



BRIEFING

Geographical Distribution and Characteristics of Long-Term International Migration Flows to the UK

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This briefing focuses on long-term international migrants coming to the UK. It examines their characteristics, where they go after they arrive in the UK, and trends over time.

Please note that the LTIM estimates used in this briefing are the revised estimates by the ONS. In their 'Quality of Long-Term International Migration estimates from 2001 to 2011' report published on 10th April 2014, the ONS revised the total net migration estimates for 2001-2011; the revision suggests that the total net-migration between 2001 and 2011 was underestimated by 346,000 net-migrants. A revised version of inflows and outflows as well as breakdowns by citizenship or reason for migration, etc., is not currently available.

Key Points

For those migrants going to England, London has remained the most popular destination (32% of the total going to England in 2014), but the share of incoming migrants going to London has decreased from the peak of the late 1990s (48% in 1998).

For those migrants going to England, London has remained the most popular destination (30% of the total going to England in 2013), but the share of incoming migrants going to London has decreased from the peak of the late 1990s (48% in 1998).

Close to 87% of migrants coming to the UK in 2014 were between ages 15 and 44, a share that has increased over time. Migrants between 25 and 44 years of age represented about half (46%) of migrant inflows during the last decade.

Half of migrants coming to the UK in 2014 were male. This contrasts with the early 1990s, when women represented the majority of migrants coming into the UK.

The majority (67%) of incoming migrants were single in 2014 and this share has been increasing over time.

About 29% of migrants entering the UK stated their usual occupation prior to migration as professional or managerial and 25% as manual and clerical. The share of migrants who report being a student prior to migration has been on an upward trend since 1991, reaching 37%-39% in years between 2010 and 2013 after which it decreased to 33% in 2014.

Understanding the evidence

This briefing focuses on the characteristics of the flow of migrants coming to the UK in a given period, not the characteristics of the stock of all migrants already in the UK. The briefing on 'Characteristics and Outcomes of Migrants in the UK Labour Market' discusses the characteristics of the stock of migrants in the UK.

All the data used in this briefing are based on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Long-Term International Migration (LTIM) Estimates. These estimates are mostly constructed using data from the International Passenger Survey (IPS), but also incorporate information from other sources such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS), Home Office data on asylum seekers and their dependants and data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency on international migration.

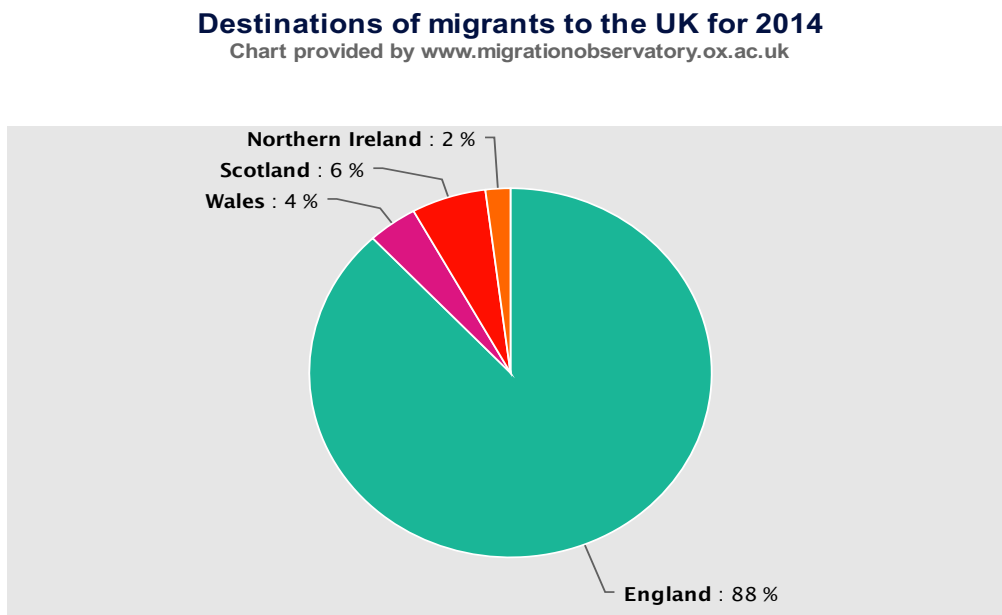
To accurately understand and interpret LTIM data, it is important to be clear about its underlying definitions and limitations. ONS uses the current international standard definition of a long-term international migrant— a person moving to another country for at least one year—to produce LTIM estimates: (see “evidence gaps and limitations” below for further discussion).

Please note that some but not all the LTIM estimates have been revised 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 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, gender, age, occupation, or different reasons for migrating will not match the total net balance.

London has remained the most popular destination of migrants coming to the UK

Figure 1 reports the share of migrants to the UK by country of destination for the year 2014. The majority of recent migrants reported England as a final destination (88%). About 6% went to Scotland, 4% to Wales and 2% to Northern Ireland. These shares have remained more or less stable over time and are roughly proportional to the share of population in each of these regions.

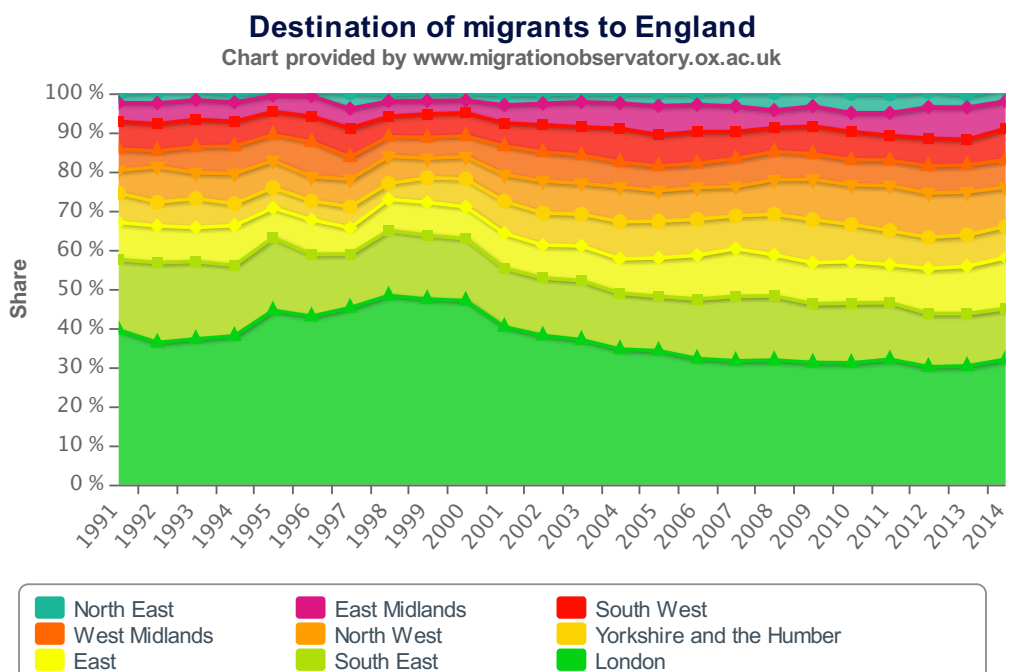
Figure 1



Source : ONS, Long-Term Migration Estimates, table 2.06

As shown in Figure 2, London has been the most popular destination for incoming migrants to England since at least 1991 (32% of the total in 2014). There has been, however, a noticeable decrease in the share of migrants going to London when compared with the peak in the late 1990s (48% in 1998). Meanwhile, there has been a slight increase in the share of incoming migrants going to other regions of England such as the East and the North West. The 2014 shares for these regions, however, remain small at about 13% and 10%, respectively.

Figure 2

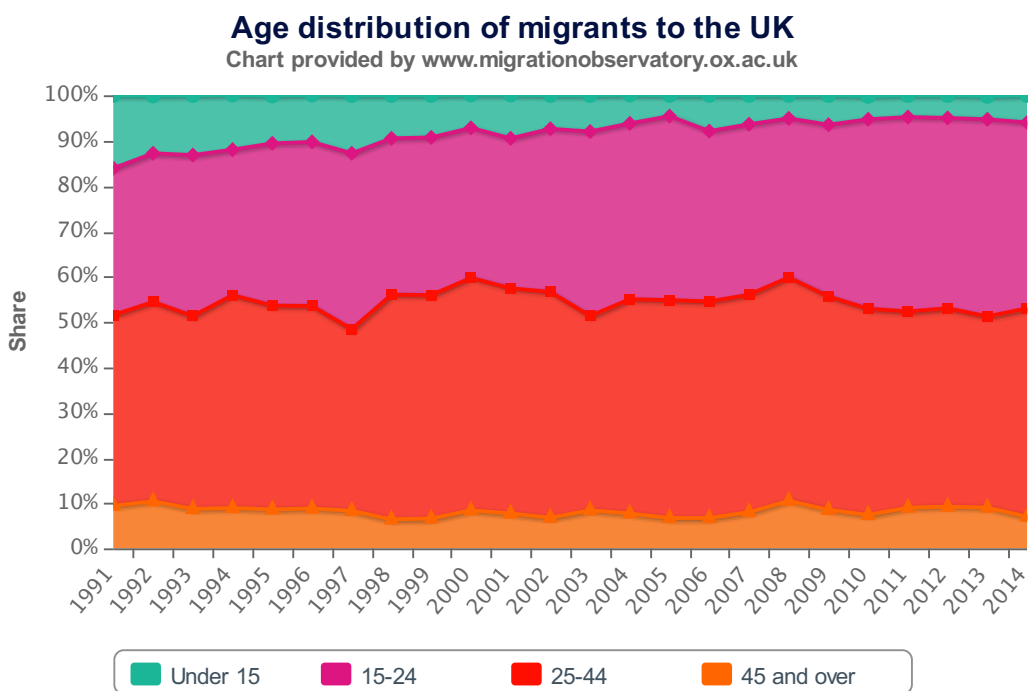


Source : ONS, Long-Term International Migration Estimates, table 2.06

Incoming migrants were more likely to be single and between 15 and 44 years of age

As shown in Figure 3, close to 87% of the migrants coming to the UK during the last decade have been between ages 15 and 44. The largest share was those between 25 and 44 years of age, who represented 46% of the migrants coming to the UK. The share of those aged 45 or older has remained relatively constant over time and stood at 7% in 2014. The 25 to 44 age group typically consists of individuals in their most productive years; see our briefing on 'The Fiscal Impact of Immigration to the UK' for a discussion of the influence of age distribution on fiscal impacts.

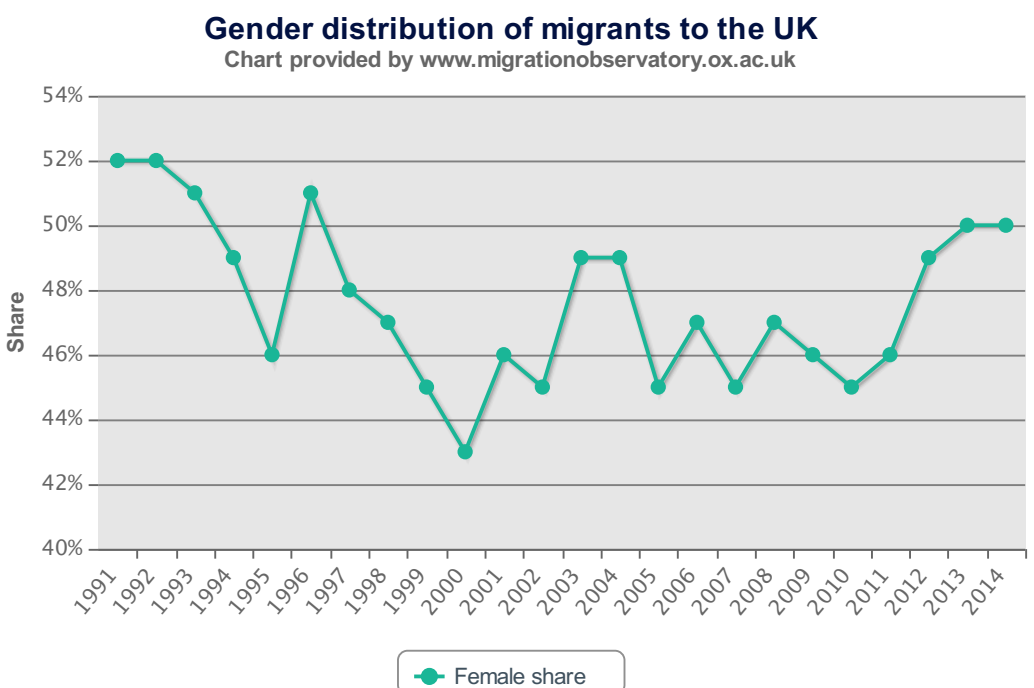
Figure 3



Source : ONS, Long-Term International Migration Estimates, table 2.07

As shown in Figure 4, women make up about half of migrants to the UK, although the estimated share has fluctuated above and below 50% over time.

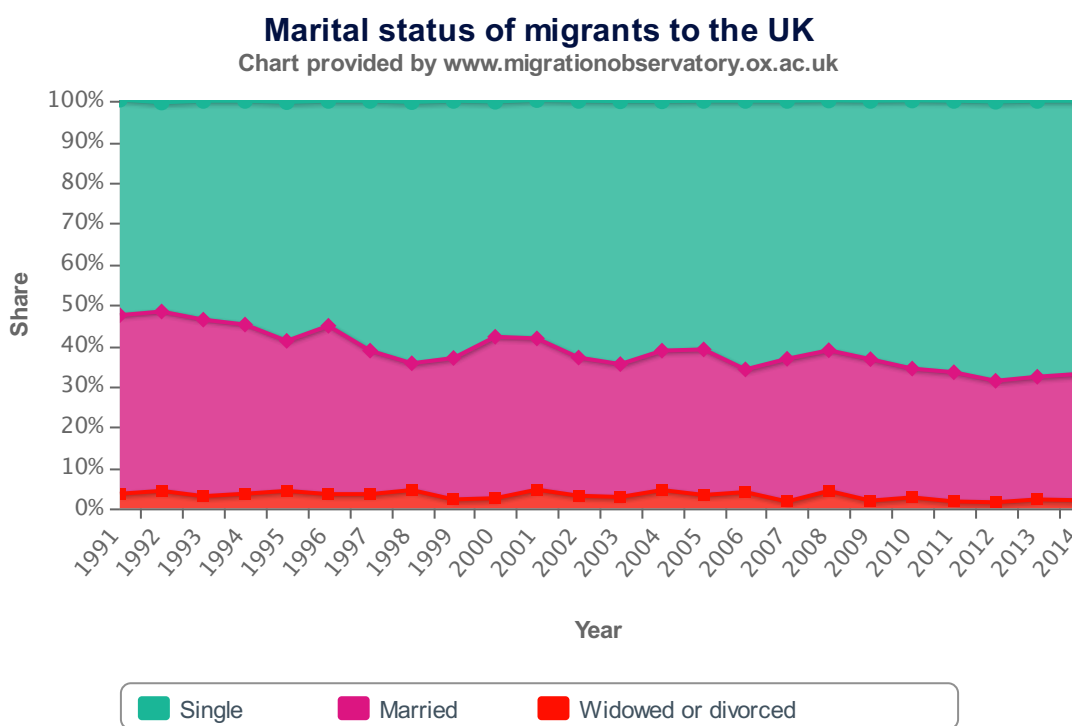
Figure 4



Source : ONS, Long-Term International Migration Estimates, table 2.07

As shown in Figure 5, in 2014 the majority (67%) of recent migrants to the UK were single (using data on those aged 15 and over, not revised yet by the ONS). The proportion of migrants who are single shows a positive trend over time. Only about one third of migrants coming to the UK in 2014 were married (31%) and about 2% were divorced or widowed. The shares of incoming male and female migrants who were single were different in 1991 than in 2014. In 1991, close to 61% of male migrants were single, compared to only 46% of female migrants. The latest estimates for 2014 show that this gap has been significantly reduced over time; in 2014, 68% of female migrants coming to the UK were single compared to 66% of male migrants.

Figure 5

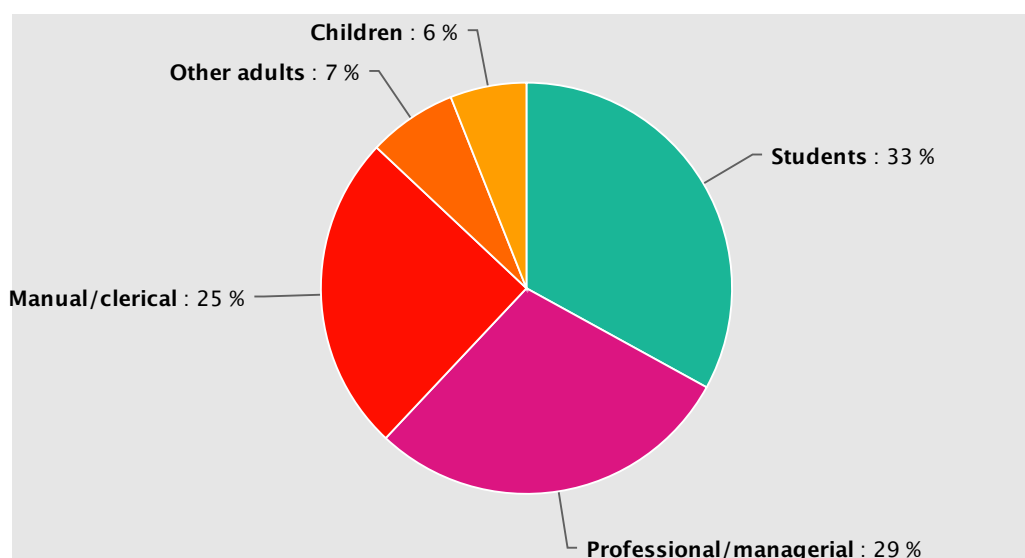


Source : ONS, Long-Term International Migration Estimates, table 2.08

A third of migrants coming to the UK said they had previously been students, while under one-third of migrants reported being previously in professional or managerial occupations

The International Passenger Survey (IPS) asks respondents about their usual occupation prior to migrating to the UK. It is of course possible, and in many cases likely, for a migrant to change occupations as he or she changes countries. Therefore, the discussion of LTIM estimates does not necessarily reflect the distribution of occupations of migrants in the UK, but rather reflects the background of incoming migrants. The LFS is a better alternative for exploring the current occupation of migrants in the UK (see our briefing on ‘Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview’).

Figure 6

Usual occupation prior to migration for 2014Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

Source : ONS, Long-Term Migration Estimates, table 2.05

The share of migrants who were students before migrating to the UK has had a long-term positive trend since 1991 (when 17% reported being students prior to migrating) and in 2013 students accounted for about 37% of the total incoming migrants. Having been a student before coming to the UK does not indicate that the migrant will also be a student in the UK.

At the same time, about 25% of all migrants coming to the UK said they had been in professional or managerial occupations. This category includes managers, administrators and migrants with technological and professional qualifications. The share represented by this type of migrant was on the rise until a peak of 38% in 2000 and has been mostly decreasing since then. The share of incoming migrants previously in clerical and manual occupations stood at about 23% of the total in 2013, just slightly higher than the year before but lower than the peak of 26% in 2005.

Evidence gaps and limitations

There are several problems with using the IPS data to identify the destination of long-term international migrants within the UK. First, the IPS asks migrants about their intended destination. Therefore, migrants are just providing information about the first location at which they plan to establish themselves. Staying at this location in the long-term depends, among other things, on the possibility of finding a job and affordable housing. Moreover, many migrants may not have a final destination in mind, but just a temporary stop while they search for a job. The IPS may overestimate London as a migrant destination, given that a large portion of the incoming migrants are sampled at airports in London. In addition, migrants may mention London as their intended destination based on their limited knowledge of other cities in the UK.

Given that the IPS depends on migrants' plans in order to estimate their destinations in the UK, the ONS also makes use of other information in order to estimate the final geographical distribution of migrants coming to the UK. Among the other potential sources of information, the LFS stands out as particularly useful. Using the LFS, the ONS adjusts the results about the geographical distribution of incoming migrants. The result is a distribution with the same number of total migrants (inflow), but with a geographical allocation based on LFS data.

The IPS is not an extensive survey, but it does collect some relevant data on the characteristics of incoming migrants. Yet there is a limitation in this regard, as the IPS does not sample those passengers who cross the land border between Ireland (Republic) and Northern Ireland (UK). Therefore, to describe the characteristics of migrants to Northern Ireland it is necessary to use family doctor registration data. Final LTIM estimates combine these two sources of data.

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 relative to the size of the apparent change.

Finally, it is essential for the reader to keep 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, marital status, prior occupations, 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. Moreover, in the case of estimates for marital status, the net balance for those aged 15 and over has not been revised.

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

References

- Office for National Statistics. "Differences between Provisional and Final Estimates of Long-Term International Migration." Office for National Statistics, London, 2009.

Related Material

- Migration Observatory briefing – Migrants in the UK: An Overview www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migrants-uk-overview
- Migration Observatory briefing – The Fiscal Impact of Immigration to the UK www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/fiscal-impact-immigration-uk
- Migration Observatory briefing – Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migrants-uk-labour-market-overview
- 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.

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