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London School of Economics and Political Science

**An “Island of Strangers”? Effects of the Anti-immigrant Rhetoric on the Well-being of
International Students at LSE**

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Group 7

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Abstract

The UK has experienced a rise in anti-immigration sentiment. Nevertheless, the extent to which this has affected international students has yet to be studied. While studies have been published on the disparity in well-being of international and home students, to our knowledge, in terms of well-being scores, they have never directly assessed anti-immigration sentiment. To help fill this gap, we utilised surveys and interviews that attempted to measure students' awareness of anti-immigration sentiment and its impact on well-being, as well as future plans. We found evidence to suggest that in specific domains, like anxiety and sense of belonging, there were significant negative effects. However, when it came to planning their futures accordingly, the relationship was less clear, with many students concerned about the general future of the UK rather than their plans to stay. The analysis of the data we acquired was done qualitatively, allowing us to dig deeper into the subjective experiences and feelings that international students are experiencing due to the shifting political atmosphere. Future research areas should focus on combining the impact of anti-immigration sentiment on well-being with the effects of emerging policy in combination with this.

Keywords: anti-immigration sentiment, well-being, international students, LSE, higher education

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1. Introduction

Immigration perceptions worldwide are undergoing a fundamental transformation (Immigration Advice Service, 2024). Political leaders across major Western nations, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, have increasingly adopted anti-immigration rhetoric while implementing policies that actively restrict the flow of immigration (Home Office, 2025). This shift carries far-reaching implications that extend beyond traditional immigration concerns.

The United Kingdom's position as a global education centre that receives an outstanding amount of international students makes this subject even more consequential (Institute of International Education, 2024). British universities have historically relied on international students not only for revenue but also for the intellectual diversity and global perspectives they bring to academic communities (House of Commons Library, 2024). Given this dependency, restrictive immigration policies could fundamentally alter the landscape of higher education (Häzaq, 2024).

In this consideration, this research examines the impact of rising anti-immigrant sentiment on the well-being of international students at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). As one of the UK's top institutions with a notably diverse student body, LSE serves as an important case study for understanding broader trends affecting global higher education (Top Universities, 2025). Measuring their well-being reveals the personal impact of the anti-immigrant sentiment and provides evidence for the wider consequences of immigration policies on educational institutions and student populations. Therefore, we conducted a research survey and interviews to investigate and affirm our results on the effects of the anti-immigration rhetoric on the well-being of international students at LSE.

2. Literature Review

Immigration has stood at the forefront of the British political atmosphere in recent decades. Data collected by Ipsos in collaboration with British Future highlights a steady rise in anti-immigration sentiment since 2014, with a majority (52%) now agreeing that immigration is too high and should be reduced (Ipsos, 2024). Dynamic shifts in British politics are reflective of this opinion. As well as the understanding that the 'Leave' campaign and subsequent exit from the EU were fuelled mainly by anti-immigrant sentiment (Creighton & Jamal, 2022), the public is showcasing an increased appeal for anti-immigrant parties like Reform UK (Politico, 2025). Indeed, anti-immigrant sentiment is not limited only to populism. A recent speech by Prime Minister Keir Starmer expressed a fear that the UK is becoming an 'island of strangers', in justifying his plans to curb migration (Syal, 2025). Negative rhetoric with regard to immigration has become pervasive in the British political agenda.

2.1 Well-being

A driving factor for immigration to the UK is an influx of international students (OECD, 2025). Students arrive with the primary goal of studying at top-tier universities, though many also view this as a pathway to permanently relocating to the UK through further education or professional work. Due to making up such a large, yet relatively understudied, demographic of immigration, understanding how anti-immigrant sentiment may affect their perceptions is important. LSE, being a university made up of 70% international students (LSE, 2025), provides an optimal domain for such a study to take place, providing a range of students to help us understand the possible consequences of the evolving anti-immigrant sentiment. A change in the well-being and

subsequent habits of this group could cause implications for the future demographic of British universities, and consequently, the diversity of British institutions as a whole.

We wish to investigate well-being to understand the effect anti-immigrant sentiment has on the way international students perceive their education in the UK, and how significant exogenous political shifts factor into the individual experience. Concerning students, anti-immigrant sentiment has been correlated to psychological stress (Adams, 2024), worsened mental health conditions (Migrant Rights Network, 2024), and social exclusion (UKCISA, 2024). The methodologies employed in these studies informed our approach. Moreover, other well-being metrics informed our approach in attempting to measure it. We mainly utilised the government's four criteria of anxiety, happiness, life satisfaction, and perceived life importance (HM Treasury, 2021).

2.2 Future Plans

Perspectives of the future, and whether the individual anticipates positive or negative events, can be indicative of well-being (MacLeod, 2013, cited in Seymour, 2015). Therefore, we considered whether student aspirations past the timeframe of their degree, including further education, employment, and settling down, are affected by anti-immigration sentiment. Indeed, as a result of relocation incentivised by increased occupational opportunities, immigrants exhibit higher levels of occupational optimism (Chykina, 2024). Uncertainty about the future in relation to the rising anti-immigration sentiment can inextricably draw into individual optimism, and thus, well-being. By studying shifts in immigration rhetoric, we seek to understand the potential long-term consequences of anti-immigrant sentiment, such as transformations in diversity in the UK.

2.3 The Literature Gap

There is an established correlation between anti-immigrant sentiment and lower levels of immigrant happiness (Assari & Najand, 2023). However, the particular effect on international students in British universities is yet to be sufficiently explored, creating a gap in the analysis of educational circumstances and the impact that anti-immigrant sentiment could potentially have. The limited research emphasises the practical and material concerns of anti-immigrant sentiment, such as visa complications, general cultural adjustment, and social integration (Xiong et al, 2024). We seek to focus on isolation on how anti-immigrant sentiment could influence the mindset, perspective, and perception of international students with regard to their well-being and potential career trajectory in the UK. By addressing this gap, we seek to understand how the diversity of the British student body may be transformed by a shift in cultural rhetoric, and what this means for the future of university demographics.

3. Methodology

We used mixed methods to extend our research on a larger scale; however, our analysis is primarily qualitative. Surveys gave us a breadth of data to sufficiently examine the consensus amongst the demographic, and interviews allowed us to gain in-depth insight into the experience of international students in relation to anti-immigrant sentiment (De la Croix et al, 2018).

3.1 Surveys

We chose to undertake surveys because of their quantitative scope, which aligns us with the research already done in the UK on well-being. It allowed us to roughly mirror the scale of well-being into a set of questions (see appendix) that allowed us to quantify seemingly abstract criteria such as anxiety, safety, and belonging (Jain, 2021). These are the criteria that we ascertained from the previously mentioned HM Treasury Green Book on Well-being Guidance and became the basis for our framing of the questions (HM Treasury, 2021). We created an online survey through Qualtrics that allowed participants to rank on a Likert scale their feelings at the time and the effects on their plans.

3.2 Interviews

Interviews were a necessary supplement to our surveys as they could allow us to dig deeper into the specific phenomena of well-being (Chauhan, 2022). Through combining the previous criteria of well-being with a more holistic definition put forward by the New Economics Foundation, which established it as "how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole" (Michaelson et al, 2012). Given this, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed us to follow the concerns of the participants

more freely without the categorical nature of survey data (Jain, 2021). Due to the short time frame of the study, we utilised a convenience sample of international students known to us. Interviews took place in person, which allowed researchers to be receptive to any form of emotional distress to minimise any potential harm caused by what could be sensitive material. Our ethics and consent form was approved by the Eden Centre before any participant involvement (see appendix).

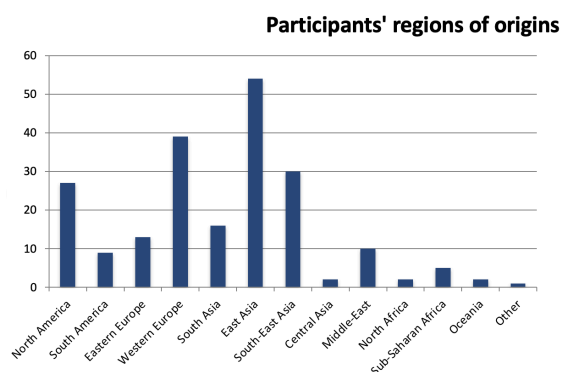
3.3 Limitations and Implications

We acknowledge the limitations of both time and funding, and how they may strain the scope of our research. Similarly, as undergraduate students with relatively little prior experience in research, the calibre of this research is limited. Furthermore, the limited number of interviews, especially in contrast to survey responses, impeded our ability to understand the nuances and rationale behind student perspectives, potentially affecting our analysis. For the ease of our research, we chose our survey and interview participants based on convenience sampling.

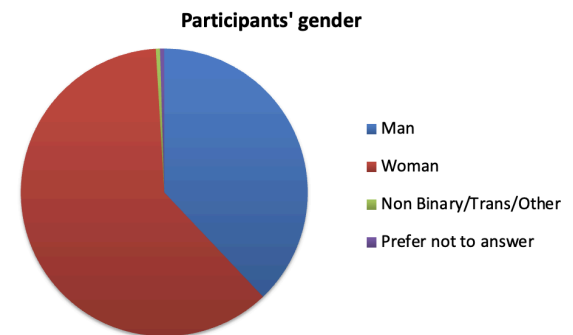
4. Analysis

4.1 Overview

The survey garnered 219 answers, with 212 participants consenting to their data being registered. Demographically, the respondents were primarily women (61%), followed by men (38%), and 1% identifying otherwise or preferring not to disclose. A significant majority were Master's students (71%), while undergraduate students constituted 22% and PhD students 6%. Geographically, all global regions were represented, though with considerable disparities. The most significant number of students hail from East Asia (26%) and Western Europe (19%), whereas only 3% come from Africa and 1% from Oceania. The regional differences between these will make up part of our analysis, as anti-immigrant sentiment is not felt by people from all regions equally. In addition to this survey data, we purposely sampled three students for qualitative interviews. Having a first-year undergraduate, a third-year, and a postgraduate master's student, we were provided with in-depth insight into well-being, as well as varying perceptions in accordance with the stage of the student's academic journey.

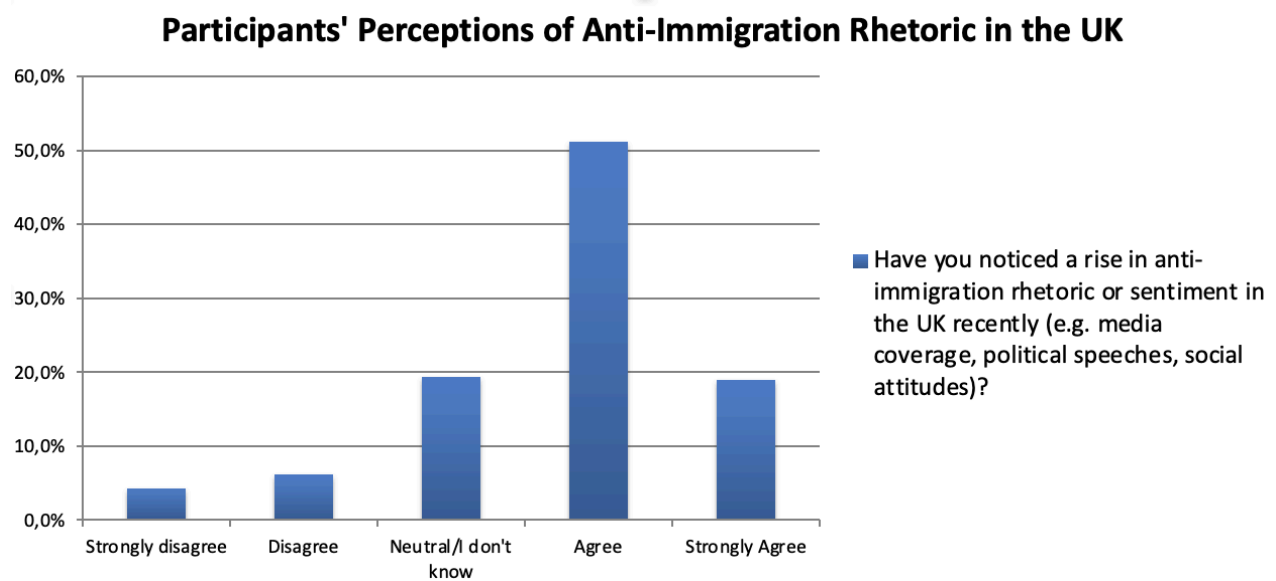


■ Which of these best describes your home country?



4.2 Analysis

The data we acquired through our mixed-method approach led us to understand that there is a perceived recognition of anti-immigration sentiment. Through our survey, and before any backgrounding, a vast majority of people (70%) either agreed or strongly agreed to noticing a rise. This is in comparison to those who disagreed or strongly disagreed, making up only 10%. Thus, more people were likely to be neutral to the proposition. This may be due to a lack of clarity on the concept, but it could also imply that they have not been exposed to it personally. For our analysis, categorising these with the people who disagree affords more clarity.



4.2.1 Well-being

The extent to which this affected the participants' well-being was focused on the aforementioned criteria for measuring well-being. When it came to documenting, the effect of anti-immigrant sentiment appeared to be limited, with 73% arguing that it had not changed their level of happiness. It was only with regard to negative emotions like anxiety and a sense of belonging

that a trend started to occur, which was echoed in the interviews conducted. For example, participants scored 42.5% on general anxiety scores. This shows, whilst not a majority, a strong connection between anti-immigration sentiment and internal well-being. However, this did not directly correlate into action, with a far less pronounced effect on individual anxiety levels in public spaces.

Information gathered through our interviews gave us insight into these disparities, allowing us to grasp the nuances of well-being. Participant 1 noted the political positioning in the UK to be worrying, mentioning the 2024 riots as indicative of the anti-immigration sentiment in the UK. However, due to the insulation in student spaces such as university accommodation and campus, this worry was stressed as internal and unresponsive to public settings.

4.2.2 Future Plans

A key aspect of well-being, in the sense of its links to life satisfaction and anxiety, that we identified was international students' future planning. Our survey data shows that these were relatively unaffected when compared to our previous findings. Just over a quarter (27%) of respondents indicated anti-immigrant sentiment has substantially changed their future plans, and 39% agreed they were less likely to apply for a post-work visa. Evidently, the future is uncertain for many international students, but this may be linked to other factors exogenous to anti-immigration sentiment, like current policy changes, which our study does not account for. In our interviews, there was broad agreement that people were still considering remaining in the UK for postgraduate education or employment in spite of growing concerns.

Respondents were concerned far more with the general future of the UK than with adjusting their plans. When asked about the UK's future as well as economy, 73% either agreed or strongly

agreed that they were concerned. These are the two most overwhelming data points in the survey. This may reflect that they perceive anti-immigrant sentiment to be something that will continue to worsen, or perhaps that more pragmatic worries of future job insecurity, visa insecurity, and just general deterioration are more impactful concerns. This could therefore provide the basis for a further avenue of research.

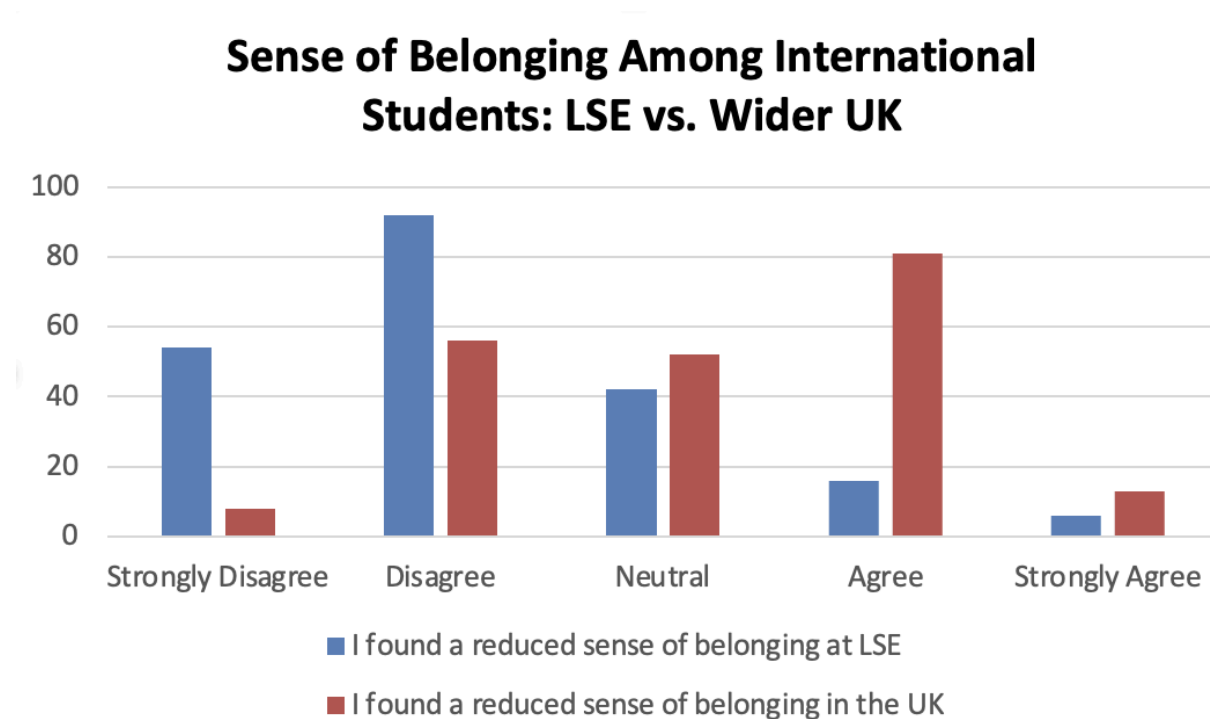
4.2.3 Disparities of the World

Curious to discern variations between those we deemed more visibly perceptible as immigrants, and thus increasingly susceptible to anti-immigrant sentiment and its effects, and those not, we divided responses between those in Europe and North America, to those from non-Western regions. This exposed discrepancies in key areas of well-being, including anxiety and daily routine, as well as the chances of recommending LSE to prospective students.

62.7% of the answers were from non-Western countries, and although our data examining anxiety levels in public settings concluded this to be fairly low, participants who did exhibit this anxiety were overwhelmingly non-Western (96%). Additionally, this demographic made up 83% of those who acknowledged changes in their daily routine resulting from anti-immigration sentiment, as well as 75% of those who agreed it has reduced their chances of recommending LSE to future students. This is a significant disparity, and it raises questions as to whether an enhanced focus on this demographic in our study would technically transform our findings and, consequently, our conclusion.

4.2.4 Sense of Belonging in the UK vs LSE

Comparative analysis in the concept of 'belonging' reveals further nuances in our research, particularly when honing in on the spheres of study: the UK in contrast to the LSE. Both our interviews and our survey reflected the individual sense of belonging to be heightened at the LSE. Only 10% of survey participants felt this phenomenon to be reduced in the LSE, as opposed to 45% in the wider UK. Similarly, Participant 2 of our interviews - a Master's student - noted that the effect of anti-immigration sentiment had intensified when completing their undergraduate degree outside of LSE. All three interviews affirmed the notion that those at LSE feel increasingly protected from a hostile political atmosphere.



One of the interviews led to the revelation that the LSE, as an international institution, is an insulated environment, with its intrinsically diverse community acting as its shield from exogenous political shifts. Therefore, LSE can be conceived of as a "bubble", with its high proportion of international students and geographic location inside the metropolitan and global city of London as potential reasons for this perceived distinction.

5. Discussion

Our findings indicate a widespread awareness among international students at LSE regarding the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, with 70% of survey participants acknowledging this trend.

While a significant majority (73%) reported no change in their overall happiness due to this sentiment, a more pronounced effect was observed concerning negative emotions. Specifically, 42.5% of respondents indicated increased general anxiety, and qualitative interviews echoed this as students interviewed were especially worried about the current situation and their plans.

Crucially, our analysis revealed disparities when controlling for students' regions of origin, suggesting that individuals from non-Western backgrounds may experience the effects of anti-immigrant sentiment differently. Furthermore, the concept of a "sense of belonging" emerged as a key area where anti-immigrant sentiment appears to have a more tangible impact on international students. Indeed, LSE emerged as a "bubble" where students belonging to the university are unchanged (89%), while 44% of them felt a reduced sense of belonging to the country. This suggests that the LSE is doing a good job in integration and cohesion, insulating its students from British affairs.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

This study examined the impact of the rising anti-immigrant sentiment on international students at LSE. Our mixed-methods approach revealed nuanced insights into how this sentiment affects a demographic within British education. Our findings indicate a widespread awareness among international students at LSE regarding the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, with a notable impact on their anxiety levels and sense of belonging, particularly for non-Western students. The data also suggests that while LSE may act as a 'bubble' providing a sense of belonging on campus, this does not necessarily extend to their perception of belonging in the wider UK. We believe that the LSE may benefit from these findings, which suggest that the well-being of international students is well-addressed.

The implications of this research are multiple and open doors for other studies. The United Kingdom is positioning itself as a global education hub (UK Department for Education, 2019) and is reinforcing its immigration policies (Home Office, 2025). This contradiction creates a challenging environment for international students that our research sheds light on, demonstrating that beyond practical concerns, anti-immigrant sentiment influences their emotional well-being, particularly their anxiety levels and sense of belonging.

Further research is needed to explore these regional disparities and the effects of anti-immigrant sentiments on students' well-being in other universities or workplaces. Furthermore, as we acknowledge several limitations that constrain this research, future studies would benefit from employing random sampling on a larger scale to mitigate potential biases. They would also ideally be conducted over a more extended timescale, with greater resources and a higher level of research experience than was feasible for this undergraduate project.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

The Impact of Anti-Immigrant Sentiment on LSE's International Students and Their Well-being.

Start of Block: Consent

Q1 Information and consent. Thanks for your interest in this project. **This survey is intended for international students only.** Participation is voluntary. This survey should take between 5-15 minutes, depending on the speed completed. There are no negative consequences for you if you decide not to take part in this study. None of the questions are compulsory and it is also absolutely fine if you feel that you don't want to answer any specific questions. The study is about the effect of anti immigration sentiments on the well-being of LSE's international students. What will my information be used for? The data will be used to present a report at the LSE GROUPS conference on the 20/6/25. Your participation will be anonymous. For any questions/issues, please contact: r.del-aguila@lse.ac.uk or m.s.agrawal@lse.ac.uk

Q2 Do you consent to your anonymous data being recorded and used in this research?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Do you consent to your anonymous data being recorded and used in this research? = No

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q3 What do you identify as?

- ☐ Man (1)
 - ☐ Woman (2)
 - ☐ Non Binary/Trans/Other (3)
 - ☐ Prefer not to answer (4)
-

Q4 What year of study are you at the LSE?

- ☐ Undergraduate Year 1 (1)
- ☐ Undergraduate Year 2 (2)
- ☐ Undergraduate Year 3 (3)
- ☐ Undergraduate Year 4 (6)
- ☐ Masters (4)
- ☐ PHD (5)

Display this question:

If What year of study are you at the LSE? = Masters

Q4, 1 We need a Master student for an anonymised twenty-minute interview. Can you help us? If yes, give us your e-mail and we will contact you as soon as possible 😊

Q5 What is your department of study at LSE?

▼ Department of Accounting (1) ... Department of Statistics (27)

Q6 Which of these best describes your home country?

▼ North America (2) ... Other (14)

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Block 2

Q8 Have you noticed a rise in anti-immigration rhetoric or sentiment in the UK recently (e.g. media coverage, political speeches, social attitudes)?

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Disagree (2)
- ☐ Neutral/I don't know (3)
- ☐ Agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Agree (5)

Q9

"Radical reforms to Britain's immigration system, restoring control to our borders and reducing record-high levels of net migration have been set out." - Home office and Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP (12/05/2025)

"In a diverse nation like ours, and I celebrate that, these rules become even more important. Without them, we risk becoming an island of strangers, not a nation that walks forward together"

- PM Keir Starmer (12/05/2025)

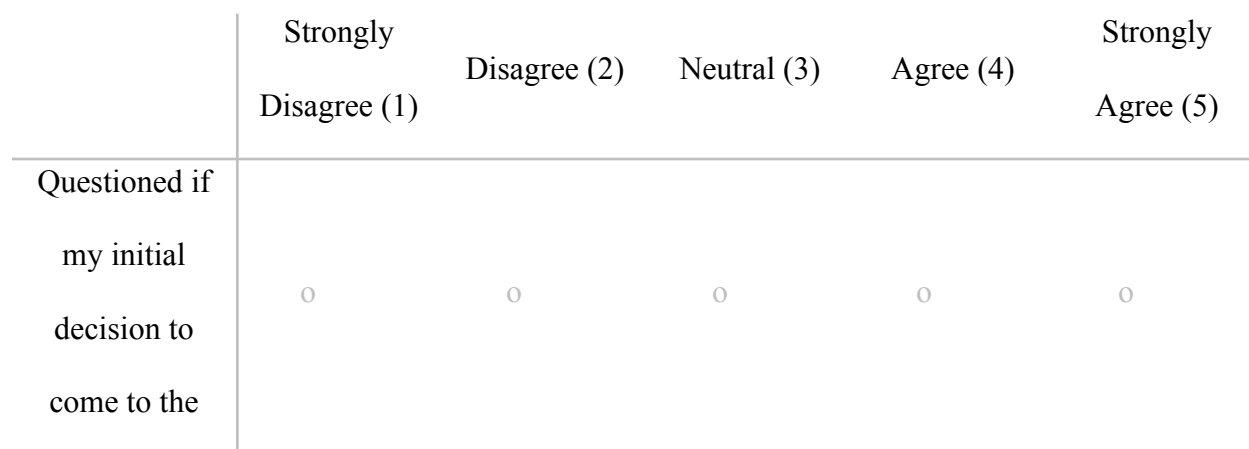
Q10 Considering what Keir Starmer said, do you agree or not with the following statements:

| | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neutral (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly Agree (5) |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I question my choice to study in UK (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I find a reduced | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

| | | | | | |
|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| sense of | | | | | |
| comfort in | | | | | |
| UK (7) | | | | | |
| I find a | | | | | |
| reduced | | | | | |
| sense of | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| belonging at | | | | | |
| LSE (2) | | | | | |
| I find a | | | | | |
| reduced | | | | | |
| sense of | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| belonging in | | | | | |
| the UK (9) | | | | | |
| I find a | | | | | |
| reduced | | | | | |
| levels of | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| happiness (4) | | | | | |
| It increased | | | | | |
| my anxiety | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| levels (5) | | | | | |
| I'm anxious | | | | | |
| about going | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| to public | | | | | |



Q11 Due to the anti-immigrant sentiment, I have



| | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| UK was the right one (6) | | | | | |
| Felt less willing to spend time professionally networking (7) | | | | | |
| Reduced my likelihood of pursuing further education in the UK (8) | | | | | |
| Reduced my likelihood of applying for a post study work visa in the UK (9) | | | | | |
| Substantially changed my 'future plans' (10) | | | | | |

Reduced my
chance of
recommending
LSE to friends
from my home
country (11)

0 0 0 0 0

Q15 Were your initial plans to stay at LSE after studying?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Display this question:

If Were your initial plans to stay at LSE after studying? = Yes

Q16 In light of this news, do you still plan to stay in the UK after your studies?

- ☐ Yes (1)
 - ☐ No (2)
-

Q12 In light of the anti-immigration sentiment, I am concerned about:

| | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neutral (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly Agree (5) |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Making friends (11) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The economy (13) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| UK's future (14) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The cost of living (15) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: Future Plans

Interview Guide

Introduction + consent

Hello, thank you for your participation...

Consent

Awareness + Perception (6 minutes approximately)

Have you noticed a rise in anti-immigration rhetoric or sentiment in the UK recently (e.g., media coverage, political speeches, social attitudes)?

- *How did you come across this? Through the news, social media, or personal experiences?*

How do you interpret comments such as the Prime Minister's reference to the UK becoming an "island of strangers"? (video:

<https://news.sky.com/video/we-risk-becoming-an-island-of-strangers-pm-says-13366454>)

- *Do you feel this reflects broader public attitudes?*

Here it should be reasonable to feel out whether there may be a correlation. Also remember ethical concerns and ensure the participant is still comfortable.

Well Being (Emotional + Social Impact) (6 minutes approximately) **WE WILL ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT WELL BEING, ALL IS OPTIONAL FEEL FREE TO STOP AT ANY MOMENT**

How have these developments made you feel as an international student living in the UK?

Has this affected your sense of safety, comfort, or belonging—at LSE or more broadly in the UK?

Do you feel that your identity or background has made you more vulnerable to anti-immigration sentiment?

Future Plan (Academic + Professional Impact) (6 minutes approximately)

Have these sentiments influenced how you view the value of your UK education, particularly your investment in LSE?

- *For instance, time spent building networks or focusing on UK-specific content or industries? When applying for internships or schemes, are they based here or in your home country etc?*

Has this impacted your decision to pursue further studies in the UK or consider migration options elsewhere (e.g., EU, US, Canada)?

Have you made or are you considering any changes to your academic or career plans due to these experiences?

Are you more or less likely to apply for a post-study work visa as a result of the current political climate?

Do you find yourself recommending (or not recommending) LSE or the UK to others back home, especially in light of these issues? Why or why not?

Well Being (Coping + Support) (4 minutes)

Have you been able to discuss these feelings with others, such as friends, staff, or student support at LSE?

What forms of support (emotional, practical, institutional) do you think international students need in this context?

Conclusion (2 minutes)

Thank you for your time...

What did you think about the interview, any recommendations?

Reiterate initial ethics like the right to withdraw.

Tuesday is the final day for this as the data will be anonymised.

Total time around 20 minutes. However, again this is variable and dependent upon the enthusiasm (or lack thereof) the participant.