



COMMENTARY

Evidence and values: The UK migration debate 2011-2013

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In the two years since the Migration Observatory was launched in March 2011, immigration policy has consistently been a major issue for the UK's policy makers, media and public. The coalition government has made a series of significant policy changes aimed at reducing net migration, among other goals, while migration continues to be among the most important issues on the agenda according to public opinion polls and is extensively covered in the news media.

Over this period the Migration Observatory has made efforts to ensure that participants in the debate have access to clear data underpinning the migration debate – and an understanding of the associated complexities and trade-offs. But one of the great challenges with immigration policy making is the relationship between evidence and values. Thus, in two years the Observatory has provided improved access to data, considered explanations of the strengths and weaknesses in the evidence base, and analysis of the trade-offs at stake in policy debates. But, as migration policy ultimately rests on value judgments as well as more tangible costs and benefits, the evidence base may be a crucial underpinning for the debate, but will never be the whole story.

Looking back: Policy changes

In the past two years a key goal of UK immigration policy has been the Conservative Party's numerical target of reducing net migration to the 'tens of thousands' by the end of the current parliament. Thus, discussion has often focused on numbers, in particular net migration data.

The latest available data show net migration in the year to June 2012 at 163,000, down from a peak of 255,000 in the year to September 2010. This suggests that, while not yet reaching its target, the government has certainly succeeded in overseeing a reduction in net migration.

The reductions have been achieved through a combination of increasing emigration – over which the government has less control – and declining immigration, which the government has encouraged through a series of new measures.

These have included:

- Controls on labour migration including: the closure of the Tier 1 general route, which had allowed 'highly skilled' non-EU migrants to enter the UK without a job offer; the introduction of a cap on skilled labour migration from outside the EU (though this has never yet been filled, so has not in itself reduced immigration); and changes to the shortage occupation list limiting it to graduate level occupations.
- A series of changes to student migration policy such as: ending the blanket post-study work route; increasing financial and language requirements; and increasing restrictions on some international students' rights to work or bring dependent relatives.
- Increasing the financial requirements for those wishing to bring family members to the UK.
- Introducing financial requirements for those wishing to settle in the UK.

Heterogeneity of immigration reflected in policy and attitudes

While opinion about whether these are the right policies may be divided, one important thing that they have helped to highlight is that 'immigration' is not a single homogenous phenomenon but a combination of a variety of forms of mobility. The government did not enact a single policy measure to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands; rather, it made changes to the main immigration channels in sequence, focusing in turn on migration for the purpose of work, study, and family.

While these may be the main categories of immigration for policy purposes, there are many other ways to group migrants as well, including country or region of origin, age, gender and income.

Over the past two years, many of the Migration Observatory's materials have also focused on highlighting the variety of drivers of migration and characteristics and impacts of migrants. Adding this nuance to the debate is a critical factor in helping to improve people's understanding of migration, and therefore helping people to make informed decisions about what sort of policies they wish to support.

A useful example of this is the Migration Observatory's 2011 public opinion report "Thinking Behind the Numbers" which, for the first time, allowed people to express views toward a wide variety of categories of immigrants, in the context of a systematic public opinion survey. The results showed that people's attitudes to migration differed greatly when considering different types of migrants.

"Thinking Behind the Numbers" provided a single snapshot of public attitudes, which are constantly evolving. But one enduring lesson from this research is that it is often useful to consider immigration as a collection of a variety of components, rather than a single undifferentiated phenomenon.

As it turns out, many members of the public have different views on these categories of migration, and at times even distinguish between migrants within these categories – between low-skilled and high-skilled workers, for example, or immediate or extended family members. A particularly telling finding was that comparatively few people identified international students as migrants or wished to reduce the number coming to Britain, even though students are the largest single group of non-EU migrants to the UK.

The evidence base and its limitations

Understanding the significance of students to UK migration issues is further complicated by the lack of clear data about student numbers. This is, at least in part, a consequence of how the International Passenger Survey (IPS) was undertaken. It did not, until very recently, collect data on why migrants leaving the UK had first come to the country – meaning, for example, that if a migrant arrived as a student but left the UK to take a job they were counted in as a student, but out as a labour migrant. This has made it impossible to get a clear picture of net migration by route (i.e. study, work, family or asylum) until data based on the revised IPS questionnaire are published, beginning in the second half of 2013.

This limitation in the existing sources of migration data was one of several highlighted in the Migration Observatory's first major report, which looked at the top ten gaps in the evidence base for policy making.

Several of the gaps highlighted in the report have now been addressed – including the introduction of a question on the IPS to capture why migrants leaving the UK initially came, progress toward the gathering of emigration data through e-Borders, and improvements to local area data on migration. . But even with these improvements, migration data are often imprecise and contested. This means that proving that targets have been, or will be, hit can be extremely challenging.

Lack of data and lack of control?

This lack of clarity on migration data, coupled with concerns about the performance of the UK Border Agency and record levels of net migration, have all played a role in creating a narrative which has focused heavily on a perceived lack of control of the UK's borders and immigration system.

Over the past two years the Labour party, for example, has repeatedly acknowledged that it failed to anticipate the level of A8 migration after 2004 – which has led to an increase in the Polish-born population of the UK of more than half a million in ten years – and has been criticised for several other elements of its handling of immigration during its 13 years in office.

The theme of a loss of control is also highlighted by concerns that the UK's population is growing unsustainably as a result of migration – encapsulated by the wide support garnered by the “No to 70 Million” e-petition organised by MigrationWatch, a think-tank campaigning for reduced immigration. The petition gained substantial support in the tabloid press and quickly raised the 100,000 signatures needed to trigger a parliamentary debate on limiting the size of the UK's population to 70 million permanently through immigration controls.

The Migration Observatory produced a report “Britain's 70 Million Debate” to inform policy makers ahead of this debate. The report showed that, although population projections include inherent uncertainty, the available evidence suggested that the scale of reductions to migration required to keep the population below 70 million would exceed the level targeted by the coalition government. The report also highlighted the costs, benefits and trade-offs associated with changing migration policy in various ways. Immigration control inevitably has broader effects; it does not occur in a vacuum.

While these concepts of ‘control’, or a lack of it, are a prevalent theme in the UK's debate on migration, control is both limited – for example the government has very little control over the level of emigration, or immigration from the EU – and hard to demonstrate given limitations in the data and the variety of factors beyond policy that can influence migration flows.

The Migration Observatory highlighted this in our “Entries, Exits and Errors” commentary, which also looked at the introduction of margins of error on government net migration figures – a welcome acknowledgement of the imprecise nature of the data. It was also an important part of our “Net Migration Bounce” commentary, which highlighted the need to recognise that reducing some inflows can have the unintended, though foreseeable, consequence of subsequently pushing net migration up.

Looking forward: Upcoming issues

The past two years have also foreshadowed a number of important developments that are set to shape UK migration policy and debates in the near future.

A particular fascination in the press and in policy circles since the start of 2013 has been how many Bulgarian and Romanian (A2) migrants the UK might expect when transitional labour market controls come to an end in 2014.

Much of the concern centres on understandable worries that it could result in a repetition of the increase in the Eastern European population of the UK that took place between 2004 and 2011. The Migration Observatory has highlighted the lack of any robust methodology for predicting migration flows from the A2 and the substantial differences between the situation at the time of A8 accession in 2004 and the current situation. This is not to minimise the potential flows from these countries – which could be large or small – but to argue that the focus of policy makers should be on preparing for the uncertain times ahead, rather than attempting to guess an unknowable future number. It is simply a limitation of the evidence base.

A2 migration, if it does increase sharply, may reduce the government's ability to deliver its ‘tens of thousands’ target going into the 2015 general election. With the next general election set for May 2015, there should be about six months of IPS data available from 2014, which should give some indication of whether the target has been hit or not.

Croatia's accession to the EU later in 2013 may also raise some concerns about increased EU immigration to the UK and labour market impacts. However, the country has a relatively small population of around 4.5 million and the UK government has already stated its intention to impose transitional labour market controls on Croatian citizens.

Earlier this year the Conservative party announced a commitment to an in/out referendum on the UK's membership of the EU if they win the next election. This has the potential to significantly affect migration flows to and from the UK and to lead to profound consequences for EU migrants in the UK and British migrants in the EU.

Another important question arises from the Scottish independence referendum, which is due to take place in September 2014. While immigration is only a peripheral issue in this debate, an independent Scotland could change the context for UK migration policy. Scotland's government has a target for increasing its population size in part through increased migration, while the current UK government's policy aims at reducing net migration. These different policy dynamics raises questions about how the two countries might manage these differences, especially in the event of a vote for Scottish independence. The Migration Observatory is currently undertaking work on a new project to document Scottish migration data and issues ahead of the referendum.

Finally, the recent rise in the polls of the UK Independence Party – with its strong opposition to the EU and preference for further restrictions on immigration – as a potential threat to all of the three main political parties in the UK has introduced a new voice to the immigration debate. UKIP's second place finish in the recent Eastleigh by-election has seemed to spark an escalation of rhetoric around restricting immigration from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. Its performance in the upcoming local elections, as well as next year's European elections, will have further impacts on how the other parties and national media discuss the migration issue.

The limits of data

The Migration Observatory has spent the last two years working to inform public debate, providing independent and evidence based data and analysis, and explaining what is known and not known about migration in the UK. Since our launch in the spring of 2011, our materials have been widely referenced by commentators, policy makers and media outlets representing a broad range of political perspectives.

But, at the same time, it is important to recognise that that evidence – in the form of data and analysis about the scale and impacts of migration – is only one side of what drives decisions on migration policy. The other side is perhaps less tangible, but no less consequential: values.

Ideas about the “sort of place I want to live in” can drive people's views and choices on immigration just as much as the economic factors – and sometimes more. A sense of what is ‘fair’ or an attachment to the ‘feel’ of a community and a concern with changes brought by immigration, may be more important to many participants in the immigration debate than national-level economic arguments.

But just as evidence can only play a certain part in the creation of immigration policy, the same is true for values, and one of the greatest challenges is ensuring that the media and policy debate unpicks what is a value-driven argument from an evidence-driven argument. Recent debates about migrant access to social housing, for example, as well as NHS health care, have fluctuated between arguments about economic implications and arguments about fairness. For many who care about these issues from a variety of perspectives, the price tag may be less important than beliefs about the extent to which welfare provisions should be exclusively or preeminently linked to citizenship

Data and evidence are crucial to the migration debate, but limited in that they cannot resolve fundamental value judgments. The Migration Observatory aims to ensure that the debate on immigration is based on solid evidence and rational analysis where possible, and to explain the limits of data where none exist. Evidence of this sort can help to inform people, so that they can decide what sort of policies best support their values, but it can never be a substitute for those values.

Related Material

- Migration Observatory report – Thinking behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/thinking-behind-numbers-understanding-public-opinion-immigration-britain>
- Migration Observatory report – Top Ten Problems in the Evidence Base for Public Debate and Policy-Making on Immigration in the UK <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/top-ten-problems-evidence-base-public-debate-and-policy-making-immigration-uk>
- Migration Observatory report – Britain’s ‘70 Million’ Debate <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/britains-70-million-debate>
- Migration Observatory commentary – Entries, Exits, Errors <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/entries-exits-and-errors>
- Migration Observatory commentary – The Net Migration Bounce <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/net-migration-bounce>
- Migration Observatory commentary – Romania and Bulgaria: The accession guessing game <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/romania-and-bulgaria-accession-guessing-game>
- Migration Observatory briefing – UK Public Opinion toward Migration: Determinants of Attitudes <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-migration-determinants-attitudes>
- 24dash.com social housing and public sector news website – Pickles says ‘time to do the right thing’ on housing and migration <http://www.24dash.com/news/housing/2013-03-25-Pickles-says-time-to-do-the-right-thing-on-housing-and-migration>



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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