



BRIEFING

Long-Term International Migration Flows to and from the UK

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This briefing provides an overview of Long-Term International Migration (LTIM) inflows (immigration), outflows (emigration), and the difference between the two (net migration) in the UK.

Key Points

Net migration to the UK, the difference between immigration and emigration, was 248,000 in 2016. This represents a decrease of 84,000 from the 2015 numbers.

Inflows to the UK for 2016 were 588,000, compared with 631,000 in 2015. Outflows from the UK were 339,000, compared with 299,000 in 2015.

There has been continuous net emigration of British citizens since at least 1991. In 2016, 60,000 more British citizens moved abroad than came to live in the UK.

In 2016, non-EU citizens accounted for 45% of all inflows to the UK (including inflows of British citizens). The share of EU citizens in total inflows increased from 22% in 2004 to 43% in 2016.

Formal study and work are the most common reasons for migrating to the UK. In 2016, 136,000 people migrated to the UK for study purposes and an additional 275,000 migrated for work related reasons.

Understanding the evidence

The analysis in this briefing is based on data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Long-Term International Migration (LTIM). The primary data source for the LTIM estimates is the International Passenger Survey (IPS), but LTIM estimates also include adjustments based on other sources, such as the Home Office data on asylum seekers, the Labour Force Survey and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency international migration estimates. To accurately understand and interpret LTIM data, it is important to be clear about its underlying definitions and limitations. The ONS uses the current international standard definition of a long-term international migrant to produce LTIM estimates: a person who moves to another country for at least one year (see “evidence gaps and limitations” below for further discussion). This excludes for example, tourism or short-term business related travel.

Please note that the LTIM estimates used in this briefing are the revised estimates by the ONS. In early April 2014 the ONS published their report on the ‘Quality of Long-Term International Migration estimates from 2001 to 2011’; in which they revised the numbers of total net migration for the years 2001 to 2011. Based on the revision, total net migration between 2001 and 2011 was underestimated by 346,000. There is evidence that the underestimation was predominantly driven by an undercount of migration from the A8 Eastern European countries. However, a revised version of inflows and outflows as well as breakdowns by citizenship or reason for migration, etc., is not currently available. As a result, estimates relating to any breakdown of inflows, outflows, or different reasons for migrating will not match the total net balance.

Net migration to the UK, the difference between immigration and emigration, was 248,000 in 2016.

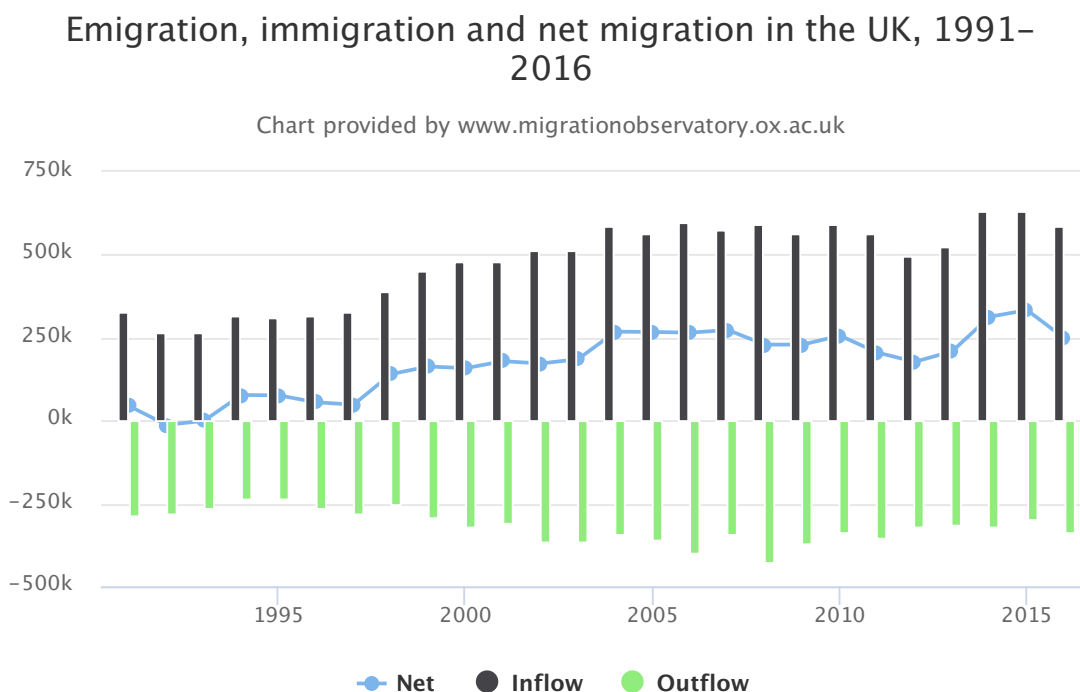
The headline net migration figures include people of all citizenships, including British citizens leaving the country or coming from abroad. As shown in Figure 1, net migration surged from minus 13,000 in 1992 to positive 163,000 in 1999. In the 2000s there was particularly a significant increase in net migration that coincided with the 2004 EU enlargement.

The highest level of net migration recorded for a calendar year is 332,000 in 2015. The latest provisional estimate of net migration is 248,000 for 2016, a drop of 84,000 from the previous year.

Migrants from new EU member states account for a significant proportion of recent net migration. In 2016, however, net migration from A8 nationals was 5,000, which is the smallest estimate since 2004. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in net migration from EU14 countries such as Spain and Italy, from a post-recession low point of 18,000 in 2010 to 73,000 in 2016.

Between 2015 and 2016, migration inflows declined by 43,000, whilst outflows increased by 40,000.

Figure 1



Source: ONS, Long-Term International Migration Estimates table 2.01a.

The share of EU citizens in LTIM inflows and net flows has increased

In 2016 non-EU citizens (including Europeans from outside the EU) had a positive net migration of 175,000 (down slightly from 189,000 in 2015). They accounted for 45% of all inflows and 51% of non-British inflows.

EU citizens had a positive net migration of 133,000 in 2016 (down by 51,000 from 2015); they accounted for 43% of all inflows and 49% of non-British inflows. The share of EU citizens among incoming migrants has been steadily increasing since 2004 (when it stood at 22%) and is much higher than the average for the 2000-2003 period (when it stood at about 13%). By contrast, the share of immigrants from outside the EU has declined from 63% of all incoming migrants in 2004 to 45% in 2016.

British citizens are the only group characterised by continuous net emigration since 1991 (i.e. negative net migration). In 2016 there were 60,000 more British citizens moving abroad than those coming to live in the UK. This is a substantial increase from 2015 when it stood at 40,000. Net emigration of British nationals peaked in 2006 at 124,000.

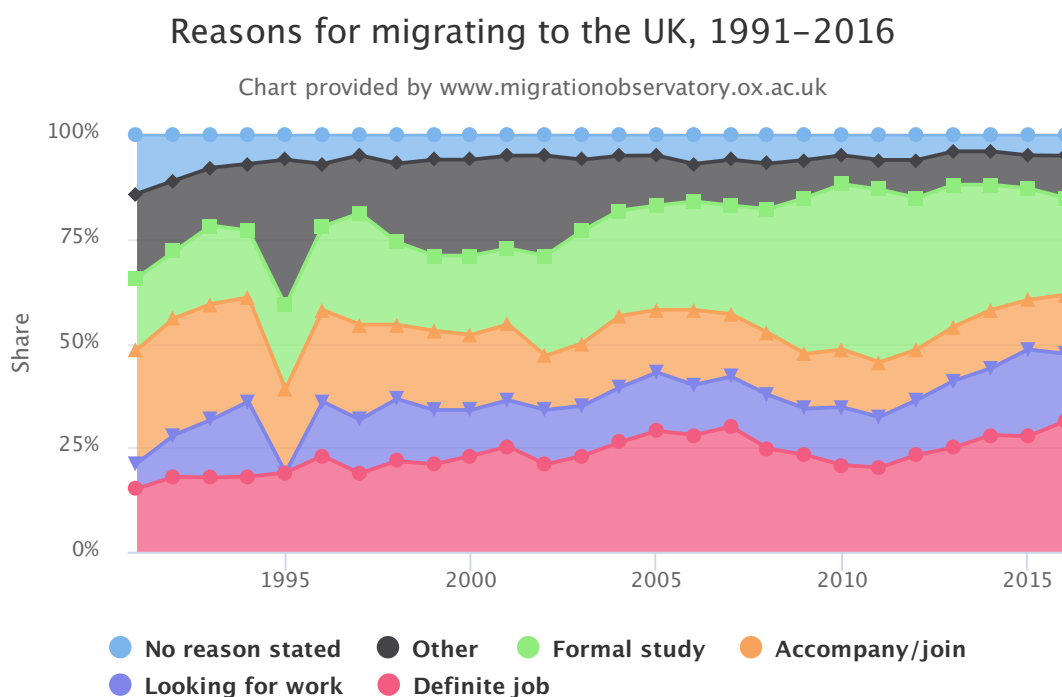
Formal study and work are the most common reasons for migrating to the UK. In 2016, 136,000 people migrated to the UK for study purposes and 275,000 migrated for work

As people often move for a variety of reasons, it can be difficult to categorise migrants based on their reasons for migrating to the UK (see our ‘Mixed Migration: Policy Challenges’ primer for a discussion of mixed migration motivations). It is not hard to imagine, for instance, that someone is moving to the UK to join his/her spouse, work in the UK and to study. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that while the ONS records the categories discussed below as mutually exclusive categories, this might clearly not always be the case in practice.

Focusing on inflows, LTIM estimates suggest that 23% of people moving to the UK for at least one year (including British citizens) came for the purpose of studying in 2016 (see Figure 2). This number has fallen from the 238,000 figures in 2010.

At the same time, 275,000 migrants came for work related reasons in 2016. These people either had a definite job (31% of all immigrants) or came to look for a job (16% of all immigrants). Work reasons are now the most common reason for migrating to the UK, a shift from the 2009 to 2012 period when formal study occupied this position. The share of migrants who came to accompany or join a family member was 14% in 2016. This share has remained relatively stable over the past 10 years, though it represents a decline from a peak of 25% in 1994.

Figure 2



ONS, Long-Term International Migration Estimates, table 2.04. Note: For 1995, there is no data for the "Looking for work" category.

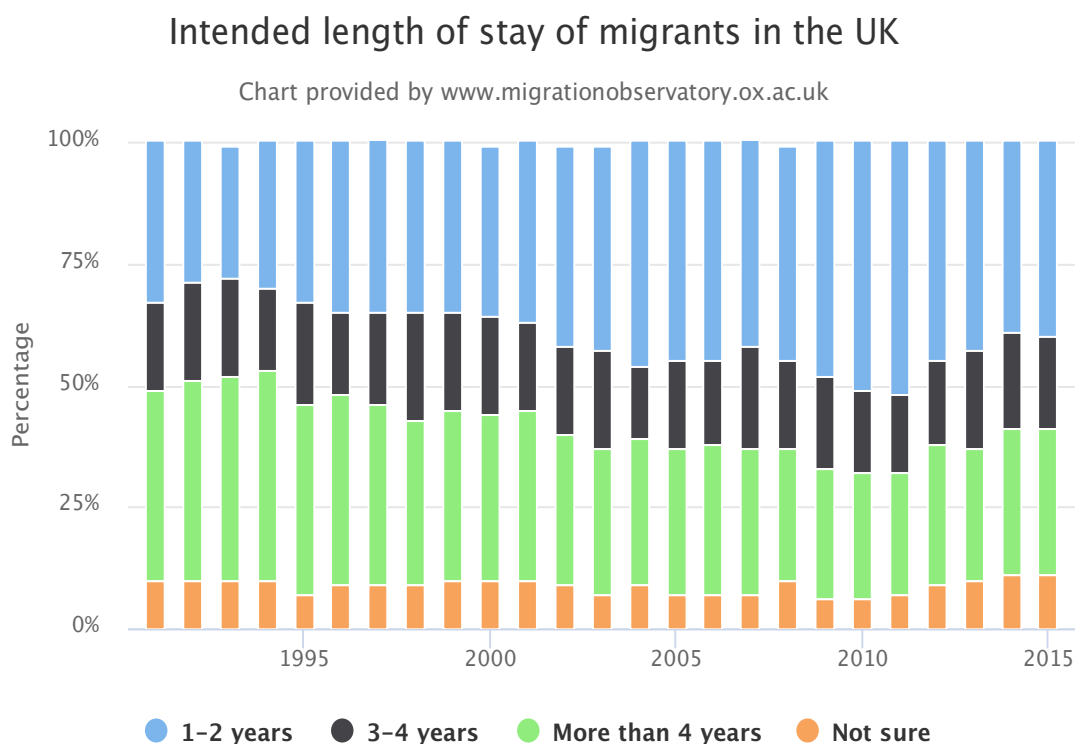
Note: For 1995, there is no data for the "Looking for work" category.

Turning to those leaving the UK, work related reasons were the most common motives for doing so (about 53% in 2016), with 34% of those leaving reporting having a “definite job” abroad and 19% reporting going abroad to look for work.

The share of immigrants planning to stay for shorter periods (of 1-2 years) has increased since the 1990s

Figure 3 depicts intended length of stay of migrants coming to the UK – note this is with a year lag in comparison to earlier figures. The share of immigrants planning to come for relatively short periods of 1 to 2 years was 40% in 2015, after a steady rise between 1993 and 2012 (from 27% to 45%).

Figure 3



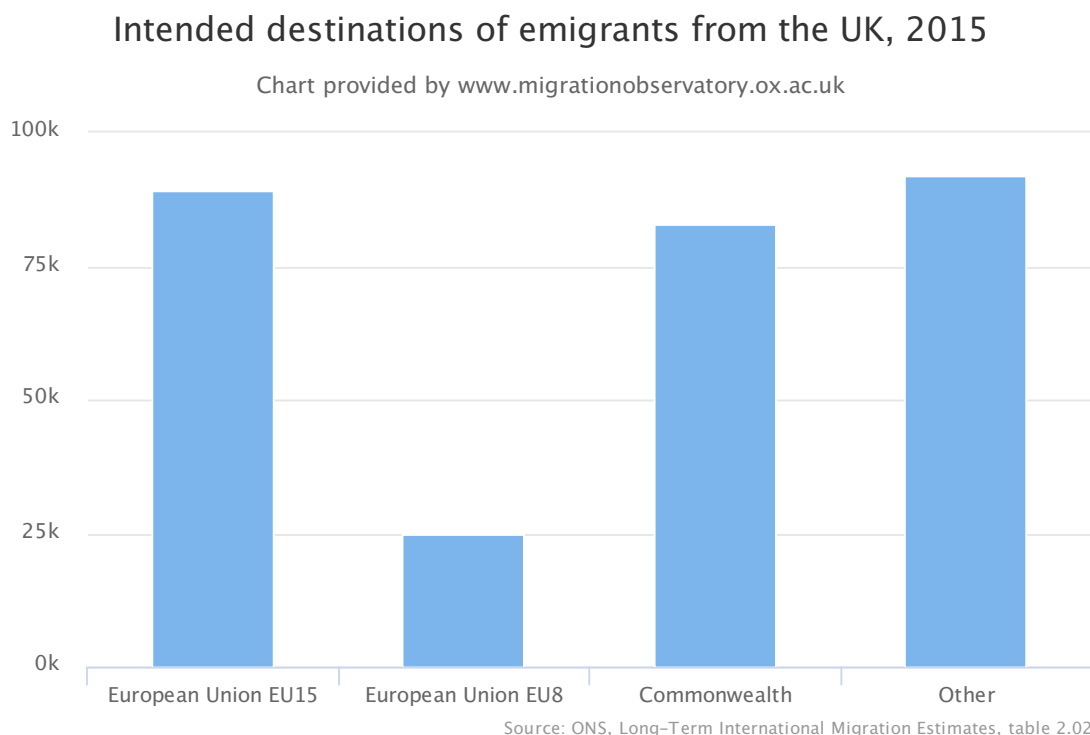
In 2015, 19% of migrants planned to stay for 3 or 4 years, while 11% were not sure. As these numbers relate to intentions, they should read with that in mind (see the Evidence Gaps and Limitations section below for discussion of the limitation of the LTIM data in regards to using the intentions of migrants, which may or may not be realised in practice.)

The most popular destinations of people leaving the UK are non-EU countries

LTIM data also provide information about the ‘next intended’ country of residence of people leaving the UK, which may of course be different from their actual final destination. Moreover, the data will not reflect those instances in which individuals migrate to a country for a short time with plans of eventually moving to a third country.

The information reported in Figure 4 suggests that the most popular destinations of people leaving the UK in 2015 were non-EU countries (Commonwealth and others combined). Closer inspection of the data reveals that the most popular destination for UK emigrants going to Commonwealth countries was Australia, followed by countries in the Indian subcontinent. Because LTIM estimates do not distinguish naturalised British citizens, it is not possible to know how many of these emigrants were returning to a country of origin.

Figure 4



Evidence gaps and limitations

Whether we should refer to all individuals who come to the UK as migrants for at least 12 months as ‘long-term’ migrants can be the subject of debate. For some people, the expression ‘long-term’ indicates a desire to settle or at least to spend a significant amount of time in the UK. However, the current ONS definition (which is the international standard) will place an individual who stays for 11 months and an individual who stays for 13 months in different categories, while a third individual who stays for 20 years will be in the same category as the individual who stays for 13 months.

In practical terms, the IPS asks individuals about their planned stay in the UK and abroad. The data thus captures individual intentions in order to measure inflows and outflows of migrants. Migrants’ plans for the future, e.g. the intention to stay in the UK for more than 12 months, may or may not be realised. The ONS uses different methods to address this challenge by, for example, adjusting for ‘visitor switchers’ (i.e. those whose original intention was to stay for less than one year but who subsequently stay longer) and for ‘migrant switchers’ (i.e. those who intended to stay for more than twelve months but left within a year).

Capturing information on migration is not the only purpose of the IPS, which collects data on a broad set of issues including tourists’ spending in the UK, towns visited and alcohol and tobacco purchases made, among others. Given that it is not an exclusively migration-focused survey, the sample of migrants in the survey is relatively small. As with any survey, there is a certain margin of error of the estimates. The ONS publishes the central estimate at the 95% confidence level, indicating the degree of uncertainty about this estimate. When evaluating changes, this allows for testing whether the given change is statistically significant or whether the estimate is too uncertain. Moreover, this uncertainty is especially relevant for the disaggregation of migrants across source countries given that the number of migrants interviewed from certain countries is small. As such, the ONS publishes the source of migrants using broad regional categories only.

It is also important to emphasize that the numbers and changes in net migration differ according to the source

of estimates. For instance, it is possible to compare the dynamics suggested by these estimates with that of other data sources such as the Annual Population Survey (APS). LTIM estimates provide information on net migration flows (i.e. difference between immigration and emigration), while the APS provide information on the stock of migrants. The changes in the stock of migrants should reflect the level of net migration; however, there are significant differences between the estimates.

Finally, it is essential for the reader to bear in mind that the total net migration figures have been revised upwards for the years that span between 2001 and 2011. This change in estimates came alongside a published report by the ONS in early April 2014. Based on the revision, total net-migration between 2001 and 2011 was underestimated by 346,000. There is evidence that the underestimation was predominantly driven by an undercount of migration from the A8 Eastern European countries. However, the figures have not been revised to reflect undercounts in inflows and outflows and there are no revised figures with breakdowns by reason for migration or citizenship. In simple terms, if for example one is looking at inflows and outflows for these years, the difference will not match the revised net balance of that year. This also applies to any other breakdown beyond the total net balance for each year between 2001 and 2011.

Thanks to Ann Singleton for helpful comments and suggestions in an earlier version of this briefing

Further Reading

- Migration Advisory Committee. "Limits on Migration: Limits on Tier 1 and Tier 2 for 2011/12 and Supporting Policies." UK Border Agency, London, 2010.
- Migration Observatory Election 2015 Briefing – Why do International Migrants Come to the UK?
www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/election-2015-briefing-why-do-international-migrants-come-uk



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 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.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

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Glossary and Terms

- Long Term International Migrant: individual that moves to the UK for one year or more.
- International Passenger Survey: survey of passengers entering and leaving the UK by air, sea or the Channel Tunnel. It is the main tool to estimate long-term international migration in the UK.
- A8 Countries: the countries which acceded to the EU in 2004 (excluding Cyprus and Malta).
- Net-migration: the difference between immigration (inflows) and emigration (outflows).

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