

COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary



What are the impacts of restrictions on participation in the labour market and civic life on young migrants?

This briefing presents newly completed research from the UK case study of the EUMARGINS project which explores the inclusion and exclusion of young adult immigrants in seven European countries.

The briefing focuses on the consequences that the restrictions and regulations imposed on young migrants have on their daily lives and sense of the future. A picture of young migrant London is drawn from thirty detailed biographical case studies collected between 2009-11 where young migrants have been the active observers of their own lives through use of photography, creative writing, and keeping scrapbooks. This inventive methodology has produced a detailed and intimate account of young migrant experience in London.

Mobile Lives and Tighter Regulation

Humankind is more mobile now than at any other point in human history. London's economic, social and cultural connections span the globe. The contemporary vitality of London's life confounds the rhetoric of protectionism at the heart of government policy and hollow promises to reduce net immigration to tens of thousands per year. The debate about migration is dogged by policy promises that are unrealistic and impossible to deliver. We argue that the tighter regulation of migration is not working. The findings of this research indicate the urgent need for a more attainable, pragmatic and humane turn in immigration policy. Such a policy would deregulate the migrant experience and harness migrants' desires to contribute and build communities of diversity.

Our research found that young migrants experience the immigration service as an inefficient bureaucracy that loses documentation and simply does not work. The result is that their lives become fragmented and disorganised by a system that acts against rather than enables them.



Katrin was born in Bolivia. She came to the UK in 2006, originally on a tourist visa but then applied successfully for a student visa. Katrin recounted that visas were easier to obtain when she first arrived, but, year on year, have steadily become more difficult to secure. Most of her classmates have had application problems and some have been refused. The application process has also become more demanding – “we have to write our life” she says. The form took days to fill in and now asks for many more details. It requires rigorous checking to avoid errors. She describes having to fill in a 41 page application form to get a biometric ID card which was required as a condition of her application for a student visa extension.

The Social Production of Suffering

Dorothy is from Ghana. When we first met her in March of 2010 she was 19. She came to the UK when she was 16 on a tourist visa. Dorothy stayed with extended family in London. Realising her visa was coming to an end and that there was no way for her and her British-born son to go to Ghana she engaged a solicitor to fight to stay in the country. Dorothy, prohibited from working legally, sought employment in the informal economy. She was arrested when the police were called to the shop that Dorothy was applying for a job in because the shop workers were



suspicious of her application. She was using false national insurance card and false passport. Her legal status means that she is, according to the home office letter, 'liable to be detained' any time in preparation for deportation to Ghana, a country her child has never been to. Dorothy's long-term ambition is to be a midwife; she has been a birth partner to a friend in London. She commented on 'how amazing it is to deliver someone's baby'. Dorothy is prohibited from working by the terms of her immigration status. She is imprisoned in an overwhelming sense of the present, full of anxiety, uncertainty and frustration, unable to move forward with her life.

We found that tighter restrictions on employment result in institutional marginalisation and uncertainty. The young migrants in the study demonstrated a strong commitment to making a contribution to the life of the city, to work and to be involved in their neighbourhoods and communities. Although London has offered them very little, many are exemplars of the government's vision of the 'Big Society'. Ali's story is just one of many we collected of young migrants' civic involvement that go unnoticed in the public debate.

Ali lives in East London. It took him two years to travel from Afghanistan to London but only twenty minutes for the UK Border Agency to turn down his claim for asylum. In the six years it has taken for his case to be processed he has become involved in his local community. Ali has had the right to work for nearly a year, although he is still seeking asylum. Before he had the right to work he spent time helping elderly neighbours with their gardens on a voluntary basis and he approached the local council with a proposal to rebuild and refurbish unused council property. Recently he encountered a bed that had been discarded by one of his neighbours in the back garden of the block they shared. He dismantled it, re-used the wood and made a bench for the street that his elderly neighbours could sit on.



Photo by EUMARGINS participant

Social philosopher Michel Foucault wrote that "the suffering of men must never be the silent residue of policy".¹ The evidence from this study suggests that suffering is the hidden residue of current immigration policy. The mismanagement of human mobility produces an profound level of suffering.

¹ Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984: Power London: Penguin Books p. 474-5.

The evidence suggests that there is both a moral and welfare case for less regulation that would decriminalise young migrants and facilitate greater social inclusion and less suffering, and a pragmatic case for fixing a broken system.

A Pragmatic Approach: Recommendations

We suggest that there a series of quite modest recommendations that would reduce social suffering amongst young migrants and offer a more pragmatic approach to challenges faced by London a centre of global migration.

On work, we suggest:

- Declaring a London-wide amnesty allowing those who are defined as overstayers, or who are otherwise undocumented, the right to work.
- Allowing all those with temporary leave to remain the right to work and the opportunity of supporting themselves.
- Automatically granting National Insurance Numbers to young migrants over 16 whose cases are currently being processed by The Home Office.

On immigration processes, we suggest:

- Offering young migrants wider access to legal advice and providing greater public investment in welfare organizations dedicated to supporting them.
- Addressing the inadequacies and failures within the immigration bureaucracy particularly in relation to the loss of documents, inaccuracies and delays in progressing cases.
- A working group should be set up into streamlining the documents needed to support immigration claims for students and asylum seekers.
- Formal acknowledgement should be made to Solicitors and Applicants of documents submitted in support of immigration claims.
- The provision within the UK Border Agency of dedicated and responsive consultants and a more open tracking system to allow young migrants to be updated on the current state of their cases.

On education, we suggest:

- Asylum seekers should be charged home fees rather than international student fees, with full and equal access to student loans.
- Greater flexibility in the amount of hours overseas students are allowed to conduct paid work.

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Thumbnails - First page: Sabrina Karim, COMPAS Photo Competition 2008, Second page: Kelly O'Brien, COMPAS Photo Competition 2010
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