


Shall We Stay Or Shall We Go?

Re-migration trends among Britain's immigrants

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Executive Summary

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In May 2009, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published its quarterly report on migration. It started its summary of statistics by noting the following:

- The number of non-British citizens emigrating rose by nearly 30 per cent in the year ending September 2008. Emigration of citizens of the A8 Accession countries [to the European Union] doubled over the same period.
- Immigration of non-British citizens, including A8 citizens, changed little over the year to September 2008. (Office for National Statistics 2009)

Here was significant evidence that the migratory flow that we term 're-migration' was increasing, while immigration remained relatively stable. This latest data therefore reinforces the conclusions and confirms some of the predictions we make in this report, in which we set out to quantify and analyse re-migration from the United Kingdom, and to understand what motivates immigrants to leave.

To understand the impacts that migration has on a country it is important to study all its components. There is no lack of scrutiny of immigration to the UK; while the emigration of British people was covered in ippr's much discussed *Brits Abroad* report in 2006, which showed that between 1966 and 2006 the UK experienced a net loss of 2.7 million British nationals. By contrast *re-migration* (the return migration or onward migration of previous immigrants to the UK) is a somewhat neglected subject – though in academic and policy circles this is starting to change.

Given the unprecedented levels of immigration to the UK in recent years, it may not appear very important that a proportion of those immigrants are subsequently leaving. Indeed some might suppose it is a wholly good thing and welcome the fact that the outflow is increasing. It is our contention, however, that policymakers should care about re-migration and know more about those leaving.

This is particularly true at a time when the processes for controlling and managing immigration are being tightened, with the aim of selecting immigrants (or at least economic migrants) on the basis of their skills. International competition for highly-skilled migrants is intensifying and it makes no sense for the UK to succeed in attracting such migrants only to lose them quickly because of re-migration. The retention of high skilled migrants is likely to become as least as important as attracting them in the first place as the traditional countries of immigration are joined by fast growing economies like China and India, all of which will be trying to lure a diminishing pool of young, skilled, mobile individuals to drive growth, plug gaps in labour markets and offset ageing populations.

At the very least, the UK may want to find ways of encouraging these migrants to return again some time in the future or to maintain contact with them in their countries of onward or return migration.

On the other hand, the Government may want to increase return migration among some types of migrant, who at the moment tend to stay longer or settle in the UK, either to aid

development in the migrant's home country or because the migrant is deemed in some way to be 'undesirable' – for example, because he or she is a refused asylum seeker or an 'irregular', low-skilled migrant. Understanding what led re-migrants to decide to leave the UK should be helpful in understanding how to make voluntary return packages or circular migration programmes more attractive.

This report looks in detail at the available datasets so that we can see the numbers re-migrating and get a clearer picture of who is going and why. We have also gathered new evidence through open surveys and through research in six case study countries, which involved extensive interviewing of people who have re-migrated from the UK.

Our main findings

Over the last thirty years or so¹, the rate of re-migration from the UK (that is, return or onward migration by non-British nationals) has been about half that of immigration (3,186,200 out compared with 6,189,900 in).

Re-migration trends reflect immigration trends, albeit with a time lag. As immigration into the UK increases so does re-migration from the country – though not to the extent of the latter matching the former. The UK has been for some time a country of net inward migration – and official projections suggest this trend will continue.

However, since 1975 at least 61,000 immigrants have left the UK each year – with numbers rising steadily in the last decade to a peak of 194,000 in 2006 – a population the size of the city of Portsmouth. This peak is likely to have been exceeded in 2008 – with re-migration topping 200,000. Emigration of immigrants is therefore a growing phenomenon. p

With the UK in recession, we would expect to see non-British immigration decreasing or at least stabilising (there is evidence that this has started to happen already) while re-migration increases. Factoring in the immigration and emigration of British nationals, we would expect to see net migration falling over the next two to five years. However, we do not expect the UK to experience net emigration during this period.

The overall rate of re-migration (emigration of immigrants to the UK) is likely to be around or above 200,000 in the next couple of years and is likely to remain above 150,000 for at least the next five years.

Most immigrants spend less than four years in the UK and such short-stay migration is increasing (it doubled between 1996 and 2007), largely as a result of an increase in the number of foreign students and of temporary labour migrants, particularly from the European Union. Of the migrants who arrived in 1998, only around a quarter were still here 10 years later. 85 per cent of the current migrants who took part in ipp's online survey said they were only planning to stay short term.

EU migrants and migrants from more developed countries tend to stay for shorter periods and to be firmer in their intention to re-migrate. Migrants from poorer countries are more likely to stay for longer, or settle permanently – though as economies in developing countries do better this is starting to change.

1. Between 1975 and 2007

Super-mobility, in which migrants move multiple times, coming back and forward between their home country and other destinations, is an increasing element of migration in a globalised world, and particularly once the world pulls out of recession we would expect to see more of this type of migration. The increased competition for highly skilled young migrants will be a particular driver of this type of migration.

The UK has been attracting increasing numbers of young and better qualified migrants in recent years, but these are the migrants who tend to leave after relatively short stays. As the stock of settled migrants ages along with the general population, the inflow of younger migrants will need to be maintained or increased. There is evidence that international competition to attract young, high skilled migrants is increasing, while demographic projections suggest they will be in shorter supply in the coming years.

The Government's new points-based system, a supply-determined model for managing economic migration, is designed to admit migrants with financial assets, high-level skills or skills that are in short supply into UK, while keeping out those who lack these attributes. Our evidence shows that the migrants most likely to be allowed into the UK through the PBS will be those most likely to re-migrate quickly (along with EU nationals who enjoy freedom of movement). However, at present, the PBS takes no consideration of the re-migration intentions of would-be immigrants.

Our research has shown us that return migration decisions tend to be more influenced by personal and family factors, including a yearning for home, than they are by economic factors. (Onward migration – where a migrant moves to a third country – is more likely to be driven by increased economic opportunities.) However, the pull of home for migrants is clearly increased still further if economic opportunities, a reasonable infrastructure and personal security are available in the home country.

Immigration decisions, by contrast, are strongly driven by economic factors, particularly work opportunities and the ability to earn more money than at home – although migration for adventure is now fairly common among younger, more affluent people. The completion of the migration experience, whether economic or personal, is another spur to re-migrate.

Migrants are more likely to re-migrate if they set off with a clear plan or objective for their migration experience. Once that is fulfilled, they return home or move on. A negative migration experience can also hasten return, but in some instances, embarrassment about returning as a 'failure' leads migrants to hang on in the destination country even if that means becoming an irregular migrant by over-staying their original terms of entry.

The UK, like many other developed countries, is tightening its borders and managing migration more closely. In some instances, this risks damming in irregular migrants who fear that if they leave they will never be able to come back. On the other hand, if the system succeeds in attracting high skilled and high value migrants, and keeping others out, more of those who come are also likely to leave. There will be greater 'churn' among the migrant population.

Recommendations

The extent and nature of re-migration from the UK is still not widely understood or even known about, and this has led to an unbalanced debate, focusing almost entirely on inflows, with the result that the Government has felt under pressure to keep on tightening migration processes. There is a risk that this could be against the UK's longer term economic interests,

particularly the need to attract migrants with high-level skills or skills that are in short supply, so there is an urgent need for all those in positions of power and influence to ensure that re-migration is central to discussions about migration.

At the same time, we need to be making migrants feel more welcome in this country, both in the way we talk about them, and in more practical ways. In particular we need to ensure that integration policies and service provision take account of the fact that many migrants will be in the UK for relatively short periods.

There is a limit to the policy interventions that government can introduce to retain migrants if they want to move on. However, it makes sense for government at all levels, as well as employers, to encourage the most in-demand migrants to stay longer in the UK, through innovative retention initiatives, simplifying visa arrangements and incentives to take up citizenship.

Particular ideas could include: extending schemes to encourage and help foreign students to find jobs in the UK after they graduate; awarding extra points under the new points-based system to high skilled migrants who are committed to staying in the UK longer term; simplifying processes for visa and work permit extensions, allowing skilled migrants to bring in their families more easily; and creating tax incentives that encourage such migrants to stay in the UK.

Very little attempt is made by the UK government to encourage young migrants from countries like New Zealand and Australia, who come here for the 'Big OE' (the Big Overseas Experience) to stay here in the longer term and work at their potential skills levels. More could be done to establish initiatives that target this group as a valuable source of highly skilled migrants.

Our research has shown that the great majority of returnees have enjoyed a positive experience of the UK and retain affection and respect for this country. At present, we tend to regard migrants who have left the UK as 'gone for good' – and make little or no effort to stay in touch with them. We think this is a mistake as we are missing opportunities to 're-recruit' some former immigrants or to use them as 'goodwill ambassadors'. We would like to see the Government treating re-migrants as a 'secondary Diaspora' of 'honorary' Brits abroad who can be regarded as a diplomatic and economic asset to the UK. Such schemes would particularly serve the UK's interests in countries, such as Pakistan, where there are signs of growing misunderstanding and tension between the two nations.

We also believe the Government needs to show greater commitment to circular migration initiatives both to meet future labour needs and to provide legal outlets for low skilled migrants from developing countries, who will otherwise resort to illegal routes. Ministers could look at best practice in other countries, such as France, Spain and Canada, where the best schemes have a good record of matching work opportunities with skills and in ensuring compliance with return.

More could also be done to provide information for would-be migrants in their home countries, both to encourage viable migration to the UK and to deter speculative migration. The Government should study and evaluate initiatives such as the EU's Migration Information and Management Centre (CIGEM) in Bamako, Mali and Migrant Service Centres operated by IOM in the West Balkans, with the idea of setting up a pilot centre in a country that produces large numbers of migrants who come to the UK through a Bilateral Migration Agreement (BMA).

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Our research has shown that re-migrants themselves could be a useful asset in this area. They can give insights into living in the UK and information about how to make a success of it. This could include advising some would-be migrants that the UK is not a good destination for them, thereby deterring inappropriate migration.

The impacts of migration and re-migration should also form stronger elements of development strategies aimed at poorer countries. One area that could be focused on is the building of capacity within sending countries to govern migratory flows in and out. The Spanish government has already financed such a scheme in Africa. The UK could consider following this lead through BMAs.

Our research suggests that if a migrant has legal status they are more likely than irregular migrants to make a considered choice to return or migrate onwards. Irregularity is therefore a bar to re-migration. The Government's current response is that irregulars will be removed, by force if necessary. But this is not happening on a scale to tackle the backlog. A smarter approach is needed, which is why we recommend that a pathway to earned regularisation for undocumented migrants should be put in place. Regularising those without status need not involve giving them the right of settlement or indefinite leave to remain; indeed it could explicitly be linked to return migration after a set period.

Although there have been improvements in recent years, with more on the way, the data and evidence that the Government is using in trying to plan migration flows in and out is inadequate. The UK could learn from other countries which collect more information about immigration and emigration. A particular issue is that the International Passenger Survey (IPS) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) do not capture information about migrants staying for short periods – even though more migration is becoming temporary and circular.