Non-European Labour Migration to the UK

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6th Revision

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This briefing examines labour migration to the UK among people who are not from the European Economic Area (EEA). Labour migrants are those whose primary reason for migrating or whose legal permission to enter the UK is for employment.

Key Points

- Non-European labour migration declined from the mid-2000s until 2012, and increased after 2012.
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- Skilled, employer-sponsored workers (Tier 2 of the Points-Based System) are the largest category of entry visas issued for work.
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- A majority of non-EEA labour migrants coming to the UK are men.
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- The largest number of non-EEA work visa recipients are nationals of India, followed by Australia and the United States.
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Understanding the Evidence

Labour migration involves people coming to the UK for the purpose of paid work. Depending on the source of data, measures of labour migration might include people who say that they are coming to the UK for a definite job or to look for work (International Passenger Survey data), or people who have permission to enter the UK on a work-related visa (administrative data on visas and passenger entries). Administrative data on visas and border admissions provided by the Home Office are based on various data sources and capture those people who are covered by the UK's immigration control and related processes (Home Office, 2015). The International Passenger Survey (IPS) data is collected via face-to-face interviews with a sample of passengers who were passing through ports (airports, land borders etc.) into and out of the UK; because it is based on a survey, IPS estimates come with margins of error.

IPS and administrative data also differ on definitions of a migrant – IPS counts only those who intend to stay in the UK for at least a year, while visa and passenger entry data do not account for length of stay. This briefing focuses mainly on migrants who are from outside the European Economic Area and Switzerland, and who are therefore subject to immigration controls and tracked in Home Office data on visas issued and passengers entering at the border. Of course, many EEA and Swiss nationals do come to the UK to work, and are included in IPS data (along with British nationals). EEA/A8 migration is considered separately (see the briefing on 'EU Migration to and from the UK').
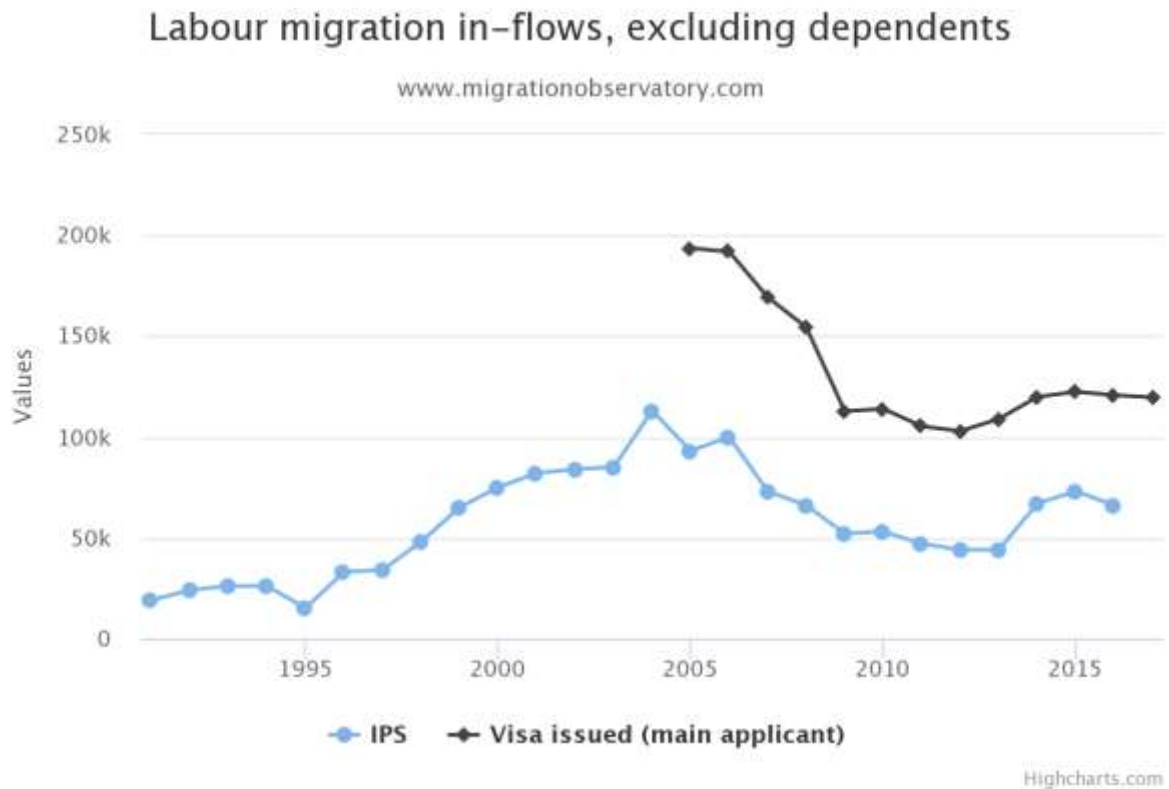
Visas and border admissions exceed IPS estimates of work-related migration. One reason for this is that some people are defined as migrants by the Office for National Statistics Long Term International Migration (LTIM) data, notably, those who intend to stay for less than 12 months. Other reasons why IPS data might be different from visa and border entry data (apart from the different migrant definition applied by IPS, visa and passenger data) could be the sampling variation of IPS; the fact that individuals may migrate for multiple reasons and this is not captured in visa and border data; and the time lag between when visa was granted and when the border crossing happened (Home Office, 2015).

Note that the visa data in this briefing provides includes figures for 'out-of-country' or 'entry clearance' visas only. Those work visas which are issued 'in-country' to allow extended leave to non-EEA nationals already in the UK are not considered further here, to limit the focus of this briefing to migrants entering the UK.

Non-European labour migration declined from the mid-2000s until 2012, and increased after 2012

Non-European labour migration increased from 1991 until the mid-2000s then decreased until 2012 after which it increased again in 2013 and 2014, according to both survey and visa data. The growth over the 1990s and early 2000s is shown in IPS data on non-EU labour migration in Figure 1. IPS estimates of non-EU labour migration increased from 19,000 in 1991 to a peak of 113,000 in 2004 before declining to 44,000 in 2012 rising to 73,000 in 2015.

Figure 1

Labour migration in–flows, excluding dependents

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Note: IPS data include both of those come to the UK for a definite job and those who look for job. Border entries data include only main visa holders and other pre-PBS and Non-PBS work categories but exclude dependants. Visa main applicants include PBS, Pre-PBS and Non-PBS as well as all other work category visas.

This trend is also apparent in visa data. Work-related entry visas declined from 193,600 in 2005 to 102,900 in 2012, before increasing to 120,700 in 2015.

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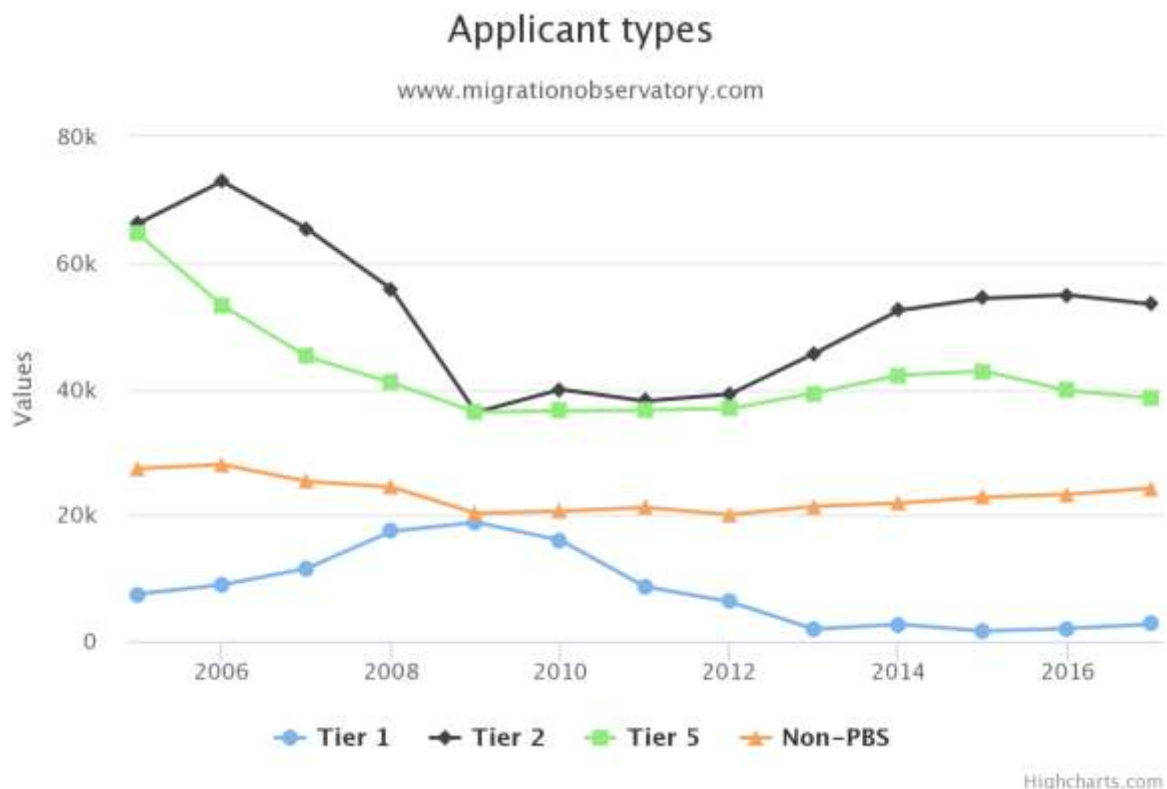# Skilled, employer-sponsored workers (Tier 2) are the largest category of work entry visas

Data are available since 2005 on how many visas go to various types of labour migrants as main applicants. Under the Points-Based System in place since 2008, this includes Tier 1 highly-skilled workers, Tier 2 skilled workers with job offers, Tier

5 temporary workers, as well as other categories outside of the Points-Based System, such as domestic workers in private households and those granted permission to work due to UK ancestry. These categories had rough equivalents in the more complicated set of pre-PBS labour migration schemes.

As shown in Figure 2, the largest category of work visas issued is Tier 2, which is designed for non-EU workers in graduate jobs. Tier 2 made up 45% of work visas issued to main applicants in 2017.

The second largest category was Tier 5, which includes various temporary workers coming for cultural exchange and other work-related purposes. In 2017, the largest component of Tier 5 was the Youth Mobility Scheme, which permits young people from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan and Monaco to come to the UK for work for up to 2 years; this category comprised 21,593 visas or 56% of Tier 5 visas. Most of the rest of Tier 5 visas went to creative and sporting workers (18%), government authorised exchanges (17%), religious workers (4%) and charity workers (4%).

Figure 2

Note: excludes visas classified as 'other permit-free employment not allocated', comprising various obsolete visa categories that were issued before 2008 and do not have a clear equivalent in the current immigration system.

The number of Tier 1 visas for main applicants decreased from a peak of 18,850 in 2009 to a low of 1,600 in 2013 and has remained below 3,000 visas per year since then. The fall around 2013 accompanied the phasing out of Tier 1 (General) for points-tested migrants and Tier 1 (Post Study) for graduating foreign students. The General and Post Study Work categories had made up 74% and 23% of Tier 1 visas, respectively, in 2009. (Statistics on sub-categories are not illustrated in the figures in this briefing.) By 2017, Tier 1 comprised primarily Entrepreneurs (38% or 983 main applicants), Graduate Entrepreneurs (8% or 225 main applicants) and Exceptional Talent (15%, or 409 main applicants).
Within Tier 2, the largest category in 2016 was Intra Company Transfers (ICTs) (32,850 main applicants, or 62% of the Tier 2 total). ICTs refer to employees transferring from a non-UK workplace to a UK workplace within the same company. Another 37% (19,980) of Tier 2 went to a Tier 2 (General) category, for those coming to work for a new employer in a graduate job.

Visas in non-PBS work categories went mainly to domestic workers (18,600) and people whose right to enter is based on UK ancestry (4,100).

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Labour migrants more likely to be male

Looking at the demographic characteristics of labour migrants, they are more likely than other groups of migrants to be young and male. LTIM estimates show that among those citing a definite job or looking for work as their reason for migrating, a majority have been male in every year dating back to 1991, including 64% in 2016. As seen in Figure 3, the labour pathway is more male-dominated than study and family (which are majority-female).

Figure 3

Gender and reason for migration, all nationalities, 1991 – 2014
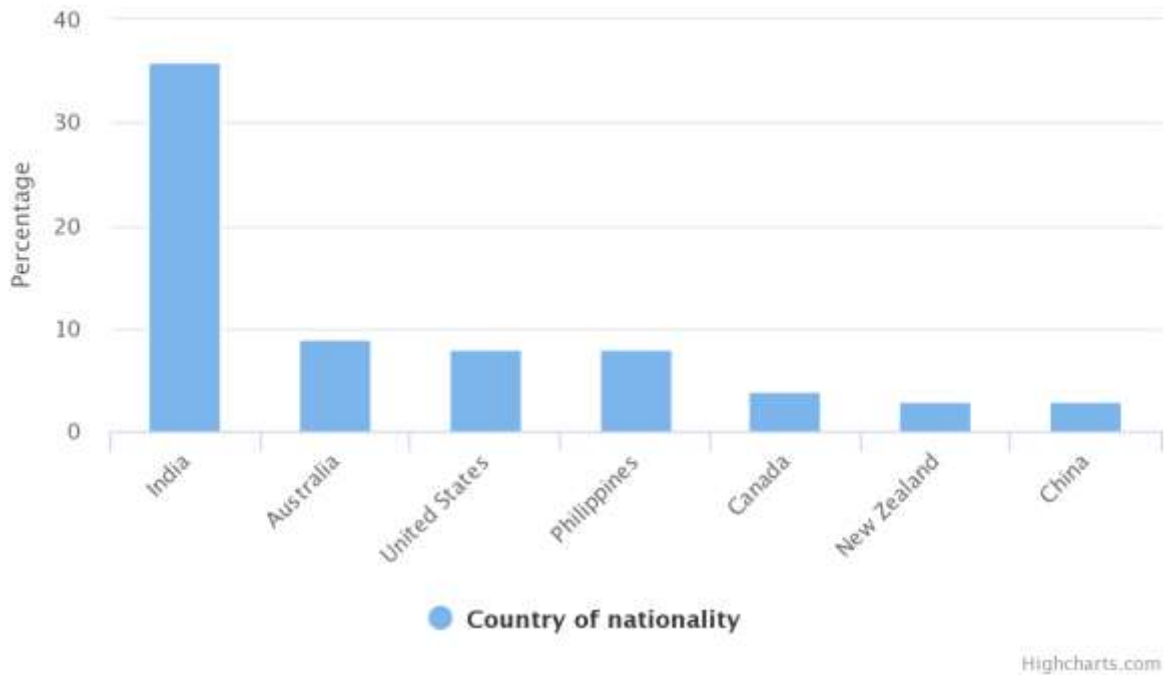
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Note that these gender data include European as well as non-European migrants. (ONS does not make available data disaggregated simultaneously by gender, nationality, and reason for migration. Data on gender, nationality and occupation at time of migration to or from Britain are available, but have large margins of error and fluctuate considerably from year to year.)

The most common country of nationality for work visa recipients is India, followed by Australia, the United States and the Philippines (Figure 5). These figures include dependents of work visa holders.

Figure 4

Work visas issued by nationality
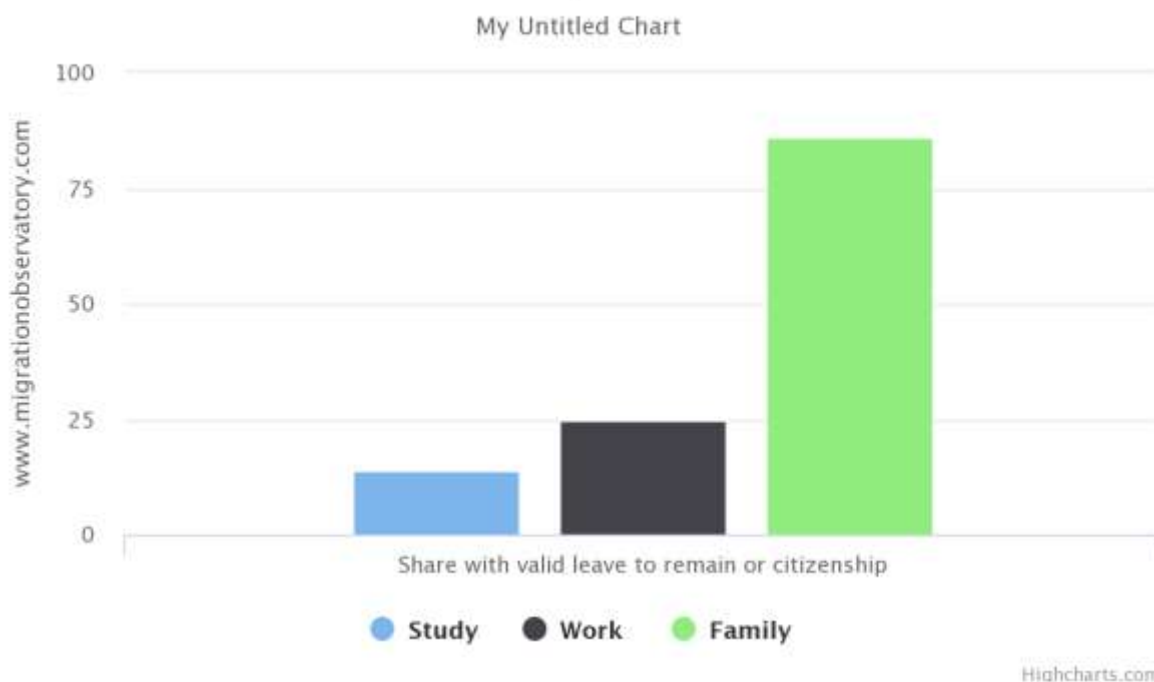
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Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics, Table vi_06_q_w
Note: includes dependants of work visa holders.

People admitted to the UK on work visas are more likely to stay in the country permanently than people who come to study, but less likely than those who come for family. By 2016, 25% of people who had been granted work visas five years earlier in 2011 still had valid leave to remain in the country. This includes people still on work visas, those granted permanent settlement, and those who had become citizens.

Figure 5

Share of 2011 visa recipients with valid leave to remain or citizenship in 2016

My Untitled Chart

Study ● Work ● Family

Source: Home Office, 'Statistics on changes in migrants' visa and leave status: 2016', volume 1, tables MJ 01-MJ 04.

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Evidence gaps and limitations

The main sources of data on labour migration are not directly comparable as they measure different things. For IPS/LTIM estimates, labour migrants are identified by their self-reported primary reason for migrating. (Alternatively, using IPS data, labour migration can also be estimated by looking at migrants' "usual occupation" prior to migration.) Administrative data classify labour migrants on the basis of legal permission to enter the UK. These groups are probably similar but not identical – some migrants may arrive as a Tier 1 migrant but report their primary reason for migrating as accompanying or joining a family member, for instance.

Each data source has its own strengths and weaknesses. Although IPS, for example, does not distinguish migrants by PBS Tiers, it collects data on main reason

for migration, including work, study or family. On the other hand, IPS/LTIM estimates do not tell us how many family-related migrants arrive as dependents of work-related migrants, as opposed to other reasons, thus, it cannot provide a full estimate of the labour path, including dependents.

Details on the occupations that labour migrants work in is not available for all visa types. Sponsorship data include occupations for Tier 2 migrants, but reliable occupational information for other groups, such as people in the Tier 5 youth mobility scheme, are not available. There is also no published data on the geographical distribution of work visa holders within the UK.

National Insurance registration numbers (NINos) are sometimes used to measure labour migration, but these are more useful for EEA/A8 migrants who are not counted in other administrative data and for people not labelled as labour migrants but who are in the labour market, such as working students or family members.

Finally, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) is also widely used to examine labour migration, but more commonly to assess the stock of migrants already in the UK as opposed to arrivals and departures. Some analyses have used LFS data to estimate migration flows, by calculating annual changes in the size of the UK's migrant population. However, LFS does not include information on migrants' visa status, and so cannot precisely determine labour migration.

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Further Readings

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- Ford, R. (2011) Acceptable and unacceptable immigrants: how opposition to immigration in Britain is affected by migrants' region of origin. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37: 1017-1037.
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Further resources

- Dustmann, Christian, and Yoram Weiss. "Return Migration: Theory and Empirical Evidence." CReAM Discussion Paper No 02/07, Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration, University College London, 2007.

Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing - EU Migration to and from the UK