

Changing status, changing lives? The socio-economic impact of EU enlargement on low wage migrant labour in the UK

Synopsis

Changing status, changing lives? was motivated by the accession of ten new countries to the European Union (EU) on 1st May 2004. These included the “A8 countries” - the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia - plus Cyprus and Malta. Among the member states of the pre-enlarged EU (EU15) only Sweden, Ireland and the UK granted A8 nationals free access to the labour market immediately upon EU enlargement. A8 workers could take up employment in the UK without restrictions (as long as they registered in the Worker Registration Scheme). A8 nationals who were already in the UK before EU enlargement experienced a “change of status” acquiring, overnight most of the economic and social rights of an EU national. These include the right to live and work without restrictions, to remain permanently in the UK, and to be joined by dependants.

Changing status, changing lives? explores the consequences of granting such rights to A8 nationals **who were already working in the UK before 1st May** with “legal” or “illegal” status. It investigates A8 migrants’ experiences of living and working in low-wage jobs in the UK and analyses how immigration status shapes these experiences in and outside the workplace. The project also discusses employer demand for and recruitment of migrant labour, and how this is affected by migrants’ immigration status.

Outputs and key findings

A series of research papers will be made available at the project website www.compas.ox.ac.uk/changingstatus. Recent papers include:

Fair enough? Central and East European migrants in low wage employment in the UK

- In April 2004, migrant interviewees worked for relatively low earnings and longer *basic* hours than the occupational average. Many had no paid holiday, sick leave, or written contract. Many had qualifications and skills significantly above those required by their job. None belonged to a trade union.
- Many migrants traded off low-skilled work and poor conditions for better pay than in their home countries or other benefits, such as learning English, often because they viewed the job as temporary. Consequently, they did not always perceive the lack of a written contract as disadvantageous.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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- Employers attributed difficulties recruiting UK workers to the physical demands, long/anti-social hours, or low pay and status of jobs, but were also concerned about retention. They valued migrants as high quality workers for low-waged work. Those entering on official immigration schemes were also considered easier to retain.
- Employers often preferred particular nationalities for particular jobs, regardless of immigration status. Employers emphasised “work ethic” and reliability, contrasting foreign nationals favourably with UK nationals.
- Three-quarters of employers felt EU enlargement had been good for business, bringing a larger labour pool. Of respondents, most ‘A8’ nationals felt enlargement had made it easier to find work. Nearly one third of non A8 nationals said working conditions had deteriorated.

Semi-compliance in the migrant labour market

- Discussions of “illegality” in the employment of migrant workers are typically based on a “legal/illegal” dichotomy that conflates breaches of rights of residence and rights of employment. To facilitate a more nuanced discussion, it is useful to distinguish between three levels of “compliance”.
- *Compliant* migrants are legally resident and working in full compliance with the conditions attached to their immigration status. *Non-compliant* migrants are those without the rights to reside in the host country. *Semi-compliance* indicates a situation where a migrant is legally resident but working in violation of some or all of the conditions attached to the migrant’s immigration status.
- Semi-compliance is a significant – but much neglected - feature of the UK’s migrant labour market. Among the 560 migrants interviewed before EU enlargement, more respondents could be classified semi-compliant than non-compliant. Over half of student visa holders and au pairs surveyed were legally resident but working more hours than permitted or in non-permitted employment. Many workers illegally resident or violating conditions paid national insurance.
- Many of the employers interviewed were prepared to tolerate or encourage semi-compliance in the employment of their migrant workers. Employers and migrants perceived of semi-compliance as “bending” rather than breaking the rules.

Methods

The ***Changing status, changing lives? Methods, participants and lessons learnt*** paper describes the research methods chosen and participants in the project. The research employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were gathered through:

- (i) surveys of and in-depth interviews with migrant workers and au-pairs before and 6-8 months after EU enlargement;
- (ii) in-depth interviews with employers, host families and recruitment agencies before and after EU enlargement;
- (iii) mail surveys of employers and host families after EU enlargement;
- (iv) diaries of migrants over a 6 month period after EU enlargement; and
- (v) interviews with key informants and stakeholders.

The study focused on the employment of migrants in agriculture, construction, hospitality and the au pair sector. Four accession nationalities were selected for study on the basis of their prominence in the UK’s legal schemes for employing migrants in low-wage occupations: Czech, Slovak, Lithuanian and Polish. As a comparison group of people whose immigrations status would not change with EU enlargement we selected Ukrainian and Bulgarian migrants. Most of the data collected were purposely selected rather than randomly chosen. This means that the samples are not representative. While the results of any analysis are thus not generalisable, they do serve as an indication of potential patterns and relationships.

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