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# Migration into the UK in the early twenty-first century: temporal trends and spatial patterns

**Sam Scott** and **Lucy Clarke** explore the data covering more recent migration to the United Kingdom, most especially from the EU. They discover that since 2000 migrant destinations have changed. No longer do migrants head exclusively to the big cities and industrial areas, but to rural areas, like Boston in Lincolnshire, where there is plenty of work to be had in the agricultural and food sectors of the economy.

## The 'Age of Migration'

There is an overall global trend towards rising international migration. According to the IOM (International Organisation for Migration) there were 258 million international migrants globally in 2017, up from 102 million in 1980.<sup>1</sup> An international migrant, as defined by the UN, is someone who changes their country of usual residence for a period of at least a year, so that the country of destination becomes the country of usual residence. In the UK, the last time more people left than entered the country in a given year was 1993, and since then we have seen over a quarter-century of positive net migration. This represents an unprecedented period in UK history.<sup>2</sup> That the UK has become an attractive destination country is something to celebrate: one would have cause for concern were people leaving the country *en masse*. Equally though, some do worry about the levels and sustainability

of 'net migration' and there have been calls, for at least the past decade, to limit it;<sup>3</sup> though the practicalities of doing so are complex, and not necessarily economically advantageous. The vote for Brexit on 23 June 2016, was certainly connected to migration concerns among a portion of the UK public. However, it is important not to overstate this: more people in the UK view migration as a positive than a negative phenomenon (see Table 1).

## Temporal Trends: 'Europeanisation'

One of the key drivers behind rising migration to the UK in the 2000s and 2010s, has been EU expansion and, specifically, the 'A8' and 'A2' enlargements in May 2004, and January 2007, respectively. A8 refers to: Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia. These eight 'Accession' (hence





the 'A') states joined the EU in 2004 and could be subject to 'transitional restrictions'. The UK, however, did not apply these and allowed unrestricted entry. A2 refers to Romania and Bulgaria that joined the EU in 2007. In this A2 enlargement, the UK did apply 'transitional restrictions' and these lasted until the end of 2013 (for seven years).

Early predictions of the EU influx following enlargement were wide of the mark, with a 5,000-13,000 migrant inflow predicted from A8 countries following the 2004 enlargement.<sup>4</sup> In the event, the inflows into the UK from A8 and A2 countries were much more impressive in size (see Tables 2 and 3). Migrants coming to the UK to work must register for a National Insurance number (NINO) and these registrations are recorded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (Table 2). In the year before A8 enlargement (2003), a mere 6.6% of all new NINO registrations were to A2 and A8 workers. By 2014, the year after transitional restrictions were lifted on A2 workers, almost half (48%) of all new NINO registrations were to A2 and A8 workers. This represents a considerable and dramatic 'Europeanisation' of migration to the UK.

NINO figures relate only to migrants coming into the UK to work each year and do not indicate the numbers leaving the country. One can also look at general Long-Term International Migration

(LTIM) estimates (Table 3) as this data gives one a sense of 'net migration' (inflow less outflow) and covers all migrants, not just those needing to register for a NINO for work. Like the NINO data, the LTIM data shows a rise in A8 and A2 migrants as a percentage of total migration up until the 2016 Brexit vote: with A8 and A2 migrants falling considerably (as a proportion of all migrant inflow) over the 2015 to 2018 Brexit period. In particular, and across the NINO and LTIM datasets, A8 migrants appear to have become more reluctant to move to the UK over recent years, with a decline also evident amongst A2 migrants (though this is smaller and more recent in nature).

The 'Europeanisation' of the UK's international migration regime then seems to have peaked: tied to EU expansion into Central and Eastern Europe and bookended by the Brexit vote in June 2016. It is important, however, not to assume correlation equals causation. The inflow of A8 migrants, as measured by NINO registrations, reached a peak in 2007 and has been on a downward trend since then. In other words, the attractiveness of the UK for Central and Eastern European migrants is likely to relate to a range of factors (home country economy, host country economy, exchange rate, opportunities in other countries) with Brexit playing a major, but not exclusive role.

### **Spatial Patterns: 'New Immigrant Destinations' (NIDs)**

Alongside these temporal trends, there are interesting geographies to recent migration into the UK. Most obviously, the Europeanisation of migration identified above has been paralleled by the emergence of 'New Immigrant Destinations' (NIDs). Traditionally migrants have been associated with major metropolitan centres; in the UK case cities like London, Manchester and Birmingham stand out. Indeed, when people think of migration they tend to get drawn to these historically significant areas of population diversity. Recently, however, scholars have begun to realise that the impact of migration is spreading to NIDs and becoming more diffuse in nature.

NIDs were first explored in a North American context and '...to date, have been studied almost exclusively in the US, with sporadic attention to immigrant settlement in new places elsewhere.'<sup>5</sup> When talking about NIDs, one is not just referring to the emergence of newly diversifying towns and cities, but also to the penetration of migrants into the now-global countryside of the developed world. The latter phenomenon is associated in particular with migrant employment in labour-intensive horticulture and food processing and this sector, more than

Table 1: Attitudes toward migration in the UK, 2011–2018

Would you say that immigration has generally had a positive or negative impact?	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
% Positive, UK	19%	25%	26%	28%	35%	40%	48%
% Negative, UK	64%	52%	51%	44%	39%	34%	26%

Table 2: Migrant National Insurance Number (NINO) Registrations, 2002–2018

Year	Total Migrant NINO Registrations	EU A8 NINO Registrations	EU A2 NINO Registrations	EU A8 and EU A2 as % Total Migrant NINO Registrations
2002	311,288	9,517	5,281	4.8%
2003	362,152	16,860	6,964	6.6%
2004	412,740	68,658	9,338	18.9%
2005	618,692	236,430	6,109	39.2%
2006	632,937	276,447	4,378	44.4%
2007	797,090	334,628	31,418	45.9%
2008	669,660	230,885	39,356	40.4%
2009	613,237	167,633	33,620	32.8%
2010	667,486	176,824	31,405	31.2%
2011	671,219	181,977	40,281	33.1%
2012	518,954	161,456	26,033	36.1%
2013	617,237	201,649	27,697	37.2%
2014	767,765	182,575	187,361	48.2%
2015	828,198	184,738	209,079	47.6%
2016	824,782	158,402	231,371	47.3%
2017	682,613	113,494	192,757	44.9%
2018	632,670	84,636	167,607	39.9%

Table 3: Long Term International Migration (LTIM) Estimates, 2008–2018

LTIM	EU A8 Net Migration	EU A2 Net Migration	Total Net Migration	EU A8 and EU A2 as a % of Total Net Migration
YE Dec 2008	20,000	4,000	229,000	10.5
YE Dec 2009	16,000	11,000	229,000	11.8
YE Dec 2010	49,000	7,000	256,000	21.9
YE Dec 2011	40,000	8,000	205,000	23.4
YE Dec 2012	30,000	8,000	177,000	21.5
YE Dec 2013	44,000	21,000	209,000	31.1
YE Dec 2014	48,000	44,000	313,000	29.4
YE Dec 2015	46,000	58,000	332,000	31.3
YE Dec 2016	5,000	54,000	281,000	21.0
YE Dec 2017	6,000	40,000	285,000	16.1
YE Dec 2018	-10,000	33,000	258,000	8.9

any other, appears to account for the rise in migration in NIDs in the rural areas of the developed world.<sup>6</sup>

The census provides the optimal lens through which to view migrants' residential decision making. However, at the time of writing, the 2011 census is dated. Thankfully, there are a number of other datasets that allow one to examine the geographies of migration between census dates, namely: LTIM data; the Annual Population Survey (APS); NINO registrations; GP registrations; and the annual School Census.

Focusing on NINO data from the decade 2008–17, we calculated the 10 year annual average number of new migrant NINO registrations for all areas of Great Britain. We then mapped this 10y annual average as a proportion of the population within a given area. The results are shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 clearly identifies a number of key NIDs outside of Greater London. In Boston, for example, each year for the period 2008–17 new migrant NINO registrations account for 6.2% of the resident population. Similarly impressive annual influxes (annual migrant NINO registrations as a proportion of the resident population over the decade 2008–17), are recorded in NIDs like Cambridge (4.9%), Oxford (4.5%), Luton (4.2%), Reading (3.9%), Peterborough (3.6%), and Northampton (3.2%). Looking in detail at NINO registrations in Boston one can see a dramatic increase from 2002 (251 new migrant NINO registrations) to 2016 (3,774 new migrant NINO registrations) that is undoubtedly associated with EU A8 and A2 enlargements (Figure 2). However, from 2016 there is a decline in new migrant NINO registrations that coincides with the Brexit vote.

Beyond NINO data, and as noted above, there are other datasets that allow one to examine the geographies of migration in the UK between census periods. Figure 3 shows data from the Annual Population Survey (APS) according to the change in the non-UK-born population over the 10-year period 2008 to 2017. Once again, a number of NIDs emerge, this time reflecting a rapid growth in the non-UK-born population, albeit usually from a low base. Bassetlaw saw its non-UK-born population rise by 450% between 2008–2017, Exeter saw a 333% rise, Canterbury a 267% rise, Bolsover a 250% rise, and South Hams a 250% rise. As with NINO data, the APS underlines the fact that the geography of migration to the UK has shifted over recent years and that a range of NIDs have emerged beyond the tradition settlement cities.



Figure 1: Annual average new migrant NINO registrations (2008–2017) as a proportion of resident population.

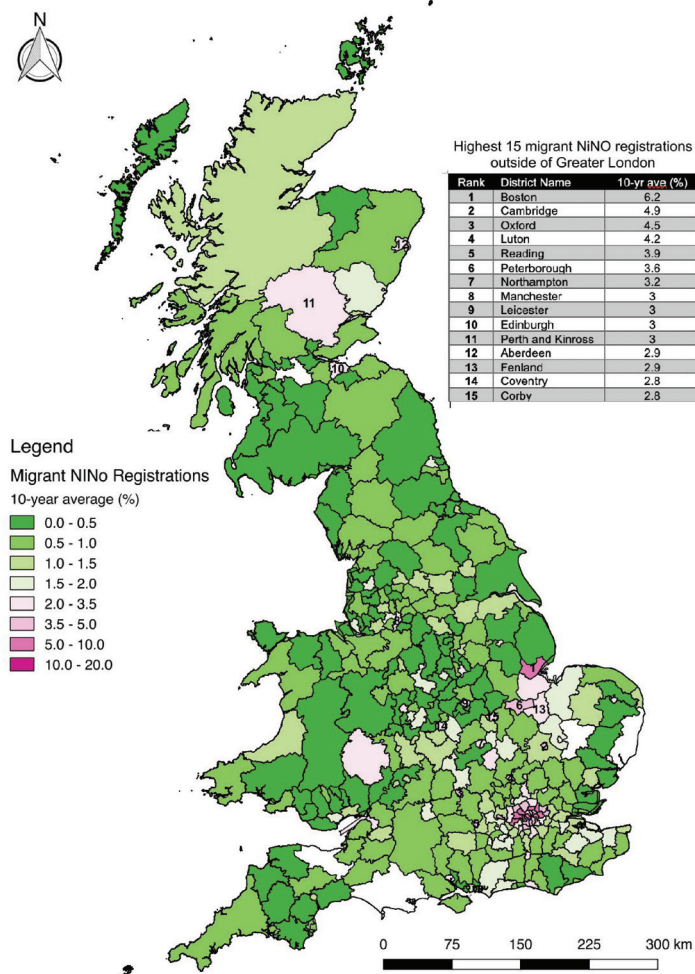
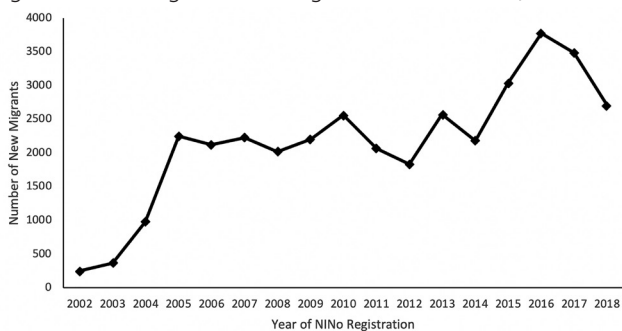


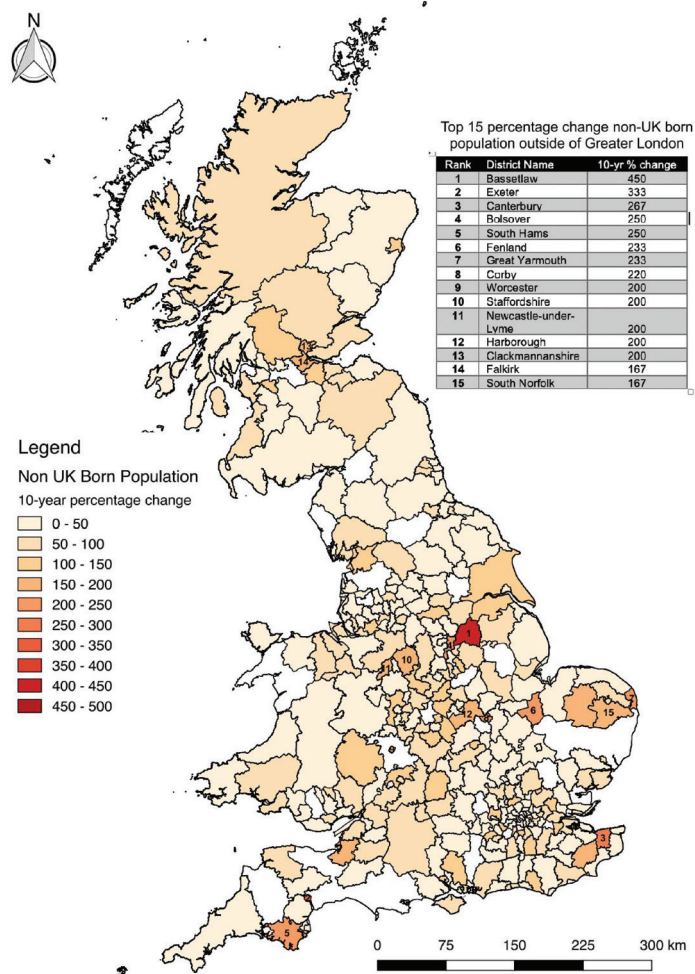
Figure 2: New migrant NINO registrations in Boston, 2002–18



## Conclusions

Migration is a highly significant population process and, in the UK case, the first few decades of the twenty-first century have been extremely important. Reflecting back on this time, we have seen, as a result of EU enlargement, a particular rise in migration from A8 and A2 countries. Recently, however, these inflows have begun to decline, a decline that partly coincides with the Brexit vote, but also appears to somewhat pre-date it. In addition, it is clear that recent migrants to the UK are settling, whether through choice or constraint (and more research is needed here) in what are called New Immigrant Destinations (NIDs). The geographies of migration in the UK are changing and places not associated with significant foreign-born populations in the twentieth century are apparently becoming increasingly diverse in the twenty-first century. In terms of future research, it would be interesting to compare

Figure 3: Annual Population Survey (APS) non-UK-born population percentage change 2008 to 2017.



the stories revealed by the data in this paper with the changes revealed by a comparison of the 2011 versus 2021 censuses. In addition, there is clearly work that can be done to improve the data that is available to look into migration between census points. Most notably, it would be extremely useful to be able to examine active migrant NINO registrations by area, rather than just total new NINO registrations. This would give a stock figure rather than just an inflow figure, and allow a more accurate real-time assessment of the temporal trends and spatial patterns associated with contemporary labour migration.

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