

Progress report on short-term migration

Over the last decade international migration flows to and from the UK have grown substantially so that net in-migration has become the main driver of population growth in the UK. This has led to significant interest in migration flows and migrant populations by policy makers and those delivering public services. In particular; this interest has grown following the accession of 10 countries to the European Union in May 2004, eight of which are Central and Eastern European countries.

Currently ONS publishes estimates of international migration based on the UN definition – “A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence.” This 12 month definition is used in UK population estimates; hence persons staying in the UK for periods of less than one year are not included in estimates of the usually resident population.

ONS recognises the need for additional data on people entering and leaving the UK for periods of less than 12 months. In particular, some users require information on those migrating to work in the UK for short periods of time. Flows of migrant workers who stay in the UK for less than a year are currently not included in ONS international migration estimates, nor necessarily in published ONS visitor data, since the latter exclude those travelling to take up prearranged employment.

ONS is carrying out research into the estimation of short-term migration flows to and from the UK. The first phase of the research (currently underway) has several strands. Initial work is focussing on definitional issues and user needs in relation to short-term migrants. The UN definition of a short-term migrant is “A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least 3 months but less than a year (12 months), except in cases where the movement to that country is for purposes of recreation, holiday, visits to friends and relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage.” However this definition may not meet all user needs.

Alongside this, the data sources available to estimate or quality assure short-term migration flows are being assessed. Since 1999, the International Passenger Survey has collected data on those intending to stay in the UK or abroad for six to 12 months, and since 2004 also for those intending to stay for three to six months. These data are currently being analysed and will be reported on by the end of 2006. As well as this key source of both inflow and outflow data, other sources of data may be available for comparison; for example, data from National Insurance numbers, work permits and the Worker Registration Scheme for nationals of eight of the ten countries who acceded to the EU in 2004. However these administrative sources on arrivals in the UK have limitations, in particular with regard to their inability to distinguish between short-term and long-term migrants. In addition they only cover those entering the UK to work (and not those arriving for study or other purposes) and do not provide any information on outflows.

Later this year, the second phase of the research will assess the feasibility of producing estimates of short-term migration flows. Feasibility is likely to depend on several factors, including data quality, suitability of reason for visit information and seasonality issues. Interactions between short-term and long-term migration estimates will also need to be taken into account. ONS expects to report on this work by the end of 2006.