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## NET OVERSEAS MIGRATION: WHY IS IT SO HIGH?

### ■ **Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy**

*Between 2004–05 and 2007–08 net overseas migration (NOM) increased dramatically. In 2006 the ABS introduced a new methodology to measure NOM. This article shows that the effect of this new methodology on NOM estimates was minor. Most of the growth was real and was mainly attributable to increases in the temporary entry visa categories, especially overseas students. The article also shows that the net loss of citizens and permanent residents—the alleged brain drain—is much smaller than previously assumed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), net overseas migration (NOM) increased from 123,800 in 2004–05 to 277,330 in 2007–08. These are final estimates. The preliminary estimate for 2008–09 is 299,000. The figures quoted above incorporate a change in the methodology used to estimate NOM from the September quarter of 2006. There were two major changes in this new methodology. The first was a new measure of who is included as a resident. A resident is anyone who has stayed in Australia for 12 months out of 16 months. It does not matter what their residence status is. To be counted as a departure, a resident must have left Australia for at least 12 months out of 16 months. (Henceforth, the new measure is referred to as 12/16.) Prior to this change, a resident was regarded as one who had stayed in Australia for a continuous 12 months and a departure was one who stayed away for a continuous 12 months.

The second change was that the ABS used a traveller, rather than a movement, database in calculating who was in or out of Australia according to the above definition. This aspect of the methodology is explained below. The striking increases in NOM since 2004–05 have attracted considerable attention and controversy. In part, the controversy relates to the methodological changes just described for estimating NOM.

Some commentators have argued that the increase in NOM may be partly an artefact of these changes and that, for this reason, concerns about the scale of the increase have been unnecessarily alarmist.

In this paper, we first discuss the way the ABS measures NOM and the implications for estimates of NOM flowing from the changes to the methodology introduced in 2006. The paper then examines the growth in NOM between 2004–05 and 2007–08 by the visa category and the major country of birth of those counted as arrivals and departures during these years. The purpose is to get a better understanding of the source of growth in NOM. As discussed below, an accurate understanding of these sources is important because immigration planning and estimates of future population are in part based on assumptions about the scale of NOM.

This analysis uses a customised set of NOM data by visa class for the years 2004–05 to 2007–08. Final data for 2008–09 must wait until records of actual movements of travellers become available for the 16 months after arrival or departure in 2008–09. The methodology used by the ABS for this data set is that introduced in 2006 (that is, it incorporates the 12/16 rule). Thus, the estimates for 2004–05 and 2005–06 are comparable with those for 2006–07 and 2007–08.

## **ABS METHODOLOGY FOR ESTIMATING NOM**

Under the new traveller-based methodology, the ABS compiles information on the movements of all travellers who arrive in or leave Australia each year, whether they be visitors, students, temporary workers, those holding permanent resident visas, New Zealand citizens or Australian citizens. This is based partly on data from the passenger cards that travellers complete when leaving or arriving in Australia and partly on administrative records obtained by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) for its Travel and Immigration Processing System (TRIPS). From these records the ABS is able to calculate and estimate NOM each quarter. It does so by using a unique identifier for each traveller in order to construct a traveller history for all arrivals and departures.

The new methodology has two benefits. The first is that it removes inaccuracies deriving from persons who arrive or depart on multiple occasions. The creation of the movement record for each traveller removes a potential source of double or multiple counting. Previously, such movements had to be estimated by matching incoming and outgoing passenger cards.<sup>1</sup> The second benefit is that the new methodology permits the calculation of the actual stay in or away from Australia by each traveller and can therefore be used to count those who meet the 12/16 measurement rule for the purposes of calculating NOM. The ABS can now measure the actual behaviour of travellers in terms of the duration of their stay or departure. Under the new methodology, NOM is the difference between arrivals who stay for 12 months or more over 16 months (who are added to the population) and residents who stay away for 12 months or more over a 16 month period (who are subtracted from the population).<sup>2</sup>

## **DOES THE NEW METHODOLOGY INFLATE NOM?**

According to ANU demographer, Peter McDonald, the ABS did not count movements of temporary residents prior to the introduction of the new methodology in 2006. He states that: 'since 2006 people who enter Australia on a long-term temporary basis have been counted as migrants. If they had been counted before this, migration during earlier years would have been higher'.<sup>3</sup> This view has been widely disseminated. However, it is not true. The ABS has always counted temporary residents, regardless of the purpose of their stay, if they meet the prevailing definition of a resident for NOM purposes. As noted, the measurement of the time of stay or departure changed in 2006, but not the range of travellers eligible to be counted as part of NOM.

This change is potentially important. As the current Minister of Sustainable Population, Tony Burke, has said, the old methodology 'knocked out most overseas students' because a very large number visit their families one or more times each year.<sup>4</sup> Burke does not imply that the new methodology is ill-advised, but rather that it may have had a large impact on the NOM estimates. In our view, it is appropriate to include people as residents if they stay for a minimum of 12 out of 16 months. To suggest that overseas students are not part of Australia's population because many go home once or twice each year is misleading. Their presence in the major metropolises is palpable and their demand for housing, transport and other services has a major impact on these cities.

Table 1 provides a comparison between the old methodology and the new methodology for measuring NOM for 2004–05 and 2005–06. These estimates combine the effects of the two changes in the methodology introduced in 2006. The move to the 12/16 definition has the effect of increasing the number of both arrivals and departures for

the purposes of calculating NOM, because it removes the restriction that the stay must be for a continuous 12 months. The change to a traveller rather than a movement measure could have had the opposite effect because it removes the possibility of double or multiple counting of travellers who come and go frequently. However, this effect was largely removed prior to 2006 by the category jumping adjustments the ABS used to make in order to account for travellers staying or departing for durations different to those stated on the arrival or departure passenger card. As is evident from Table 1, the net effect of the new methodology is to increase NOM relative to the old methodology. The counts derived from the old methodology come from the ABS Australian Demographic Statistics (cat. no 3101.0) releases.<sup>5</sup> Those for the new methodology derive from the customised NOM data set provided by the ABS.

As Table 1 indicates, the effect of the new methodology is to increase NOM by about 15 to 17 per cent for the two years 2004–05 and 2005–06. For the purposes of our inquiry into the causes of the sharp rise in NOM, the base year is 2004–05 as calculated under the new methodology. The expansion from 142,500 in 2004–05 to 277,300 in 2007–08 under the new methodology is real. It reflects the new and sensible definition of who is a resident (the 12/16 rule) and it measures actual travellers rather than movements. It captures their true behaviour rather than their intentions as recorded on their passenger cards.

Burke was probably correct to say that the new methodology is capturing more overseas students and other temporary arrivals than

under the old methodology and that this is the main explanation for the difference between the counts produced by the new and old methodology. However, the difference of 16 to 17 per cent is small, relative to the scale of the increase in NOM when measured under the new methodology. There was a near doubling of NOM between 2004–05 and 2007–08 from 142,500 in 2004–05 to 277,300 in 2007–08. This increase must be explained by changes in the numbers and characteristics of arrivals and departures of migrants and residents. It is not a consequence of changes to the methodology as the comparison between the two methods for the overlapping period (Table 1) clearly shows.

### NOM BY VISA CLASS AND RESIDENCE STATUS

Table 2 provides a summary of changes in NOM between 2004–05 and 2007–08 by broad visa category and citizenship status. It groups detailed visa categories into broad categories, including students (on higher education, vocational, English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students [ELICOS] and other student visas), and those with permanent residence visas (who

**Table 1: Net overseas migration (NOM) as measured by the old and new methodologies 2004–05 to 2008–09**

	Net overseas migration (NOM)		
	Old methodology '000	New methodology '000	Increase per cent
2004–05	123.8	142.5	15.1
2005–06	146.8	171.4	16.7
2006–07		232.8	
2007–08		277.3	
2008–09		298.9	

Source: Old methodology, *ABS Demographic statistics*, September quarter 2009, May 2010  
New methodology, customised ABS dataset held by CPUR

are not citizens), Australian citizens and New Zealand citizens.

One caution in interpreting these statistics is that the travel record of an arriving or departing person does not include information on any earlier visa that the person may have had. Thus, if an overseas student on completion of a course subsequently succeeded in gaining an onshore permanent residence visa or bridging visa (pending a decision on his or her application for a permanent residence visa), the student would appear in the departures column as an onshore permanent resident or the holder of a bridging visa if they departed for 12 out of 16 months.

Table 2 shows that the main group driving the surge in NOM since 2004–05 is overseas students. They constituted nearly half of the increase in NOM (63,490) between 2004–05 and 2007–08. The

contribution of others on temporary visas to the growth in NOM is also important. The business long stay (457) visa holders contributed 21,720 to the growth in NOM between 2004–05 and 2007–08, working holidaymakers contributed 11,950 and visitors 7,500. These three groups combined contributed 41,170 to the increase in NOM between 2004–05 and 2007–08. Together with students, these temporary-entry migrants contributed 77.6 per cent of the growth in NOM between 2004–05 and 2007–08.

Table 2 also confirms the crucial role that New Zealand citizens are currently playing in increasing Australia's population. They contributed 36,090 to NOM in 2007–08 and some 15,460 to the total increase in NOM of 134,830 between 2004–05 and 2007–08. New Zealand citizens include both the New Zealand-born

**Table 2: Net overseas migration (NOM) in 2004–05 and 2007–08 by broad visa class**

Visa class	Net overseas migration (NOM)			Share of growth per cent
	2004–05	2007–08	Change 2004–05 to 2007–08	
Business long-stay (457)	13,110	34,830	21,720	16.1
Student	45,250	108,740	63,490	47.1
Visitor	21,510	29,010	7,500	5.6
Bridging	-6,730	-6,200	530	0.4
Other temporary entry	-540	-1,200	-660	-0.5
Working holiday maker	9,410	21,360	11,950	8.9
Permanent arrival	71,140	86,400	15,260	11.3
Australian citizen	-21,440	-20,310	1,130	0.8
Onshore	-3,520	-3,540	-20	0.0
New Zealand citizen	20,630	36,090	15,460	11.5
<i>New Zealand born*</i>	<i>16,880</i>	<i>32,770</i>	<i>15,890</i>	
All other	-6,290	-7,820	-1,530	-1.1
Total	142,530	277,360	134,830	100.0

Source: Customised ABS dataset held by CPUR

Note: \* New-Zealand born are a subcategory of New Zealand citizen

and third-country migrants who migrated to New Zealand and subsequently obtained New Zealand citizenship. Both groups can freely come to and go from Australia. Table 2 shows that the great majority of the New Zealand citizens counted as part of NOM in 2007–08 were New Zealand-born persons (32,770 out of 36,090).

### WHY TEMPORARY RESIDENTS ARE THE MAIN SOURCE OF GROWTH IN NOM

The reasons why NOM is currently dominated by temporary visa holders include the liberalisation of the rules of eligibility for temporary visas by successive Australian governments. As a result, the number of visas issued under these temporary categories has increased sharply during the period studied. Even if it is assumed for the moment that most of these temporary visa holders will leave, there will be lag factor in departures while the number of arrivals bounds ahead. This alone will ensure an increase in NOM from this source. However, the Australian government has also provided inducements for temporary visa holders to apply for other temporary-entry visa subclasses or to change their status to permanent residence while in Australia.

These inducements have limited the rate of departure from Australia. The overseas student group illustrates the point. Table 3 shows the contribution to NOM by major country-of-birth groups within the student visa category.

The number of student arrivals counted in NOM doubled from 66,550 in 2004–05 to 135,170 in 2007–08. Since students typically stay two to three years, the lag factor alone ensured a significant increase in NOM from this source. But, it is also evident that departures have increased at a much slower pace than arrivals. This means that many are extending their stay as students perhaps by switching courses. This appears to be the case with the India-born, who contributed by far the largest component of the growth in NOM among student visa holders over the years 2004–05 and 2007–08. By 2007–08, only 1,290 India-born students on student visas left Australia for 12 months out of 16 months. Yet arrivals were 9,550 in 2004–05, 12,960 in 2005–06, 24,390 in 2006–07 (not shown in Table 3) and 35,540 in 2007–08. If their purpose was to gain a qualification and return home, many thousands of these students would have done so within this period.

**Table 3: Constituents of NOM—students by major country of birth, 2004–05 to 2007–08**

Birthplace	2004–05			2007–08			Net Increase 2004–05 to 2007–08
	Arrivals	Departures	Net Increase	Arrivals	Departures	Net Increase	
India	9,550	670	8,880	35,540	1,290	34,250	25,370
China	15,930	2,320	13,610	29,630	3,820	25,810	12,200
Nepal	260	70	190	7,320	40	7,280	7,090
Vietnam	1,300	340	960	4,960	690	4,270	3,310
Other	39,510	17,900	21,610	57,720	20,580	37,140	15,530
Total	66,550	21,300	45,250	135,170	26,420	108,750	63,500

Source: Customised ABS dataset held by CPUR

They have not left because the Australian government has created a raft of options enabling them to stay. These include applying for permanent residence under the onshore skilled-migration categories designed for overseas students and the graduate skills visa (subclass 485) for which almost all students who complete their courses have been eligible. This visa allows a stay of 18 months in Australia. Until recently, all overseas students who finished their courses and met the accreditation and English-language requirements could also apply for permanent residence visas under the skilled migration visa subclasses. This was so even if their qualifications were not those required for an occupation listed on the Critical Skills List operative since January 2009. They have been granted bridging visas that allow indefinite stay in Australia until their application is processed.

This situation is about to change because of the Labor government's decision to largely decouple immigration selection under the skilled migration program from the completion of courses in Australia by overseas students. Fewer students are

likely to be attracted to Australia and more of those already here will have to return home because their qualifications will not be sufficient to lead to a skilled permanent residence visa.

## PERMANENT RESIDENTS AND AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS

Table 4 provides details of the numbers of Australian citizens and permanent residents who arrived and departed in 2004–05 and 2007–08 and who met the 12/16 definition of NOM. As we will see, these figures put quite a new complexion on what has hitherto been assumed about the scale of movement of Australian citizens and permanent residents in and out of Australia for a year or more.

### Permanent residents

Permanent residents for this analysis are defined as those who possess a permanent residence visa granted either overseas or onshore within Australia. They cease to be permanent residents if they become Australian citizens. Permanent residents as defined do not include New Zealand citizens.

**Table 4: Arrivals and departures, 2004–05 and 2007–08, by selected country of birth for citizens and permanent residents, Australia**

Country of birth	2004–05				2007–08			
	Arrivals		Departures		Arrivals		Departures	
	Aust. citizens	Permanent residents	Aust. citizens	Permanent +onshore <sup>1</sup>	Aust. citizens	Permanent residents	Aust. citizens	Permanent +onshore <sup>1</sup>
China <sup>2</sup>	890	7,080	2,120	1,390	1,220	9,400	2,650	2,100
India	380	6,540	840	790	610	12,030	1,490	930
United Kingdom	5,680	12,410	5,110	1,470	5,800	17,040	5,410	1,940
Australia	46,160	60	63,110	70	51,720	100	65,410	110
Total	69,330	75,570	90,770	9,210	75,950	91,520	96,260	10,770

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, cusotmised NOM data 2004–05 to 2007–08 held by CPUR

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Permanent resident departures include those whose visa was issued onshore

<sup>2</sup> Excluding SARs and Taiwan; SARs = special autonomous regions.

The Australian government's permanent migration program increased from around 134,000 in 2004–05 to around 173,000 in 2007–08 (figures include the humanitarian component). As a result, there has been some increase in the net movement of permanent residents between these years from 71,140 to 86,400 (see Table 2). This increase would have been larger if those granted permanent residence onshore were included. However, because they are already in Australia, they are only counted once in NOM on their initial visa at arrival. Nonetheless, it is clear that the permanent program is only a minor source of the increase in NOM since 2004–05. As demonstrated above, this increase is dominated by those holding temporary visas.

The main interest in the findings concerning permanent residents is the small number leaving Australia and staying overseas for 12/16. As Table 4 shows, only 10,770 who met this criterion departed in 2007–08. This figure barely moved from that recorded for 2004–05 when 9,210 were counted as NOM departures. This group includes permanent residents who had entered on a temporary basis and changed their status while in Australia, as well as those who arrived in Australia originally with a permanent residence visa. The 10,770 figure is tiny given that there is a rapidly-growing stock of over one million residents in Australia who are permanent residents.

This finding is contrary to what might be expected from the migration literature. The emphasis has been on the ways in which migrants, including those who are nominally permanent, are becoming more mobile in the current globalised environment because of the ease of retaining business and social links in their homeland.

### **Australian citizens**

Another striking finding is the small net loss of Australian citizens—just 20,310 in 2007–08 (see Table 2). The figure was similar for

each year 2004–05 to 2007–08. It needs to be remembered that most Australians are citizens, including by 2006 some 75.8 per cent of those who were overseas born.<sup>6</sup> At the time of 2006 census, some 17.1 million Australian residents, or 86 per cent of the total of 19.8 million, were Australian citizens. The number is also small when considered in the context of the long-running publicity about Australia's alleged 'brain drain' of residents.

A recent example is the press release from the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Chris Evans, which accompanied DIAC's annual report on emigration for 2007–08. The Minister stated that in 2007–08 some 76,923 Australian residents left Australia permanently. This figure is not NOM data but rather is derived from the overseas arrivals and departures movement data base.<sup>7</sup> These data come from passenger cards. They report what departing residents say is their intended length of stay overseas, and in this case that they intended to leave Australia permanently. The passenger cards ask people to tick whether they are a visitor departing or a resident departing. So the category of residents for the movements data should be very close to the category of citizens and permanent residents as defined for NOM purposes.

Senator Evans bemoaned the loss of skilled persons and commented that: 'These latest figures also reflect the current global demand for skills and internationalisation of the labour market as part of the broader process of globalisation'.<sup>8</sup> Evans was referring to the demand for skilled professionals, especially in the finance and banking area, who were highly sought after by 2007–08.

However, as is now known through analysis of the NOM data, the 76,923 permanent loss that the minister was worrying about was in fact much smaller. The NOM data enable the identification of the residents who said that they were leaving Australia permanently in 2007–08. Some 73,782 of



the 76,923 were so identified. Of these, only 14,658 actually stayed overseas for 12 out of the 16 months following their departure.

Concerns about a brain drain from citizens and permanent residents have been based on the movements data. Until recently, these have been the used by commentators (including us) on resident loss. However, this should no longer be the case now that the more accurate NOM data, using the new methodology, are available. As indicated, with the example of those stating an intention to leave permanently, the movements data seriously exaggerate resident loss. The 2007–08 Emigration Report states that, as well as the 76,923 Australian residents who left Australia permanently, another 102,066 left long-term (that is, for a year or more). On the return side, the report indicates that 110,066 Australian residents returned after a long-term stay overseas. Again, these are movements data based on passenger card records.

On these figures the loss of Australian residents was 68,157. According to the overseas arrivals and departures movement data, the annual resident loss has been around 50,000 to 60,000 each year for the past decade.<sup>9</sup> Given the scale of these losses, it is not surprising that it is often argued that Australia needs a strong migration program just to compensate for a large continuing resident loss.

However, the findings from the new NOM methodology do not support this conclusion. In the case of Australian citizens, there was a net loss in 2007–08 of just 20,301. Clearly, departing residents have been exaggerating their intentions to depart permanently or long-term (for a year or more) relative to what the NOM data reveal was their actual period of departure. Conversely, a small minority of those who said that they were departing short term actually turned out to be NOM departures (staying overseas 12/16). The balance, however, is very much towards the overstatement of

departure intentions. The small number of permanent residence departures, measured in NOM terms (10,770) suggests a similar conclusion.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POPULATION POLICY**

Those who think that Australia needs a big migration intake because it is currently suffering a serious brain drain are mistaken. The net loss of Australian citizens and of permanent residents is remarkably small. The other side to this point is that those who wish to plan for long-term population stabilisation in Australia may have to reconsider their assumptions about the level of net overseas migration which would achieve this goal. For example the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) proposes that Australia could stabilise its population by mid-century at around 27 to 30 million. The ACF thinks this could be achieved without the Australian government having to compromise its humanitarian and family reunion commitments.<sup>10</sup> It is unlikely that the ACF is assuming that skilled migration will be reduced to zero. If so, the stabilisation scenario appears to be based on the assumption that a substantial migration program could be sustained that is compatible with a low net migration outcome, one that is consistent with the 27 to 30 million figure. This would only be possible if there were a large loss of residents each year.

This is an issue that all advocates of population stabilisation will have to come to grips with. If Australia's low net loss of permanent residents and citizens continues, any plan to stabilise the population will have to incorporate tougher restrictions on the migration intake than have hitherto been thought to be necessary.

## **CONCLUSION**

The new methodology to measure NOM is a vast improvement over the old methodology. Because it is based on travellers'

histories it removes the problem of double or multiple counting and abolishes the need to rely on traveller statements (via passenger cards) about their intentions to leave or stay in Australia. As we have seen, these traveller histories are far more reliable than the movements data because they measure the actual length of stay or departure. Yet DIAC continues to publish movements data in its annual Emigration Reports and in its bi-annual Immigration Update reports. These data, especially for resident movements (as distinct from settler arrivals), grossly exaggerate resident losses. If DIAC continues to publish them it should do so with explicit warnings as to their limitations.

The methodology implemented in 2006 incorporated the 12/16 rule, which means that arrivals and departures do not have to be continuously present or absent for 12 months to be counted in NOM. The NOM calculated on this basis is a little higher than under the old methodology. This outcome does not distort estimates of Australia's population. Rather, it gives a better indication of the size of this population, from the point of view of the social and economic implications of the migrant presence in Australia. For example, students who return home for a month or two each year but who stay in Australia for at least 12 months out of 16 ought to be counted as residents because of their housing and other service needs.

The extraordinary increase in NOM as measured by the new methodology from 142,400 in 2004–05 to 277,360 in 2007–08 provides a real indication of population growth in Australia resulting from international movement. Two major factors are responsible. The first is the surge in temporary migrants over the past decade, including students, 457 visa holders and working holiday makers. Migrants on temporary visas contributed 77.6 per cent of the overall increase in NOM over the years in question. Our analysis shows that this increase is partly due to the lag effect of

continuous increases in arrivals in these visa categories and partly due to the propensity of these migrants (especially students) to extend their stay in Australia via the many avenues the Australian government created to make this possible.

It follows that, with the recent reforms restricting these avenues, NOM from this source could fall just as rapidly as it rose. This is likely over the next few years due to the combination of a decline in student visas issued (already sharply down in the first three quarters of 2009–10) and limits on the availability of pathways to onshore permanent residence.

The second contribution to the NOM surge is something of a paradox as it concerns what has not happened. All those who have followed demographic debates in Australia will be familiar with the claims that Australia has experienced a serious and growing resident loss—even a brain drain. This loss has prompted national concern, but is hardly a surprise for those familiar with the academic literature on global mobility. Who could be surprised if residents and migrants are less stable in their domicile in a global economy which facilitates and encourages mobility?

The NOM data show that these perceptions are based on misleading movements data. The loss of residents from Australia, whether they be citizens or permanent residents, according to the NOM estimates, has been much lower than that indicated by the overseas arrivals and departures movements data. The net citizen loss by 2007–08 was just 20,310. The net loss of permanent residents was 10,770. Because these losses are so small, they have offset very little of the increase in arrivals over recent years.

These tiny losses from citizens and holders of permanent-entry visa holders require a rethinking of claims about the seriousness of resident loss and the underlying theory about increased global mobility that underpins our understanding of these issues. The

small citizen and permanent resident losses should be a cause for celebration about the attractiveness of living in Australia. However, they also imply that it will be hard to stabilise Australia's population if this pattern continues in the context of a simultaneously high migration intake.

### **Acknowledgement**

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