By restricting entry, settlement and family reunification in the UK now, the UK risks putting off those that it will be seeking to attract in the future, as well as making the process of migration more precarious for all, says Ruth Grove White

At the end of 2011 the immigration debate in the UK is, understandably, shaped by wider pressing concerns. Life in austerity Britain is set to become grimmer for many as the public purse strings are tightened, unemployment rises and public services are further squeezed.

In this context, the flurry of facts and figures coming from research centres, think tanks and economists which emphasise the role of migration for supporting growth and contributing towards British universities, businesses, towns and communities, have little chance of capturing public imagination. On the contrary, when it comes to immigration, the argument that appears to have gained most traction is coming from purveyors of fear and blame such as MigrationWatch through clever messaging and red top media support.

What do they bring to the table? The headline argument put forward by MigrationWatch is that all but ‘properly controlled’ immigration presents immediate threats to the UK, bringing congestion, competition and overcrowding. The thrust of their current argument, projected through the newspapers and a recent online petition, is that population growth is spiralling out of control. They cite ONS statistics which project that the UK population will rise to 70 million within 16 years, largely as a result of migration, arguing that the only way to avoid these side effects is to take ‘all necessary steps’ to reduce immigration levels to the UK. According to MigrationWatch this translates into a yearly net migration figure below 40,000 which is needed to “stabilise population”.

There are many reasons to find this proposal unconvincing and overly gloomy. Despite a host of restrictive policies over the past decade, net migration has continued to increase. Figures for 2010 show that annual net migration to the UK in that year was 252,000, the highest calendar figure on record, and proving that migration trends have a way of defying the wishes of policy-makers. As pointed out by Matt Cavanagh at the ippr, really bringing about such a drop in migration would likely involve drastic measures such as leaving the EU, making all labour migration temporary, and stopping marriage of British citizens to foreigners – most mainstream politicians would not seriously advocate these measures.

But there is a wider context which urges that we look beyond this position. Migrant Rights Network's recent meeting on global migration, organized in partnership with Chatham House, explored the difficulties of balancing national pressures against global challenges across the EU, USA and UK. Although there are efforts to reduce migration across western liberal democracies, the shifting global context is moving us in another direction.

Like it or not, international mobility is set to increase over coming decades – and will be likely to confound policy-makers who find themselves unable to reconcile populist national agendas with the reality of global trends. The 'Global Migration Futures' team at Oxford University anticipates that likely macrotrends, such as higher standards of education, cheaper technology and travel and climate change in countries across the world, are likely to have significant impacts on patterns of movement.

But it is not only people who will be wanting to move – many states will be hoping to attract them.
Future migrants are likely to target countries with good prospects for growth and an ability to accommodate international skills, talent and capital. Researcher Hein de Hass points to the 'self-centred notion' of western states, that assume they will continue to be an attractive destination to migrants in the future. But as we can begin to see already, the financial crisis has made the prospects for migrants coming to these countries significantly less appealing. He argues that, at the moment, it is countries with booming economies and in closer proximity to migration source countries, such as Mexico, Turkey, Brazil and India, that are attracting migrants in large numbers, rather than the UK.

Looking ahead, the UK's need for migration is deeply embedded, and is unlikely to decline. The UK is heavily reliant upon international migration to sustain our higher education sector, contribute towards business, international trade and investment and provide critical public services.

The Office of National Statistics projections indicate a drop in the UK's working age population in relation to the cohort at pension age by 2035 – in short, the UK may well be in greater need of skills across the labour market in the future. But according to predictions of researchers at the New Economics Foundation this is when UK will be in real competition for migrants with other developed nations, as well as with rising economic superpowers such as China, India and Brazil, which provide more obvious return for the investments made by migrants. By restricting the possibilities for entry, settlement and family reunification in the UK now, the UK risks simply putting off those that it will likely be seeking to attract in the future, as well as making the process of migration more precarious for all.

All this is not to dismiss the challenges of the present, but to point out the urgent need for a pragmatic long-view when devising policies and when debating these issues. If continued immigration will not only be inevitable but vital to our national interests, then surely the best strategy is to plan for it by strengthening the structures and systems which make it work for the benefit of all, rather than trying to turn back the clock to no avail.

What we need is not time and money spent trying to convince the public that less migration is both possible and desirable, but efforts to build a better narrative and policy agenda which can prepare the UK for occupying a place within the global economy and society of the future. This will involve investing in local structures which support migrant integration, regulating business to ensure that migration is associated with fair employment conditions, and ensuring that the possibilities for migration to the UK meet the needs and interests of employers, communities and migrants themselves.

Of course wider public concerns about the scale and impacts of migration in the UK must be addressed, but this will not happen by overplaying the negative aspects of migration and devising new policies to restrict them. We need measures which will address the underlying causes of tensions between some communities and their newer arrivals, such as the chronic shortage of social housing in the UK. This must be accompanied by a bigger narrative about the future of the UK and the role that migration will continue to play.

Ultimately, we will find out that we don't have much choice about whether immigration is part of our future, but what we can decide is how to respond to it.

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