

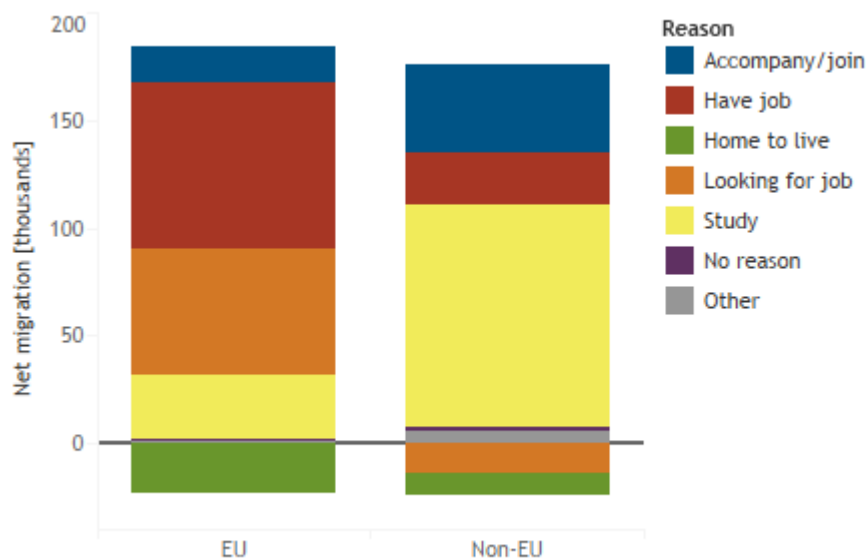
The 100,000 person question

Blog post by Adviser Leo Ringer, 13 October 2016

Immigration is the simmering political issue at the heart of the Brexit. Much of the debate has focused on how far the UK can reclaim control of EU migration into the UK, while retaining some form of participation in, or preferential access to, the single market. But what if we assume that full migration policy is back in the hands of the UK government. How does it meet the palpable public expectation it has created?

Since 2010, the Conservative Party has intended to reduce the UK's annual net immigration figure to less than 100,000. Prime Minister Theresa May and Home Secretary Amber Rudd have re-committed to the figure, but when set against the arithmetic of recent immigration to the UK, the target looks virtually unachievable. So how can May and Rudd deliver - or be seen to?

Net migration to the UK by non-UK nationals



Source: ONS IPS estimates (2016), GC analysis

We start with the size of the 'problem'. Net immigration to the UK last year stood at 327,000 - well above the 100,000 target. This implies that, roughly, for every three people who entered the UK last year, only one such migrant could be permitted in future. So who are the two that would lose out?

Based on a slightly different measure, which allows for a finer breakdown and excludes the migration of UK nationals, the figure for the year until March 2016 was 313,000 foreign immigrants.* Those from the EU numbered 162,000, while those from the rest of the world totalled 152,000. In terms of reason for entry, the two biggest cohorts were workers (145,000) and students (134,000).

It is immediately clear that, even if the government prevented *all* foreign students entering the UK, the corresponding group of workers would immediately breach the 100,000 limit - and vice versa. So both immigration for work and for study would have to be cut, substantially. But how?

One option might be to prevent anyone without a definite job lined up from arriving in the UK, as suggested by William Hague, former leader of the Conservative Party. But this would knock a mere 44,000 foreign job seekers off the numbers, which would still leave May and Rudd 269,000 individuals adrift of the target.

In fact, 101,000 foreign nationals arrived in the UK with a job to come to last year, so even if the government excluded every individual from every other group - all job seekers, students and those accompanying or joining relatives - the target would already have been missed.

What if the government decided that, for the sake of the Brexit negotiation, it was going to allow free movement from the EU, but exclude all non-EU nationals? Again, no luck: even excluding all of the 152,000 non-EU nationals would leave the government 62,000 people above target. Even going as far as halving both EU and non-EU migration would be similarly ineffective, creating a 57,000 overshoot.

By this point, the arithmetic looks bleak. Altering the target from 100,000 to a higher, more manageable number would have been an option seven days ago, but Rudd and May's re-commitment has probably locked it in - the political cost of rowing back now would be severe.

A marginally more subtle work-around would be to exclude cohorts from the figure altogether. British universities have long called for students to be excluded, on the basis that they are not what the British people worry or care about when it comes to immigration. Polling suggests this is probably true. This would make an immediate difference, reducing the figure from 313,000 to 179,000.

The bright young policy adviser might then observe that the government could take away the 44,000 job seekers, giving a mere 35,000 overshoot. Throw in a tightened basis on which foreign nationals are allowed to accompany or join family members, and, hey presto, you've just a refined work permits system away from 100,000. Flippant, perhaps, but reflective of the numerical nature of the task the government has set itself.

Despite rendering the 100,000 target more achievable, exempting students would still constitute a major U-turn for Theresa May, who refused to do just that for six years as Home Secretary. But without this or a similar approach, the target is so demanding that it is difficult to see how it can be met - even if the UK secures full control of its migration system via Brexit.

**This assumes that the net migration by UK nationals is zero.*