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Public debate on economic migration to Ireland is now needed

If we are to have new migration policies, we need more accurate information about migration patterns and a clearer view of what our objectives are, writes **Martin Ruhs**.

As economic migration to Ireland continues at rapid speed, the Government has promised a comprehensive overhaul of its labour and other immigration policies. An Employment Permits Bill 2005 has already been published. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is also working on a policy paper that will lay out the administrative and institutional details of the new employment permit policies.

Ireland's proposed new labour migration policies require a comprehensive public debate. But this is, of course, easier said than done. The experience of other countries with much longer histories of hosting migrants than Ireland suggests that there are few public policy issues that generate more heated and muddled debates than immigration.

So, how can the idea of a "comprehensive" debate on labour migration be given substance and achieved in practice?

I would like to suggest four key ingredients for a successful public debate on labour migration in Ireland. They can be summarised under the headings of facts, impacts, objectives and policies

First, we need to know the facts about the volume, composition and process of migration to Ireland. The currently available data give us some of these facts. We know, for example, that about 34,000 non-EU nationals were employed on work permits in 2004. But there are also important gaps.

For example, we do not yet have any accurate and reliable figures about the number of accession-state nationals coming to work in Ireland since EU enlargement. More than 130,000 PPS numbers have been issued to workers from the new EU member states since May 2004. But it is not clear how many of these workers are newcomers rather than migrants who were already working in Ireland illegally before May 1st, 2004, and who used EU enlargement to regularise their status.

We know that about 21,000 students from outside the EU were registered in Ireland in 2004. But there is no information about how many of these students have taken up employment, legally or illegally. In many countries, such as Britain, students make a significant contribution to the labour market, especially in low-wage service jobs in hotels, restaurants, pubs and bars.

The lack of official information about the number of migrants coming to Ireland as dependants is another important gap in the current evidence base. In many countries - the US and Sweden are examples - dependants constitute the largest category of legal permanent immigrants.

The second critical ingredient in a successful debate on labour migration is information about its impacts on Ireland, migrants and their countries of origin. Studies carried out for other countries suggest that the impacts of labour migration include both benefits and costs for all sides involved. The various impacts are also interrelated and potentially conflicting. In other words, left on its own, migration is unlikely to automatically create a win-win outcome from which all sides benefit.

For example, the permanent migration of highly-skilled workers may benefit Ireland and migrants themselves, but it could harm the sending country through the potential permanent loss of human capital ("brain drain") and likely decline in remittances that permanent emigration is usually associated with.

Research on the impacts of labour migration to Ireland, and the relevant trade-offs, is just beginning to emerge. There now is a debate on multiculturalism but many other impacts of migration, including especially impacts on the labour market, remain under-explored. This is obviously a serious obstacle to developing an evidence-based policy on labour migration.

Facts and research about migration and its consequences are important but not enough. In the end, a decision needs to be made about which of the various impacts are most important in the design of Ireland's labour migration policy and why. As a third element of a comprehensive debate on labour migration, there needs to be an explicit discussion about policy objectives.

Whose interests should Ireland's labour migration policies serve? Should - as it appears to have been the case so far - the number of migrant workers admitted be simply determined by individual employers' demand? Or should considerations about any potential adverse effects on the labour market or potential cultural impacts - however perceived - be taken into account when deciding on the level and composition of labour immigration?

Of course, the answer is likely to be that what is required is a balancing of interests but, to go beyond the soundbite, this requires discussion about how exactly this balancing act should be carried out. And it is exactly this discussion about how to balance competing objectives that appears to be currently missing in Ireland. For example, whatever the costs or benefits of multiculturalism, how should they be balanced with the impacts of meeting, or not meeting, employers' demand for migrant labour?

Finally, any comprehensive debate on labour migration naturally requires discussion about policies. As always, soundbites are tempting. Over the past few years, there have been frequent calls to replace Ireland's work permit system with a points system or green cards for migrants. Few would dispute that Ireland's current work permit system needs

fixing, but simply calling for a green card or points system without explaining how exactly this should work is unlikely to do the trick.

There are no international best practices in managing labour immigration that Ireland could import wholesale. For example, in Canada - often cited as an example of a country with a successful points system for regulating immigration - immigrants' skills are severely underutilised. A recent study found that foreign-educated immigrants in Canada earned \$2.4 billion less than native-born Canadians with comparable skills, because they worked in occupations that were below their skill levels.

Of course, none of this is rocket science. But having explicit discussions and trying to improve our understanding about the facts, impacts, objectives and policies of migration will be an important step towards improving the current debate and achieving sustainable and effective policies.

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