

Improving the public value of the UK's international migration statistics

Summary

Understanding migration is important to aid decision making across society – from understanding the changing workforce needs in hospitals and schools or the demands placed on these services, to the impact of population turnover in areas across the UK and in different industry sectors.

Two recent Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) roundtable events threw a spotlight on various aspects of these information needs, and revealed potential opportunities to help address them. The proposed solutions included both short and medium term opportunities, through new ideas volunteered by statistical producers during the discussions. The producers identified that some of issues raised are being tackled in the longer term developments [announced in September 2017](#) by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on behalf of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) Migration Steering Group, which require the sharing and linking of various administrative data sets held across Government.

The roundtable discussions highlighted widespread stakeholder support for the proposed ideas, and particularly GSS migration development plan to produce new analyses based on linked data, but strongly emphasised the need for urgency and continued cross-departmental collaboration. Stakeholders were also unclear about how they and other users would be kept informed about access to any newly developed outputs.

OSR recommends that the statistics producers update the cross-GSS migration development plan, to set out the roles of the individual departments in producing new statistics based on shared administrative data, and to reflect the commitments that departments have made to address stakeholders' identified needs. The updated plan should include details about how users will be kept informed about progress. OSR will monitor producers' progress against their commitments.

Introduction

International migration is a topic of central interest to all parts of government, whether national or local, devolved or UK. It is also a major influence in decisions within business – in investment and in employment, across sectors whether public, private or charitable, for employers and employees. There is also a large amount of debate about government policy and about the migration statistics required to inform decision making in the area of service provision.

OSR has been tracking the progress of government producers of migration statistics through its regulatory work programme for a number of years, recognising that these statistics are an essential public asset. International migration is a politically sensitive topic and been subject to substantial debate about its measurement – most recently focussing on student migration. OSR

conducted a detailed [review](#) of ONS's estimates of student migration in 2017. These are some of the highest profile and most debated migration statistics. We concluded that the former-student emigration estimate may not provide a complete and coherent picture of former-student emigration. We requested ONS to publish this estimate as experimental statistics. Working with the Home Office, ONS has done so and is making improvements to the migration statistics to ensure that they serve the needs of users. These improvements include using new data sources, for example, the Home Office's exit check data, to better understand the outcomes of international students.

Given the widespread debate about international migration statistics, we decided to explore the extent to which the available data on international migration meet the needs of society and what might be done to fill any gaps. In October and November 2017, we hosted two roundtables discussing statistics on international migration relating to employment and business, and in relation to service delivery. They involved a range of stakeholders (see the list of participant organisations in Annex A) from trade organisations, think tanks, expert users, and local and central government users with particular interests in the two topics.

The sessions also involved migration statistics producers from across government, with representatives from ONS, Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and National Records Scotland (NRS). This report summarises the main points raised by stakeholders in the two discussions and the actions put forward by the producers to address stakeholders' information needs.

Background to the roundtables

The Office for Statistics Regulation is keen to emphasise the importance of statistics being available and suitable for answering critical questions within society. Statistics and data need to be responsive and evolve to continue to meet the needs of a changing world, while at the same time balance the needs for continuity and consistency, to provide insight and realise their considerable public value.

We convened two roundtables as part of our systemic review programme, to uncover the central questions of interest to stakeholders, to seek and witness the public commitment of statistics producers in addressing the issues identified. Our aims were to help remove barriers to progress, both within and between departments, in addressing these users' key public value questions. We asked stakeholders:

- What issues in this area cannot be resolved or understood due to a lack of information on international migration?
- What information is needed about migrants living in the UK to address a critical issue within your area of interest/business/service area?
- What is preventing progress in your area of concern and what changes would you like to see to enable the issues to be addressed?

In bringing together a range of stakeholders and key migration statistics producers in two roundtable discussions, our goal was to move the debate away from the numbers of migrants; but instead to focus on the detail of what other information about migrants is important, to support decision makers. The UK departure from the EU placed a critical context for the discussion and featured in the issues raised by stakeholders.

Main findings

The stakeholders attending highlighted the areas where they would like more detailed statistics – these are set out in Annex B, and cover migrant demographic and socio-economic characteristics and status, data and method issues, and a range of analytical interests. Users described some particular needs and issues, including:

- information on migrant ‘churn’ in local areas, to help to inform the overall population and labour market view of migrant turnover in and out of those areas, and to inform business decisions around planning as labour market pressures experienced by local industries are not covered by current official statistics
- migrant employment by sector – particularly important in predicting the impact of Brexit on council services and businesses, especially those employing seasonal and short term workers, and may depend on coordinating and enhancing the existing analyses available and using new, more detailed sources to show where short-term migrants are moving around the UK
- different issues for Devolved Administrations compared with parts of England, due to local authorities wanting to see growth in their populations and many already at risk of depopulation, and a much weaker evidence base available at regional and local levels
- a need to better understand the composition of the workforce, including information on migrant skills, qualifications, employment and transitions to support planning – for example in the health service
- detailed local level information to inform public service planning as migration levels change the demand and type of services needed, for example in children’s social care
- being kept informed about developments in migration statistics and data that are relevant to their needs, as some stakeholders were not aware of the cross-GSS development work, including being told about the availability of new statistics as they become available

Critically, users need:

- a **common measure of migrants** that producers/data collectors can apply across data sources: a ‘passports-held’ indicator has been used successfully on the 2011 Census in England and Wales and can act as a proxy for identifying the nationality of migrants. Users talked about how standardisation of data collected on ‘ethnicity’ following the 2001 Census has been really helpful and said this kind of ‘harmonisation’ around a measure and roll-out across different data sources, is now needed for nationality

- better access to **record-level data about migrants** than is currently possible through the **secure data labs**^{1,2,3}
- **more analysable local data** than available through the [ONS indicator suite](#)
- **access to (some) Labour Force Survey migration variables on the public use version of Annual Population Survey**, as they are not all easily accessible (through the secure data lab)
- **detailed, local-level, labour market information** to help understand the implications of **Brexit** in different geographical areas and sectors
- a **broader range of Home Office immigration statistics and data** where possible – to allow analyses of **application and grant numbers/rates by nationality and visa category**

Users were particularly encouraged by the [GSS migration development plan](#) to link the administrative data held across government, which was put forward by ONS in light of the Digital Economy Act (DEA). This is a large programme of work between now and 2019 to markedly improve the value of international migration statistics by pulling together numerous government data sets including: Semaphore data, Home Office exit check data, DWP Migrant Worker Scan and National Insurance number allocations to adult overseas nationals (NINOs) data, Real Time tax Information from HMRC, Department for Education School Census and non-UK participation in Higher and Further Education data, as well as health data including UK/non-UK patient GP registrations.

ONS proposed that combining these administrative data sources would offer many analytical benefits, and help to answer unanswered migration questions concerning the impact migrants have on the economy and society while living in the UK, and with the ability to look in detail across migrant groups and at more detailed geographies. In the longer term, this would also help provide an integrated migration figure, not just relying on the International Passenger Survey (IPS) net migration figure. Survey sources would continue to collect information that would not be available from administrative data sources (such as detailed migrant characteristics and reasons for immigrating) to help answer questions about the drivers of migration. The GSS is working closely to ensure that the relevant data sets are made available to achieve these aims to the proposed timetable. Some new analyses had already been released prior to the roundtables including the [impact of migration on the labour market](#) and on [housing](#), and the evidence submitted to the [Migration Advisory Committee \(MAC\) consultation on European Economic Area \(EEA\) workers](#).

Obtaining access to linked, government data was identified as an important goal by the range of stakeholders attending, however, many want the analyses promised by the GSS's migration

¹ <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/use-data/secure-lab>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs/about/research>

³ <https://adm.ac.uk/get-data/secure-access/>

development plan to be available now, not in two years time. It was also highlighted that user organisations might also have data of value to statistics producers in developing their statistics.

Roundtable actions

During the course of the roundtable meetings statistics producers volunteered solutions which could address some of needs identified by users, and which producers committed to address. Some of these were in addition to the producers' current development plans for migration statistics, and while specific timescales for delivery were not agreed at the meeting, we anticipate many being potential quick wins⁴.

- DWP/HMRC said they would try to address barriers in accessing DWP/HMRC data (such as Migrant Worker Scan, NINOs and Real-Time tax Information), including exploring options such as the Administrative Data Research Network and the ONS Virtual Micro-data Laboratory - but needed ONS specifications quickly to meet the proposed timescales
- HMRC prepares some additional analysis for Ministers and was happy to explore with ONS what additional statistics of value it might be possible to produce through DEA
- Home Office said that it could in future produce an [exit check analysis](#) for Work, Family and other non-visit visa holders, but this would be dependent on the nature of future immigration systems
- Home Office would continue to review what regional and local analysis could be produced from its data sources and statistics, as it has done on refugee settlement and asylum, and publish additional breakdowns where the underlying data allowed
- National Records of Scotland (NRS) said it would assess what analysis could be produced on migrants using its health administrative data and education administrative data in a way that was consistent with ONS plans for incorporating statistics from all three devolved administrations
- ONS committed to improving its qualification questions on the LFS which were now asked on a selective basis due to changes to the question routing – in an order that leads to fewer migrants being asked detailed qualifications questions
- ONS would also review where it could produce more analysis to explore EEA issues for selected sectors, such construction and agriculture (where there is seasonal labour market variation), and in the medium term on international comparisons for individual countries, pulling together data from across sources and departments

⁴ Since the roundtables were held, ONS has published its evidence submission to the [MAC consultation on international students](#) and a new analysis article on [Labour within the Agriculture Industry](#). The article was a collaborative piece of work with DEFRA, the National Farmers Union and the British Growers Association. It highlights the difficulty in estimating the number of seasonal workers within the industry and sets out the next steps to help improve the data on this topic

- ONS would continue to work with DWP to look at what more it can do to answer stakeholders' key questions concerning migrants' participation, earnings, location and movement around the UK labour market using DWP and HMRC data
- ONS would work with the devolved administrations to identify how to integrate devolved regions data into the GSS development plans to ensure a UK wide perspective of international migration and where possible disaggregate this to local levels
- OSR will explore the barriers to sharing data to help improve access to data on migration
- OSR will publicise the user-needs for data on nationality across the GSS and provide opportunities for users to make their needs known directly to those developing data sources and working on question harmonisation

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the urgency of the issues raised by stakeholders, OSR expects the producer departments to:

- Review the cross-GSS migration development plan (to be coordinated by ONS) in early 2018, to incorporate the short and medium term actions that will be taken to address users' identified needs from the roundtables, setting out the roles of the individual departments in producing new statistics, including those based on shared administrative data, and clearly setting out the proposed timings for delivering the required improvements
- Enhance existing collaborative relationships with other departments as necessary to improve the public value of migration statistics produced across government, demonstrating the nature of the collaboration in both development updates and statistical research outputs
- As required by the Code, involve users in the testing and development of new migration outputs, publishing an outline of their approach to engaging users in planned migration statistics developments by April 2018
- As required by the Code, keep users regularly updated with progress against this and any other development plans (for example, quarterly), ensuring that plans and updates are accessible, and being open with users' about where their needs both can and cannot be met

Next steps

We will review producers' progress against their commitments and our recommendations over the coming weeks. This will focus in particular on the cross-departmental working that will be

required for GSS to achieve the milestones identified in its development plan (Annex C), which critically depends on the linkage administrative data held by the various departments.

We will publish an update on this review by May 2018, including the actions and outcome of the steps taken by producers by this point, and by OSR.

Annex A: Roundtable approach and list of organisations attending

Approach

By giving users opportunities to raise areas of interest, we hoped to positively enhance the public value of international migration statistics for the wider public good. The focus on the relevance to employment and business and service delivery allowed a more insightful look, avoiding too narrowly addressing specific aspects of statistical methodology, such as the design of International Passenger Survey.

We invited a range of stakeholders (shown in the table below) to provide their insights into the current migration-related issues concerning aspects of employment and business and service delivery. Our focus was on fundamental needs, such as information requirements about migrant characteristics, geographic differences and barriers to business,

We asked stakeholders to answer questions such as:

- What issues in this area cannot be resolved or understood due to a lack of information on international migration?
- What information is needed about migrants living in the UK to address a critical issue within your area of interest/business/service area?
- What is preventing progress in your area of concern and what changes would you like to see to enable the issues to be addressed?

A panel of statistical producers listened to the stakeholder discussion and then provided feedback on the statistical implications raised. The roundtables ended with a plenary discussion on the likely barriers or opportunities in meeting the needs raised in the event, which included an indication of statistics producers' commitments to address the key issues stakeholders raised.

List of participating organisations:

Stakeholders
Buckinghamshire Council
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Strategic Migration Partnership
Greater London Authority
Hampshire County Council
House of Commons Library
Institute for Public Policy Research
Local Government Association
Migration Advisory Committee
Migration Observatory, University of Oxford
Migration Yorkshire
National Farmers Union
Resolution Foundation
Producers
Department of Health
Department for Communities and Local Government
Department for Education
Department for Work and Pensions
HM Revenue and Customs
Home Office
National Records Scotland
Office for National Statistics
Welsh Government

Annex B: Stakeholders' information needs

Each of the producers publishes a range of statistics using a variety of data sources – some are survey statistics, such as using the International Passenger Survey (IPS), Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Annual Population Survey (APS).

Others are from administrative systems, such as visas, asylum applications, and registrations of National Insurance Number (NINOs) allocations for overseas nationals.

Some statistics are produced by combining data from different types of sources such as ONS's international migration statistics.

Much of the information needs identified below reflect the richer level of detail needed by stakeholders across all data collections, irrespective of the method, to help build a fuller picture about migrants living in the UK.

Some of the data items listed are available currently at a national level but not available for local areas or within sub-groups of the population.

List of information needs:

Characteristics of Migrants	
Demographic characteristics	
Age breakdown eg age of those working on farms	Nationality
Ethnicity	Country of birth
Religion	Country of origin
Socio-economic characteristics	
Earnings	Level of educational qualification
Benefit claimants	Language proficiency
Employment status, including self-employment	Earnings of self-employed
Sector eg health, care, education, and sub-sector	Access to local services
Active/inactive NINOs	Housing
Migrant status	
Intention to stay	Illegal migrants
Visa types	Asylum information: age, accommodation, section 4
Visa sponsors	
Data/method issues	
Consistent measures and definitions on surveys and admin sources	
Integrated/linked data sources across departments	
Geographical breakdowns, disaggregated by area / small area	
Area types: constituencies, other area types eg clinical commissioning groups	
Use same variables on country of birth and nationality as on IPS	
Improved accessibility and usability of the local indicator data suite	
Churn (overall change in population turnover – moving in and out of an area)	
Migration flow: eg flow data in and out of work over 2 and 5 quarters	
Multivariate cross tabulations	
Timely data (as census data now not representative of population)	
EEA, Non-EEA and UK (as a minimum) on public version of APS/LFS	
Add a migrant flag on ASHE	
Improved data on sectoral turnover (for migrants and non-migrants) by improving the 2Q LFS	
Longitudinal information on migrants (e.g. through Understanding Society) to understand migrant earnings and employment trajectories	
Greater detail in Home Office data on migration control (i.e. the number of applications for and grants of visas by both nationality and visa category) - to allow the analysis of refusal rates for nationals of a given country applying for a particular type of visa	
Analytical interests	
Migrant outcomes	
Skills gaps	
Movement of migrants around the country	
How migrants settle in communities	
Local level information to inform service planning as migration levels change the demand and type of services needed – for example in children's social care	
Housing sector (e.g. pressures on rental accommodation) timely statistics important given changing	

context
Numbers of migrants leaving sectors - skill shortages
Seasonal aspects related to churn
Net contributors to the economy
Who is leaving the UK and what their skills are
'Why' questions which will be best answered by surveys

Annex C: GSS planned migration statistics developments using linked administrative data

Date	Topic	Additional Admin data sources
Early 2018	Work, Family and other non-visit visa analysis, providing better evidence on travel and migration patterns of non-EU nationals	Exit Check data
2018	EU Nationals travel and migration patterns – How do EU citizens interact with administrative systems in the UK and what can we learn about their movements, to supplement existing analysis?	HMRC Real Time Information, DWP benefits data, Home Office Borders data
Mid 2018	How different groups of international migrants impact the economy, building on available evidence.	Migrant Workers Scan, Benefits and Income Data
Autumn 2018	Experimental migration statistics using admin data as the core	All available sources, particularly Patient Registers and Customer Information System
Autumn 2018	Consultation with migration statistics users on the shape that a new administrative based system would take	
Late 2018	International migrant use of Health Services, and labour supply in the Health Sector – building on information already available across the public sector	NHS data on GP registrations, and hospital interactions, in addition to the HMRC sources above, augmented with data for devolved administrations where available.
Late 2018/early 2019	International migrant use of Education Sector, and labour supply in the Education Sector – building on information already available across the public sector	DfE School Census, Longitudinal education outcomes, in addition to the HMRC sources above, augmented with data for devolved administrations where available.
2019	Administrative Sources as core to Migration Statistics	Linked data system based on all available sources.