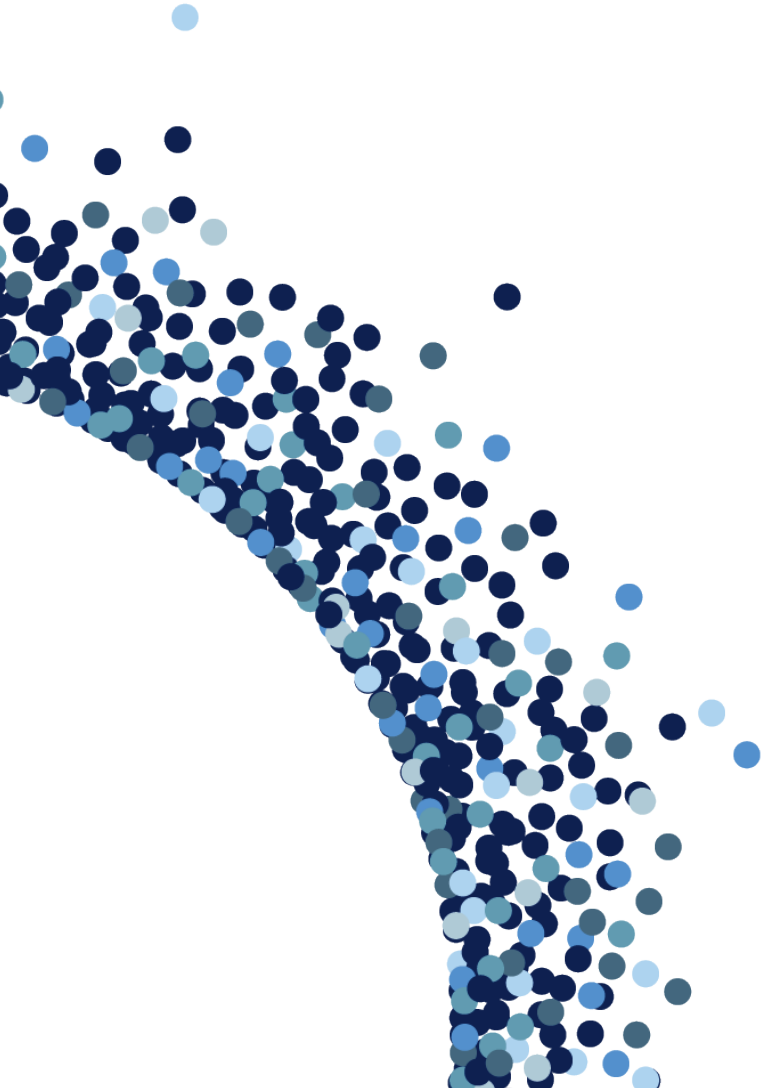
THE MIGRATION OBSERVATORY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

BRIEFING

Net migration to the UK



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This briefing covers the scale of immigration and net migration in the UK since the early 2000s and under the post-Brexit immigration system.

Key Points

The UK has experienced broadly similar levels of migration compared to other high-income countries, on average, over the past few decades.

Net migration was 431,000 in 2024, a sharp decline from the unusually high levels in 2022 and 2023. However, it remained higher than levels seen during the 2010s, when the figure typically fluctuated between 200,000 and 300,000. Post-Brexit, net migration has been driven by non-EU immigration. In 2024, 69% of non-EU immigration was for work and study purposes.

EU citizens made up a majority of immigration and net migration in the run-up to the 2016 EU referendum. Since 2021, however, EU net migration has been negative, according to official estimates (-96,000 in 2024).

While the emigration of international students has been rising, they became more likely to stay in the UK since Brexit, contributing more to net migration than they had done in the past.

Projections of future net migration are inherently uncertain. In the past 20 years, official projections have usually underestimated future net migration levels.

Understanding the policy

The scale of UK migration is affected by immigration policies but also depends on other factors such as the state of the economy here and in countries of origin, demand for international study opportunities, and events and crises around the world. Immigration policies tend not to specify the total number of people who can move to a country, but simply set eligibility criteria to determine who can qualify for residence. The number of people who meet the criteria will fluctuate over time even when policy does not change. This is one reason it is difficult for politicians to specify exactly what level of net migration they expect in future.

During some periods, specific numerical targets in immigration policy have been in place, however. In particular, the Conservative-led UK governments from 2010 to 2019 had explicit targets to reduce net migration – immigration minus emigration – to under 100,000 a year. In the early 2010s, several policies were introduced to help achieve this target. The net migration target was never reached, and was abandoned at the end of 2019 under Boris Johnson's government. The Labour government elected in 2024 has said that it does not want to set a target for net migration.

In January 2021, a new immigration system was introduced to replace free movement. Under the new system, EU citizens migrating to the UK have been subject to the same immigration rules as citizens from the rest of the world (though Irish citizens continue to have free movement rights under separate legal arrangements). An annual cap on skilled workers was also removed. Projections made before this system came into force suggested that it would reduce overall migration, compared to a system in which free movement had continued. These projections did not account for other factors that affect migration trends, such as the war in Ukraine and the establishment of a route for Hong Kong British National Overseas (BNO) status holders; and they did not anticipate the substantial increase in demand for migrant workers in the health and care sector post-Brexit, or the introduction of long-term work visas for care workers in early 2022.

Initially, the new immigration system was considerably more restrictive towards EU citizens and somewhat less restrictive towards non-EU citizens, compared to the system that existed until the end of the post-Brexit transition period in December 2020. In November 2023, however, the previous Conservative government announced a suite of policies designed to restrict immigration via several regular routes. They included higher salary thresholds for work and family migrants and restrictions on the dependants of newly arriving students and care workers.

In May 2025, the Labour government announced a range of further restrictions on visas, including the closure of the care worker route to new overseas recruitment. Home Office analysis estimated that the changes would reduce visa grants by 98,000.

Understanding the evidence

Broadly speaking, there are three main measures of the scale of migration to the UK:

- *Long-term immigration*: includes anyone moving to the UK for at least 12 months. This measure is useful because it excludes very short-term migrants such as those who come on work visas for just a few weeks or months.
- *Net migration*: is calculated as long-term immigration minus long-term emigration (i.e., those moving for at least a year in either direction). It shows the contribution of migration to population growth.
- *Visa grants*: include anyone receiving a visa to live or work in the UK, including those who move for very short periods (although we exclude visitor and transit visas from all the data in this briefing). Visa data only cover people who require visas, which means that before the end of 2020, EU citizens were not included in the figures. This means they can only be used to look at changes in migration since the pre-Brexit or pre-pandemic period for non-EU citizens.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) have produced different estimates of both long-term immigration and net migration, using different data and methods. In this briefing we provide the overall story told by looking at the different data sources together. The four main methods are as follows:

Experimental estimates using administrative records

ONS has recently developed new methods of measuring migration using administrative data. These include tax and benefits records contained in the Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID) and Home Office data on visas granted and entries and exits at the border. These data sources have the potential to improve migration statistics but are not yet labelled National Statistics as they have important limitations.

For non-EU citizens, recent ONS estimates rely on border data. Non-EU citizens who receive entry visas, enter the UK, and remain for at least 12 months, excluding short trips abroad, are counted as long-term immigrants. Those who leave for at least 12 months are counted as long-term emigrants. For estimates based on the most recent data, ONS cannot yet confirm whether people who leave do so for at least 12 months. As a result, it must make assumptions about how long people will stay. These may not be accurate when behavior is changing, for example due to policy changes. This is why provisional estimates can be substantially revised over time.

Exit checks data currently only meaningfully cover non-EU citizens, although this will change over time as more EU citizens moving to and from the UK are incorporated into the visa system (rather than, for example, the EU Settlement Scheme). Estimates of EU citizens thus currently rely on RAPID. Understanding immigration and emigration using the RAPID database requires assumptions about whether people absent from the data have actually left the UK. These assumptions will affect the estimates. The RAPID data will not include people who do not work or receive benefits. Children and students are not counted in the RAPID data either, but in recent migration estimates ONS has made an adjustment to include them. People are classified as migrants in the RAPID database if they were a non-UK citizen when they applied for a national insurance number (NINo). Note that for consistency with other data sources and ONS practices, we describe the data as being for the period "year ending March", although in practice the figures actually end with the fiscal year on 6th April.

Experimental ONS estimates also include asylum applicants and resettled refugees. Arrivals are estimated using internal Home Office data on the asylum applications and grants of status for resettlement, with an adjustment made to avoid the double counting of those who applied for asylum after entering the country on a long-term visa. The number of departures is sourced from Home Office data on voluntary and enforced returns of asylum seekers. This category does not include immigration or emigration of people who arrive through irregular routes and never go on to claim asylum, because their numbers are not known.

Immigration and net migration figures based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS)

The main source for immigration and net migration data before the COVID-19 pandemic was the IPS, which had many flaws and limitations but provided a long-term view of changes in migration patterns over periods of more than a decade. The survey, conducted at ports and airports, was based on respondents' *intention* to come to or leave the UK for at least one year. Intentions may not be accurate. Indeed, in August 2019, ONS announced that its Migration Statistics Quarterly Report was being reclassified from National Statistics status to *Experimental Statistics*, to convey a lower degree of reliability. This move followed analysis showing that certain groups, such as non-EU students and Eastern European immigrants, were not being measured accurately. Estimates in this briefing for before 2012 are based on the earlier, IPS-based figures.

British citizens in the data

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the IPS survey was reinstated but only used to measure the migration of British citizens. However, IPS figures were not used in the ONS's May 2025 release (for net migration in 2024) due to data issues. Instead, it rolled forward British migration estimates from earlier periods. This means that there is effectively no method in place currently to measure actual net migration of British citizens.

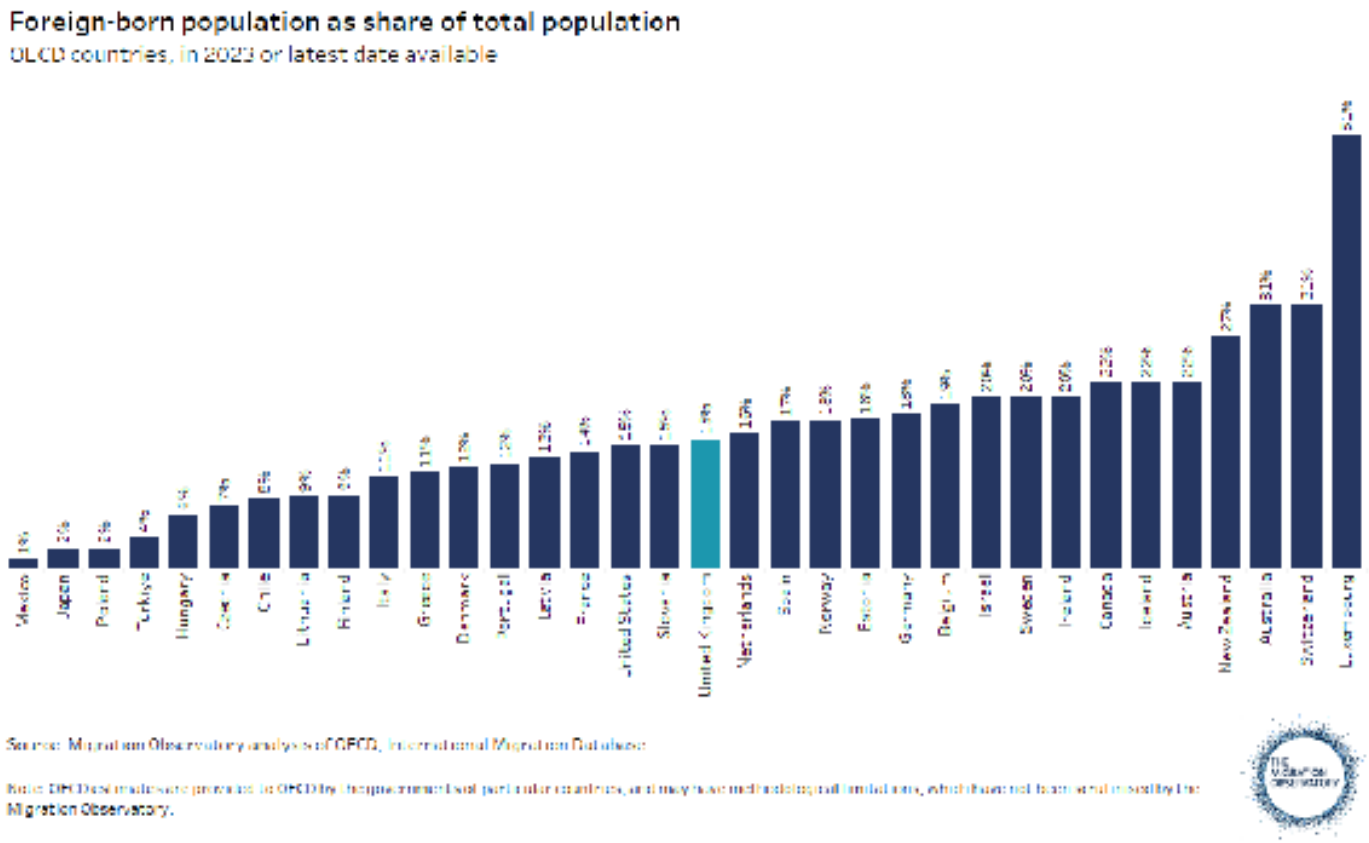
The UK has experienced broadly similar levels of migration compared to other high-income countries, on average over the past few decades

Migration levels fluctuate from year to year, but over long periods, a useful measure of how much immigration a country has experienced is the size of the foreign-born population as a percentage of the population. Countries with high levels of net migration—defined as people immigrating minus those emigrating—develop larger foreign-born or migrant populations over the long run.

According to Census data from 2021/22, the UK's foreign-born population was 16%. However, OECD data is more informative for the purpose of international comparison since they report more comparable data for a range of countries. The OECD reports that 15% of the UK's population was foreign-born in 2023, less than the Census figure, because the data source used – the Annual Population Survey – underestimates the migrant population due to survey non-response.

The OECD estimates suggested a similar foreign-born share as in high-income countries such as France and the United States (Figure 1). The UK had a smaller foreign-born population than Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The foreign-born population in Australia, for example, was roughly double that of the UK as a share of the population. By contrast, the UK had a higher share of foreign-born people in the population compared to Italy, Portugal, and most Eastern European countries, and a much higher share than Japan.

Figure 1



The scale of migration to a country may have some economic impact, but research suggests that for many economic impacts, the composition of migration is more important than the numbers alone. Whether migrants are working and what skills and qualifications they bring are among the key factors that affect the impact of migration on public finances and productivity, for example. For more discussion of the economic impacts of migration, see the Migration Observatory briefings, The Fiscal Impacts of Immigration in the UK, and The Labour Market Effects of Immigration.

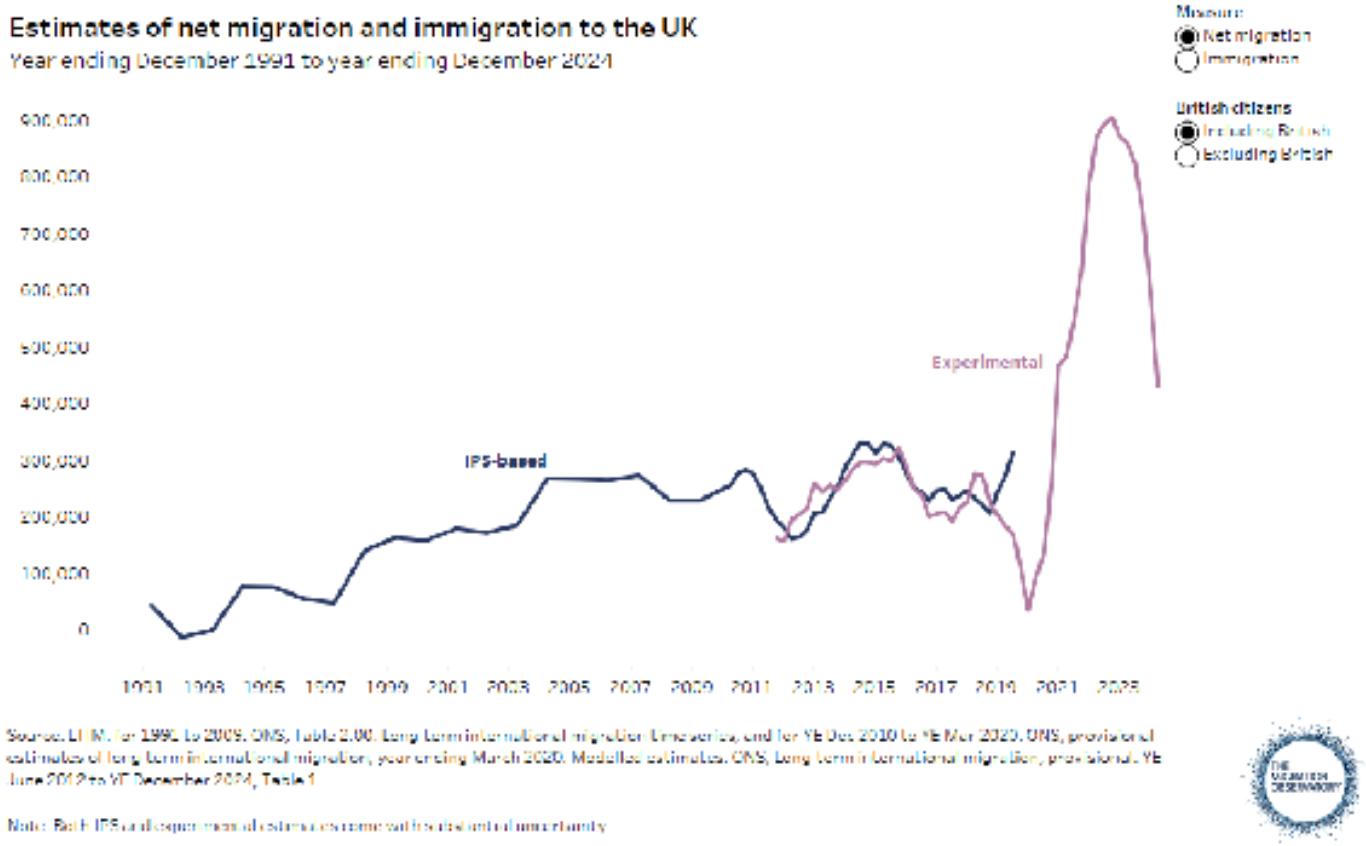
Net migration fell sharply in 2024, from the unusually high levels seen in 2022 and 2023

Net migration is a commonly used measure of the overall scale of migration in the UK. It takes into account not just people moving to the country, but also those leaving. This helps understand migration's contribution to population growth—especially since many people who move to the UK do not remain here permanently. However, the net migration measure also has flaws. For example, it tells us little about *who* is arriving and leaving or what their impacts are. It can also produce counterintuitive or misleading figures when migration patterns change substantially in a short period, as discussed further below. The UK is unusual in its choice to use net migration in policy debates as the main measure for discussing migration levels. See the Migration Observatory commentary, Net Migration: Frequently Asked Questions, for more information.

Official net migration estimates are currently uncertain and published figures will be revised. For example, ONS has revised the estimate of net migration for 2023 upwards by 26%, or 175,000, since it was first published. (For more detail, see the Evidence Gaps and Limitations section below.)

With this caveat in mind, estimates from the Office for National Statistics suggest that total net migration was 431,000 in 2024. This figure represents around half of the level recorded in the year ending June 2023, when net migration peaked at a historical high of 906,000, but is above pre-pandemic estimates of between 200,000 and 300,000 (Figure 2).

Figure 2

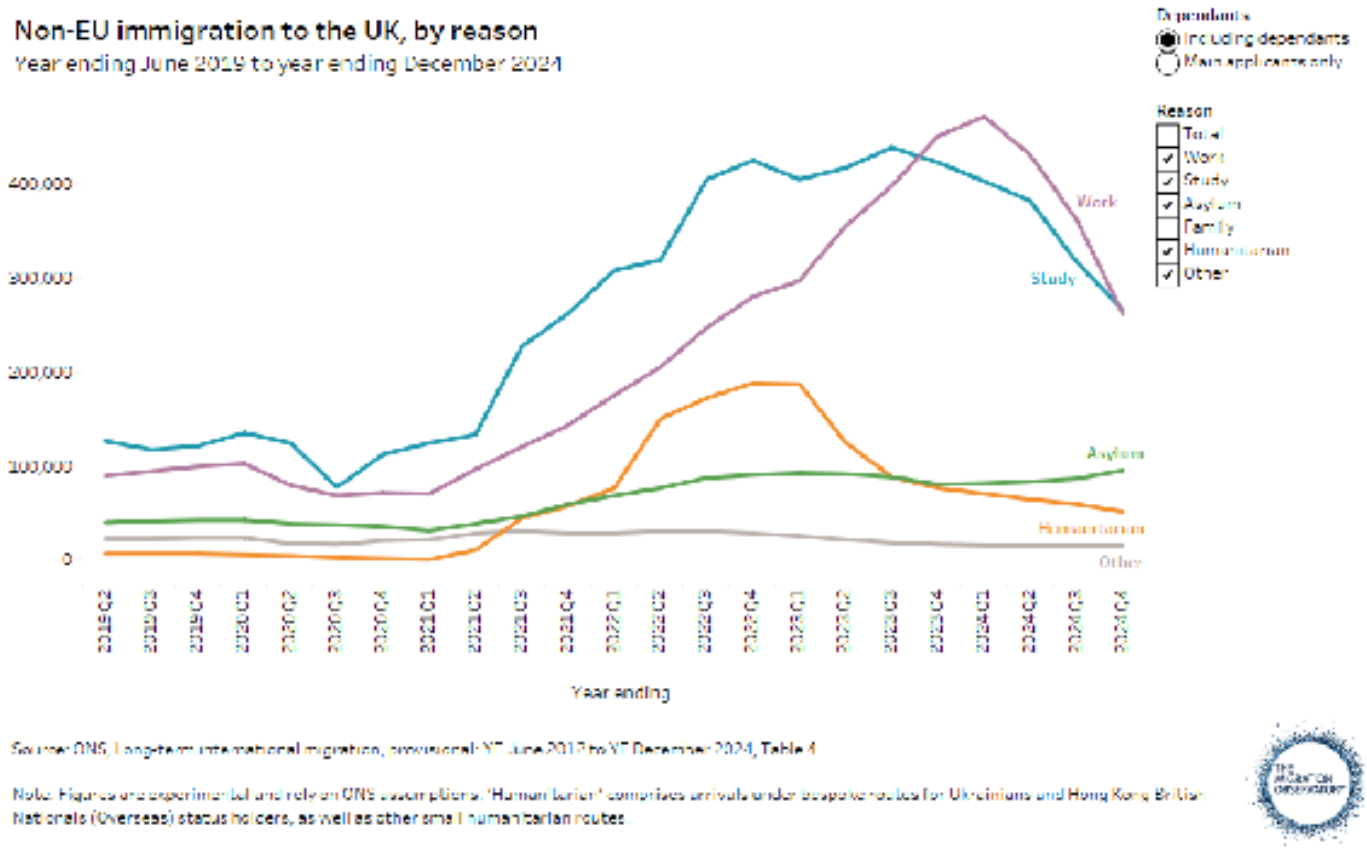


The sharp rise in net migration after Brexit was driven by an increase in non-EU citizens coming to the UK. This followed policy liberalisations made under the Conservative government. For example, it reintroduced a post-study work route – which likely made the UK more attractive to international students – opened new humanitarian visa routes for Ukrainians and Hong Kongers, and made care and senior care workers eligible for work visas. At the same time, immigration policy also interacted with other factors unrelated to immigration. UK universities recruited students overseas more actively as their financial situation deteriorated, and social care providers hired migrant workers to fill vacancies caused by low pay and poor working conditions in a sector with limited funding.

Net migration fell sharply in 2024, however, after the Conservative government introduced a suite of policies aimed at reducing immigration. These included visa restrictions on the family members of care workers and most international students. Widespread reports of exploitation in the social care sector also led to a Home Office move to scrutinise applications to sponsor migrant care workers more closely.

The ONS estimates that non-EU immigration stood at 766,000 in 2024, 32% lower than the previous year (Figure 3). Two-thirds of non-EU arrivals came to study at UK universities (33%), as a worker (15%), or as the partner or child of a work migrant (19%). More information on the drivers of work and student migration is available in the Migration Observatory briefings, Work visas and migrant workers in the UK and Student migration to the UK.

Figure 3



Source: ONS, Long-term international migration, provisional: YE June 2019 to YE December 2024, Table 4

Note: Figures are experimental and rely on ONS assumptions. 'Humanitarian' comprises arrivals under bespoke routes for Ukrainians and Hong Kong British National (Overseas) status holders, as well as other small humanitarian routes.

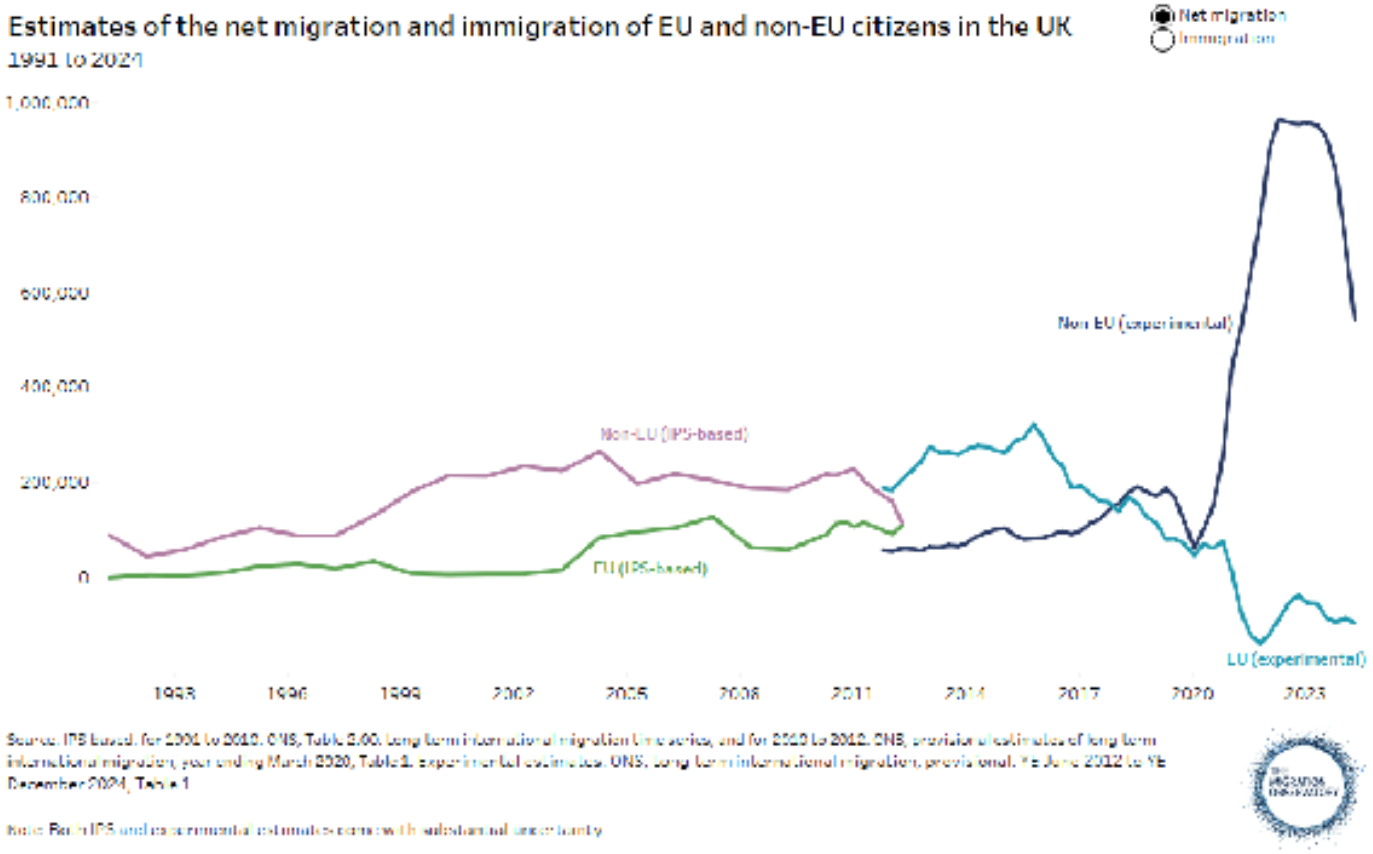
Indian nationals were by far the largest nationality coming to the UK in 2024, accounting for 17% of overall immigration, followed by Pakistani and Chinese citizens (8% and 7%, respectively).

Net migration of EU citizens was negative in 2024

Shortly before the 2016 referendum on EU membership, EU citizens made up the majority of all net migration to the UK (excluding British citizens). Depending on the data source used, EU citizens contributed between 59% and 77% of estimated net migration in the year ending March 2015. This high share was unusual by historical standards and partly resulted from temporary factors: Romanian and Bulgarian citizens receiving full access to the UK labour market in 2014, and migration from Southern European countries where youth unemployment was high due to the Eurozone crisis.

Since the 2016 referendum, the picture has changed (Figure 4). Although policy towards EU citizens did not change until January 2021, EU net migration began to fall immediately after the referendum. Possible explanations for this decline include the economic recovery in southern European countries following the Eurozone crisis; the decline in the value of the pound after the referendum, which made work in the UK less attractive; and uncertainty about the political climate. The decline in the EU *share* also resulted from rising non-EU migration during the same period.

Figure 4



EU net migration subsequently turned negative following the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system in 2021, which greatly reduced opportunities for EU citizens to move to the UK. Take-up of work visas among EU citizens in the post-Brexit immigration system in 2021 and 2022 was relatively low, as explained in the Migration Observatory briefing, Work visas and migrant workers in the UK.

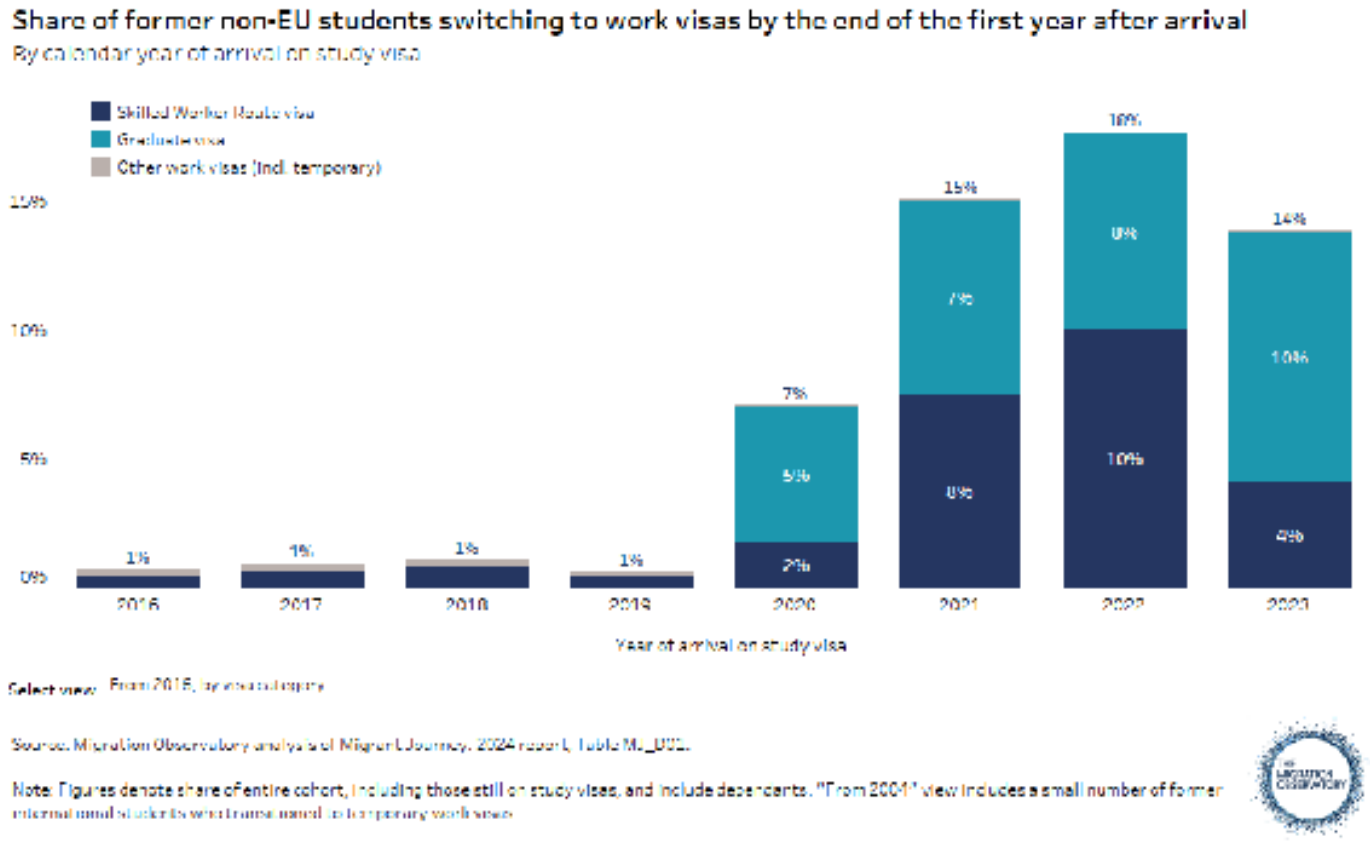
Net migration of EU citizens in 2024 was estimated at -96,000. More detail on how EU net migration has changed following the Brexit referendum and COVID-19 pandemic can be found in the Migration Observatory briefing EU Migration to and from the UK.

After Brexit, international students started to stay in the UK at higher rates than in the past, contributing more to net migration

In the past, many non-EU citizens—particularly international students—have come to the UK for periods of just a few years before emigrating again. Among non-EU citizens with visas granted in 2008, for example, 83% saw their visas expire by the end of the seventh year after arrival. The resulting emigration subtracts from the overall net migration figure.

Recent increases in study migration have contributed to rising emigration: the estimated number of students emigrating in 2024 was almost one and half times the number emigrating in 2021 (135,000 compared to 55,000). However, there is some evidence that international students became more likely to remain in the UK long term, under the post-Brexit immigration system (Figure 5). This is not just because of the Graduate visa but because more students are switching to long-term Skilled Worker visas, too. As a result, international students have been contributing more to long-term net migration than they did in the past. The decrease in the share of international students switching to long-term work visas in the 2023 arrival cohort may result from restrictions introduced in 2024 that prevented people from switching *with their family members* into the care worker visa route, and increased salary thresholds for skilled work visas in other jobs. For more information, see the Migration Observatory commentary, International students entering the UK labour market.

Figure 5



Even if a majority of students and workers eventually leave the country, those who remain do of course contribute to net migration in the long term and not just the short term. For example, if 500,000 sponsored students arrived in a given year and 20% remained permanently, that annual cohort would contribute 100,000 to net migration over the long term.

Students' temporary stays have previously generated debate about whether they should be included in net migration statistics. Net migration data are used to generate population estimates, and since students are part of the population, removing them from the UK's main net migration figures would make population estimates less accurate. Other countries routinely include students in their net migration statistics, including Australia, Canada, the United States and New Zealand. One difference between the UK and other countries is that UK policy debates focus more on net migration (and thus are more affected by idiosyncrasies of the net migration measure), while debate in other countries tends to focus on immigration and grants of temporary or permanent status.

Projections of future net migration are inherently uncertain

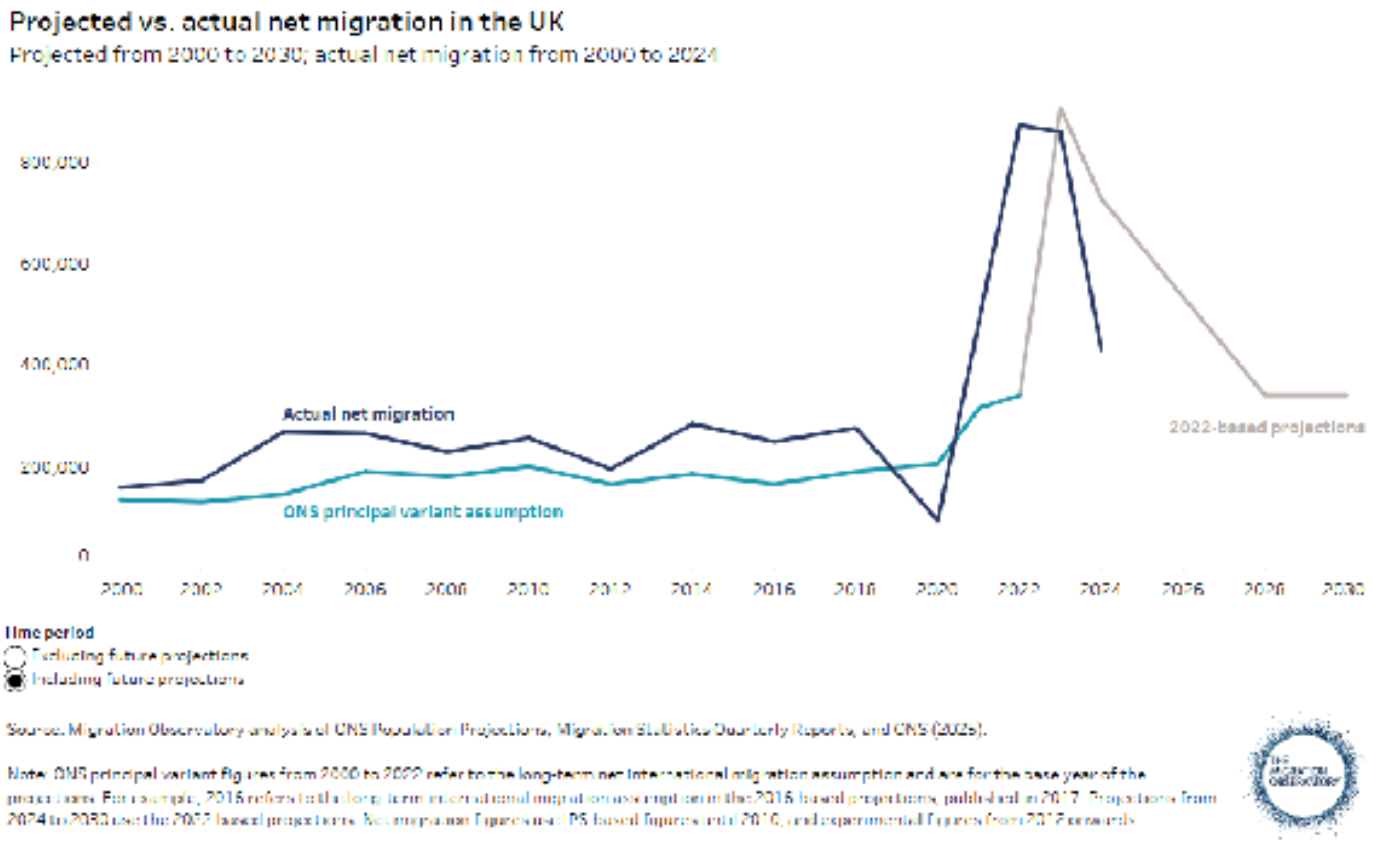
ONS produces population projections that are used for planning services and making public finance forecasts, among other things. This requires assumptions about future net migration. Making these assumptions is difficult because migration patterns depend on so many different factors both within and beyond government policy. ONS assumptions typically have not taken into account migration policy announcements or political intentions, but instead are based on historical migration and consultations with academic experts.

In its most recent population projections, produced in early 2025 and based on 2022 data, ONS assumed that net migration would fall to an average long-term level of 340,000 by 2028.

Net migration assumptions contained in population projections over the past twenty years have usually undershot (Figure 6). For example, net migration was an estimated 229,000 in 2008. The 2008-based population projections assumed that net migration would fall to 180,000 within a few years, but it remained persistently above 180,000, with a brief exception in 2012. Another exceptional year was 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly reduced net migration. For a further discussion of ONS population projections, see the Migration Observatory briefing, The Impact of Migration on UK Population Growth.

One reason net migration projections have often been too low is that they usually assume net migration will be similar to previous trends over a long period. This will mean the projections will be too low when migration levels are on an upward trajectory, as has generally been the case since the late 1990s. More recent ONS projections take a shorter period of historical data (10 rather than 25 years), which might help to address this problem.

Figure 6



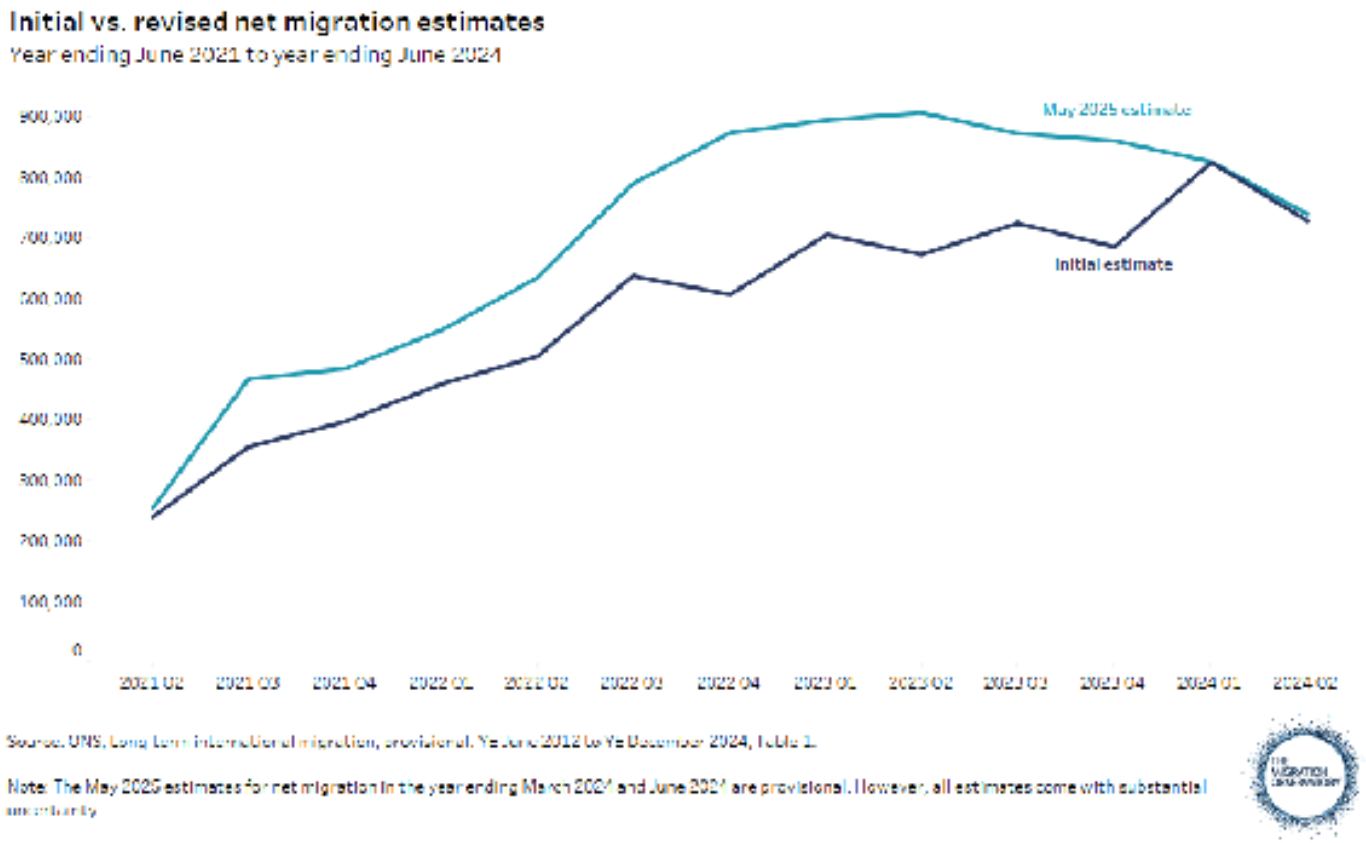
Evidence gaps and limitations

When producing the most recent year of data, ONS relies on assumptions about future travel patterns that are necessarily uncertain. As a result, provisional estimates are sometimes revised substantially. In particular, ONS must make assumptions about the share of people granted long-term visas who will not remain in the UK for the full duration of their visa, but migration behaviours have changed following the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system. ONS thus faces a trade-off between timeliness and accuracy of its provisional statistics.

Net migration publications also provide revised estimates for previous years, using more complete travel data. Due to both changing mobility patterns and one-off factors, including improvements in the methods and data used, substantial revisions were made to net migration estimates between 2022 and 2024.

The May 2025 publication made much smaller revisions, however. Net migration for the year ending June 2024 was revised up by 11,000 (or 1.5%) compared to the initial estimate in the November 2024 publication (Figure 7). For more information about ONS revisions to migration estimates, see Sumption (2024).

Figure 7



People who enter the UK without permission (e.g. in small boats) are included in the statistics if they claim asylum, but irregular migrants who do not claim asylum will not be included.

Estimates of EU citizen migration come from the RAPID tax and benefits database, which is not designed to measure migration flows. In the 2024 estimates, both immigration and emigration of EU citizens are relatively high at 122,000 and 218,000, respectively. The EU immigration estimate is much higher than the number of visas granted to EU citizens (52,500 in 2024, excluding visitors, transit and frontier workers who do not live in the UK). ONS analysis suggests that most of the EU citizens migrating to the UK during this period were not on visas but already held status under the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). However, full data on the migration of people with EUSS status are not currently published.

Acknowledgements

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Further reading

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- ONS. 2025. Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2024. Newport: ONS. Available online.
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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.
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