



Recruitment and employment regimes: Migrant labour channels in the UK's rural agribusiness sector, from accession to recession

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Migrant labour has been particularly significant in the British rural agribusiness sector, where employers often struggle to source labour regardless of economic conditions. While most research on East-Central European migration has focused on the experiences of members of the migrant community, this paper is one of a small number of studies that has gathered evidence from employers and labour recruiters. The paper draws on in-depth interviews undertaken in four case study areas. The analysis focuses on the practices of employers and recruiters that have shaped how migrant labour is sourced and used in the UK labour market, and how labour migration channels have evolved since 2004. The two main conceptual contributions of this paper are a new typology of recruitment/employment practices and a schema illustrating the changing spatial impacts of migration channels in areas of destination.

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1. Introduction

Recruitment and employment of labour migrants involves a range of knowledge practices which produce observable selectivity in who is recruited, from where, and for what purposes (Findlay et al., 2010; Kanbur and Rapoport, 2005). This paper researches these knowledge practices as revealed by interviews with UK employers and recruitment agencies. The purpose of the paper is for deeper understanding of these practices through building a typology that illustrates the diversity of recruitment, employment and management of migrant workers and that shows how the mechanisms that 'produce' migration also account for many aspects of the selective patterning of East European migration to the UK. A final objective of the paper is to examine how recruitment and employment practices have changed over time in an attempt to build a new schema to represent how migration channels impact in areas of destination.

Our starting point is the recognition that demand for migrant workers has become a notable feature of labour markets in high income countries, with employer's typically citing 'labour and skills needs' that cannot be met from within the domestic labour force as their reason for engaging with migrant labour (Anderson and Ruhs, 2010). In contrast to the neo-classical literature which interprets labour migration as an equilibrating mechanism resolving uneven

patterns of labour demand and supply (Chiswick, 2008), it can be argued that labour 'shortages are socially, economically, culturally and politically constructed and that they need not exist' (Geddes and Scott, 2010, 211). Alternatives to the widespread use of migrant labour can be found such as employers offering higher wages to attract more local labour into work or the substitution of capital for labour. If it is accepted that the need for labour migrants is socially constructed (Geddes and Scott, 2010), then it becomes important to research the knowledge practices that underpin employers' claims relating to their desire to recruit and employ migrant labour and to explore the social practices by which employers recruit and engage labour in production and service activities.

Ruhs and Anderson (2010) in their research on East European migrants in the UK have led the way in mapping some aspects of the cultural packaging of the 'labour and skills needs' that employers argue cannot be met from within the domestic labour force. According to Ruhs and Anderson (2010) employers see migrants as more tolerant of undesirable employment conditions than domestic labour as well as holding a superior work ethic in terms of putting significant effort into their job and monitoring their own performance without the need for continual employer surveillance. Migrants were also found to have better 'soft skills' in terms of customer care, team working and problem solving. Other research exists to support this discourse (Fife Partnership, 2007; Rolfe and Metcalf, 2009; Green, 2007) but most research on East European workers in Britain looks to other issues such as their transnational identity and issues around integration to UK society (Trevena, 2009; Cook et al., 2010; Metykova, 2010). This wider

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literature is not reviewed here as this has been adequately covered elsewhere (Burrell, 2009; Sumption and Somerville, 2010). Instead we focus directly on research relating to employers' images of migrants and the practices they use to engage with them. This points to the existence of some normative images of what constitutes the 'ideal' migrant worker and to a discourse around why Eastern European workers are required/desired. Researchers taking a cultural economy approach go further, suggesting that in some senses migrant workers are themselves produced by discourse (Li et al., 1998). This takes place not only because employers seek to recruit workers that fit with their idealised image but also because some labour migrants self-regulate their actions to conform to perceived social norms (Mansfield, 2000). From this cultural economy perspective (Amin and Thrift, 2004), migrant workers are not only selected by employers to do certain types of work because of idealised images of their social and skill characteristics, but migrants may self-regulate their own behaviour to conform to these characteristics.

This paper engages with these concepts by exploring in more detail the literature on migration channels and the structuring of immigration with particular reference to agribusiness in rural Britain. Primary interview material derived from a survey of UK employers and recruitment agencies is then used as an evidence base to build a typology of migrant recruitment and employment practices. Insights from this typology are used in the latter part of the paper to deepen understanding of how selective practices have evolved in relation to the recent economic crisis to produce other different channelling mechanisms from those established in 2004 at the time of EU expansion.

2. Migration channels and the production of labour migration to rural Britain

This paper focuses on East-Central European labour migration to the UK rural agribusiness sector. At the time of accession of the A8 states (Poland, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Estonia) to the European Union in May 2004, the UK was one of only three countries (along with Ireland and Sweden) to permit citizens from these countries unrestricted access to its labour market. Well over a million labour migrants entered the UK between 2004 and 2011, with many working in agriculture (McCollum, *in press*). The UK has been by far the most common destination of A8 migrants, followed by Germany and Ireland (Fihel et al., 2007).

A particular area of interest is that of the labour migration channels (Findlay and Li, 1998) that influence the nature of labour flows between Eastern Europe and the rural UK agribusiness labour market. Most international migrants depend on some form of intermediary to help them migrate to and find employment in another country. These intermediaries can take a number of forms and include recruitment agencies selecting those they consider to be appropriate candidates and matching them to suitable vacancies in host countries. They can also be informal social networks, whereby friends and family share information and advice about job opportunities abroad. In addition employers can act as intermediaries in the migration system through practices such as bringing in workers from overseas through intracompany transfers or doing overseas recruitment visits (Kuptsch and Pang, 2006). These intermediaries, by channelling information and resources, have an influence in moulding the process of international migration (Salt, 2001). This understanding provides the basis for a 'migration channels' framework (Findlay and Garrick, 1990), which contends that these intermediaries or channels not only reflect the existence of a migration system but that they are also partially responsible for the structuring of the system (Findlay and Li, 1998). Critically, these

channels operate selectively in the moulding of international migration flows by filtering who does and does not have access to the migration system as well as shaping the nature of the migrant experience for those involved in it. This analysis explores these concepts through the analytical lens of Eastern European migration to rural UK agribusiness labour markets.

Recruitment practices are located at the nexus between employer images of the ideal worker and the self-regulating action of migrants seeking to present themselves as best placed to take up the employment positions open to them. Geographical research on the topic not only investigates the practices that take place when employers or recruiters meet potential future employees, but also the practices that move workers over space from regions of origin to places of work. In this arena there is an established literature on recruitment agencies and international migration channels (Goss and Lindquist, 1995) which shows that channels of movement are not simply structured by the interests of international capital, but that there is a duality of structure (Gregory, 1989) involving the shaping of migration channels partly in response to the collective social actions of human agents (those seeking to move and those wishing to prosper from promoting the business of international mobility). From a cultural economy perspective it can be anticipated that migration channels (and the role of recruitment agencies in relation to these channels) may change as the socially constructed needs for migrant labour alter and as the social practices associated with employing migrant labour evolve. Goss and Lindquist (1995) therefore argue that the practices of labour migration become institutionalised and that migration channels can be thought of as social institutions. The nature of labour migration can thus be expected to be continually produced and reproduced by the social interactions of migrants, employers and recruitment agencies. In terms of the suggestion by Scott (2012) that East European migrants are represented in relation to idealised images of the 'good worker', it can therefore be anticipated that over time (for example during an economic recession) not only may the image of the good worker change, but also does the way in which migrants and employers are brought together (through social institutions of migration channels and recruitment agencies evolving and adapting). This will produce changing geographies of labour mobility expressed not only in terms of the patterning of migrant origins and destinations, but also in terms of the character of migration flows and employment practices associated with labour migration (Rogaly, 2008).

These general structuring forces take on a set of specific forms when analysed in the context of the rural agricultural economy. The channelling of labour migration to the rural food production and processing sectors is particularly interesting because they emerge as part of the wider economy where a distinctive geography of lower population densities and limited local labour sources (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011) combine with identifiable employment practices (such as the circulation of labour gangs engaged in labour intensive production systems). The result often seems to be that employers and industry representatives raise the issue of labour shortages and claim that the use of migrant labour is an effective and efficient response (Local Government Association, 2009). This concentration of migrant labour can in part be attributed to a shrinking of the rural working-class, a less paternalistic and more narrowly business-focused attitude on the part of farm employers, the growth of job opportunities in more attractive sectors such as services and a decline in the local social status of farm work (Scott et al., 2008). For these reasons it is estimated that migrants constitute up to a third of food manufacturing workers and a quarter of farm workers in rural England (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011).

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