

Statement on the inclusion of students in the UK's international migration statistics

The treatment of students in the UK's immigration data and statistics published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been an ongoing focus of political and media attention during the present and previous Parliament.

There have been repeated calls, from across the political spectrum, for students to be excluded from the UK's immigration statistics. Similar views have also been expressed in numerous editorial columns, as well as in press releases and briefing papers from organisations representing universities and colleges.

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) feels compelled to call for two key points to be taken into account as this important debate continues to take place.

First, we believe it is imperative for due attention to be paid to the international definitions of migration, which lead to the inclusion of students in the figures. People staying at least 12 months are classified as long-term migrants.

Such definitions have been developed by the United Nations over many years; indeed, it was a major statistical achievement to arrive at classifications which enjoy such comprehensive international support.

Accordingly, we believe it would be a major mistake if the ONS were put under any pressure to, in effect, ignore this international definition and present its figures on a fundamentally different basis. Such a move – especially if demanded by politicians – would set a dangerous precedent and damage ONS's independence. We would expect the UK Statistics Authority, the regulator created under the 2007 Statistics and Registration Act, to ensure the continued professional independence of the ONS.

Secondly, RSS believes it is important for a clearer distinction to be drawn, as this debate continues, between the ONS's immigration statistics and the Government's net migration target.

In our view, the UK's immigration statistics should continue to conform to international best practice. However, Ministers' immigration targets are different and much more political matters, which we recognise lead to calls for more fine-grained analysis.

Maintaining international standards should pose no obstacle to the development of national, sub-national and local data on categories of migration, which may include or exclude estimates of student migration. The Government Statistical Service (GSS) should develop statistical data for measurement of public policy goals, and should be responsible for their independent production and publication. Such figures should be seen as a complement to, not a substitute for, the internationally recognised figures which the ONS must continue to produce.

In short, the RSS believes that while the ONS and the rest of the GSS should advise upon and produce the statistics that government and other users need, they must keep producing headline figures that accord with the UN standards. The production and use of figures on migration, detailed or otherwise, should also have regard for the UK's code of practice for statistics. Statistical independence must be protected, international comparability needs to be maintained, and statistical integrity should be safeguarded in this way.

About us

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a learned society and professional body for statisticians and data analysts, and a charity which promotes statistics for the public good.

Notes / references in support of statement

The RSS is seriously concerned that there is a risk that policy and targets around immigration are conflated with the requirements for statistics. Statistical problems and policy problems differ, and we see clear advantages of continuing to include students in the statistical framework.

First and foremost, the UK should continue to pay due attention to the [United Nations Statistical Division guidance on international migration](#) (1998).¹ It is a major achievement that the UN set out this definition, and an accompanying taxonomy, after a number of decades. The UN's taxonomy for migration flows seeks to make more explicit the linkages between departures from one country and arrivals in another. This leads to foreign students being included, where their length of stay aligns with long-term / short-term immigrant / emigrant definitions.

The RSS does, however, recognise that there are many calls for more fine-grained analysis of international immigration. This has long been the case, across many countries. Administrative and policy frameworks have often stood juxtaposed to international statistical frameworks.

The ONS has a strong present focus upon improving its population and migration statistics.² This includes a programme of work to better estimate and understand student migration numbers, however it is not exclusively focused upon such improvements.³

To address analytical requirements, we believe that more comprehensive figures across categories of migration are needed. These should be produced and used in accordance with the [UK code of practice](#), and should be coupled with strong statistical communication about the reliability of estimates and their uncertainties.⁴

Such figures should be seen as a complement to, not a substitute for, the internationally recognised figures which the ONS must continue to produce.

Statement issued 30 January 2018

¹ 'International long-term immigrant / long-term emigrant: A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence. From the perspective of the country of departure the person will be a long-term emigrant and from that of the country of arrival the person will be a long-term immigrant.'

United Nations Statistics Division 'International migration' [webpage], available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/migration/migrmethods.htm>

Original source is Box 1, p.10, Chapter 2 'Definition of "international migrant" for the purpose of measuring flows' in United Nations Statistics Division (1998) *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration* [PDF]. Available from: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/migration/migrmethods.htm>

Taxonomy at p. 14, *ibid*, identifies foreign students as a relevant category for the compilation of international migration statistics.

² Bell, I. (2017) 'ONS forum signals new era for migration statistics', *ONS blog*, 22 September 2017. Available at: <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2017/09/22/ons-forum-new-era-for-migration-statistics/>

³ Letter from Iain Bell, ONS Director General, Population and Public Policy, to Ed Humpherson, UK Statistics Authority Director General for Regulation [PDF]. Available from: <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Iain-Bell-letter-on-Student-Migration-27-July-2017.pdf>

⁴ UK Office for Statistics Regulation (2018) 'Code of Practice' [webpage]. Available at: <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/code-of-practice/>