



COMMENTARY

The relative and the real: A decade of migration in Scotland

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Between 2001 and 2011 the foreign-born population of Scotland effectively doubled, increasing by 92.8% from 191,571 to 369,284, according to new Scottish census data. This is a significant change for Scotland and one that has implications for many areas of Scottish life.

This is the last census before Scotland's referendum on independence, and as population is an important factor in discussions about independence, and census data is only produced once per decade, these new data will play vital role in informing that debate.

But while the change is certainly notable, it also needs to be considered in context, and setting it in context tells us as much about the nature of the UK's migration debate as it does about the changes in Scotland.

There are several different ways of characterising the change that has happened, all of which are accurate, but all of which may elicit different public – and possibly also political – responses to the change.

A starting point might be what we could call the 'superlative approach'. With any politically-charged data a common response, certainly in the media, and often in policy debates, is to highlight extreme data points – the 'biggest', the 'most significant' or that a place or group is the 'most affected'.

It is not hard to find data that fits the 'superlative approach' here. With a 92.8% increase in its foreign-born population Scotland has seen a proportionally bigger increase in its migrant population between 2001 and 2011 than England (61%), Wales (82%) or Northern Ireland (71%) according to the census.

Another factor that allows us to follow the 'superlative approach' is how the change has happened. Specifically, Scotland's increased foreign-born population is largely due to migration from the eight Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 (the A8) – with Scotland's European-born population (excluding the UK) increasing by 168% in a decade, compared to 84% for England.

There has been a particularly a dramatic increase in Scotland's Polish-born community – which has increased by 2,105% in the last decade, from 2,505 in 2001 to 55,231 in 2011, (compared to an 890% increase for England) – and now represents the single largest migrant group in Scotland outnumbering the next biggest group – Indian-born migrants – by more than two to one. As much as Polish and A8 migration has changed the face of migration in Britain overall—in statistical measures, media coverage, and public perceptions— Polish migrants comprise a larger share of the foreign-born of Scotland than of Britain as a whole.

So far, so superlative.

But a second way of looking at Scotland's migrant population, and the change it has encountered over the last decade, might be described as the 'minimalist approach'. This is essentially a mirror image of the 'superlative approach' but focuses on highlighting where the data shows Scotland to be 'less affected' by migration than other places.

Again it's not hard to find data to back up this 'minimalist approach' – providing that one compares Scottish data with England rather than the smaller and slower growing migrant populations of Wales or Northern Ireland. Scotland's share of migrants in the population (7%) is little over half that of England (13.8%). Looked at another way, Scotland's migrant population accounts for less than 5% of the UK's migrant population while Scotland's overall population accounts for around 8.4% of the UK as a whole.

Non-UK born	2001	2011	2011 population share (%)	Increase in numbers (%)
England	4,550,823	7,337,139	13.8	61.2
Wales	92,263	167,871	5.5	82
Scotland	191,571	369,284	7	92.8
Northern Ireland	69,498	119,186	6.6	71.5

Source: England & Wales Census 2001 and 2011, ONS. Scotland Census 2001 & 2011, NRS. Northern Ireland Census, 2001 & 2011, NISRA.

But there is also a third way of looking at the changes to Scotland's migrant population, which considers the data slightly differently. We might call this the 'average approach'.

Looking at the factor that has caused the biggest change in Scotland's foreign-born population over the last decade – the 2,105% increase in the Polish-born population – but considering it in the context of what has happened to the Polish-born population in England over the same period provides an interesting insight.

Both populations were considerably smaller in 2001 (England 56,679, Scotland 2,505) and both grew sharply following the accession of Poland to the EU in 2004. The Polish-born population of England is now (as of 2011) 561,098, representing 1.06% of England's overall population, while the Polish-born population of Scotland is 55,231, representing 1.04% of its population.

To put it another way, what has differentiated Scotland from England in migration terms in the past has been Scotland's lower levels of immigration – but over the past decade the Polish-born population has distributed itself similarly in England and Scotland, and what now characterises the Polish-born population of Scotland compared with England over the last decade is not difference but sameness.

What this means is that depending on what data points one chooses to focus on, Scotland can be characterised as a country that has been affected by immigration more (superlative approach), less (minimalist approach) or in much the same way (average approach) as England over the past decade. All of these are fair assessments, but a more nuanced picture of an issue can also make it more challenging to make decisions about how to act.

It also highlights that migration data is not simply about numerical change, but also relative change. Scotland's migrant population in 2011 may have been small relative to England's, but it was large relative to how it was before.

But relative change is not only important in understanding data, it may be extremely relevant to people's experience of change. When an area with a small migrant population sees that population increase sharply, members of that community may experience a much more dramatic change than a community with a larger established migrant population would experience when receiving the same number of migrants.

Scotland has seen a decade of significant change in its migrant population, and while this change may be relatively small in some respects, relatively large in others, and completely average in others, it is, nonetheless, a very real change for people to adjust to.

Related Material

Migration Observatory briefing – Scotland Census profile www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/scotland-census-profile

BBC New Monitor – Paper Monitor: The bestest superlatives www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-24986023

Channel 4 News – UK Roma population one of biggest in Europe www.channel4.com/news/immigration-roma-migrants-bulgaria-romania-slovakia-uk

The Daily Express – Romanian and Bulgarian workers up by 19 per cent www.express.co.uk/news/uk/443190/Romanian-and-Bulgarian-workers-up-by-19-per-cent

The Mail Online – The town that’s had enough: We visit the place with the country’s biggest influx of East Europeans www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2272195/The-town-thats-We-visit-town-countrys-biggest-influx-East-Europeans.html



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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.



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