

UK migration target "is not useful or appropriate"

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The government's target to cut net migration to the UK to below 100,000 by 2015 is neither a useful tool nor a measure of policy effectiveness, according to a new discussion paper by UCL academics. The aim to achieve a single numerical net migration target, announced by the coalition government in 2010, is unique in the history of UK migration policy and also new in an international context.

The discussion paper, published online today by Professor John Salt and

Dr Janet Dobson from the Migration Research Unit (UCL Geography), examines progress towards the target over the first three years and highlights the issues and complexities involved in migration management.

Net inflow of migrants to the UK is calculated as the difference between the number of people entering the country and the number leaving. Therefore, reducing net migration means reducing immigration, increasing emigration – or both. The target applies to all immigrants and emigrants, including British citizens and those from other countries in the European Economic Area (EEA), whose movements are for the most part beyond government control.

The government has therefore so far focused its policies almost entirely on non-EEA citizens, making big cuts in Tier 1 (the highly-skilled) and in Tier 4 (students) coming from non-EEA countries. A drop in net migration from 252,000 in 2010 to 176,000 in 2012 mainly reflects this. However, the latest quarterly data suggest the decline in net migration may have halted – raising questions about where the further big reductions needed to meet the target can be found.

The authors point out: "It is not clear what happens next – where further cuts would come from, what policies would be needed to maintain a net inflow below 100,000, or what happens if an improving economy requires more skilled labour. Measurement of policy success is dependent on accurate data. However, the measurement being used in this case – the International Passenger Survey – is too imprecise to demonstrate whether the target has actually been met.

"We have serious doubts that the net migration target is either a useful tool or a measure of policy effectiveness and we believe that recent experience provides a number of lessons for future migration policy, both in the UK and internationally."

The authors cite evidence of the "collateral damage" already caused by actions to cut work-related, student and family migration – including the damage done to the UK's reputation as a good place to work and study, issues with workforce planning and the splitting up of families and relationships.

They add: "Too much of the debate about international migration in the UK is about 'immigrants' as an undifferentiated group, without getting to grips with who 'they' are, why they come, the jobs they do, the contribution they make and the length of time they stay. And there is almost no reference to the fact that international migration is a two-way street, involving British as well as non-British citizens, which is what net migration is all about. The flow of people out of the country is vital to achieving the target and is something over which the government has much less influence."

The authors argue that what is required is a policy which does not focus on a single net migration target but one which strikes a balance between minimising the economic and social costs of migration while maximising the benefits. They suggest any targets for non-EEA immigration should be based on estimates for different routes of entry (e.g. labour, family, student, asylum) rather than a single overall figure. They also point out that other policies impinge on migration.

The paper addresses the following questions by drawing on existing data and research:

- What is net migration and why does it matter?
- How is the coalition attempting to cut net immigration?
- What are the pros and cons of the government's approach to cutting net immigration?
- What are the wider implications of the policy?

They add: "We're not arguing against the objective of trying to reduce net [migration](#) nor against measures, which all governments take, to combat abuse of the system, such as sham marriages and bogus educational institutions.

"However, we do question how sensitive a target can be when economic, social and demographic circumstances are changing and are concerned that, having publicised the target the government is under pressure to prioritise its achievement over other considerations which may be in the national interest or the interests of individual citizens, and to act hastily to reach it in the promised time scale. Too much deterrence could be impacting adversely on the education sector and economy and creating negative social consequences for families."

More information: Discussion paper: 'Cutting net migration to the tens of thousands: what exactly does that mean?' ([PDF](#))

Provided by University College London

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