

## **How welcoming does Ireland want to be?**

Managing labour immigration in Ireland in a more effective way requires a rational and balanced public debate, writes **Martin Ruhs**.

Ireland's work-permit system for employing migrants from outside the European Union has recently been criticised as inhumane. Critics argue that it treats migrant workers as "guests" rather than as permanent immigrants and effectively turns them into bonded labourers because they are tied to the employer who obtained the work permit.

To address this concern, it has been suggested that work permits should instead be issued to workers, giving them freedom of movement in the Irish labour market.

Others go further and suggest that Ireland should abandon the idea of guest workers altogether and replace the current temporary work-permit system with a US-style "green card system", which is a permanent immigration programme.

Is this criticism of the work-permit system fair, and are the proposed new policies workable and desirable? The fact is that Ireland's work-permit system has, at one level, been very "liberal" in regulating the number and selection of migrant workers coming to Ireland.

Less than 4 per cent of work-permit applications have been refused over the last three years. There is no quota on the annual number of permits issued, which increased dramatically from fewer than 6,000 in 1999 to 45,000 in the first 11 months of this year.

Moreover, three out of four migrant workers are employed in low-skilled occupations. This is in contrast to most other countries' temporary foreign worker programmes which are regulated by quotas and exclude low-skilled occupations.

Ireland is also in a minority of EU member-states in its intention to grant accession-state nationals, who currently comprise one-third of all non-EU nationals employed on work permits in Ireland, the right to work without a permit immediately on EU enlargement in May 2004.

At the same time, critics are right in pointing out that current policies have been restrictive with regard to migrant workers' freedom of movement in the labour market.

Although it is in theory possible to change employers - the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment approved about 3,000 such "transfers" in 2002 - in practice it can be a difficult and time-consuming process as it requires the new employer to make an application for a new permit. There is no doubt that this restriction can, in some cases, lead to exploitation. This is a problem that needs to be addressed.

But proposals for new and better policies need to consider and evaluate, in a balanced manner, their consequences for all sides.

This must start from the recognition that the employment of foreign workers generates a complex array of economic and social benefits and costs for Ireland, for migrant workers and for their countries of origin. These consequences may sometimes conflict, and policy responses may therefore need to be characterised by tradeoffs.

For example, a permanent immigration programme could benefit Ireland and migrant workers themselves, but could harm sending countries by draining them of their highly skilled workers. Permanent emigrants may also have less incentive to send money home and thereby reduce the remittances received by sending countries.

Moreover, giving migrant workers the right to complete freedom of movement in the labour market may make them more competitive and thus less attractive to local employers, who may respond by eliminating some of the jobs that migrants are now filling.

In times of lower economic growth and rising levels of unemployment, granting migrant workers free choice of employment may also put pressure on the wages and employment conditions of Irish workers in sectors that do not face labour shortages.

These tradeoffs are not inherent to international labour migration in all cases but, where real, they need to be acknowledged and considered. And, more importantly, the consequences of the policy options need to be evaluated: ultimately, designing a labour immigration policy requires a decision on its objectives. This must be based on a balancing of the competing interests.

It also needs to take account of related objectives such as promoting anti-racism and complying with international human rights treaties.

This raises a number of difficult ethical questions. To what extent should Ireland's policies give preference to the interests of Irish citizens? Should the interests of migrant workers prevail over those of their countries of origin? Should Ireland's policies allow for employment arrangements which benefit migrant workers economically at the cost of restricting some of their rights?

These questions need to be addressed before making recommendations for changing the system. There are neither quick fixes nor "best practice" labour immigration programmes that Ireland could import wholesale.

The fact is that building a humane and effective labour immigration policy in a liberal democracy is feasible but inherently difficult as it necessarily involves acts of both inclusion and exclusion.

Op-ed published in The Irish Times on 24 December 2003

© The Irish Times

Policy decisions need to be made about how many migrant workers to admit, how to select them and what rights to grant them after admission. Few countries, even those with much longer immigration histories than Ireland, have managed those issues well.

Maybe the most important and useful policy lesson to be learnt from other countries' experiences with immigration is that the fastest way of generating an "immigration crisis" is to design and implement policies without fully considering and openly discussing their multifaceted and interrelated consequences for all sides.

An effective and sustainable labour immigration policy must derive from a rational public debate that is balanced and addresses all the hard questions. Ireland does not yet have such a debate; if its labour immigration policies are to change for the better, it is high time to start one.

*Martin Ruhs is an economist at Compas, a new migration research centre at Oxford University. He is author of a recent report on labour immigration in Ireland, published by TCD's Policy Institute. He can be reached at [martin.ruhs@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:martin.ruhs@compas.ox.ac.uk).*