Migration controversy in the UK

The news from the ONS about migrant births is just one of a number of high-profile migration reports appearing in the media recently. Political commentators say the rise of Ukip — with its anti-immigration stance — is leading the major political parties to take a tougher line too. Interesting issues for you to examine include:
- Cameron’s pledge to cut net migration (this has created problems for UK universities and relations with India and Brazil) www.tinyurl.com/acshy8
- The government’s campaign against illegal immigrants: www.tinyurl.com/oez7my
- The Labour Party’s clash with Tesco: www.tinyurl.com/s3yf9q
- The net benefits that migrants bring. www.tinyurl.com/bqdt56

How do UK population changes relate to stage 4 (or 5) of the demographic transition model (DTM)? Up-to-date knowledge can help you excel at this topic.

For instance, the recent uptick in total births challenges the idea that we have entered a period of ever-falling fertility (the crude birth rate has increased to around 13 per 1,000 per year). A better analysis might be that we are experiencing a positive fluctuation within stage 4, following a negative fluctuation in the 1990s. However, you could also argue that the unprecedented impact of migration on the UK’s demography has made the DTM redundant as a way of predicting future changes. Remember too that national trends conceal enormous regional variations (Figure 4).

What are the media saying?

There are three big media debates that AS geographers can benefit from reading about.

An end to the ageing population?

The baby boom does not mean the population has stopped ageing. While more births means more workers paying taxes in the future, the number of elderly people is growing at an even faster rate (Figure 1). This is because the large ‘baby boom’ generation of the 1960s is reaching retirement age, and advances in healthcare mean someone who is 65 can now expect to live to 88. Figure 2 shows that the median age of the population is rising, so we still have an ageing population.

Is it migrants having babies?

Much of the increase is due to higher birth rates among immigrant households. Most economic migrants are of childbearing or childrearing age and some migrant cultures favour higher fertility: the fertility rate of UK-born women is 1.9 compared with 2.2 for foreign-born women. However, native-born British women are responsible for one-third of the increased births. Contributing factors may include fertility treatment for older women and arrival of the ‘baby boomers’.

Impacts on public spending?

Changes in the size of the dependent population affect public spending. The cost of care for the elderly continues to rise. Among younger people, the picture is more complicated. There has been a fall in numbers of young teenagers (those born around 2000, before eastern Europeans started arriving in 2004, see Figure 3). The suggests we will need less spending in secondary schools. However, primary-school funding is now in crisis, with 356,000 extra places needed for 2014. The impact is greatest in places with large migrant populations, such as London (where 30% of people are overseas-born).