Office for National Statistics

Statistical bulletin

Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2021

Experimental statistics on UK international migration throughout 2020 and into 2021 including the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Table of contents

1 . Main points

- We are continually improving our methodology to measure migration; these latest experimental estimates are produced using a new method that relies less on International Passenger Survey (IPS) data and statistical modelling and makes greater use of administrative data.

- These estimates are not comparable with our previously published official measures of international migration, however, early insights of provisional census results gives us further confidence in these estimates derived from administrative data sources.

- Based on our current best assessment of available sources, net migration was estimated to be in the region of 239,000 in the year ending June 2021; there is a degree of uncertainty around today's figures, but this represents a small decrease from the year ending June 2020 (260,000).

- Non-EU net migration remained positive at 251,000 in the year ending June 2021, with 81,000 non-EU nationals emigrating compared with 332,000 immigrating.

- Both British and EU net migration are estimated to be close to zero in the year ending June 2021.

- Historically, a large part of non-EU net migration has been foreign students; current analysis of available sources on international students suggests a recent increase in those coming from abroad to study in the UK.

- As these estimates cover the period of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, there will have been some realignment of student arrivals which will affect the current picture; it will take time for these changes to be fully reflected in the data and provide a clearer picture on current trends.

Statistician's Comment

"The 12 months to June 2021 was a period when migration behaviour was impacted by the restrictions imposed to manage the coronavirus pandemic as well as ongoing changes in migration policy following Brexit. Bringing together the best sources of data we have available, our latest estimates of net migration suggest that around 239,000 more people came to the UK than left, driven by non-EU immigration.

Due to the data collection challenges posed by the pandemic, we've used new, experimental, methods to produce today's numbers and these will be finessed over the coming months as more data becomes available, including census numbers. While the figures give a snapshot of migration during the pandemic, they should not be compared with historic trends and are subject to change."

Jay Lindop, Director of the Centre for International Migration, Office for National Statistics.

Follow ONS Director of the Centre for International Migration @JayLindop_ONS

2 . Latest estimates

Experimental and provisional long-term international migration flow statistics for the UK for the year ending (YE) June 2021 have been published today by the Centre for International Migration, at the Office for National Statistics (ONS). They are our first set of estimates to cover a whole year (July 2020 to June 2021), when migration behaviour was impacted by coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic restrictions as well as ongoing changes in migration policy following Brexit.

They are available for immigration, emigration and net flows by British, European Union (EU) and non-EU nationality groups and will feed into the UK 2021 mid-year population estimates (MYEs) published in autumn of 2022 and into the Scottish 2021 MYEs in July 2022.

These estimates are produced using a different method to those previously published. This means that they cannot be compared with previous estimates such as those produced from the International Passenger Survey (published in Migration Statistics Quarterly Report) or more recently using statistical modelling (published in Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2020). As with the latter, these current estimates are experimental and uncertain and we plan to revise them, both as our understanding of the data and estimation improves and as migration patterns begin to normalise following the dislocation and impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Alongside YE June 2021 estimates we have provided YE June 2020 estimates to enable year-on-year change on a comparable basis. We have not provided a longer back series because of the experimental nature of the methods and planned revisions of migration estimates following the release of Census 2021 results later this year and the subsequent rebasing of mid-year estimates. Finally, we discuss how we could disaggregate data on reasons for migration in the future, with a focus on students in this bulletin.

Our release coincides with the publication of the latest immigration system statistics from the Home Office, for the period to the end of March 2022. Numbers of visas may indicate trends in the arrivals of long-term migrants but cannot indicate the net effect, once emigration is taken into account. The ONS and Home Office continue to work closely together to produce a coherent insight into UK international migration.

This bulletin forms part of a suite of international migration releases:

- Methods to produce provisional long-term international migration estimates, which explains the current and previous methods used to produce our experimental and provisional estimates

- an updated Revisions policy for population and International migration statistics

- A blog explaining the work of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to estimate migration flows in the year up to June 2021, as well as our wider population plans for the coming months

These estimates are experimental and provisional. They are based on administrative data and supported by statistical modelling. There is a degree of uncertainty around them that we are unable to quantify at this time.

3 . How these international migration estimates can and cannot be used

These latest estimates are experimental and provisional. These estimates can be used for:

- providing our current assessment of changes in international migration over the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic from the period year ending (YE) June 2020 to YE June 2021

- providing our current best assessment of the contribution of net migration flow to the overall UK population in the period YE June 2021

They cannot be used for:

- comparison with previously published official international migration estimates, including those published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in November 2021

- insight into migration flows in greater level of detail than the broad EU, non-EU and British nationality groups, or reasons for migration

4 . Experimental estimates of international migration

Understanding migration in a time of change (following Brexit and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic) is challenging. As more data becomes available, we have to adapt our methods accordingly.

Our latest experimental estimates for year ending (YE) June 2021 and YE June 2020 are produced using a new method that relies less on International Passenger Survey (IPS) data and statistical modelling and makes greater use of administrative data. This is in line with our ambitions published in April 2021 in International migration: developing our approach for producing admin-based migration estimates. In this, we shared our plans to move from IPS based estimates of intended migration to estimates based on actual activity observed in administrative datasets. Observed migration activity, from early insights of provisional census results, provide some confidence that these estimates derived from administrative data sources are more accurate than those derived using previous methods. Additionally, using these data and methods produces estimates that are more comparable with the latest Home Office statistics on the operation of the immigration system. However, these are still experimental estimates and may change in the future as our understanding of the data improves. Further details on our current and previous methods are available in the methodology that we have also published today.

Full results from the Census 2021 will be available later in 2022. This, alongside administrative data, will provide the clearest possible picture of international migration flows over the last decade. Following the rebasing of the mid-year population estimates that are due for release in spring 2023, we aim to use all the available information to publish a revised back series of long-term international migration flows over the course of the last decade.

These estimates are experimental and provisional. They are based on administrative data and supported by statistical modelling. There is a degree of uncertainty around them that we are unable to quantify at this time.

5 . Net migration to the UK in the year ending June 2021

The estimates for year ending (YE) June 2020 and YE June 2021 have a degree of uncertainty around them. The experimental methodology used to produce the estimates means that we are currently not able to quantify this uncertainty. Users should exercise caution when interpreting small changes between the time periods and/or estimates which are close to zero (and therefore maybe either positive or negative).

In the YE June 2021, we can be confident that long-term international migration continued to add to the UK population (Figure 1).

Our experimental and provisional estimates suggest that around 239,000 more people moved to the UK than left in the YE June 2021 (net migration). This compares with 260,000 in the YE June 2020 using the same experimental method. Almost all of this net migration is accounted for by non-EU nationals.

Figure 1: Total net international migration was mainly driven by non-EU nationals in year ending June 2021

Breakdown of net migration by nationality, year ending June 2020 and year ending June 2021

Figure 1: Total net international migration was mainly driven by non-EU nationals in year ending June 2021

Breakdown of net migration by nationality, year ending June 2020 and year ending June 2021
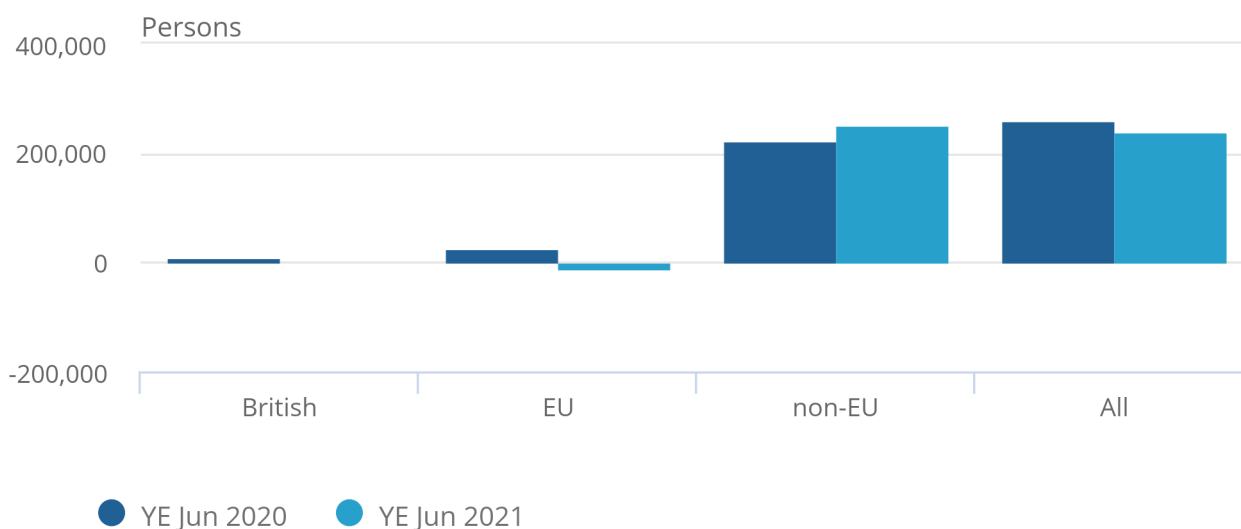
Source: Office for National Statistics; Department for Work and Pensions – Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID); Home Office

Notes:

1. Excludes some EU Nationals who were unable to register for a National Insurance Number (NINo) during the pandemic as a consequence of a partial suspension of DWP NINo registration services.

2. We are developing estimates of international migration using new methods and data sources. As such, international migration statistics are badged as experimental. The strengths and limitations sections includes more detail on the how these estimates should be interpreted.

3. YE: year ending.

The YE June 2020 (July 2019 to June 2020) and the YE June 2021 (July 2020 to June 2021) were highly unusual. The restrictions associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had a huge impact on travel patterns, with historical migration trends and typical behaviour patterns significantly disrupted. The other major event that occurred, in the year ending June 2021, was the end of the Brexit transition period on 31 December 2020, and the introduction of a new immigration system. The impact of this on migration is difficult to disentangle from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Operational processes were also impacted during the coronavirus pandemic, which affected the collection of some administrative data. The National Insurance Number (NINo) registration service was partially suspended in March 2020 for certain customers, with a phased return to normal operations completed by April 2021. Some of the trends seen in EU migration from RAPID may be affected by these restrictions, where some migrants may have arrived in the UK but were unable to register for their NINo. Therefore, they may not be included in the estimates from RAPID. For more information on the suspension of the NINo application process, see National Insurance numbers allocated to adult overseas nationals.

For the YE June 2021, net migration for non-EU nationals was positive (251,000). This is slightly higher than for the YE June 2020 (224,000). EU net migration was estimated at -12,000 compared with 24,000 in the year ending June 2020. British net migration was close to zero in YE June 2021, because of a similar number of British nationals estimated to have migrated (around 60,000) into the country as left (Figure 1).

These are experimental and provisional statistics and should not be compared with previously published migration statistics. There is a degree of uncertainty around them that we are unable to quantify at this time.

6 . Non-EU migration in the year ending June 2021

Figure 2: Non-EU net migration continues to be positive

Non-EU migration by flow type year ending June 2020 and year ending June 2021

Figure 2: Non-EU net migration continues to be positive

Non-EU migration by flow type year ending June 2020 and year ending June 2021

Persons

400,000	
200,000	
0	

YE Jun 2020   YE Jun 2021

● Immigration   ● Emigration   ● Net Migration
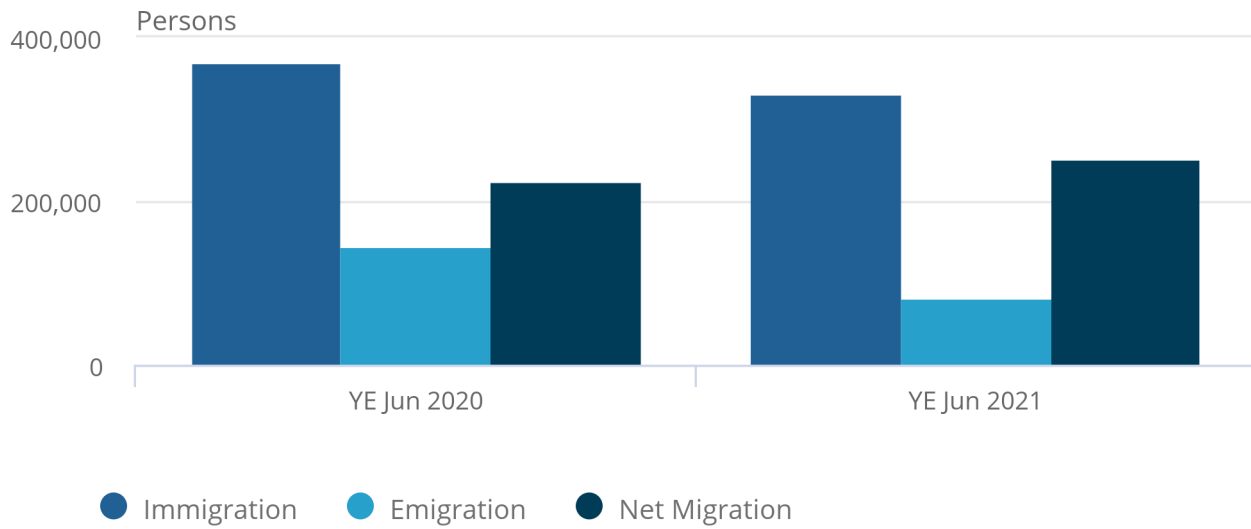
Source: Office for National Statistics; Home Office

Notes:

1. We are developing estimates of international migration using new methods and data sources. As such, international migration statistics are badged as experimental. The strengths and limitations section includes more detail on the how these estimates should be interpreted.

2. YE: year ending.

Using the new methods, our current best estimate for non-EU net migration suggests that it remained positive (251,000) in the year ending June 2021. Over the same period, these estimates suggest that immigration decreased to 332,000, while emigration decreased to 81,000.

Compared with published Home Office statistics on entry clearance visas granted, these show a 61% reduction between June 2020 and June 2021, though most of this is attributed to those on visitor visas. When focusing on only those granted for work, family and study (where we know long-term migrants are more likely to be on these routes) the number remained similar between the two periods broadly reflecting the immigration trend in Figure 2. However, these annual trends mask the sharp differences seen over the course of the coronavirus pandemic.

These are experimental and provisional statistics and should not be compared with previously published migration statistics. There is a degree of uncertainty around them that we are unable to quantify at this time.
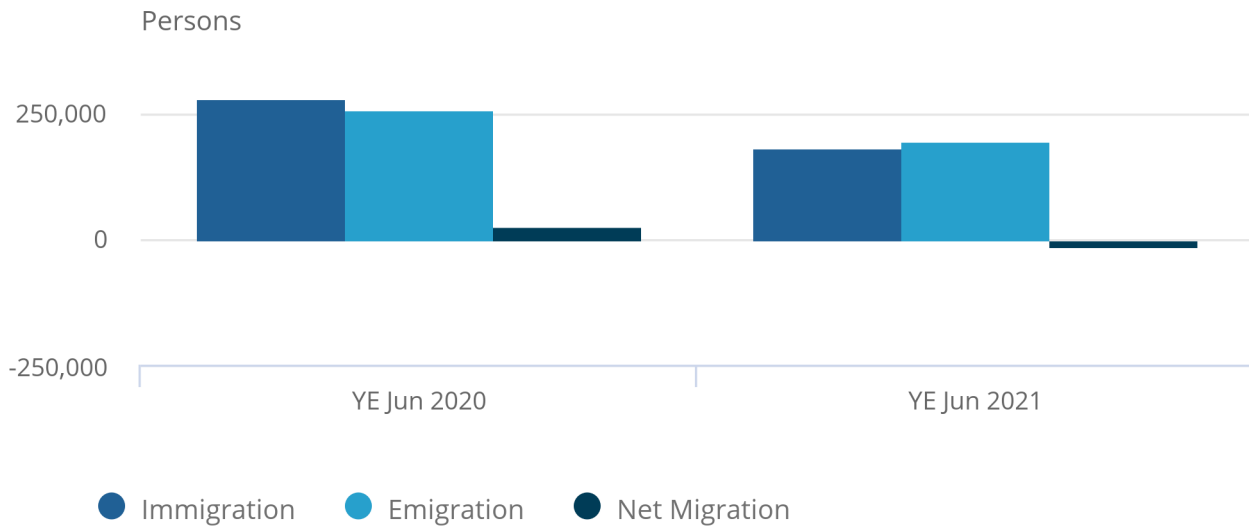
7 . EU migration in the year ending June 2021

Figure 3: Flows of EU migrants were lower in the year ending June 2021

EU migration by flow type, year ending June 2020 and year ending June 2021

Figure 3: Flows of EU migrants were lower in the year ending June 2021

EU migration by flow type, year ending June 2020 and year ending June 2021

Source: Office for National Statistics; Department for Work and Pensions – Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID)

Notes:

1. Excludes some EU Nationals who were unable to register for a National Insurance Number (NINo) during the pandemic as a consequence of a partial suspension of DWP NINo registration services.

2. We are developing estimates of international migration using new methods and data sources. As such, international migration statistics are badged as experimental. The strengths and limitations section includes more detail on the how these estimates should be interpreted.

3. YE: year ending.

In the year ending June 2021 EU immigration (181,000) was estimated to be slightly lower than EU emigration (193,000). Given the uncertainty surrounding the estimates, we can only say that there is a possibility that EU net migration was no longer positive.

These are experimental and provisional statistics and should not be compared with previously published migration statistics. There is a degree of uncertainty around them that we are unable to quantify at this time.

8 . Comparisons with other data sources

We are committed to being as clear as we can be about our methods, especially while they are in the experimental stage. We are working to fulfill the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) recommendations on transparency, making it easier for our expert users to understand how our estimates are calculated. This includes presenting headline measures using a range of sources, to demonstrate how the choice of source has a potential impact on the estimate.

Figure 4 contrasts these published estimates of non-EU immigration and emigration (which are derived using Home Office (HO) data) with comparable estimates derived using RAPID (Registration and Population Interaction Database: the DWP data used to produce estimates of migration for EU nationals). While we consider HO data to be a better source of data for measuring non-EU migration, levels of immigration are comparable whether RAPID or HO data are used. However, there are greater disparities in measures of non-EU emigration across the two sources, highlighting a potential area for research to understand these differences, and improve the underlying methods.

Currently HO data do not provide sufficient coverage to measure EU migration, leaving the Annual Population Survey (APS) as the only alternative source against which to compare published estimates. While the APS is not designed to measure long-term international migration flows it does provide insights into changes in the population. Levels of net migration as measured in the APS for both EU (-182,000) and non-EU (94,000) tend to be lower than published estimates (-12,000 for EU and 251,000 for non-EU). This larger gap for EU net migration highlights another area for future research to better understand what is driving this. The full results of Census 2021, available later this year, will also provide further data comparison opportunities.

Figure 4: Estimates of non-EU immigration are comparable on both RAPID and Home Office data sources

Breakdown of different data sources by flow type, year ending June 2021

Figure 4: Estimates of non-EU immigration are comparable on both RAPID and Home Office data sources

Breakdown of different data sources by flow type, year ending June 2021
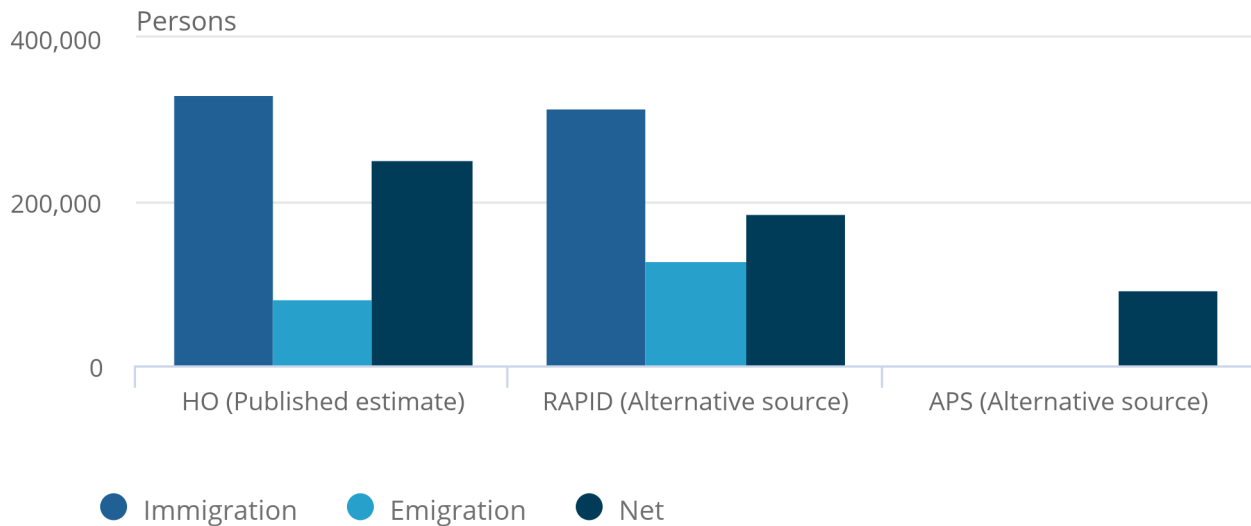
Source: Office for National Statistics; Department for Work and Pensions – Registration and Population Interaction Database; Home Office

Notes:

1. RAPID = Department for Work and Pensions – Registration and Population Interaction Database.

2. HO = Home Office.

3. APS = Annual Population Survey.

4. RAPID data excludes some EU Nationals who were unable to register for a National Insurance Number (NINo) during the pandemic as a consequence of a partial suspension of DWP NINo registration services.

5. Home Office data used does not currently include information on EU nationals.

6. The APS is not designed to measure long-term international migration but does give insights into changes in the population. Our research report details how estimates differ.

7. The letter 'x' found within the data download designates data that is not available.

9 . Reason for migration, using study as an example

The estimates presented in this release do not provide a breakdown of reason for migration. This is partly because of limitations in available information on EU nationals. Visas provide a good indication of the reasons many foreign nationals come to the UK, but they will include both short-term and long-term arrivals. New EU arrivals have only required visas from January 2021. Other EU nationals will have permission to enter as UK residents if already registered under the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) scheme. Therefore, we have to use other data sources for indications on why people migrate. We have used students to illustrate this, as the most common reason for immigration to the UK is currently to study, and sources indicate a continuing rise in student migration in recent years.

Student migration patterns are often difficult to analyse. They are generally thought of as temporary migrants, but previous research has shown that this is not always the case. They are typically a very mobile population and intentions change, for example, some go onto further study or work. If a separate net migration estimate for students was produced, an adjustment would have to be made to account for those that remain in the UK once completing their studies.

The analysis presented here is a first step in using available sources to better understand student migration patterns. More research will be done to develop robust estimates that account for these challenges.
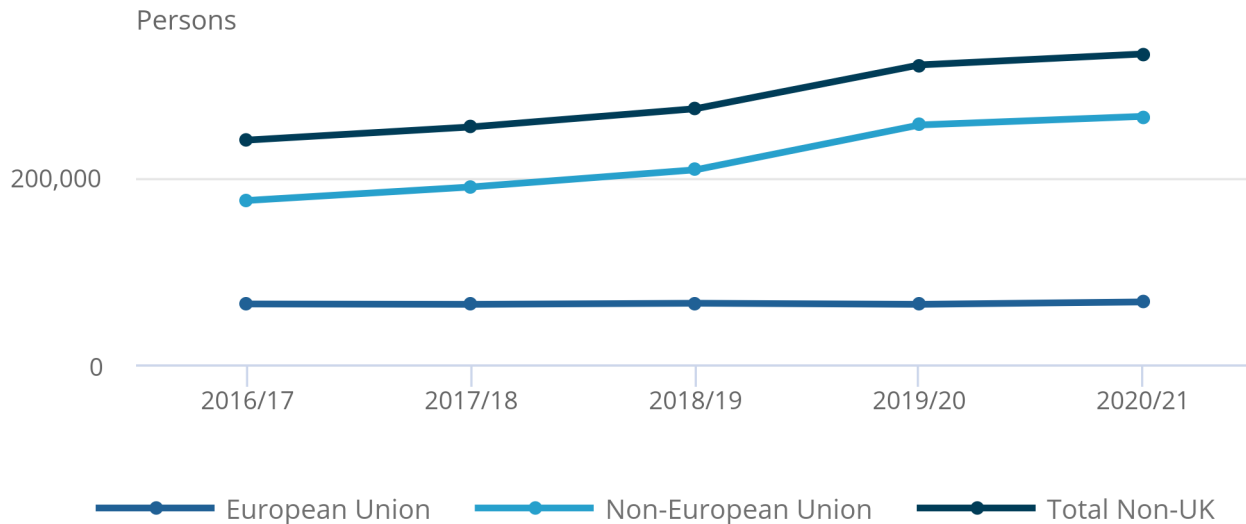
Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) suggest that there were 332,000 first year enrolments to UK higher education institutions (HEIs) from overseas domiciles in the academic year 2020 to 2021 (Figure 5). This is an increase of 4% compared with enrolments in the academic year 2019 to 2020 (320,000) and 21% compared with the academic year 2018 to 2019 (273,000). This was driven largely by enrolments from outside the EU (265,000), with some from EU domiciles (67,000).

Figure 5: First year student enrolments from overseas domiciles increased over recent years, driven by those from outside the EU

First year higher education student enrolments by domicile, UK, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Figure 5: First year student enrolments from overseas domiciles increased over recent years, driven by those from outside the EU

First year higher education student enrolments by domicile, UK, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

1. Academic year based on reporting period of 1 August to 31 July.

2. Domicile is a student's permanent home address prior to entry to the course.

3. For more information see the [methodology and notes section](#) on the HESA website.

First year enrolments alone cannot be used as a measure of student immigration. This is partly because they do not account for those who do not travel to the UK or their length of stay (some may be short-term migrants staying less than 12 months).

We must look to alternative data sources, such as [Home Office data](#) on non-EU nationals, to provide additional insight into the characteristics and behaviours of international students. These statistics highlight similar trends to HESA data, suggesting there was a large increase in sponsored study visas granted to non-EU nationals in the year ending June 2021, with a total of 281,000 issued. This is an increase of 10% compared with the year ending June 2020 and 11% compared with the year ending June 2019.

However, while HESA and HO data both show an increase in those studying, the numbers and rate of growth differ. This is likely in part because of definitional differences between the two sources. For example, the HESA figures are based on a student's previous country of residence whereas the HO data provide breakdowns by nationality. HESA also only cover first year enrolments at HEIs in the UK.

Caution should be used when comparing data from 2020 to 2021. The coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on the UK immigration system, both in terms of restricting migrant movements to and from the UK and the impact on operational capacity. Comparisons will therefore include impacts resulting from the restrictions put in place during this period of the coronavirus pandemic.

We know that not everyone who has been granted a visa uses it immediately. However, HO data allow us to see when visas are used, giving a clear indication of an individual entering the country. For example, of the study visas starting in Quarter 3 (July to September) 2020, 82% had a first arrival by the end of Quarter 2 (April to June) 2021. This is a decrease from the same period in 2019 where 95% of study visas starting in Quarter 3 2019 were used by the end of Quarter 2 2020. This is likely to reflect re-scheduling of plans to study because of the coronavirus pandemic, highlighted by Figure 6, meaning recent trends may reflect some rebalancing between study years and may not indicate trends well at present. It is also important to highlight that not all visas fulfilled represent a long-term immigrant as not everyone will go on to stay long-term (for 12 months or more).

Figure 6: Use of study visas has recovered since Q2 2020, but is still below previous levels

Study visas granted to non-EU visa nationals and associated arrivals, UK, Quarter 1 2017 to Quarter 2 2021

Notes:

1. Based on experimental analysis of Home Office border crossing data

2. Excludes visas with a leave to remain of less than 12 months

3. [Further information on Home Office border crossing data](#) is published annually by the Home Office.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

On emigration, recent analysis on [visa journeys and student outcomes](#) showed that 61% of non-EU students with a leave expiry date between 1 September 2018 and 31 August 2019 departed the UK. Others obtained new visas, such as for work or further study, therefore continuing to be a part of the UK population. This tells us that not all students will leave the UK at the conclusion of their studies and the intentions of students may change over time.

Research on outcomes of international students are based on pre-pandemic data. Behaviours of students with expiring visas are likely to have changed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, so caution should be applied when looking at these proportions in context to data during the pandemic.

This data provides insight into the migration patterns of international students from non-EU countries. However there is currently less information available on those from EU countries as many will already have permission to reside in the UK through the EU Settlement Scheme.

As the new immigration system embeds and matures, our ambition is to make greater use of HO data on visas to inform both our estimates of EU and non-EU overall migration patterns. We then hope to use information on visa type to provide breakdowns of international migration estimates by reason that are consistent with headline totals, as well as similar statistics published separately by the HO.

This will provide a richer picture of international student migration (including the new [Graduate Visa](#) route) as well as other reasons for migration. We will continue to update users on our progress as it develops.

10 . UK international migration data

11 . Glossary

Administrative data

Collections of data maintained for administrative reasons, for example, registrations, transactions, or record keeping. They are used for operational purposes and their statistical use is secondary. These sources are typically managed by other government bodies.

Long-term international migration

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Centre for International Migration uses the UN-recommended definition of a long-term international migrant: "A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence."

EU

EU is the sum of EU14, EU8 and EU2, plus Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 1 July 2013).

EU14

Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, the Republic of Ireland, Spain and Sweden.

EU8

Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004: Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

EU2

Bulgaria and Romania.

EU Other

The two Mediterranean countries, Malta and Cyprus, which joined the EU in 2004, and Croatia, which joined the EU in mid-2013.

Non-EU

Non-EU is the sum of the rest of the world including the rest of Europe. British nationals are excluded from these numbers.

12 . Measuring the data

We announced in the [August 2020 Migration Statistics Quarterly Report (MSQR)](#) that we would continue to develop methods using administrative data, given the known limitations of the International Passenger Survey (IPS). Further details on our progress, including our plans to use statistical modelling, were published in November 2021 in our [International Migration Statistical Design: progress report](#).

We continue to use the UN definition of a long-term migrant: a person who moves to a country other than that of their usual residence for at least a year.

A brief summary of our methods is given in this bulletin, with more details set out in the [methodology](#) that we have also published today (26 May 2022).

Non-EU nationals

Non-EU migration refers to estimates of migration for people who do not hold British or EU nationality. We use data from the Home Office ISA (Initial Status Analysis) system that combines visa and travel information to link an individual's travel movements into and out of the country. This dataset is known as the Exit Checks dataset, with more information provided within [Home Office statistics on exit checks: user guide](#).

EU nationals

The latest methodology to estimate the migration of EU nationals is based on [previous research to measure international migration using RAPID](#). The Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID) currently provides the best insight into the migration of EU nationals.

RAPID is created by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to provide a single coherent view of citizens' interactions across the breadth of systems in the DWP, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and local authorities via Housing Benefit. RAPID covers everyone with a National Insurance number (NINo) and for each person, the number of weeks of "activity" within these systems is summarised in each tax year. Records are then categorised as either long-term or short-term by looking for patterns of interactions with the tax and benefits system.

RAPID is created for the financial year ending April 2021 and estimates are disaggregated to a monthly series using rates of change in the EU IPS data.

British nationals

Our research into this subset of the population is ongoing. Identifying British migrants in administrative data is complex. Consequently, we continue to base our estimates on data from the IPS, using State Space Model (SSM) time series analysis to estimate their migration during the period when the IPS was suspended (March to December 2020). The IPS was re-instated in January 2021 and is currently the best insight into the migration activity of British nationals.

Further details on [our current and previous methods are available in the methodology](#) that we have also published today.

13 . Strengths and limitations

Because of the nature of the current methods, these estimates provide headline estimates only and cannot provide further breakdowns or insights.

Refugees and asylum seekers are currently excluded from the estimates. Asylum seekers are only included in Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID) data if their asylum application has been granted, at which point they are allocated a National Insurance Number (NINo) and can therefore interact with the benefits or employment systems. Persons arriving as asylum seekers or as refugees on resettlement schemes are identified and removed from IPS data. Further work will be carried out in order to incorporate these migrants into the overall statistics.

Information on strengths and limitations of the data sources are included in the [methodology](#) that we have also published today (26 May 2022).

14 . Related links

[Measuring migration: the story behind the headlines](#)
Article | Released 17 September 2021
In this interactive article, we take you behind the headlines and use the latest data to answer questions about international migration. We also explain why measuring migration is harder than you might think.

[How we are improving population and migration statistics](#)
Article | Released 15 November 2021
Find out more about our population and migration statistics transformation journey.

[Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality: year ending June 2021](#)
Bulletin | Released 25 November 2021
Latest population estimates for the UK by country of birth and nationality, covering the period from 2004 to the year ending June 2021.

[Building the richest picture of our population](#)
Blog | 28 January 2022
Pete Benton explains how, this year, with new census outputs and more frequent statistics from new data sources, the ONS will deliver richer and more timely insights than ever before.

[EU settlement scheme quarterly statistics, March 2022 (Home Office)](#)
Article | Released 26 May 2022
This report provides detailed statistics on applications made to the EUSS from 28 August 2018 to 31 March 2022, and applications concluded during the same time period.

[Irregular migration to the UK, year ending March 2022 (Home Office)](#)
Article | Released 26 May 2022
Statistics on irregular migration to the UK, including small boats.

[Immigration statistics, year ending March 2022 (Home Office)](#)
Article | Released 26 May 2022
Quarterly and annual statistics relating to those: coming to the UK, extending their stay, gaining citizenship, applying for asylum, and being detained or removed, as well as immigration for work, study and family reasons, including new visa routes where these are operational.

[Statistics relating to passenger arrivals since the COVID-19 outbreak, May 2022 (Home Office)](#)
Bulletin | Released 26 May 2022
A statistical report showing the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system, up to April 2022.