

# Migration policy and high-skilled migrants

Net migration to the UK reached the all-time high of 336,000 in November 2015, according to figures from the Office for National Statistics. This is more than three times higher than the UK Government's target of fewer than 100,000 per year for net migration (ie, the amount remaining once emigration has been subtracted).

Policies related to cutting net migration face two challenges: on the one hand, the government cannot restrict migration of EEA (European Economic Area) workers, due to EU law protecting the freedom of movement across EU Member States. On the other hand, when focusing on non-EEA immigration there is currently no route for low-skilled labour migration into the UK, so any measures here must involve cuts in migration routes intended for high-skilled non-EEA nationals.

Dr Carlos Vargas-Silva and Dr Cinzia Rienzo from the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society have explored the effects of restricting non-EEA migration, primarily focusing on high-skilled migrant workers. They studied the impact of restrictions on overall high-skilled migration to the UK, on the inflow of high-skilled workers from the EEA, and on the high-skills component of the recent migrant workforce in the UK.

These migration restrictions could have several indirect impacts: they could encourage employers to recruit more British workers; increase recruitment of EEA high-skilled nationals; or change business practices to be

less dependent on employing high-skilled workers (for instance through up-skilling current workers or changing the production process).

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## Key findings

- Policies to decrease net migration were accompanied by a reduction in high-skilled migrant workers from outside the EEA and an increase in high-skilled migrant workers from within EEA. This is consistent with immigration policy changes targeting non-EEA nationals, including the restriction and closing of routes intended for high-skilled migrants.
- The decrease in high-skilled non-EEA migrant workers was almost 39 per cent between 2011 (when policies to reduce net migration came into effect) and 2013, while the increase in high-skilled 'Old EU' (pre-2004 EU expansion) migrant workers was 53 per cent.

## Key findings - continued

- Estimates from an alternative 'pre-policy' scenario for the period 2011-2013 indicate that there would have been more non-EEA high-skilled migrant workers and fewer Old EU high-skilled migrant workers in the UK in 2013.
- The findings suggest a migration policy 'balloon effect', where squeezing it at one end (restricting the number of non-EEA high-skilled workers) led to an increased size at the other (inflating the number of EEA high-skilled workers).
- The increase in EEA workers is likely to only partially compensate for the reductions in non-EEA workers.

## Policy relevance and implications

- Policies to reduce migration from outside the EEA are likely to have a smaller effect on overall migration than intended, due to the 'balloon effect': restricting one type of migration may lead to an increase in an unrestricted type.
- Policies to decrease migration are likely to have a negative impact on the UK talent pool. More effort is needed to ensure that any restrictions on migration are compatible with the goal of attracting the most talented from around the world.
- Government policy should explore possibilities for making better use of the skills of migrants who are already in the country. Some groups of migrants, such as those coming from the new EU member states, earn low salaries despite their relatively high levels of education.

**Policies to reduce migration from outside the EEA are likely to have a smaller effect on overall migration than intended, due to the 'balloon effect'.**

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Research by Carlos Vargas-Silva and Cinzia Rienzo on high-skilled migration from non-EEA and 'Old EU' states shows a possible substitution effect: restricting one type of migration may lead to an increase in an unrestricted type. The research evidence is consistent with this substitution effect for the case of high-skilled migrant workers in the UK.

Carlos Vargas-Silva, Cinzia Rienzo:  
*Targeting Migration with Limited Control: The Case of the UK and the EU*  
 Web: [www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2015/targeting-migration-with-limited-control-the-case-of-the-uk-and-the-eu/](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2015/targeting-migration-with-limited-control-the-case-of-the-uk-and-the-eu/)

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The Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) is a research centre within the University of Oxford part-funded by the ESRC. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policymaking and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.  
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