



# COMMENTARY

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## Under Control?

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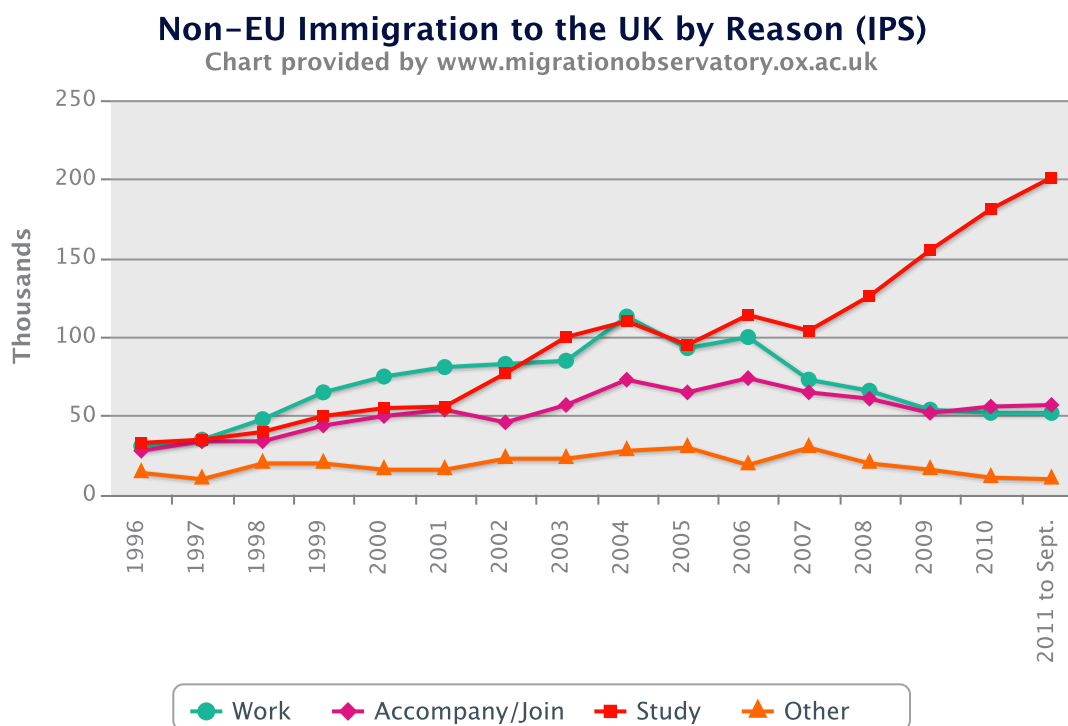
[www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk)

Today the Office for National Statistics has released quarterly figures showing that net migration, in the year to September 2011 remained virtually unchanged at 252,000. The data suggest that the government still has a very long way to go if it hopes to hit its target of net migration in the ‘tens of thousands’ by 2015. To achieve this target, non-EU net-migration – over which the government has some control – needs to be cut by two thirds.

Today’s data release is likely to reignite public debate about the extent to which migration to the UK is “under control”. This is, of course, a highly subjective term, but, considering current UK government objectives, one way of defining “under control” would be immigration flows that are either stable or declining and that are similar to levels from the 1990s.

The inflows that the government has the authority to regulate are those from outside the European Union. Figure 1 looks at non-EU immigration to the UK by reason since 1996 (based on Provisional Long Term International Migration (LTIM) estimates from the International Passenger Survey).

Figure 1



Note: source is IPS/ONS. Values for 2011 are for year to September 2011.

The chart shows that non-EU immigration flows for work reasons rose from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s and have been declining since 2006 (from a peak of 113,000 in 2004 to 52,000 in today’s data) and that work migration is now at approximately the same level it was at in the late 1990s. Family migration, despite a small increase since 2009 has otherwise also been declining slightly since its peak in 2006 (74,000) and is now, at 57,000, only marginally higher than it was at in 2000 (50,000). Non EU migration for ‘other’ reasons has been declining since 2007 (a peak of 30,000) and is now at its lowest level since 1997 (10,000).

But the detail that is most visible in from Figure 1 is the rapid increase in student migration to the UK from outside the EU, which has more than tripled since 2001, with a particularly sharp increase since 2007 and, evident in today’s data release, an increase of around 11,000 from September 2010–September 2011. (NB – Today’s 2011 data are provisional and compare the year to September, rather than the final, full year data. This means that comparing them to the other data in the chart – from 1995–2010 – is imperfect.)

So, using the “stable or declining” definition of “under control” it can be said that immigration for work, family and ‘other’ purposes from outside the EU are “under control”, since they have been either stable or declining since 2006 or 2007 – and are now similar to the levels seen around 2000. But the large increase in non-EU student migration bucks this trend, and plays a substantial role in boosting the overall positive net migration figures.

Questions about whether government should be making efforts to reduce non-EU student numbers are hotly contested, but it is clear that the government is very unlikely to hit its “tens of thousands” target unless it makes cuts to this group. There are many challenges with this, among them is the fact that cutting student numbers offers limited long term impact because students tend not to stay in the UK and also the fact that there is little public appetite for cutting student numbers.

### Related Material

- Office for National Statistics: Migration Statistics Quarterly Report May 2012. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/may-2012/msqr.html>
- Migration Observatory press release: Government would have to cut net migration from outside the EU by 70% to hit its target. <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/press-releases/government-would-have-cut-net-migration-outside-eu-70-hit-its-target>
- Migration Observatory commentary: International students: A+ or D- for the UK? <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/international-students-or-d-uk>
- Migration Observatory commentary: The net migration bounce. <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/net-migration-bounce>
- Migration Observatory report: Thinking behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain. <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/understanding-uk-public-opinion/executive-summary>



## The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



## COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

[www.compas.ox.ac.uk](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk)

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### Press contact

Rob McNeil

Senior Media Analyst

[robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk)

+ 44 (0)1865 274568

+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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