

The experiences of Central and East European migrants in the UK

This research explores the experiences beyond the workplace of migrants from East and Central Europe working in four low-wage occupations in the UK. This is the second report from a study conducted before and after EU enlargement on 1 May 2004, which draws on a survey and interviews with over 600 migrants. It explores their access to information and to English classes, their accommodation, leisure time, social relationships and long-term intentions about staying in the UK. It found:

- Migrants' experiences at work, including low pay and long working hours, had a significant impact on their lives beyond the workplace, showing that labour market and social experiences cannot be understood or addressed in isolation.
- A lack of practical information on arrival left many migrants ignorant of the conditions attached to their immigration status, how to access health care, where to obtain advice and their rights at work.
- Some migrants experienced very poor housing conditions and overcrowding yet most migrants expressed satisfaction with their accommodation, relative to their expectations.
- English language proficiency was a key factor in whether migrants had received the information they needed, the extent of their social contact with British people and how they felt treated by them.
 - One-third had taken English classes
 - Those with poor English were the least likely to have done so.
 - Long working hours, accessibility and cost of classes were contributory factors to this.
- Migrants spent relatively limited time with British people. After two years, one in four migrants surveyed still spent no social time with them and instead worked and lived with a diverse mix of recent and settled migrants.
- Acquiring legal rights is a necessary but insufficient foundation for migrants' full economic and social participation.

Background

In May 2004, ten new states joined the European Union, which allowed their citizens to work in the UK and sparked an ongoing debate. The first report from this research, *Fair enough: Central and East European migrants in low-wage employment in the UK*, published in May 2006, looked at the implications for the labour market and the work experiences of these migrants. Less attention has been given to their experiences beyond the workplace and while migrants' integration has come under the spotlight in recent debates on 'social cohesion', there has been little evidence from Eastern European migrants. This study helps to fill that knowledge gap.

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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Most of the respondents in this research were young, single and had been in the UK since 2003. Two-thirds described their English as fluent or adequate, while the rest said it was basic or none. Most were in low-paid jobs with poor working conditions and long or anti-social working hours and many were over-skilled for their job. Some of those in the UK legally were working outside employment restrictions attached to their immigration status. Many were in jobs with few British colleagues. Those working in agriculture in rural areas lacked leisure facilities available in towns. The research aimed to understand the factors which influence their experiences and perceptions, including their immigration status, English proficiency, length of time in the UK, occupation and gender.

Lack of information on arrival

The researchers asked migrants if they had access to information and advice when they first arrived in the UK, who provided it and whether it was adequate. 54 per cent had received information on the conditions attached to their immigration status; that is, whether they were permitted to work and access public services. It could not be established if lack of information was connected to migrants working in breach of their immigration status. 47 per cent had received information on their rights at work. 33 per cent knew how to register with a GP and these migrants were twice as likely to have registered (54 per cent) as those who lacked this information on arrival (26 per cent). The vast majority who did not access health care said it was because they did not need to do so. Just 17 per cent knew where to get advice when they first arrived and some migrants said lack of information and advice created practical difficulties and left them vulnerable.

“It is important for everybody to know their rights and where to go for help if anything goes wrong. When I came here and saw my working conditions my English was so bad that I couldn’t ask my agency for help.” (Lithuanian woman, au pair, aged 27)

The lack of systematic provision of information was apparent. Friends and family were a frequent source, as well as agencies, employers, unions and occasionally government. Those with good English reading skills were more likely to be informed. The vast majority of those who received information said it was adequate, suggesting this may not be a difficult area in which to meet migrants’ basic needs.

Accommodation

Accommodation can impact on health, access to work and social interaction. The researchers explored the standard of accommodation, satisfaction with living conditions and reasons for moving. It was a condition for participation in the study that all migrants were working. None were homeless and most agricultural workers and au pairs were given accommodation by employers. 44 per cent were sharing a room with at least one person other than a partner. Interviews revealed overcrowding through ‘choice’ to reduce rents but the extent or implications of this was not established. Two-thirds considered their living conditions to be good, and a further 26 per cent said it was at least adequate. Only 6 per cent said their conditions were poor but evidence suggested that, in part, satisfaction reflected expectations.

“It is a room with six beds. We have TV, fridge, radio. I think I have very good accommodation. I pay £30 per week..” (Czech man, farm worker, aged 22)

Workers on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) were more satisfied with their accommodation than other farm workers, suggesting some success in the regulation of accommodation provided to SAWS workers. A minority of au pairs had poor accommodation. Living in a family home, many reported a lack of privacy and autonomy.

*“I feel like a child here ... I came here being 26 years old and somebody starting regulating my life..”
(Lithuanian woman, au pair, aged 26)*

Many migrants moved frequently in the early months. In the eight months after EU enlargement, 39 per cent moved once and a further 18 per cent twice or more. 38 per cent had done so to improve their housing while 30 per cent related it to a job. A8 nationals were more likely to have moved and more likely to be satisfied with accommodation than non-A8 nationals.

English classes

Migrants' experiences at work, including low pay and long working hours, had a significant impact on how much leisure time they had and how they spent it. 38 per cent had taken or were taking English classes. Au pairs were most likely to take classes, while those working more than 40 hours per week were less likely and those in construction and agriculture were the least likely to do so. Migrants whose English was fluent or adequate were more likely to have taken classes (but their language skills may reflect the fact that they had been taught). Only 25 per cent of those who described their English as basic had taken classes. Two-thirds of those who did not study English said it was because they did not need or want to do so, while 9 per cent cited the cost of classes. Lower tuition fees were cited as one benefit of becoming an EU citizen.

Leisure activity

One in three migrants had used a library. Half had gone to a concert, museum or gallery, just over a third had used sports facilities and more than four fifths had been to pubs or clubs. The proportion of farm workers using leisure facilities was lower than in other sectors, although some employers facilitated leisure trips. Au pairs spent little leisure time with their host family. Patterns of service use did not change significantly over time until migrants had been in the UK for more than four years

Social relationships

The vast majority of the migrants spent most of their time with recent or settled migrants from their own country and with migrants from other countries. During the first six months in Britain, half spent no leisure time with British people, falling to a third after six months. After two years, one in four still spent no social time with British people, less than one in five spending most of their time with them. Those with fluent English were more likely to spend some leisure time with British people. Lack of English may be a cause and a result of this lack of contact. For many migrants, work and accommodation nevertheless provided opportunities to socialise with people from a wide range of countries.

The limited contact with British people was not from choice. Migrants either did not meet British people or thought that those they did meet were not keen to be friends.

They “do not let you into their circles”. (Ukrainian woman, waitress, aged 25)

One in three migrants thought British people were not interested in social relationships but 25 per cent disagreed, suggesting no uniform experience. After three years in the UK, less than half were confident that British people were interested in friendship. Women were more likely to think they were interested, as were those with good English. 39 per cent of migrants believed that British people treated them as an equal but 30 per cent disagreed. Those who had been

resident for over three years were more likely to think so, as were A8 nationals and those with fluent English. Gender was not a factor.

“Even if they don’t know where Slovakia is they know it’s in the EU so they take it more seriously. They have more respect for us because we are in the EU now.” (Slovak man, hospitality worker, aged 23)

“Nothing has changed since we joined the EU. It gave us only the right to work otherwise we are not treated equally with other EU members.” (Polish woman, hospitality worker, aged 31)

“I have never experienced discrimination. But sometimes people ask me whether we have electricity in Lithuania.” (Woman, former au pair now working in a hotel, aged 28)

Some expressed negative attitudes towards other migrants. There were differing grounds (or justification) for hostility including historical or class tensions relating to migrants from their own country and a perception of unfair competition for jobs in the UK. Some migrants had been unaware that Britain is a multicultural country and had negative attitudes towards minority ethnic people. It is not certain how widespread these views were relative to those of British people. Some formed more positive attitudes through experience in the UK.

“I had not thought that this place was so multicultural. I did not know that there were black people. For me it was a disaster as I had seen them only 2-3 times in my life. I was also warned I should not use this word ‘negro’ but just to say ‘black’.” (Ukrainian woman, hospitality worker, aged 25)

Long term plans

When the migrants arrived most had been given only temporary leave to stay. Those from A8 countries may have anticipated acquiring the right to stay when their country joined the EU. The researchers explored migrants’ intentions regarding length of stay and how these changed over time. The results are influenced by the fact that some respondents left the UK during the study, biasing the sample towards those who prolonged their stay.

There is often a difference between how long migrants anticipate they will stay and the actual duration. Legal status, location of dependents, income, gender, strength of trans-national connections, having friends in the UK, and the way migrants feel treated can be contributory factors. Just under a quarter of those interviewed in April 2004, including non-A8 workers, said they intended to stay permanently. When they had entered the UK, only 6 per cent had had this intention. By six to eight months after enlargement, 29 per cent intended to stay. Those intending to stay had fewer dependents outside the UK, less regular contact with their home countries and sent less money home. Women were more likely to have decided to stay than men, as were those with higher average earnings. Of those planning to leave, some intended to return at a later date. When interviewed in April 2004, those migrants who had planned a temporary stay remained on average 14 months longer than they had intended. Interviewed six to eight months after EU enlargement, many of those A8 and non-A8 nationals still in the UK planned to stay a further two years.

18 per cent of A8 nationals felt a stronger attachment to the UK after enlargement and 25 per cent a stronger attachment to the EU. The impact of becoming an EU citizen was most significant for those whose status had been illegal before enlargement.

“I feel much better now. Before, when we saw the police it made us anxious whereas now we feel confident. Having legal status made all the difference.” (Lithuanian woman, hotel cleaner, aged 39).

Conclusion

These findings make a strong case for reviewing national policy towards new migrants in the UK, taking into account the challenges they face, particularly in the immediate period after arrival, and the experiences of the organisations and the public with whom they interact. Addressing the situation of those who anticipate a temporary stay as well as those intending to settle, the review need not mean a strong delivery role for central government but the coordination of local organisations. It should in particular consider:

- the most cost effective means of ensuring that all new migrants have access to the practical information they need;
- the accommodation of migrants in the context of wider strategies on affordable housing;
- the barriers migrants can experience in accessing English classes; and
- the relationship between migrants and other members of the public.

About the project

The study was undertaken by Sarah Spencer, Martin Ruhs and Bridget Anderson at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, and Ben Rogaly at the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex.

The researchers set out to investigate the experiences of migrants from four accession states (Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and Lithuanians from so-called 'A8' states) and two, then, non-accession states (Ukrainians and Bulgarians) working in agriculture, construction, hospitality and as au pairs. The full study included a survey and in-depth interviews with over 600 migrants (some without permission to work in the UK), diaries kept by migrants, interviews with employers and au pair host families, and interviews with policy-makers and service providers. Most interviews were carried out in two waves, in April 2004 (just before EU enlargement) and six to eight months later.

For more information

All papers arising from this research project, including a paper detailing the research methodology, can be downloaded at www.compas.ox.ac.uk/changingstatus.

The full report, *Migrants' lives beyond the workplace: the experiences of Central and East Europeans in the UK*, by Sarah Spencer, Martin Ruhs, Bridget Anderson and Ben Rogaly, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.