

RESEARCH NOTE

Perceived beneficiaries and support for the globalization of higher education: a survey experiment on attitudes toward international students

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Abstract

Foreign students are one of the most significant immigrant categories in many North American and Western European countries. Yet, as their numbers have swelled, many governments have experienced increasing pressures to cap their entry. This is true despite the sizable benefits that foreign students bring to host countries, and despite standard political economy concerns about immigrants—that they take away jobs or abuse public entitlements—not applying to foreign students. We field a nationally-representative survey experiment in the UK, one of the top destinations for foreign students, to examine potential activators of public support for capping the number of foreign students. Results show that support for caps is most activated when citizens are primed to think about foreign students competing with domestic students for scarce admissions slots at universities.

Keywords: Comparative political economy

Foreign students are one of the most important types of immigrants. Across the world, there are nearly 5 million foreign students, and by 2025, OECD estimates predict that figure to rise to 8 million (ICEF, 2017). Many countries in North America and Western Europe welcome hundreds of thousands of foreign students each year (OECD, 2018). In the UK, for example, more immigrants moved to the country in 2018–19 to study than even to work (Sturge, 2019). Yet, amid these sizable numbers, many countries have witnessed strident anti-foreign-student calls. In the UK, a writer in one prominent newspaper refers to a “culture of hostility toward international students” (Paton, 2013). In the USA, scholars identify “a backlash movement against further international student growth” (Miller-Idriss and Streitwieser, 2015). The *Washington Post* editorial board (2019) says that America now sends a clear signal to foreign students: “get lost.” Even outside North America and Western Europe, foreign students have raised the ire of public officials. For instance, several Australian universities have restricted foreign student numbers (Ross, 2019). Singapore has also capped its foreign students (Tan, 2011).

Despite the controversy they provoke, the determinants of policy preferences over foreign students have received little attention.¹ Extensive research analyzes attitudes toward high-skilled immigrants (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; Iyengar *et al.*, 2013; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015; Bansak *et al.*, 2016; Wright *et al.*, 2016; Valentino *et al.*, 2019). Yet, foreign students are a distinct category. Foreign students are important not only because of their numbers, but also because they are a particular immigrant type that one might expect to be immune to backlash.

¹Ward *et al.* (2009), for instance, note that “[t]here has been a paucity of empirical research on attitudes toward international students.”

Overwhelming evidence shows that foreign students enrich host countries economically (London Economics, 2018; IIE, 2019; Kennedy, 2019). Unlike other immigrants (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Mayda, 2006), foreign students should not be perceived as posing an employment threat because they are only in the country to study. Additionally, unlike other immigrants (Hanson *et al.*, 2007; Facchini and Mayda, 2009; Cavaille and Ferwerda, 2017), foreign students should not be accused of abusing public entitlements because they are not expected to rely on social insurance.

In this note, we conduct the first political economy attempt at isolating the types of information that activate anti-foreign-student attitudes. We theorize that even if foreign students neither vie for the same jobs as domestic workers nor cost taxpayers money by relying on public entitlements, there are analogous ways in which they may pose competition and impose fiscal burdens. First, concerns about competition may arise if foreign students are perceived to “crowd out” domestic students for scarce admissions slots at universities. Although empirical evidence on whether foreign students crowd out domestic students is mixed (Borjas, 2004; Zhang, 2009; Machin and Murphy, 2017; Shih, 2017), citizens may perceive that foreign students take away admissions slots from their children, relatives, and other domestic students. Second, concerns about fiscal burdens may arise if foreign students are perceived to cause “human capital flight.” When foreign students acquire state-subsidized skills but then depart without contributing to the national economy by working, this may be seen as subsidizing the labor force of other countries (Docquier and Rapoport, 2012; Haupt *et al.*, 2015).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that concerns about both crowding out and human capital flight are salient in public debates. The media and other actors often report on the challenges of domestic students getting admitted to universities due to foreign students taking limited slots. Take, for example, headlines such as “Surge in Foreign Students May Be Crowding Americans Out of Elite Colleges” (*Washington Post*), “British Undergraduates at Oxbridge Fall amid Concern They Are Being ‘Squeezed Out’ by Foreign Students” (*The Telegraph*), or “Lucrative Foreign Students ‘Taking Oxbridge Places from State Pupils’” (*The Times*) (Anderson, 2016; Turner, 2019; Bennett, 2020). The *Wall Street Journal* (n.d.) reports that “many people worry the influx of international students is depriving qualified American youths of slots in top schools.” Writing in the *Times Higher Education*, Sir Keith Burnett (2015) says that “[a]n obsession with cleansing the country of foreigners regardless of their contribution was once seen as a right-wing, crypto-racist issue.” Now, he laments, it is “a feeling in some families ... [that] their children are denied access to higher education because of ‘all these students from overseas.’”

Likewise, the concern that taxpayers partially foot the bill for foreign students—even though those students typically leave after graduation—is often featured in the press and other outlets. *Fox News’s* Tucker Carlson, for example, has demanded that the USA “ceas[e] ... subsidizing the education of the children of Chinese elites”: “Our colleges and universities—almost every one of which is supported by taxpayers in the end—educate, at a net loss, the children of the people who are trying to displace us. Why are we doing that?” he asks (quoted in Chapman, 2020). Similarly, one former government official in Canada has complained that “[w]hen an international student comes to a Canadian university ... , he or she arrives to a system that has been bought and paid for by Canadian taxpayers. There’s no logical reason to subsidize international students” (Rothenburger, 2019). “[T]he argument that taxpayers are bleeding funding to pay for international students’ free education in Denmark is powerful and speaks into an existing agenda against foreigners that is increasingly dominating the European world,” observes a Danish university administrator (quoted in Smith, 2015).

We test whether anti-foreign-student attitudes are activated by concerns about competition (“crowding out”) and fiscal burdens (“human capital flight”), when compared with merely making the topic of foreign students salient and providing basic facts about their numbers. To do so, we conduct a nationally-representative survey experiment in the UK, one of the world’s top destinations for foreign students (UNESCO, 2016)² and a country where foreign students have

²As seen in Appendix Figure A1, the UK has a much higher share of foreign students relative to the USA and the European average.

become especially controversial (Parr, 2012; Paton, 2013; Buchan, 2018). Our objective is to understand how information about the use of a core public service by immigrants affects attitudes toward that service, and how these attitudes can vary depending on how the costs of foreign students are presented. We field an experiment because it enables us to simulate and unpack the kind of information about foreign students that citizens might be exposed to in real-life—for example, from the media, politicians, and activists. It offers insight into how political messaging and communication (Allen, 2016; Haynes *et al.*, 2016) shapes public opinion toward policies regulating entry of foreign students.

The UK is a useful test case not only due to its large number of foreign students and the controversies that foreign students have elicited there, but also because UK universities charge among the steepest tuition fees in the world and offer limited financial aid to foreign students (Murphy *et al.*, 2017; OECD, 2019). This means that foreign students contribute more to their own education than in many other countries.³ To the extent that our treatments still increase calls for foreign student caps, we should expect these results to be at least as salient in other contexts that provide more generous educational benefits. The UK is also a clear case where attitudes toward immigration have demonstrably affected government policy. As exemplified by Brexit, attitudes toward immigration are a significant force in politics, in some cases even shifting policymaking against the preferences of elites and the governing class (Hobolt, 2016; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). Public opinion toward foreign students may factor prominently not only in public discussions, but also in the policy levers that elected officials pull in response to constituent demands.

Our results reveal differential impacts of our treatments in shaping public support for foreign student caps. On average, the likelihood of respondents supporting a cap is 53 percent when not provided any treatment, compared to 56 percent when receiving a generic treatment that provides information neutrally about the large number of foreign students studying in the UK. As expected, priming respondents about crowding out significantly increases support for a cap—an 8 percentage point increase compared to neutral information about the large number of foreign students in the country. Priming respondents about human capital flight, however, has a smaller effect in raising support for a cap that is statistically indistinguishable from zero—a 5 percentage point increase over the generic treatment about the large number of foreign students in the UK. This is consistent with an ambiguous connection between perceptions of fiscal burdens and support for a foreign student cap. Additionally, with some exceptions, we find directional evidence that respondents who otherwise are less inclined to support a cap on foreign students absent priming are most responsible for driving this main result.

Our study sheds light on the drivers of public opinion toward policy governing foreign students. A considerable literature in political economy suggests that concerns about immigrants taking away jobs and abusing public entitlements can heighten anti-immigrant attitudes.⁴ Less effort, however, has been made to analyze whether analogous effects apply to different categories of immigrants, such as foreign students, for whom such concerns do not directly apply.⁵ We provide a framework for thinking about the calculations that inform voter preferences that could be adjusted and extended to study attitudes toward other specific immigrant types. Our study also contributes to a growing literature on the political economy of higher education (Ansell, 2008, 2010; Garritzmann, 2016, 2017; Jungblut, 2016). Although this scholarship generally analyzes the origins of funding for universities and the redistributive aspects of resourcing tertiary education, we complement existing analyses by examining how citizens react to participation in the sector by foreign students. We show that political controversies can arise over the perceived beneficiaries of the globalization of higher education.

³See Garritzmann (2016) for a discussion of the “Four Worlds of Student Finance.”

⁴This is in contrast to some scholarship that has downplayed the importance of such considerations compared to factors like culture, race, or identity (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Newman and Malhotra, 2019).

⁵However, for some examples of research on specific categories of immigrants, see: Iyengar *et al.* (2013); Levy *et al.* (2016); Malhotra *et al.* (2013).

1. The survey

To test the activators of anti-foreign-student attitudes, we conduct an original survey experiment in the UK that primes respondents to think about the large number of foreign students who enter the country, as well as the competition and fiscal burden effects that they might induce. We fielded our survey in the UK in February 2018. Survey Sampling International (now known as Dynata), a global survey company, collected the data online from a panel of respondents who agreed to participate in surveys on various topics. UK citizens 18 years of age and older were eligible to take the questionnaire. Our final figures were nationally representative according to age, sex, and statistical regions of the overall population in the UK.⁶ Our survey included completes for 3000 respondents, from a base of 3505 eligible individuals who started the survey.

1.1 Treatments

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three main treatments or a control (see Appendix Table A1 for full text of vignettes). The *Control* group received no information. *Treatment 1 (Simpleforeign)* informed respondents about the large number of foreign students who attend universities in the UK. This was designed to absorb a residual foreign student effect. *Treatment 2 (Crowdout)* provided the same information as *Treatment 1*, but also informed respondents that competition exists for entry into UK universities, in which domestic students vie against foreign students for admission. *Treatment 3 (HC flight)* provided the same information as *Treatment 1*, but also informed respondents that most foreign students leave the UK after completing their coursework and take the skills they obtained with them.⁷

1.2 Dependent variable

We derived our dependent variable from the question: “Should there be a cap on the number of foreign students who can study at UK universities?” Respondents could answer either “Yes” (coded 1) or “No” (coded 0). We kept the DV as a clear binary choice between supporting or rejecting a cap on foreign students because it provides the simplest representation of the option to limit foreign student participation and signals that respondents are broadly dissatisfied with permitting large numbers of foreign students into the country.

2. Empirics

We estimate linear probability models to measure the effects of our treatments on support for a cap on foreign students.⁸ For robustness, we also re-estimate our main results using probit regression (see Appendix Table A7).⁹

⁶Appendix Table A2 shows that the average values of the covariates are balanced across treatment groups, indicating successful randomization. This table also shows demographic means for respondents in our sample relative to national UK means. For the covariates we include in our main regressions, the only substantial deviation from national averages is that respondents are considerably more likely not to be employed.

⁷We also embedded a pair of subtreatments into *Treatment 2* (priming respondents to think about foreign students coming from “Western” or “non-Western” countries) and *Treatment 3* (priming respondents to think about foreign students having skills in STEM or non-STEM fields). As reported in Appendix Table A3, none of the disaggregated treatments is statistically significant relative to their baseline.

⁸For all main regressions, we include the following standard individual-level demographic covariates: gender (female), age, parental status (having children), race (white), country of birth (born in the UK), education (university graduate), employment status (not employed), and household income. We re-estimate the main tables without covariates in Appendix Table A4. We also use post-sample stratification to approximate the composition of our sample based on national employment figures. As shown in Appendix Table A5, results remain almost identical. We also fit models with additional political and contextual-level variables. Results are shown in Appendix Table A6 and again are almost identical.

⁹Probit models yield essentially identical results.

Table 1. Marginal effects of treatments on support for a cap on foreign students

	(1)	(2)
Any treatment	0.0827*** (0.0233)	0.0317 (0.0303)
Crowdout		0.0872*** (0.0260)
HC flight		0.0404 (0.0260)
Observations	3000	3000
R ²	0.079	0.083

This table displays results from linear regression models, with individual covariates as described in the text. Model 2 shows the effect of the Simple foreign student treatment (line 1) and the marginal effects of the Crowdout and HC flight treatments (lines 3 and 5, respectively), over and above the Simple foreign student treatment. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

[†]p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

2.1 Aggregate effects

We first test for an aggregate foreign-student effect by comparing respondents who received any of the treatments to those who received the control. Model 1 of Table 1 reports these results. The coefficient on *Any treatment* is positive and statistically significant (0.08), suggesting that people are more likely to support a cap when assigned to one of the treatments. As shown in Figure 1, when holding the control variables at their average values, 53 percent of citizens support a cap on foreign students when assigned to the control, compared to 61 percent when assigned to one of the treatments. The size of these treatment effects should be viewed against a relatively high baseline of citizens supporting a cap even absent priming, suggesting less room for movement than on a policy receiving less initial support.

2.2 Crowding out and human capital flight effects

Next, we turn to our main hypotheses by estimating the extent to which concerns about crowding out or human capital flight may explain these findings. Model 2 of Table 1 reports these results. Although the *Simple foreign student* treatment informing respondents about the large number of foreign students in the UK makes people more likely to support a cap, this effect (0.03) is not significantly different from zero. As expected, *Crowd out* has a large and statistically significant marginal effect (0.09, with a total effect when added to the *Simple foreign student* treatment of 0.12). *HC flight* also has a positive marginal effect, but it is not statistically significant (0.04, with a total effect with the *Simple foreign student* treatment of 0.07; the latter is significantly different from zero). The effect of *Crowd out* is larger than that of *HC flight*, and the difference is statistically significant.¹⁰ Figure 2 plots the predicted probabilities of supporting a cap on foreign students, holding the covariates at their average values. Fifty-three percent of respondents favor a cap when receiving the control. That number increases to 56 percent when receiving the simple foreign student treatment, to 61 percent when receiving the human capital flight treatment, and to 64 percent when receiving the crowding out treatment.

Finally, we parse which respondents most contribute to the significant result by stratifying responses to the *Crowd out* treatment by our standard demographic characteristics, as well as additional political and contextual-level variables (see Appendix Table A9). Holding the control variables at their average values, Figure 3 plots predicted levels of support for a cap across a selection of these key variables.¹¹ Directionally, it shows that respondents who have the lowest initial support for a foreign student cap (males, non-whites, non-parents, non-UK-born residents, Brexit

¹⁰Appendix Table A8 shows the total effects of each of the treatments compared to the control group (Model 1), as well as the difference in the effects of the treatments compared to the crowding out treatment (Model 2).

¹¹Analogously, we estimate subgroup effects for the human capital flight treatment and show them in Appendix Table A10. Effects are only significantly different from the average effect of the *HC Flight* treatment for different age brackets, with older residents experiencing smaller effects.

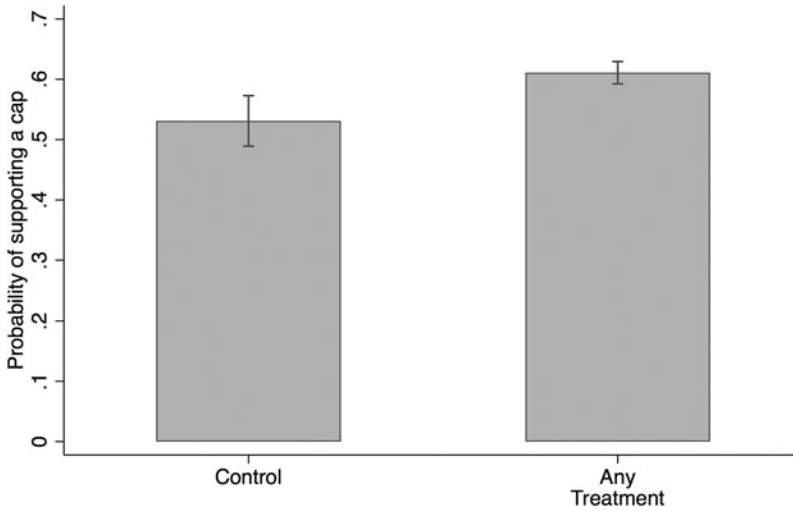


Fig. 1. Predicted probability of supporting a cap on foreign students (with 95 percent CIs), comparing respondents receiving any of the treatments with the control.

remainders, non-Conservatives, and non-middle-aged residents) generally have the most elastic preferences in response to the crowding out treatment.¹²

3. Discussion and conclusion

Foreign students are one of the largest categories of immigrants. In many countries, however, calls for restricting the number of foreign students have grown louder. This is the case even though foreign students yield large benefits for host countries, and despite typical criticisms of immigrants—that they take away jobs and abuse public entitlements—not applying to foreign students. In this note, we test whether anti-foreign-student preferences can be attributed to analogous ways that foreign students are perceived to generate competition and to impose fiscal burdens on taxpayers. In a nationally-representative survey experiment in the UK, we find that priming respondents to consider how foreign students compete with domestic students for finite university admissions slots significantly activates support for capping their numbers. Priming respondents to consider how foreign students impose fiscal burdens by leaving the country after receiving state-subsidized schooling, however, does not significantly activate support for caps. In general, we find that, directionally, citizens who are least supportive of a cap absent priming have the most elastic preferences in response to our treatments.

Our results suggest that different types of priming about the costs of foreign students can have asymmetric effects in activating anti-foreign-student attitudes. Simply framing foreign students in an ostensibly negative way does not automatically lead to greater support for capping their numbers. Instead, public opinion appears to be conditional on the types of information provided to citizens. There may be several potential reasons for our mixed results. With crowding out, for example, citizens may see competition for scarce admissions slots at universities as especially straightforward. Or, citizens may perceive that its downsides for students and families are particularly high-stakes and concentrated. By contrast, with human capital flight, citizens may simply not detect a link between foreign students and subsidizing the labor force of other countries, or educational subsidization in the UK may be too modest compared to elsewhere (e.g., the

¹²With some exceptions: respondents who are university graduates, high-income earners, employed, and live in high-immigration areas have lower initial support for a cap and are also less responsive to the crowding out treatment.

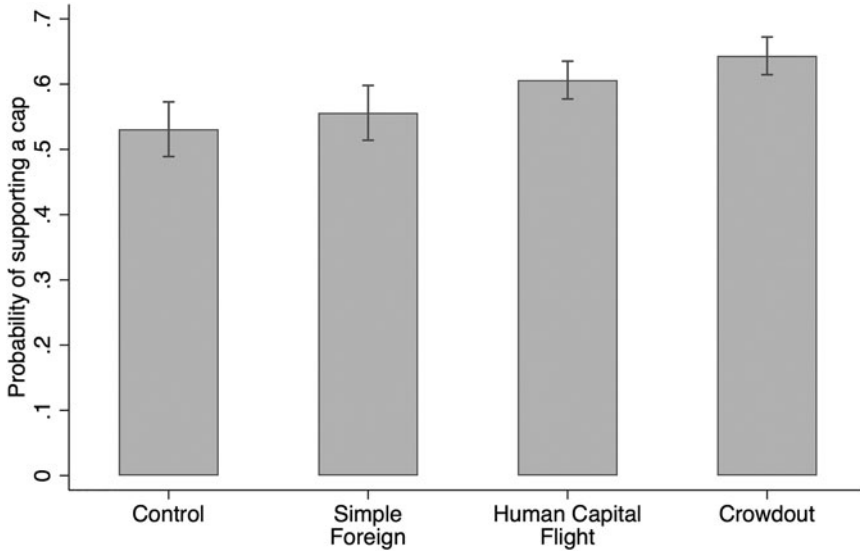


Fig. 2. Predicted probability of supporting a cap on foreign students (with 95 percent CIs), comparing respondents receiving each of the treatments with the control.

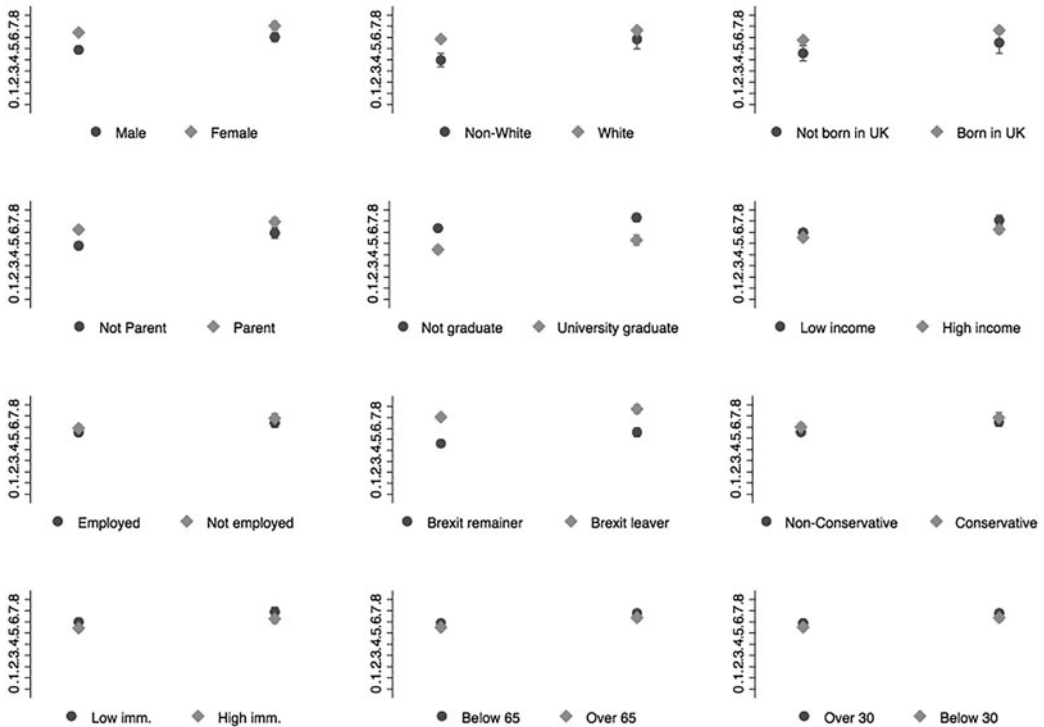


Fig. 3. Predicted probability of supporting a cap on foreign students (with 95 percent CIs), by respondent subgroup, for those receiving the Simple foreign student treatment (left estimates) and the Crowdout treatment (right).

Nordic countries) to make a difference. Alternatively, citizens may detect a link, but not think that it is a major problem if their primary concern is ensuring that immigrants do not, in their view, take away jobs or abuse public entitlements.

In addition to providing a framework for analyzing attitudes toward a specific category of immigrant, our study may also have broader implications for scholarship on the political economy of education (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2011; Gift and Wibbels, 2014). Most analyses, including those on higher education (Ansell, 2008, 2010; Garritzmann, 2016, 2017; Jungblut, 2016), examine the determinants of citizen support for education spending and reform. Proposed caps on foreign students, however, have received little scholarly attention, despite being an important policy over which considerable public disagreement exists. Going forward, scholars could probe whether our treatments bring to the fore latent preferences toward foreign students or actually create—or shift—attitudes. Scholars could also test how citizens react to positive, not just negative, information about foreign students. Another question is how perceived cultural threats of foreign students compare to the political economy concerns presented here. Understanding attitudes toward specific immigrant types should be a priority area for research. With foreign students, we found that citizen attitudes can be susceptible to activation.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.23>.

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