

# Migration Terminology Resource

## Introduction

When teaching and discussing migration, using the right language is foundational. The words we choose shape how we, and students, understand complex and sensitive topics, and they influence how we relate to the people at the centre of them.

Language is powerful – it can be used to humanise, dehumanise or deliberately misunderstand people who migrate. Approaching this topic with care, empathy, and an awareness of this power is key to fostering understanding and creating space for more informed, compassionate conversations.

Using the right language means being precise. This includes understanding when legal definitions like “refugee” are necessary, and why certain terms are more appropriate than others in different contexts. Clear definitions help avoid confusion, but they also prevent the unintentional reinforcement of harmful narratives. This terminology sheet is designed to help you navigate this and to explain some of the nuances of the language around migration.

It is also important to acknowledge that language is not fixed. What is considered appropriate or respectful today (in 2026) will likely change over time, reflecting broader social understanding and thinking. To engage with this topic meaningfully, you need to be aware that language can evolve and that we may need to change the language we use as well.

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Migrant	<p>A person who has moved from one place to another place with the intention of settling either temporarily or permanently.</p> <p>This is an umbrella term that is used to describe people moving for all different reasons.</p>
Immigrant	<p>A person who has moved into a country. E.g. someone who has migrated into the UK from another country.</p>
Emigrant	<p>A person who has moved away from a country. E.g. someone who has migrated away from the UK to live in another country.</p>

# Migration Terminology Resource

Refugee	<p>A person who has fled their country due to well-founded fear or persecution for political, religious or ethnic reasons, or because of war, and has <b>been granted status to remain</b> in a new country for their safety.</p> <p><b>In the UK</b>, this is a legal definition that indicates the government has granted refugee status to allow them to remain in the UK for a temporary or indefinite period.</p> <p><b>In the global context</b>, the word refugee is applied to anyone who has fled their country due to well-founded fear or persecution for political, religious or ethnic reasons, or because of war, regardless of their status.</p>
Asylum seeker / Person Seeking Sanctuary	<p>A person who has fled their country due to well-founded fear of persecution for political, religious or ethnic reasons, or because of war, and is looking for a country and government to grant them protection and allow them to live there.</p> <p>Some people no longer use the term “asylum seeker” and instead use “person seeking sanctuary”. For some, the term “asylum seeker” reduces a person’s complex identity to a legal status, stripping away their individuality and humanity. However, some people prefer to still use this term as it is the legal term used by the UK government.</p> <p>An alternate term which centres the person in this conversation is “person seeking sanctuary”.</p>
Internally displaced person	<p>A person who has fled their home due to lack of safety, whether environmental or due to well-founded fear of persecution for political, religious or ethnic reasons, or because of war.</p> <p>This person has not crossed an international border and has remained inside their country. If they cross an international border, they would then become a “refugee” or “person seeking sanctuary”.</p>
Economic migrant	<p>A person who has moved from one place to another place for a job or other economic reasons.</p>
Forced migration	<p>The involuntary movement of individuals or groups from</p>

## Migration Terminology Resource

	<p>their homes due to factors beyond their control, such as war or persecution. Refugees and people seeking sanctuary have had a forced migration.</p>
<p>Undocumented migrant/person with insecure status</p> <p>Unauthorised migration</p>	<p>These terms should be used when people are discussing unauthorised forms of migration. This is often referred to as “illegal migration”, but it is important not to use this term.</p> <p>"Illegal" migration suggests that people claiming asylum are doing something criminal, which is not the case. Under the Human Rights Act and Refugee Convention, it is a basic right to be able to seek safety in a country.</p> <p>It is a crime to enter the UK without proper documentation, and, unless you are from a list of specified countries, people are unable to claim asylum in the UK without physically being in the country – and in many cases are unable to obtain the required documentation to enter the country legally. Therefore, many people seeking sanctuary are technically entering the UK without authorisation.</p>
Émigré	<p>A person who has left their country of birth, often for political or social reasons, to settle elsewhere. It frequently refers to those fleeing persecution, revolution, or conflict, and is derived from the French word for "emigrated". Synonyms include “refugee”.</p>
Expat / Expatriate	<p>The word expat (from expatriate) carries many connotations and assumptions about class, education and privilege. It is often used when describing wealthy white people from the Western World.</p> <p>There is no real difference between an “immigrant” and an “expat” – both describe people who have moved to live in a new country.</p>
Net migration	<p>The difference between the number of people moving into a country and the number of people leaving a country over a specific period of time, usually a year.</p> <p>E.g. In 2025, 898,000 people immigrated to the UK, and 693,000 people emigrated from the UK. So the net migration figure was 204,000 people.</p>
Diaspora	<p>Refers to a population of people who have left their country of birth and their descendants, and have moved to multiple locations worldwide, whilst still maintaining a collective identity, culture, or connection to their country of birth.</p>

# Migration Terminology Resource

<p>Ethnicity</p>	<p>Being part of a group because of a shared cultural background which distinguishes them from other groups, e.g. language, history, traditions, etc.</p> <p>A person's ethnicity is self-defined and includes aspects such as culture, heritage, religion, and identity.</p>
<p>Race</p>	<p>Dividing people into groups based on physical characteristics, e.g. skin colour, hair texture or bone structure.</p> <p>Race is a social construct which was designed to create divisions based on physical characteristics. Even if it isn't biologically "real", its impact on people is very much a reality. Race is a system of social categorisation which advantages certain groups of people and disadvantages other groups of people.</p>
<p>Racialisation</p>	<p>Racialisation is <b>the act</b> of giving a racial character to someone or something. It is the process of categorising, marginalising, or regarding something/someone according to race.</p>
<p>Ethnic minority</p>	<p>Ethnic minority is a term used by the UK government to refer to all ethnic groups except the 'White British' group, which is the majority demographic in the UK. E.g. Irish Travellers are an ethnic minority in the UK.</p> <p>This isn't interchangeable with terms like "person of colour" or "person from a global majority background", because in many global contexts they would not constitute a minority group. However, if you are talking about groups in the context that they are a minority (such as in the UK), it is appropriate terminology. Importantly, it is used to describe a group, not a person or identity.</p> <p>Please note: Some people do not like the term "ethnic minority" because it implies marginalisation.</p>
<p>Person from a global majority background</p>	<p>Refers to the fact that on a global level, the majority of the world is not white, therefore it is important to have terminology that doesn't centre whiteness in our understanding and dialogue about ethnicity.</p> <p>Please note: This is a preferable term to "ethnic minority", as it centres personhood, and isn't describing people in reference to their relationship with whiteness. However, some people do not like this term because it homogenises</p>

# Migration Terminology Resource

	diverse cultures.
Person of colour	<p>A person who does not define themselves as white.</p> <p>Please note: There is a preferred term to “ethnic minority”. However, some people do not like this term because it still places emphasis and focus on someone's identity based on their relationship to whiteness.</p>
Enslaved person	<p>A person who was enslaved. This term accurately describes how slavery was enforced upon people.</p> <p>Please note: It is important to use this term instead of the word “slave”, which is a dehumanising term, as it does not acknowledge that these are people who had slavery forced upon them.</p>