

Post-Brexit immigration policy: Scotland wants to go its own way



*Britain does not yet have a post-Brexit immigration policy, and a likely shortage of lower-skilled workers poses a particular challenge. **Sarah Kyambi (University of Edinburgh)** looks at how governments try to meet labour shortages and why Scotland is exploring ways to encourage migrants to settle permanently.*

Despite the likelihood that free movement will end when the UK leaves the European Union, the shape of its future immigration system is still perturbably unclear. The lack of specific goals for UK immigration policymaking – beyond bringing the numbers down and filling immediate vacancies – is hampering policy development. A more systematic approach is badly needed.

Our [research](#) considers both sides of the equation: what types of programmes are best suited for particular goals, and how different policies would impact on migrants' decisions to come to, and remain in, the UK.

Since free movement has been the sole entry route for labour migration into lower-skilled jobs, low skilled, low paid jobs are likely to be hardest hit by Brexit. A growing number of reports address the potential impacts on particular sectors and occupations, and shortages are predicted in areas like social care, agriculture, food processing and hospitality.



Scottish external affairs secretary Fiona Hyslop launches a campaign in April 2018 to promote the country abroad. Photo: [Scottish Government](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

However, [proposals](#) for immigration into lower skilled jobs after Brexit are few and will probably be confined to short-term, possibly sectoral, schemes with restrictive conditions that require migrants to leave the UK at the end of their stay. This is in marked contrast to the open-ended flexibility provided by free movement, which offers access to benefits, generous family rights and, eventually, access to permanent status for those coming to work. This makes it all the more important for post-Brexit immigration policy to consider the full range of options and factors at work.

We identified three types of immigration programme:

- Sectoral schemes, which recruit workers to particular sectors or occupations to address specific sectoral or occupational shortages.
- Employer-led schemes, which select workers based on employer demand and assume that employers are best placed to identify shortages.

- Human capital schemes, which select workers based on their individual characteristics, such as work experience, family status, language skills or ties with the country/region.

Looking at six case studies in industrialised countries, we found that the generosity of these schemes depends on their aims, the difficulty of attracting migrants and the social, economic and political context underlying social norms. Temporary, restrictive schemes for migration into lower skilled work are widespread, but other types of programme exist. Many balanced a range of competing and complementary aims, some more successfully than others.

Countries who want migrants to settle generally have to offer more generous conditions. Mechanisms that target migrant labour to specific locations or occupations, such as tied visas, increase the risk of exploitation which calls for increased safeguarding. Migrants themselves trade off working at a level matching their skills and qualifications for the opportunity to access more generous programmes: pathways to permanent settlement can mean deskilling.

At present, we are awaiting the [Migration Advisory Committee's final report](#) on the role of EEA workers in the UK's economy. This is expected to provide a clearer picture of labour shortages, and whether the resident population benefits if migrants are recruited to fill them. While this will give a clearer picture – particularly of economic needs – it risks applying too narrow a conception of the goals to be pursued. The [Scottish Government, for example, has been vocal about seeking a wider range of immigration goals](#), such as averting population decline, offsetting population ageing and sustaining remoter communities. Short-term, sectoral schemes are least well suited to meeting these aims and likely to generate extraneous problems, given the level of population churn involved.

At the SNP conference First Minister [Nicola Sturgeon](#) made clear that Scotland remains committed to attracting migrants. Our research with EEA migrants in Scotland showed that a more restrictive regime would certainly impact migrants' settlement decisions, although younger, unattached migrants would not necessarily be put off from coming to the UK in the first instance. Access to family and welfare rights, the opportunity to extend their stay and settle permanently, the ability to change jobs and move within the UK all matter, particularly for longer-term stay and settlement. This chimes with international practice, where programmes that recruit migrants for the longer term go hand-in-hand with more generous provisions.

We found that increased restrictions and barriers to entry would prompt EEA nationals to consider their options elsewhere, within other EEA countries, but also in other English-language destinations such as Canada and the USA. It is vital that considerations of the UK's future immigration regime looks at the impacts of proposed rules on migrants' decisions, an aspect often neglected.

Finally, as immigration policy in the UK and Scotland diverges, we need to give serious thought to the options for a [differentiated system](#) that lets regions pursue different goals. Despite many calls for greater regionalisation in this area, the [Migration Advisory Committee interim report](#) appears to indicate that it is unlikely to support it, as it cannot find sufficient variation in regional labour markets. However, this fails to take into account the strong desire in Scottish politics to do things differently on immigration, and the reasons and goals underpinning it. A system that cannot accommodate a fuller consideration of immigration goals, and how best to meet them, will chafe.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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