This briefing provides an overview of net migration to the UK – defined as the difference between immigration and emigration of people moving for at least a year.

**Key Points**

Net migration to the UK, the difference between immigration and emigration, was estimated to be 270,000 in 2019, down from a peak of 331,000 in the year ending March 2015.

Net migration of EU citizens rose substantially from 2012 onwards, then fell sharply after the June 2016 EU referendum.

Estimated non-EU net migration averaged around 175,000 per year from 2012 to 2019, but the accuracy of this estimate is uncertain and it is possible that the true figure is lower.

Study and work are the most common reasons for immigration to the UK, but their contribution to net migration cannot currently be accurately calculated.

**Understanding the Policy**

From 2010, a major migration policy objective of three successive UK governments was to reduce net migration – immigration minus emigration – to under 100,000 a year. Several policies were introduced to help achieve this target. These included a cap on skilled non-EU workers, minimum income requirements for those sponsoring the immigration of non-EU family members and stricter requirements governing which educational establishments could sponsor non-EU international students, which non-EU students would be permitted, and the working rights of student visa holders. (A brief outline of some of the key policies introduced before the EU membership referendum can be found in the Migration Observatory commentary, *The State of the Nation: the Immigration Numbers Game*.)

The net migration goal was never reached and was abandoned under Boris Johnson’s government in 2019. EU citizens are still, at the time of writing, able to travel to live and work in the UK without restrictions. However, a new policy designed to end free movement rights for EU citizens in the UK, and to create a single system for both EU and non-EU migrants is being developed and is expected to replace the current system in 2021. A brief overview of the new Immigration Bill that promises to end EU freedom of movement can be found in the Migration Observatory commentary *The new Immigration Bill: closing the door on freedom of movement*. The anticipated impact of the new ‘points based system’ – due to be introduced under the bill – on net migration is outlined in the Migration Observatory commentary, *Calculating the Bill: the projected impact of the points-based immigration system after Brexit*.

**Understanding the evidence**

The analysis in this briefing is based on data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates of Long-Term International Migration (LTIM), which form a part of ONS’s Migration Statistics Quarterly Report (MSQR). All charts provide full-year data rather than quarterly data.

The primary data source for the LTIM estimates is the International Passenger Survey (IPS), which is based on respondents’ stated intention to come to or leave the UK for at least one year. But LTIM estimates also include adjustments based on data from other sources, such as Home Office data on asylum seekers, the Labour Force Survey, and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency international migration estimates.
To correctly interpret LTIM data, it is important to recognise its underlying definitions and limitations. To produce its LTIM estimates, ONS uses the UN’s international standard definition of a long-term international migrant: a person who moves to another country for at least one year (see ‘Evidence Gaps and Limitations’ below for further discussion). This excludes, for example, tourism or short-term business travel.

There is uncertainty about the accuracy of some of the components of the IPS and LTIM estimates. In particular, is has become clear that the emigration of non-EU students is not being correctly captured in the IPS survey, though it is not yet clear to what extent data problems also exist for other categories of migrant (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Fluctuations in IPS figures – which have significant margins of error – are not always visible in other data sources such as visa issuances. ONS has said repeatedly that it believes the IPS – which is commonly used in policy debates to scrutinise specific subcategories of migration such as non-EU students or EU workers – has been “stretched beyond its original purpose” (Office for National Statistics, 2019a). It has also cautioned against reading too much into year-on-year variations in specific components of net migration, because sampling error means that short-term changes in the estimates may represent statistical noise rather than real trends.

Some of the LTIM estimates for 2001 to 2011 have been revised following problems uncovered for that time period, while other estimates have not. In April 2014, ONS published a report on the ‘Quality of Long-Term International Migration estimates from 2001 to 2011’, in which they revised the figures for total net migration for the years 2001 to 2011. Based on the revision, total net migration between 2001 and 2011 had previously been underestimated by 346,000. There is evidence that this underestimation was predominantly driven by an undercount of migration from the EU-8 eastern European countries. This is supported by EU Settlement Scheme applications, which for some nationalities have surpassed their estimated resident populations in the UK. However, revised numbers of immigration and emigration as well as breakdowns by citizenship or reason for migration are not currently available. As a result, estimates relating to any breakdown of immigration, emigration, or different reasons for migrating will not match overall net migration.

This briefing uses the term EU-15 to describe EU countries other than the UK that were members of the EU before enlargement in 2004. EU-8 refers to the eight east European countries that joined the European Union in May 2004: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia. EU-2 refers to the countries that joined in 2007: Romania and Bulgaria.


In August 2019, ONS announced that its Migration Statistics Quarterly Report (MSQR) was being reclassified from National Statistics status to Experimental Statistics, to convey a lower degree of reliability. This was because they believed the previous statistics underestimated EU migration and overestimated non-EU migration.

In the August 2019 MSQR, ONS provided adjusted estimates based on data from the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). In these adjustments, non-EU net migration between 2013 and 2019 was revised downwards to correct for the IPS underestimating the emigration of former students; and EU immigration estimates between 2011 and 2016 were revised upwards after analysis of National Insurance Number registrations showed that immigration from the EU-8 countries was around double the IPS estimates (Home Office, 2020a).

On 16 March 2020, the IPS was suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Because the quarterly LTIM statistics refer to periods two quarters before publication, the final MSQR that uses the IPS will be published in August 2020 and cover the year ending March 2020. ONS has stated that the November MSQR will be the first to not use the IPS and instead base its migration estimates for the year ending June 2020 on administrative data from several government departments, including the Home Office, DWP, and HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC).
Net migration to the UK was estimated to be 270,000 in 2019, down from a peak of 331,000 in the year ending March 2015

The headline net migration statistic includes people of all citizenships, including British citizens. As shown in Figure 1, net migration rose from -13,000 in 1992 to 163,000 in 1999. In the mid-2000s, there was a significant increase in net migration that coincided with the 2004 enlargement of the EU.

Net migration fell between 2010 and 2012, from 256,000 to 161,000. This period coincided with several policy measures designed to restrict study, work and family migration, as part of the Conservative Party’s goal to reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands”. The lowest estimate of net migration during this period was 161,000 in the year ending December 2012.

Net migration started to increase again from 2013 onwards. This increase took place at a time when the UK economy was starting to recover from the economic crisis while some of the key origin countries of migrants to the UK (particularly in southern Europe) were still experiencing high unemployment.

The highest level of net migration on record is 331,000, reached in the year ending March 2015. The provisional estimate of net migration in 2019 was 270,000.

Figure 1

ONS also produces estimates of long-term international migration at the local-authority level, which can be found in the Migration Observatory’s Local Data Guide.
Net migration of EU citizens rose substantially from 2012 onwards, then fell sharply after the June 2016 EU referendum

Figure 2 shows net migration for EU and non-EU citizens, as well as total net migration, which includes British citizens.

Before 2004, net migration of EU citizens fluctuated but remained below 35,000 each year. It saw a sharp increase from 2004 to 2007, after EU enlargement, although the figures for this period are underestimates due to a problem with the measurement of net migration at this time (see ‘Understanding the Evidence’ above). EU net migration was estimated at 127,000 in 2007, then fell around the time of the financial crisis, from 2008 to 2012. A second increase in EU net migration took place from 2013 onwards, peaking at 219,000 in the year ending March 2015. EU net migration then fell sharply following the EU referendum.

The decline in EU net migration from the year ending June 2016 to the year ending December 2019 was spread across all of the three main EU origin groups – EU-15, EU-8 and EU-2. During this period, the net migration of EU-15 citizens fell from 84,000 to 44,000, from 42,000 to -12,000 for EU-8 citizens, and from 62,000 to 18,000 for EU-2 citizens. These estimates are subject to significant margins of error and this means that the negative net migration estimate for EU-8 citizens was not statistically different from zero.

Figure 2a
Adding together the net migration of EU and non-EU citizens does not lead to total net migration, because total net migration includes British citizens. British citizens are the only group with continuous net emigration since 1991 (i.e., negative net migration). Peaks in British net emigration occurred in 2004 (104,000) and 2006 (124,000). In 2019, provisional estimates suggest that there were 60,000 more British citizens moving abroad than coming to live in the UK.

For more information on EU migration in the UK, see the Migration Observatory briefing, EU Migration to and From the UK.

**Estimated non-EU net migration averaged around 175,000 per year from 2012 to 2019, but the accuracy of this estimate is uncertain and it is possible that the true figure is lower**

In 2019, estimated net migration of non-EU citizens was 282,000. This figure has fluctuated over time (Figure 2, above), averaging around 175,000 per year over the eight-year period from 2012 to 2019.

Although this suggests that the net migration of non-EU citizens in 2019 was over five times the net migration of EU citizens – despite policies introduced from 2010 onwards to restrict non-EU migration – there is reason to be cautious about making this comparison.

In August 2019, ONS started to adjust its official estimates of both EU and non-EU net migration to address a problem identified in the IPS figures, namely that it was overestimating non-EU net migration and underestimating EU net migration. Comparisons with other data sources had suggested that the population of non-EU migrants in the UK had not grown as much as one would expect given the levels of net migration that ONS was estimating, and that the overestimate was primarily due to difficulties measuring the emigration of non-EU students (Office for National Statistics, 2018; Office for National Statistics, 2019b).
However, there is still an unexplained gap between data sources, even after the 2019 revisions. According to the Annual Population Survey (APS), the non-EU born population of the UK increased by an estimated 696,000 from 2012 to 2019 – an average of only 99,000 per year (Office for National Statistics, 2020b). This data source also has limitations so it is not currently possible to say which data source paints the more accurate picture of change in the non-EU migrant population. ONS continues to adjust its methodology for producing the net migration estimates, so it is possible that further revisions will take place.

**Study and work are the most common reasons for immigration to the UK, but their contribution to net migration cannot currently be accurately calculated**

As people often migrate for a variety of reasons, it can be difficult to categorise migrants based on their reasons for moving to the UK (for a discussion of mixed migration motivations see our primer [Mixed Migration: Policy Challenges](#)). For example, someone might move to the UK to join their spouse, work, study, or work part-time and study. It is therefore important to keep in mind that while ONS records the categories discussed below as mutually exclusive, this will not always be the case in practice.

In 2019, an estimated 219,000 people or 32% of long-term migrants moved to the UK for work-related reasons (including British citizens) (Figure 3). These people either had a definite job – 25% of all immigrants – or came to look for a job – 8% of all long-term arrivals. The sharp decline in work-related migration from 2016 to 2018 was a result of a fall in EU migration after the 2016 referendum. For more information on work-related migration, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Work Visas and Migrant Workers in the UK](#).

In 2019, 35% of long-term migrants said they were coming to the UK for study. Study migration is driven by non-EU citizens, while work migrants are more likely to be EU citizens. For more information about EU and non-EU students, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [International Student Migration to the UK](#).

The number of people who came to accompany or join a family member in 2019 was substantially lower, at an estimated 68,000 people, or 10% of total long-term immigration. For more information about family migration, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Family Migration to the UK](#).
Since 2012, ONS has collected data on emigration from the UK by initial reason for migration. In theory, this should make it possible to understand which categories of migration – work, family, study, or other – have contributed most to net migration.

However, as noted above, estimates of the number of non-EU students who subsequently emigrate are now recognised to be inaccurate (Office for National Statistics, 2018). It is not yet clear to what extent this means that other categories of net migration (e.g. people arriving for work or family) are also inaccurate.

These problems with the data make it important to not draw strong policy conclusions from the net migration figures for specific routes.

**Evidence Gaps and Limitations**

Due to the suspension of the IPS because of Covid-19, ONS has brought forward its plan to produce new migration statistics based on administrative data. The new statistics will be published for the first time in November’s Migration Statistics Quarterly Report and be based on such data as visa records, exit checks, HRMC tax records, and data from the NHs and DWP. This will be a complex exercise, because different sources of data are collected in different ways and often measure different things. As a result, the IPS, on which the net migration figures in this briefing are based, could play a smaller role in future estimates of UK migration – or no role at all.

In the meantime, it is not advisable to use the IPS-based net migration figures for detailed scrutiny of different categories of migration and their contribution to net migration overall. Using these data to draw policy conclusions about how to treat different types of migration would be misguided.
It is also important to note that the IPS estimates of immigration and emigration are not designed to account for short-term migration. This is one reason why immigration figures from the IPS are, for some nationalities, smaller than the number of National Insurance Number registrations.

The International Passenger Survey asks individuals about their intended length of stay in the UK and abroad. People are classified as ‘long-term migrants’ if they state that they intend to move for 12 months or longer. However, migrants’ plans for the future, such as the intention to stay in the UK for a year or more, may or may not be realised. To address this, ONS adjusts the data for ‘visitor switchers’ – those whose original intention was to stay for less than one year but who subsequently stay longer – and for ‘migrant switchers’ – those who intended to stay for a year or more but left within a year. However, making these adjustments is methodologically challenging, and with currently available data sources it is not possible to be certain about how much switching is actually taking place and what the implications are of this for the overall net migration figures (Office for National Statistics, 2018a).

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References

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 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

About the authors
Madeleine Sumption
Director, The Migration Observatory
madeleine.sumption@compas.ox.ac.uk

Dr Carlos Vargas-Silva
Director, COMPAS
carlos.vargas-silva@compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact
Rob McNeil
Head of Media and Communications
robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk
+ 44 (0)1865 274568
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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