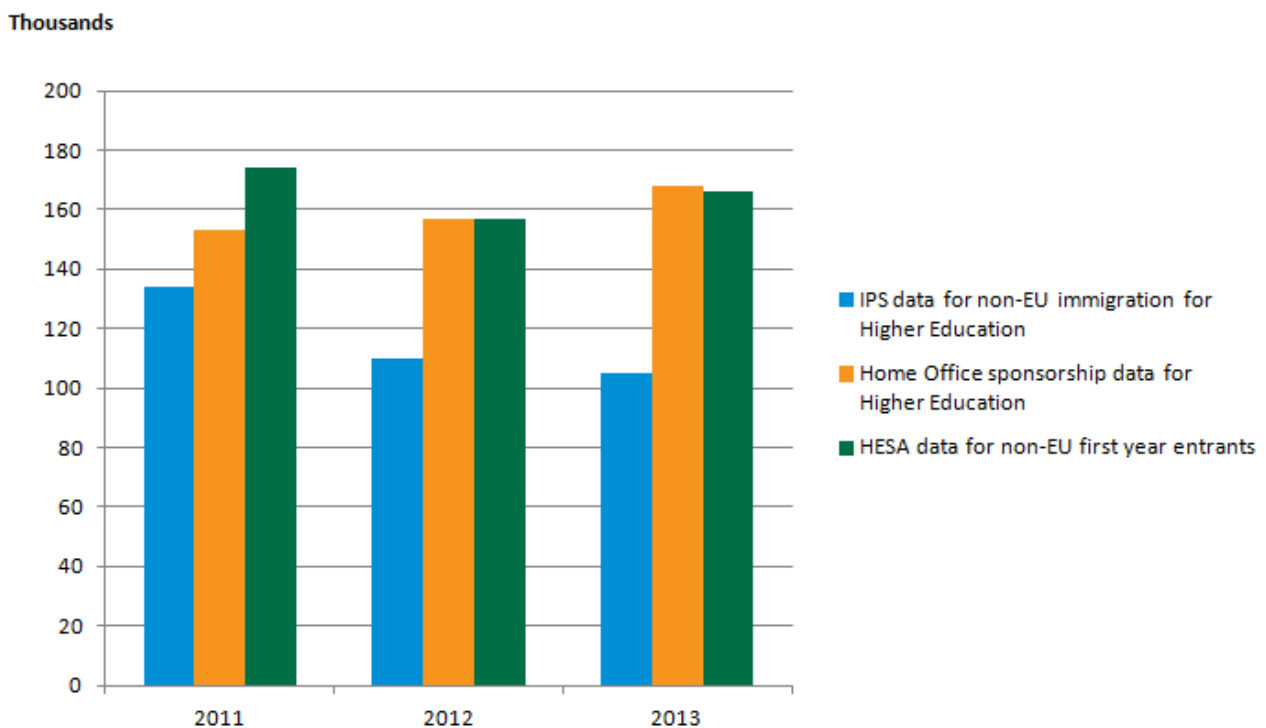
Sources: ONS, Home Office and HESA.

Note: HESA data based on domicile unavailable for 2011.

6.10   HESA data are particularly useful when estimating the distribution of student migrants by Local Authorities within the UK, since the IPS and Home Office visa data are not suitable for this purpose.

Figure 5: Illustration of the comparability of HESA enrolment data and Home Office sponsorship data

Home Office sponsorship data for higher education only

Non-EU individual who is granted a study visa after sponsorship but travels from an EU country

Non-EU migrant who has sponsorship and enrols on a course provided by a higher education institution.

Non-EU HESA data

Non-EU immigrant for study who attends an "alternative provider" of higher education (privately funded institution)

Non-EU individual who is granted a study visa after sponsorship given but decides not to travel to the UK.

Non-EU immigrant for study who does not fully participate in the student record, for example nationality is an optional question in Northern Ireland.

Note: Not to scale

6.11   Clearly the coverage of the various data sources differs and there is no one definitive source to use. For non-EU student migrant data, the IPS is preferable to use as not every individual issued a study visa travels to the UK. The exceptions to this are:

- if non-EU nationals from countries with smaller populations are to be analysed, visa data would be more robust at these levels than a sample survey;
- if the most recent data as possible are needed, visa data are published one-quarter earlier than the IPS estimates;
- for EU student data, IPS estimates are best if information is needed for all student migrants, but for local data on Higher Education HESA data might be preferred since the IPS is not designed to provide accurate statistics at this level of detail.

7. Improving the data

7.1   Currently there is no administrative process that tracks a student migrant into the country and out again with a clear matching process between the entry and exit of that student. In due course it is expected that the Home Office exit checks (introduced in April 2015) will produce a more complete picture of the degree to which non-EU students leave by the time their visa expires. However these new data will need to be assessed for their suitability for statistical purposes.

7.2   The IPS currently provides the most robust and reliable estimates available for measuring changes in the UK population due to migration but, since it is a sample survey, it is limited in terms of providing detailed information on migrants with particular characteristics. Furthermore, while people being

interviewed may not deliberately mislead the interviewers, questions may be misinterpreted. The evidence can be made stronger for understanding international student migration by using the IPS alongside administrative sources, such as visa statistics and HESA statistics. The Labour Force Survey now includes a question asking why foreign nationals currently resident in the UK originally came to the country and is thereby able to provide some further estimates of the socio-economic outcomes for former student migrants. The Census also provides a range of additional detailed information about residents who are currently studying, including those who are foreign nationals.

7.3   Administrative sources can provide more detailed data on sub-groups of the population, particularly if sources can be linked together such as visa data, border and exit check data and large Government data holdings (such as those maintained by HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions). The linkage of these data sources (with each other and potentially the IPS) may allow for better identification of those who overstay their visa, for example, or who work illegally. However, while providing the possibility of additional insights of operational or administrative benefit, there are additional data quality challenges to overcome before these can provide robust statistical estimates.

7.4   The Higher Education system also collects information on where former students are, and whether they are working or still studying, through a leavers' survey. The response rates to the leavers' surveys are low, so these do not provide robust statistical estimates at present, particularly for foreign students who may have left the UK and be harder to contact. Potentially, if response rates could be improved, then these data may provide additional insights – although there needs to be caution since those people who are overstaying may be less likely to respond to an official survey.

7.5   The Universities UK 'Commission on International Student Destinations' report on the *Analysis of the international student's journey through the UK Higher Education System*[7] concluded that:

- Despite the emergence of new data sources and welcome improvements to existing ones, it is nonetheless clear that some key gaps remain in the evidence base around student migration;
- International students follow a range of different pathways through the UK education system, which affects the duration of their stay;
- There is a wider range of data available on students entering the country, compared to numbers leaving, which has implications for the measurement of net migration.

The report contains recommendations for improving data sources. Progress on these recommendations is shown in Table A4 (see Annex).

7.6   To present a more comprehensive picture of how many students are expected to leave the UK after their studies, it is necessary to build a picture over time taking into account policy changes, examine cohorts of students and evaluate the data sources outlined above. Using the available data sources in this way should enable a better picture of a specific year's arrivals of international students, inform expectations about when we would expect people to emigrate (based on visa and extension duration) and track this cohort annually to determine the numbers that take different paths after their studies. Further linkage and development of data sources are required before this type of analysis is possible. ONS is working with statisticians across government to explore these developments further.

---

[7] http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2015/international-student-journey-through-UK-higher-education-system.pdf

Annex - Additional data on student migration

Table A1: International Passenger Survey estimates of long-term international migration into the UK for formal study by nationality, 2009 to 2014

thousands

Year	Total (+/- CI)	British	EU (excluding British)	Non-EU
2009	209 (16)	11 (4)	42 (9)	155 (13)
2010	234 (17)	8 (3)	45 (11)	181 (13)
2011	226 (16)	5 (2)	41 (8)	180 (14)
2012	175 (16)	8 (3)	28 (7)	139 (13)
2013	171 (17)	9 (4)	40 (9)	122 (13)
2014	187 (20)	5 (3)	48 (11)	134 (17)

Source: ONS

Note that since these estimates are based on a sample survey they are subject to sampling error.

The above estimates are based upon International Passenger Survey data, which are available with a breakdown by nationality. The figures used in Section 4.1 are based on the total figures above with adjustments for those who change their migration intentions and land border crossings into and out of Northern Ireland, resulting in a more complete total estimate (known as LTIM). Nationality breakdowns are not available for student migration from these adjusted figures.

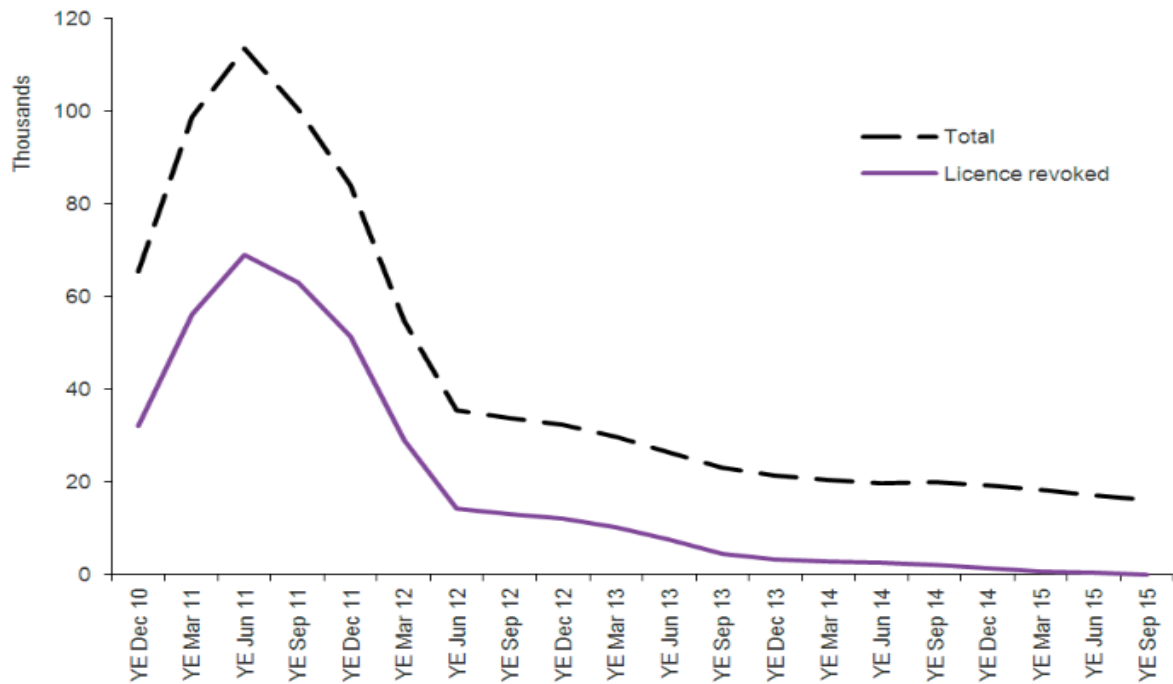**Figure A1: IPS inflows for formal study, EU and non-EU, 1991 to 2014, UK**
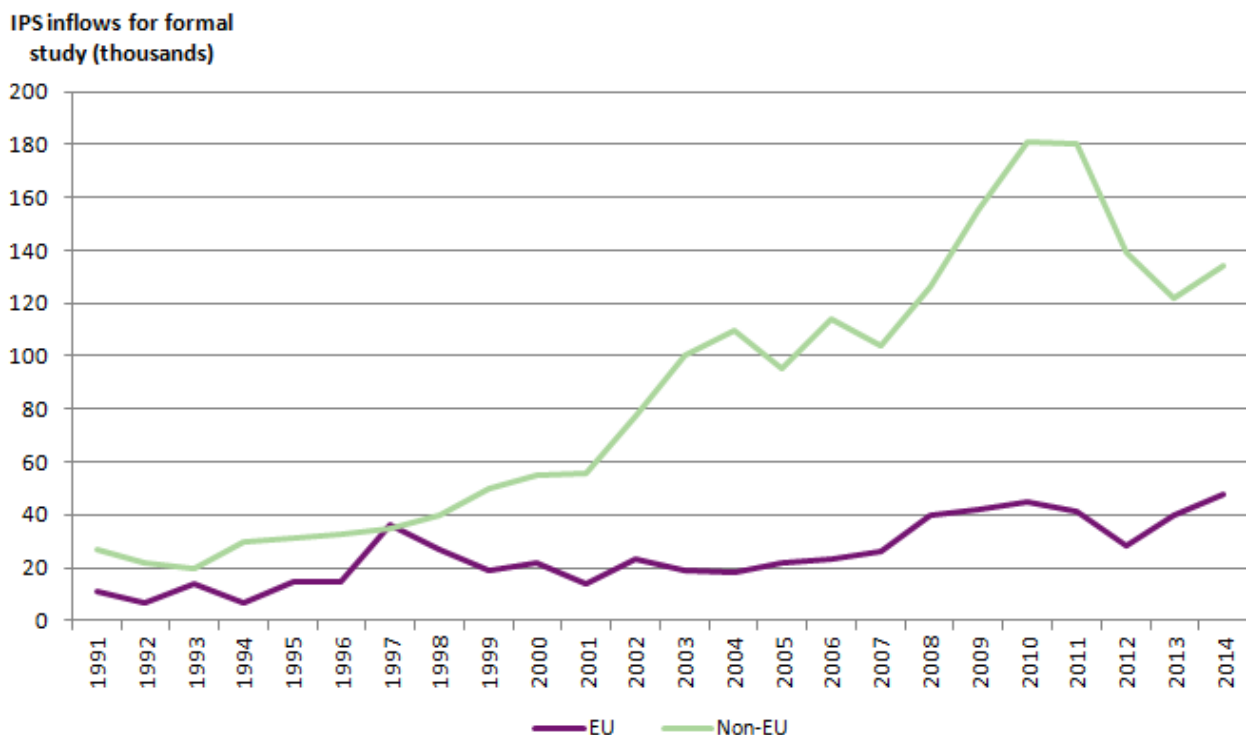
Source: ONS

Figure A2: Study-related sponsored visa applications by sector, year ending December 2010 to year ending September 2015, UK
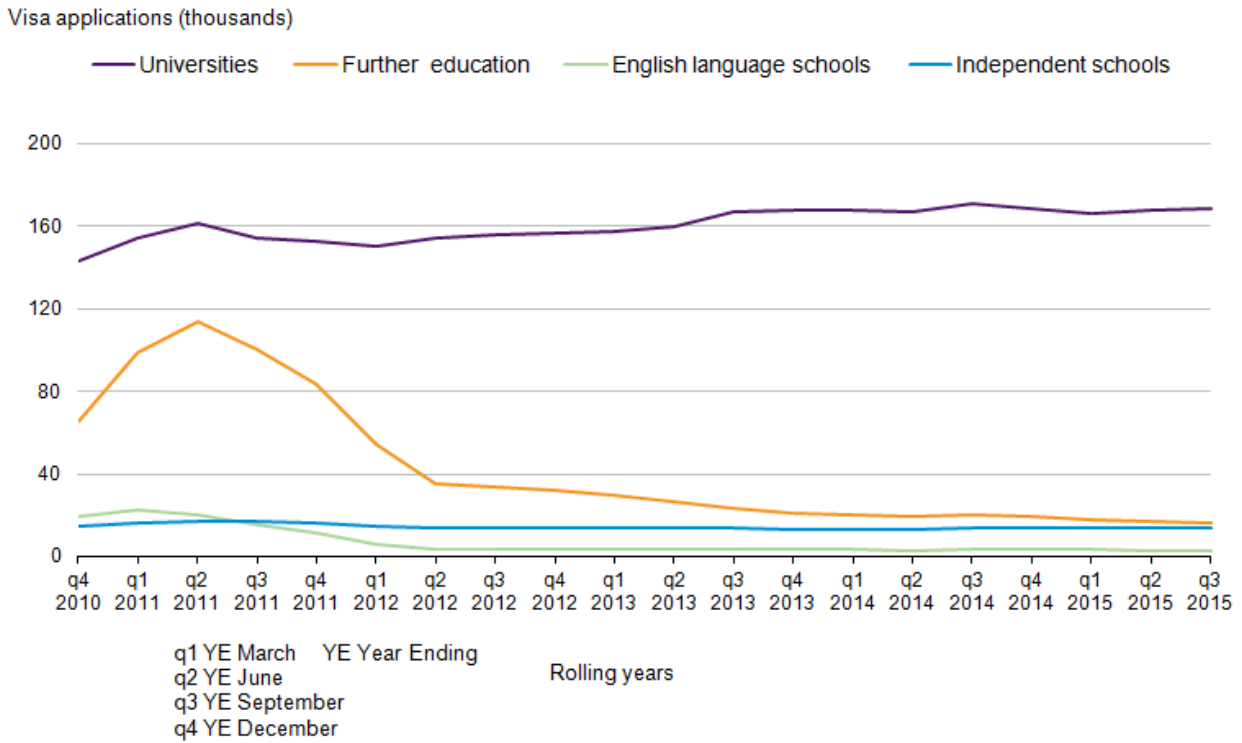
Source: Home Office

Figure A3: Further Education sponsored visa applications and licences revoked, year ending December 2010 to year ending September 2015, UK

Source: Home Office https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2015/study (Chapter 5)

Figure A3 shows that the fall in FE is heavily driven by the number of licences that were revoked by the Home Office.

Table A2: Entry Clearance Visas granted outside the UK for study, 2009 to 2014, UK

Year	Total	Main applicant	Dependants
2009	303,361	273,205	30,156
2010	285,544	253,786	31,758
2011	261,870	237,471	24,399
2012	209,749	193,047	16,702
2013	218,625	199,608	19,017
2014	220,041	200,297	19,744

Source: Home Office

Typically the number of visas granted is higher than the IPS estimates since not all people allocated a visa will migrate to the UK and some visas are for durations of less than 12 months. Additionally, there could be a time lag between visa approval and arrival into the UK and a person's main reason for immigrating to the UK may not be the same as their visa type.

Table A3: Extensions to people whose previous visa was for study, by category of their next visa, 2011 to 2014, UK

Year	Total grants of extensions	Work	Study	Family	Other
2011	153,632	46,875	99,587	5,458	1,712
2012	115,106	38,505	70,962	4,312	1,327
2013	112,432	6,238	99,611	5,948	635
2014	74,761	7,043	62,814	3,957	947

Source: Home Office
Note that the previous visa may not have been the one they used on entry to the UK.

Table A4: Progress to date on recommendations from Universities UK's 'Commission on International Student Destinations' report on the *Analysis of the international student's journey through the UK Higher Education System*

Recommendation	Progress to date
The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills should work with those education providers not included within HESA's records to address the data gap between HEI student numbers and others.	Data from alternative providers of education is now being collected.
The Home Office should publish its data on in-country visa extensions by previous category annually (as standard).	These data are now published annually.
The IPS could helpfully include a question about former students' level of study, in order to disaggregate those leaving the country who were in higher education versus other education providers.	A new question has been added to the IPS from January 2016.

Supporting information

The Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, November 2015

The MSQR User Information (ONS) (365.2 Kb Pdf)

International Migration Statistics First Time User Guide (ONS) (375.6 Kb Pdf)

Long-Term International Migration – Frequently Asked Questions and Background Notes (ONS) (453.1 Kb Pdf)

http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/population-and-migration/international-migration-methodology/how-to-interpret-table-4.pdf

Quality and Methodology Information for International Migration (ONS) (207.4 Kb Pdf)

Long-Term International Migration Estimates Methodology (ONS) (551.2 Kb Pdf)

International Passenger Survey: Quality Information in Relation to Migration Flows (ONS) (303.8 Kb Pdf) –