

The Economic Impact of Immigration

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Economic Impact of Immigration on the UK Economy. This response has been compiled with the assistance of a number of expert Fellows of the RSE in the form of a small working party, under the direction of the Vice-President, Professor John Mavor. The working party has sought to answer those questions which it feels it can most authoritatively comment upon.
2. As Dustmann and Weiss (2007) indicate, there are distinctive types of migration, with different implications. Thus, there are economic motives for migration and non-economic ones, in some cases related to natural disasters or persecution (e.g. asylum seekers). There are both legal and illegal immigrants. Immigration may be temporary or permanent – perhaps the majority of cases falling into the former category. Migration may be circulatory (with frequent movements between host and source countries) especially in the case of those engaged in seasonal work, or transient, with movement to various host countries before fixing on a final destination. There is also contract migration for a fixed term under a working contract or residence permit. Finally, there is return migration, whereby migrants return voluntarily to their country of origin. The economic implications arising from each of these forms are quite distinctive.

Q.1 What are the numbers and characteristics of recent immigrants – age, gender, country of origin, immigration status, duration of stay, skills and qualifications? How do the characteristics of EU migrants differ from other migrant groups? What are the expected future trends for immigration from within and outside the EU?

3. The effect of immigration on the economy depends on a number of factors including the state of the economy, the nature of the immigration and the type of immigrants, but the increase in the scale of immigration has certainly raised its importance in policy terms. According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), over 10% of the British working age population was born in another country, but many of these are recent arrivals. According to Dustmann and Fabbri (2005), around 8% of all immigrants arrived within the last year they analysed (2004) and around 40% within the previous decade. Furthermore, the composition has changed. While in the 1990s the largest single group were of Irish origin by 2004 those born in the European Union (excluding Ireland, but including those from the eight accession (A8) countries) made up the largest group. A8 immigrants tend to be young, male and single. They are generally in less skilled occupations. Indeed, one in five of them are in

temporary jobs, though a high proportion of them have a qualification¹. Immigrants are far from homogenous. There are substantial differences in economic outcomes depending on colour and ethnic origin. Thus, white migrants, if anything, fare better than the indigenous white population, whilst Pakistanis and Bangladeshis appear to be particularly disadvantaged.

4. As the Committee has recognised, it is difficult to obtain accurate data on the number of immigrants in the UK and this makes it difficult to draw accurate policy conclusions. There are four main sources of data on flow statistics. First, the Worker Registration Scheme suggests a figure of 486,660 workers have registered to work in the UK between EU enlargement in May 2004 and September 2006, but this figure does not include the self-employed as well as those who fail to register. The second is the International Passenger Survey which is designed to capture those staying more than 12 months, which suggests a figure of 408,000 but the accuracy of the data has been questioned. The third measure is obtained from National Insurance Number Registrations and, although these include the self-employed, these provide a figure of 380,000. Finally, the LFS, which is designed to capture those staying more than six months measures the stock of migrants. The figures quoted above represent lower bound measurements and there is even greater uncertainty over upper bound measurements and Blanchflower *et al.* (2007) conclude, *The number of A8 migrants entering the UK since Accession appears quite uncertain from the available data.*
5. There is also a problem with the measurements of return migration. There are no procedures in place to capture immigrants who leave the UK. Dustmann and Weiss (2007) suggest, however, that on the basis of LFS data about 60% of male and 68% of female foreign-born still remain in the UK after 5 years, but there are substantial differences among groups, with the more educated tending to leave early. Improving the immigration statistics should therefore be a policy priority.
6. Using the Worker Registration Scheme data, Gilpin *et al.* (2006) suggest that the UK attracts migrants from countries in Eastern Europe with the lowest GDP per head, and the highest unemployment rates. However, Blanchflower *et al.* (2007) suggest that the Human Development Index (HDI) is an even better predictor of migrant flows. If the low scores on the HDI are temporary, resulting from adjustment to post-communist structures, then we may well expect to see a significant slowdown of migration to the UK.

Q.2 In what sectors and occupations are immigrants employed? How do immigrants' labour market outcomes – including their employment rates and earnings – compare to those of local workers? What determines migrants' performance and integration in the UK labour market?

7. For Sweden, Aslund and Rooth (2007) find that assimilation is strongly dependent on favourable labour market conditions. Early outcomes affect

¹ The LFS classifies foreign qualifications as “other”, so we have no information on the precise level of these qualifications. But on average immigrants have higher levels of education than the native population.

future performance, so that it is important that immigrants start in good locations from the point of view of employability. Both “when” and “where” matter from a long term perspective. Therefore, attention should focus on the initial entry to the UK and the UK Household Longitudinal Study extension of the British Household Panel Survey will enable understanding of diversity within the population and will assist with understanding the long term effects of social and economic change.

8. There have been a number of studies which have attempted to estimate the economic impact of immigration in the UK. These recognise the likelihood of productivity differences between immigrants and British born individuals, due to differences in socio-economic characteristics, levels of education, demographic composition and English language fluency or lack of it. The skills acquired prior to migration may not be fully transferable to the UK and educational qualifications may not be recognised as equivalent to UK qualifications. Migration may result in assimilation over a period of time and this will be more marked for second and third generation migrants. An alternative is that minorities form enclaves in certain locations, where there may be advantages in serving the needs of other members of the same community, but the evidence suggests that in the long run migrants who assimilate fare better in economic terms. Enclaves may also inhibit migrants from improving their understanding of the English language and adjusting to UK culture. Indeed, the English language is a competitive advantage to the UK in terms of attracting immigrants and should be built upon.
9. Most studies have adopted the so-called spatial correlation approach which focuses on the correlation between immigrant labour inflows and changes in native or overall labour market outcomes. However, as Dustmann *et al.* (2005) point out, the construction of the counterfactual (i.e. what would have happened without the immigration) involves assumptions which might be challenged. Nevertheless there are some consistent results from the various studies suggesting that outcomes are far from homogenous among the different immigrant groups. Thus in terms of employment non-white immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh have significantly lower employment probabilities than most white immigrants, who have a similar employment experience to the British born white population. Employment rates for non-white immigrants also display much greater volatility than those of British born whites or white immigrants. The rates for non-white immigrants also decline and recover faster over the cycle, suggesting that they act as an inbuilt stabiliser. This is an important point that is often overlooked as it implies that the local workforce can be insulated from some of the labour volatility and economic shocks.
10. Pakistani and Bangladeshi women have substantially lower participation rates than native born white women (with unconditional participation probabilities more than 50% lower). Immigrants have a higher probability of being self-employed than the British born population. Finally, controlling for individual characteristics and region of residence all non-white male immigrant groups have average wages which are more than 10% lower than those of the white British born population. For women the overall differential is somewhat

lower². In contrast, *white migrants* have higher earnings than British born whites (Dustmann and Fabbri, 2005).

11. To what extent these differences are due to discrimination, culture or religion or to genuine productivity differences is less certain. Frijters *et al.* (2005) find that immigrant job search is less successful than that of the native population, but improves over time. Battu and Sloane (2004) find that ethnic minorities are more likely to be in jobs for which they are over-educated, and for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis this is more likely where qualifications have been obtained abroad. Manacorda *et al.* 2006 find evidence that native born and immigrants are imperfect substitutes – a 10% rise in the share of immigrants in the local population increases the native-migrant male wage differential by just 2%, and this could explain why there are few signs of a negative impact of immigrants on local workers. However, an alternative explanation is that immigrants in a specific area simply push non-immigrants out of the locality, thereby defusing the local labour market effects. Thus, Hatton and Tani (2005) find that an increase of 100 in net immigration to a region from abroad generates a net outmigration to other regions of 35. There is some anecdotal evidence in the case of A8 migrants that productivity of immigrants might actually be higher than that of the local employees.

Q.3 Why do employers want to hire immigrants? Which sectors and occupations in the UK economy are particularly dependent on migrant labour and why? What is the impact of immigration on mechanisation and investment in technical change? What are the alternatives to immigration to reduce labour shortages?

12. A 2006 Home Office Survey reports that many employers find that migrant workers have a superior attitude and work ethic and are more prepared to work longer and flexible hours. However, there are also concerns about the conditions under which many migrant workers operate and the Low Pay Commission has expressed concern that some of them may be being paid below the National Minimum Wage.
13. In Scotland and the UK as a whole, the food, agricultural, healthcare and hospitality sectors are dependent on migrant workers and there are considerable benefits to employers from employing migrants in sectors which face strong competition from abroad and where profit margins are tight or that even the continuing existence of the industry is in question (Craig, 2007). In addition, migrant workers can fill skilled employment gaps, as has been illustrated by the increasing number of new NHS dentists that are migrants, while migrants have long been a source of supply of doctors to the NHS. Though the data are not recent, a report to the Scottish Executive (Elliott *et al.* 2001) records that in 2000 16.8% of all hospital doctors and 5% of all GPs in NHS Scotland qualified outside the UK. The proportion of hospital doctors had increased from 12.3% in 1990, while the proportion of GPs was about the same as a decade earlier. This evidences that migrants have for some time been an important source of physician supply to the NHS. With the expansion

² In the case of Polish immigrants differentials are even larger. See Drinkwater *et al.* (2006)

of medical school places in the last two years this position looks set to change.

Q.4 What impact has immigration had on the labour market, including wages, unemployment and other employment conditions of the UK workforce, and has it differed for skilled and unskilled employees? How does the minimum wage affect the impact of immigration?

14. The main market response to removing economic disparities among countries is either labour migration or firm migration, with the location of call centres in low wage countries being a mixed mode. Labour will move from low wage to high wage countries, attracted by higher wages and the greater availability of jobs. If mobility is on a sufficiently large scale then changes in relative supply and demand for labour should increase wages in the low wage economy and lower wages in the high wage economy until the wage disparities net of mobility costs are removed. However, as Dustmann, Fabbri and Preston (2005) note, immigration inflows will change the skill composition of the host country labour force if the skill composition of immigrants differs from that of the host country, so that the restoration of equilibrium implies a need for short-run changes in both wages and employment for different levels of skill or perhaps long run changes in the economy's output mix. In the UK, the main impact has thus been to put labour market pressure on low-skilled rather than high-skilled workers. The impact on the wage distribution has been to increase the disparity in that distribution. As theory (Altonji and Card) suggests, the shift in supply of low-skilled workers depresses the wages of unskilled workers but increases the wages of skilled workers, and may increase the return to capital. The overall impact on the average wage should be positive. The econometric analysis in Dustmann, Frattini and Preston (2007) appears to confirm this. If the minimum wage were to act as a floor to this downward pressure then like any "price control", it could result in the emergence of a "black market" for low-skilled labour. Perhaps the scandals of "gangs" in UK agriculture and fishing reflect this.

15. There is little robust evidence that immigrants have harmed native employment opportunities (See Card, 2005), and despite the introduction of, and increase to the minimum wage in recent years, there appears to have been little impact on employment opportunities in the UK. However, it should be noted that since 2004 a very substantial proportion of A8 workers who have registered have been aged under 24 and since 2004 the unemployment rate among native 18-21 year olds has been rising. Further research is required to investigate developments in the youth labour market in the UK.

Q.5 What is the economic impact of illegal immigration, including on employment, wages and the fiscal balance?

16. We are not aware of detailed research on this in the UK, although there is work in the US looking at illegal immigrants from Mexico. However, the impacts are primarily likely to be felt in low-pay/low-skill jobs and if they were widespread, one might be able to pick them up from inconsistencies in

data: e.g. between various measures of the value of output, or in data on claimant counts in “low-skill” sectors as “legals” are replaced by “illegals”. This latter effect would have fiscal implications as it would reduce income tax revenue and increase government expenditure.

Q.6 What is the economic impact of a net change in the UK population? If there is a net increase, does the impact differ when this comes from higher immigration rather than from changes in birth and death rates?

17. As is well-known, the dynamics of population structure have significant long-term implications for savings and pensions. Indeed, immigration can be regarded as a mechanism for offsetting the adverse consequences of an ageing population in many developed economies, since immigrants are typically younger than the mean of the indigenous population and have higher fertility rates (Drinkwater and Blackaby, 2004). It is worth noting in this respect that the one developed economy where this is seen as less of a problem is the US, and this is due to the impact of immigration flows into the Hispanic community. Birth and death rate effects are likely to be very long term whereas immigration effects would operate more quickly.

Q.7 What has been the impact of immigration on key macroeconomic indicators: GDP and GDP per head, unemployment, productivity, investment, inflation and asset prices especially housing? Do the economic effects of immigration vary over time?

18. To put the current increase in immigration in context, the UK population grew at just 7% over the period 1971 to 2004, which is a much slower rate than in all other EU 15 countries, apart from Germany. Thus, the effect of immigration since 2000 has been to accelerate this growth from a relatively low level. Blanchflower *et al.* (2007) suggest that for this reason, despite the fact that half of the immigrants may have returned home, inflationary pressures are likely to have been reduced and the natural rate of unemployment lowered, with overall benefits to the economy. These potential benefits are, however, dependent on the type of immigrants, the timing of entry and their location in the UK.
19. It is likely that immigration has generally had beneficial effects on key macroeconomic indicators. Immigration of higher skilled workers could raise productivity growth and reduce the natural rate of unemployment by reducing upward pressures on wages. And the beneficial effects of migration on supply are not matched by equivalent increases in demand, since a significant proportion of migrant workers’ earnings are remitted to the home country. The net effect is a reduction in inflationary pressure. It is also true that recent A8 migrants have been less likely to claim benefits, with beneficial effects on government finances. Finally, if higher skilled workers are complementary to capital as previous literature (e.g. Griliches 1969) has suggested, then skilled immigration may have a beneficial impact on investment.

Q.8 How does immigration affect public finances? Do immigrants contribute more in taxes than they use in public services? As the UK population ages, does immigration affect the shortfall in pension funding?

20. This is a complex area of study, both in terms of the economic impacts as well as wider political and social impacts, and much can depend upon the methodology employed. As we have highlighted in previous answers, immigrants are far from homogenous and while studies undertaken to-date have been able to focus upon the aggregate contribution of immigrants on public finances, decision makers need to be aware of and fully consider the diversity of the immigrant population and their relative performance.
21. Sriskandarajah, Cooley and Reed (2005), found that in terms of tax revenue the foreign-born population makes a relatively higher contribution than the UK-born. This is due to foreign-born having higher average earnings than the UK-born and being over represented at the upper end of the income spectrum, thereby paying proportionally higher amounts of tax. The key finding from the paper is that the difference between the net annual fiscal contribution (NAFI), expressed as a ratio of revenue to expenditure, for foreign-born and UK-born has been getting larger, in favour of the foreign-born, over recent years. Indeed in 2001-2002, despite the UK-born NAFI being net negative, the foreign-born NAFI remained positive. Therefore, the analysis suggests that the relative net fiscal contribution of immigrants is stronger than that of the UK-born, and has been getting even stronger in recent years.
22. Ultimately, there is no evidence to suggest that recent immigrants from the A8 countries have come to claim or receive benefits. Rather, they have come to work and similar conclusions have been arrived at for both Sweden and Ireland.

Q.9 How has immigration affected public services such as health care, education and social housing? How has this varied across the country?

23. In addition to the answer to question eight, the contribution that immigrants make to the provision of public services in the UK has to be considered (Sriskandarajah *et al.*). Immigrants are disproportionately employed in those sectors involving public service provision. This can be emphasised by the fact that in 2003 29.4% of the total number of doctors employed in the UK were foreign-born (Sriskandarajah *et al.*), though the proportion is evidently much higher in England than in Scotland.
24. Immigrants face many hurdles when they enter the UK but it could be argued that it is the housing system and its consequences, rather than employment issues, which pose the greatest difficulties. The question focuses upon social housing but a very significant proportion of migrants rely on the private rented sector. Housing issues in the UK, such as availability, affordability, and conditions may negatively impact upon the UK's competitive position in attracting migrants in the future.

Q.10 How does the impact of immigration vary across different regions of the UK?

25. Immigrants do not distribute themselves randomly throughout the UK, but tend to be concentrated in certain locations. Home Office figures show that London and the South-East attract the greatest proportion of immigrants. Although, there is little correlation between the relative distribution of migrants and the growth of unemployment.

Q.11 Are there any relevant parallels and lessons for the UK from the economic impact of immigration on other OECD countries?

26. Overwhelmingly, the available data does confirm the view that we have taken, that immigration has had positive impacts.

Q.12 How do differences in migrants' skills affect the economic impact of immigration? Does immigration fill skill gaps? What impact, if any, has immigration had on education and training? What is the relationship between the Government's migration policies and labour market policies?

27. Migrant workers are generally in less skilled occupations, though a high proportion of them have a qualification. However, there are few data on the precise qualifications of immigrants. The evidence suggests that on entering the labour market, migrants "trade down" in terms of the kinds of posts that their qualifications suit them for and, therefore, they may improve the overall level of skills in the economy. It is clear that in certain sectors of the UK economy, such as health and higher education, important skills can only be effectively filled by immigration, particularly in the short term, until there is satisfactory workforce planning. As touched upon in the answer to question three, migrant workers account for almost half of new NHS dentists.

Q.13 How can data on immigration be improved? What improvements are already being put in place? To what extent have "inadequate data" affected public policy? How confident can we be in forecasts of future immigration and how important is it that such forecasts are accurate?

28. As we mention in our answer to question one, there are a number of data sources containing information on the number of immigrants in the UK, but none of these is entirely satisfactory and, therefore, improving the accuracy of immigration statistics must be a priority. More detail in the data collection in terms of the characteristics of immigrants is needed. This brings us on to the important issue of the recognition of foreign qualifications. As we refer to in our answer above, the statistics do not contain information on the precise level of these qualifications. It may be the case that we in the UK are simply undervaluing foreign qualifications, or there may be good reasons for doing so. Whatever the reasons, more precise data on the qualifications of immigrants should be collected so that migration can be more effectively managed. Public policy as well as public confidence in this area will founder unless this is the case. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the lack of accurate

statistics has put increasing pressure on local authorities and the services that they provide.

29. There is an important question as to whether survey or administrative routes should be followed to collect better information on immigration. Given that it is often difficult to sample adequately from migrant groups, it is perhaps true that the administrative route is the preferable one. It might be interesting to explore whether the development of ID cards might help in some way to rectify what is currently an unsatisfactory situation.

Q.14 How do the Government's policies, including immigration and labour market policies, affect the scale, composition and impacts of migration? How will the points system for immigrants from outside the EU operate? How will the Government decide where there are skill shortages in the economy as the basis for its points system? What has been the international experience, e.g. in Australia and Canada, of such a points system? How will the Government respond to employers asking for non-EU workers to fill low-skilled jobs?

30. What then does all this mean in policy terms? First, the evidence in general supports the view that immigration has had a beneficial effect on the economy overall. Second, some immigrants, notably some of those from ethnic minorities, are relatively disadvantaged in terms of labour market outcomes and may need protection in terms of equal opportunities legislation. Third, experience differs markedly across different immigrant groups, so blanket approaches seem inappropriate. Given the free mobility of labour within the European Union it is not possible to control all immigration. It may, however, be possible to control non-EU immigration if this is thought to be desirable. Thus, a number of countries have guest worker programmes which enable them to obtain a permanent increase in their labour forces without a permanent increase in their population and also to restrict employment of migrant workers to certain sectors or occupations. There are also two types of policy to reduce the incentive for temporary immigrants to overstay. First, defer payment until the end of the contract and deposit payment in an appropriate foreign bank, accessible only when the migrant has left. Second, one can make employers purchase a bond which is forfeited if the worker overstays. Alternatively, one can utilise Mode IV contracts which allow for the temporary movement of service providers between a host country employer and a foreign firm.³
31. Based upon the experience of other countries, notably Canada, it seems appropriate that the UK adopts a points system. However, for the system to operate effectively, up-to-date labour market statistics are needed and the operation of the system will have to be periodically appraised and "re-calibrated," if need be, to ensure that skills shortages are effectively managed.
32. Thus, there are a number of devices that can be utilised if immigration is regarded as too large but there is no hard evidence that this is currently the

³ On this see Schiff (2007)

case in the UK, and we are not yet in a position to be able to define the optimal degree of immigration.

Q.15 Should more be done to help immigrants boost their productivity in the UK?

33. It is not clear that immigrants are “low productivity” workers. Although, as has been made clear in previous answers, immigrants are not a homogenous group and some immigrants, particularly those from ethnic minorities, are disadvantaged and need assistance and protection in terms of labour market outcomes.
34. Again, competency in the English language is an issue here. There could be negative impacts on productivity in some sectors if migrant workers struggle with English and co-workers have to assist them. We encourage the Committee to examine the language constraint and to recommend arrangements to improve the language situation, which would in turn aid assimilation as well as labour market outcomes.

Additional Information and References

Copies of this response are available from the RSE’s Consultations Officer, Mr. William Hardie (email: evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk) and from the RSE web site (www.royalsoced.org.uk).

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