

Loud talk, small stick

Plans to cut the number of foreign students are less draconian than feared

The home secretary, Theresa May, has a distinctive approach to immigration policy: she threatens Armageddon and settles for a middling skirmish. The explanation lies in her Conservative Party's pre-election pledge to cut annual net immigration, running at 226,000 in the year ending last June, to "tens of thousands" over the course of this parliament. The pledge has proved difficult to fulfil (because British emigration keeps dropping, and because European Union citizens cannot easily be kept out) and controversial (arguably the economy needs immigrants to grow). The Tories' Liberal Democrat coalition partners aren't very keen on the goal anyway. No surprise, then, that plans to curb student visas announced on March 22nd bear signs of private compromise, as well as of public consultation with a nervous education lobby.

For Tories intent on cutting immigration, study visas provide a great opening. The number of these visas, which allow students to stay in Britain for more than a year, has increased sharply, from 186,000 in 2007 to 254,000 in 2010. The lion's share goes to China and India (see chart). Students and their dependants accounted for two out of three migrants from outside the EU last year—and that is without counting more than 49,000 short-stay student visitor visas, which technically don't count toward immigration totals.

There are non-political reasons to want to discourage some types of foreign students from coming to Britain. Despite a reform of the regime by the previous government, abuses remain. Some young people see a study visa as a quick ticket to the British job market and eventual settlement. Bogus colleges (fewer than in the past) promise to provide just that.

But teaching foreigners is a thriving business. Overseas students pump at least £10 billion a year into the economy. The higher fees they pay at university subsidise domestic students. Every ten full-time university students from outside the EU create three full-time British jobs, according to Ursula Kelly of Strathclyde University. These benefits are spread around the country, not concentrated in London and the south-east. Many think it would be mad to imperil this proven source of economic growth.

Mrs May expects her new measures to cut non-EU student numbers by at least 70,000-80,000 a year, or more than a quarter of the non-EU total (EU citizens don't need visas to study in Britain), though both numbers and policy details remain a work in progress. Private colleges recruiting foreign students will be subject to tighter scrutiny. Most students will have to show greater proficiency in English and more robust proof that they can support themselves. The rules on part-time working are to be tightened. Only postgraduate students or those sponsored by their governments will henceforward be allowed to bring dependants. University students who complete their degrees may stay on for two years only if they land a skilled job at a reasonable salary, rather than hanging around hopefully or flipping burgers.

But three big threats have been averted. Educators feared that all courses below university level might be ruled off limits to overseas students, even though between 40% and 50% of foreigners at British universities had taken an earlier course in Britain, usually to hone language or study skills. That will not be the case. They worried too that the two-year post-study work privilege, a big draw for international students, would be revoked altogether. It has not been. And a mooted fixed cap on foreign student numbers, to go with the previously announced limit on skilled workers, has been shelved, allegedly because of Lib Dem influence—though Mrs May hints that she might reconsider if the number of post-study workers balloons.

This is not Mrs May's last word on immigration. She will be back shortly, she says, with proposals to narrow the family-reunion immigration route (including a crackdown on sham marriages), and then to make it harder for holders of time-limited visas for study or work to convert them into permanent settlement. Expect more apocalyptic proposals—and, with luck, more discreet retreats.

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