

Net Migration as a Target for Migration Policies: A Review and Appraisal of the UK Experience

Alessio Cangiano*

ABSTRACT

The impact of migration on population growth has become a ubiquitous argument in UK immigration debates, leading to the introduction of immigration restrictions to reduce net migration and prevent the UK population from reaching 70 million. Taking the UK as a case study, this article assesses the rationale for setting a national net migration target as a pivotal point for migration policies and the feasibility of limiting net migration using immigration controls. A framework for analysing the effects of migration policies on net migration is proposed and applied to UK official migration data. The results show that, due to various policy constraints, competing objectives and unintended feedbacks, it is neither optimal nor entirely feasible to prioritize a reduction of net migration as a target for migration policies. Nevertheless, factoring net migration into the migration policy debate provides useful insights on the long-term implications of migration policies in the context of broader demographic changes.

INTRODUCTION

Long-term policy objectives typically do not feature amongst the major concerns of migration policies and debates. In contrast, there has long been a generalized lack of farsightedness in migration policies, which are mostly driven by short-term labour market objectives, e.g. annual reviews of labour migrant entry systems (MAC, 2008), highly compartmentalized (i.e. consisting of distinct and uncoordinated policy strands for the management of different admission channels), and often influenced by political agendas not exceeding the duration of one parliamentary mandate. Despite the prevalence of this “short-termism”, demographic arguments have been gaining ground in migration debates in some national and international fora. The notion that Europe will need large immigration flows to make up for a demographic gap associated with population ageing and decline has been popular in EU and international policy circles (e.g. CEC, 2005). In the UK, the demographic argument has been played out in the opposite way with the establishment of a net migration upper limit as a pivotal point of UK migration policy. Fuelled by debates emphasizing the negative externalities of immigration-driven population growth, the conservative-led Government coalition elected in 2010 (Conservative Government since May 2015) has taken action to reduce net migration (i.e. the balance between in- and out-migration flows) “from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands” (Conservative Party, 2010: 21; 2015: 29). Plans to cut net migration have been presented as a tool for preventing the UK population from reaching 70 million within the next two decades (Cameron, 2007).

* The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji Islands

This article speaks to, and tries to bridge some of the gap between, two rather separate strands of literature: the rapidly expanding body of academic research on migration policies, and the long-established demographic literature on the impact of migration on population dynamics. The migration policy literature often raised doubts about the effectiveness of policies in steering migration flows (e.g. Castles and Miller, 2009). The ostensible contradiction between the strong public pressures for immigration restrictions and the relatively large number of migrants admitted by many liberal democratic states (Boswell, 2007) has been explained in terms of discrepancies between migration discourses and rhetoric (e.g. broadly stated goals such as curbing immigration), concretely formulated migration policy objectives, and the actual implementation of immigration laws (Czaika and De Haas, 2013). This strand of literature has also pointed out the “significance of migration to competing policy objectives” (e.g. economic competitiveness, the protection of human and welfare rights, and the capacity to provide public services), as well as the lack of “consensus on the weight that should be placed on those priorities” (Spencer, 2011: 2). A neglected question in the migration policy literature is what role, if any, demographic objectives should play in migration policies. In turn, this question has been widely discussed in the demographic literature looking at the long-term impact of migration on population dynamics and structure (e.g. Coleman, 1992; Bijak, 2007). However this latter body of research hardly considers the demographic impact of different flows making up the immigration and emigration aggregates (e.g. labour, family and asylum migration) and states’ ability to manage these flows to achieve immigration (or net-migration) targets that may be seen as desirable over a prolonged period of time.

In general terms, a policy that sets as a goal the reduction of population growth and relies on the limitation of net migration as an instrument to achieve this goal rests essentially on three propositions: i) reducing population growth is beneficial, i.e. it will improve general well-being; ii) it is desirable to prioritize the limitation of net migration as an objective for migration policies; and iii) states are able to limit net migration by controlling the different flows of people moving in and out of the country that make up this aggregate. The first proposition raises broad questions about the costs and benefits of population growth and immigration that are beyond the scope of this study. Rather, this article focuses on propositions ii) and iii) by addressing two main research questions: is it useful and desirable to prioritise demographic objectives – with particular reference to managing the size of the population – in migration policies? And, if so, is it feasible to use migration policies to achieve pre-determined levels of net migration over the long term? Taking the UK as a case study, and trying to refrain from grand generalizations, I attempt to draw some lessons that help answer these questions based on an analytical framework that links the establishment of a net migration target to the distinct compartments of migration policy used for the management of different in- and out-flows. The main argument of this article is that, due to the significance of net migration to competing policy objectives and to numerous constraints and unintended feedbacks that limit governments’ ability to control flows that make up the net migration aggregate, it is neither optimal nor feasible to set a net migration target as a pivotal point for migration policies. Nevertheless, factoring net migration in the migration policy debate provides the opportunity for a useful reflection on the long-term implications of migration policies in the context of broader demographic changes.

THE RISE OF THE NET MIGRATION TARGET IN UK MIGRATION POLICY

The stance of the UK Government on population policies was long characterized by a non-interventionist approach. This is well-illustrated by the statement that was presented at the UN Conference on Population in Mexico in 1984 and restated ten years later at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (ONS, 1993: 1–2):

The United Kingdom government does not pursue a population policy in the sense of actively trying to influence the overall size of the population, its age-structure, or the components of change except in the field of immigration. Nor has it expressed a view about the size of population, or the age-structure, that would be desirable for the United Kingdom.

Consistent with this *laissez-faire* stance, until recently government legislation on immigration and asylum did not connect the issue to wider demographic trends or debates. The official document setting out the previous government's five-year strategy for the introduction of the current points-based system still made no mention of the potential for managed migration to help address some of the challenges associated with demographic change (Dixon and Margo, 2006).

For the last two decades net migration has been a major driver of UK population growth. Following several upward revisions of net migration assumptions, recent releases of official demographic projections also suggest that net migration will continue to represent a major contributor to UK demography (Cangiano, 2014). In the wake of this demographic scenario, from the second half of the 2000s UK population debates have witnessed a significant departure from the long-standing non-interventionist approach, with a new focus on the need to control population growth. Symbolically, the landmark that testified the shift of mainstream politics to a new approach is David Cameron's speech on "the challenges of a growing population", where the current British prime minister outlined his vision of Britain's demographic future. In Cameron's words, Britain's current level of population growth is "unsustainable", largely because immigration and family breakdown (i.e. the increase in one person households) are "too high" (Cameron, 2007).

Since then, the impact of migration on population growth has become a ubiquitous factor in public debates about growing housing needs, congested road networks and public transports, loss of countryside to eco-town developments, and public service provision. A reduction of net migration is advocated by vocal campaigning organizations like MigrationWatch UK with public messages evoking the long-term demographic burden of immigrant settlement – such as "We must build a new home every seven minutes for new migrants for the next 20 years or so" (<http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/>, accessed 9 October 2014). Balanced Migration, a Cross Party Parliamentary Group, was established in September 2008 with the objective to "bring immigration down to the level of emigration" to "stabilise the population of the UK at about 65 million by mid-century" (see <http://www.balancedmigration.com/>). The idea that Britain's demography is not environmentally sustainable, including a widespread belief that England is "overcrowded", has gained increasing endorsement by influential environmentalist groups (e.g. Population Matters) and prompted alarmist tabloid headlines – e.g. "a time-bomb ticking under our environment" (Daily Mail, 2009, quoted in Spencer, 2011: 3).

Environmental and welfare concerns of population control advocates are relatively self-evident. A growing population consumes more natural resources (e.g. energy supplies), pollutes more, and requires building new housing and infrastructures and expanding service provision. From a planning perspective, these concerns are not unjustified. For example, some data clearly point to the significant contribution of migration to the demand for accommodation, services and infrastructure (DCLG, 2010). However, this type of arguments and the evidence provided in their support is also highly contested. For example, Finney and Simpson (2009: 79) showed that the increase in housing demand over the past half century was less driven by population growth than by the increase in the number of one person households; a trend towards living in larger properties (with an increase in the proportion living in semi-detached and detached houses); and an increase in second home ownerships. Murray (2008) points out that only eight per cent of Britain's land is built environment, and that even if three million new homes were built outside built-up areas, this would amount to just a one per cent loss of non-urban land. The idea that a high population density is associated with worsening standards of living is also contested – a cross-national perspective suggests that very densely populated countries can be found amongst both the most and the least developed

countries in the world (according to various human development indices), and the same is true for sparsely populated countries (UNDP, 2010). Overall, the debate remains not only highly polarized, but also undermined by an insufficient evidence base.

Set against the international migration policy landscape, the emphasis on population growth in the UK migration debate is rather unique. While net migration in the UK and its contribution to population growth are not exceptionally high by international standards – see Matheson (2010) for further comparative analysis – the UK is the only Western country which is officially taking action to curb population growth. In particular, based on the government reporting for the UN World Population Policies Database¹ (Table 1), the UK is the only country where policy action to lower immigration is associated with official concerns about population growth – unlike for example other longstanding European receiving countries with similar demographics (such as France and the Netherlands) which also aim to reduce immigration and/or the permanent settlement of immigrants. It is therefore legitimate to wonder whether lowering population growth is a genuine target of the UK government policy, or an instrumental argument deployed to publically justify more restrictive immigration policies that are largely favoured by the British electorate – see below.

Whether a real policy objective or a simple political device, the “population control” argument has played a prominent role in presenting the recent reform of the UK immigration system as a means to cut net migration “from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands” (Conservative Party, 2010: 21). With lesser skilled labour migration already being significantly restricted and refugee admissions at an historical low, regulatory changes to restrict immigration and settlement consisted of: a cap introduced on immigration of non-EU highly skilled workers via tier 1 and 2 of the Points-Based System (April 2011); a stricter regime for checking on overseas students before they enter the UK and for limiting their possibility to stay on and find employment (April 2012); and the introduction of a minimum income threshold for sponsors of non-EEA family migrants (July

TABLE 1
POPULATION AND MIGRATION POLICIES IN SELECTED NET IMMIGRATION COUNTRIES, 2013

	Population growth	Immigration	Permanent settlement ^a
Australia	No intervention	Maintain	Maintain
Austria	Raise	Raise	Raise
Belgium	No intervention	Maintain	Maintain
Canada	No intervention	Maintain	Maintain
Denmark	No intervention	Lower	Lower
Finland	No intervention	Raise	Maintain
France	Maintain	Lower	Lower
Germany	Raise	Maintain	Lower
Greece	Raise	Maintain	Maintain
Ireland	No intervention	Lower	Maintain
Italy	Raise	Maintain	Maintain
Netherlands	No intervention	Lower	Maintain
New Zealand	No intervention	Maintain	Maintain
Norway	No intervention	Maintain	Maintain
Portugal	Raise	Maintain	Maintain
Spain	Raise	Maintain	Lower
Sweden	No intervention	Raise	Raise
Switzerland	No intervention	Maintain	Maintain
U.S.A.	No intervention	Maintain	Maintain
United Kingdom	Lower	Lower	Lower

Note: ^aData refer to 2011

Source: United Nations' World Population Policies Database

2012). On 6th September 2012, the UK parliament voted in favour of a motion which called on the Government to “take all necessary steps to reduce immigration to stabilize the UK’s population as close to present levels as possible”, and in any event to keep it well below 70 million.

Right from the aftermath of the reform its potential for reducing net migration below one hundred thousand annually appeared doubtful. Early impact assessments suggested that the new immigration restrictions were not sufficient to achieve the Government’s target – and that only a net migration scenario close to zero for the following two decades would stabilize the population before reaching the 70 million mark (Migration Observatory, 2012). The latest trends have also challenged the fitness of the system for reducing net migration. After a significant decline in the aftermath of the reform (176 thousand in 2012, down from 251 thousand two years earlier), net migration trespassed again the 200 thousand threshold in 2013 and reached 330 thousand in the year ending in March 2015 according to the latest provisional estimates (ONS, 2015).

Despite failure to deliver the 2010 electoral promise in its first mandate, the re-elected Conservative government has retained the net migration target in its 2015 electoral Manifesto, including plans to “regain control of EU migration by reforming welfare rules” and to hold a referendum on UK membership of the European Union by the end of 2017 (Conservative Party, 2015). Another emerging strand of the recent debate has focused on the role of international students, with some commentators suggesting that students should be taken out of the net migration target because of the transient nature of this type of mobility (Migration Observatory, 2015). The contribution of the major admission categories to the long-term demographic impact of net migration is further discussed in the next section.

USING MIGRATION POLICY TO ACHIEVE A NET MIGRATION TARGET

While the net migration aggregate refers to the balance of all immigrants and emigrants regardless of their status or nationality, immigration laws consist of multiple sets of criteria that separately regulate the admission and conditions of stay of different immigrant groups based on nationality, whether or not they need a visa and, if so, the purpose for entering/staying in the country. Thus, the composition of immigration and emigration by nationality and status on entry is shaped by the admission system and gives an indication of the room for manoeuvre that governments have in steering migration flows by targeting different admission categories. This is outlined in Table 2, which provides a synoptic framework for analyzing the impact of current UK migration policies on immigration and emigration flows.

A first level of categorization is based on nationality, i.e. the criterion based on which the requirement of a visa is established. With reference to the UK, three major groups are identified: British nationals (exempt from immigration controls), other EEA nationals (also exempt from immigration controls except citizens of new EU member states that may be subject to transitional restrictions) and non-EEA nationals (subject to visa requirements). The exemption from visa requirements implies that the movement of British and other EEA nationals is, for the most part, beyond government control. In turn, those who need a visa (non-EEA nationals) are further broken down according to major category of admission: labour, family, study, and other (second column in the table). Entry into the UK for employment and study purposes is managed through the Point-Based System (PBS). Family reunification policies are founded on international rights-based frameworks, although eligibility to bring in dependants varies by nationality and immigration status. Other non-EEA nationals include asylum seekers and a variety of other admission categories² that typically involve numerically small inflows and whose admission is separately regulated on a case-by-case basis. For each category of non-EEA migrants the most significant changes introduced by the last reform of the system are listed in the table.

TABLE 2
FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF UK MIGRATION POLICIES ON NET MIGRATION

Migrant group		Immigration	Emigration
British nationals		Uncontrolled	Uncontrolled
Other EEA nationals		Transitional controls for EU accession country nationals - Bulgaria and Romania (2007–2013), and Croatia (until 2018)	Indirect measures (e.g. restrictions of benefit entitlement)
Non-EEA nationals	Labour	PBS Tier 1 (highly-skilled without a job offer) - annual cap of 1,000 PBS Tier 2 (highly-skilled with job offer in shortage occupations or passing resident labour market test): - annual cap of 20,700 (excluding ICT), minimum salary and maintenance requirements PBS Tier 3 (low-skilled, not activated from the outset)	Limitation of the right of settlement and naturalization Restriction in the possibility to shift immigration status - abolition of post-study work route Deportation of irregular migrants and convicts Assisted voluntary returns
	Family	Eligibility to sponsor admission of spouses/dependants varies by immigration status - minimum income threshold, language requirements	
	Study	PBS Tier 4 - more restrictive entry and progression criteria; stricter sponsorship requirements; limitations in the entitlement to work and bring in dependants	
	Other	Case-by-case decisions	

Emigration policies also focus on non-EEA nationals and primarily consist of i) the set of criteria that regulate the rights and entitlements to renew expired permits, apply for a different permit and obtain indefinite leave to remain and ii) repatriation policies, which involve a combination of coercive interventions (deportations) and various programmes for assisted voluntary returns. The latter are mainly targeted at irregular migrants, overstayers and asylum seekers who were denied recognition of refugee status – that is, regular permit holders and all migrants exempt from immigration controls are not amongst the target groups unless they are convicted for a criminal offense. Assessing the effectiveness of emigration policies in fostering return or re-migration of non-EU migrants who entered via different admission channels – and the resulting impact on net migration – is a methodologically challenging task. First, because data on non-EU emigration by category of initial entry are still limited. For example, no data are available on the entry status of irregular migrants who are deported or assisted to return. Second because it would be difficult to assess the extent to which differences in category-specific return or re-migration rates are determined by the differential propensity to settle of migrant groups or by different legal constraints on permit renewal and access to permanent residence. For these reasons, in Table 2 the breakdown of emigration policies by non-EU admission category is not operationalized. It is also worthwhile noting that, although in the table immigration and emigration policies are dealt with as separate policy domains, their effects

are often concomitant. For example, measures restricting access to welfare benefits, the renewal of residence/work permits or the right to remain indefinitely might foster the departure of foreign residents subject to immigration controls, while diverting new immigrants with long-term migratory plans to other destination countries providing better opportunities for settlement.

The outlined framework provides a conceptual and operative tool to assess the impact of migration policies on net migration. It does not consider the additional contribution of migration to natural change, which might well vary by category of admission. The framework is moulded around the UK as a case study and refers to the regulatory system and migration data collection currently in operation in this country. However, subject to the availability of immigration data by nationality and admission category (or reason for entry) of foreign nationals, the framework can be applied to other countries by replacing EEA nationals with any other national groups enjoying unrestricted mobility arrangements and adapting the entry categories subject to immigration controls to the local policy context and data classifications. As hinted above, a major limitation is that emigration data by category of entry are not routinely collected in most countries.

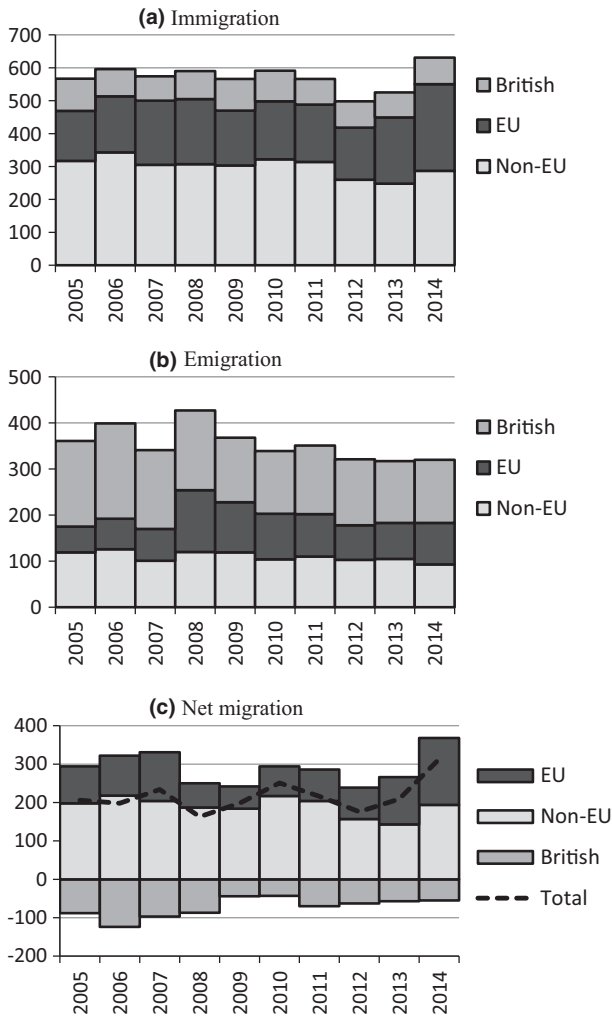
The application of the described framework to UK data provides a useful indications of the challenges of achieving a net migration target. The first level of analysis, based on the breakdown by nationality shows that UK governments have had limited control over significant parts of immigration and emigration flows (Figure 1). Over the decade 2005 to 2014, British and other EU nationals accounted for almost half (47%) of total immigration flows and for more than two-thirds (69%) of total emigration flows. It follows that largely uncontrolled variations in British and EU mobility significantly affected the net migration aggregate. For example, the major drivers of net migration change in the second half of the 2000s were the increase of British emigration and – with a counterbalancing effect – the decline of EU emigration. As for the components subject to migration controls, the non-EU migration balance was relatively stable from the mid-2000s until the last reform of the system. The effects of the restrictive changes are visible in the significant decline of non-EU immigration between 2011 and 2013, which resulted in a corresponding decrease of the non-EU net migration balance. Once again, however, a sharp increase of EU immigration since 2012 has driven net migration up to the pre-reform levels. Overall, these trends demonstrate that, in a country such as the UK with large unconstrained movements of own citizens and nationals of visa-exempt countries, government ability to achieve a lower net migration target by managing only regulated inflows from/to outside the EU might be severely limited.

Data in Figure 1 also allows for an assessment of the temporariness of EU and non-EU migration to the UK. It can be inferred that the majority of EU inflows were temporary: for example, an average annual inflows of 176 thousand in 2005–09 was followed by an average outflow of 101 thousand between 2007 and 2011 (i.e. when EU8 nationals who arrived from mid-2004 started to leave, partly owing to the unfavourable economic climate). On the other hand, with reference to the same periods the size of the outflows of non-EU nationals was only about a third of the average inflows, suggesting that a much larger proportion of non-EU migration was settlement-oriented. While the comparison with EU nationals is not fully representative because naturalization rates amongst non-EU immigrants are much higher (i.e. some might have left after having acquired British citizenship, thus being counted in the British outflow), the difference in the ratio of outflows to inflows between the two groups is large enough to conclude that, on a per capita basis, the cumulative contribution to net migration of EU flows was smaller than that of non-EU migration.

The composition of non-EU immigration by main reason for entry³ provides more clues on the ability of migration policies to steer inflows. Figure 2 shows sizeable changes in non-EU immigration by category of entry in the second half of the 2000s, with a large drop of labour-related inflows and “other” migrant groups (i.e. asylum seekers) and a large increase of international students. The decrease in the number of work permits issued to non-EU nationals was associated with the revision of the shortage occupation list and the introduction of the Points-Based system but also related to the worsening employment climate at the end of the last decade (Salt, 2014). The surge

FIGURE 1

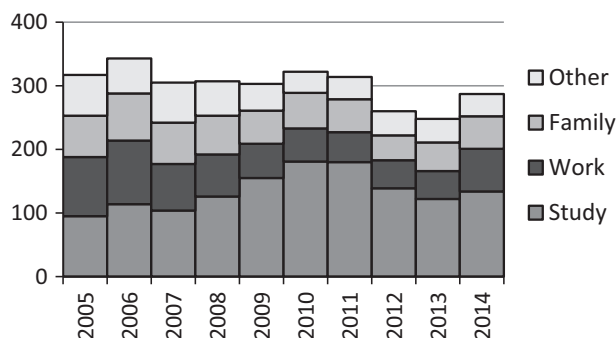
IMMIGRATION, EMIGRATION AND NET MIGRATION BY NATIONALITY. UK, 2005–2014 (THOUSAND)



Source: ONS, Long-term international migration estimates

of non-EU student immigration – accounting for more than half of non-EU inflows at the turn of the decade – was driven by the internationalization of tertiary education as well as by active overseas recruitment by UK institutions seeking to cope with domestic public funding cuts (Salt and Dobson, 2013). The restrictive changes introduced in 2011–12 to limit non-EU labour, family and student migration affected to a different extent the three entry routes: arrivals of international students significantly dropped, while labour- and family-related entries, after some initial decline, went up again in 2014. Overall, international students were the only group for which immigration numbers were significantly brought down by the reform and have currently remained lower than pre-reform levels – which resonates with the above-mentioned proposal to take students out of the net migration aggregate.

FIGURE 2
IMMIGRATION OF NON-EU NATIONALS BY MAIN REASON FOR MIGRATION. UK, 2005–2014
(THOUSAND)



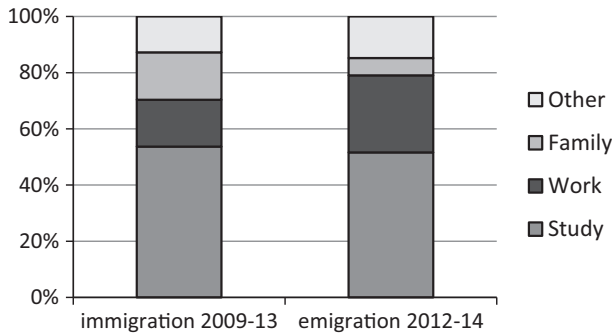
Source: ONS, Long-term international migration estimates

It is important to recall that official migration data do not capture irregular migration. The last – and by now probably out-dated – estimates of the stock of irregular migrants (and their UK-born children) living in the UK at the end of 2007 provided a range of 417,000 to 863,000, with a central figure of 618,000 (Gordon et al., 2009). This might be a larger presence (both in absolute and relative terms) than in most other EU-15 countries, although comparisons are fraught with difficulties due to the varying quality of these estimates (Vollmer, 2011).

The measurement of the contribution of each non-EU visa category to net migration is also undermined by the lack of comprehensive longitudinal data on emigration by category of initial admission. However, for the UK it is possible to compare the distribution of non-EU out-flows by previous main reason for immigration (available for the 3-year period 2012–14) with the composition by reason of entry of non-EU in-flows for the preceding five years (2009–13, Figure 3). This comparison provides pretty robust evidence that the propensity of non-EU migrants to settle varies widely by entry category. In line with expectations, the overrepresentation of labour migrants in the outflows strongly suggests that a significant share of work permit holders live and work only temporarily in the UK. A similar indication can be drawn for migrants coming to the UK to study, which make up more than half of the outflows. On the other hand, family migrants are highly underrepresented in the outflows, which testifies to the settlement-oriented nature of this migrant group. These patterns are also confirmed by the Home Office’s “Migrant Journey” report showing that the probability of having obtained leave to remain in the country after 5–7 years since arrival is much lower for work permit and student visa holders than for people who entered as family members (Achato et al., 2013). However, inconsistencies between Home Office administrative data and ONS estimates based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS) imply that the proportion of students who stay on after completing their studies is uncertain. This is also one of the reasons why it would be problematic to take international students out of the net migration target – see Migration Observatory (2015) for a comprehensive discussion of this topic.

Overall, the outcome of settlement restrictions seems to be consistent with the categorical selectivity of return (and secondary) migration, i.e. higher departure rates are observed for categories (such as students) whose opportunities for settlement are more restricted. However, the extent to which different emigration rates depend on the regulatory provisions rather than on the migrant original intention is difficult to assess. Assuming that settlement restrictions play a role, it follows that stricter admission requirements for categories whose opportunity for settlement are limited

FIGURE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF NON-EU IMMIGRATION (2009-13) AND EMIGRATION OF FORMER NON-EU IMMIGRANTS (2012-14) BY MAIN REASON FOR (PREVIOUS) IMMIGRATION (%)



Source: own elaboration of ONS Long-term international migration estimates and International Passenger Survey (IPS)

would contribute to reduce net migration mostly in the short term, because a reduction in immigration today will also bring about a decline in emigration (and therefore an increase in net migration) in the subsequent years. This has been referred to as the “net migration bounce effect” (Migration Observatory, 2012).

Repatriation policies for non-EU irregular migrants are likely to have numerically limited impact on overall levels of out-migration: over the decade 2004–13 enforced removals, voluntary departures⁴ and Assisted Voluntary Returns averaged 37 thousand cases per year (Blinder, 2015a: Figure 1), a relatively small number if compared with a non-EU emigration flow three times as high and especially with an average total outflow of 360 thousand. The scope for using these policies to achieve higher levels of out-migration is limited not only by their small target population (migrants who violated the conditions of entry to or leave to remain in the UK) but also by their high costs and possible non-compliance with international human rights frameworks (cfr. Cherti and Balaram, 2013)⁵.

FEASIBILITY OF A NET MIGRATION TARGET: OTHER CONSTRAINTS

The previous section illustrated the range of policy options that are typically available for managing different types of in- and out-flows with a view to achieving a lower net migration count. This section further elaborates on the challenges of setting and achieving a net migration target. From a demographic perspective, unequivocally identifying “ideal” levels of net migration on the basis of population growth targets is far from straightforward. Demographic research does not provide compelling evidence that – referring back to the UK example – a population size of 70 million would be less conducive to general wellbeing levels than a population of 80 million or 40 million. As for all demographic objectives – such as a given pace of population growth or a stable age structure – setting a net migration target is not a desirable policy objective as such, and only makes sense when the broader economic, social and environmental implications are taken into account. Clearly, competing priorities exist between these different policy domains: for example, a migration policy aiming at maximizing economic growth may look very different from one prioritizing the reduction of CO₂ emissions. Ethical issues are also at stake: not only in the functional logic underpinning the use of migration policies to achieve the receiving country’s national interests, but also in the risk of putting the blame on migrants for making population growth “unsustainable”. Therefore, an

obvious risk in UK “70 million” debate is that a complex series of issues affecting virtually every area of public policy are reduced to an arbitrary round number (Migration Observatory, 2012).

Competing interests and trade-offs associated with immigration restrictions also make setting an “optimal” level of net migration a problematic task. For example, limiting highly-skilled labour immigration might exacerbate labour mismatches in understaffed occupations and undermine economic competitiveness – a scenario that typically faces significant opposition from business sector representatives. Restricting opportunities for family reunification or asylum might jeopardize the country’s compliance with international human rights frameworks and undermine prospects for migrant integration. According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), since the 2012 reform the UK has the most restrictive family reunification policies in the Western world (33rd out of 33 countries in 2015, see <http://www.mipex.eu/family-reunion>). Restrictions on international student mobility might have budgetary implications for education institutions and undermine their capacity to attract foreign talents.

Indirect effects and unintended policy feedbacks of the net migration target are also possible. An inflexible target intrinsically requires the consideration of numerical trade-offs between “sub-targets” – e.g. a reduction in the admission of asylum seekers if more labour migrants are needed in a given period – constraining room for separately managing admission channels. Scholars have also identified two main types of unintended effects that restrictive immigration policies might generate. The first can be labelled “categorical substitution”, i.e. the shifts of immigration flows from one entry route to another (e.g. from labour to family migration or to irregular migration) as a result of restrictive policy changes introduced for one avenue (Czaika and de Haas, 2013). The second is that restrictive admission policies might discourage return intentions amongst those who qualify for shifting to a permanent immigration status – as exemplified by the settlement of Turkish and Moroccan “guest workers” in Europe after the recruitment ban in the 1970s (Castles and Miller, 2003) – resulting in a reduction of net migration mainly in the short term (in the medium-long term emigration will also decrease). However, neither of these hypotheses has been supported by conclusive empirical testing (Czaika and De Haas, 2013).

The effectiveness of a national-level net migration target as a tool to release the pressure of population growth on housing, public services, or the environment is also undermined by the lack of government control over internal mobility. Crucially, these concerns are contingent on where migrants settle and whether there is capacity to respond at local level. The UK is again a case in point because of the divergent demographic trends of Scotland, whose population was in decline from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s and is currently growing, albeit slowly, mainly because of the positive contribution of net migration. Here population growth is an explicit objective of the Scottish government’s economic growth strategy, and actions have been taken to attract migrants and encourage their settlement, reduce out-migration and ensure that Scotland’s circumstances are actively considered in central decision-making on migration policy⁶ (Kyambi, 2009). Therefore, a system based on capping net international migration may not represent an effective solution unless other structural reforms are implemented to promote the redistribution of the population from the most over-stretched areas to areas actively seeking to attract migrants. An example is provided by ad-hoc measures constraining the onward movements of resettled asylum seekers, although these policies have a limited demographic impact because of the relatively small sub-group of the migrant population involved. Research on the dispersal policy to resettle asylum seekers in Scotland suggested that most individuals had remained in the dispersal sites after being granted refugee status, but questioned the impact of constrained mobility on refugee opportunities for social and economic integration (Stewart, 2012).

Finally, it is worthwhile reflecting on the challenges arising from the long-term perspective implicit in a migration policy prioritizing demographic objectives. A first challenge is logistical, and has to do with the high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability of migration trends. Future international migration has proved to be more difficult to project than fertility and mortality because

migration flows are typically affected by sudden economic or political changes that are hard to predict. Net migration assumptions have been the major source of uncertainty for long-term population projections, particularly in demographic regimes characterised by low fertility and low mortality such as the UK⁷ (Shaw, 2007). Although less volatile, fertility and mortality might also deviate from forecasted trends – which, assuming that a given level of population growth is the policy objective to be achieved, would also require revisions of the net migration target. While demographers are aware that population projections are purely mechanical calculations formalizing the future outcomes of a set of assumptions (and that their reliability decreases the further these assumptions are carried forward in time), use of population projections for policy purposes is problematic due to these inherent uncertainties.

The second type of challenge is political. The idea of building long-term public consensus around a net migration target that could only contribute to lowering population growth over decades is at odds with governments' short-term electoral mandates. One may argue that opinion polls consistently showing over the years that a large majority (about 70%) of the British population favours a reduction in immigration could be taken as a sufficient political argumentation for limiting long-term net migration. Yet specific polling questions show that public opposition significantly varies by category of immigrants. In the UK, there is only minority support for reducing immigration of high-skilled workers and students (the categories that made up almost two-thirds of non-EU immigration over the last decade). Public opinion surveys also revealed a mismatch between perception of immigration and actual migration trends, i.e. preferences for reducing immigration are focused on numerically smaller groups (asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, extended family members) and on groups such as low-skilled EU workers whose mobility cannot be easily restricted (Blinder, 2015b). For these reasons, taking the overall support for reducing immigration as the only metric to justify a long-term net migration target remains politically problematic.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has addressed the questions of whether it makes sense to prioritise net migration as an outcome of migration policies, and whether it is feasible to achieve a net migration target given the barriers and costs involved. My analysis draws some lessons for migration policies from the recent UK experience. Although these lessons might not have immediate applicability across national contexts, they are relevant also for other EU and OECD countries where large parts of international mobility flows are not subject to immigration controls.⁸

The first lesson is that the ability of governments to achieve a net migration target highly depends on the extent to which citizens and other population groups that enjoy free mobility arrangements contribute to in- and out-migration flows. In a country like the UK, characterized by large scale mobility of its citizens, a significant part of total flows is beyond government control. The regime of free-circulation of EEA citizens and non-EEA permanent residents, combined with the great diversity of demographic trends across the EU, also implies that it would be difficult to adopt an immigration policy inspired by demographic objectives within a shared European system of migration governance.

Secondly, even immigration restrictions for categories that are subject to controls (e.g. non-EEA workers, family members, students and asylum seekers) are not exempt from constraints. Significant policy trade-offs are associated with the economic and social costs of immigration restrictions – e.g. the detrimental effects of restricting highly skilled labour migration for the competitiveness of the economy and the reduced opportunities for migrant integration that derive from a restrictionist agenda on family reunification. A second type of constraints is represented by the unintended

feedbacks and indirect effects of immigration restrictions – e.g. categorical substitution between different channels of entry and the potential incentive to settle. The cumulative effects of these constraints might jeopardize governments' capacity to achieve specified levels of net migration even for the flows that are subject to immigration controls.

A further implication of a low net migration target is that it provides an incentive to curtail “discretionary” immigration flows that are more numerous or more easily targetable (non-EU labour migrants and students) (Dayton-Johnson et al., 2007: 20), with a long-term effect of a distributional shift from more “productive” forms of immigration to rights-based flows that are often regarded as a burden to the system. This situation has historical precedents in post-1970s recruitment bans adopted by continental European countries like France and Germany, where immigration has since been dominated by family, co-ethnic and asylum flows. These countries have now departed from this policy approach – e.g. France's shift from “immigration subie” (suffered immigration) to “immigration choisie” (chosen immigration) – and implemented measures to attract highly skilled migrants.

Finally, the analysis presented in this article has highlighted that data requirements for a full assessment of the impact of migration policies on emigration (and therefore on net migration) are high. Evidence that in the UK migratory and settlement patterns widely vary by category of initial admission is relatively consistent, but the limited availability of category-specific emigration data remains a challenge in most receiving countries. This gap not only underscores the need for improved migration data collections, but also indicates a promising line of inquiry for further scholarly research.

The UK case study revealed a substantial “implementation gap” (cfr. Czaika and De Haas, 2013) between a stated policy objective of reducing the net migration balance as a means to stabilise population growth, and what the Government has been able to achieve. The results have exposed the limitations of a focus on curtailing net migration as a target of migration policies, which neglects and even conceals the diversity of migration flows and undermines the capacity of immigration policies to respond to different types of needs. In this light, the UK net migration target appears more as a demographic argument instrumentally deployed to provide a technocratic justification to a restrictionist immigration agenda than as a sensible and feasible policy objective. This does not mean, however, that evidence on the impact of net migration on long-term demographic trends cannot usefully inform migration debates. Indeed, one constructive element of the net migration debate is the departure from narrowly-framed migration discourses entirely focusing on short-term labour market objectives and considering migration in isolation, towards a broader, long-term perspective which sees migration as a structural phenomenon related to other socio-demographic trends.

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NOTES

1. The World Population Policies Database is compiled with data and information drawn from official Government responses to the United Nations Inquiry among Governments on Population and Development, as well

- as from publications, documents, statements and other materials that reflect the official positions taken by Governments (e.g. development plans, sectoral programmes, white papers, and different types of legislative documents).
2. Examples include categories such as Ministries of religion, ancestry-based admissions, and domestic workers travelling with their employers. Due to lack of data on irregular immigration (people who enter the country undocumented or overstay temporary visas) this is not listed as a separate category. Temporary immigration categories that in no circumstance can lead to settlement are also excluded (PBS Tier 5 regulating youth mobility and other visiting schemes).
 3. The stated reason for entry recorded by the ONS International Passengers Survey might not correspond to the actual type of visa held by the migrant on arrival. However this mismatch is likely to occur only in a limited number of cases.
 4. This includes also non-notified voluntary departures of people against whom enforced removal had been initiated.
 5. Although there are no Government published data on the costs of removals, estimates suggest that expenses for removing a failed asylum seeker amount to £11,000 (Cherti and Balam, 2013: 10)
 6. Immigration restrictions adopted by the UK central government have further exacerbated the divergences on immigration policies between Westminster and the Scottish Government. The need for greater control over immigration policy was one of the arguments put forward by the Scottish Government in the white paper making the case for independence from the UK.
 7. This is well illustrated by the numerous and sizeable revisions of net migration assumptions made in different sets of UK population projections released throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In the 1994 projections net migration was assumed to stabilize at zero in the long-term – reflecting the balance between immigration and emigration observed during the 1980s and early 1990s – and the UK population was projected to peak at 61 million and then start to decrease. Following several upward revisions of net migration assumptions, in the 2012-based revision the projected size of the UK population in 2031 is almost 11 million higher than in projections produced in the early 1990s (Cangiano, 2014).
 8. In Australia, for example, about 30% of immigrants and 40% of emigrants in 2010–2012 were Australians or New Zealanders (who are visa-exempt in Australia under the bilateral Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement) (ABS, online data on net overseas migration, accessed 9 September 2015).

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