

INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION

IHE response to the ONS consultation on the future of population and migration statistics in England and Wales

October 2023

1a) How does IHE currently use ONS population and migration statistics?

IHE is a representative and membership body for independent providers of higher education, professional training and pathways. As part of this role we use migration statistics to estimate international student populations to support member education organisations with planning and strategic modelling. We model student journeys, using data on domestic and international students, to enable members to plan student recruitment and resources for international and domestic students.

As a representative body we use migration data to estimate variations in international student visas to support public policy decision making. We also use this data to support international partnership activity and contribute to ongoing discussions of export revenue from international education.

In our role as secretariat for the APPG for International students we use migration statistics to support APPG with information about international student populations, their study levels, and their graduate activities in the UK.

1b) To what extent do the proposals for changes to population and migration statistics meet IHE's needs?

The proposals meet some of our needs.

1c) Are IHE's current information needs better met by the proposals to transform the system? Which information needs are better met by these proposals?

Yes.

As most of the proposals focus on domestic populations it is not entirely clear how these changes would specifically support IHE's information needs. However, should the data include data from migrants after they enter the UK, there would be considerable benefit for IHE and our members. Data on movement within the UK, could support more regionalised cooperation between education providers and local services to support students while they study. This could include accommodation planning for example as little is known about the accommodation choices of international students outside of purpose built halls of residence. Should this data include tax and employment information on international students, where they are permitted to work, it would support local planning for short term job shortages, and enable education providers to work more closely between students and employers to fill local job needs while enabling work experience. It would also demonstrate better the net contribution of international students while they study, enabling better policy decisions where numbers grow or decline.

Of greatest interest are suggestions that the new data system would enable the UK to better track students between term-time and study time. If applied across domestic and international students this model could enable a far greater understanding of the duration of time students spend in the UK, and at their study location. The current model, which considers anyone intending to stay for a period of 12 months or more as a 'migrant' is outdated. Modernisation of travel has enabled the 'migrants' of the 21st century to be far more mobile than before, and behaviour can be more like that of a frequent visitor than the vision of a migrant when that definition was established. Relying solely on the UN definition, that a migrant who declares they intend to stay for at least one year, without regard that this declaration is more strongly related to the requirements of the visa than actual intent, lacks the nuance needed to use migration statistics beyond a top level 'counting-in' analysis. The higher education sector must then use their own data to create estimated data on a variety of further uses such as accommodation needs, transport needs, and future employment needs here or abroad.

2a) Do the proposals to deliver characteristics estimates at Local Authority level, with some being available at lower levels, meet IHE's information needs? What additional geographic breakdowns would IHE need?

Yes, they will meet some of our needs.

Improved characteristics data, especially where two or more characteristics are combined would be very welcome. Students are not a homogenous group, and too often we lack data at local level to support robust planning. For example, there is a general assumption that 'students' are 18-21 years old, single and with no caring responsibilities. The Higher Education sector is able to propose reliable characteristics data that can combine student, nationality and some other characteristics such as age or caring responsibilities, which can support some of their planning needs, but without a broader approach across the different institutions locally this becomes increasingly difficult. Each of these characteristics will impact resource planning differently. We strongly encourage more integration between population statistics and education data to support the proposed model to create more robust data on students, both domestic and international.

2b) The use of administrative data could result in less detailed breakdowns for characteristics being available, particularly where more detailed breakdowns are collected in the census beyond standard tick-box options. Would this change in available detail still meet IHE's

needs? What impact would this change have on IHE's use of population and migration statistics?

No.

To enable some of the work which is conducted across the higher education sector, details of nationality, education, and labour market status or occupation need to be combined with other characteristics to support estimations of the impact of students, domestic and international, on regional and national pressure areas such as housing, healthcare and further education needs.

We encourage the use of education statistics along with a greater depth of data collected by the Home Office through the border, visa and sponsor systems to enable a more robust understanding of characteristics at local level.

3a) Does IHE need definitions for population estimates other than 'usual resident'?

Yes.

3b) For population present estimates, what is of interest and why?

By day of week; By weekday or weekend; other.

IHE has noted through qualitative data that the residency models of students are changing and that this impacts both domestic and international students. To some extent this reflects changes made to delivery models for higher education and professional training, with more learning being completed in a model blending online and in-person. Teaching which is conducted in the evenings and on weekends is also increasing, as are courses where in-person learning is condensed on specific days of the week. These not only impact travel and on-campus resources, but also accommodation. In some cases, this helps to spread the pressure on accommodation and opens opportunities for students from surrounding areas. However, there remain policies in government who feel that students who commute longer distances are not 'genuine' students, regardless of the model of teaching. Data which can show population present in areas where there are higher education providers, can support us to normalise the model of travelling to learn, and support government decision making which facilitates students who choose this model.

3c) What, if any, other definitions could IHE use to estimate population and migration that would better meet your needs?

We would strongly support population estimates which use a monthly or quarterly definition. Where students do move to study, they do so based on the academic calendar of their education provider and course. For some this is a 9 month academic year, and for others there are terms of study. For example, IHE members teach high numbers of professional and skills training courses, which can significantly change the population of a rural area in the summer months when more students take up temporary residency to study. This can also be the case where the specialist provider is often one of the largest employers in the area.

Population estimates by month or quarter could support a greater understanding of student

flows, to allow resource planning and understand the impact to local businesses.

4a) When would IHE like population estimates? Please select the most important frequency.

Annually.

4b) How timely would IHE like population estimates to be?

Early provisional estimates, followed by updated estimates 12 months after the reference period.

Early provisional estimates would allow the education sector to triangulate data with existing data sources, and support more rapid releases of information to education providers and local authorities when the final estimates were available.

5a) Section 3.5 of the consultation document outlines the potential to securely retain personal information obtained from administrative data used to create statistics, for historical purposes.

No comment – we do not use this information.

6a) Is there anything else about the transformation of population and migration statistics proposal that IHE wish to add to our response?

IHE strongly supports more robust and timely population statistics to facilitate better policy discussions. To that end, we recommend that ONS look to compile reports beyond net migration statistics, bringing together many of the administrative data noted in this consultation.

The challenge currently facing IHE, as with the rest of the broader education sector, is that the existing published migration data is too high level to be useful. It then falls to the sector to augment that data with other existing data sources to publish estimates on everything from resource use to tax contribution. This data can fall short of its intended usefulness as the education sector is not seen as a neutral party, despite every safeguard to ensure the data is as reliable as possible.

In other countries, bodies similar to ONS take the responsibility, as ONS has in some of these proposals, to combine the top-level migration data with data held by other government and statistical bodies. The end result is a single source for data on specific groups of migrants, like international students. Countries like Australia (<https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-numbers-country-state-and-territory>) generate localised information by state on students, nationalities, levels of study including schools, vocational education, English language and higher education, and export statistics. The value of this data for local resource planning, policy making and employment estimates is significant. We strongly urge ONS to consider this model of reporting on migration to support more efficient policy making across national to local levels.

We read with interest the use of cohort analysis in the Refugee Integration Outcomes Cohort Study. The use of this methodology should be encouraged and we strongly support the creation of the Longitudinal Population dataset partly because of the opportunities it presents for further use of cohort analysis. In particular IHE has found the lack of data and analysis on international

students post-graduation, either on exit or transfer to a new visa, to be prohibitive. We feel cohort analysis could support better estimates of migration data in this case.