

## Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 51 – Introducing the “Labour Mobility In Transition” project  
Speakers: Dr Gabriella Alberti and Dr Jo Cutter

[00:00:00] **Gabriella:** Hello everyone. Welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast. My name is Gabriella Alberti. I'm Associate professor in work and employment relations at the Business School.

[00:00:17] **Jo:** Hi, and I'm Jo Cutter and I'm a lecturer in work and employment relations at the Business School.

[00:00:22] **Gabriella:** This is episode one of our LIMITS project - Labour mobility and transition – a multi-actor study of the re-regulation of migrant work in 'low-skilled' sectors. We are going to introduce our new ESRC project, which is a three-year-long project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, where we are going to look at the responses to the effects of Brexit and COVID-19 on so-called 'low-skill' sectors of the UK economy.

Many sectors have historically relied on migrant labour, such as hospitality, social care, food manufacturing, and warehousing. Jobs in the same sectors have been critically impacted by the pandemic and considered as essential, or in the public discourse, kind of high-value during the health crisis.

So we're going to tell us a bit about our project and also our team. This project is led by a group of academics from the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change at the University of Leeds Business School. I, myself, am a specialist in labour migration and employment relations. And my colleague, Jo Cutter, has done long-time research on training and industrial relations, but we have also colleagues in the business school who have specialized in labour supply chains, work organization, migration flows, transnational mobility, and also a colleague from the Institute for Transport Study who has specialized in sustainable food system and transport who will give a contribution, especially on the warehousing and food manufacturing sector.

So as you can see is a very large and diverse interdisciplinary team, and we really hope to contribute to the development of the field of study of employment relations by bringing in these different points of view.

[00:02:41] **Jo:** That's great Gabriella. I think it would be really helpful in this first episode in the series of podcasts if you could just give us an overview of the main aims of the research, what it's about, and then I'll come in and talk a little bit more about what we're planning to do over the next three years.

[00:02:55] **Gabriella:** Thank you Jo. Yes. We were really interested in understanding how different sectors in employment relations are responding to this unprecedented change in the regulation of labour mobility in the UK. Since the... and the free movement of labour, the sectors that have historically relied on the influence of migrant workers, especially from the European Union have, experienced the major developments and change. And we are really looking into understanding how people respond on the ground. We are not looking only at employers, we are also looking at people working in organizations like HR managers, training specialists, but also workers. So our ambition is to bring together the voices of all these different actors and understanding how they respond to the

changes in the regulatory system, by, for example, developing new strategies in the field of recruitment and retention, but also development, skills policy, and interact with government institutions that are at the core of that kind of new migration policy.

So really what is happening in terms of responses on the ground to respond to this critical policies transition, away from the free movement of labour and towards the so-called points-based immigration system and whether new forms of dialogue and coordinations are emerging actually, between what we call old and new actors in employment relations. We will tell you more about this, these concepts and how we implement this in the real world.

We know little about, for example, how employers are adapting, the human resource strategies in the labour market including, recruitment, training, whether they are looking to employ new groups of migrant workers, given that there has been quite a big exit from the UK by migrants themselves since the referendum. The impact of visa rules changed and the extent to which that actually also thinking about redesigning work systems, developing new skills that I've seen engaging more, technological developments, including automation.

Little is known how employers, workers, unions, and other stakeholders in these sectors in particular, actually are interested in creating new forms of dialogue in light of the new changing migration environment. I mean, the UK has been historically, not really a country where you can find structured forms of dialogue, in the field of migration regulation for work.

The debate has been often focused on asylum seekers, refugees, at least in the, you know, main media. But when it comes to the regulation of migration for work, the consultation from the government has been relatively limited. And we are interested in developing through our research new forms of coordination, dialogue between different actors. And if you think about the subsequent shortage crisis that we are witnessing, especially since autumn 2021, these questions around, you know, substituting the workforce, attracting new workers, young workers into the sectors, has become even more relevant.

So questions around training development, but also automation, have become even more important in our research field. We are interested of course, in the question of job quality, because these sectors like warehousing, hospitality, social care, food manufacturing, that have been historically relying on migrant workers have also been known for relatively poor working conditions. So we're interested through our research to expand a dialogue on quality of work, how to bring workers, voices into the debate, how to engage with unions and the extent to which actually the current shortage crisis can be considered and opportunity for improving their conditions and the relative attractiveness of these sectors to new groups of workers.

[00:07:36] **Jo:** Yeah, today's a really interesting day. There's the announcement of the new visa, particular, there are different now visa routes for different workers. So today there's the announcement of the visa routes for graduates from the so-called top 50 universities across the world. So it will be interesting.

There are, there have been a number of tweaks or there are a number of different strands of the new visa system and over our three-year project it will be interesting to see how employers are trying to make sense of these kinds of new options, because at one level from just thinking quite simplistically about these four sectors, it may be that graduate recruitment won't solve their current shortages that they're looking for, for workers and skills that are currently not eligible to come into

the UK through the points-based system. But this is what hopefully the project will, as you say, try to uncover, is the responses of employers on the ground to these changing conditions.

[00:08:35] **Gabriella:** Exactly Jo - major ongoing developments that you have to kind of, really follow and, and constantly including our research. But can you tell us a bit more about the different phases of our research? I mean, this is a three-year project, just if you go through the main research packages and maybe how these are related to our impact objectives.

[00:09:01] **Jo:** Yeah, absolutely. So we very much started off with a view that given the focus on sectors, that it would be important to work in partnership with organizations, unions, employer bodies, local authorities who are sort of supporting migrant workers into employment to think about how we develop and design a project that has value. So we actually did some sort of, pre-work actually, talking to organizations in those sectors and have a really kind of multi interest, if you like, advisory board who is sort of helping us shape this project, as it goes along.

But broadly we have a three-year project which has, there's sort of different scales. So we're focusing on - we have a national survey, which we'll talk about in a minute, but we're also having a kind of a deep dive into a particular region. And we'll have some case studies within particular organizations to try and look at responses, both of what kind of HR strategies, how both employers and workers themselves are responding to this really dynamic situation of the changing labour market but then bring that back up to how to regional level and indeed at a national level, how policy is sort of shaping or facilitating, kind of access to work and employment.

In terms of the first part of the package will involve a survey of 1600 employers, across our four sectors. So that will be national in scope, trying to, you know, it will reflect this kind of different regional makeup, but essentially we'll be undertaking a national study that will ask employers to tell us about how were they changing recruitment strategies since the advent of Brexit and of course, since COVID, when we've had broader trends that are sort of highlighted perhaps in the press around the so-called great resignation, certainly, you know, national statistics telling us of the shortages in labour. I mean, in the sense, at a very crude level, we now have more vacancies than we have people who are looking for work. So what kind of measures are the, particularly the sectors that have been reliant previously on EU labour, to expand and diversify their labour supply, what training and skills policies are they undertaking and so on?

Maybe it's substitution, maybe it's to digitalize more their operations or bring in more automation. And of course those will have skills implications as well. So we're just thinking about these kinds of on the ground responses. And this question of dialogue, you know, to what, to extent are employers, themselves being involved in consultations about developments with policymakers and other actors or the partners in the system.

So that will be the employer focus. And the second phase, package two, we'll look at the more qualitative nature of our kind of case studies of 3 per sector, looking at a range of actors at a workplace level. So employers, workers, maybe, sort of recruitment, support training specialists, and so on.

And then in our third element, we would look to bring, together sector actors at a national level, again, to look at the findings of our research and the policy implications. Clearly we're particularly interested in initiatives on the ground, initiatives that we're starting to see right now. How employers and support organizations are responding, and to share good practice.

A really interesting example we were looking at last week with the food and drink sector was a passport to support young people into the sector and to move across different and be aware of the different, opportunities and types of jobs and the qualifications that they need to move around the sector.

We've mentioned sort of working with our partners. So we're very much, we're very keen to, foster dialogue, both between the academic fields that Gabriella highlighted earlier on, but the voices of these different stakeholders. So the kind of the third element, we're very much look to kind of bring together those different parties together to think about and share practice across this sort of multi scalar, dimensions that we've mentioned.

Given that changing context of skill shortages, and so on, Gabriela, do you want to say a little bit more about the challenges as the project leader, thinking about, this sort of fast-moving area?

[00:13:16] **Gabriella:** Absolutely Jo. It's certainly very exciting to be operating in such a changing context where every, every other week there seems to be a new international shock. So really our research project started with this focus on the effects of Brexit in terms of the end of the free movement on the sectors relying on migrant labour, but then interestingly, the same sectors that we selected, for our, you know, workplace case studies on the basis that they were going to be excluded from the points-based system for immigration because they were characterized as being low skilled, which is in itself a relatively contested concept, were the same sectors that were being massively impacted by COVID.

We couldn't, but include the COVID pandemic as another parallel, external labour market, you know, like phenomenon with labour market implication, alongside Brexit. And interestingly, while COVID of course had major implications for the world of work, mobility, society at large, it actually played a role in making more visible, the so-called low skill jobs and highlighting the value of the workers who were keeping, you know, supporting everyday life, the provision of goods and services from health services, using the social care and the national health system, but also food, food production, manufacturing was our case, but also more broadly, of course, in agriculture and interestingly warehousing, that has been a very hidden sector for many years. Now finally, workers in these sectors have more visibility in terms of like the discourse about being key workers.

So we definitely had a good guess at selecting the sectors for the research design, but then also, discuss the implications that later on the COVID and that in the labour market and we envisaged that for example, some sectors would be more impacted than others by the health crisis.

So it was difficult to predict exactly what the shortages would have been. We thought that hospitality could have been relatively different than others because workers experienced massive levels of unemployment there. You know, many were furloughed by the state. Others just lost their jobs because the sector just closed down during the pandemic.

So that was something that made us think, well, maybe there is going to be a much higher level of supply rather than demand for workers when the economy reopened. But that wasn't the case. Actually, even beyond the UK, we saw unprecedented vacancies, including in hospitality. So there are a series of unpredictable factors that us sociologists of work and employment relations and we have some anthropologists in our team. We really need to go to the bottom of these issues, like why some workers decided not to go back to their jobs. Was it about quality of work? Was it about work-

life balance? Is it about long working hours or perhaps, like, the impact of long COVID and having to care for relatives in the house or in the home?

Changing life priorities - there has been a debate in the US about the great resignation for the COVID brought a complete reassessment of people's life priorities. But we are cautious in, you know, depicting a workforce that is free to decide whether to resign that themselves completely as individual subject in the labour market, post-pandemic. Some workers, some particular categories of migrants might have different abilities and face different constraints while they make these choices around changing jobs, changing careers.

So this, this question of labour mobility transitions, which initially was a focus only on the impact of migration regulation on workers and migrant workers' strategies in the labour market became also interesting as to whether workers are actually moving between sectors of the economy in the UK, and we are already seeing interesting results in this, with workers, for example, deciding to move from the health sector to jobs in hospitality or warehousing because of that pressure that they received during the COVID pandemic in health.

So these are part of our, you know, changing field and kind of ability to stay tune with, with the changing context. Of course, the latest sad, very sad developments with the war in Ukraine is meaning also that there are going to be more challenges for employers dealing with increasing costs in terms of, you know, basic supplies of material and food, but then also increasingly fragile supply chains internationally, whereby planning workforce needs become more challenging.

There is also, of course, a new wave of refugees from the Ukraine, which will also have major impacts on the labour market. And we wouldn't be unable to, you know, ignore this very relevant, significant phenomenon.

So just to move to the conclusion then, Jo, would you tell us, the audience about our plans for the next episodes as part of the series for the LIMITS project?

[00:19:35] **Jo:** Yeah, absolutely. We look forward to bringing both updates in terms of the specific research that we're doing, but also the conversations that we're developing with the kind of sector and the partners, to be thinking about the overall aims of the kind of impact side of our work is to help inform those both working within organizations and supporting organizations and workers, in terms of good practice, in terms of trying to address these kind of complex and fast moving challenges, whether it's supporting new groups of workers into work, how to upscale in the face of either automation or these new supply chain challenges.

So in terms of our next episodes that we've got lined up so far, we're going to be talking with some of the third sector organizations who were supporting migrants at the regional level and particularly those that are supporting those into work and particularly those where they're migrants or refugees and the experiences that they've had of supporting people into local labour markets that facing kind of different challenges.

As well as thinking about those who are supporting employability, we're also developing conversations with our specific sectors and we have an interview planned with the head of the UK warehousing association. Again, a really interesting, sector that's, you know, facing expansion, rapid change in the move to online retail, facing automation, as a really fast-paced sector.

We'll certainly look forward to speaking to both the project team and our partners in future episodes and perhaps, Gabriella, if you just want to say about how people can stay in touch?

[00:21:14] **Gabriella:** Definitely Jo, yes. So we have a social media presence. So please feel free to get in touch with us via our Twitter account, or our email address. All of these details will appear in the show notes for this podcast. If you're a member of the public or a member of any organization and would like to get involved, please do not hesitate to contact us.

We look forward to the next episode and we thank you very much for your interest and attention. Thank you.

[00:21:52] **Jo:** Thanks everybody. Bye.