
Director General for Regulation

James Pitman
(By email)

24 November 2017

Dear Mr. Pitman,

Thank you for your letter of 19 October. We are pleased that our report on the quality of student migration statistics has been well-received.

Your letter questioned the impact of the quality of the student migration estimates on the overall migration estimates, and encouraged us to seek more development work by ONS in this area.

On the first point, our view remains that the International Passenger Survey (IPS), when supplemented with other sources, can satisfactorily produce overall estimates of international migration. As covered in our report, our concern lies with the ability of the IPS to categorise migrants by reason for travel. In particular, while it can count people in and capture their reason for travel as 'student', it may fail to record people as a 'former student' when counting out. This arises because the current methodology cannot capture or count all former-student emigrants. Thus the IPS may be underestimating the number of former-student emigrants because it may be overestimating the number of emigrants in other categories, such as work; this issue of categorisation need not affect the overall estimate of emigration. ONS summarises this argument in its August 2017 article on 'What's happening with international student migration'¹.

On your second point, we agree that more in-depth analysis is required. ONS has already publicly committed to further work to understand the impact that student migration has on the migration statistics overall. This can be seen in the conclusions of their August 2017 'International student migration research update'², which set out ONS's next steps. These steps include continuing to investigate the coverage of the International Passenger Survey, reviewing the "switcher adjustment" that is applied to the long-term international migration estimates to account for changing intentions of migrants, and using the Home Office exit check data to investigate the migration intentions of other groups of non-EU migrants.

ONS committed to publish further detail on plans in September. These details, including the deliverables and an outline of the timeline of planned work, were summarised in a post on ONS's National Statistical blog on 22 September³. While this material is helpful, it is difficult to find on ONS's website. We have discussed this matter with ONS, and it has committed to looking at alternative ways to make it clear to users that this information is available and, therefore, to improve its accessibility.

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/whats happening with international student migration/2017-08-24>

²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/internationalstudentmigrationresearchupdate/august2017>

³ <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2017/09/22/ons-forum-new-era-for-migration-statistics/>

I am copying this letter to the Home Affairs Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and the Treasury Select Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', written in a cursive style.

Ed Humpherson

Director General for Regulation