



# International students and the UK immigration debate

August 2014

British  
Future...

  
Universities UK



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## Foreword

Here in the United Kingdom we are rightly proud of our world class universities.

Our global reputation for higher education excellence helps to explain why the UK is such an attractive place for people to study.

Almost 300,000 international students came to our universities in 2012–13. Only the United States matches the strength of this appeal to students from around the world.

A global brand such as this is also fantastic news for our economy. Top international students and academics keep our universities at the cutting edge of global knowledge, technology and innovation. The diversity they bring to campus life enriches the educational experience for British students and helps build strong links with other nations for decades into the future. They bring with them an estimated £7 billion in income, injecting substance into the UK's economic recovery. What better example of a true British success story in what the prime minister has called the 'global race'?

However, there is a twist in this tale. The sheer strength of the UK's higher education offering means that international students make up a significant proportion of those counted in the official immigration statistics. This often comes as a surprise to those who are not specialists in this subject. After all, few people have students in mind when they express concern about the impact and number of migrants coming to our shores.

This creates a dilemma when it comes politically to managing the tricky minefield of migration. Any uplift in the number of international students means greater scientific, economic and cultural benefit to Britain. Yet it also spells trouble for politicians trying desperately to cut headline immigration figures. A mark of our success therefore acts simultaneously – and perversely – as a badge of failure.

It need not be this way. This comprehensive report shows that students are among the most popular migrants with the public, in spite of their representing one of the largest inflows of people coming to the UK. Even the majority of those sympathetic to the overall aim of reducing migration believe that student migration is a good thing, both economically and culturally. So long as students are genuine, the public believes this issue should be kept apart from immigration policy.

At a time when Britain is seeking to promote industries that can take advantage of global growth driven from beyond Europe, our higher education sector should be challenged and supported to increase its share of the rapidly expanding international student market. This is why it was always a mistake to include the student migrant flow within a target to reduce total immigration numbers.

*'Even the majority of those sympathetic to the overall aim of reducing migration believe that student migration is a good thing, both economically and culturally. So long as students are genuine, the public believes this issue should be kept apart from immigration policy.'*

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Politicians are rightly expected to engage with public views and anxieties about immigration, and the government has admirably done so. It will, of course, be an important election issue for all political parties as we approach the 2015 General Election. But it is time politicians made the case that there are different types of immigration.

This important report shows that the public is quite capable of making those distinctions and in fact has a pragmatic and nuanced view about how to select the kinds of migration that best reflect our nation's interests and values.

There is a broad public consensus that international students are good for Britain: people welcome the income they bring to these shores; they are happy to see the skills they have gained here help British firms rather than our international competitors; they are rightly anxious when they see other English-speaking nations aggressively target the lucrative international student market at the expense of British universities.

I very much hope that this report will reassure political parties in advance of next May that the public respects those politicians who put forward a mature and rational case for a managed migration policy.

Above all this is great news for those of us who want our world class universities to thrive and compete internationally. A welcoming approach to international students can clearly be seen to reflect British public opinion, rather than challenge it.



**Mark Field MP**  
**Chairman of Conservatives for Managed Migration**

*'A welcoming approach to international students can clearly be seen to reflect British public opinion, rather than challenge it.'*

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## Executive summary

Immigration is likely to be the number one issue for many voters at the 2015 General Election. Student migration makes up the largest single flow of migrants from outside the EU. This report proves that there is strong public support for international student migration, and that people seem to understand the **economic and educational benefits** brought to Britain by those who come here to study.

The report draws on a nationally representative poll by ICM of 2,111 people, together with six deliberative workshops held in York, Bristol and Nottingham. It reveals that:

- 59% of the public says the **government should not reduce international student numbers**, even if that limits the government's ability to cut immigration numbers overall. Only 22% take the opposing view.
- 66% of Conservative voters are opposed to reducing student numbers.
- 60% of people think that **international students bring money into their local economy**. Only 12% think they take money out.
- 61% agree that **Britain's universities would have less funding** to invest in top-quality facilities and teaching **without** the higher fees paid by **international students**. Only 7% disagree.
- 75% think that **international students should be allowed to stay and work in Britain after graduating** from British universities, using their skills for the benefit of our economy, for at least a period of time.
- **Only 22% of the public thinks that international students should count as migrants**. Most people do not understand why they would be counted towards the government's immigration targets.

*'Only 22% of the public thinks that international students should count as migrants.'*

Based on public opinion, the report makes the following recommendations:

- The government should **remove international students from any net migration target**.
- The government should launch an international student growth strategy, backed by investment, to promote British universities overseas, build new international partnerships and **attract more international students to Britain**
- The government should make a renewed effort – through its words, actions and policies – to communicate a consistent message that **Britain welcomes international students**.
- The government should enhance opportunities for qualified **international graduates** to stay in the UK to **work and contribute to the economy**.

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# Introduction

Repeated opinion polls show the breadth of public concern about immigration: about the pace of change in some towns and cities; about impacts on jobs and wages; about cultural issues and the failures of some migrants to successfully integrate. As the General Election draws nearer, politicians will be required to engage in the debate and to address these views.

Our research finds that, despite these debates around immigration, the public is *not* concerned about international students – by which we mean students from outside the EU – coming to study at British universities.

This response remains broadly constant even when people are informed about how many international students come to Britain each year. People are surprised to find out that international students make up a significant proportion of government immigration statistics. But, importantly, this new knowledge about the numbers does not then translate into anxiety or concern about international students coming to Britain. People welcome the economic and cultural contribution they make. The most common reaction is surprise and even bafflement that international students are classified as immigrants at all.

Most people do not see international students as ‘immigrants’. While many people may have negative feelings towards some forms of immigration, they view international students, on the whole, in a very positive light – as people who contribute economically, intellectually and culturally to Britain.

Yet, despite strong public support for international students, there is a real risk that pressure to reduce immigration numbers will lead to further restrictions on immigration that, deliberately or otherwise, restrict international student numbers. The government has promised to reduce net migration to ‘tens of thousands’ and international students are one of the largest groups of migrants counted in these figures: around one in three people coming to Britain for a year or more do so to study.

Not only could this have a highly damaging financial impact – international students from outside the EU bring £7 billion into the British economy every year through fees and living expenses while here – it would also damage Britain’s position as a world leader in higher education provision, as well as the international character of our universities.

What reducing international student numbers would *not* do is address public concern about immigration. Our research finds that people think international students make a positive contribution to

*‘What reducing international student numbers would **not** do is address public concern about immigration.’*

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Britain. Most agree that they bring money into the local economy and that Britain's universities would have less funding to invest in facilities and teaching without the financial contribution made by international students.

Most people also agree that when international students graduate from British universities, it is better if we can keep their skills here, working for British companies, than if they return home to work for our international competitors.

Critics of current government policy say Britain is making it harder for people to stay and work, while other countries are making it easier. After they graduate, international students in the UK have just four months to find a job, which must pay at least £20,500 – more in some professions – or they have to leave. This is a high starting salary, especially outside London. Some say this is already deterring some students from enrolling at British universities, with overall numbers going into decline for the first time in years – and, from some countries such as India, plummeting drastically.

This report finds that politicians will not show that they understand and are responding to public opinion on immigration by targeting international students. Taking students out of the net migration target and decoupling two issues which are, to most people, unconnected, may be a better approach.



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# I. Background and context

Universities play a central role in supporting economic growth, creating jobs and other benefits in their local areas, improving individuals' life opportunities, conducting research and promoting invention and innovation.

In terms of international higher education, Britain is a world leader. Only the United States attracts more students from outside its borders to study at its universities.

In 2012–13 there were almost 300,000 students from outside the EU, and a further 125,000 students from non-UK EU countries, studying at British universities. This represents some 12.8% and 5.4% respectively of the UK's student population.<sup>1</sup>

Internationally, there has been rapid growth in the number of students studying outside of their home country in recent years. The OECD has estimated that the number of 'internationally mobile' students more than doubled between 2000 and 2011, from 2.1 million to 4.3 million.<sup>2</sup>

This medium-term trend of strong growth has been reflected in Britain. 300,000 non-EU students came to study here in 2012–13, a 31% increase from 230,000 just five years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, though, despite this rapid growth, the international higher education market has not reached its peak: it is estimated that the number of internationally mobile students could rise to 7 million by 2020.<sup>4</sup> This provides an excellent opportunity for UK universities.

*'Internationally, there has been rapid growth in the number of students studying outside of their home country in recent years.'*

## *Recent trends and policies relating to international students*

In spite of this global growth, the number of international students studying at British universities has seen a small decrease in the last few years.

The number of non-EU students beginning courses at British universities has fallen over two consecutive years, from 174,225 in 2010–11 to 171,910 in 2012–13<sup>5</sup>. This compares to strong levels of growth witnessed pre-2010.

There has been a particularly startling decline in students from key markets such as India. The number of new enrolments from India decreased by 49% between 2010–11 and 2012–13; those from Pakistan

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1. Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency. Note that these figures relate to domicile rather than citizenship or immigration status

2. OECD (2013), *Education at a Glance 2013*

3. These earlier figures will include students who were domiciled in countries that were not at that time, but which since have become, members of the EU

4. UNESCO (2009), *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution*

5. Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014)

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by 38%; and those from Saudi Arabia by 35%.<sup>6</sup> These decreases have been largely masked by strong increases from China.

### *The impact of immigration and visa policy*

The university sector has argued that changes in immigration policy in recent years, and in particular numerous changes to visa requirements, have harmed its ability to attract and recruit international students.

The Conservative Party's commitment, before the 2010 General Election, to reduce 'net migration' to under 100,000 by the end of this parliament is now driving government policy. All those who come (or return) to Britain for a period of at least 12 months count in these figures as a long-term immigrant, for the purpose of this target. This means that a large proportion of international students are counted as 'immigrants' in these figures – indeed they are the largest single group of non-EU immigrants by some margin.<sup>7</sup>

A number of changes to the student visa system have been instigated since 2010, including limiting opportunities for post-study work; the introduction of credibility interviews; the imposition of a maximum length of study time; the introduction of a requirement to demonstrate academic progression; and significant increases in the cost of a visa application.

While there has been an overall reduction in net migration from 2010 levels, further considerable reductions would be necessary to meet the net migration target. Students are the largest category of migrant from outside the EU. There is, therefore, a tension between the government's immigration policy of significant reduction and its belief that significantly increasing numbers of international students is an 'achievable' goal,<sup>8</sup> as well as its objectives of economic growth and an increase in export earnings.

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6. Ibid

7. Office for National Statistics (2014), *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report*, May 2014 and Home Office (2014), *Immigration statistics*, January to March 2014

8. HM Government (2013), *International Education: Global Growth and Prosperity*: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/340600/bis-13-1081-international-education-global-growth-and-prosperity-revised.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/340600/bis-13-1081-international-education-global-growth-and-prosperity-revised.pdf)

## 2. What do international students bring to Britain?

In our research groups in York, Bristol and Nottingham, people expressed broadly positive views about international students. They are seen on the whole as hardworking contributors, both financially and in terms of their attitude while studying here. This view, which was even shared by some participants who held quite negative views about immigration generally, was also borne out in quantitative research among the public nationwide.

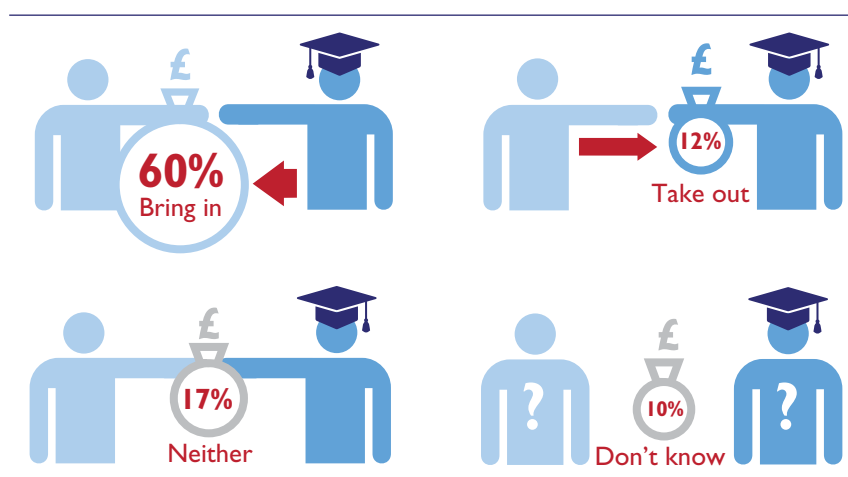
### *A boost to towns and cities in Britain*

In addition to jobs in the university sector, the estimated £3.4 billion of off-campus expenditure from non-EU students – on things like rent, food, transport and entertainment – also supports significant numbers of jobs in surrounding towns, cities and regions. In 2011–12, over 136,000 full-time-equivalent British jobs could be attributed to the enrolment of non-EU students at British universities.<sup>9</sup>

People recognise that international students bring money into the towns where they live. Six out of ten people (60%) think that international students bring money into the local economy, while only 12% think they are a net drain on it.

*‘Six out of ten people (60%) think that international students bring money into their local economy.’*

Figure 1: 'Do international students bring money into the local economy, or take it out?'



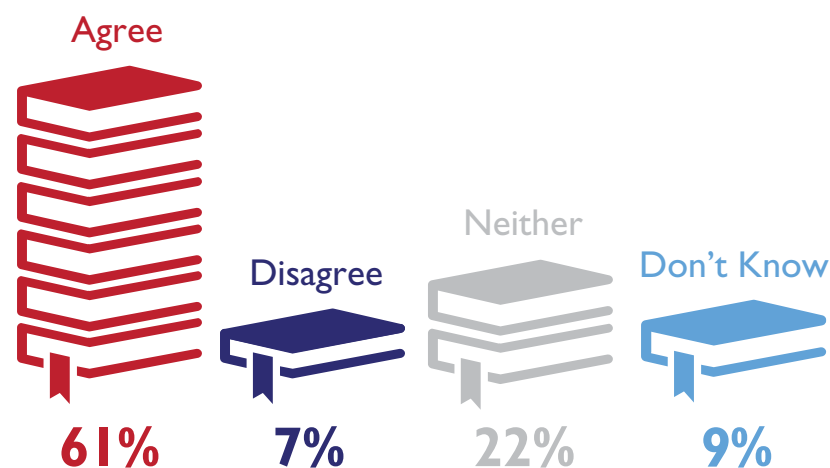
This support increases to two-thirds (66%) among people who live in a town or city with a university.

9. Universities UK (2014) *The impact of universities on the UK economy* <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/ImpactOfUniversities.aspx>

## Benefitting our universities

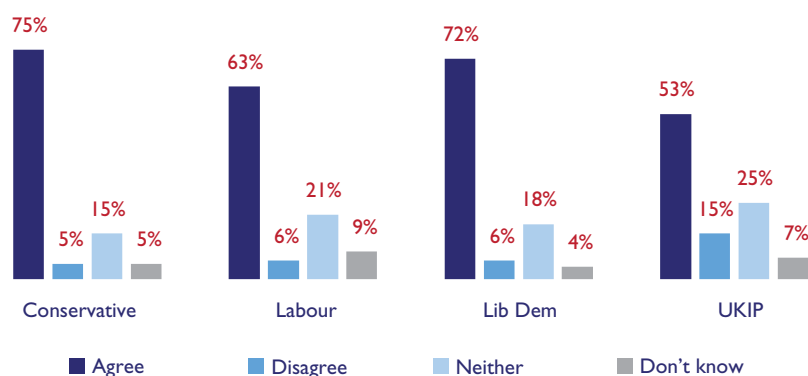
Most of the public also recognises that international students are good for Britain's universities. Sixty-one per cent agree that universities would have less funding to invest in top quality facilities and teaching without the higher fees paid by international students, while only 7% disagree. In our groups, people recognised that these benefits were felt not just by the universities, but by the British students who study there.

Figure 2: 'Without the higher fees paid by international students our universities would have less funding to invest in top quality facilities and teaching'



Interestingly, analysis of the research by political party support shows that these benefits are felt particularly keenly by Conservative voters, three quarters (75%) of whom agree that international students help to fund the teaching and facilities enjoyed by home students. Fifty-three per cent of UKIP supporters also agree that international students benefit British universities and students in this way.

Figure 3: By party support: 'Without the higher fees paid by international students our universities would have less funding to invest in top quality facilities and teaching'

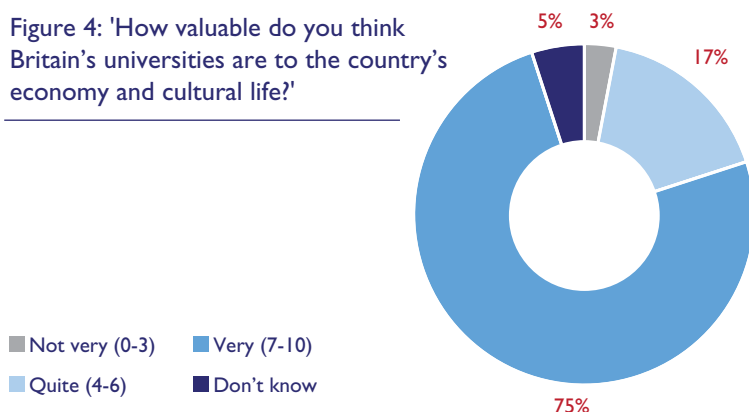


The public awareness of the benefits of international students to universities is particularly important given the strength of positive

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feeling towards our universities. Three quarters (75%) of people agree that Britain's universities are very valuable to the country's economic and cultural life. Only 3% of people do not value them highly.

Figure 4: 'How valuable do you think Britain's universities are to the country's economy and cultural life?'



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### *The contribution of international students to the UK*

International students make an important contribution to Britain economically. They pay tuition fees directly to universities and spend significant sums off campus in shops and businesses, predominantly from funds outside Britain. These fees and living costs therefore represent goods and services being bought from outside the country, and so are considered an export.

Given the large number of international students studying at our universities, and the global market share that Britain enjoys, higher education is a significant and successful export industry for the country. Higher education's export earnings from non-EU students alone have been estimated at £7 billion in 2011-12.

Yet the benefits that international students bring are more than just economic.

International students significantly increase the diversity and vibrancy of a local area. Members of the public who took part in our research groups – three quarters of them non-graduates – readily (and often enthusiastically) identified this as a significant local benefit brought by international students. They attract improved services for local people – more and better shops, entertainment and transport, for example.

### *Promoting the UK to tomorrow's leaders*

Those who study in Britain and return home (or go elsewhere) to work are likely to leave with a positive view of Britain and substantial personal and professional connections. In a 2013 study carried out for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS),<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) *The wider benefits of international higher education in the UK*

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90% of the international graduates interviewed agreed that their perception of Britain had changed for the better as a result of studying here. A separate BIS report<sup>11</sup> revealed that 78% intended to develop professional links with organisations in Britain in future and 86% would seek to remain connected to their university.<sup>12</sup> Many international graduates go on to take up influential positions in their home countries, and these personal links and bonds with Britain are likely to be an important contributor to our ‘soft power’.

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11. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2012) *Tracking international graduate outcomes 2011*

12. Ibid.

### 3. Are international students ‘immigrants’?

#### Perceptions of international students

Time and time again in our research groups, participants were keen to distinguish international students from ‘immigrants’, or were puzzled as to why they would be classified as such.

Some members of our groups held quite negative attitudes towards immigrants. Yet even these participants were broadly positive about international students. For some of these participants, concern about immigration was centred on whether immigrants are perceived to be making a contribution to Britain, and on their access to welfare benefits. Because international students are perceived to be contributing positively to the UK they were viewed differently to ‘immigrants’.

Groups did not believe that international student numbers were counted in the government immigration figures and could not understand why they should be. There was consensus in every group on this point. One man in the Bristol group said:

*It’s a completely different issue – there’s no way this should be part of the immigration issue. As long as they are genuine students and will go to university, it won’t affect us badly at all.*

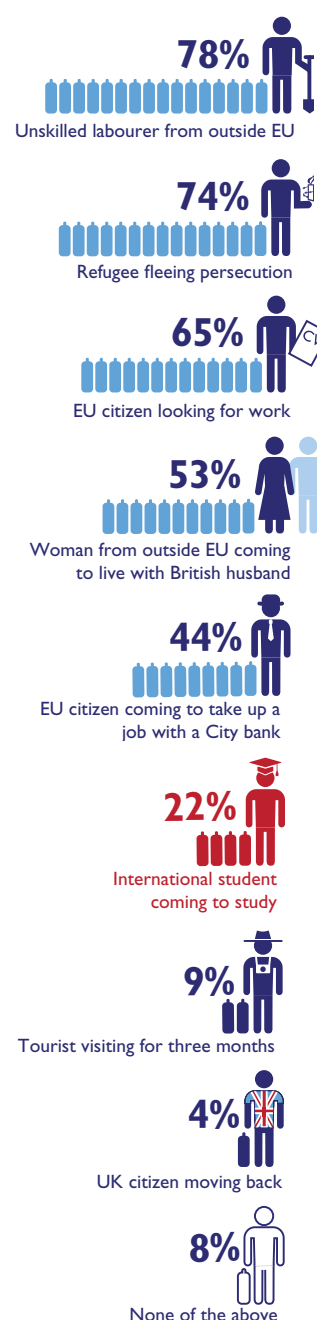
ICM’s nationwide poll found a similar response when it listed a series of different categories of people coming to Britain and asked whether or not people consider them to be an ‘immigrant’. Only 22% of people categorise international students as ‘immigrants’: the only categories scoring lower were tourists and returning British citizens.

#### Wider attitudes to immigration

Our quantitative research with ICM also tested people’s views on immigration, asking them to give a score from 0 to 10 to indicate whether they think that immigration has a positive or negative effect on Britain. Using these scores we were able to segment respondents into three groups: the ‘liberal’ 25% who feel confident about immigration and the benefits it can bring; the ‘rejectionist’ 25% who give a very low score and would rather we had little or no immigration; and what we term the ‘sceptical middle’, the remaining 50% who have more nuanced concerns about the impacts of immigration but may also see its benefits.

Engaging these sceptical voters and addressing their concerns about immigration will be a priority for politicians in the 2015 General Election.

Figure 5: ‘When thinking about government immigration policy, which of the following people do you think of as an immigrant?’



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The responses of this sceptical group to our questions are relevant here. Fifty-nine per cent of the ‘sceptical middle’ agrees, for example, that without the fees from international students, our universities would have less funding for teaching and facilities, compared to just 6% of them who disagree.

One caveat here is the issue of fraudsters trying to abuse student visas in order to enter the country. Within some of the focus groups, concerns were expressed around the need for this to be well policed as part of an effective immigration system:

*I think if people saw this as an area that wasn't being properly monitored, you might get some unscrupulous people trying to exploit it. I think universities should make sure it's being used fairly. Rules should be in place to make sure people aren't using it as a route into the country.*

Respondent from Nottingham focus group

As with other areas of immigration, people need to trust that an effective and fair system is in place. Universities need to ensure that they have rigorous systems to protect against those who might try to defraud the student visa system and would damage their reputation. The university sector spends £67 million a year on student visa compliance and continues to work closely with the government to stamp out any residual abuse.<sup>13</sup>

Scepticism towards international students is far lower. The majority view is that international students come here to study, gain skills and will then look for skilled work in Britain or overseas.

**‘Universities need to ensure that they have rigorous systems to protect against those who might try to defraud the student visa system and would damage their reputation.’**

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13. A report by the Higher Education Better Regulation Group (HEBRG) estimated that universities spent £67 million on Tier 4 compliance in 2012–13. See: <http://www.hebetterregulation.ac.uk/NewsEventsPublications/News/Documents/HEBRG%20Tier%204%20Final%20Report%20%2811%20JULY%202013%29.pdf>



## 4. International students and the net migration target

With students making up a significant proportion of those counted in the immigration statistics, this creates a potential tension for a government that wishes to reduce net migration.

Many of the available policy options for reducing net migration have already been implemented. Some other migration flows are currently beyond government control. Reducing international student numbers could be considered as a way of meeting this target. Indeed, overall international university student numbers have declined, for the first time in many years.<sup>14</sup>

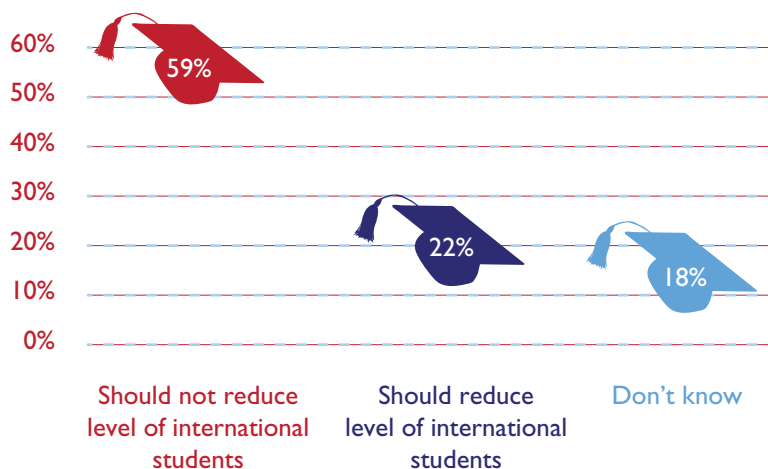
In our national ICM poll we asked people what should happen to international student numbers, to see whether this reduction aligns with public opinion. People were asked to choose between these two options:

- Don't reduce the number of international students in order to keep the income they generate, even if this choice means the total reduction in immigration numbers would be less than if the number of international students was reduced.
- Reduce the number of international students in order to cut net immigration numbers to Britain, even if this choice means less income from international students.

Most people (59%) think the government *should not* reduce the number of international students coming to Britain, even if this means a lower reduction in immigration: they would rather keep hold of the benefits to the economy.

*'Only a fifth (22%) of people would reduce the number of international students in order to help get immigration numbers down.'*

Figure 6: 'Should we maintain international student numbers?'



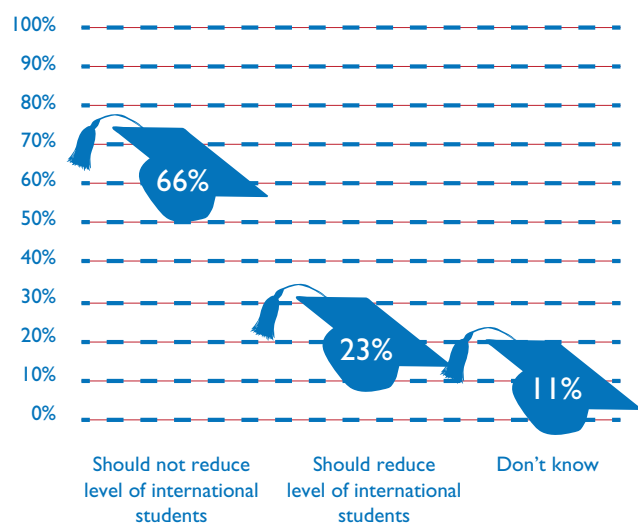
14. Higher Education Statistics Agency data on university student enrolments, 2012–13

Only a fifth (22%) of people would reduce the number of international students to help get immigration numbers down.

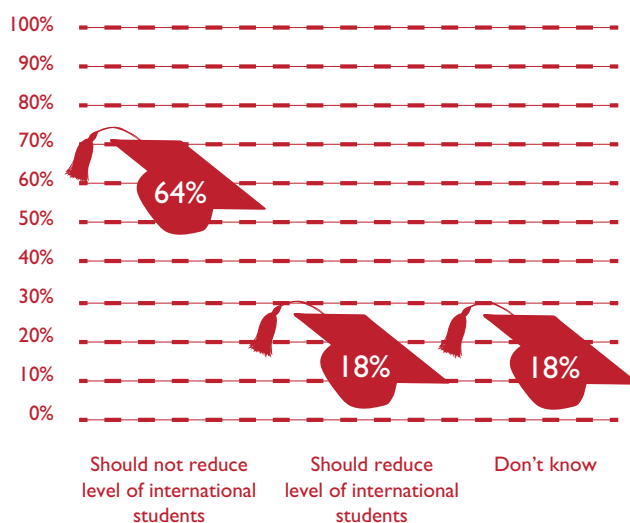
Strikingly, this feeling is even more prevalent among Conservative Party supporters, of whom two-thirds (66%) think the government should *not* reduce the number of international students, even if this means a lower reduction in net migration. Only 23% of Conservative supporters would reduce the number of international students to help get immigration numbers down.

Figure 7: By party: 'Should we maintain international student numbers?'

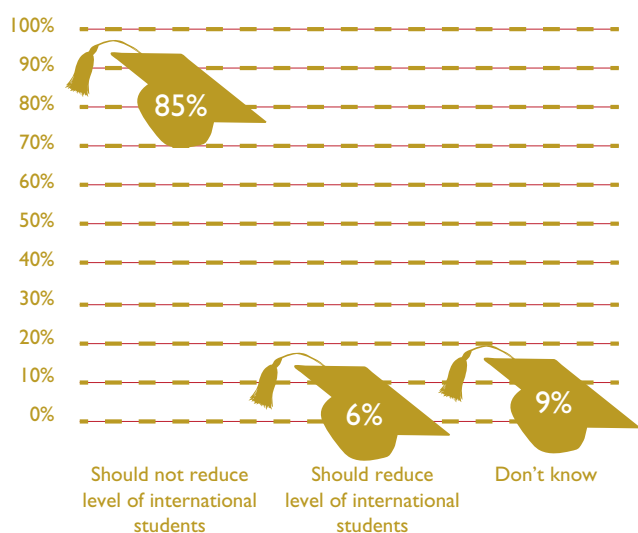
### CONSERVATIVE



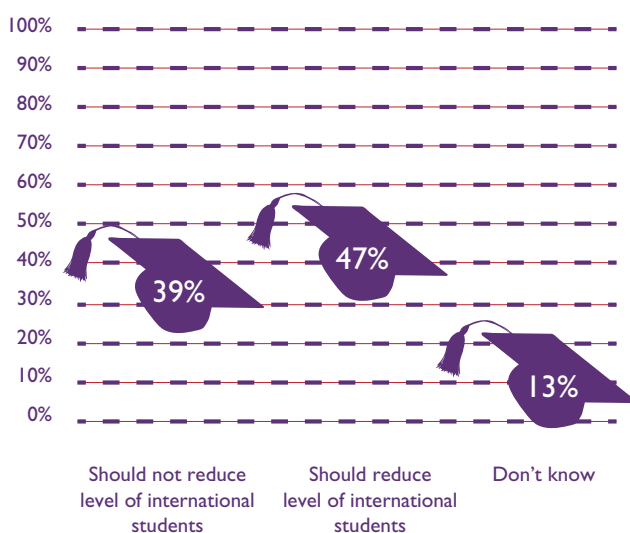
### LABOUR



### LIBERAL DEMOCRAT



### UKIP



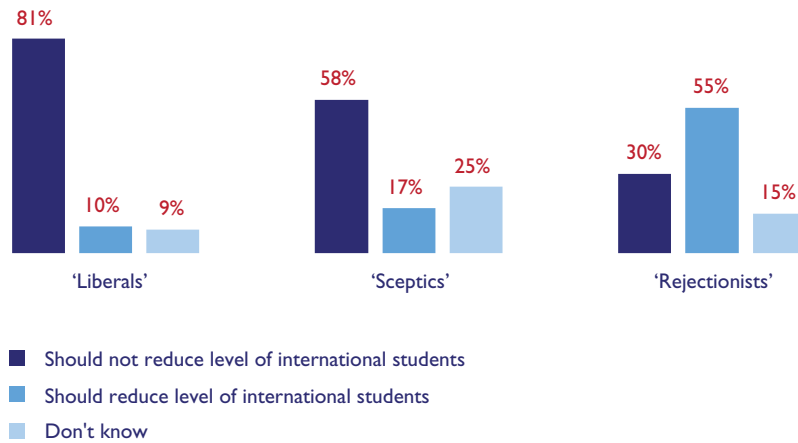
Even those who are sceptical about immigration – the middle 50% of the population who are neither outright pro-immigration nor outright against – do not want the government to reduce international student numbers as part of its efforts to reduce net migration. Just 17% of this 'sceptical middle' group would reduce the number of

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international students; 58% of them think the government should not reduce international student numbers, even if that means a lower reduction in immigration numbers.

Figure 8: By migration attitude: 'Should we maintain international student numbers?'

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These two findings are instructive as the promise to reduce net migration is a cornerstone of current Conservative immigration policy and one that would be expected to resonate with those voters who have concerns about immigration. These voters are not saying that they oppose the target itself: what they are saying quite clearly is that the government should not seek to meet this target at the expense of the perceived benefits, to Britain's universities and wider economy, brought by international students.

## 5. Keeping skills for Britain

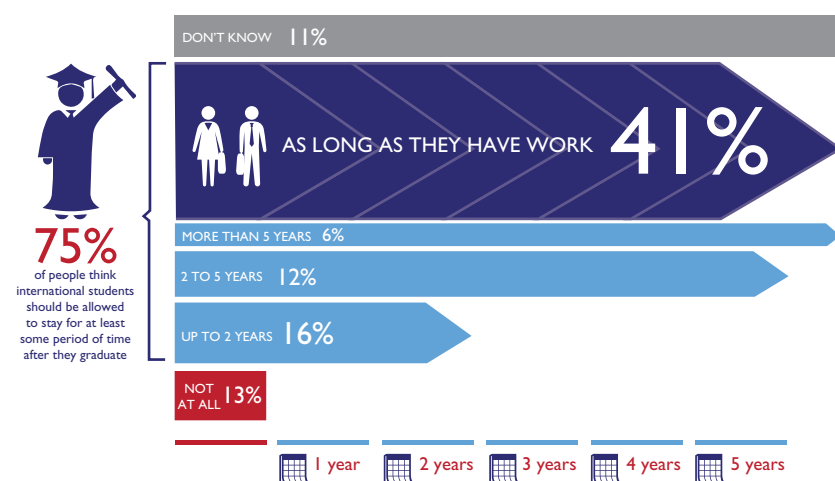
*'They come here, they study, then they take all those wonderful skills away.'*

Nottingham focus group participant

Our national ICM poll found broad support for letting international students stay in Britain to work. Three quarters (75%) of the public thinks international students should be permitted to stay and work in Britain for at least some period of time after they graduate. Only 13% of people think they should not be allowed to do so.

People's views differ as to how long international graduates should be allowed to stay and work: 41% say they should be allowed to stay 'as long as they have work'; 16% set a limit of up to two years. Twelve percent say they should be allowed to stay for two to five years and 6% think international students should be allowed to stay on and work for more than five years after finishing their studies.

Figure 9: 'How long should international students be allowed to remain in the UK after university?'



There is wide public support for international students staying on to work in Britain after they have graduated. Participants in research groups welcomed the idea that graduates could fill 'skills gaps', such as those in science and engineering, thus continue to make a positive contribution to Britain. Respondents did not want skilled, hardworking graduates taking their newly-acquired skills and leaving Britain to work for competitors in China or the US.

This support is qualified, however. It is accompanied by a concern that we should be looking to address these skills gaps from within

Britain as well, encouraging more of our own young people to gain the skills that are needed by British companies. ‘We need to address the fact that British people aren’t going into areas like engineering,’ said one participant in our York group.

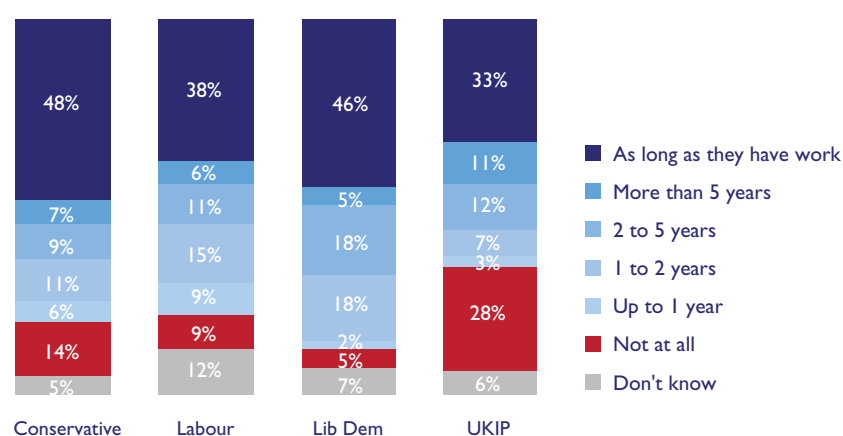
Throughout the research groups, this nuanced support welcomed the economic benefits of retaining skilled graduates while maintaining concerns about any potential impact on opportunities for young British people. A member of one of our Bristol groups said:

*I’m sat on the fence a little bit – you want to strengthen the economy by keeping them here, which is good, but you know what the headlines are going to say about British jobs being taken.*

Broken down by political party preference, support is highest among Conservative voters, with a total of 81% thinking that international students should be allowed to stay and work in Britain for some period of time after graduating. Nearly half of these (48%) say they should be allowed to stay as long as they have work, with 16% setting a two-year limit, 11% saying two to five years and 6% saying international students should be allowed to stay and work here for up to five years. Only 14% think they should not be able to stay and work at all.

Surprisingly, 66% of UKIP supporters, who tend to hold negative views about migration, think that international students should be allowed to stay and work for some period of time after graduating. A third (33%) think they should be able to stay as long as they have work, 11% set a one-year limit, 12% say they can stay for one to two years to work after graduation, 7% say two to five years and 3% say more than five years.

Figure 10: By party: 'How long should international students be allowed to remain in the UK?'



Proponents of the government’s current approach will argue that the existing rules permit international students to stay here if they have work. Critics argue that the rules make it difficult to do

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so, as international students must find work within four months of graduation on an annual salary of at least £20,500 – significantly more in some jobs – in order to stay in the country.

The April 2014 report of the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee<sup>15</sup> highlighted the limitations of the current post-study work options:

*... it is clear to us that the closure of the previous post study work route has had a deleterious effect on international students. Four months is too short a post study work period and it is at least questionable whether £20,300 is an appropriate figure across all STEM disciplines. It is also unclear how this figure was arrived at. The previous post study work route was simple and competitive; current arrangements are far less so.*

*We therefore recommend that the Government immediately reinstate the previous post study work route as it was simple, competitive and effectively enabled qualified STEM students access to the UK jobs market.*

Some members of our Nottingham groups cited personal experience of international graduates struggling to find work for this kind of salary so quickly. One participant said: *'They make an effort to come here, learn a skill that we're crying out for, then we make them jump through hoops to stay here.'* Another related a personal anecdote about a well-qualified Indian graduate her own employers wanted to take on, but who could not stay in Britain as they could not offer her the salary required for her to comply with immigration rules.

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15. House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee (2014) *International Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students*: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldselect/ldsctech/162/162.pdf>

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## 6. International students and the politics of immigration

Public concern about immigration is something no party can afford to ignore. Numerous polls confirm that over 70% of the public wants to see a reduction in migration. Looking behind the numbers, however, there are some important nuances concerning the extent to which they want numbers reduced and about which categories of migrants they are more or less concerned about. Of the majority that say they want overall numbers down, for instance, just over a third want ‘a little less’ rather than ‘a lot less’ migration.

These distinctions matter. Generally speaking the public is much less concerned about ‘contributing’ groups who ultimately benefit Britain both economically and socially: doctors and nurses, care workers, skilled migrants, entrepreneurs and, as our research shows, international students. Public concern is instead focused on the numbers of unskilled workers arriving and what they characterise as ‘illegal’ immigration.

The challenge for politicians is to create sensible policies that deal with these public anxieties but do not harm our economic self-interest. Yet successive governments have crafted immigration policies that fail to recognise the nuanced nature of public concern. A ‘one size fits all’ approach, focused on reducing overall numbers, ends up targeting groups that the public considers either beneficial or benign to modern Britain.

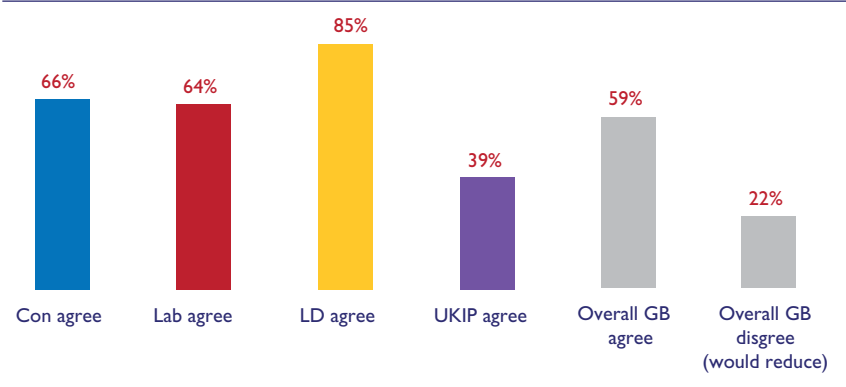
Hence the apparent dilemma over international student numbers. It is, after all, one of the largest flows of inward migration to Britain and one of the easiest to control. And yet it is also one of the most popular and beneficial. What is most striking in our research findings is that the perceived benefits brought by international students trump the desire to cut immigration numbers. The public is far less concerned about people coming to Britain in relatively large numbers when they are seen as hardworking contributors who benefit the country.

The current government has used a ‘net migration’ target as a key measure, with the Conservative part of the coalition pledging to bring down net migration below 100,000 by the end of this parliament. While this was a popular promise, few believed the target would be met – and indeed it looks highly unlikely that it will be.

The Conservatives have the most invested politically in the net migration target. The overwhelming majority of their voters, however – even more than Labour voters – do not want to see international student numbers reduced, even if this means a lower reduction in immigration numbers overall.

*‘What is most striking in our research is that the perceived benefits brought by international students trump the desire to cut immigration numbers.’*

Figure 11: By party: 'We should not reduce the number of international students'



There is also political concern on the centre right about the likely effects on the economy and universities of targeting student numbers. Mark Field MP, launching the Conservatives for Managed Migration group, drew attention to the benefits to Britain of international students who ‘become ambassadors for Britain for the rest of their lives’.<sup>16</sup> Sam Bowman of the Adam Smith Institute, writing for the *Bright Blue Modernisers’ Manifesto*, said that ‘the inclusion of student visas without work allowances in the overall net migration cap is senseless and should be changed.’<sup>17</sup> Jo Johnson MP, writing in the *Financial Times* before he was appointed to head up the Prime Minister’s No. 10 Policy Unit, said:

*The government faces real choices over policy on international students. The difference they make to long-term net migration is relatively small. The difference these choices make to the education sector, to Britain’s soft power around the world and to the UK economy is very significant.*<sup>18</sup>

The Labour Party faces not dissimilar challenges. It was badly burnt by the public’s rejection of them at the ballot box in 2010, when the two main issues in voters’ minds were the economy and immigration. The party has yet to declare whether or not it would keep some form of net migration target as a measure or create something else in its place. It has, however, announced that it will take students out of the net migration target.<sup>19</sup> Labour has made no decision yet, however, on whether or not it will reform the current rules on post-study work for international students.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that 85% of its supporters do not want to reduce student numbers, the party that has been the most vocal on the issue of students is the Liberal Democrats. It has stated that ‘it makes no economic or social sense to limit the flow of international students to the UK. Liberal Democrats propose, therefore, that students should be taken

16. Mark Field MP, ‘Conservatives for Managed Migration – launch speech’ 25 March 2014 <http://markfieldmp.com/news-a-articles/conservatives-for-managed-migration-launch-speech/>

17. Bright Blue (2014), *The Modernisers’ Manifesto* <http://brightblue.org.uk/bbmanifesto.pdf>

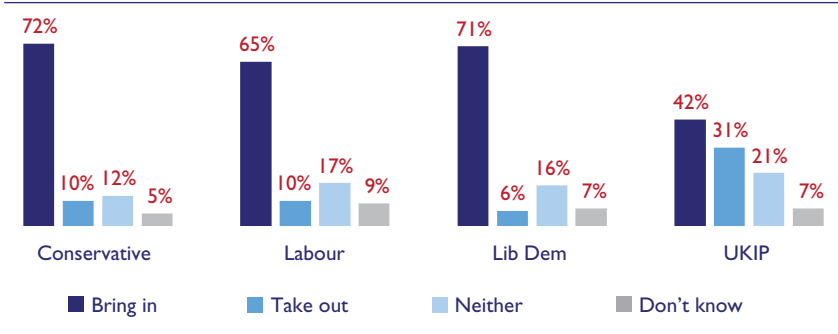
18. ‘Foreign students are key to UK prosperity’ *The Financial Times*, 14 May 2012

19. Yvette Cooper, ‘Labour’s approach to immigration’, speech 10 April 2014



out of any future net migration target'.<sup>20</sup> The party has been explicit about the value of students to the British economy, while being clear that there must be action to root out students who arrive on student visas primarily to work here rather than study.

Figure 12: By party: 'Do international students bring money into the local economy, or take it out?'



What of UKIP? Although nearly all of its voters hold negative views about immigration, nearly 40% of them would like to see current levels of student migration maintained and a majority understand the beneficial impact of international students' economic contribution on investment in facilities and teaching at Britain's universities. Many UKIP supporters (42%) believe that international students are net contributors to the local economy and two-thirds (66%) believe they should be allowed to stay and work here after they graduate.

The lesson for the Conservative Party, and to an extent all three main Westminster parties, is that given that nearly 70% of its voters are in favour of retaining the current numbers and nearly 50% of them think they should actually be increased, there is no reason to formulate more restrictive policies in order to compete with UKIP over this particular aspect of migration. Furthermore, there are enough UKIP voters with positive attitudes towards international students to justify emphasising the importance of international students, while dealing with forms of immigration that voters worry about.

Parties should also heed the broadly positive view the public holds of international students staying on to work and using their skills in Britain's economy. The Liberal Democrats' proposal, while limited in scope as it focuses only on students who graduate in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths), could be a policy on which to build.

Immigration will be a headline issue in the General Election. Parties and candidates will be expected to have plans to manage the pressures effectively while protecting the benefits of managed migration for Britain's economy and society.

20. 'Making migration work for Britain: for a stronger economy and a fairer society' Liberal Democrat policy paper. See: [http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/libdems/pages/4138/attachments/original/1392840151/116\\_-\\_Making\\_Migration\\_Work\\_for\\_Britain.pdf?1392840151](http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/libdems/pages/4138/attachments/original/1392840151/116_-_Making_Migration_Work_for_Britain.pdf?1392840151)

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This report sets out clear evidence of the broad public popularity of the contribution that international students make to our universities, and to the towns and cities in which they are located. This could have a political impact too, particularly in many of the close-fought marginal seats that will decide the outcome of an unpredictable General Election.

With more than 160 universities and other higher education providers spread around Britain, MPs and candidates in many seats will be seeking to represent university towns and other constituencies which benefit from the local and regional economic impact of higher education. Of the 100 most marginal seats, 45 either contain a university or are in close proximity to one.

Significant segments of the electorate – not just students and university staff but local businesses that depend on students and major industries that need to recruit employees with the right skills – welcome and benefit from the economic and cultural contributions that universities make.

So it will make political sense for candidates and party leaders to strike the right balance in the approach they take to immigration. Managing immigration effectively and fairly will be important on the doorstep. But so will protecting the valued contribution universities make to the economy and cultural life of their towns, cities and regions.

*‘It will make political sense for candidates and party leaders to strike the right balance in the approach they take to immigration.’*

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## 7. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Based on public opinion, the report makes the following recommendations:

- The government should **remove international students from any net migration target.**
- The government should launch an international student growth strategy, backed by investment, to promote British universities overseas, build new international partnerships and **attract more international students to Britain**
- The government should make a renewed effort – through its words, actions and policies – to communicate a consistent message that **Britain welcomes international students.**
- The government should enhance opportunities for qualified **international graduates** to stay in the UK to **work and contribute to the economy.**

Our research finds strong public support for the economic and educational benefits brought to Britain by international students. This can be found among supporters of all three main Westminster parties.

The public does not see international students as immigrants. They do not understand why international students should be counted in the government's immigration target. If asked to choose between the economic and other benefits brought by international students, and a reduction in immigration figures at the expense of having fewer international students, people choose to keep the students.

If the government wishes to address public concern about immigration it is evident that policies that will reduce international student numbers are not the way to do it.

**We therefore propose that the government removes international students from any net migration target.** Doing so will help ensure that the valuable contribution that genuine international students make to Britain is no longer caught up in the immigration debate.

The government should, of course, count the number of international students studying here. But those on student visas should be recognised as temporary migrants while they are studying and excluded from targets aimed at reducing immigration.

We should also make it perfectly clear that there is no place in higher education for those who wish to defraud the immigration system. Abuse of student visas is a small-scale problem but an

*'If the government wishes to address public concern about immigration it is evident that policies that will reduce international student numbers are not the way to do it.'*

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important one. The university sector spends £67 million a year on student visa compliance and continues to work closely with the government to stamp out any residual abuse. Those who try to defraud the system risk damaging the integrity of our universities, of Britain's immigration system, and of the genuine international students who come to study here. We agree that the authorities should continue to enforce rigorous checks, and they can be assured of universities' full cooperation in doing so.

While the government should be clear that it will crack down on the small number who try to abuse the student visa system, it should be equally clear that it welcomes the thousands of genuine students who wish to study at Britain's universities.

Decoupling international students from the immigration debate will free up the government to follow the example of many of our international competitors and pursue an ambitious strategy to attract more international students to study at our universities. Higher education is a competitive international market and Britain is strongly positioned as a market leader. However, maintaining this position is by no means a foregone conclusion. It is an advantage that we could do much more to exploit.

Therefore, **the government should launch an international student growth strategy, backed by investment, to promote British universities overseas, build new international partnerships and attract more international students to Britain.**

Our research found that more than twice as many people support the adoption of such a strategy as oppose it (36% support, 15% oppose). Support for the adoption of such a strategy, used in other countries to attract more international students, rises to 48% among Conservative voters, with only 12% opposed.

Such a campaign will only succeed if students want to come and study in this country. Therefore it should be accompanied by greater efforts from government – through its words, actions and policies – to **communicate a message that Britain is welcoming to international students.**

It is important to stress the findings of our research: that a welcoming message from government to international students *reflects* public opinion in Britain, rather than *flies in the face of it.*

One significant factor for international students in deciding where to study is the potential to stay for a period of time after graduation and gain work experience. Our international competitors are expanding, not contracting the opportunities for graduates to stay in the country and contribute.

Our research finds broad public support for international students being allowed to stay here and work after graduation. People would rather international graduates use their newly-acquired skills in British companies than hand the skills and knowledge we have given those graduates to our overseas competitors.

*'It is important to stress the findings of our research: that a welcoming message from government to international students reflects public opinion, rather than flies in the face of it.'*

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In view of this, we believe **the government should enhance opportunities for qualified international graduates to stay in Britain to work and contribute to the economy.**

These policy proposals – decoupling international students from immigration targets and encouraging more students to study at our universities through marketing, post-study work opportunities and a more welcoming message – make sound economic sense. What may be new to some decision-makers is that they also make political sense.

Our research finds that a government which takes a more positive approach to international students would secure broad, cross-party public support. People in Britain are proud of our universities and the contribution they make to our economic and cultural life. They understand and welcome the contribution that international students make, both to our universities and to our economy. They welcome international students and want their government to do the same.

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# Notes and tables

## Notes

Polling was conducted on behalf of British Future and Universities UK by ICM Research from 2 to 4 June 2014, and surveyed a representative sample of 2,111 British adults aged 18 and over in GB online. Surveys were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults. ICM is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Further information is available at [www.icmresearch.com](http://www.icmresearch.com)

Six discussion groups were run on behalf of British Future and Universities UK by Britain Thinks in Bristol, Nottingham and York in April 2014 and focused on people's attitudes to universities, international students and immigration.

## Tables

Figure 1: 'Thinking about the impact of international students on the local economy where they live, on balance, do you think international students bring extra money into the local economy or take money out of the local economy?'

BRING IN	TAKE OUT	NEITHER	DON'T KNOW
60%	12%	17%	10%

Figure 2: 'Without the higher fees paid by international students our universities would have less funding to invest in top quality facilities and teaching'

AGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER	DON'T KNOW
61%	7%	22%	9%

Figure 3: By party support: 'Without the higher fees paid by international students our universities would have less funding to invest in top quality facilities and teaching'

	AGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER	DON'T KNOW
Conservative	75%	5%	15%	5%
Labour	63%	6%	21%	9%
Lib Dem	72%	6%	18%	4%
UKIP	53%	15%	25%	7%

Figure 4: 'On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being "not at all valuable" and 10 being "very valuable", how valuable do you think Britain's universities are to the country's economy and cultural life?'

	NOT VERY (0-3)	QUITE (4-6)	VERY (7-10)	DON'T KNOW
Score given	3%	17%	75%	5%

Figure 5: ‘When thinking about government immigration policy, which of the following people do you think of as an immigrant?’

	% THAT COUNTS THIS GROUP AS MIGRANTS
None of the above	8%
UK citizen moving back to the UK after living abroad	4%
Tourist from outside the EU visiting the UK for three months	9%
International student coming to study at a UK university	22%
EU citizen moving to London to take up a job offer from a City bank	44%
Woman from outside the EU moving to the UK to live with her British husband	53%
EU citizen moving to the UK to look for work	65%
Refugee coming to the UK to escape persecution	74%
Unskilled labourer from outside the EU	78%

Figure 6: ‘Thinking specifically about international students, which of the following actions, in your opinion, should the government take?’

Don't reduce the number of international students in order to keep the income they generate, even if this choice means the total reduction in immigration numbers would be less than if the number of international students was reduced	59%
Reduce the number of international students in order to cut net immigration numbers to Britain, even if this choice means less income from international students	22%
Don't know	18%

Figure 7: By party support: ‘Thinking specifically about international students, which of the following actions, in your opinion, should the government take?’

	CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIB DEM	UKIP
Don't reduce the number of international students in order to keep the income they generate, even if this choice means the total reduction in immigration numbers would be less than if the number of international students was reduced	66%	64%	85%	39%
Reduce the number of international students in order to cut net immigration numbers to Britain, even if this choice means less income from international students	23%	18%	6%	47%
Don't know	11%	18%	9%	13%

Figure 8: By attitude to immigration: ‘Thinking specifically about international students, which of the following actions, in your opinion, should the government take?’

	LIBERALS	SCEPTICS	REJECTIONISTS
Don't reduce the number of international students in order to keep the income they generate, even if this choice means the total reduction in immigration numbers would be less than if the number of international students was reduced	81%	58%	30%
Reduce the number of international students in order to cut net immigration numbers to Britain, even if this choice means less income from international students	10%	17%	55%
Don't know	9%	25%	15%

Figure 9: 'How long, if at all, do you think international students who have completed a full degree course at a UK university should be allowed to stay and work in the UK after their studies?'

	CAN STAY	NOT AT ALL	DON'T KNOW
Total	75%	13%	11%
More than 5 years	6%		
As long as they have work	41%		
2 to 5 years	12%		
Up to 2 years	16%		

Figure 10: By party support: 'How long, if at all, do you think international students who have completed a full degree course at a UK university should be allowed to stay and work in the UK after their studies?'

	CAN STAY	THEY SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO STAY AFTER THEIR STUDIES	DON'T KNOW
<b>CONSERVATIVE</b>			
Total	81%	14%	5%
More than 5 years	6%		
2 to 5 years	11%		
1 to 2 years	9%		
Up to 1 year	7%		
As long as they have work	48%		
<b>LABOUR</b>			
Total	79%	9%	12%
More than 5 years	9%		
2 to 5 years	15%		
1 to 2 years	11%		
Up to 1 year	6%		
As long as they have work	38%		
<b>LIB DEM</b>			
Total	88%	5%	7%
More than 5 years	2%		
2 to 5 years	18%		
1 to 2 years	18%		
Up to 1 year	5%		
As long as they have work	46%		
<b>UKIP</b>			
Total	66%	28%	6%
More than 5 years	3%		
2 to 5 years	7%		
1 to 2 years	12%		
Up to 1 year	11%		
As long as they have work	33%		



Figure 11: By party support: ‘Don’t reduce the number of international students in order to keep the income they generate, even if this choice means the total reduction in immigration numbers would be less than if the number of international students was reduced.’

SHOULD NOT REDUCE LEVEL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	
Con agree	66%
Lab agree	64%
LD agree	85%
UKIP agree	39%
Overall GB agree	59%
Overall GB disagree (would reduce)	22%

Figure 12: By party support: ‘Thinking about the impact of international students on the local economy where they live, on balance, do you think international students bring extra money into the local economy or take money out of the local economy?’

	BRING IN	TAKE OUT	NEITHER	DON'T KNOW
Conservative	72%	10%	12%	5%
Labour	65%	10%	17%	9%
Lib Dem	71%	6%	16%	7%
UKIP	42%	31%	21%	7%

Figure 13: By party support: ‘Other countries’ governments, such as Canada, the US and Australia, have ambitious strategies to increase the number of international students coming to their country. Would you support, oppose or neither support nor oppose the UK adopting this policy?’

	SUPPORT	OPPOSE	NEITHER	DON'T KNOW
Conservative	48%	12%	36%	5%
Labour	43%	11%	37%	9%
Lib Dem	53%	10%	33%	4%
UKIP	22%	35%	39%	4%

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Designed by Soapbox, [www.soapbox.co.uk](http://www.soapbox.co.uk)

## About Universities UK

Universities UK (UUK) is the representative organisation for the UK's universities. Founded in 1918, its mission is to be the definitive voice for all universities in the UK, providing high quality leadership and support to its members to promote a successful and diverse higher education sector. With 134 members and offices in London, Cardiff and Edinburgh, it promotes the strength and success of UK universities nationally and internationally.

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## About British Future

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, opportunity and identity, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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