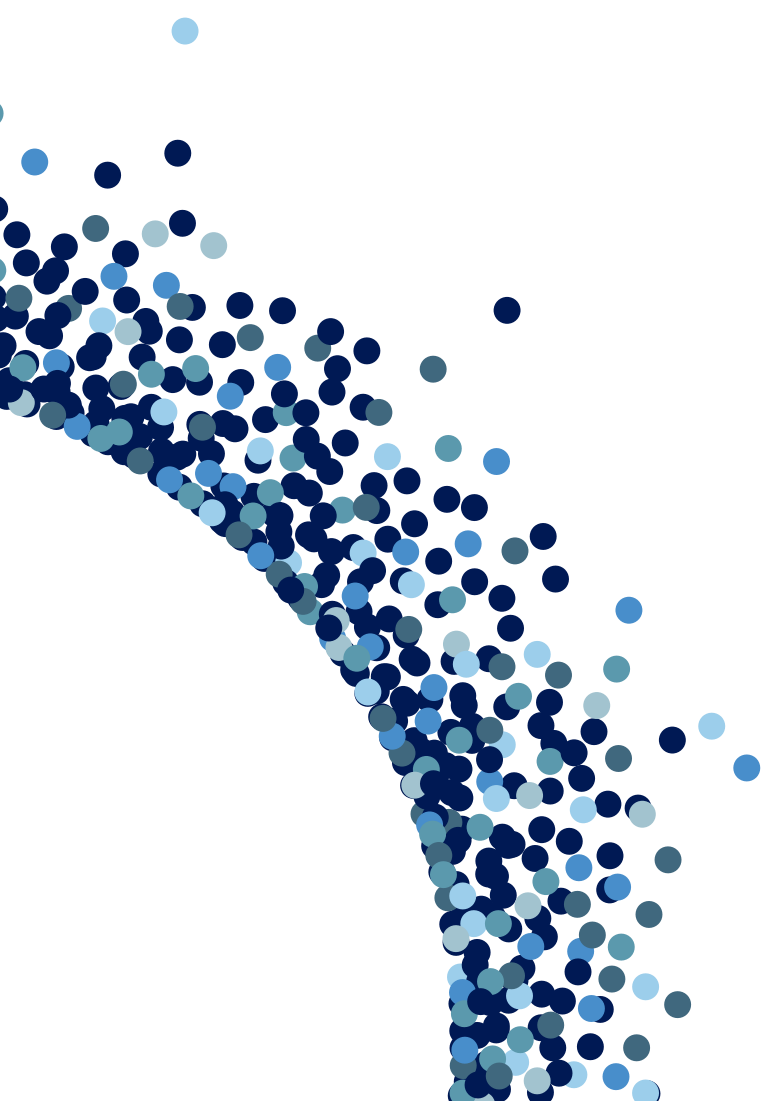




COMMENTARY

Bordering on confusion: International Migration and Implications for Scottish Independence



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The United Kingdom in its current form has existed since the Republic of Ireland gained independence from Great Britain in the 1920s. But in one year (18 September 2014) an historic referendum will be held that could redefine Britain again, if Scotland chooses to become an independent state.

In the event of a “yes” vote on independence, immigration policy would be among the ‘reserved’ powers currently held in Westminster that an independent Scotland would take charge of. This has important implications for both Scotland and the rest of the UK.

In this piece, we outline the differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK in migration policy, dynamics and attitudes, and consider the implications of migration issues for Scottish independence.

The dynamics both of migration and of population change in England and Scotland are very different, leading many advocates of Scottish independence to argue that Scotland needs its own immigration policy. At the same time, supporters of continued political union between Scotland and the rest of the UK have raised questions about the practical challenges of an independent Scotland implementing its own immigration policy, not least the question about how “migration” between Scotland and the UK would be regulated.

At present Scotland has a specific policy of encouraging population growth through immigration, particularly of highly skilled workers. But since immigration policy remains in the hands of Westminster, Holyrood has little opportunity to directly shape immigration policy to help it toward these goals – other than the Scotland-specific ‘shortage occupation list’ which gives employers greater scope to recruit non-EU migrants for some specific roles in Scotland.

The UK government, on the other hand, has been pursuing policies designed to reduce immigration and net migration (the difference between migrant arrivals and departures). It does not have a population target or policy, although a motion to “stabilise the UK population as close to the current levels as possible” and to use immigration controls to prevent it from exceeding 70 million was passed by the House of Commons in September 2012, following an e-petition initiated by the pressure group MigrationWatch which lobbies for reduced immigration.

Scotland and the rest of the UK differ not only in migration policy but also in their experience of migration. Outlined below are some of the key differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK on various aspects of migration.

Immigration and population dynamics: A crowded island?

International migration – both in the past and in projections looking forward – affects the population of the countries of the UK differently. Internal migration – movement across the boundaries of the UK’s constituent countries – also affects population change in each country, but our focus here is on international migration, meaning movement into or out of the UK.

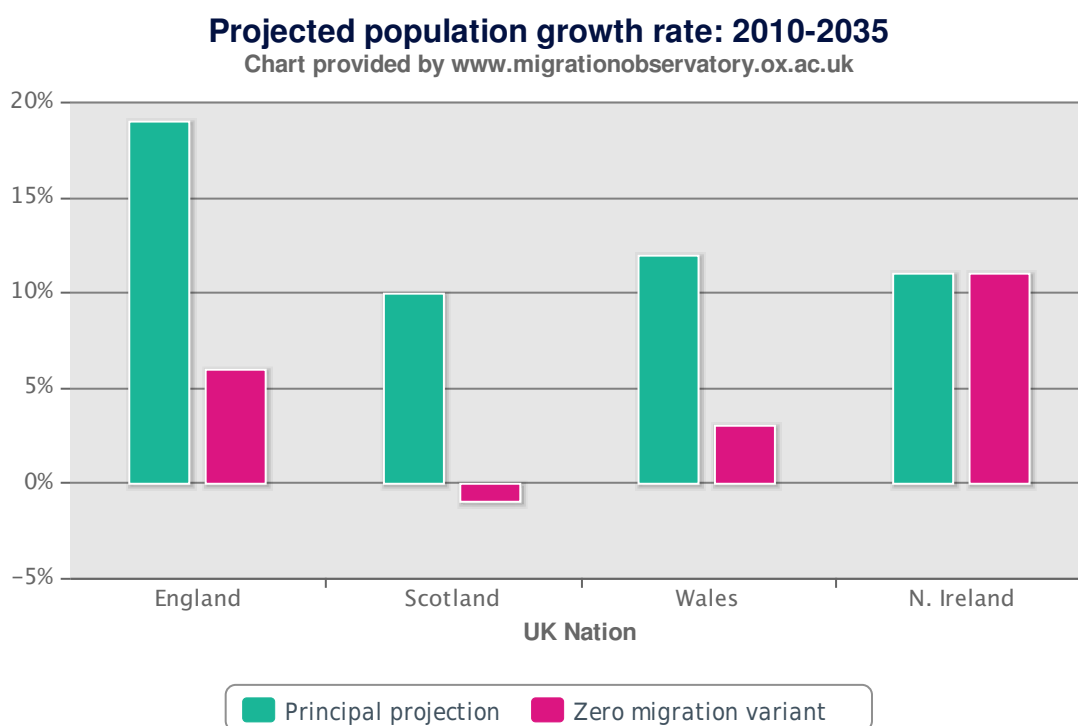
Scotland’s population has only been growing recently, thanks to positive net international migration, whereas England has been growing more rapidly and consistently over time. For example, Scotland’s population declined by about 100,000 from 1981 when it stood at 5,180,200, to 2003 when it stood at 5,054,800. This decline was fuelled in part by net international emigration.

Scotland’s population has been growing again since the mid 2000s, fuelled by increased immigration following EU enlargement. Latest data (Link to latest ONS quarterly report) suggest that in 2012 while the overall population of Scotland grew, the UK-born population of Scotland actually declined slightly, meaning that population growth was only achieved as a result of positive net migration.

In contrast, the population in England during the same period (1981–2003) grew by more than 3 million, and then grew even more quickly in the past decade. Between 2003–2011 the number of people living in England grew by more than 3 million again – driven to a significant degree by immigration.

Future migration flows are difficult to predict, but the ONS provides projections of future population growth with different levels of net migration (it is worth noting, as discussed in our briefing “The Impact of Migration on Population Growth”, these projections are based on a number of assumptions and caveats). As shown in Figure 1, Scotland’s population is projected to decline unless more people move there than leave. All of the other nations of the UK are projected to see some population growth, even with zero net international migration.

Figure 1

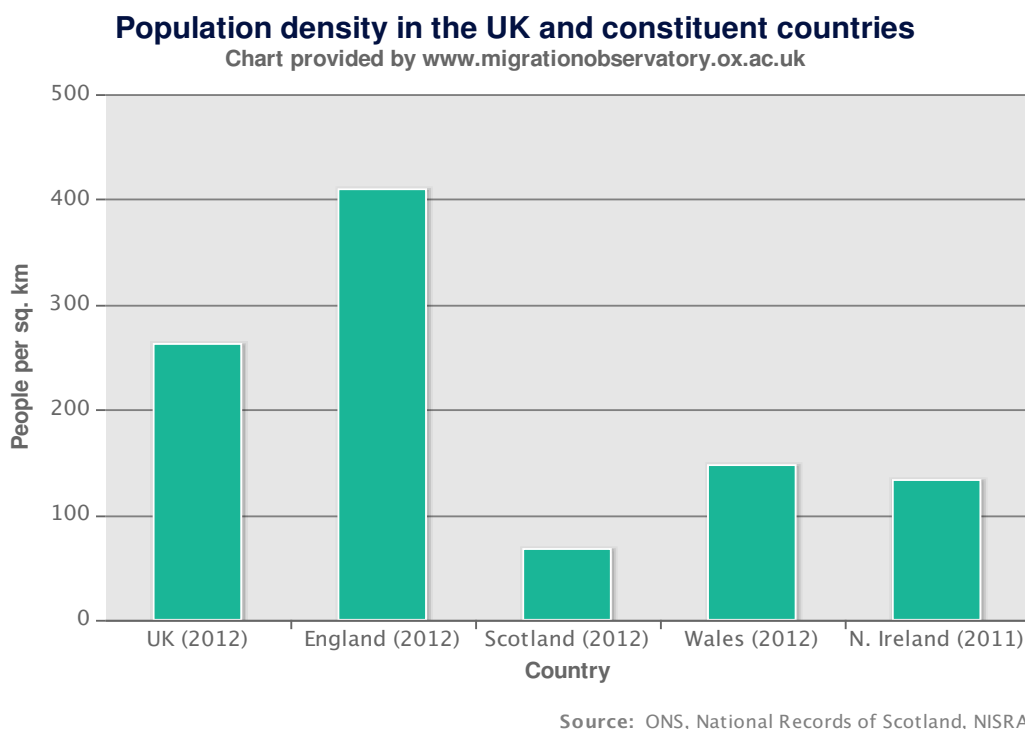


Source : Office of National Statistics

Aside from the size and growth rates of their populations, the nations of the UK differ in population density as well. For example, Scotland has a landmass of 78,772 square kilometres – 60% the size of England. But Scotland’s estimated population stands at an estimated 5.2 million, which is about a tenth of England’s population of 52 million (ONS 2012a). Populations in Wales and Northern Ireland are 3 million and 1.8 million (ONS 2012a) respectively.

Consequently, as Figure 2 shows, Scotland’s population density in mid-2012 was the lowest of the four territories that make up the UK, at just 68 people per sq km (National Records of Scotland 2012). As a comparison, Wales was 148 per sq km (ONS 2012b) and Northern Ireland 133 per sq km (NISRA mid 2011 estimates), while England was the most densely populated at 411 per sq km (ONS 2012b).

Figure 2

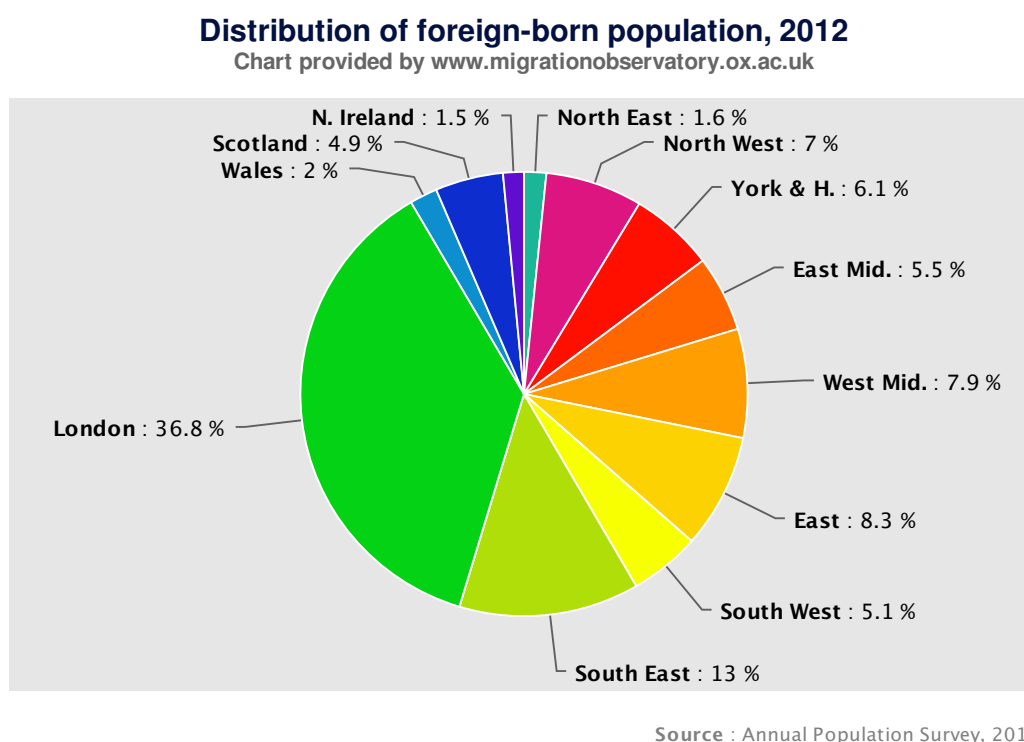


Scale of immigration: 90% of Britain’s non-UK born population is in England

In 2012 there were around 7.7 million non-UK born individuals living in the UK.

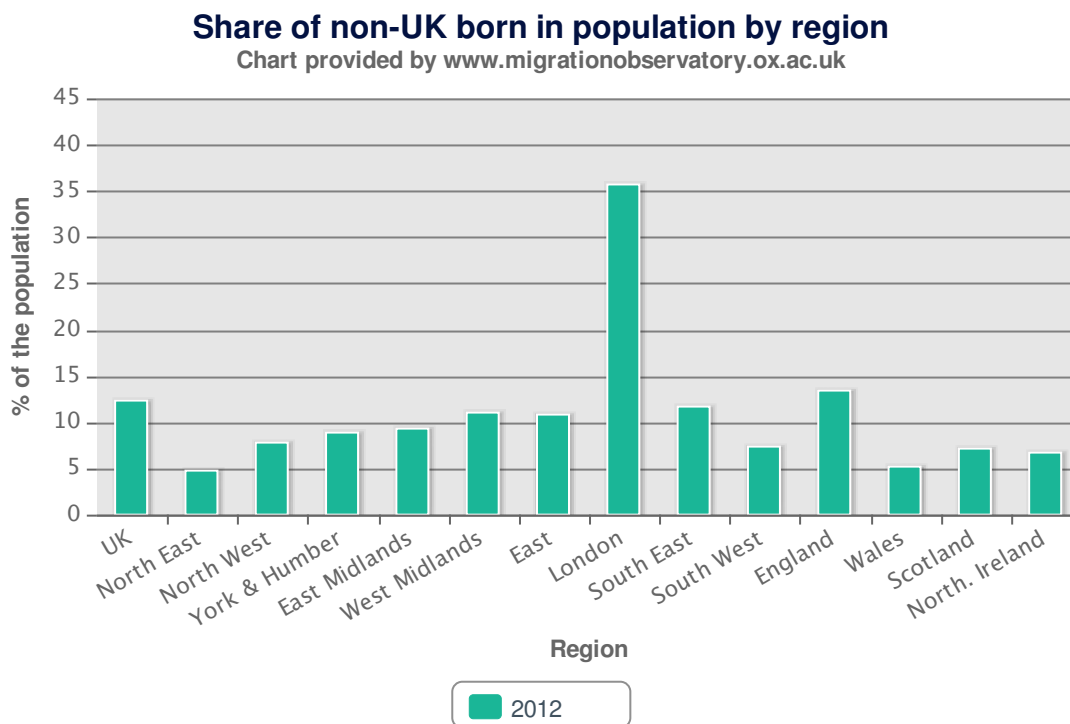
The vast majority of non-UK born people living in the UK (more than 90%) are in England, with around 50% of the entire non-UK population of Britain concentrated in London and the South East (see Figure 3). Scotland has less than 5% of the UK’s migrant population, and Wales and Northern Ireland have 2% and 1.6% respectively.

Figure 3



Data from the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) Annual Population Survey shows that migrants make up about 7.2 % of the population in Scotland compared to about 12.3% in the UK as a whole and 13.5% in England, with a particularly large presence in London, where non-UK born people represent 36% of the population (see Figure 4). Wales and Northern Ireland have even smaller migrant populations (both numerically and in percentage terms) than Scotland, at about 5% and 7% respectively.

Figure 4

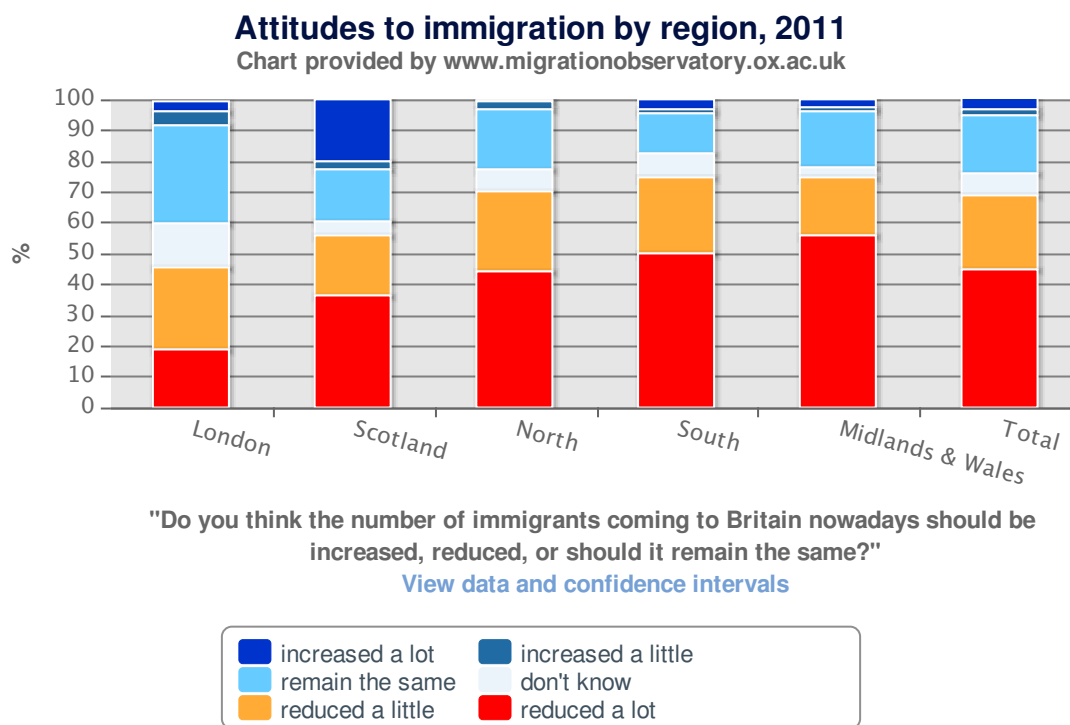


Source : Annual Population Survey, 2012

Public opinion: opposed to immigration, but to differing degrees

There is limited data available to allow us to differentiate between the views of people in Scotland and of people elsewhere in Britain about immigration. One survey conducted in September 2011 (see figure 5 below) suggests that while there is majority support for reductions to immigration in both England and Scotland, overall support for cuts to immigration in the UK tends to be higher outside Scotland (with the important exception of London).

Figure 5



Source: Migration Observatory/Ipsos Mori, 2–8 Sep 2011

Implications for policy debates

There are substantial differences between Scotland and England in terms of demographic trends, migration flows, composition of the migrant population and public opinion on immigration. Scotland has a smaller, considerably less dense and slower-growing population than England. While some would argue that this means Scotland needs a different approach to managing immigration to densely-populated, fast-growing England, this 'need' is highly subjective and would undoubtedly be debated in an independent Scotland.

What is more clear is that if Scotland votes for independence it will have the opportunity to define its own immigration policy. This will bring with it practical challenges that will vary depending on an array of factors that have not yet been properly established, in particular what its status would be within the EU. But whatever the practicalities, the fact that there is a land border between England and Scotland means that any Scottish immigration policies have the potential to also affect the rest of the UK.

Immigration control issues play an important role in the critical, though hotly contested, question of whether there would, should, or could be continued free movement through a UK/Scottish border as part of a continued Common Travel Area in the event of Scottish independence. But whether border controls would ever be introduced is simply not clear yet. Scottish nationalists have argued that no changes are needed and that no border controls would be required between England and Scotland, but the UK Home Secretary, Theresa May, has called this into question, suggesting that passport checks may be necessary to prevent the rest of the UK from becoming a de-facto member of the EU's Schengen free-movement area and to prevent migrants from using Scotland to bypass UK immigration controls.

This, in essence, adds up to a potential trade-off or tension:

If an independent Scotland were to introduce policies that are broadly in keeping with, or at least accommodate, the immigration policies of the rest of the UK – which at the moment are focused on the reduction of net migration and which keep the UK out of the Schengen area – then continued free movement between the rest of the UK and Scotland would seem more realistic from the UK's side. The UK currently shares a Common Travel Area with Ireland, which is an independent country and EU member but not a member of the Schengen borderless zone.

However, if an independent Scotland were to adopt immigration policies that are more out of step with the rest of the UK – for example joining the Schengen area, or adopting policies which encourage increased non-EU immigration without measures to prevent these migrants from relocating to the rest of the UK – then it seems likely that stronger concerns will be voiced in Westminster about the need for border controls.

Although it may seem surprising, alternatives do exist to a one-size-fits-all immigration policy even within a single country or borderless multinational area. A Scotland specific immigration policy that goes beyond the Scotland-specific shortage occupation list is not impossible, irrespective of the results of the independence vote. Canada's example of regionally specific visas for migrants, to encourage population growth in areas where it is required, but to limit international migration to the large urban centres that were traditionally the main draws is an example. The Schengen zone itself is another example: France and Germany have different policies for issuing work and study visas to non-EU nationals, even though travel across their international boundaries does not require a passport.

But again, this sort of approach brings trade-offs, and presents its own set of challenges to implementation and enforcement that may make it unwieldy, costly and politically unpalatable.

These trade-offs, like most immigration issues, raise a broader series of social and economic issues: Does it bring more benefits to an independent Scotland to have an open border with England than to have population growth through immigration? What are the implications for EU membership of not joining the Schengen area – if that is indeed a choice open to an independent Scotland? Can a regional immigration policy which allows for Scotland-specific immigration be effectively enforced so migrants do not use Scotland as a back-door route to access the economic juggernaut of London? These questions do not have obvious answers but are important considerations for the debate on independence. The difficult task for Scotland now is to look at the evidence, consider the unknowns and then to weigh up these – and innumerable other factors – to make the choice that will define Britain in the 21st century.

Related material

- [Scottish National Party website - SNP call for Scotland specific immigration rules](#)
- [BBC News, 25 Mar 2012 - Scottish independence: 'Border checks' warning from home secretary](#)
- [Scottish Government website - Scotland Performs: Population](#)
- [ONS Migration Indicators Tool - Mid-2012](#)
- [Migration Observatory briefing - The Impact of Migration on Population Growth](#)
- [ONS Population estimates 2012a](#)
- [National Records Scotland - Mid-2011 and Mid-2012 Population Estimates](#)
- [ONS Population by country of birth and nationality 2012b](#)
- [Huffington Post, 20 Feb 2012 - Alex Salmond Rejects Minister's 'Scaremongering' Over Scottish Border Controls](#)
- [Robert E. Wright - Devolved Immigration Policy: Will it Work in Scotland?](#)



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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