

Brits Abroad

Mapping the scale and nature of emigration from the UK



A project supported by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

PROJECT OUTLINE

Summary

Whilst immigration is a subject of substantial academic, policy and public interest, the other and more numerous side of the UK migration equation - namely emigration - receives almost no attention. This project will address this imbalance by estimating the true scale of the British diaspora, mapping which countries émigrés are leaving for, understanding the reasons why they leave, and exploring what connections they retain with the UK. This work will not only fill a clearly important research gap, but also highlight policy challenges, contribute a novel dimension to public debate on migration and act as a starting point to further projects that examine not just emigration from the UK, but Europe as a whole. The project will be conducted through 2006 with a final report due in December 2006.

Background

Several million British nationals live abroad permanently or on a long-term basis. Taken together, this vast population may actually outnumber the 2.9 million foreign nationals currently living in the UK. Yet, while the presence of foreign nationals in the UK has been of considerable interest and concern to researchers, the media and policymakers, almost nothing is made of the fact that as many as one in 12 UK nationals may be living overseas.

Similarly, research, media and policy attention almost always focuses on the impacts of *immigration* on the UK and rarely consider the effects of *emigration*. Yet, over the last fifty years, almost as many British nationals have left the UK as non-British nationals have entered the UK. Indeed, the number of people emigrating in recent years has started to increase in net terms.

Policy context

This large-scale emigration *from* the UK throws up social, economic and political consequences which require recognition and attention by both policy makers and other relevant institutions in order to function effectively.

The term 'brain drain' was coined to describe the flow, in the aftermath of the Second World War, of British scientists to the USA. Early evidence suggests the skills/qualification profile of people leaving the UK has been increasing at a greater rate than that of the resident population, implying a slight 'brain drain'. While the loss of these highly-skilled people may not have quite the disastrous effects on the British economy as on smaller, poorer economies, it is something that has the potential to undermine innovation and economic dynamism in the UK. There may also be other economic implications, such as Britons working overseas (and therefore contributing to economic activity elsewhere) but then returning home to

retire or, conversely, Britons working in the UK but then drawing down their UK pensions overseas.

The range of reasons for leaving and the destinations that British people go also do not feature prominently in academic and popular discussions of migration. Again, early evidence suggests that émigrés are not a holistic group, but complex in both their reasons for migrating (employment, retirement, better quality of life), nor their destination country (both traditional destination countries of Australia, France, Spain and USA, and less familiar countries such as India and Kenya).

In some countries - Spain is the notable example - anecdotal evidence suggests that British emigrants do not integrate very well with the host society. This not only affects Britain's image abroad but it can also undermine the social fabric of the recipient society. Indeed, the lack of integration of Britons when they move abroad has an ironic parallel with the apparent lack of integration of some communities when they enter the UK. Understanding this parallel better will help in promoting strategies for both types of integration.

Seen in a positive way, the presence of a substantial British diaspora has considerable economic, cultural and political value for the UK. Returning expatriates often bring home invaluable skills, experience and networks. Even those who stay abroad permanently may promote important economic and cultural links with their erstwhile homes. Where Britons occupy positions of global importance, they serve as important and prominent ambassadors for the country. It could also be argued that the presence of considerable British populations abroad enhances Britain's political clout on the world stage.

More importantly as mobility is encouraged across Europe and many other parts of the world, the scale of emigration (and circular migration) is likely to increase substantially. Indeed, the European Union has declared 2006 the Year of Mobility in order to promote movement of citizens between EU member states. In this context, the more we know about who goes, why they go and what ties they maintain will be important. This will include examining barriers to movement (e.g. the portability of pensions) and to re-engagement with the home country.

A better understanding of emigration is also a critical missing element in our understanding of migration flows generally. For a start, understanding the scale and impact of immigration will require a good understanding of emigration. Unless we know how likely immigrants are to return, it is difficult to plan the levels and types of immigration and integration policies are required. Similarly, understanding the economic impacts of immigration will require us to look at which immigrants actually remain in a country.

Finally, while many other countries have become very interested in understanding and promoting links with their diaspora communities (especially developing countries concerned with 'brain drain'), this has not yet happened in the UK. Many developing countries have been going out of their way to harness the economic development potential of their diaspora communities. More developed countries, such as Australia, have also been very interested in recent years about fostering closer ties with diasporas. The Australian government has even recently concluded a major Parliamentary enquiry on the subject. This may seem appropriate for a relatively small and isolated country but the estimated size of the Australian diaspora (4 percent of the resident population) is actually smaller than the relative size of the British diaspora (5-6 percent of the resident population).

Desired outcomes

We believe that a better understanding of the scale and nature of emigration from the UK will be important for several reasons:

- The project will generate new empirical data that will be of interest to other researchers, policymakers and the general public.
- The findings of this research will contribute to the growing field of research into the nature of diasporas and transnationalism. To date, there has been little examination of the recent British (or even European) diasporas and this research will seek to fill some of these gaps.
- We hope to stimulate a more balanced debate on migration issues in which the role of emigration as an important social and economic phenomenon is highlighted.
- Our research will assist policymakers in better understanding the impact of emigration on economic dynamism and how to work more effectively with emigrants. We also hope to raise some interesting policy issues with regard to the access that members of the British diaspora enjoy to public services in the UK and what role emigrants might play in promoting trade and investment links.
- We hope to help organisations and businesses that provide services to emigrants deliver better-targeted services.
- Given the increasing interest in the notion of a national identity, we also hope to flag up an important set of questions around how emigrants think of Britain and think of themselves. There is also a potentially important subset of questions relating to the identity of ethnic minority members of the British diaspora (especially those who have returned to their original country of birth).

Project Outputs

The project findings will be disseminated in the following ways:

- A final report of around 80 pages, containing empirical and descriptive sections (including maps and individual stories), and a set of policy recommendations.
- A weblog that will provide a forum for Brits Abroad to discuss and debate issues of concern.
- A website presenting some of the key findings, which we envisage will be produced in conjunction with BBC online along the same lines as our previous collaboration on the [Born Abroad project](#).
- A one-day conference to be held in London in early 2007 to present and discuss our preliminary findings, involving key stakeholders from Government, cultural organisations, academics, business and civil society organisations.

Key research components:

1. **Quantitative research.** This will involve collecting and analysing data from the UK International Passenger Survey, the Office of National Statistics, and other countries' Census and surveys. Questions to be answered include: How large is emigration from the UK? Where in the world do emigrants go? What are the socio-economic characteristics of emigrants?
2. **Literature review.** Examine existing academic and popular literature on emigration to see: What do we know about Brits abroad and their experiences? What are the key trends?
3. **Focus groups.** Conduct focus groups with small groups of Brits abroad in at least 5 countries (Spain, France, the USA and Australia plus a Caribbean country to which Commonwealth immigrants have returned). We also plan to work with British missions abroad to conduct additional discussion groups with local Brits. The questions we would ask include: How do emigrants feel about the UK? How well have they integrated with host community? What British products/services they consume? What more can be done to tap into the economic and political potential of emigrants?
4. **Stakeholder interviews.** Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the UK (Government departments, business leaders, media, etc.) and overseas (community leaders, prominent Brits, service providers). Similar questions to focus groups.
5. **Online survey/blog.** Use an interactive internet site, to engage with a broader sample of Brits abroad. This would be used similar questions to section 3, but also to collect stories, discuss issues, and get comments on interim findings.

Project team

- [Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah](#) will lead the project, liaise with FCO, coordinate budget, conduct some of the focus groups, and oversee analysis and writing.
- [Catherine Drew](#) will manage the project on a day to day basis, conduct some of the focus groups, and contribute to writing final report.
- **Laurence Cooley** will conduct initial literature review and data analysis, and contribute to writing final report.
- Several other members of ippr staff, including [Rachel Pillai](#), and [Jo Twist](#), will contribute to research and writing on an ad-hoc basis.
- The project team will also work closely with BBC Online in disseminating the results.