

Immigration statistics: Is the tanker turning around?

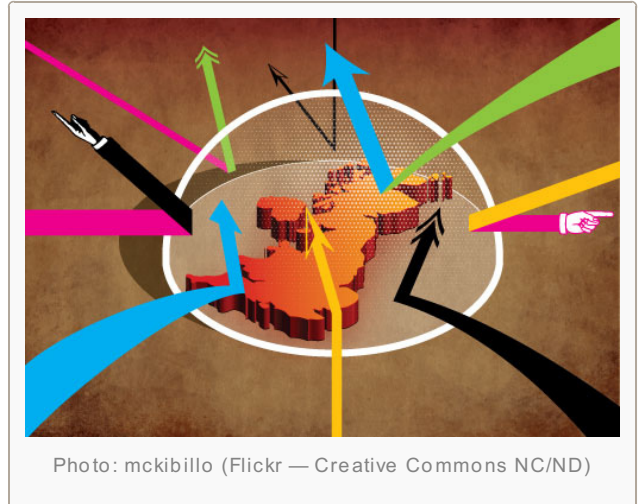
At last the Home Office has 'good news' to report on lower net migration figures. [Don Flynn](#) asks whether this is a measure of successful policies, or just a measure of how deep the economic mire we are all in.



With party conference season just around the corner it is not surprising that ministers in the Home Office would want to big up [the news of a drop in net migration figures](#) during the year ending December 2011.

[The Home Office claims](#) that figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published last week showing an estimated the drop in net migration 216,000 from the previous year's 252,000 are the result of a "raft of recent reforms to the immigration system."

Maybe. But a big chunk of this reduction— 11,000 people – actually came from an increase in the number of people *leaving* the UK rather than numbers entering. In 2010 an estimated 339,000 people left the country to live abroad; in 2011 this rose to 350,000.



At the same time that more Brits are seeing the sluggishness of the UK's recovery from recession as a reason to 'get on their bikes' it does seem to be the case that there is a drop in the numbers wanting to work and study in the country.

Skilled migrants

We've know for a long time that the much-vaunted Points-Based System has been turned into something close to a disaster zone as route for skilled migrants coming to the UK, [with employers recruiting only around 50% of the allocation of the 20,700 Tier Two work permits](#).

There seems to have been a slight recovery here, with the ONS reporting a 4% increase in the number of highly skilled visas being issued. But the gap in terms of what the skilled labour market needs and what it is getting is still very wide.

The new ONS suggests that the struggle to attract 'the brightest and the best' to the UK workforce might be continuing, with a 7% drop in the number of work-related visas issues in the 12 months up to June 2012.

This snubbing of employment opportunities in the UK is also likely to be extending to groups of non-Brits who don't require work permits – namely EU nationals. Figures for the issue of new National Insurance numbers to people from abroad in the 12 months up to March 2012 are reported to have fallen by a staggering 15%.

Students, family visas and more

The growth in the lucrative business of providing education services to foreigners seems to have been firmly arrested by Home Office policies, with 30% less visas being awarded to international students in the year ending June 2012.

Family visas are also down by 10% in the year to June 2012, reflecting a longer term downward trend but also the effect of tougher rules on language now required of spouses and partners, which are likely to be amplified by the recent adoption of a minimum earnings threshold of £18,600 for people wanting to sponsor their loved ones.

The immigration minister, Damian Green, appeared on the BBC Radio 'Today' programme this morning claiming that the statistics showed that the Home Office was finally 'turning round the tanker' of increasing immigration numbers and bring things back in the direction of the promises made by the coalition back in 2010, of net migration in the 'tens, rather than hundreds of thousands.'

Hold the celebrations

These are all figures that will be picked over in great detail in the coming weeks and months to determine their significance, but even at this early stage it appears to be the case that the government is claiming its greatest successes in precisely the areas where we would most want it to be cautious in driving down figures. Lower labour migration can be read as due to a growth in the unattractiveness of employment opportunities that exist in the UK, which would be consistent with the news that more Brits are leaving the country as well as immigrants failing to arrive.

The crowing about reduced student numbers is irrational at just about every level, given that it is likely [to jeopardise earnings of £2 – 3 billion a year to the UK economy](#). [The news last week that the existence of one London university](#) has been threatened by the loss of its trusted sponsor status is likely to increase the sense which already exists in international student networks that the UK represents a high risk for anyone planning to invest anything from £13,000 to £20,000 a year in a university level education.

In the short-term the immigration minister will probably feel that he has good news to report to the Conservative Party conference when it meets in Birmingham in early October. The dominant anti-immigration mood that exists in the party will doubtless applaud the news that the tanker might be showing signs of turning around. But the rest of us will be wondering if the only effect is to put us all on course for hitting the rocks.

This article first appeared on the Migrants' Rights Network [blog](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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