BRIEFING
Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview

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www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk
This briefing provides an overview of the employment levels and employment shares of migrants in the UK economy as a whole, and in specific sectors and occupations.

**Key Points**

The number of foreign-born people of working age in the UK increased from 2.9 million in 1993 to 6.6 million in 2014.

The share of foreign-born people in total employment increased from 7.2% in 1993 to 16.7% in 2014. The share of foreign-citizens in total employment increased from 3.5% in 1993 to 10.5% in 2014.

Compared to the early 2000s, the presence of foreign-born workers has grown fastest in relatively low-skilled sectors and occupations. The increase in the share of foreign-born workers was fastest among process operatives (e.g. transport drivers, food, drink and tobacco process operators), up from 8.5% in 2002 to 32.0% in 2014.

In 2014, 36% of all foreign-born workers working as employees, and 48% of self-employed foreign-born workers lived in London.

**Understanding the evidence**

Migrants can be defined in at least three different ways: by place of birth (i.e. foreign-born), nationality (i.e. foreign citizens), and length of stay in the UK. As the foreign-born definition is most commonly used in UK debates and analyses, it is the default definition used in this briefing. Wherever relevant and indicated, this briefing also provides figures for foreign citizens residing in the UK, as well as for recent migrants – defined as foreign-born people who have been living in the UK for 5 years or less. The focus is on those migrants of working age defined as 16 to 64 for men and 16 to 59 for women. The briefing draws on data from the UK’s Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS).
The number of foreign-born people of working age in the UK increased from 2.9 million in 1993 to 6.6 million in 2014
The number of working-age foreign-born people in the UK increased from 2.9 million in 1993 to 6.6 million in 2014 (see Figure 1). The annual increases have been mostly positive, but there are a few cases of slight decreases (e.g. 2007, 2009 and 2010). There was a significant jump in the number of foreign-born workers in the UK during 2006, which coincides with the opening of UK labour markets to workers from the A8 countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) in mid-2004.

Since 2005, there has been an even gender distribution in the stock of foreign-born people of working-age in the UK. Before 2005, foreign-born women workers outnumbered men.

Figure 1

The share of foreign-born persons in total employment increased from 7.2% in 1993 to 16.7% in 2014
Figure 2 shows the share of migrants in total employment. The term "employment" is based on the ILO/OECD definition and refers to all workers aged 16 to 64 for men and 16 to 59 for women who are “at work” both part time and full time as employees, self-employed, under a government scheme or working for a family. The share of foreign-born persons in total employment increased from 7.2% in 1993 to 16.7% in 2014. In 2014, foreign-citizens made up 10.5% of total employment, up from 3.5% in 1993. The share of recent migrants in total employment increased significantly in recent years although it declined slightly since 2008, possibly due to the global economic recession, before increasing again from 2012 to 2014.
Elementary process plant occupations and cleaning and housekeeping managers and supervisions have the highest shares of foreign-born workers

The increase in the share of foreign-born workers in employment in the UK has been highly differentiated across occupations and sectors. Although foreign-born workers have been and remain employed in a wide range of jobs, the growth in employment shares of foreign-born workers in recent years has been fastest among lower-skilled occupations and sectors. In 2002, there was only one low-skilled occupation (food preparation trades) in the list of top ten occupations with the highest shares of foreign-born workers. As shown in Table 1, there are now at least five low-skilled occupations on this list (i.e. elementary process plant, cleaning and housekeeping, process operatives, food preparation and hospitality, elementary cleaning, elementary storage, and assemblers and routine operatives).

In 2014, 43% of workers in elementary process plant occupations (e.g. industry cleaning process occupation and packers, bottlers, canners and fillers), 33.6% in cleaning and housekeeping managers and supervisions, and 32.0% of workers process operatives (i.e. food, drink and tobacco process operatives, glass and ceramics process operatives; textile process operatives; chemical and related process operatives; rubber and plastic process operatives; metal making and treating process and electroplaters) were foreign-born. The increase in the share of migrant labour has been greatest among process operatives (e.g. food, drink and tobacco process operatives, plastics process operatives, chemical and related process operatives) up from 8.5% in 2002 to 32.0% in 2014. As discussed by Aldin et al. (2010) a significant share of relatively skilled recent migrants have taken up employment in less-skilled occupations in the UK.
Table 1 - Top-10 occupations of foreign-born workers, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 10 by workforce share, all migrants</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Occupation share</th>
<th>Top 10 by workforce share, recent migrants</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Occupation share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Elementary process plant occupations</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Elementary process plant occupations</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Cleaning and housekeeping managers</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Process operatives</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Process operatives</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Cleaning and housekeeping managers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Food preparation and hospitality</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Elementary cleaning occupations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Health professionals</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Health professionals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Elementary cleaning occupations</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Elementary agricultural occupations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Managers and proprietors in hospitality</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Elementary construction occupations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Natural and social science professionals</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>Assemblers and routine operatives</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Elementary storage occupations</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Other elementary service occupations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Assemblers and routine operatives</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Natural and social science professionals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: occupation share indicates the share of total employment represented by the occupation. Source: Labour Force Survey 2014, Q1-4.

Manufacture of food products was the sector with the highest share of foreign-born labour in 2014

In 2014 the industry with the highest share of foreign-born workers in its workforce was food products manufacturing, where about 38% of the workforce was foreign-born (see Table 2). The sector with the second highest share of foreign-born workers was domestic personnel (32%) followed by manufacturing of wearing apparel (29%).

Table 2 shows that recent migrants concentrate in low-skilled sectors. These include manufacture of food products (14% of total employment in the sector), accommodation (11%) and manufacture of domestic personnel (11%).
Table 2 - Top-10 sectors of foreign-born workers, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 10 by workforce share, all migrants</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Industry share (%)</th>
<th>Top 10 by workforce share, recent migrants</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Industry share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of food products</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Manufacture of food products</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic personnel</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of wearing apparel</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>Domestic personnel</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Food and beverage service activities</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverage service activities</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Manufacture of textiles</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific research and development</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>Extraction crude petroleum and gas</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security &amp; investigation activities</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>Manufacture of electrical equipment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air transport</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Information service activities</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services to buildings and landscape</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Warehousing and support for transport</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer programming and consultancy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Services to buildings and landscape</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: sector share indicates the share of total employment represented by the occupation. Source: Labour Force Survey 2014, Q1-Q4.

In 2013, 36% of total foreign-born workers working as employees, and 45% of self-employed foreign-born workers lived in London

The foreign-born population in the UK is particularly concentrated in London (see the Migration Observatory briefing on 'Migrants in the UK: An Overview'). This is also the case for those migrants who are in employment. As Figure 3 shows, in 2014 about one-third of total migrants working as employees, and 48% of self-employed migrants lived in London. The share of recent migrants working as employees who lived in London is the same as all foreign-born (36%). Meanwhile, about 56% of self-employed recent migrants lived in London.
Evidence gaps and limitations

The LFS does not contain information on short-term migrants because the survey excludes individuals who have been resident in their households for less than 6 months (Dustmann et al. 2010). Also, the LFS excludes those who do not live in households, such as those in hotels, caravan parks, and other communal establishments; it also excludes halls of residence, thus missing many overseas students (many of whom are known to be legally working in the UK). Furthermore, the LFS does not include asylum seekers. Finally, the LFS is unlikely to capture migrants working without the legal right to live and/or work in the UK. See the data sources and limitations section of the Migration Observatory website for further discussion.
References


Further Readings


Related material

• Migration Observatory briefing – Migrants in the UK: An Overview

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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.

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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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