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# UK IMMIGRATION AFTER BREXIT

Report



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite the claim of pro-Brexit campaigners that immigration in the UK would diminish with new conditions, in 2022, more than 1 million people migrated to the UK, effecting a net migration of 504,000 people, a +27% increase compared to 2021.
- After the enactment of the new migration policy in 2021, the UK attracts more workers from non-EU countries (+114%) (due to the loosening of some migration barriers, such as a high salary threshold), but less workers from the EU (-21% compared to 2021) (affected by the new conditions they have to meet to get a visa).
- The new migration policy also contributed to a 32% rise in the arrival of non-EU new students – possibly incentivised by the reopening of the Graduate Route scheme – and a parallel decrease of newly enrolled European students in UK universities (a contraction of 53%), plausibly discouraged by the doubling of the tuition fees that affected them. Enrolments from Ireland, the only EU nationality unaffected by the financial barrier, is roughly constant over the past 5 years.
- In 2022, the arrival of irregular migrants made a new record of 74,751 asylum applications, the highest annual number since 2002, marking a +49% increase from 2021.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The current report broadens the scope of queries and problems the association [Manifesto di Londra](#) has dealt with in the past three years. Matteo and Federico wish to wish to extend their gratitude to the members of the association's Migration Committee for their insights and support.

The authors also wish to express their appreciation to Danae Bulfone for the layout and graphic design of the report.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been more than six years since the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum, and more than two years since the signing of the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Still, it is not entirely clear how Brexit affected the UK regarding many relevant socio-economic dimensions, such as trade, inflation, or financial services. The almost contemporaneous presence of the covid 19 pandemic made it difficult to isolate the Brexit effect, and precisely measure its impact. The fading of the health emergency, along with the increased availability of data, is now allowing researchers to make progress in this regard. This report contributes to such efforts, by analysing the most recent data on irregular, study-, and work-related migration, describing how Brexit affects the changes in migration flows to the UK.

## THE SYSTEM

### THE BREXIT REFERENDUM

On 23 June 2016, a referendum took place in the UK, which saw the majority of the electorate choosing the country to leave the EU. After several years of negotiations, the UK left the EU on the 31 January 2020, with the transition period ending on 31 December 2020. This decision was to have profound political, economic and social consequences for the UK. Among these, changes in the migration policy impacted the movement of people moving in the country.

*The Trade and Cooperation Agreement* between the UK and the EU was signed on 30 December 2020 and entered into force on 1 May 2021.<sup>1</sup> The agreement covers topics on trade in goods and services, energy, aviation, road transport, fisheries, and the movement of persons. While the agreement ensured a fair treatment of EU citizens living in the UK before Brexit and vice versa, from 1 January 2021 onwards a new migration policy was issued for regulating the inflow of people in the UK.

During the Brexit campaign, pro-leave campaigners maintained two claims about the desired outcome of Brexit on migration. They claimed that a new migration policy, banning the free movement of EU citizens, would boost wages and increase productivity (Portes, 2022, p. 92). It must be noted that, among the many changes that Brexit was to make, one of the most heated points of discussion in public debates was migration; the animated debate on the net-migration target (the reduction of net-migration to from “hundreds” to “tens of thousands” (Vargas-Silva & McNeil, 2017)) ultimately contributed to the referendum results and the 2017 general elections (Dennison & Geddes, 2018). It should be noted that net migration goal was publicly abandoned under Boris Johnson’s government in 2019, after having never been reached.

#### Goals and rationale of the new immigration policy

On 1 January 2021 the British government adopted a new immigration policy that for the first time in decades makes no distinctions between EU- and non-EU citizens. This policy consists in a point-based immigration system, whereby migrants are granted a leave to work and remain on the UK on the basis of a score determined by a series of parameters (e.g. education, earnings, language proficiency).

The new immigration policy is aimed at being more diverse (in a geographic sense) and more selective (regarding workers skills) than the past one. Increased diversity and selectiveness are in turn expected to broadly benefit the UK’s economy, by enhancing productivity thanks to a presumably higher human capital. It must be noted, however, that this policy presents some discrepancies with the wider Johnson’s economic agenda, whose main points were: 1) Level-up disadvantaged areas; 2) Pushing the throttle on science and tech (big data, AI); 3) Commitment to net-zero (green economy) (Portes, 2022). In fact, the points-based immigration system adopts a quasi-market-driven approach, meaning that it is beneficial to sectors (such as the financial sector) and areas (e.g. London and the southeast) where salaries are already high. In addition, this system is based on sheer economic standards (taking market wages as a main indicator of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/summary-the-uks-new-relationship-with-the-eu>

high skilled jobs – with the exception of shortage occupation jobs, for which there is a lower threshold), without considering the social value of lower paid jobs (e.g., care workers, bus drivers, supermarket staff – sectors where migrants’ employment is higher).

### The new Points-based Immigration System

Although the new policy is formally presented as ‘points-based’, researchers observed that the points determining the final score granting or not access to the UK are mostly “cosmetic”; in fact, the policy largely consists in a traditional employer-driven work permit system, since there is no flexibility in how most of the points are allocated (Sumption & Walsh, 2023, p. 100).

The new immigration policy entails the same regime for EU and non-EU citizens, who now both need to get a work visa to work in the UK (except for Irish citizens, who do not require a visa to work or live in the UK).

As a result of the new policy, there currently exist the following Visa types.

### Visitor Visas

This visa is for those who intend to spend 6 months or less in the UK for tourism, business and study. “**Visitor Visa**” holders need only to prove they can sustain themselves for the length of stay and will not make the UK their permanent home. They are not allowed to work in the UK but can volunteer for 30 days. Special conditions apply for academics, doctors, dentists and people who intend to marry or register a civil partnership.

### Work Visas

The most significant changes of the new policy regard work visas. There are three main categories of work visas: ‘high-value’ work visas, sponsored long-term work visas, and short-term work visas.

The new policy abolished the previously known “Tier 1” visa, whose eligibility criterion was merely economic (minimum funds or investments). Those starting their activity in the UK now can apply for a “**Start-up visa**” or an “**Innovator Founder Visa**”, whereby their business ideas need approval by an “endorsing body” selected among a pool of organisations including start-up accelerators and seed investors. Besides, the “**Global Talent visa**” is available for workers who excel in one of the following fields: academia or research; arts and culture; digital technology. They need to be endorsed by a set of specific organisations, e.g., the British Academy or Tech Nation.

The “**Skilled Worker Visa**” is the main innovation in the current policy, substituting the old “Tier 2 Visa”. Workers who apply to this kind of visa should meet the following criteria: being in receipt of a work offer for middle- or high- skilled jobs; earn an annual salary of at least £26,200 annual, £10.75 hourly, or the job’s ‘going rate’. There are exceptions to this last condition; the salary threshold is lowered to £20,960 (or 80% of the ‘going rate’) for: jobs in a shortage occupation; people who are under 26, recent graduates or in training; people in possession of a STEM PhD relevant to the job (the threshold is £23,580 or 90% of the ‘going rate’ for other PhDs); people

who hold postdoctoral positions in science or higher education (70% of the ‘going rate’); health and care professionals (a smaller application fee applies). Furthermore, intra-company transferees can apply for “**Global Business Mobility Visas**” (all with salary threshold £45,800). These are in place for specialist workers, people who have to set up a branch of an overseas business, have a contract to provide services for a UK company, are transferred to the UK to work for a different organisation than their overseas one, or are graduate trainees (threshold lowered to £24,220).

Substituting the “Tier 5 visa”, the policy also includes several other types for people who come to the UK for a temporary work position. The “**Youth Mobility Scheme**”, open only to people aged 18-30 from certain nations (Australia, Canada, Monaco, New Zealand – open to those aged 18-35 –, San Marino, Iceland), or, through a ballot (for those coming from Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan), grants the right to live and work in the UK for 2 years. There are caps on visa numbers for each of the listed nationalities. Other types of temporary visas are: the “**Seasonal Worker Visa**”, for people who plan to work in horticulture (for up to 6 months) or poultry (from 2 October to 31 December in the same year); and the “**Overseas Domestic Worker Visa**”, which includes cleaners, chauffeurs, cooks, nannies and those providing personal care for the employer and their family to work and reside in the UK for up to 6 months.

**Student Visa** A consistent number of people come to the UK to study. The new policy confirms the same conditions that were already in place for international students, extending the need for the “**Student Visa**” to EU citizens. It reintroduces, under the name “**Graduate Visa**” (opened on 1 July 2021),(McKinney et al., 2022, p. 15) the possibility to live and work (at any skill level and remuneration) in the UK for recent graduates for a period of 2 years after the end of their studies (or 3 years for those with a PhD). Beyond this point, graduated will have to switch to another visa type, typically the Skilled Worker Visa.<sup>2</sup>

**Route to Settlement** For most of the abovementioned visas (that is, excluding visitor and temporary workers), there is the possibility to apply for settlement after 5 years. Skilled workers have to maintain the same eligibility criteria to be able to obtain settlement.

<sup>2</sup> A similar type of visa existed from 2004 until 2012, but it was used by fewer individuals than the recent graduate visa.



## EFFECTS ON MIGRATION:

After two years that the new policy entered into power, it is possible to start looking at the new trends in migration pattern in the UK. Net migration (considering people moving in and moving out of the country) is the main indicator of migration patterns.

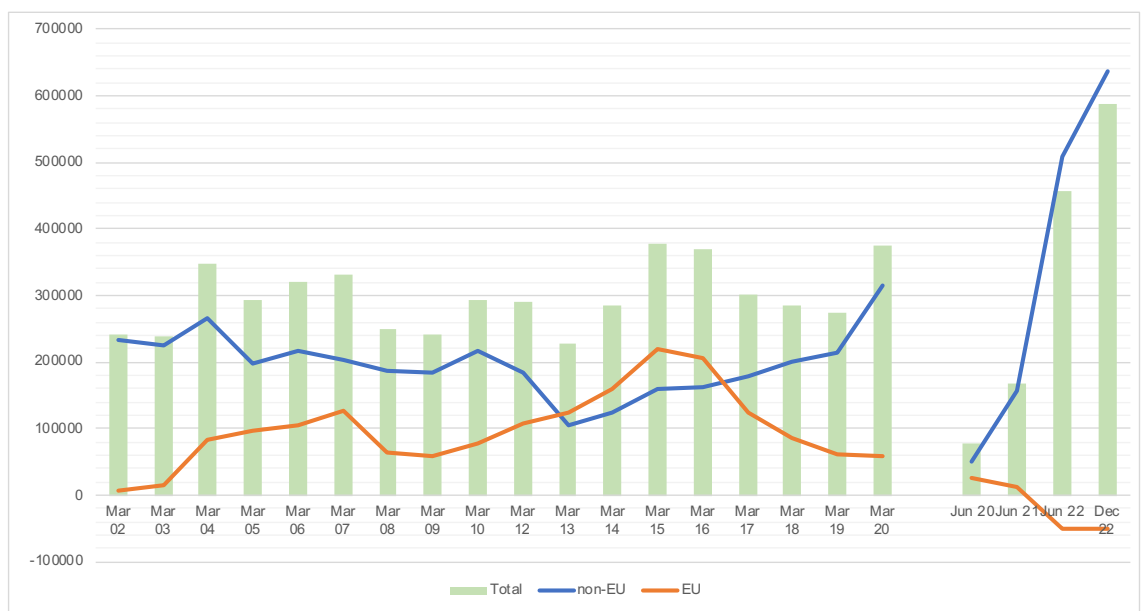
### NET MIGRATION IN THE UK

Evidence suggests that, after a sharp fall in immigration due to COVID-19 restrictions, Net migration has increased, and reached a +587,000 record in December 2022 (see *figure 1*)<sup>3</sup>. There are remarkably different patterns for EU and non-EU migration. While Net migration from European countries has gradually decreased since 2016, and dropped to a -51,000 in 2022, non-EU citizens marked a sharp increase, totalling a +638,000 in the same year.

It must be observed that the available data for the period 2012-2022 is not consistent, since: 1. the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic prevented from collecting significant data in 2020-21; 2. The ONS have adopted a different methodology from June 2020 onwards. The main source for these estimates was in fact the *International Passenger Survey*, which had to be discontinued because of the pandemic outbreak in March 2020. To bridge a gap in the data and to produce more accurate estimates, the ONS has been experimenting a new methodology that combines: A. Improved data for non-EU emigration and immigration: Home Office’s *Border Systems Data on individuals’ travel movements*; B. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)’s *Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID)*; C. *International Passenger Survey (IPS)* – this latter now mainly used to monitor British migration. Besides, it is particularly hard to get the data for permanent emigration. Considering these remarks, the figures presented in this paper are to be considered rough estimates and not a detailed account of effective movement of people. However, it may be, data from different sources consistently show that in the last two years, the increase in Net migration was largely driven by non-EU citizens, to which British Nationals Overseas must be added.

Figure 1. Net Migration to the UK. EU and non-EU citizens

Sources: 2010-2020: ONS, Provisional long-term international migration estimates (This data collection method has been discontinued after August 2020)<sup>4</sup>. 2020-2022: ONS, Long-term international immigration, emigration and net migration flows, provisional (new experimental methodology).



3 These figures comprise only non-UK (EU and non-EU) citizens.

4 The ONS has adopted a new methodology from 2020 onwards, hence the gap in the graph. Details of the new methodology are available on [the ONS website](#). The need for a revision of the old methodology is explained [here](#).

While the strong discrepancy in EU and non-EU trends partly reflects the effects of the new migration policy, there are other factors to take into account when looking to those figures. In fact, the surge of non-EU migration is dictated by contingent geopolitical circumstances, as Visa grants well illustrate: a “Bespoke Humanitarian Route”<sup>5</sup> has allowed more than 133,000 Ukrainian citizens and 75,000 British Nationals Overseas (from Hong Kong) to move to the UK in 2022. Considered together, these people account for the 30% of non-EU immigration (704,000).

However, the arrival of international students (277,000) and skilled workers (151,000) from non-EU countries also impacted on the overall Net migration increase. As researchers have observed, “this rise in non-EU migration is partly the result of the criteria for a skilled worker visa having been ‘liberalised’ under the new system” (Sturge, 2022).<sup>6</sup>

To better understand the general data on net migration and capture the outcomes of the new policy, the paper will analyse the new trends in study-related, work-related, and irregular migration.

## STUDENTS

In 2022, roughly 39% of the migration influx was related to study reasons. Recent changes in the migration policy were paralleled by a change in tuition fees. Starting with the academic year 2021/22 (starting after 31 July 2021), EU and non-EU students were both due to pay tuition fees at the full ‘international student’ rate. This did not change the conditions for extra Europeans but meant in most cases a doubling of the fee for students coming from the EU, which were previously due to pay fees at the Home rate – same as UK nationals –, usually around a half of the Overseas rate.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, EU students are generally no longer eligible for public teaching grant or student support funding.

Looking at the last 5 years, it is possible to observe a general rise in new enrolments of foreign-born students, from 254,000 in 2017/18 to 382,000 in 2021/22 (led by a 84% increase in postgrad and 7% undergrad new enrolments over the last 5 years). However, whereas the enrolment of non-EU students increased noticeably, there is for the first time in decades a decrease in EU students’ new enrolments (see *figure 2*). A similar trend can be seen at Brunel University, where EU postgraduate enrolments fell by 25% in the last year whereas non-EU postgraduates registered an increase of 66%.

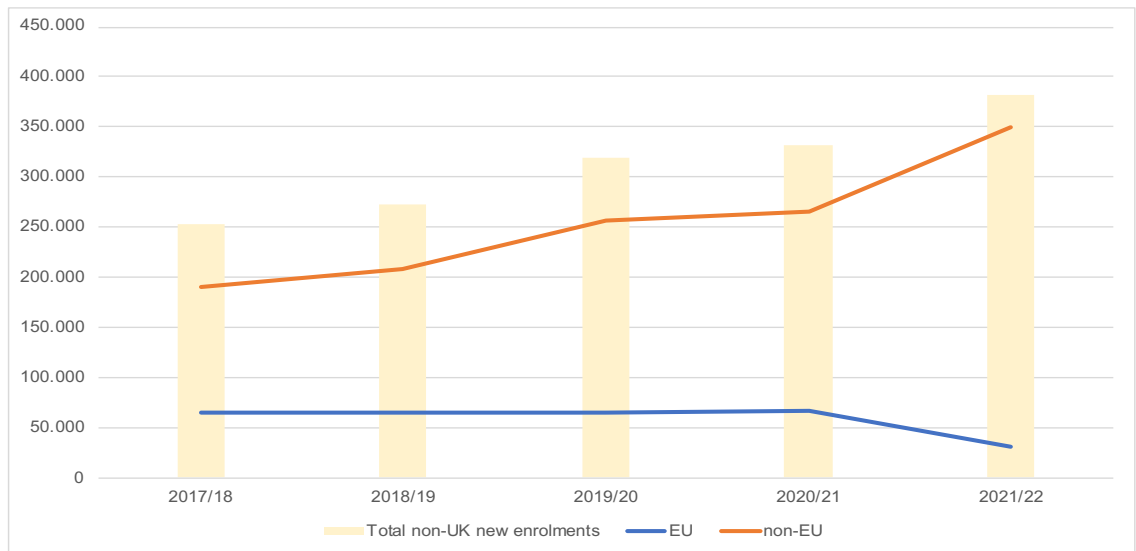
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<sup>5</sup> Cf. the Home Secretary’s [Statement](#).

<sup>6</sup> More on this subject in the “Work related migration” section below.

<sup>7</sup> Tuition fees depend on institution and programme. For academic year 2022/23, the average Undergraduate Home tuition fee was £8,283, whereas the average Undergraduate Overseas tuition fee was £16,349, 97% more; the average Postgraduate Home tuition fee was £9,376, whereas the average Postgraduate Overseas tuition fee was 17,332, 84% more. Data source: [Redding Survey \(2007-22\)](#). In our elaboration, we only considered fees for courses offered at the ‘classroom’ rate to calculate the average; this latter has not been weighted considering the number of enrolled students or places available in each university; where the tuition fee depended on the course, the median value was considered for calculation.

Figure 2. Non-UK new enrolments ('New Year Marker').



Source: [HESA](#).

A possible reason for the noticeable increase of non-EU students' new enrolments includes the loosening of restrictions for work-related visas, which might make studying in the UK more attractive for foreign born nationals who intend to enter the UK as students and subsequently work in the country. However, most likely, the main element of attraction is the re-opening of the 'Graduate route' (as presented above), which offers to recent graduates the possibility to work at any skill and salary rate in the UK for a period of 2 years after graduation (3 years for PhD graduates). When considering the increase of extra-EU new students, the most represented countries are China (from 77 to 100 thousand news enrolments in the period 2017-2021), India (from 13 to 87 thousand), and Nigeria (from 5 to 33 thousand).

The fall of students' enrolment number from EU nationals (-53% in the last year) can be related to the increase of tuition fees as compared to pre-Brexit rates.<sup>8</sup> Another possible deterrent factor explaining the fall in EU students' numbers is the need to apply for a Student Visa for the period of their studies and for the 'Graduate Route' afterwards, which guarantees only 2 years of almost unconditional leave to remain, as compared to the indefinite leave to remain under pre-Brexit conditions. Furthermore, EU students are now unable to access government-subsidised loans.

It must be observed that non-EU tuition fees rose significantly in the past decade, from £15.5 bln in 2014 to £24.6 bln in 2021.<sup>9</sup> The application of the international tuition fee to EU students from 2021 onwards, although likely increasing the share of HEI's income coming from fees – and consequently increasing the overall economic benefit on the UK's economy<sup>10</sup> –, meant that less EU students chose to enrol in UK universities.

Regarding tuition fees, the Department for Education made an exception for Irish students, who are subject to the same fees rates payable by UK nationals. The trend of Irish students' enrolment is remarkably different from the general EU one (as shown in *figure 3*).

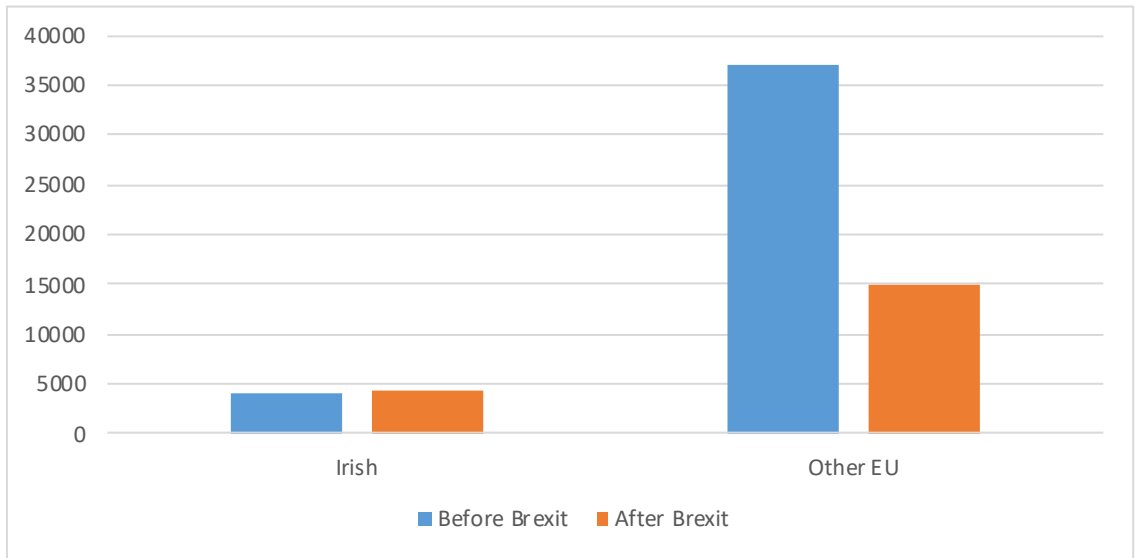
<sup>8</sup> The changes in fees eligibility are described in the [EU Exit Student Finance Policy](#) published by the Department for Education in December 2022. In most cases, this meant almost a doubling of the expense: see note 6 for details.

<sup>9</sup> Source: [HESA](#). This also includes educational contracts.

<sup>10</sup> Researchers from London Economics estimated that the net economic impact of non-UK students on the UK economy rose from £28.2bn in 2018/19 to £37.4bn in 2021/22. Furthermore, the £1.2bn loss of net income from EU students from 2018/19 to 2021/22 is more than outweighed by the £10.4bn net income rise from non-EU students (Cannings et al., 2023, pp. 45–47).

Figure 3. Number of Irish and European students enrolling in a UK University before and after Brexit ('First Year Marker').

Source: HESA. The blue line represents the average of enrolled students – both in undergraduate and postgraduate courses – for the academic years 2017/8 through 2019/20. The orange line refers to the academic year 2021/22. We intentionally discarded the year 2020/21, severely affected by the Covid 19 epidemic.



Considering the period 2017-2021, the constant trend of new Irish students’ enrolments is strikingly different from the sharp fall of enrolments from all other EU-nationalities, which is cut by a half. One can speculate that the trend of Irish students (the number being virtually constant if not increasing in the considered 4-year period) would have applied to all EU students, was it not for post-Brexit conditions.

Lastly, it is noticeable that only a few non-EU students chose to remain in the UK after the completion of their study period. As noted by Walsh (2022, p. 13), “among non-EU migrants issued an initial study visa in 2016, only 17% still had permission to stay in the UK (i.e., valid leave to remain) around five years later at the end of 2021. Around 5% (around 7,800) held work visas, 9% (around 14,000) were still on study visas, and around 0.1% (169) had settlement.” The vast majority (83%) had therefore to leave the UK.

### WORK-RELATED MIGRATION

For the last two decades, EU workers accounted for the majority of the migrant workforce arriving to the UK. Before 2020, the free-movement policy allowed EU citizens to move to, live and work (in any job) in the UK without restrictions. With Brexit, a new migration policy was put in place, with different outcomes for EU and non-EU migrant workers, towards which the same criteria are now applied.

#### Loosening of restrictions for extra-European workers

The new policy entailed a liberalisation of middle-skilled jobs-related visas for non-European citizens (Sumption, 2022, p. 98). In fact, after 2010, Conservative governments have put several measures in place to meet the “net-migration target” (by reducing new workers’ inflow). Particularly significant were the salary threshold of £30,000 to be able to work (or £20,800 for new entrants) and £35,000 for settlement after five years; and a numerical cap on non-EU skilled migrant workers (Tier 2 Visa) of 20,700 per year (introduced in April 2011) (cf. Vargas-Silva & McNeil, 2017, p. 3).<sup>11</sup> With the introduction of the new migration policy in 2021, restrictions on

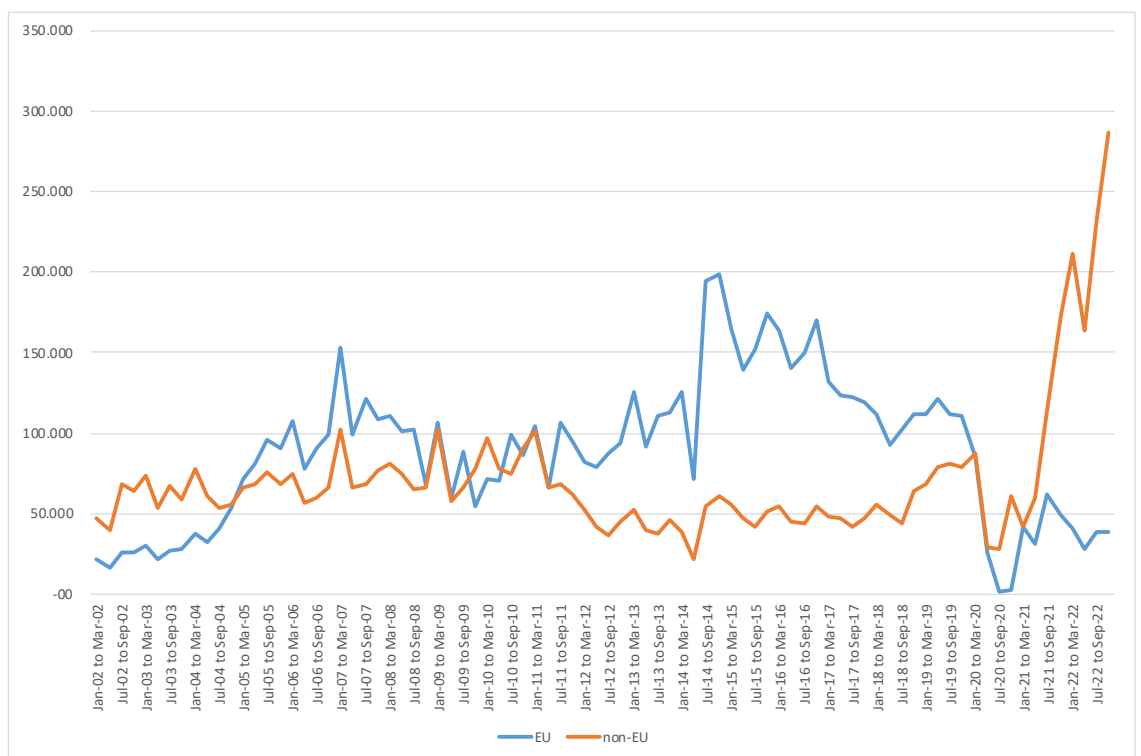
11 Other measures include a minimum income threshold of £18,600 per year for British nationals and non-EU nationals settled in the UK wishing to bring non-EU spouses to the country and the closure of the Tier 1 route (high skilled route).

non-EU citizens were eased to meet the same standards of EU citizens (most importantly, the salary threshold was lowered by almost £5,000 and the Tier 2 visa cap was scrapped). On the other end, the enactment of the same policy posed stricter conditions for EU citizens, particularly impacted by the newly introduced minimum salary threshold.

**National insurance Number registrations**

People moving to the UK for work need to register for a National Insurance Number before or soon after they start working. NiNo Registrations are therefore a good proxy for work-related migration to the UK.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 4. NiNo Registrations in the UK. 2002-2022.



Source: DWP

Data covering the last two decades broadly reflect the different work- and migration- policies that entered in effect throughout this period (see figure 4).

The steady but low increase in EU NiNo registrations from 2009 to 2014 is likely correlated with the debt crisis that took place in the EU from 2009 until mid to late 2010. Several eurozone state member states' economy were impacted, resulting in job losses; as a consequence, many EU citizens sought to start a career abroad, and the UK was one of the main destinations. In the 2000s, several new countries became EU member states (EU8,<sup>13</sup> in 2004, and EU2,<sup>14</sup> in 2007). Transitional controls on movement to the UK were in place for the seven years following their access to the EU. In In 2014, transitional controls on movement to the UK were lifted for EU2 countries, which is reflected in the peak of EU NiNo registrations between 2014 and 2015.

However, it must be noted that already after the 2016 Brexit referendum a light but steady decrease <sup>12</sup> Although it is impossible to differentiate between people who arrived in the UK and directly applied for a NiNo and people who had already entered the country and waited some time before applying (it could be the case of students, or people arrived with a family visa).

<sup>13</sup> Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

<sup>14</sup> Romania and Bulgaria.

in EU NiNo registrations can be observed. Non-EU NiNo registrations have been slightly but constantly increasing until 2011, when a new policy was enforced, which set a stringent visa cap and high salary threshold; the sudden plunge in NiNo applications registered that year is likely to be linked to this policy. Restrictions related to the Covid pandemic (2020-21) determined a slowing of operational processes for NiNo, impacting both EU and non-EU citizens. Lastly, the new peak in non-EU NiNo applications after 2021 and the corresponding fall of EU NiNo applications are partly a consequence of new migration policy, which on the one hand liberalises non-EU middle-skilled job Visa application and on the other, restricts the access to the UK for new European workers.

**Observations  
on work-related  
migration**

Data from NiNo registrations shows how labour and migration policies have direct (caps, limits, restrictions) or indirect (disincentives, deterrent) impact on work-related immigration. The policy introduced in 2021, although seemingly curbing EU work-related migration, has not stopped the inflow of foreign-born workers; on the contrary, the overall number has increased, mainly because of the liberalisation for non-EU workers. The sharp peak in NiNo registrations for non-EU workers gives testimony to this new trend. Contrary to much of the rhetoric that inflamed debates on the Brexit referendum, not only the “net migration goal” has never been met, but the overall number of migrant workers has in fact increased. However, it must be recalled that the “Bespoke Humanitarian Route” allowed Ukrainian citizens escaping the war and British Nationals overseas escaping persecution in Hong Kong to live and work in the UK. However, if it is true that in 2022, 103,134 NiNo registrations came from Ukrainian citizens and 25,367 from Hong Kong, compared with only 7,742 and 1,201 in 2021 respectively, these still accounted for a mere 11.6% or 2.8% respectively of the total 892,488 non-EU NiNo registrations in the same year. This means that, despite the staggering number of visa applications received in 2022 through the Bespoke Humanitarian Scheme (210,906 applications were received by Ukrainian Nationals and 53,836 through the BN(O) Route),<sup>15</sup> Ukrainians and BN(O)s account for a mere 14.4% of work-related migrants (based on NiNo registrations).

In sum, although it seems reasonable to expect a rise in non-EU migrants in the next years, it is unlikely that the entity of immigration will be as remarkable as it has been in the past two years.

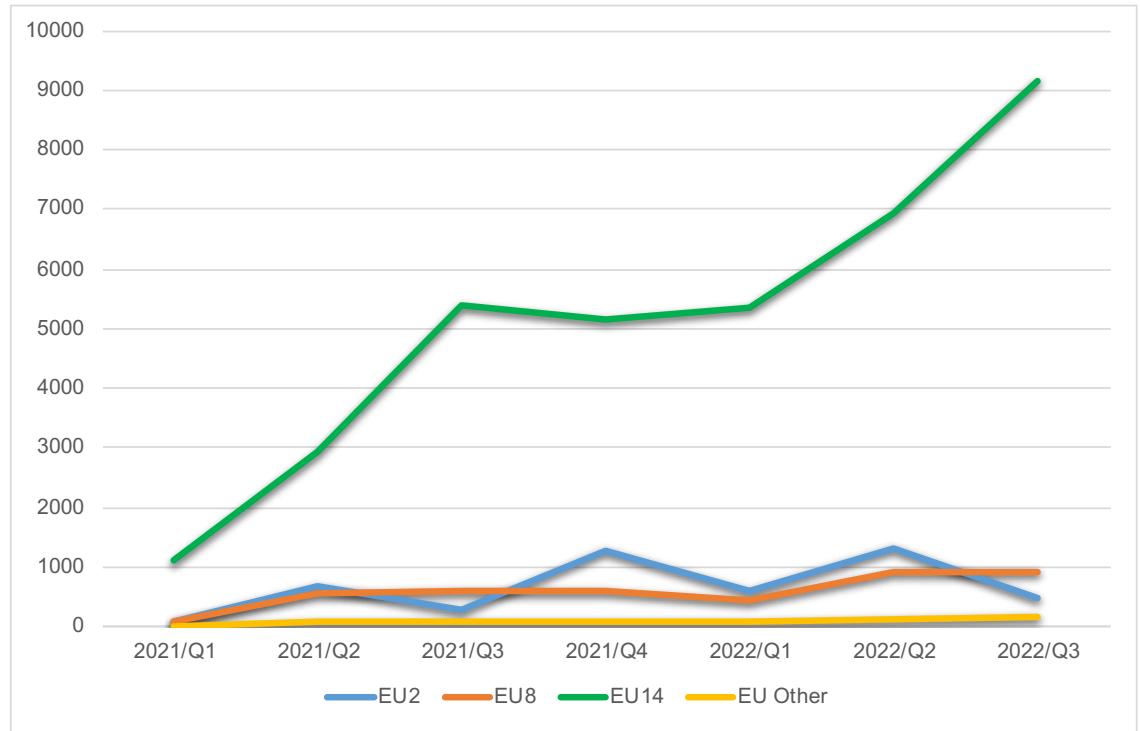
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<sup>15</sup> Source: [Home Office](#).

**Work visas issued to EU citizens**

Since 2021, newly arrived EU citizens willing to work in the UK need a work visa. It is interesting to look at the number of visas granted to EU citizens from different areas.

Figure 5. Work Visa for EU Countries.



Source: [ONS](#).

As shown in figure 5, not only the number of visas for people coming from EU2 and EU8 countries is lower compared to EU14 countries, but whereas the latter registers a noticeable increase, the two former groups mark a more constant trend.

This can partly reflect the nature of work-migration coming from different EU country groups. Whereas a good percentage of EU 14 nationals work in mid- to high-skilled jobs, the majority of EU2 and EU8 nationals tend to take up low-income (and often low-skilled) labour; these latter are more likely to be cut off by the new migration system. Even among EU14 countries, we notice a shift in migration patterns: whereas before 2021 Italians were by far the most numerous group (with 617,930 people who applied to the EU settlement scheme, compared to 252,520 French and 177,590 Germans); they took up a mere 3,868 work visas in 2022, compared with French workers (5,740 work visas) and German ones (4,439 work visas).<sup>16</sup>

**IRREGULAR MIGRANTS**

Lastly, migration fluxes ought to take into account irregular migrants entering the UK as well.

On 28 April 2022, the Government-sponsored Nationality and Borders Act 2022<sup>17</sup> was enacted and entered into effect on the 28 June of the same year. The Bill: included a differential treatment of refugees (distinguishing between those arriving from a life-threatening country or territory and others); increased the standard of proof for finding persecution; and penalised applicants for late evidence submission for an asylum or human rights claim. The expectation was that a stricter

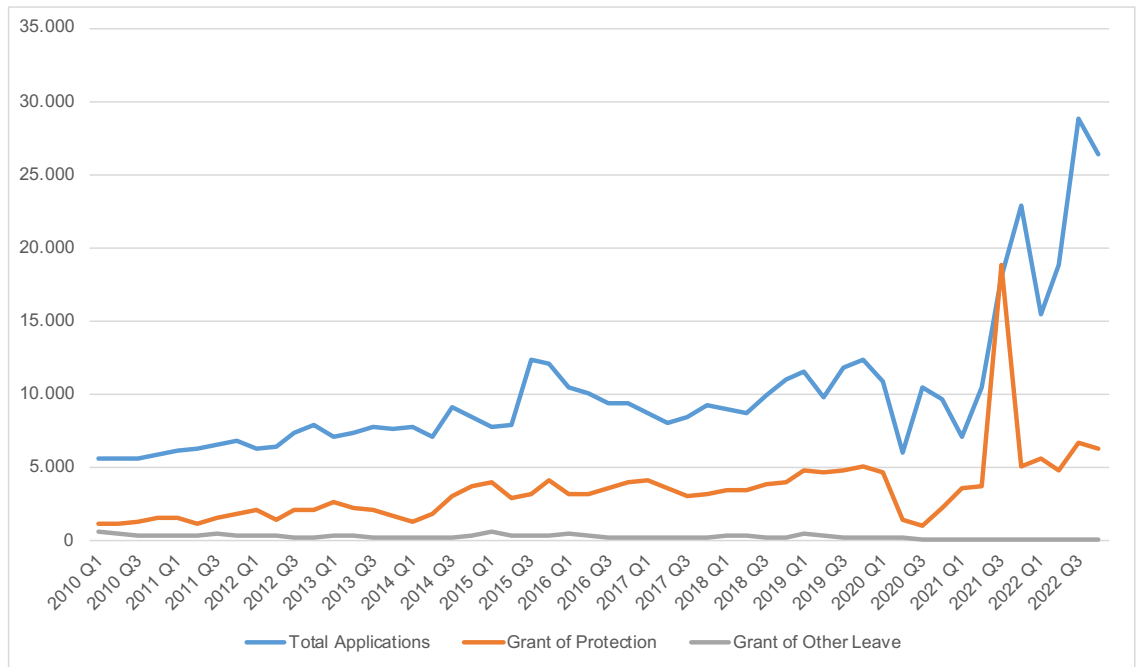
<sup>16</sup> Source: [Home Office](#).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. [Nationality and Borders Act 2022](#).

policy would act as deterrent for those wishing to reach the UK illegally.

However, data from the Home Office shows that the last 2 years registered an increase, and not decrease, of asylum applicants in the UK (figure 6).

Figure 6. Asylum applications and grants (2010-2022)



Source: Home Office, Asylum and resettlement datasets

Figures show that illegal migration to the UK has not diminished after the enactment of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. In fact, the number of people crossing the Channel on small boats in 2022 exceeded 45,700, a 60% increase on the 28,500 who arrived in 2021. Last year also marked a new peak of asylum seekers, with 86,000 applicants (see figure 6).

As a consequence, on 08 March 2023, the government proposed the new Illegal Migration Bill<sup>18</sup> in a further attempt to prevent people from illegally making their entrance in the country. This new Bill would enact more severe measures against illegal immigrations, including the removal from the UK of persons who have entered or arrived in breach of immigration control and the detention for immigration purposes, beside further restricting the admissibility of certain asylum or protection and human rights claims relating to immigration.

Meanwhile, the lack of government support for those arriving from allegedly “safe” countries leaves the task to safeguarding newly arrived migrants from exploitation and illegal activities in the UK to charities and NGOs. Volunteers at the *Shpresa* charity, for example, have stressed that migrants from Albania, often labelled as ‘economic migrants’ and therefore left outside of international protection, often escape dire conditions and end up being viciously exploited in the UK’s underground economy (Gentleman, 2023).

In sum, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 has not caused irregular migration to stop or diminish; on the contrary, there is a new spike of irregular migrants in 2022. Furthermore, the strictness of this policy has sometimes led to the exposure of irregular migrants to risks of being trafficked and exploited, a risk only partially thwarted by the work of Charities and NGOs.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the Government-released [factsheet](#). At the time of writing (May 2023), the [Bill](#) is under discussion in the House of Lords.



## CONCLUSIONS

Brexit has undoubtedly had a huge impact on various aspects of the economic, social and political life of the UK. Two and a half years have passed since the enactment of a new immigration policy that was due to produce a significant change on the inflow of citizens from foreign countries. However, the outcomes on immigration patterns are less straightforward than pro-Brexit campaigners would have expected. In fact, while on the one hand newcomers arriving from the European Union have decreased, the last two years have registered an unprecedented peak in arrivals from non-EU countries, with a total net migration surging to a +638,000-record high.

Now that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are tailing off and international travel has resumed on a global scale, it is possible to describe new trends in UK immigration.

The impressive rise of non-EU immigrants to the UK is driven by students and skilled workers, mostly coming from China, India and Nigeria. The re-opening of the Graduate Route, allowing students to live and work in any job in the UK for 2 years after their graduation is a relevant attraction factor for foreign students that can partly explain the substantial rise in students' application from non-EU countries. The mitigation of work visas restrictions for non-EU citizens – lowering the salary threshold to obtain visa eligibility – concurs to the rise in work-related migration. In the absence of radical disruptions or changes in policy and geopolitical equilibrium, it is reasonable to expect similar trends to be confirmed in the next years.

The new immigration policy, on the other hand, meant a significant restriction to EU citizens aiming to move to the UK. EU students are now subject to the same tuition fee rate as other international students, whereas before Brexit they were due only the “Home student” rate, in most cases significantly lower (in average, almost a half). A higher cost for education, paired with the necessity to undergo the Visa process, from which EU students were exempt in pre-Brexit times, are two major deterrent factors that explain the decrease in EU new enrolments. For EU workers, the necessity to work in a skilled job and the introduction of a salary threshold have cut off many from the possibility to enter the country for work. This also results in a change in the fluxes of workers coming from different EU countries. Whereas before Brexit Romania and Poland were the two main countries of origin of EU workers, after the enactment of the new policy, France and Germany are currently leading the take up of work visas. Given the features of the current policy and the status of EU-UK relations, it seems plausible that similar trends will be maintained in the next years.

It must be added that exceptional geopolitical circumstances also contributed to the net migration peak. Special humanitarian routes opened by the government to Ukrainian citizens and to British Nationals Overseas (from Hong Kong) allowed a considerable amount of people to move into the country. However, the entity of migrants through humanitarian routes accounts for a mere 30% of non-EU immigration and is therefore still relatively limited within the full picture. When picturing trends for the next years, it is in any case reasonable (and hopeful) to expect a decrease of people coming through humanitarian routes.

Lastly, in spite of the harsher conditions set by the *Nationality and Borders Act 2022*, the number of irregular migrants coming to the UK marked a 30-year record peak last year. This surge

is difficult to explain through current political and economic events and it must be therefore attributed to contingent circumstances involving asylum seekers from non-EU countries. It is in any case worth remembering that the overall number of irregular migrants arriving to the UK is significantly lower than that of other European countries such as Germany, France, Spain and Italy in the same period.

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