



BRIEFING

Migration Statistics February 2011

Sarah Mulley

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ippr, 4th Floor, 13–14 Buckingham Street, London WC2N 6DF
+44 (0)20 7470 6100 • info@ippr.org • www.ippr.org
Registered charity no. 800065

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About the author

Sarah Mulley is Associate Director for Migration, Trade and Development at ippr.

What do the latest migration statistics say?

Overall migration¹

Net migration is continuing to rise, but this is largely explained by decreased emigration, rather than increased immigration.

Estimated net long-term immigration to the UK (the surplus of people immigrating over people emigrating) in the year to June 2010 was 226,000. This compares with 166,000 in the year to June 2009, an increase of around 35 per cent (but is still lower than the peak of net migration in 2004/05). The increase in net immigration is due to the continued decline in emigration (down 13 per cent on the year to June 2009, and down almost 20 per cent since a peak of 427,000 in 2008) rather than any significant increase in immigration (up 1 per cent on the year to June 2009, and largely stable since 2004).

Different measures of migration

Immigration: total number of people moving to the UK (British and non-British), usually defined as those staying for more than one year.

Emigration: total number of people leaving the UK (British and non-British), usually defined as those going for more than one year.

Net migration: the difference between immigration and emigration. If immigration is more than emigration, net migration is positive (**net immigration**); if emigration is more than immigration, net migration is negative (**net emigration**). Small levels of net migration can occur even with high rates of immigration: it is zero if immigration and emigration are the same, however high those rates might be.

Net non-British migration: the difference between immigration and emigration of non-British nationals.

Example: in 2008, 85,000 British citizens migrated (back) to the UK and 172,000 left; 505,000 non-British nationals migrated to the UK and 255,000 left. This meant that immigration was 590,000 (85,000 + 505,000), emigration was 427,000 (172,000 + 255,000), net (im)migration was 163,000 (590,000 – 427,000) and net non-British (im)migration was 250,000 (505,000 – 255,000).

Note that most migration statistics include only those who move to, or leave, the UK for more than 12 months. Note also that 'British citizens' includes previous migrants who have subsequently taken British nationality.

Declining net emigration by British citizens accounted for a substantial proportion of the increase in net immigration.² Net emigration by British citizens was 30,000 in the year to June 2010, compared with 61,000 in the year to June 2009, a decline of over 50 per cent. This is the lowest level of net emigration of British nationals since 2001 and a substantial decline from the peak of net British emigration of around 130,000 in 2006/07. Most of this decline in net emigration was driven by reduced emigration by British citizens (down 22 per cent), rather than by increased immigration by British citizens.

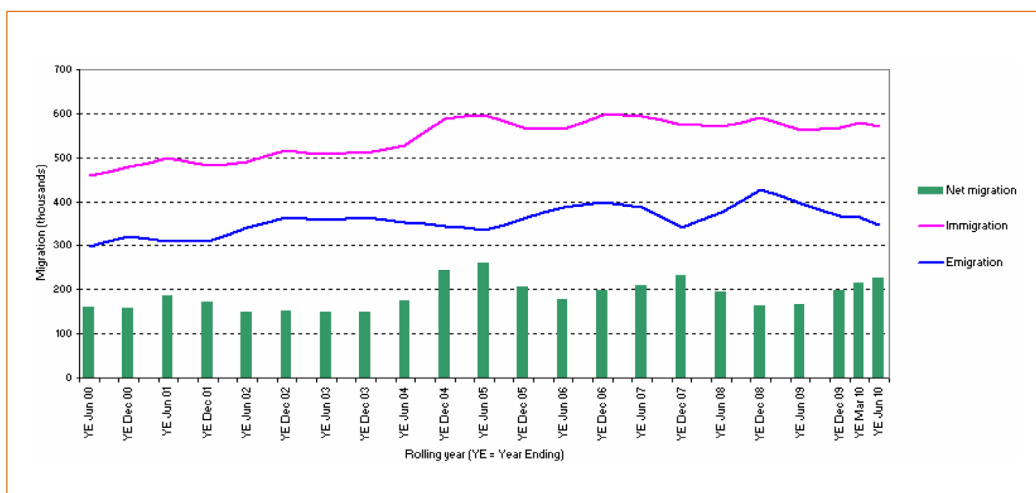
Meanwhile, net immigration by non-British nationals was 255,000 in the year to June 2010, up 23 per cent on the year to June 2009, but still significantly lower than the peaks of over 300,000 seen in 2004 and 2007.

The net emigration by citizens of A8 countries during 2009 has not continued, but net immigration by A8 nationals was only 17,000 in the year to June 2010. (Net immigration from A8 countries peaked at over 80,000 in 2007.)

¹ All data in this section come from Office of National Statistics (2011) *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report February 2011*, unless otherwise stated.

² Data broken down by nationality are provisional International Passenger Survey (IPS) data (which exclude, for example, asylum seekers), whereas total immigration data are provisional Long-Term Immigration (LTIM) data – the two are therefore not directly comparable. But based on provisional IPS data, decreased net emigration by British citizens accounted for almost 40% of the increase in total net immigration.

Total long-term international migration estimates, UK, 2000–10



Immigration through different routes³

Immigration for work is stable. In the year to December 2010, 166,660 employment-related visas (including dependents) were issued, an increase of 3 per cent compared to the year to December 2009 (and down from a peak of over 260,000 in the year to December 2006).

Grants of employment visas under Tiers 1 and 2 of the points-based system (PBS) were around the same in 2010 as in 2009 (just under 56,000), but numbers remain substantially lower than 2007 and 2008.

The number of Tier 4 Students and pre-PBS equivalent student visas issued in 2010 was 253,845, down 7 per cent on 2009, although levels remain somewhat higher than 2007 and 2008.⁴

The numbers of visas issued for family reunion/formation were around the same in 2010 as in 2009 (just over 46,000), and substantially lower than 2007.

The dramatic fall in asylum applications continues – applications were down 27 per cent in 2010, compared to 2009. Asylum applications are now at the lowest level seen in the last decade, and significantly lower than the very high levels of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Settlement and citizenship⁵

Grants of settlement rose significantly in 2010 (up 22 per cent on 2009) and are now at historically high levels. The number of people granted British citizenship in 2010 was down 4 per cent on 2009, although remains higher than 2005 to 2007.

Migrants in the UK population⁶

In the year to June 2010, 11.4 per cent of the UK population were non-UK-born, more or less unchanged from the previous year. Non-British nationals made up 7.2 per cent of the UK population in the year to June 2010.

3 All data in this section taken from Home Office (2011) *Control of Immigration: Quarterly Statistical Summary, United Kingdom – Q4 2010* unless otherwise noted. Note that visa data measures intentions to come to the UK, rather than actual arrivals.

4 Data on student migration is explored in more detail in Mulley S and Sachrajda A (2011) *Student Migration in the UK* London: ippr. <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=802>

5 See Home Office *Control of Immigration: Quarterly Statistical Summary, United Kingdom – Q4 2010*.

6 See ONS *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report February 2011*.

What explains the trends?

Total immigration and emigration

Falls in net migration from the new EU member states have helped to reduce total net migration since peaks in 2005 and 2007, and net immigration from these countries remains low. With the expansion of the EU in 2004, only the UK, Sweden and Ireland fully opened their labour markets to workers from the new accession (A8) countries. The result for the UK was a rapid, substantial, and largely unpredicted wave of migration from countries such as Poland. However, this proved to be a short-lived phenomenon.

Net migration has historically been correlated with economic growth, and previous recessions have seen the UK experience net emigration. Pre-recession levels of net immigration were substantially higher than those seen before previous recessions, so it is perhaps unsurprising that net migration did not fall to the same extent on this occasion. However, it is certainly the case that changing economic conditions have led to a decline in immigration to the UK for work, and have led more migrants to return home. This is both because there is less work available now in the UK and because the weakened pound has made the UK less attractive to migrants who want to work here and send money home.

On the other hand, the weakened pound has made the UK an attractive destination for international students, which may have helped to maintain high levels of student immigration despite the economic conditions.⁷

The UK has seen net emigration of British citizens (including migrants who have gained British citizenship) for most of the last three decades, but this net emigration is now declining sharply. More British people are returning to the UK, but the most significant trend is that many fewer British people are emigrating to other countries. This seems likely to be due to global economic conditions. Some key destination countries for British emigration (such as Spain) have been badly hit by the economic crisis, which has reduced employment opportunities for British migrants. A weaker pound has also made it more expensive for British retirees on fixed incomes to move abroad, and for British students to study overseas. ippr has looked at British emigration in more detail in a recent report.⁸

Changes in UK immigration policy have also had an impact on numbers. The roll-out of the PBS for managing migration to the UK for work and study helped to reduce immigration numbers in 2008–09, as did subsequent changes to the rules made in response to worsening economic conditions. Policy changes since the 2010 general election are too recent to be reflected in most of today's statistics.

Settlement and citizenship

The increase in the number of immigrants being granted settlement in the UK is striking – particularly at a time when levels of immigration are relatively stable. This is explained by the gap which typically occurs between immigrants arriving in the UK and their applying for settlement and citizenship – so this spike in grants of settlement is a lagged effect from the 'boom years' of immigration. Second, as the immigration regime in the UK becomes ever-tighter, migrants may be choosing to apply for settlement now for fear that their ability to do so may be restricted in future – the last government tightened the rules, and there are good reasons to expect that the current government will continue this process. A final point worth mentioning is that greater numbers of asylum-seekers who have been waiting years for the case backlog to clear have been granted settlement as part of the ongoing case-resolution process.

What does this mean for immigration policy?

The increase in net immigration shown in today's statistics is bad news for the government, given its aim of reducing net immigration to 'tens of thousands, rather than hundreds of thousands'. With net immigration now rising again, after a period of substantial declines, this objective looks like it is becoming harder to reach.

7 See Mulley and Sachrajda 2011.

8 Finch T with Andrew H and Latorre M (2010) *Global Brit: Making the most of the British diaspora* London: ippr. <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=760>

In seeking to achieve this objective, the government has already introduced a temporary cap on immigration via Tiers 1 and 2 of the PBS, and has announced a permanent cap to be introduced in April 2011; has proposed substantial restrictions on student immigration; has announced its intention to review family visas and settlement rules; has brought forward various initiatives planned by the previous government, including stricter language requirements for those entering the UK through family formation/reunion visa routes; and has made clear that future EU expansion will be accompanied by transitional controls on migration to the UK from new member states.

However, if net emigration of British nationals continues to decline, the government may find itself running to stand still with respect to its total net immigration target – all the measures taken so far could be blown out of the water. ippr's paper *The Limits to Limits*⁹ explored the numbers behind the immigration cap in some detail, and concluded that net immigration of less than 100,000 could be achieved without major policy changes, in the current economic circumstances. However, this analysis assumed that British net emigration continued at levels of around 70,000 a year – with today's figures showing British net emigration of just 30,000 in the year to June 2010, net immigration of less than 100,000 looks harder and harder to achieve.

If British net emigration settles at anything close to the current levels, and given that other key migration flows are more-or-less outside direct government control (including migration from the EU and asylum) the government will have to impose drastic limits on non-EU immigration for work and study if it is to have any hope of reducing net immigration to below 100,000.¹⁰

The cap on skilled migration from outside the EU via Tiers 1 and 2 of the PBS is already raising major concerns among employers – if the government is forced to set the cap at a very low level in order to meet its overall net migration objective, serious economic harm seems likely to result.

Reforms to the student visa regime are needed, and a further clampdown on abuse of the system is welcome – policy changes made by the previous government largely dealt with so-called 'bogus colleges' but some abuse no doubt remains. However, evidence suggests that most student migration is legitimate, and many UK education institutions are dependent on foreign students' fees for their financial survival. These issues are explored in more detail in ippr's recent report *Student Migration in the UK*.¹¹

All this demonstrates the difficult task that the government has set itself in seeking to significantly reduce total net immigration, a statistical measure over which it has only limited control.

Reduced net immigration may also be a more difficult political sell than the government expects – it is a policy objective which means very little to ordinary people. While net immigration was around 225,000 in the year to June 2010, emigration was around 315,000, so (gross) immigration was around 540,000. To translate this flow into something approximating people's real experiences, think about 54 new migrants moving to a community while 31 leave – the net impact on the local population is relatively small but it represents a lot of coming and going, and longer-term residents will likely be aware (and perhaps worried) about the number of newcomers. People don't meet 'net migrants', they just meet immigrants.

More politically challenging for the government is the fact that concerns about immigration are often (rightly or wrongly) bound up with worries about housing, inequality and jobs. Unless these issues are resolved – something that looks difficult in the current economic and political times – immigration will continue to be a political hot potato, regardless of any changes to immigration policy.

The fact that today's statistics show rising net immigration – although this is driven by emigration rather than immigration – will no doubt be taken by anti-immigration groups as evidence that the government needs to be even tougher. In fact, the government should take a careful look at today's statistics and revisit its objective of reducing total net immigration to 'tens, rather than hundreds, of thousands' – meeting that aim looks likely to have serious economic costs for the UK, and may not deliver the political result that the government seeks.

9 ippr (2010) *The Limits to Limits: Is a cap on immigration a viable policy for the UK?* London: ippr. <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=740>

10 For ippr's analysis of the Migration Advisory Committee report, see ippr (2011) *Capping Immigration to the UK: Where next?* London: ippr. <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=788>

11 Mulley and Sachrajda 2011