



# International study for an international career: A survey of the motivations and aspirations of international students in the UK

There are currently 435,000 international students<sup>1</sup> studying in UK Universities. This paper investigates the forces driving student mobility and the relationship between student migration and future mobility plans. The research, based on a survey of over 3000 international students and interviews with senior staff in International Offices at ten UK Universities confirms the importance of understanding international student mobility as part of wider mobility trajectories.

## Key Points

- Only a minority of international students see themselves remaining in the UK after graduation.
- Female students were slightly more likely to plan to remain in the UK and less likely to want to return to their country of origin.
- The desire to study at a world-class institution is the dominant driver of international student mobility.
- A majority of international students anticipated that studying in the UK would be the first step in launching them on an international career.

## Introduction

International students continue to be included in a wider debate about immigration to the UK. Over the last parliament opinions varied about whether to include international students in the governments' net migration targets and immigration reforms had a significant impact on Universities and their

non-EU students. Although the evidence for the academic and economic benefits of international student recruitment has been well-established – contributing £4.4 billion in 2011/12 through tuition fees and accommodation alone – less attention has been given to the longer term migration aspirations of international students themselves.

<sup>1</sup> This includes EU and non-EU/overseas students

## The study

The study, conducted in the first five months of 2015, focused on ten UK Higher Education Institutions with varying proportions of non-UK students. In-depth interviews were carried out with staff in the International Offices of these institutions and an online survey was administered in six of the Universities. In order to participate in the survey, students needed to have moved to the UK in order to study an entire degree i.e. not exchange students. The research covered a number of themes including the educational and family background of students, their motivations for international study, experiences studying in the UK and aspirations for the future. There were over 3,300 responses to the survey, with students drawn from 119 countries. The participants represented a spread of disciplines and levels of study; including Undergraduate students (UG) and those studying for Postgraduate qualifications (PGT- Postgraduate Taught courses. PGR - Postgraduate Research study e.g. a PhD)

## Main findings

### Motives for international study

Table 1 shows that studying at a 'world class institution' was by far the most important factor motivating people to engage in international study (82% rated this as very important). Opportunities to pursue an international career was the second

most important driver of student mobility, with influences such as accessing a particular course or fulfilment of family ambitions rated much less highly.

Motivations for international study varied by the level of study (Table 2) however studying in a world class institution was a very high priority for all students regardless of level of study. As might be expected encouragement from family and the desire for adventure were more important motivating factors for undergraduate students than postgraduates. However, taking a specific course was viewed as very important by more postgraduate taught students compared with either undergraduates or postgraduate research students.

### Lifetime mobility aspirations

A key feature of the survey was to discover the plans that international students had for work and residence after their studies. Is international study a first step on a longer term mobility trajectory? Table 3 shows that only a small minority of international students surveyed expect to still be in the UK five years after graduating. Female students were slightly more likely to wish to remain in the UK and less likely to expect to return home.

Table 4 cross tabulates some of the key motivations for international study against future migration intentions. The most interesting feature

Table 1: Motivations for international study in the UK

| <i>How important were the following factors in motivating you to study abroad?</i> | <i>Very important</i> | <i>Not very important</i> |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| To study in a world class institution  | 82%                   | 18%                       |
| To increase chances of pursuing an international career                            | 61%                   | 39%                       |
| To experience an adventure   | 58%                   | 42%                       |
| To gain independence   | 45%                   | 55%                       |
| To study in the English language   | 43%                   | 57%                       |
| To take a specific course not available at home                                    | 37%                   | 63%                       |
| Encouragement from family  | 27%                   | 73%                       |
| Cost effective (cheaper than at home)  | 7%                    | 93%                       |

Source: Authors' own analysis

Table 2: Motivations for international study in the UK by level of study

| <i>How important were the following factors in motivating you to study abroad?</i> | Undergraduates            |                       | Postgraduate Taught       |                       | Postgraduate Research     |                       |
|--|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
|  | <b>Not very important</b> | <b>Very important</b> | <b>Not very important</b> | <b>Very important</b> | <b>Not very important</b> | <b>Very important</b> |
| <b>To study in a world class institution</b>                                       | 20%                       | 80%                   | 18%                       | 82%                   | 14%                       | 86%                   |
| <b>To increase chances of pursuing an international career</b>                     | 39%                       | 61%                   | 37%                       | 63%                   | 40%                       | 60%                   |
| <b>To experience an adventure</b>  | 40%                       | 60%                   | 40%                       | 60%                   | 48%                       | 52%                   |
| <b>To gain independence</b>  | 46%                       | 54%                   | 61%                       | 39%                   | 63%                       | 37%                   |
| <b>To study in the English language</b>  | 56%                       | 44%                   | 57%                       | 43%                   | 59%                       | 41%                   |
| <b>Encouragement from family</b>   | 69%                       | 31%                   | 75%                       | 25%                   | 77%                       | 23%                   |
| <b>To take a specific course</b>   | 70%                       | 30%                   | 57%                       | 43%                   | 59%                       | 41%                   |
| <b>Cost effective (cheaper than home)</b>  | 91%                       | 9%                    | 94%                       | 6%                    | 96%                       | 4%                    |

Source: Authors' own analysis

Table 3: Mobility intentions following graduation from a UK University, by gender

| <i>Where do you plan to live?</i> | 1. Immediately after graduation |               | 2. In five years' time |               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|------------------------|---------------|
|                                   | <b>Male</b>                     | <b>Female</b> | <b>Male</b>            | <b>Female</b> |
| <b>In the UK</b>                  | 43%                             | 47%           | 22%                    | 26%           |
| <b>In home country</b>            | 38%                             | 35%           | 38%                    | 39%           |
| <b>Another country</b>            | 19%                             | 18%           | 40%                    | 35%           |
| <b>Total</b>                      | 100%                            | 100%          | 100%                   | 100%          |

Source: Authors' own analysis

Table 4: Lifetime mobility aspirations by motive for initial student migration

| <i>Important factors motivating you to study abroad</i>                           | Where do you plan to live?   |                               |                                |                         |                               |                                  |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|   | Immediately after graduation |                               |                                | In five years' time     |                               |                                  |
|   | <b>Remain in the UK</b>      | <b>Return to home country</b> | <b>Move to another country</b> | <b>Living in the UK</b> | <b>Living in home country</b> | <b>Living in another country</b> |
| <b>To study in a world class institution was very important</b>                   | 48%                          | 34%                           | 18%                            | 26%                     | 38%                           | 37%                              |
| <b>To experience an adventure was very important</b>                              | 43%                          | 37%                           | 20%                            | 24%                     | 37%                           | 38%                              |
| <b>Encouragement from family was very important</b>                               | 49%                          | 36%                           | 15%                            | 28%                     | 39%                           | 33%                              |
| <b>To increase chances of pursuing an international career was very important</b> | 54%                          | 25%                           | 21%                            | 30%                     | 26%                           | 44%                              |

Source: Authors' own analysis

is that the desire to live in the UK immediately after graduation is particularly associated with those wishing to pursue an international career (54%). Despite this, those motivated by a desire for an international career see their time in the UK as a short-term engagement, with less than a third believing that they will still be in the UK five years after graduating. A key question is whether onward mobility of this highly talented cohort reflects the constraints of UK immigration policy, or whether it says more about perceptions of the limited future opportunities of the UK economy.

### Policy implications

Despite increased global competition, thousands of international students continue to choose the UK as a destination for Higher Education. This study has revealed that students are drawn to British Universities for a 'world class' education as well as to boost their chances of pursuing an international career. The research also suggests only a minority of students expect to remain in the UK five years after graduation. This raises policy questions about restrictive policies on international student visas and working entitlements and the longer term impact such measures may have on the global reputation of Higher Education in the UK.

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