

New Evidence on Post-Brexit UK Migration Trends



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Main Stories

- In December 2023, net migration was 685,000, a 10% decrease from its all-time high in December 2022 (764,000), but still a 47% increase compared to December 2021 (466,000). Among internationals, 41% immigrated to the UK to work, 34% to study, 7% for family reasons, 11% for humanitarian and asylum, and 6% for other reasons.
- In December 2023, the Department for Work and Pensions recorded more than 1.11 million new NiNo registrations from internationals, comparable with 1.05 million in 2022, with non-EU nationals accounting for 91% of the total (led by India and Nigeria), and EU for the remaining 9% (led by Romania). Between 2022 and 2023 there has been a 46% rise in the granting of work visa, amounting to 616,371 in 2023.
- In 2023, the number of new international students marked a 3% decrease, for a total of 340,990. This is consistent with the 3% drop in study visa grants, which amounted to 605,504 in 2023. However, last year, almost a quarter (24%) of study visas have been granted to a dependant, a significant rise from the 4% in 2019.
- The number of small boat arrivals totalled 29,437, marking a 36% decrease compared to the previous year, and in line with 2021. The decline in 2023 is mainly driven by a vertical drop in the number of Albanian migrants, which decreased by 93%. Humanitarian visa grants amounted to 102,283 in 2023, almost half of which were on Ukraine schemes. However, the latter marked an 80% decrease compared to the previous year, which drove down the number of humanitarian visa grants by approximately two thirds.
- In 2023, there were 81,203 family-related visas granted in 2023, a 72% increase from last year and an all-time high.

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This report expands on the range of inquiries and issues addressed by the [Manifesto di Londra](#) association over the past four years. Matteo and Federico extend their gratitude to the members of the association's Migration Committee for their valuable insights and support.

1. Introduction

In 2019, amid the EU-UK negotiations around Brexit, debates on the possible impact of Britain's leave still left space for the then-chancellor of Exchequer Philip Hammond to cast the image of Britain becoming the new 'Singapore on Thames'.¹ He referred to the idea of a lightly regulated and low-tax economy, in contrast to its European highly bureaucratic and heavily taxed counterpart. After Brexit measures were implemented, however, attempts to steer Britain in this direction with Truss's 'mini budget'² proved disastrous in the short-term,³ forcing the then-PM to resign and the radical policy to be abandoned.

According to analyses conducted in the last two years, the economic impact of Brexit is all but flowery. A recent study commissioned by the Greater London Authority found that "London's economy is smaller than it would have been had the UK opted to remain in the European Union back in June 2016: by 6.2%, (or £32 billion, 9,500 for every household) by 2019;"⁴ another study, focusing on the whole country, forecasts "nearly 3 million fewer jobs post Brexit by 2035, approximately 500,000 of which would have been in London."⁵ Brexit's negative impact on international trade appears equally significant. Du et al. analysed COMTRADE data for the period of 2019 up to 2022Q1 using a synthetic difference-in-differences approach, finding that "the reduction in the UK trade with EU for exports was 22.1% and for imports it was 9.5%" and estimate a "loss of 20-42% of product varieties over the 15 months since Brexit."⁶ Using International Monetary Fund's (IMFs) Direction of Trade Statistics data, Buigut and Kapar reached similar results, estimating a 13% loss in EU-UK trade during the Referendum and transition period, and a further 24% after the Trade and Cooperation Agreement entered into effect.⁷ In short, recent data suggests a detrimental effect of Brexit.

The idea of a 'Singapore on Thames', besides its economic aspects, also included another approach to international migration. The idea was that stricter immigration policies would allow Britain to sift through the immense number of migrants so as to select highly skilled workers while stopping the arrival of supposedly less productive workforce. In this regard, it must be noted that anti-immigration discourse – whereby EU economic migration was referred to as a 'drain on public budget' – did already play a central role in the Brexit campaign and in the 2016 referendum outcome.⁸

1.1. The 2021 Immigration Policy

Conservative governments have attempted to cut migration since the 2010 general election, when they set the target to bring down net migration "from the 'hundreds of thousands' to the 'tens of thousands'."⁹ By reducing the inflow of low-skilled European workers, Tory-led governments hoped on the one hand to prioritise English citizens within the low-skilled job market, on the other to curb overall migration figures. Most important, however, was the sense that the UK did not take the reins of migration flows, which led the *Vote Leave* campaign to be built around the 'take back control' slogan. During their respective electoral campaign, all of

¹ Davies (2019).

² Announced on the 23rd of September 2022 as the '[Growth Plan](#)'.

³ Nanji (2022).

⁴ Hope (2024: 40).

⁵ Bui et al. (2024: tbl. 5.3, pp. 30-31).

⁶ Du, Satoglu, and Shepotylo (2023: 274, 280, figs. 3 and table 1).

⁷ Buigut and Kapar (2023: 1575-78).

⁸ Grinan-Moutinho (2022).

⁹ Vargas-Silva and McNeil (2017).

the last four UK Prime Ministers – Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak,¹⁰ all in power after the 2016 referendum – have consistently pledged to cut migration. After the referendum, successive Conservative governments developed plans for revised work and student visa rules to cover both EU and non-EU immigration. The system was presented in principle in a White Paper in December 2018,¹¹ and was enacted on 1 January 2021. Thus, in parallel to the **Trade and Cooperation Agreement**,¹² the UK government adopted a new immigration policy, formally a **Points-Based Immigration System**, whereby migrants are granted a leave to work, study, and remain in the UK on the basis of a score determined by a series of parameters.¹³

The new system is similar to what was in place for non-EU migrants before Brexit, but now it does not differentiate between EU and non-EU migrants, placing both under a visa regime (with the exception of Irish citizens). Similarly to the previous one, it included work, study, and family visas, and opened some humanitarian routes (which have been used primarily for people from Ukraine, Hong Kong, Syria and Afghanistan). While putting an end to the EU free movement and thus forcing Europeans to obtain a visa to study, work, or reside in the UK, the system was somewhat more relaxed than the previous one vis-à-vis non-Europeans. Among other things, the system foresaw the introduction of the student graduate visa, allowing recent graduates to live and work in the UK for the 2 years after graduation (3 years for PhDs), the slight lowering of the salary threshold for work visas,¹⁴ and the possibility of bringing a dependant for anyone with a work or study.

¹⁰ Respectively, Saeed (2017), James (2019), Lee (2022).

¹¹ Home Office [Policy Paper](#), 19 December 2018.

¹² Cf. [The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement](#).

¹³ See the [Home Office's 19 February 2020 Policy Statement](#) and [Further Details](#).

¹⁴ However, this measure was later reversed, as discussed down below.

2. Effects on Migration

Contrary to the expectations, however, immigration fluxes to the UK not only did not shrink, but rose to a historical high in 2022, with a record net migration of 504,000 people, a +27% increase compared to 2021.¹⁵ It must be mentioned that the growing immigration rate registered last year was also a consequence of the opening of the humanitarian route (especially for people from Ukraine and Hong Kong). Beyond the humanitarian route, immigration to the UK in 2022 was mostly driven by students and skilled workers, together with their dependants (i.e. partner and children) – mostly coming from China, India and Nigeria – also thanks to the reopening of the student graduate visa.

2.1. Implementation of New Restrictions

In response to those data, on the 4th of December 2023, the Home Secretary James Cleverly announced new measures to curb migration, which are expected to reduce immigration by 300.000.¹⁶ The measures consist of five main changes to the previous policy, substantially revising the legal migration rules for family visas.¹⁷ The main changes are as follows:

1. Since the 11th of March 2024, social care workers are no longer allowed to bring dependants on their visa.
2. Since the 4th of April 2024, the minimum salary to be sponsored for a Skilled Worker visa has increased, with the baseline minimum rising from £26,200 to £38,700 (but not for the Health and Care Worker visa, which includes social care, or for education workers on national pay scales).¹⁸
3. Since the 4th of April 2024, the Shortage Occupation List has changed to reduce the number of jobs where it will be possible to sponsor someone for a Skilled Worker visa on less than the usual minimum salary (which is the main purpose of the list).
4. The minimum income normally required to sponsor someone for a spouse/partner visa is rising in stages from £18,600 per year to £29,000 and ultimately around £38,700. This measure started on the 11th of April 2024 with the first increase to £29,000. The second increase to £34,500 will take place at a yet unspecified time later in 2024.
5. Finally, the Migration Advisory Committee has conducted a review of the Graduate visa, a two-year unsponsored work permit for overseas graduates of British universities, and has recommended that the route remains in place in its current form. At the time of writing, it is not clear how the Government intends to proceed in this regard.¹⁹

Also in December 2023, the Government announced new measures to curb irregular migration, which will be discussed in section 6.

While it is not yet possible to assess the impact of those new measures on future immigration – it will be visible next year at the earliest –, it is worth offering a picture of the latest developments, taking place after the implementation of the previous policy.

In this report, first, we summarise the latest developments on net migration and visa grants, with a note on citizenship grants. Then, given that immigration flows are largely driven by students and workers, we analyse the latest available data for these two categories so as to

¹⁵ See our previous work on this subject: Pazzona, Filauri, and Gockeli (2023).

¹⁶ [Home Office News, 21 December 2023](#).

¹⁷ [Briefing: Changes to legal migration rules for family and work visas in 2024](#).

¹⁸ Of note, the new figure is higher than the 2023 median salary in the UK (£35,000). See ONS, [Employee earnings in the UK: 2023](#).

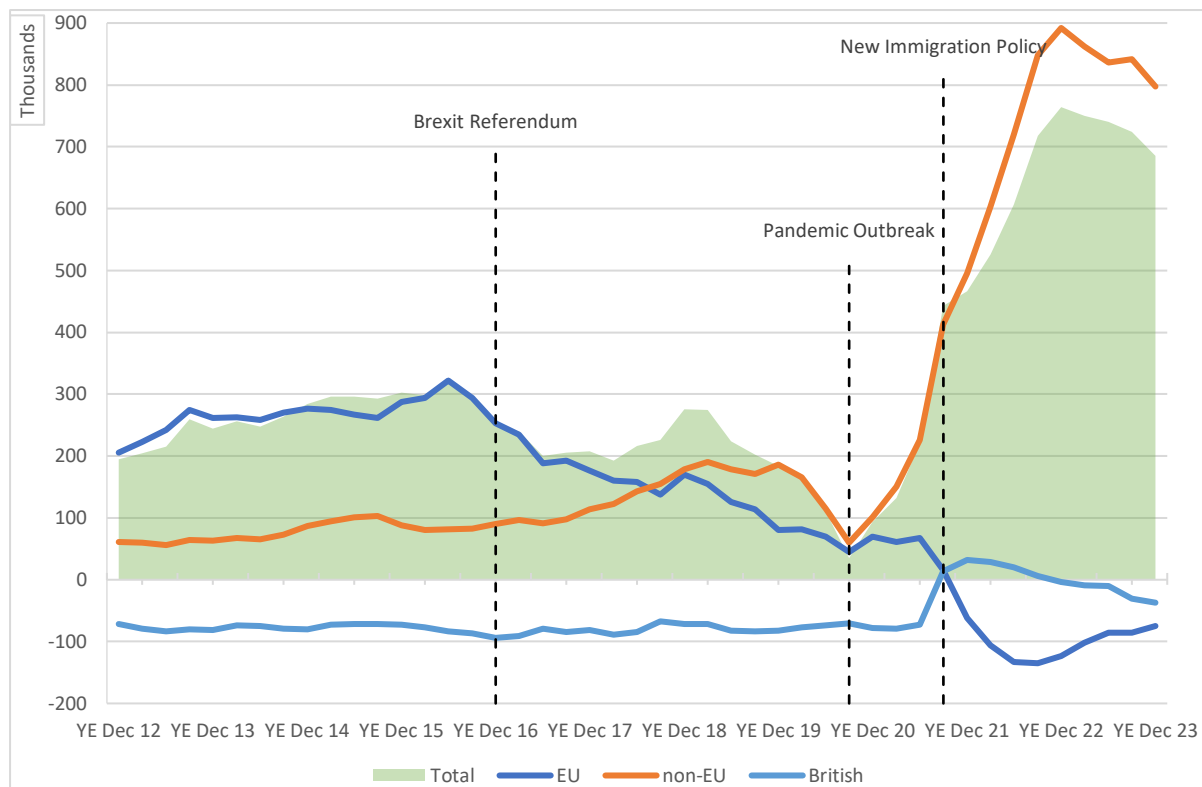
¹⁹ The Home secretary formally requested Prof. Brian Bell to conduct the review by the 14th of May 2024 (see the [Home Secretary letter](#)). The [MAC report](#) is available from the government website.

draw some insights about migration patterns. Lastly, we put forward a broader discussion on irregular migration in consequence of the latest legislative changes, particularly the July 2023 **Illegal Migration Act**.²⁰

3. Net Migration

According to the latest data released by the ONS, updated to December 2023, the implementation of the new immigration policy ensued a sharp increase in international immigration over the past three years, partly offset by last year's figures.

Figure 1. Long-term international migration into and out of the United Kingdom by nationality.



Source: Home Office ([Long-term international immigration, emigration and net migration flows, YE Dec 23](#)); ONS.

Figure 1 shows how migration patterns were relatively stable before the 2019 pandemic. After the 2016 referendum, immigration of European nationals registered a steady decline, while there was a slight increase in non-European migration between 2018 and 2020. The Covid-19 outbreak caused a sudden drop of immigration to the UK, mostly because of travel restrictions and difficulties related to the pandemic. Shortly after, however, figures of non-EU study- and work-related immigration registered a considerable increase.

However, after reaching a peak in YE December 2022, Net migration registered a slight decline in 2023 (-10% compared to the peak); yet the YE December 2023 estimate of +685,000 still marks a 47% increase compared to December 2021. In YE December 2023, immigration to the UK was just above 1.2 million, largely driven by non-Europeans (1,031,000), and emigration was 532,000. Interestingly, since 2014 emigration was led by EU nationals, up until September 2023, whereas in December 2023 non-European emigration (233,000) was higher than European emigration (202,000).

²⁰ [Illegal Migration Act](#).

Considering the period YE December 2022 - December 2023, non-European immigration registered a 2% decrease. This was partly caused by the conspicuous decline of the Ukrainian humanitarian route (-90%) and of non-EU students' intake (-10%), as we will discuss down below. This decrease has been partly offset by a rise of non-EU worker migrants (+53%). On the other hand, negative EU net migration (-75,000 in YE December 2023) keeps signalling that less Europeans are inclined to come to the UK to study or work than those who are leaving the country, despite a slight increase of immigration compared with December 2022 (+39%).

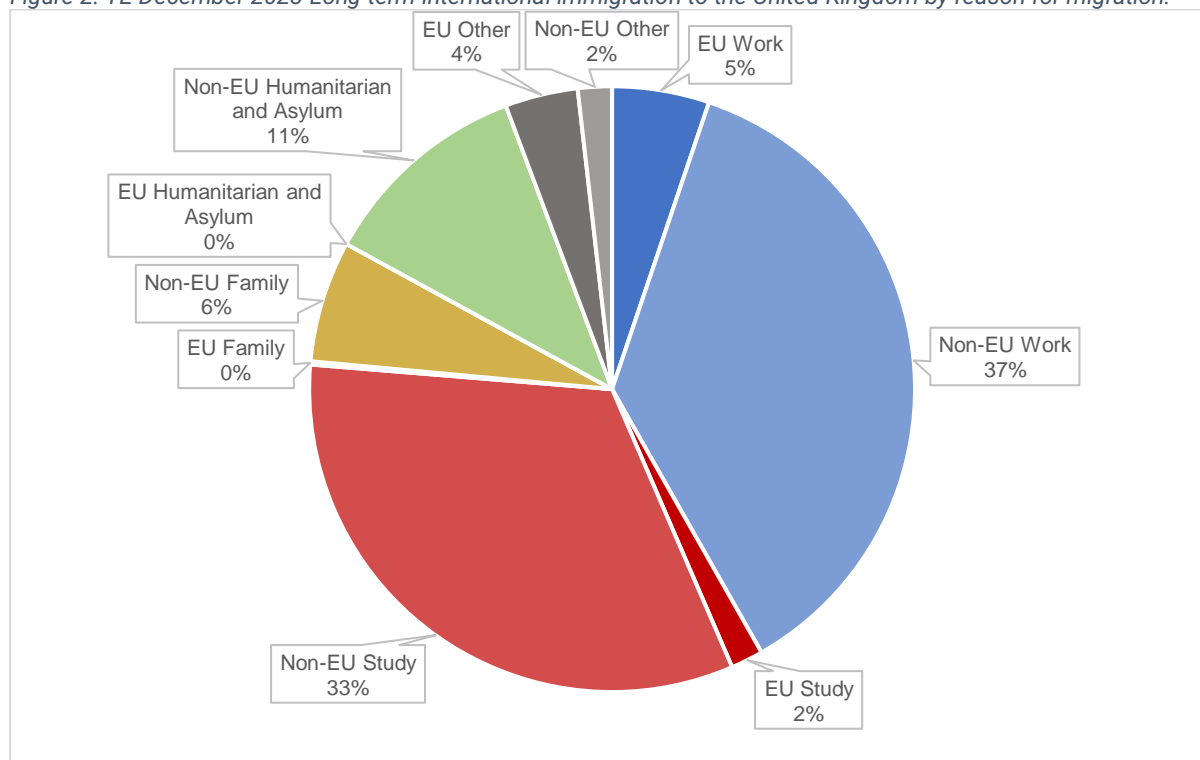
3.1. Reasons for Immigration

In YE December 2023, 41% of internationals immigrated to the UK for work (483,000), 34% for study (399,000), 11% for humanitarian and asylum (131,000), and 7% for family reasons (77,000). The remaining 6% (66,000) arrived for other reasons.

Estimates for non-EU immigration show that in YE December 2023, the main reason driving non-EU immigration (faded colour in figure 2) was work (423,000), followed by study (379,000). Study-related immigration, after an impressive 59% increase between YE December 2021 and YE December 2022, registered a 10% decrease from YE December 2022 to YE December 2023. On the other hand, non-EU work-related immigration increased by 99%, and a by a further 53% over the respective time periods. There has also been a sharp decrease of people moving to the UK for humanitarian and asylum reasons (-48%) from Dec 2022 to Dec 2023. Crucially, the number of dependants coming to the UK was remarkably higher in the period 2021-2023 than before the pandemic outbreak: while in YE June 2019 dependants accounted for 6% of non-EU student immigration and 37% of non-EU work immigration, these figures increased to 25% and 48% respectively in YE June 2023.

Turning to EU immigration (full colour in figure 2) over the same period, it is notable to see how, while study-related immigration declined by 33%, work-related immigration registered a 28% rise. However, figures remain well below the 100,000 threshold, significantly lower than in the pre-pandemic and pre-Brexit period.

Figure 2. YE December 2023 Long-term International immigration to the United Kingdom by reason for migration.



Source: Home Office ([Long-term international immigration, emigration and net migration flows, YE Dec 23](#)).

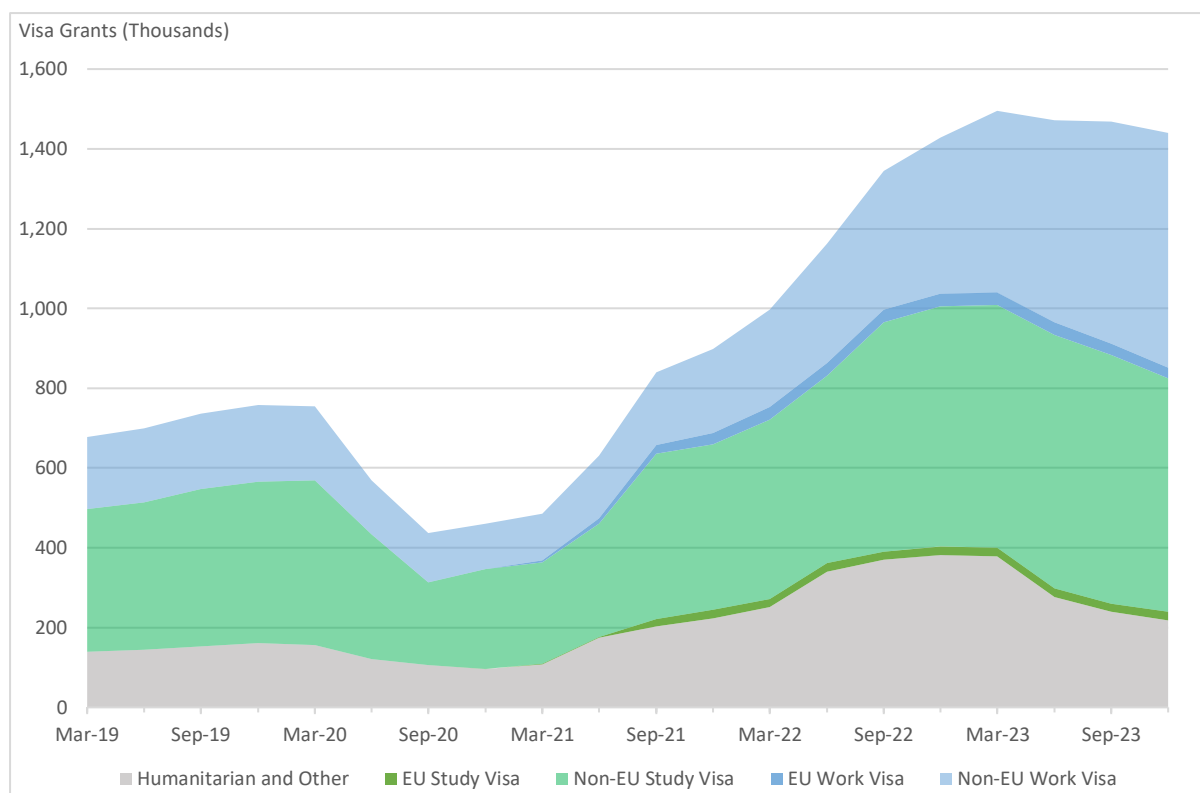
When looking at the latest ONS estimates, it is relevant to add a methodological note. The ONS calculates these figures through a combination of data drawn from a variety of sources, such as the *International Passenger Survey* from the Office for National Statistics, *Home Office Borders and Immigration* data from the Home Office, *RaPID (Registration and Population Interactions Database)* from the Department for Work and Pensions. Despite attempts to improve their estimates' accuracy, the novel methodology necessarily makes them uncertain and slightly inconsistent with the data made available before 2019.²¹

It is therefore worth looking at different sources to double check consistency so as to obtain a better picture of the whole phenomenon.

3.2. Visa Grants

Turning to the issuing of Visa grants, we find patterns that are largely in line with ONS estimates.

Figure 3. Visa Grants to Internationals, 2019-2023 Quarterly.



Source: Home Office ([Entry clearance visa applications and outcomes detailed datasets, YE Dec 2023, Vis_D02](#)).

Figure 3 shows the visa granted in the period 2014-2023, quarterly, per type, excluding visitor visas. The sharp decline in 2020 in dependence of the Covid-19 pandemic is immediately noticeable. In 2021 and 2022, all types of visa grants registered a remarkable increase. This depends on three main reasons: 1) the end of the pandemic; 2) the need for EU nationals to obtain a visa to work or study in the UK after Brexit; 3) the conspicuous number of visas issued under humanitarian routes.²²

²¹ The methodology is available [here](#). Cf. also the [Population and International Migration Statistics Revisions Policy Methodology](#) and the [November 2023 Progress Update](#).

²² Under "other" we group the Hong Kong BNOs route, the EEA Family Permit, EU Settlement Scheme Permits, the Ukrainian Visa Schemes, and other settlement and temporary visas.

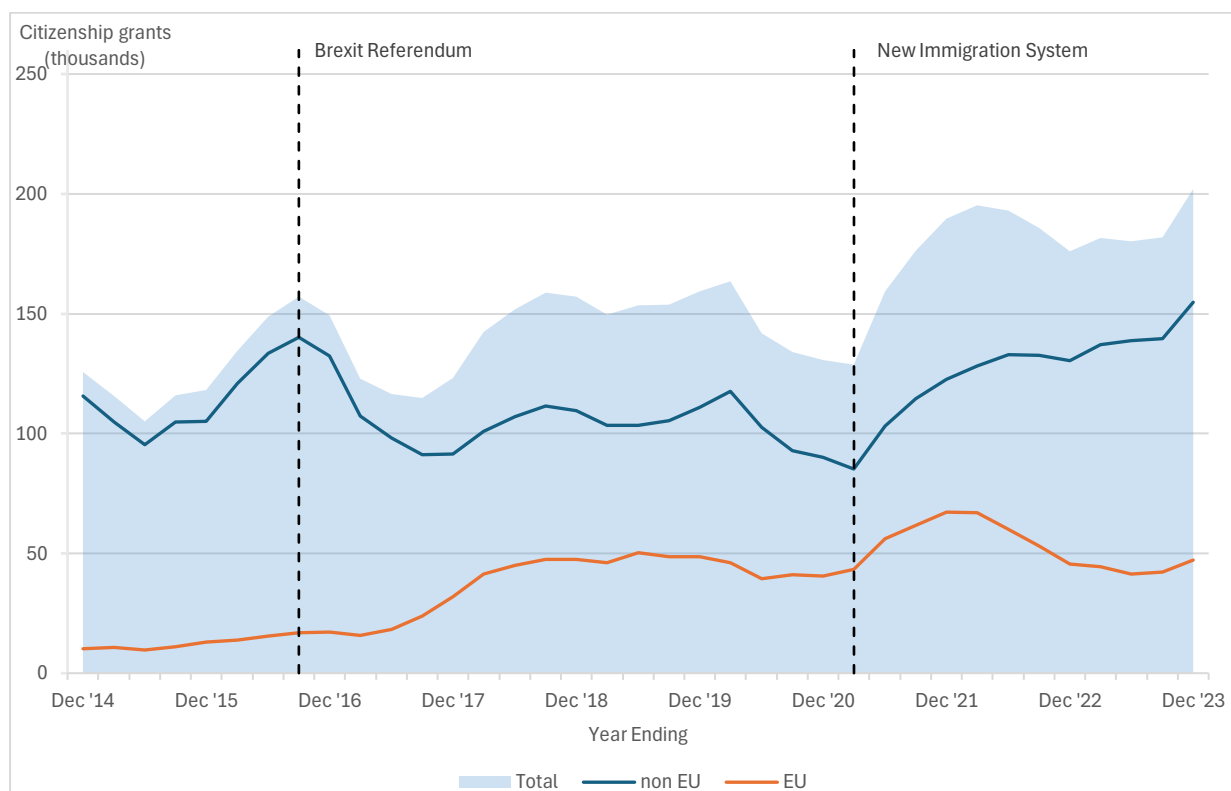
The grand total rose from 1,427,535 in 2022 to 1,440,611 in 2023, marking a 1% rise over the past year. The conspicuous decrease of humanitarian route visas is largely driven by the Ukrainian Humanitarian Visa Scheme, which fell by 80%, from 209,706 in 2022 to 41,767 in 2023. The 47% decrease of the Hong Kong BNOs humanitarian route, from 53,694 in 2022 to 28,303 in 2023, also contributed to the reduction in visa grants.²³

On the other hand, between 2022 and 2023 there has been an impressive 46% rise in work visa grants, from 421,565 in 2022 to 616,371 in 2023. When comparing this data with the 2021 figure (239,193), the year the new migration system has been implemented, this marks a staggering 158% increase. It must also be remembered that 10 years ago, in 2014, the 'skilled worker' visas were 90,615 and in 2023 they reached 500,677, over five times more.

3.3. Citizenship Grants

Lastly, it is worth looking at the trend in citizenship grants over the past decade, to complement the observations above.

Figure 4. Number of grants of British citizenship for EU and non-EU nationals, 2013 to 2023.



Source: Home Office ([Citizenship detailed datasets - Cit_D02](#)).

Figure 4 shows the grants of British citizens to EU and non-EU nationals over the past decade, registered quarterly. The slight increase of EU nationals obtaining a UK citizenship after the Brexit referendum in June 2016 leads to a plateau, until it registers a rapid growth towards the end of 2021, when the new points-based system was adopted.

Clifton-Spriggs et al. looked at data gathered between 2012 and 2023 to assess the impact of Brexit on migration patterns. Using a difference-in-differences approach, they built a counterfactual for citizenship application data and found that British citizenship application registered a 214% increase compared to their counterfactual.²⁴ We are compelled to concur

²³ See section 6.4. down below for further comments.

²⁴ They used samples from 2012Q3 to 2019Q2. See Clifton-Spriggs et al. (2023: tbl. 6, p. 57).

with them when they affirm that it is likely that “migrants already in the UK tried to secure their position and renew the sense of safety and security that had been compromised by the referendum. This overall increase could have been even larger, considering the number of EU nationals with the potential to apply. This confirms the bureaucratic complexity and high cost associated with applying. We only find an effect on migrants originating from EU countries allowing for dual citizenship, indicating that migrants were not willing to give up their original nationality to mitigate insecurity.”²⁵

In 2023, grants of British citizenship rose by 15% compared with 2022, totalling 202,041, of which 47,259 to EU nationals (+4%) and 154,782 to non-EU nationals (+19%). Among EU nationals, the most represented nationalities in 2023 were Italians (10,636), Romanians (6,335), and Polish (5,871), all of which accounted for 48% of British citizenship to EU nationals (consistently over 40% since 2013). Among non-EU nationals, top nationalities in 2023 were Indian (18,288), Pakistani (16,440), and Nigerian (8,836) nationals, accounting in total for 28% of grants to non-EU nationals.

²⁵ Clifton-Sprigg et al. (2023: 29).

4. Students

The Home Office reported a 34% of UK immigration in 2023 as study-related, making it the second reason to migrate. The arrival of students has a significant positive impact on the UK's economy. Estimates from the Department of Education²⁶ indicate that total export earnings (revenue coming from international students) linked to UK higher education reached £21.7bn in 2021, more than double the amount of 2010, which was £9.53bn.²⁷ Tuition fees, which for most Overseas students are roughly double the amount paid at the Home rate, amounted to more than double than the total HEI income in the academic year 2021/22 (of which 57% from UK domiciled students, 5% from EU domiciled students, and 38% from others).²⁸

Turning to the issuing of study visas, in the last year the Home Office registered a slight decrease (-3%) in study visa grants, from 623,698 in 2022 to 605,504 in 2023 (figure 4). However, in the past five years, the share of study visa granted to dependants experienced a significant rise. While in 2019 study visas issued to dependants accounted for 4% of the total study visa grants (16,047), the share rose to 13% in 2021 (134,571), 22% in 2022 (134,571), and 24% in 2023 (143,595).²⁹ In view of these figures, on 4 December 2023, the Prime Minister announced on social media: "Immigration is too high. Today we're taking radical action to bring it down," including by "banning overseas students from bringing their families to the UK."³⁰ The scrapping of dependants' study visa had been already anticipated in May 2023,³¹ but entered into effect as early as on the 1st of January. This did not prevent internationals to apply and obtain a study visa for themselves and their dependants until late 2023.

Furthermore, the government did commission to the Migration Advisory Committee a review of the Graduate Route. Since its introduction in mid-2021, the Graduate visa route has demonstrated a steep and steady rise. Students extending their visa through the Graduate Route rose from 28,238 in 2021, to 86,964 in 2022 and 143,884 in 2023.³² The review, published on the 14th of May 2024, found that the Graduate Route did broadly achieve the intended objectives, namely increasing the attractiveness of the UK as a destination of study, increase the number of international students in higher education, and increase the value of education exports,³³ thus contributing to the UK economy. The review suggests that around 46% of the first group of people to use the Graduate visa route moved onto other work visas after the expiry of their Graduate visa. The MAC has therefore recommended to keep the route in place in its current form.³⁴ At the moment of writing, the government's plan on the Graduate route is unclear, since it is uncertain how the government intends to reconcile the opposing objectives of cut immigration and increase the number of international students.³⁵

Looking at the international students' journey prior to the opening of the Graduate route, it is notable that among non-EU students issued a study visa in 2017, a mere 20% still has a valid

²⁶ DoE, [UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity](#).

²⁷ A study conducted by London Economics found that the net economic impact of international students has considerably increased from £28.2bn for the 2018/19 cohort to £37.4bn for the 2021/22 cohort (33% increase). See Cannings, Halterbeck and Conlon, G. (2023).

²⁸ HESA, [What is the Income of HE Providers? \(Income and Expenditure Summary, and Tuition fees and education contracts\)](#). Note that we considered only course fees.

²⁹ Source: Home Office, [Entry clearance visas granted outside the UK \(Table Vis_D02\)](#).

³⁰ Adams (2024).

³¹ See the [Announcement](#) (23 May 2023) and the ensuing [Memorandum on the Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules, Point 6.6](#) (17 July 2023).

³² Home Office, [Extensions Detailed Datasets, table Exe_D01](#).

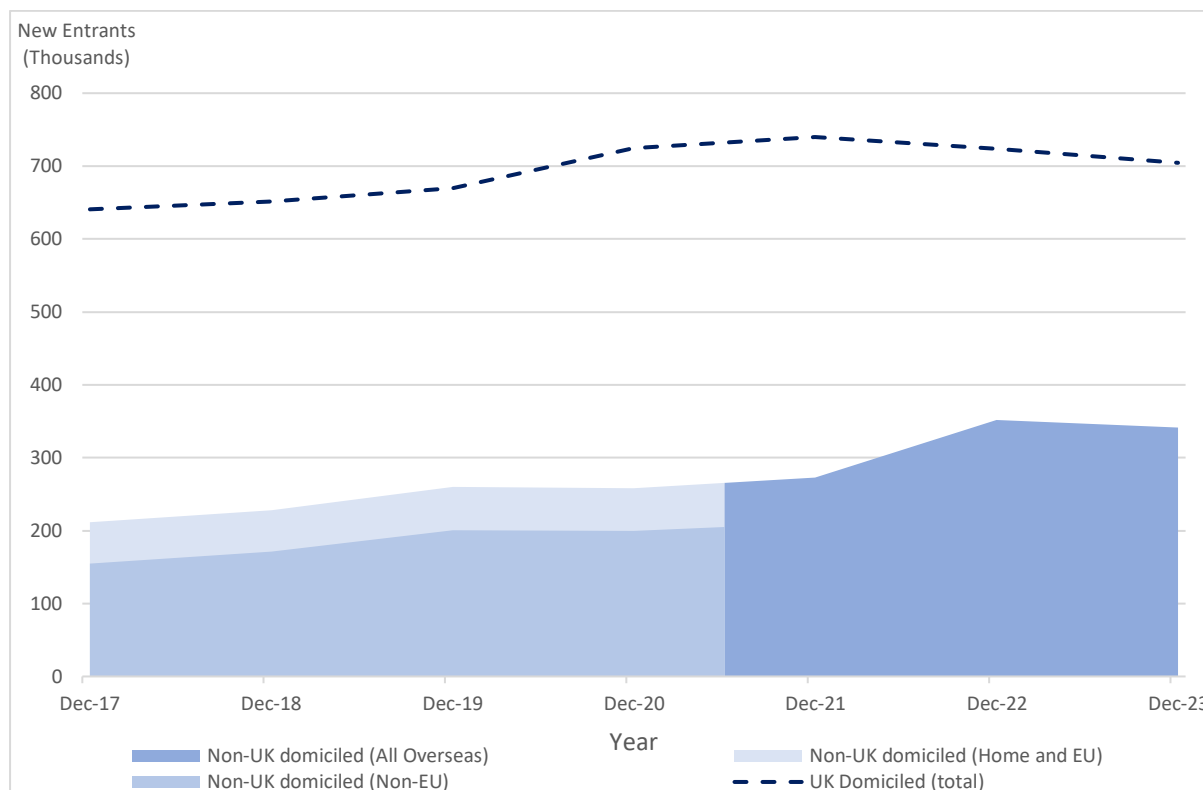
³³ See Home Office, [Impact Assessment for the Graduate Route \(2021\)](#), and the relative [announcement](#) on the 4 March 2021.

³⁴ See the [MAC Rapid Review of the Graduate Route](#).

³⁵ See *The Economist* (2024).

leave to remain in 2022: in the past, most non-EU students have left the country after their studies.³⁶

Figure 5. New Entrants into UK HEI: 2017-2023 (UK vs Non-UK domiciled).



Source: Office for Students ([HESES summary data workbook 2017 through 2023](#)).³⁷

According to surveys conducted by the Office for Students, in the last 6 years, the number of international students (not domiciled in the UK at the moment of registration) grew by 61%, from 211,907 in 2017 to 340,990 in 2023 (figure 5). However, it is noticeable that the last year marked a 3.1% decrease in new entrants, from 351,790 in 2022 to 340,990 in 2023, consistently with visa data. While internationals enrolling to an undergraduate course rose slightly, postgraduate enrolments fell by 6%. However, this decrease was paralleled by a 2.7% contraction in UK-domiciled new entrants (from 723,930 in 2022 to 704,320 in 2023), suggesting a general contraction in new enrolments in UK universities, not limited to international students.

It should be noted that the share of EU students enrolling to a new course in the UK has rapidly shrunk, from a quarter of total overseas students' new enrolments in 2017/18, to 20% in 2020/21, to a mere 8% in 2021/22.³⁸ This most likely depends on the increased tuition fee EU nationals started to pay since the academic year 2021/22, when it reached the full 'international student' rate, in most cases amounting to roughly double the cost of the previous year.³⁹ Moreover, since 2021 EU students are no longer eligible for student support funding and are subject to visa regulations. All of this is an effect of post-Brexit reforms.

³⁶ Home Office: [Migrant Journey detailed dataset \(2022\)](#). Note that having a leave to remain does not imply that the person is still in the UK.

³⁷ Note that Heses data represent only students at English providers in the approved (fee cap) category of the OfS register and as such is less exhaustive than HESA data.

³⁸ Source: Hesa, [HE student enrolments by domicile 2017/18 to 2021/22](#).

³⁹ Tuition fees depend on institution and programme. Following the [Redding Survey \(2007-2022\)](#), for academic year 2022/23, the average Undergraduate Overseas tuition fee was 97% higher than the

Student migration for the past 3 years has therefore been largely driven by non-Europeans, mostly Indians (which were granted 27% of study visas in 2023), Chinese (17%) and Nigerian (17%). However, the slight decrease in overall study visa grants largely depends by a sharp decrease in Indian and Nigerian students, which dropped by 7% and 16% respectively compared to the previous year.⁴⁰

Commentators from the British Council suggest that, for Nigerian students, dissuasive factors include the sharp drop in the national currency's value in mid-2023, together with the announced change in the policy on dependent visas. The perception of an uncertain policy, unfavourable economic conditions, and hardships from the UK housing and job markets likely had an effect on Indian nationals, some of which were redirected towards the US.⁴¹

Home rate. The average Postgraduate Overseas tuition fee was 84% higher than the Home rate. These figures are calculated considering courses offered at the 'classroom' rate to calculate the average; the 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.

⁴⁰ Home Office, [Entry Clearance Visa Applications and Outcomes, table Vis_D02](#).

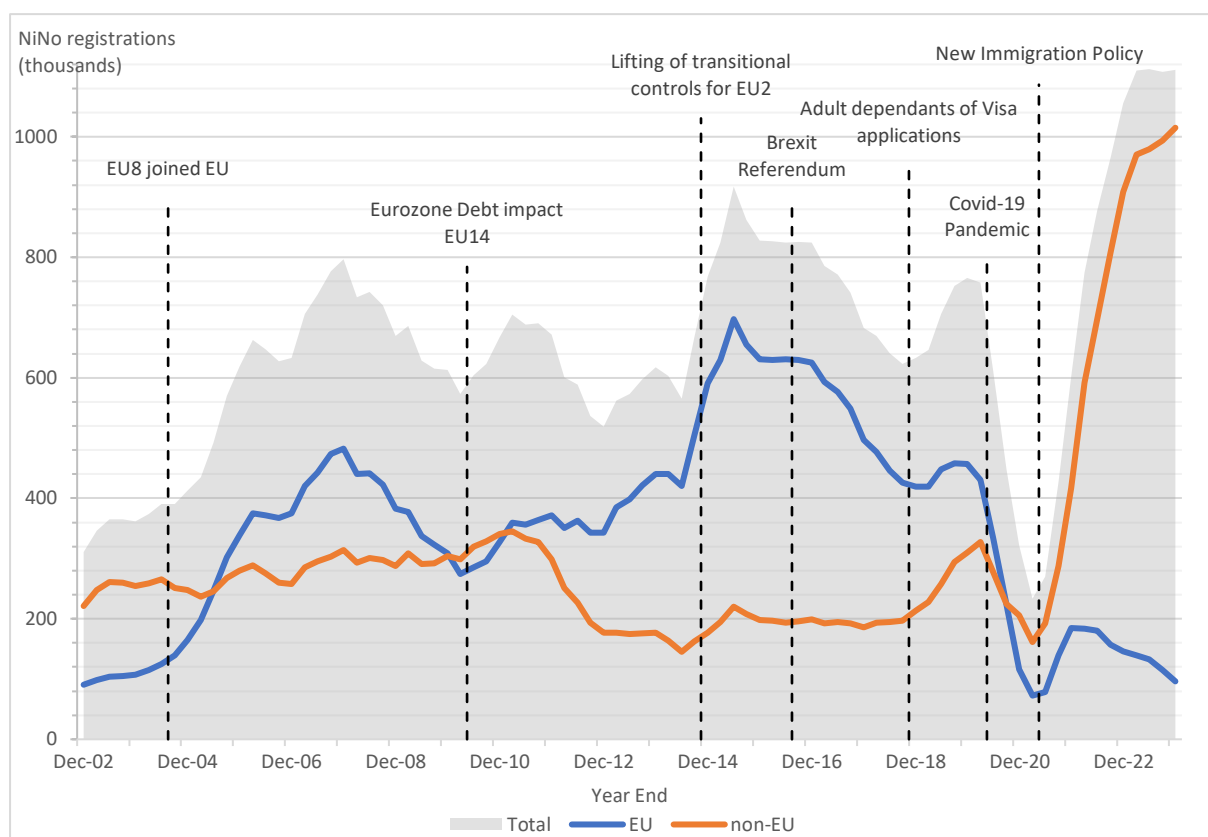
⁴¹ Prest (2023).

5. Work-related Migration

According to the Home Office, 41% of people coming to the UK in 2023 did so for work-related reasons, making it the first reason to migrate.

Variations in UK immigration policies and European and global economic situation have had a significant impact on work migration over the past two decades (see figure 6). The number of non-UK NiNo registrations fluctuated, gradually increasing up to 920,000 in June 2015. After this peak, the number declined to 760,000 in March 2020 and plummeted to 230,000 in March 2021.

Figure 6. Quarterly NiNo registration totals for EU and non-EU nationals: to YE December 2023.



Source: [DWP](#) through Stat-Xplore ([NiNo Registrations To Adult Overseas Nationals Entering The UK](#)).

Up until the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in spring 2020, work-related migration to the UK was largely driven by EU nationals. The increase in their number depended on the one hand on the process of EU integration of several countries in Eastern Europe (EU8⁴² in 2004 and EU2⁴³ in 2007) – which allowed workers from there to access the UK labour market, although with some restrictions⁴⁴ –, on the other on the financial difficulties most European countries experienced while facing the Eurozone debt crisis since late 2009 through mid-2010s.⁴⁵ After the 2016 Brexit referendum, EU worker migrants steadily declined, reaching 430,000 in March

⁴² Eight countries joined the EU in 2004: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

⁴³ Two countries joined the EU in 2007: Bulgaria and Romania.

⁴⁴ They were required to join the Accession State [Worker Registration Scheme](#), aimed at limiting and monitoring the impact of work migration to the UK.

⁴⁵ Pratsinakis et al. (2020).

2020 and plunging down as the Covid-19 pandemic hit. With the 2021 migration policy, the number of NiNo registrations by EU workers increased a little, without ever surpassing the 200,000 threshold, and settling at around one sixth of its 2015 peak.

A recent study assessing the impact of Brexit on migration found that the new migration policy has had a significant impact on the drastic reduction of EU work-migration: looking at NiNo data and using a difference-in-differences approach, Clifton-Sprigg et al. find that NiNo applications registered a 22.5% decrease compared to their counterfactual.⁴⁶

The number of non-European migrant workers coming to the UK was around 300,000 until July 2010,⁴⁷ when the newly elected conservative government placed a cap on sponsored work visas, after which the non-EU workers plummeted to a minimum of 145,000 in June 2014. After some policy relaxations in 2014 (leave extended from 3 to 5 years, opening a route to settlement) and, most importantly, the possibility to bring dependants (2018), non-EU work migration returned to previous levels just before the pandemic hit. After Covid-19 restrictions were eased, and post-Brexit reforms were put in place, the UK has attracted an unprecedented number of non-EU workers, with over a million NiNo registrations in Year End December 2023, over than three times more the pre-pandemic figure.

In 2023, the Department for Work and Pensions recorded more than 1.11 million new NiNo registrations from internationals, comparable with 1.05 million in 2022, with non-EU nationals accounting for 91% of the total, and EU for the remaining 9% (figure 6). The main countries of origin of international workers were India (280,000) and Nigeria (140,000), while the most represented European country was Romania (23,000).

The drop in new EU-workers, together with the decision by a number of them to leave the UK, affected various job sectors differently. A recent study by Portes and Springford, using data from the APS and the HRMC PAYE and adopting a difference-in-differences approach to build their counterfactuals, finds that the new migration system produced a shortfall of about 460,000 EU workers, only partially compensated of about 130,000 non-EU workers.⁴⁸ They also show that the inflow of non-EU workers has only partially offset the loss of European citizens, affecting different economic sectors disproportionately.

On the one hand, they find large shortfalls in lower skilled sectors, such as Manufacturing, Transport, Construction, Wholesale and retail, and Accommodation and food service. On the other, in higher skilled sectors such as Professional service and finance, non-EU workers have completely offset the loss of EU workers, while in Information, communication and technology, and even more in Health, non-EU workforce have overcompensated the relatively small EU-workers shortfall.⁴⁹

The most likely explanation for this is that it is difficult for SMEs to adapt to the new system and sustain VISA sponsorship costs, even when the salary threshold was below the median salary in that sector (such as Construction and Transportation).⁵⁰ It is worth noticing that with the new changes, for all of these sectors the salary threshold is above the median salary.

⁴⁶ They used samples from 2014Q4 to 2019Q2. See Clifton-Sprigg et al. (2023: tbl. 6, p. 57).

⁴⁷ See the [Changes made by the Coalition Government 2010-2015](#).

⁴⁸ Portes and Springford (2023: 15-16).

⁴⁹ Portes and Springford (2023: 18-19, especially tbl. 2).

⁵⁰ Portes and Springford (2023: 23).

6. Irregular Immigration and Asylum

6.1. Legislative changes

With Brexit, the Common European Asylum System stopped applying in the UK, leaving a notable gap in the country's migration and asylum management system. The UK government has since then adopted several measures to address such gap, focusing on deterring unauthorised migration and enhancing collaboration with partner countries.

In April 2022, the **Nationality and Borders Act**⁵¹ became law. The Act introduced a differential treatment of refugees, distinguishing between those arriving via regular and irregular routes. It also reinforced criminal sanctions for irregular entry in the UK, raising them from 6 months' to 4 years' imprisonment. While the expectation was that the policy would act as a deterrent, small boat arrivals increased since the adoption of the Act, incentivising the government to introduce further reforms.⁵²

In July 2023, the **Illegal Migration Act**⁵³ was therefore adopted, with the goal of "prevent[ing] and deter[ring]" irregular migration. The Act creates a legal duty to remove *all* migrants arriving irregularly on British territory. It foresees their expulsion to their home country, or to another "safe" third country, identifying 57 such territories. Finally, the Act prevents anyone who has entered irregularly from applying for international protection in the UK.

It is in this context that the Government signed the **UK-Rwanda Treaty**⁵⁴ in April 2023. The Treaty foresees the transfer of asylum seekers to Rwanda for the processing of their asylum claims, but was deemed unlawful by the UK Supreme Court in November 2023, based on the risk of asylum seekers' mistreatment in Rwanda.⁵⁵ In response to such judgement, the government announced the **Safety of Rwanda Bill**⁵⁶ in December 2023, designating Rwanda as a safe country, and compelling policymakers and courts to recognise it as such. The Bill became law in April 2024.

The Illegal Migration Act, UK-Rwanda Treaty, and Safety of Rwanda Bill, have all been the object of extensive criticism by international organisations and civil society, on human rights, legality, and effectiveness grounds.⁵⁷ The UNHCR as explicitly stated that the Rwanda plan "runs counter to the fundamental principles of global solidarity and responsibility-sharing".⁵⁸ Moreover, existing evidence suggests that deterrence does not work, as recognised by the Home Office itself.⁵⁹ These policies, by merely introducing higher sanctions, ultimately fail to address the root causes of migration, merely resulting in substitution effects, whereby migration flows simply shift to other entry points or categories, rather than being curtailed.⁶⁰

Finally, the UK has increased **cooperation with European and international partners**. In December 2022, it signed a cooperation agreement with Albania, to return irregular migrants who have not applied for asylum, or whose claims were rejected.⁶¹ In March 2023, the UK secured a deal with France to sponsor a detention centre and border patrols along French

⁵¹ [Nationality and Borders Act](#).

⁵² Home Office 2023: [Nationality and Borders Act compared to Illegal Migration Bill: factsheet](#).

⁵³ [Illegal Migration Act](#).

⁵⁴ [Memorandum of Understanding](#).

⁵⁵ [Supreme Court Press Summary 15 November 2023](#).

⁵⁶ [Safety of Rwanda \(Asylum and Immigration\) Bill](#).

⁵⁷ See the [UNHCR Analysis](#), the [ECRE Weekly Bulletin](#), and [Rosina and Kadhum \(2023\)](#).

⁵⁸ UNHCR (2024).

⁵⁹ See Rosina (2022), Rosina (2024), Home Office 2023: [Impact Assessment: Illegal Migration Bill](#).

⁶⁰ De Haas (2011), Rosina (2022).

⁶¹ [UK-Albania Joint Communiqué](#).

coasts,⁶² and in August of the same year it agreed with Turkey to strengthen cooperation on migrant smuggling.⁶³ In February 2024, the UK concluded an agreement with Frontex to increase information sharing as well as training and operational collaboration.⁶⁴

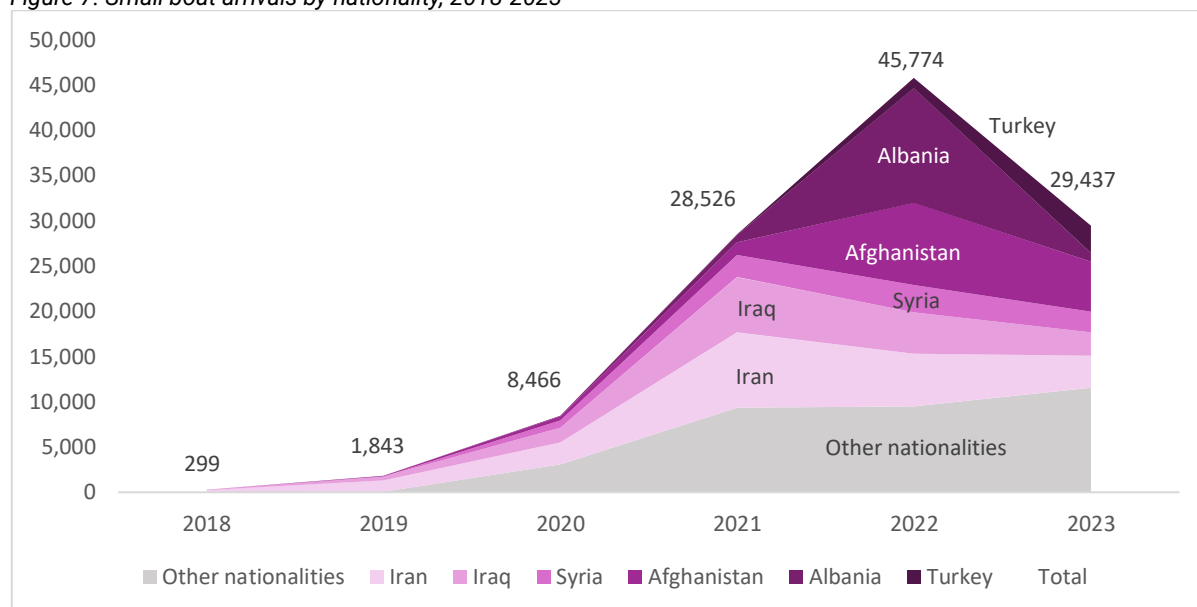
6.2. Irregular migration

Looking at trends in irregular migration, there has been a slight decline in figures over the past year. In 2023, the number of small boat arrivals totalled 29,437, marking a 36% decrease compared to the previous year’s figure of 45,774. This 2023 figure aligns closely with the numbers observed in 2021 (Figure 7).

The decline in 2023 is mainly driven by a significant drop in the number of Albanian migrants, which decreased by 93%. Indeed, the number of Albanian arrivals peaked at 12,658 in 2022, only to plummet to 924 in 2023 (Figure 7).

Conversely, migration from Turkey has increased in 2023. The number of small boat arrivals from Turkish citizens more than doubled, rising from 1,127 in 2022 to 3,040 in 2023 (Figure 7). Turkey has now emerged as one of the top three countries of origin for arrivals, alongside Afghanistan and Iran.

Figure 7. Small boat arrivals by nationality, 2018-2023



Source: Home Office 2024 ([Irregular migration dataset](#)).

6.3 The mixed nature of the flows

In 2023, the primary countries of origin among small boat arrivals were Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey (Figure 8). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that individuals from the first three of such countries exhibit asylum success rates above the average, with Afghans, Syrians, and Iranians achieving rates of 99%, 98%, and 78%, respectively.⁶⁵

⁶² [Government Press Release 10 March 2023](#).

⁶³ [UK-Türkiye joint statement on illegal migration](#).

⁶⁴ [Home Office News: UK and Frontex agree work to crack down on illegal migration](#).

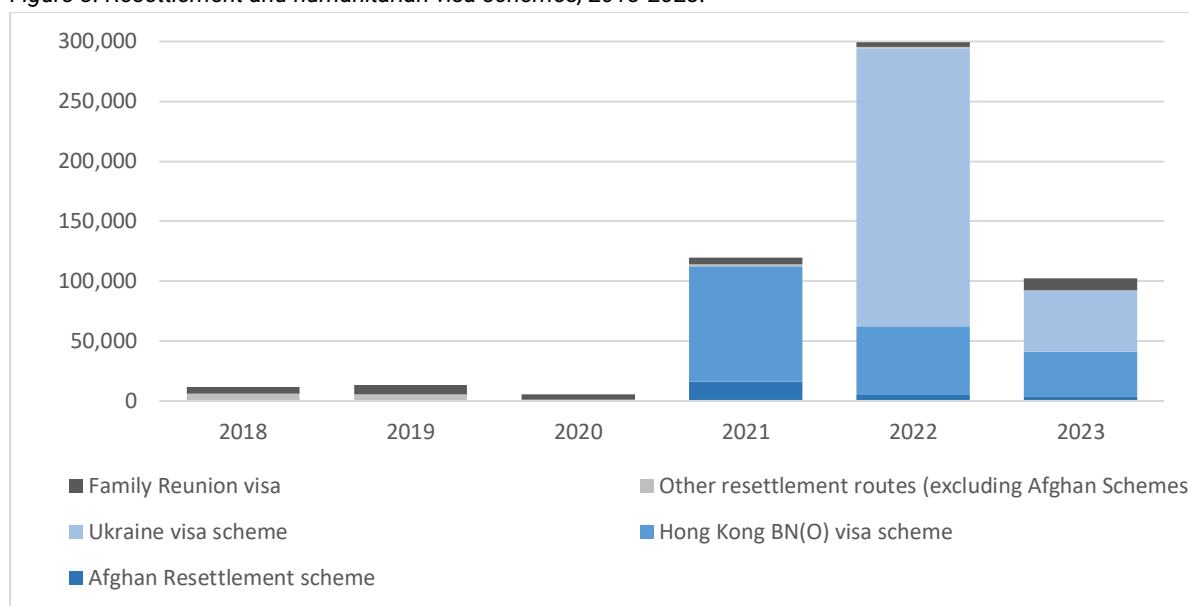
⁶⁵ Walsh and Cuibus (2023).

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of small boat arrivals seek asylum. In 2022, 90% of arrivals submitted asylum applications (41,194 applications, out of 45,574 arrivals). Among those who have already received a decision, nearly three-fourths (74%) were granted protection.⁶⁶ Overall, the above shows that small boat arrivals predominantly comprise individuals seeking protection.

6.4. Resettlement

Finally, the number of individuals offered resettlement and humanitarian visa witnessed a decline in 2023.⁶⁷ The UK operates humanitarian visa schemes targeted at people from Ukraine, Hong Kong, and Afghanistan, alongside other resettlement initiatives not tied to specific countries. In 2023, a total of 102,283 individuals were offered visas to legally enter and stay in the UK on humanitarian grounds. This figure represents approximately a third of the 2022 total, which stood at 299,623. The reduction primarily stems from a decrease in visas granted to Ukrainians, which dropped from 232,135 in 2022 to 50,520 in 2023 (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Resettlement and humanitarian visa schemes, 2018-2023.



Source: Home Office 2024 ([Asylum and resettlement summary tables](#)).

⁶⁶ Home Office 2024: [Irregular migration dataset](#).

⁶⁷ See figure 3 above for the full picture of visa grants.

7. Conclusions

Net migration experienced a 10% decrease from December 2022 to December 2023. After the 2022 all-time high, in 2023 we observe a decline in the number of international students and of people coming for humanitarian reasons. Workers and students are the two main categories of international migration to the UK. The uncertainty produced by Brexit and by the recent changes in migration policy have pushed several internationals already residing in the UK for a qualifying period to ensure they will maintain their rights through the obtainment of the British citizenship. In 2023, more than 200,000 people were granted British citizenship, 15% more than in 2022 and a 20-year record high.

In 2023, the Office for Students' provisional statistics registered a 3% contraction of new entrants (i.e., students enrolled on a course at their first year), and study visa grants decreased by the same share. While Brexit stifled EU study-related migration, the possibility to bring dependants, added in 2018, paired with the opening of the Graduate Route in 2021, increased the appeal of British Universities for non-Europeans. The recent rise in international students paying tuition fees at the Overseas rate has in turn boosted UK universities' finances in recent years. However, since early 2024, most overseas students are banned from bringing their families to the UK. This choice – already announced in May 2023 –, together with international economic contingencies, has already prevented some to choose the UK for their studies in 2023, and it is reasonable to expect negative trends in study-related migration for next year. In this respect, DataHE analyst Mark Corver warns that “high inflation and the government's freezing of domestic tuition fees have created financial difficulties for universities that will become worse if international students stay away.”⁶⁸

The new migration system relaxed some of the regulations previously existing for non-EU workers, which was followed by a 20-year record high of 1.1 million NiNo registrations in 2022, which was maintained constant in 2023. While the post-Brexit system achieved the goal of curbing EU migration, it also produced unintended effects. In particular, the UK has not yet recovered from job shortages in lower skilled sectors, such as Manufacturing, Transport, Construction, Wholesale and retail, and Accommodation and food service. The measures adopted in April 2024 (particularly the significant rise of the salary threshold for the skilled worker visa and the scrap on the possibility to bring dependants) have just started to impact migration flows. It is reasonable to expect that these new restrictions will significantly limit work-related immigration.

Finally, figures from the Home Office show a 36% decrease in irregular migration to the UK in 2023. However, this is mainly due to a drop in the number of Albanians, which decreased by more than 90% compared to the previous year. Notably, most of the people who arrive via small boats apply for asylum, pointing to the mixed nature of the flows. Humanitarian visa schemes, mainly offered to people from Ukraine, Hong Kong, and Afghanistan, registered a 2/3 drop compared to 2022, mostly due to the 68% decline of the Ukrainian humanitarian route. Against this backdrop, the government has pushed forward its plan to deter irregular migration through the Illegal Migration Act, the UK-Rwanda Treaty, and the Safety of Rwanda Act, attracting sharp criticism by international organisations and civil society, on human rights, legality, and effectiveness grounds.

⁶⁸ Adams (2024).

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