

Migration: A flexible return ticket

Last update: 2 December 2019




© Phil Crean / Alamy Stock Photo

Today, bolstered by steady economic growth and an emerging confidence in Ireland’s future, the government is taking a new tack by fostering a bolder engagement towards emigration and the diaspora.

Actively encouraging Irish nationals to come home, with key strategies for connecting with the Irish worldwide, is more than a wish, but is a central part of the government’s first paper on the subject, *Global Irish: Ireland’s Diaspora Policy*, issued in March 2015. As Enda Kenny, the Taoiseach (prime minister), writes in the foreword of the publication, the economy is “creating opportunities for our people here and we want them to be able to come home.”

However, figures published by Ireland’s Central Statistics Office (CSO) in April 2015 suggest that while the trend is shifting favourably, a return to positive net migration among Irish nationals may still be some way off. At the peak of the Celtic Tiger in 2007, emigration among Irish nationals dropped to 12 900, while the number of Irish people returning home rose to 30 700, up from 18 900 in 2006. There was a rise in positive net migration that year too, to 104 800. However, the crisis triggered a sharp reversal in migration flows with immigration suddenly halting in 2009 and emigration increasing.

Between 2010 and 2013, emigration levels of Irish nationals jumped from 28 900 to a peak of 50 900 ; more than 600 000 have left since 2008.

Between 2010 and 2013, emigration levels of Irish nationals jumped from 28 900 to a peak of 50 900 

“For the first time, during the Celtic Tiger if a person was born here they expected to work here. We felt we’d turned a corner, changed history. So forced emigration was the most emotive area of the 2008 recession,” says Alan Barrett of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). For him, the government’s innovative steps to mobilise its overseas workforce is a response to the changing nature and profile of the migrants who are flowing in and out of Ireland today. Until the 1990s, emigration was largely composed of the indigent and unskilled. Today college graduates and young professionals leave, while the average age has risen, too: rather than the 15-24-year-old group of yore, the new wave is led by 25-44 year-olds, many of them leaving jobs.

Despite this trend, since 2013 migration to Ireland has started to follow a less negative trend. In the 12 months to April 2015, 80 900 people emigrated from Ireland, a slight 1.2% drop on the previous year. Of that group, 35 300 were Irish nationals, down by 13% on the previous year.

The numbers arriving have risen, with immigration in 2015 increasing for the third year in a row, up 14% in the last year to 69 300. However, just 12 100 of those were Irish. In fact, nationals from outside the EU form the largest category, reaching 30 400 following a rise of nearly 20% on a year earlier. Indeed, as the economy continues to rally, it is largely thanks to strong net inflows of non-EU nationals that net negative migration has fallen so sharply in the last three years.

The profile of foreign nationals coming to Ireland is also shifting towards more highly qualified people. When Microsoft’s Bill Gates chose Dublin in 1986 as the hub to localise his firm’s software for Europe, it attracted one of the first waves of foreign technology graduates to Ireland. Today, about a third of the company’s 1 100 staff in Dublin is non-Irish.

However, this inflow of skills has not yet generated a sufficient “brain gain” to close some stubborn skills gaps, particularly in engineering, information technology, finance and health care. Also, a moratorium on recruitment to the public health sector during the crisis resulted in many qualified health and education professionals leaving.

The construction industry has also been affected, with 17% of Irish emigrants having worked in the industry, including the likes of civil engineers, architects and quantity surveyors.

While courses aimed at existing workers, such as through Springboard Courses, can plug some of this skills gap, a return of more Irish skills from abroad would be welcomed, too. “We will not achieve our target if we do not attract at least 100 000

people back home to take up jobs,” said Damien English, minister for skills, research and innovation, [in a parliamentary discussion](#) in May 2015. Recruitment drives have been launched, while firms like Grafton Recruitment and the Social House in Dublin hope to entice workers home with positive statistics, including an improving job market and rising salaries among returnees.

Meanwhile, the government also has its work cut out to ensure Ireland provides new opportunities for people who have not left the country, in some cases deliberately standing their ground, as witness the “We’re Not Leaving” campaign in 2013.

As articles in this edition show, policies are starting to pay off. By adopting the kind of policies recommended by the OECD to enhance innovation and promote more spillovers from Ireland’s cutting-edge sectors, emigration should once again become just another choice. *Claire MacDonald*

Visit the [Central Statistics Office’s website](#)

References

Barrett, Alan and Jean Goggin (2010), “Returning to the question of a wage premium for returning migrants”, National Institute Economic Review, Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin <http://ftp.iza.org/dp4736.pdf>

Government of Ireland (2015), “Global Irish: Ireland’s Diaspora Policy”, Department of Foreign Affairs, March <https://www.dfa.ie/media/globalirish/global-irish-irelands-diaspora-policy.pdf>

Glynn, Irial, Tomas Kelly and Piaras MacEinri (2013), Irish Emigration in an Age of Austerity, University College Cork, Cork https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/emigre/Emigration_in_an_Age_of_Austerity_Final.pdf

Irish Abroad Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and UCD Clinton Institute (2015), Global Irish Civic Forum Report, UCD Clinton Institute, Dublin <http://www.ucdclinton.ie/Global-Irish-Civic-Forum-Diaspora>

OECD Economic Surveys: Ireland 2015 http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eco_surveys-irl-2015-en