



COMMENTARY

A degree of confusion: What do people in the UK think about international students?

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www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

This week (September 17 2012) details of a new survey were published by MigrationWatch – a pressure group campaigning for lower immigration – which found that a large majority of people in Britain (70%) support a limit to the number of student migrants coming to the UK. The report adds that large majorities want to see people with student visas deported if they are working without permission, do not have adequate language skills for their courses or fail to leave when their visas have expired.

The accompanying press release from MigrationWatch refers to the Migration Observatory's Thinking Behind the Numbers report and notes the difference between the percentage of people in our survey supporting reductions in the number of student migrants (31-33%), and the number of people in their survey supporting a limit in the number of student migrants (70%). It concludes that their survey "...gives the lie to those who have been claiming that the public are not concerned about student inflows."

Better understanding what members of the British public think about student immigration is of critical importance to the current policy debate in the UK. Understandably, presenting the public and policy makers with what at first appear to be two very different answers to the same question creates some confusion. So it is important to compare carefully and discuss the differences and commonalities of the questions and results of the two surveys. There are three important differences and one important area of common ground between the two surveys.

Difference 1: Asking different questions

First it is important to note that the two polls asked different questions.

The Migration Observatory asked if people would like to see student immigration reduced, increased, or kept the same, mirroring the language of the government's Citizenship Survey. It found that 31-33% of respondents supported reductions to the number of student immigrants coming to the UK, a further 41-42% felt that the number coming to the UK should remain the same, and 14-16% said that the number should be increased.

MigrationWatch's poll asked whether there should be a limit on student immigration. 70% of respondents said that there should be a limit, and 22% rejected a limit.

The results from these questions are not directly comparable. The Migration Observatory question does not ask about a limit, while the MigrationWatch question does not capture public responses to current levels of student immigration. In principle, it is possible to support a limit while at the same time supporting more, less or no change in student migration. It all depends on the level at which the limit should be set.

Difference 2: Framing of the question

When interpreting public opinion data, it is important to look at how questions in surveys are framed. The Migration Observatory question about students was part of a broader set of questions about all the main channels of immigration (work, family, study and asylum). The entire survey was designed so that people would express their views about immigration – in general and in reference to specific types of immigrant – without any external prompts or information beyond what they already knew and believed. The specific question the Migration Observatory survey asked was:

Policies on immigration often affect specific groups of people coming to Britain. For each of the following groups, please tell us whether the number of people coming to Britain should be increased, reduced or kept the same.

In contrast, the MigrationWatch survey prepared respondents to answer a specific question about students by first providing them with selected information. The first question in the MigrationWatch survey was as follows:

“At present about 250,000 foreign students from outside the EU arrive every year to study in Britain. Foreign students have to pay the full cost of studying at British universities and colleges, providing them with valuable income. Around a fifth stay on legally after their studies, and so become long term immigrants whilst other students return home. However, it is not known how many have returned as there are no exit checks. Thinking about this, do you think that there should or should not be a limit on foreign student numbers in British colleges and universities?”

Both approaches (providing background information, and not providing such information) have their pluses and minuses. Unprimed or unframed questions are better suited to capturing public opinion as it is. Most people respond to political issues without knowing detailed statistics, and it is often this sort of ‘saltwater’ public opinion to which governments are accountable. On the other hand, priming respondents means that one gets a more direct response to the specific information that one offers them. This approach needs to be undertaken with care as it introduces the risk of selectively nudging respondents toward certain answers, since no question prompt can provide all of the facts that might be relevant to a policy issue.

Difference 3: Timing of the surveys

Survey results will be affected by current affairs. It is reasonable to imagine, for example, that a survey looking at attitudes to the tabloid press immediately after the death of Princess Diana may have been very different to a survey asking the same question a few weeks before she died. So, when interpreting public opinion data, the timing of the surveys and their proximity to high-profile events also needs to be considered.

MigrationWatch’s poll was undertaken on the 9-11 September 2012, just over a week after London Metropolitan University was stripped of its right to sponsor non-EU students – one of the most high-profile student immigration stories in UK history. This may have affected people’s views on student migration in unknown ways, in either the short or long term.

The Migration Observatory survey was undertaken almost exactly a year earlier – 2-8 September 2011 – not close to a period of any major media focus on international students.

Common ground: opposition to illegality

The two surveys were broadly similar with respect to attitudes toward illegality in immigration and residence in the UK. Four out of the five questions that MigrationWatch asked were focused on various forms of illegality on the part of those holding student visas: a) those who have acquired visas by deception because they do not have adequate English language skills to undertake their courses (question 2), b) those whose intention is work, not study (questions 3 and 5) or those who overstay their visas after completing their course (question 4).

The MigrationWatch survey found high levels of support for action against those involved in various forms of illegality surrounding their visas. The Migration Observatory findings also show high levels of concern about illegal immigration in Britain as well as higher levels of concern about permanent migrants than temporary ones.

Given the opposition to illegality and permanent migration found in the Observatory survey, it can indeed be expected that linking student immigration to long-term residence and illegal status in one question – as the MigrationWatch survey has done – will show greater opposition to student immigration.

Conclusion

International students, largely ignored in earlier debates about immigration policy, have moved front and centre recently. This debate is likely to be ongoing, so it is important to be clear about what we do and don't know about the data, including public attitudes.

The questions about students in the public opinion surveys by the Migration Observatory and MigrationWatch are different in terms of content, framing and timing. So it is not surprising that the two surveys came up with some different results.

The MigrationWatch survey suggests that the majority of people in Britain want to see some sort of limit on student immigration, while the Migration Observatory found that only about 31–33% of people want to see student immigration actively reduced from levels at the time of the poll (Sep 2011). These two findings are not incompatible. It should also be noted that both surveys suggest opposition to illegality and abuse of the student route (MW survey) and immigration more generally (MigObs survey).

Analysis of public opinion toward different groups of migrants is of fundamental importance in the current policy debate, so it is important to continue work in this area. As the Observatory's Thinking Behind the Numbers report highlighted, it is important to 'unpack' the headline figures, as public opinion can be much more complex and nuanced than answers to a single question can suggest.

Related Material

- MigrationWatch Poll – Strong Public Support for a Limit on Foreign Students <http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/pressReleases#336>
- Migration Observatory report – Thinking Behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/understanding-uk-public-opinion/executive-summary>

Useful further reading on survey design and analysis

- Weisberg, Herbert F. *The Total Survey Error Approach*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Schuman, Howard and Stanley Presser. *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys: Experiments on Question Form, Wording, and Context*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996.



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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