

Article

The international student population in England and Wales: Census 2021

Country of birth, age, sex, employment status, industry, housing type and language spoken for the international student population of England and Wales.



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1 . Main points

- There were 373,600 non-UK-born, non-UK passport holding international students in England and Wales at the time of Census 2021.
- India (11.6%), China (11.2%), Romania (9.5%) and Nigeria (5.3%) were the top four individual countries of birth of international students.
- A third of the international student population was in London (33.9%).
- One in three international students were in employment; Eastern European countries had the highest proportions in employment alongside studying (Romania, 73.9%; Bulgaria, 62.3%; Poland, 56.7%, and Lithuania, 56.0%).
- International students' residence type varied by age, with most students aged 18 to 25 years living in communal establishments (36.4%) or an all-student household (28.7%), while most students aged 26 years and over lived in single or multiple family households (59.0%).
- Of the international students whose preferred main language was not English (239,000, 64.0%), 59.3% and 35.5% reported being able to speak English very well and well respectively.

2 . International students

International students in higher education (HE) are an important sub-group of the population in England and Wales. Studying is one of the main reasons people migrate to the UK. International students contribute to the income of universities through tuition fees, as well as the economy of communities in which they live, as discussed in [Impact of international students in the UK from the Migration Advisory Committee, 2018 \(PDF, 1.951 KB\)](#).

Census 2021 provides the opportunity to explore the characteristics of the international student population of England and Wales. Administrative sources, such as Home Office data and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data provide regular and comprehensive information on international students. However, census data allow us to explore characteristics such as country of birth, employment and housing. [Section 8: Comparing Census 2021 with other data sources](#) covers how census data compares with these administrative sources.

Definition

In this article, an international student is defined as someone who was a usual resident in England and Wales and meets all the following criteria:

- In full-time education
- non-UK-born
- non-UK passport holder
- aged 17 years or over upon most recent arrival in the UK
- aged 18 years or over on Census Day

We arrived at this definition through consultation with our users and it is used throughout the article when referring to the population of "international students" in England and Wales.

Details on how students were counted in the census can be found in our previously published [Students: Census 2021 article](#). Information on the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on international students in the census can be found in [Section 11: Data sources and quality](#).

3 . Overview of the international student population

Census 2021 estimated that in England and Wales there were 2,463,000 people aged 18 years and over in full-time education. Of this overall total, 70.7% were UK-born, 9.7% were EU-born and 19.6% were non-EU-born. This means nearly 3 in 10 people in full-time education, aged 18 years or over, were non-UK-born. However, this overall estimate may include those studying at boarding school or in further education and people who are non-UK-born but UK passport holders (see [Section 10: Glossary](#) for details).

International students (those who meet the definition in Section 2: International students) make up a subset of the overall group. There were 373,600 international students in England and Wales at the time of Census 2021, 96.6% were in England and 3.4% were in Wales. Almost two-thirds were born in non-EU countries, with the remaining third born in EU countries. The patterns were similar when comparing England with Wales for both EU (35.8% and 32.8%) and non-EU-born (64.2% and 67.2%).

In England and Wales, 57.6% of international students held passports for non-EU countries, with the remaining 42.4% holding passports for EU countries. This article largely focuses on country of birth, but more information on how passports held was measured is available in [Section 10: Glossary](#).

Country of birth

Of the international student population in England and Wales, Middle East and Asia-born were the largest group (40.2%). Figure 1 shows in England, the Middle East and Asia was followed by EU14 (15.9%), Africa (12.4%) and EU2 (11.7%). However, in Wales the Middle East and Asia was followed by Africa (13.9%), EU14 (13.3%) and Americas and Caribbean (12.0%).

Figure 1: Proportions of international students by country of birth groupings vary between England and Wales

Percentage of international students by country of birth, 2021, England and Wales

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Figure 2 shows that India (11.6%), China (11.2%), Romania (9.5%) and Nigeria (5.3%) were the top four individual countries of birth of international students in England and Wales. Looking at England and Wales separately, the proportions of China- and Poland-born international students were greater in Wales than in England.

Figure 2: China, Romania and Nigeria make up a higher proportion of the international student population than the total non-UK-born population

Percentage of international students and all non-UK-born by country of birth, 2021, England and Wales

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Age and sex

Figure 3 shows there were more 18- to 25-year-old (212,000, 56.7%) international students studying in England and Wales than those aged 26 years and over (162,000, 43.3%). Non-EU-born international students were older than EU-born students, with the peak age being 22 to 23 years (18.9%) for non-EU-born and aged 20 to 21 years (18.5%) for EU-born.

The proportion of women (55.0%) was larger than men (45.0%), with a similar pattern when looking at England and Wales separately.

Figure 3: EU-born international students were younger and more likely to be women than non-EU-born

Percentage of international students by country of birth and age, 2021, England and Wales

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Geography

Figure 4 presents the distribution of the international student population by region (as determined by the term-time address given on Census 2021) in comparison with the distribution of all people in full-time education who were aged 18 years and over at the time of Census 2021. A third of the international student population were in London (127,000, 33.9%), while the wider population was more evenly distributed. The South East (45,000, 12.0%) and the West Midlands (35,000, 9.4%) were the regions with the highest populations of international students outside London.

Figure 4: A third of the international student population were in London

Proportional distribution of international students by region, 2021, England and Wales

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Across England, Manchester (13,000), Birmingham (12,600), Coventry (9,700), Newham (9,300) and Cambridge (9,100) were the local authorities (LAs) with the highest populations of international students. Of the top 20 LAs, 7 were in London. Across Wales, just under half of the international student population was in Cardiff (6,150). Swansea (1,960), Rhondda Cynon Taf (1,000), Ceredigion (990) and Gwynedd (940) were the LAs with the highest populations of international students outside Cardiff.

Figure 5 shows there was some regional variation for the individual country of birth of international students. For example, 22.3% of students in Yorkshire and The Humber were China-born, compared with only 7.1% in the East of England.

Figure 5: There was some variation when looking at individual country of birth by region

Top 10 individual country of birth by region, 2021, England and Wales

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4 . Comparing Census 2021 with the 2011 Census

To provide additional context on the international student population, we also applied the definition to the 2011 data to compare it with the 2021 population.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected the international student population in 2021 and comparisons with 2011 should be considered with caution.

The 2011 Census estimated there were 2,485,000 people in full-time education aged 18 years and over in England and Wales, of these, 17.1% (425,100) were international students. In Census 2021, the number of international students present in England and Wales was notably lower (373,600) and made up 15.2% of all those aged 18 years and over in full-time education (2,463,000).

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency suggest that enrollment of international students in higher education increased from 2010 to 2011, to 2020 to 2021. However, it is possible many of these students were studying remotely from outside the UK because of travel restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic. This could have led to a lower number of international students resident in the UK at the time of Census 2021 despite an overall increase in international migration since 2011.

Looking at international students by country of birth, there was a lower volume of Middle East and Asian-born students in 2021, but conversely a higher proportion of those born in the EU2. This was primarily driven by lower volumes of students born in Pakistan (2011: 21,600; 2021: 8,000), China (2011: 51,400; 2021: 41,800) and Bangladesh (2011: 12,200; 2021: 5,000), and a higher volume born in Romania (2011: 6,500; 2021: 35,300). These trends may represent differences in the likelihood that people from different countries were studying remotely in early 2021.

The lower volume of students in 2021 also showed a geographic trend, with London showing 23.2% less students in 2021 (126,700) compared with 2011 (165,000), while other regions showed smaller decreases.

5 . Labour market

Employment status

Census 2021 took place during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change, which affected the labour market topic. For further information, see [Section 11: Data sources and quality](#).

At the time of the census, approximately a quarter of people in England and Wales aged 18 years and over, in full-time education were also in employment (27.9%). Almost two-thirds were economically inactive (63.7%), and the remaining were unemployed (8.4%).

Employment status by country of birth

Figure 6 compares the employment status of EU-born and non-EU-born international students as a subset of the population described previously. A significantly higher proportion of EU-born international students were employed (47.1%), compared with non-EU-born (24.6%). Some of this will be explained by [EU citizens historically having a right to work in the UK](#). A higher proportion of EU-born international students were in employment in England (47.5%), than in Wales (36.7%).

Figure 6: A higher proportion of EU-born international students were employed in comparison with non-EU-born

Employment status of international students, 2021, England and Wales

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Of the 122,000 employed international students in England and Wales, Figure 7 shows the majority were born in EU2 (25.3%), Middle East and Asia (22.4%), Africa (14.8%) and EU14 (14.3%) countries.

Figure 7: Those born in EU2 countries made up the largest percentage of international students in employment

Percentage of international students in employment by country of birth groupings, 2021, England and Wales

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A higher proportion of EU8-born international students were in employment in Wales (21.5%) than in England (11.2%).

Romania (21.4%), India (11.9%), Nigeria (7.0%), Poland (6.1%) and Italy (4.0%) were among the top 10 countries of birth for international students in employment. Looking at England and Wales separately, the trend remains broadly the same.

Figure 8 looks at the proportions of these top 10 countries of birth for international students in employment. Of the Romania-born full-time international student population in England and Wales, 73.9% were also employed. Bulgaria-born (62.3%), Poland-born (56.7%) and Lithuania-born (55.9%) followed as the most likely to be employed while studying. Many EU-born international students will have arrived before the end of free movement, so the figures do not represent the activity status of EU students under the post-Brexit immigration system.

Figure 8: Over 70% of the Romania-born international students in England and Wales were in employment alongside studying

Proportions of employed international students by individual country of birth, 2021, England and Wales

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Employment and geography

Figure 9 shows the proportion of international students in employment by region. East of England (41.0%), London (36.6%), West Midlands (35.4%) and East Midlands (34.1%) were the regions with the highest proportions of international students in employment.

Figure 9: East of England, London and West Midlands were the regions with the highest proportions of international students in employment

Percentage of international students in employment while studying by region, 2021, England and Wales

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Of the top 60 local authorities (LAs) with the highest volumes of international students, the five LAs with the highest proportions of international students also in employment were Waltham Forest (63.1%), Barking and Dagenham (63.0%), Harrow (61.5%), West Northamptonshire (60.8%) and Redbridge (57.8%).

Employment by industry

Figure 10 shows that, of the employed international student population, the most common industries in which they were employed were:

- wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles (18.5%)
- human health and social work activities (16.8%)
- accommodation and food services (13.0%)
- education (12.0%)

Figure 10: Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles was the industry in which the highest proportion of international students were employed

Top 10 most common industries for international students in employment, 2021, England and Wales

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Figure 11 shows EU and non-EU international students employed in each of the top 10 industries, as proportions of the employed EU and non-EU international students. Higher proportions of non-EU-born international students were employed in human health and social work activities (22.6%) and education (14.1%), than EU-born (11.4% and 10.1% respectively).

Figure 11: A higher proportion of non-EU-born compared with EU-born international students were employed in human health and social work activities

Percentage of EU-born and non-EU-born international students employed in top 10 industries, 2021, England and Wales

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Figure 12 shows that of the male and female employed international students, men and women were differently distributed across the top 10 industries. Women (21.7%) were more likely to be employed in human health and social work activities than men (11.0%). However, men (10.9%) were more likely to be employed in transport and storage, than women (4.3%).

Figure 12: More women than men were employed in human health and social work activities

Percentage of employed international students by industry and sex, 2021, England and Wales

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Figure 13 shows there was variation in employment patterns when comparing international students aged 18 to 25 years with those aged 26 years and over. Higher proportions of those aged 26 years and over were employed in almost all industries. However, higher proportions of those aged 18 to 25 years (23.3%) were employed in wholesale and retail trade than those aged 26 years and over (15.7%). Similarly, a higher proportion aged 18 to 25 years (18.4%) were employed in accommodation and food services than those aged 26 years and over (9.8%).

Figure 13: Younger international students tended to work in wholesale and retail trade and accommodation and food services

Percentage of employed international students by industry and age band, 2021, England and Wales

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6 . Housing

Student accommodation

Census 2021 showed some variation in the living arrangements of international students. Residence type showed notable variation, with a relatively even split among communal establishments (25.2%), all student households (24.4%), other households made of different families (19.2%) and other households made of a single family (17.2%). Communal establishment residences were highest in Yorkshire and The Humber (38.6%), but much lower in London (15.0%).

Figure 14 looks at residence type by age and shows a different picture. The majority of those aged 18 to 25 years were living in communal establishments or student households, while those aged 26 years and over were more likely to live in a single or a multiple family household. Almost 1 in 10 lived alone across both age groups.

Figure 14: Communal establishments were most common for those aged 18 to 25 years

International student accommodation type by age band, 2021, England and Wales

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The census also collects information on second address when stayed at for more than 30 days a year. For international students, this can give an indication of how many regularly travel in and out of the UK for their studies. Of international students aged 18 to 25 years, 4 in 10 stayed at an address outside of the UK for at least 30 days a year, compared with only 1 in 10 aged 26 years and over. This suggests postgraduate and mature international students were more settled in England and Wales. University areas such as Warwick (60.9%), Lancaster (54.1%) and Bath (53.5%) showed high proportions of students with a non-UK second address.

7 . Language

Language spoken

Figure 15 shows that English (English or Welsh in Wales) was the preferred main language spoken by the largest proportion of international students in England and Wales combined (36.0%). This is followed by All other Chinese (9.0%), Romanian (8.1%) and Arabic (4.0%).

Figure 15: English, Chinese and Romanian were the most common preferred main languages spoken by international students

Preferred main language spoken by international students, 2021, England and Wales

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Similar trends were seen between England and Wales. However, Romanian was proportionally higher in England (8.3%), than in Wales (2.4%) and Arabic was proportionally higher in Wales (9.0%) than in England (3.8%).

English language proficiency

Some international students will have had to meet eligibility criteria for a student visa to study in higher education in England and Wales. These criteria include needing to meet a certain level of English language proficiency. For details, see the [Student visa webpage on GOV.UK](#).

In census, English proficiency relates to how well a person whose main language is not English, feels they speak English. Of the international students whose preferred main language was not English (239,000, 64.0%), 59.3% reported being able to speak English very well, 35.5% well, 4.9% not well and 0.3% not at all.

Figure 16 shows Other EU countries-born (81.9%) and EU14-born (81.4%) were the groups with the highest proportions of international students who reported being able to speak English very well. In contrast, the group with the lowest proportion were Middle East and Asia-born (44.8%).

Figure 16: The highest proportions of international students reporting being able to speak English very well were born in Other EU countries

Percentage of international students whose preferred main language was not English by English proficiency and country of birth grouping, 2021, England and Wales

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8 . Comparing Census 2021 with other data sources

Home Office

The census provides a snapshot in time and is therefore not directly comparable with Office for National Statistics (ONS) measures of non-EU international migration based on Home Office data. However, comparisons can be approximated by looking at reports of most recent arrival in census by passport held.

Our [Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2022 bulletin](#) showed 129,000 non-EU nationals arrived in the UK on study visas in the year ending March 2021. Census 2021 data showed 101,100 international students who were non-EU passport holders had most recently arrived in England and Wales over the same period. As census data do not include Scotland and Northern Ireland or those arriving after Census Day, 21 March 2021, these numbers are broadly comparable and support the use of the international student definition.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

The number of non-UK domiciled full-time higher education students estimated as enrolled by HESA for the academic year 2020 to 2021 was 562,995, as seen in [HESA's Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2020/21 - Where students come from and go to study \(Figure 8\)](#). This number is significantly larger than the estimate of the population size produced using census data (373,600). However, there are various reasons for this difference and users are urged to proceed with caution if comparing census with HESA data. Reasons include:

- analysis by HESA showed [a marked increase in the number of first-year students who were not at term-time accommodation in the academic year 2020 to 2021](#), compared with the equivalent number in each year since the academic year 2016 to 2017
- a student halls' survey we conducted shortly after the census to inform our production of census statistics found that some halls were below full occupancy
- census is a household survey which collects information on the characteristics of the population, at a specific period in time and will therefore not reflect more recent changes
- HESA data contain information on enrolments but do not record whether they arrived in the UK to study at the time of census
- census collects information on country of birth and passports held, using these as ways of estimating the international student population
- [HESA collects information on domicile](#) and legal nationality; however, domicile is used to indicate whether a student is international
- census collects data on a person's most recent arrival to the UK
- HESA collects information on academic year and enrolment and is therefore more useful when attempting to understand the flow of international students

9 . The international student population in England and Wales: Census 2021 data

[International student population, England and Wales](#) Dataset | Released 17 April 2023 The international student population of England and Wales by country of birth, passport held, age, sex and other characteristics.

10 . Glossary

Country of birth

The country in which a person was born.

Usual resident

A usual resident is anyone who on Census Day, 21 March 2021, was in the UK and had stayed or intended to stay in the UK for a period of 12 months or more, or had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK and intended to be outside the UK for less than 12 months.

In full-time education

In full-time education indicates whether a person aged 5 years and over was in full-time education on Census Day, 21 March 2021. This includes schoolchildren and adults in full-time education.

Schoolchildren and students in full-time education studying away from home are treated as usually resident at their term-time address.

International student

In this article an international student is defined as someone who was a usual resident in England and Wales and meets all the following criteria:

- in full-time education
- non-UK-born
- non-UK passport holder
- aged 17 years or over upon most recent arrival in the UK
- aged 18 years or over on Census Day

People need to meet all the above criteria to be included. By including being both non-UK-born and non-UK passport holder in the definition, we are aiming to ensure we exclude British citizens who were born abroad or those who may have been born outside of the UK but have since become British citizens. Non-passport holders are also excluded. International students need to be aged 17 years or over upon their most recent arrival and aged 18 years or over on Census Day, to exclude people who had arrived to study at a boarding school or in Further Education (FE).

EU

EU is the sum of the EU14, EU8 and EU2, plus Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 1 July 2013).

EU2

EU2 is Romania and Bulgaria.

EU8

EU8 is Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

EU14

EU14 is Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

Other EU

Other EU is Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 2013).

Non-EU

Non-EU is the sum of the rest of the world including the rest of Europe. British nationals are excluded from these numbers.

Other non-EU

The category "Other non-EU" refers to the following list of countries:

Albania, Andorra, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, Cyprus (non-EU), Faroe Islands, Georgia, Guernsey, Iceland, Isle of Man, Jersey, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Svalbard and Jan Mayen, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Vatican City.

Economic activity

People aged 16 years and over are economically active if, between 15 and 21 March 2021, they were:

- in employment (an employee or self-employed)
- unemployed, but looking for work and could start within two weeks
- unemployed, but waiting to start a job that had been offered and accepted

It is a measure of whether or not a person was an active participant in the labour market during this period. Economically inactive are those aged 16 years and over who did not have a job between 15 to 21 March 2021. Or they are those aged 16 years and over who have not looked for work between 22 February to 21 March 2021 or could not start work within two weeks.

The census definition differs from the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition used on the Labour Force Survey (LFS), so estimates are not directly comparable.

Industry

Industry classifies people aged 16 years and over who were in employment between 15 and 21 March 2021 by the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code that represents their current industry or business.

The SIC code is assigned based on the information provided about a firm or organisation's main activity.

Employment by industry

Census estimates of the number of people employed by industry differ from estimates from the Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES). BRES collects data directly from businesses. In contrast, the census relies on respondent information about the business they work for in their main job only. The BRES estimates are the preferred measure of the number of jobs within each industry, while the census estimates allow analysis of characteristics of people working in each industry not possible with the BRES data.

Passports held

In the case of multiple passports being held, they were categorised in the following priority order for statistical purposes to prevent double-counting residents:

- UK passport
- Irish passport
- other country passport

For example, a dual citizen who holds both an EU and a UK passport is not classified in this analysis as a non-UK passport holder.

For further information, please see our [Guidance on using country of birth, nationality, and passports held data methodology](#).

Ethnic group

The ethnic group that the person completing the census feels they belong to. This could be based on their culture, family background, identity or physical appearance.

Respondents could choose 1 out of 19 tick-box response categories, including write-in response options.

11 . Data sources and quality

The census provides the most detailed picture of the entire population, with the same core questions asked to everybody across England and Wales. Census results can be more reliable than survey results based on a sample of the population, because the whole population is included. The UK Statistics Authority has assigned National Statistics status to Census 2021 outputs, providing assurance that these statistics are of the highest quality and value to users.

Census 2021 achieved a very high response rate of 97%. We ensure the census results reflect the whole population by using statistical methods to estimate the number and characteristics of people who were not recorded on a census response. This means that the census statistics are estimates rather than simple counts of responses, so they have some statistical uncertainty associated with them. We take numerous steps to minimise possible sources of error.

Additionally, we apply statistical disclosure control to protect the confidentiality of census respondents. Differences in the methods used for statistical disclosure control may result in minor differences in data totals between census products. As we round all figures individually, table totals may not sum exactly.

Quality considerations along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally are provided in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#).

Read more about the specific quality considerations in our [Demography and migration quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#) and our [Labour Market quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#).

Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates methodology](#).

Impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on international students in Census 2021

Census 2021 was conducted during the coronavirus pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change, and it is possible that this affected the way some people responded to the labour market questions on the census. Estimates from the census will also differ to those collected on the [Labour Force Survey](#), because of a range of conceptual differences between the two sources. For further information about interpreting census labour market data, see [Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales: 13 March 2023 article](#).

The coronavirus pandemic had an impact on both the domestic and international student populations, and it is difficult to disentangle the impact of the pandemic from other changes across the decade. While this article includes some comparisons between 2011 and 2021 census data, it is advised that users proceed with caution when comparing the two sources.

The census counts students at their term-time address, and we are confident our estimates are as good as possible in representing the student population as it was in March 2021. There was some evidence of changes to the term-time population resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. Read more about [how the Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) ensured an accurate estimate of students at their term-time address](#).

12 . Related links

[International migration, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) Article | Released 2 November 2022 International migration, including country of birth, passports held and year of arrival, Census 2021 data.

[The changing picture of long-term international migration, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) Article | Released 27 January 2023 Analysis of the migrant population of England and Wales and how it has changed looking at the characteristics of country of birth and passports held.

[The changing picture of short-term international migration, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) Article | Released 22 March 2023 Analysis of the short-term migrant population of England and Wales and how it has changed looking at the characteristics of country of birth and passports held.

[Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales: 13 March 2023](#) Article | Released 13 March 2023 Comparing the percentages of adults in employment and other labour market data between Census 2021 and the Labour Force Survey, and reasons why they differ.

[Immigration Rules: Appendix Student](#) Manual | Updated 13 April 2023 Immigration rules manual from the Home Office including a section on work conditions for a student.

13 . Cite this article

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