

What do home students think of studying with international students?

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The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned YouthSight to ask undergraduate students about studying alongside international students.

Introduction

The UK recruits more international students than any country other than the United States and they comprise one-sixth of the total student body. The new Government has set an ambitious target for further growth. In his first speech as the Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson, said: 'We are committed to increasing education exports from £18 billion in 2012 to £30 billion by 2020.'

However, the proportion of all international students who choose to study in the UK is falling. Moreover, the Conservative Party's 2015 manifesto promised further crackdowns on student visas and restated an 'ambition of delivering annual net migration in the tens of thousands, not the hundreds of thousands'. So it is not just the current rules that cause concern but also the direction of policy. The forthcoming referendum on Britain's place in the European Union is also prompting fears of a more isolationist approach.

In recent years, the Home Office's desire for stricter rules has been pitted against the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills's desire to encourage greater earnings from educational exports. Although the two interests are sometimes aligned – legitimate colleges and legitimate international students benefit from securing the reputation of the UK's education system – the

conflict within government has caused a lack of policy stability. It has also sent a signal that Britain may not be as open to new international students as it once was.

Moreover, setting the security risks against the economic benefits of welcoming more international students ignores a crucial aspect: the educational benefits of having diverse student bodies. Without a healthy number of international students, it is likely that some courses would be uneconomic to run, graduates would have a more limited outlook and classroom discussions would be excessively monocultural. Universities are more able to fulfil their core mission of sharing and spreading knowledge when they have students and staff who bring experiences from different countries and cultures.

This HEPI / HEA research paper explores the views of students about studying in a diverse student body. It builds on an earlier study, published in March 2015 by HEPI and Kaplan International, which asked similar questions of people applying to higher education in the 2014/15 UCAS application round. Together, the two pieces of research reveal a positive but nuanced picture of the educational benefits that international students bring to the UK.

Methodology

This research was undertaken by YouthSight as part of a Student Omnibus survey. The sample was therefore representative of the UK's full-time undergraduate student population (in terms of gender, year of study and university type). The research was undertaken between 15th and 19th May 2015, with respondents receiving a £1 Amazon Gift Credit for taking part.

Expectations and experience

The overwhelming majority (86%) of undergraduate students in UK higher education institutions study alongside international students, and only 10% are certain that they do not. There are some regional differences, with a relatively high proportion of students at institutions in London and Scotland (both 95%) and a relatively low proportion of people studying in the West Midlands (74%) saying that they study alongside people from other countries.

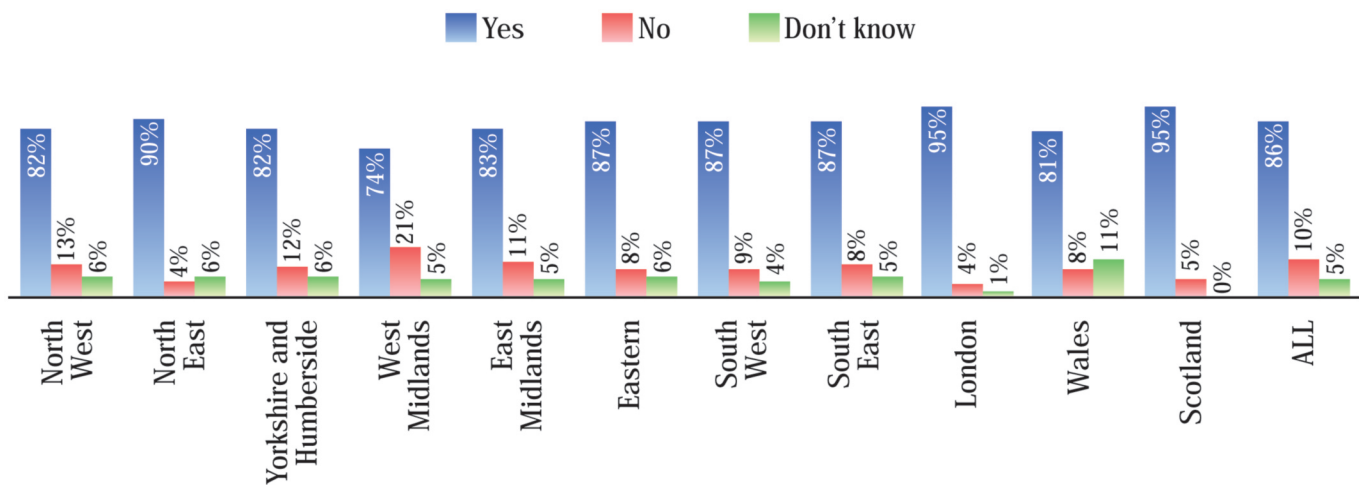
Many new students have prior experience of studying alongside people of different nationalities.

Among first-year students, 17% say they have studied alongside ‘lots’ of international students before and a further 44% say they have studied alongside ‘some’ international students before, with only 38% saying they have never done so.¹

Prior experience of studying alongside international students goes up somewhat as students progress through higher education – as reflected in the chart below, which is for all students. However, one-in-three (34%) of all students say they have never studied alongside international students before.

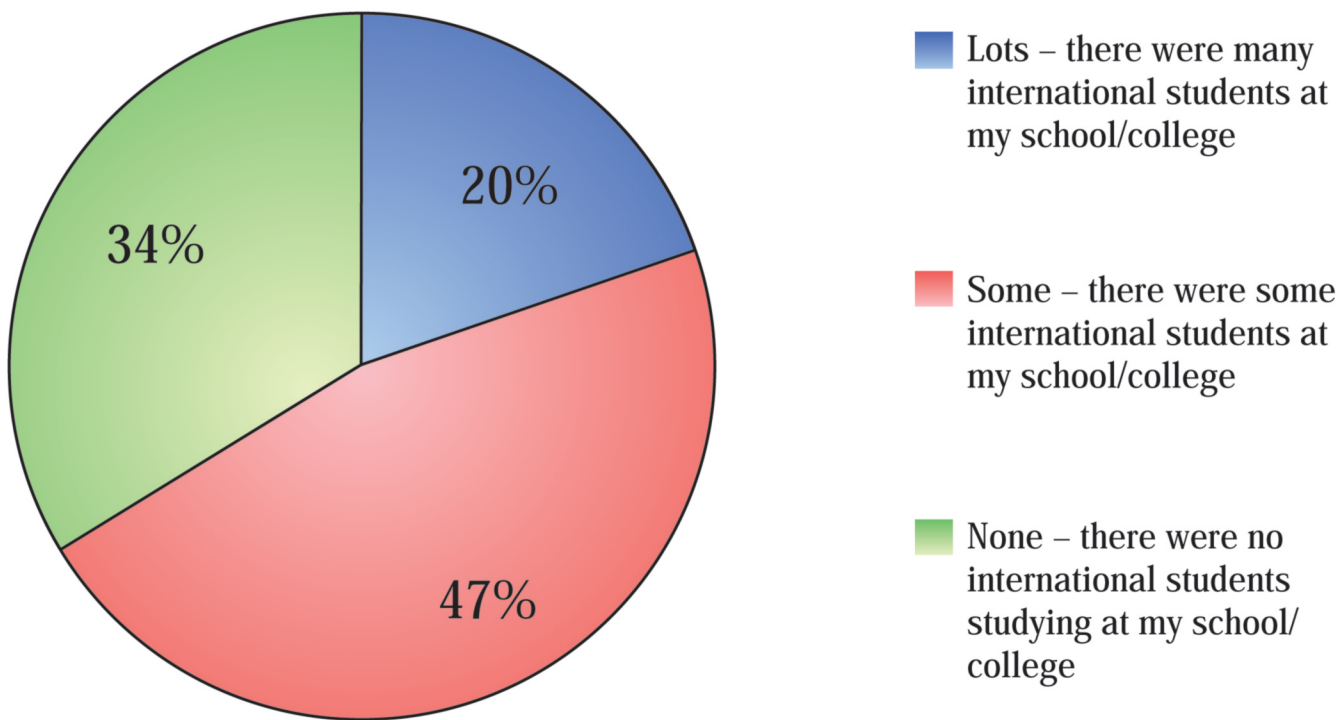
Are you studying alongside international students on your course?

Base: All respondents, excluding Northern Ireland due to small sample size (1,000)



Have you studied alongside international students before?

Base: All respondents (1,009)



Who works harder: home or international students?

The survey sought to uncover assumptions about the working patterns of students with different backgrounds. A majority of students (54%) think international students work ‘much harder’ or ‘a little harder’ than home students and a mere 4% think they work either ‘less hard’ or ‘much less hard’. The balance is made up by those who think they work the same (33%) and by don’t knows (9%).

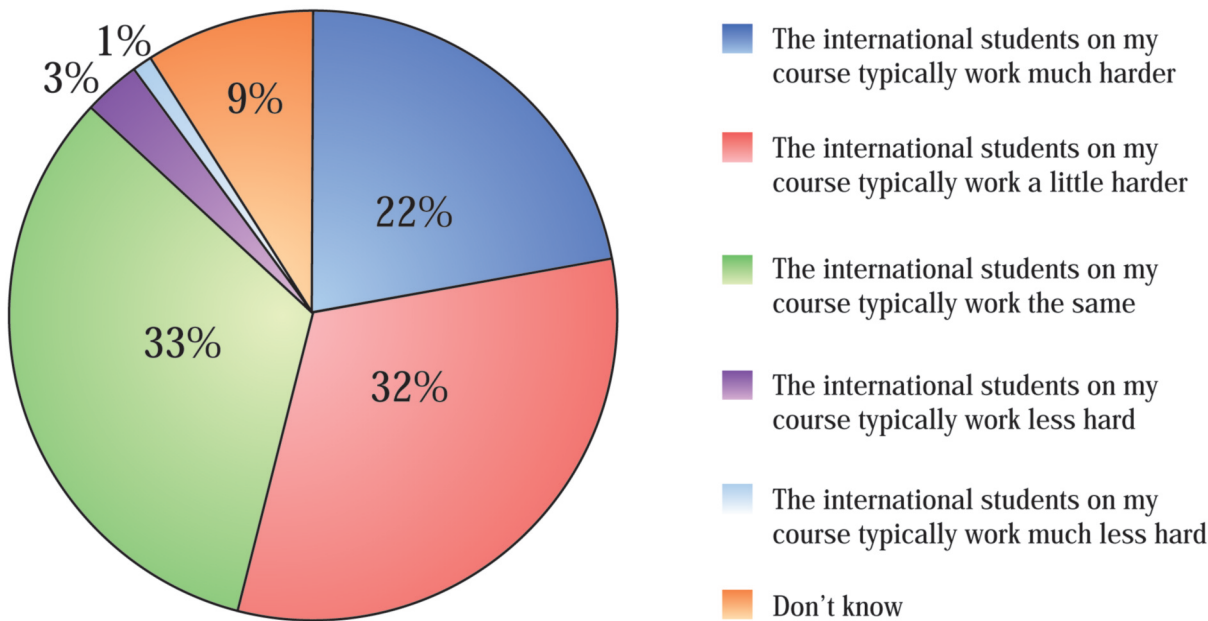
We cross-referred these attitudinal responses with the data from the recent HEPI / HEA 2015 Academic Experience Survey, which shows that UK students work around two hours a week less than students from other EU countries and around half an hour a week less than non-EU international students.² The results vary by residency, with 52% of home students,

67% of EU students and 69% of non-EU international students saying international students work either ‘a little harder’ or ‘much harder’. Home students are more likely than others to think the workload of home and international students is the same (35%, compared to 23% for students from the EU and 17% from elsewhere in the world). The responses also vary by type of institution: 63% of students at Russell Group institutions think international students work ‘much harder’ or ‘a little harder’ than home students, compared to 48% at specialist institutions.

If international students really do work noticeably harder than home students, as these results suggest, it begs the question why their presence is not doing more to spur on the work of home students.

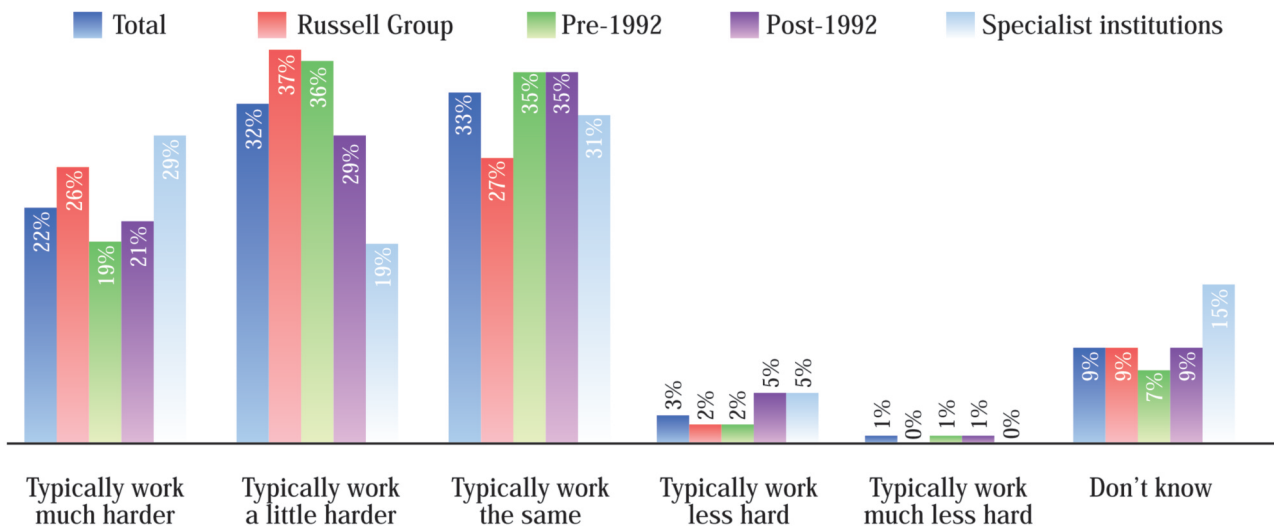
Do you think the international students on your course typically work harder or less hard than the home students?

Base: All respondents (1,009)



The international students on my course...

Base: All respondents (1,009)



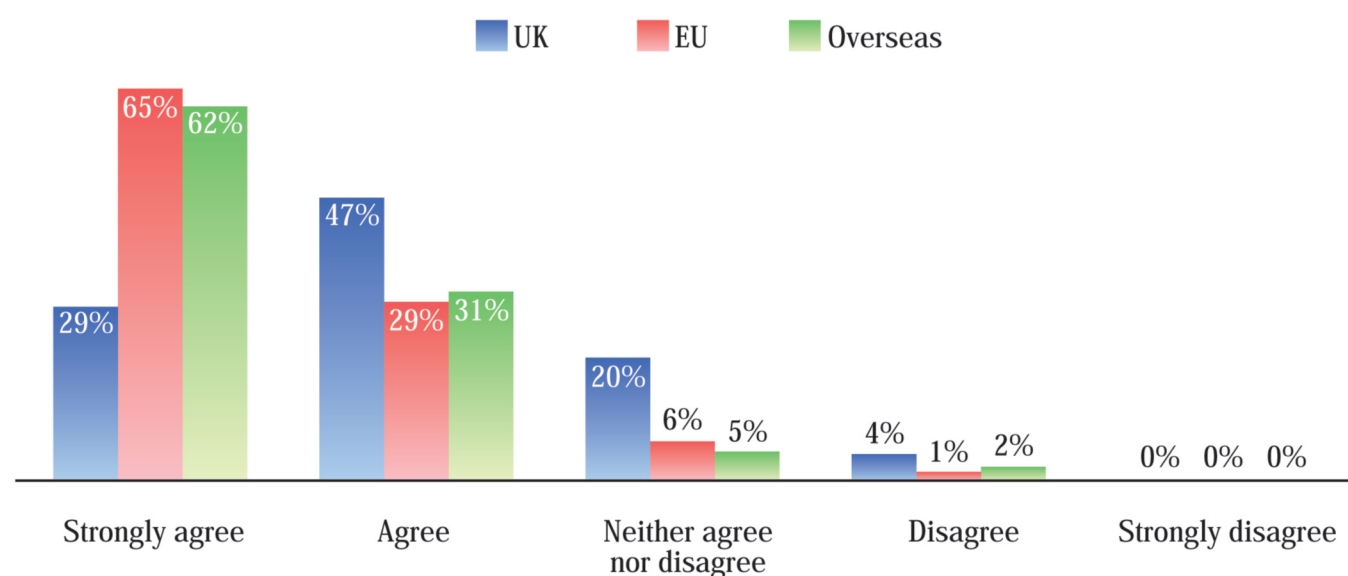
Working in a global environment

For many people, the primary purpose of higher education is to secure fulfilling employment. The survey asked whether studying alongside people from other countries 'is useful preparation for working in a global environment'. Over three-quarters of respondents agree with this proposition (33% 'strongly agree' and 45% 'agree'). However, there is a notable difference between 'home' students (those from the UK) and students from other countries, who were more than twice as likely to 'strongly agree' (29%

for UK students, 65% for students from the EU and 62% for other students from abroad). In contrast, students from the UK are more likely to 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'disagree' than students from other countries. This suggests the employability benefits of studying alongside people from other nations may be somewhat clearer to those who travel the world to study than for those who stay at home. Indeed, it may have been part of their original motivation for studying in the UK.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that studying alongside students from other countries while in higher education is useful preparation for working in a global environment?

Base: All respondents (872 England; 82 EU; 55 non-EU)



The impact of international students on the student experience

Respondents were asked to express a view on eight possible effects on learning of studying alongside people from other countries. To ensure a rounded picture, there were five potential positive effects and three potentially negative ones.

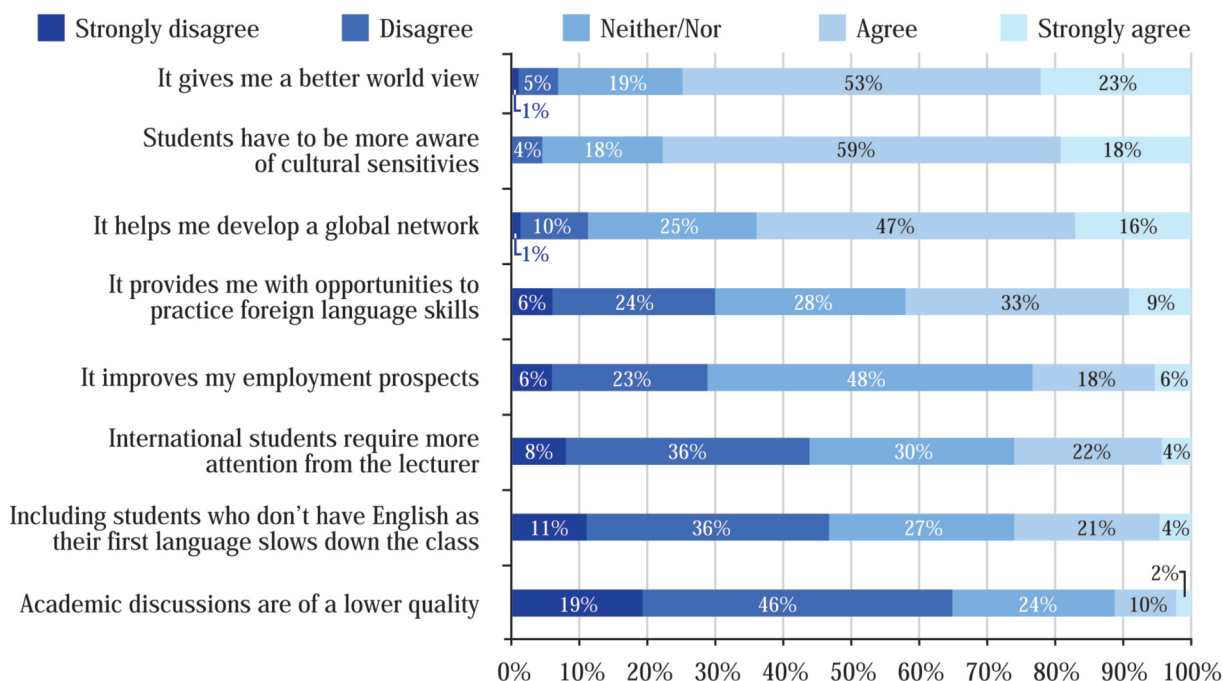
Overall, the impact of studying from within a diverse student body was clear. The positive statements all have a net positive rating, other than for the important exception of 'It improves my employment prospects' where (perhaps surprisingly) the positive and negative views were quite evenly balanced. The negative statements all receive a net negative rating. There were particularly high positive ratings for 'It gives me a better world view' and 'Students have to be more aware of cultural sensitivities'. There was a particularly high negative rating for 'Academic discussions are of a lower quality', suggesting few students agree with this proposition.

Although the number of non-UK students in the survey was small, they were typically more positive about the benefits and less negative about the potential disadvantages: for example, only 12% of UK students 'strongly agree' that studying alongside international students helps them develop a global network compared to 37% of EU and 47% of non-EU students. This may signal a reluctance among some home students to mingle with their international counterparts: research in other countries has suggested that close friendships between home and international students are relatively rare.

A greater proportion of students from abroad 'strongly disagree' that including students who do not have English as a first language slows down the class (10% of UK students, 22% of EU students and 19% of other international students).

Many university students in the UK study alongside international students. Thinking about the impact this has on your learning, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Base: All respondents (1,009)



Staff

The degree to which internationalisation affects higher education institutions is determined by the proportion of international faculty members as well as the proportion of international students. The majority of students (75%) are agnostic about whether their lecturers come from other countries, although twice as many (16%) hope to have some lecturers from abroad as hope they do not have any from abroad (8%).

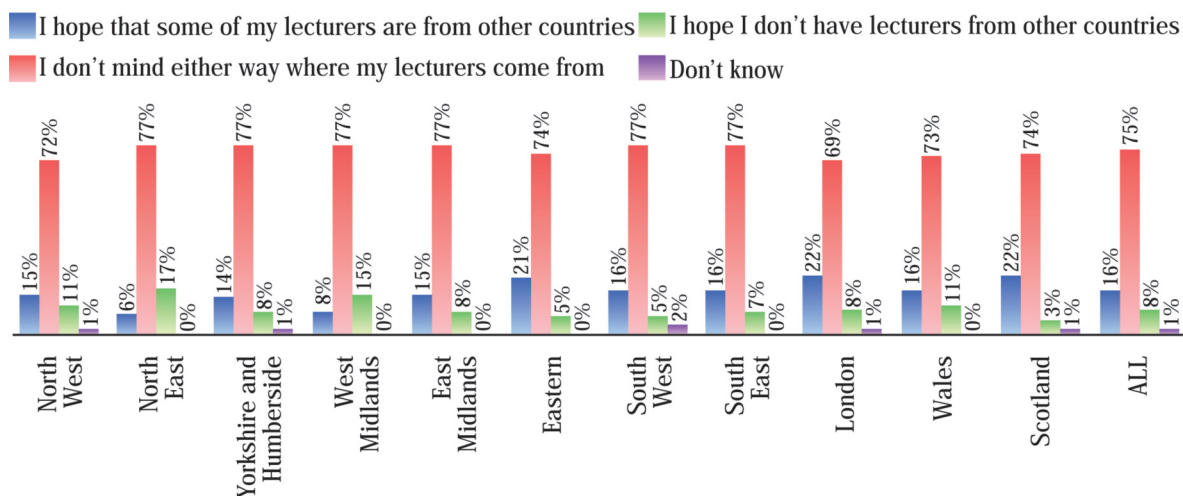
This suggests students make little distinction between international and home staff, or – more

negatively – it could be seen to mean they give little weight to international experience among those who teach them.

There are some regional differences. Those studying in the north east are the least favourable towards international faculty, with 6% wanting to have some lecturers from abroad and 17% per cent hoping they do not. Those studying in Scotland are notably more favourable, with 22% hoping to have some lecturers from abroad and only 3% wanting none.

Higher education institutions typically have professors and lecturers who are originally from other countries. Which of the following statements most closely reflects your feelings about this?

Base: All respondents, excluding Northern Ireland due to small sample size (1,000)



Conclusion

Universities are among the most multicultural of all British institutions and they are, relatively speaking, tolerant and welcome places for people from different backgrounds. The results of this survey suggest students recognise the benefits that accrue from studying in such a diverse environment. The positive story is only partially affected by the presence of some regional differences in attitudes towards international students and by the modest differences in opinion among students at different types of institutions.

But, despite the limited number of EU and non-EU students covered in the poll, there are some important differences in the views of home students and those from elsewhere. International

students who travel to the UK to study are clearer about the benefits of studying in a diverse environment than those home students who have chosen to remain in the UK to study. Students from other countries spend longer on their academic work too, which pours doubt on those who believe that large numbers of international students arrive in the UK with a motive other than to study hard.

Currently, relatively few British students choose to study abroad. Were more to do so, this could have a positive impact on the international outlook of the future labour force with the added benefit, to Home Office eyes at least, of reducing the statistics on net inward migration.

Footnotes

1 Respondents were not guided, so may have had different perceptions of who international students are – for example, whether they were people who have travelled the world to study or whether they include first-generation migrants.

2 The total weekly academic workload of home students was 30.29 hours a week, compared to 32.26 for students from other EU countries and 30.73 for non-EU international students.

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