

Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 53 - How recent changes to the immigration system have affected the Yorkshire and the Humber workforce.

Speakers: Dr Marketa Dolezalova and Ewa Jamroz

[00:00:00] **Marketa:** Hi, welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. My name is Marketa Dolezalova and I'm a research fellow in labour migration at Leeds University Business School. I'm delighted to be joined today by Ewa Jamroz who's a policy data and development officer at Migration Yorkshire. Welcome Ewa.

[00:00:24] **Ewa:** Thank you. And hi and thanks for having me.

[00:00:27] **Marketa:** So the project that I'm working on is called labour mobility and transition: multi-actor study of the regulation of migrant work in low-skilled sectors. And we are looking at employer human resource strategies in post-Brexit labour market that has been also impacted by COVID.

And we are looking at how employers are adapting their human resource strategies and how workers are responding to the visa changes and migration changes. So Ewa, can you tell me a bit about the work of Migration Yorkshire and what Migration Yorkshire does in the region?

[00:00:58] **Ewa:** Yeah, so Migration Yorkshire is a Local Authority-led partnership which works across all of the Yorkshire and Humber region.

So we work with partners from all different sectors including local authorities, the Home Office, the other government departments, such as Department for Levelling Up, Department for Education, health, police, universities (such as yourselves), and also private sectors, volunteer sector, refugee and migrant community groups, to ensure that the region benefits from migration.

So we do have a strategic role across the region to coordinate different migration program. But we also support local authorities and other partners to respond to change by providing migration policy data research, and further information.

[00:01:46] **Marketa:** Thank you. So would you be able to tell us what migration in the region looks like? So what type of migrants are coming into the region? Who are they? What do they do?

[00:01:56] **Ewa:** Yeah. So we do have a different group of migrants as whole of the UK. We do have refugees and asylum seekers. We've got EU nationals. We have newer group of migrants, such as Hong Kongers and Ukrainian migrants.

We also have international students and other type of migrants that are coming through different work or dependent visa, spouse or other family type of visa. So some type of migration or group of migrants are concentrated around larger cities, such as Leeds and Sheffield where we've got universities, so it'd be more people on a work visas or student visas. But other regions such as North Yorkshire may have more seasonal workers to help with agriculture there.

So in terms of numbers, so, we are the top English region for refugee resettlement. Second after Scotland in the UK. We've resettled refugees from Syria. And that was later expanded to MENA region - so Middle East. Then in terms of the top cities, we've got Bradford, Sheffield and Leeds in terms of refugee resettlement. Then we've got asylum dispersal and I think we are fourth highest asylum dispersal region in the UK.

And in terms of the numbers, that's, I think 7,000, the last quarter. And top cities would be Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield. So, so the biggest cities in the region again. And within that refugee and asylum seekers group, we've got UASC - So "unaccompanied asylum-seeking children". Young refugees who are coming without their parents.

And we probably have smaller numbers compared to some other regions such as London and Southeast where the concentration is much higher for this group.

[00:03:43] **Marketa:** Thank you Ewa. Would you just be able to tell us a bit more about what is Asylum Dispersal?

[00:03:48] **Ewa:** Yes. So asylum dispersal is a model for distributing asylum seekers across the UK.

Because previously, asylum seekers were placed, were decided... or the person kind of stayed in a place where they first arrived to the UK. And so either through the ports or through the airport. So obviously there was a higher concentration in the Southeast region around where, you know, we've got coastal we've got Dover area, but also around airports. So London mainly, as an international airport, and Manchester.

So obviously it was decided, I think back in 2000, to distribute asylum seekers to across different regions in the UK. And we had local authorities coming on board on a voluntary basis. So they came forward saying we want to be part of that asylum dispersal and they volunteered in that.

So they were taking kind of share of that asylum seekers, if you like. And obviously then the housing was then taken over by private companies and they are deciding ultimately where to place people based on available accommodation.

And just very recently actually it was agreed that asylum dispersal will be made mandatory for local authorities. So all local authorities will now be part of dispersal process to make that dispersal fairer for all of the local authorities across the UK.

[00:05:13] **Marketa:** Thank you for the explanation Ewa. So from what you've said, it sounds like there is a very, very diverse migration into the region and that migrants play a big role in Yorkshire and the Humber region. Because our project focuses on labour mobility, labour shortages, and how migration policy affects the workforce, I would be interested to hear where and how in your experience, do migrants fit into the region's economy?

[00:05:38] **Ewa:** As I mentioned, we have different group of migrants and different group of migrants have different rights when it comes to right to work. So asylum seekers, for example don't have right to work as given, they may apply for permission to work after they've been waiting, I think for over a year, on the decision on the claim. And they, they can only work in shortage occupational list jobs. So very specific type of jobs.

Rest of group of migrants, such as refugees, EU nationals Hong Kongers who are coming - they can work in all different type of jobs. There may be some restrictions related to... so Hong Kongers have restrictions related to sport person, for example, but in general, people can get into any employment type and any type of jobs.

So what we are seeing is I think in terms of the highest groups - that's EU nationals - we do have based on EU settlement scheme data, we do have probably 6% of EU nationals who are in our region. But we do have higher proportion of EU8, eight nationals. So from Poland, Czech Republic you know, Slovakia, Lithuania, and so on. And this group tend to work, tend to fill up the gaps in the market in a more low-skilled type of jobs.

So that would be hospitality sector, transport, information, health and social care and obviously high-skilled migrant will come into, you know, NHS, social care type of jobs, communication, IT. So, so depending on a different type of migrants, they would fit into differently into the economy.

But in terms of the type of economy we have in Yorkshire and the Humber, we do have agriculture. Obviously we do have a seasonal migrants and EU migrants working in North Yorkshire on, on the fields. We do have migrants in HGV roles as well. We are seeing gaps in that now, following, following Brexit and following many EU nationals returning home during the pandemic.

So, so yes, I would say there would be across different sectors. But there are some sectors which are over-represented where migrants are over-represented compared to, to their share of population.

[00:07:48] **Marketa:** Thank you, Ewa. So, would you be able to tell us a bit more about how have recent immigration changes impacted on the ability of migrants to enter the workforce? And what impact do you see this as having on the region?

[00:08:01] **Ewa:** So, so I think we cannot not talk about Brexit ultimately at this point Because EU migration have been the biggest migration to the UK in recent years. Following the expansion of the EU in, in 2004 there were a lot of EU migrants coming to the UK.

And obviously it's very hard to estimate the numbers. Obviously we do have Office for National Statistic data. In terms of the size of that group. We do have EU settlement scheme data as well, but that's number of applications rather than number of applicants. So, it is estimated that we could have about 3.7 million of EU nationals in the UK and obviously this group had free movement up until end of December 2020. And following that this group will have to apply for a visa.

So obviously previously we did have a lot of seasonal migration. People from Poland, Romania will come to the UK to do seasonal work. During summer, we had a lot of students coming to fill up those gaps, in those type of businesses.

And obviously that's not happening at the moment because people do not have a right to work. They cannot get visa to work in a coffee shop as they previously did and so we are experiencing the shortage of you know, gaps in agriculture, catering, there's some gaps in care sector as we know, construction.

So those are the type of jobs that were previously overrepresented by EU nationals who can no longer move freely to the UK. But we also have other group of migrants that are coming. So we have

Afghans, we've got Ukrainians. So to some extent, they may be filling up some of those gaps left by EU nationals.

We do have a very different group coming to the region. So Hong Kongers coming on a BNO visas, a British National Overseas Visa. Hong Kongers are much more qualified than other migrant groups. And again, you know, they may be filling in gaps in highly-skilled, you know, in IT, in communication.

In NHS we are seeing Hong Kong nurses coming in and accessing NHS. So we would have those policy changes in terms of the immigration system that are affecting which group of migrants are coming to the UK, but we also have some changes in practice. So we've very recently we've had changes in terms of how people are proving the right to work, which are obviously affecting employers and employees.

But we also have kind of changes in, in the way that immigration system, people are given the proof of their status - so we have digital status. So there's a whole system being digitalized. And I don't necessarily think that the businesses and employers have understood all of those changes in the recent years.

And especially, you know, because we did have a pandemic. We had a lot of changes within businesses and businesses had to worry about other things during that time. And I think there is a lot to be done to make sure employers are aware of all those changes related to migration.

[00:11:07] **Marketa:** So in terms of the digitalization that you just mentioned. Because obviously some of the immigration statuses are digital only like the EUSS scheme, British National Overseas, those people coming from overseas, they also have digital status. And you just mentioned that right to work checks are increasingly becoming digital, they are changing. What do you think the consequences of these changes will be for migrants and for employers? And what do you see as like the advantages or disadvantages of digitalization of immigration status?

[00:11:37] **Ewa:** So, so just to put that in a context. So from 6th of April, all migrants who have biometrics have to provide right-to-work digitally.

So there is no other way for them to prove their status, prove that they do have right-to-work. So ultimately, and that covers, as you mentioned, EU nationals who have digital status anyway. But we also have more vulnerable group of migrants who used to have biometric needs to show those right to work physically, such as refugees.

So obviously it will affect it, it does affect, kind of more vulnerable groups accessing jobs, because they are struggling to engage with digital status with digital way of proving it. You do have to have email address, phone number, you have to log on to the system to then generate a share code.

And you, you have to generate a right share... there are different type of shares you can generate and they have to be a right one for you to prove right-to-work. So there is a lot about access to that. Although you do have right-to-work, actually in practice, a lot of groups are struggling to prove that right-to-work because they cannot log in and generate that share code.

So that's kind of one area where a lot of people are experiencing difficulties, but we also have people who are still waiting for status. So we have EU nationals who have applied to EU settlement

scheme and are still waiting for a decision to come. So although they do have right to work, they cannot necessarily prove it in digitally all the time.

Some groups may, you know, if you do have certificate, what is called certificate of application, so a formal confirmation. The reapplication have been submitted in most, most of the time, you're able to generate that share code for six months and that have to be renewed every six months while you're waiting for a decision. But obviously that's quite problematic for employers.

But we also have EU nationals who applied via paper forms. And obviously they do not have any sort of digital way of proving right-to-work. So it's very problematic for migrants to kind of, understand and engage with a system which is digital.

You do have to have a mobile phone. You do have to have access to internet, ultimately to generate that share code. And you need to have those IT skills to be able to engage with that. And we know that there are a lot of groups who are here in the UK. They may be refugees who may have interruption with education and they don't have those IT skills.

We have older people who may be, may not quite there with retirement age yet trying to work. And you know, it's very difficult to engage, for them to engage with the system. And we do have groups like Roma migrants who have, who are a lot of the time illiterate. A lot of groups and especially older generation, so obviously it's very problematic for them. They have to very much rely on the children and grandchildren sometimes to help them to, to engage with those systems.

So I think it's, it's a big barrier for a lot of groups and it came, that change came quite unexpectedly. When we were just coming out of the pandemic, when services just started to work with people physically again, and obviously it's very difficult to explain to someone who doesn't quite understand, you know, how the online system works. You know, to explain it to them, how to generate a share code.

So, so I think, you know, that change happened next year, possibly when we had the time to prepare a migrant group for that change, would've been easier. And that's the same going for employers. I don't think employers are very much aware. There have been a lot of changes with immigration, within new immigration system. And I think smaller employees have not caught up at all with that. And obviously we did have some confusing things within this system. So, the immigration system changed on 1st of January last year. But we had a first six months was a grace period for EU nationals to apply, to continue applying for, to the EU resettlement scheme.

So nothing has changed for first six months. So I think it, it was a bit of a confusing period for a lot of people and only from 1st of July last year, EU nationals had to rely on a digital way of proving status. So we only just had a full year of EU nationals using the system, that is very new.

And then, you know, back in April that was introduced to other group of migrants. I think that was done a bit too soon and caught people unprepared, from both ends, from employees and employers.

[00:16:06] **Marketa:** Thank you, Ewa. It sounds like the gap in digital skills can be a big barrier for migrants into entering workforce, but also for employers in being able to attract their workforce.

[00:16:17] **Ewa:** Absolutely. And I think, and I think because the way that the system's designed and that employers don't necessarily know how to check the right-to-work. So they're asking for things that people don't have and don't have to have. the, a lot of employers obviously attract people through online application forms, application forms are not adjusted to those new systems.

So they are asking people about biometrics. They're asking people about, you know, proof, physical proof of status that obviously isn't possible for a lot of groups. And I lead on a Hong Kong welcome program working with Hong Kong, people from Hong Kong are very educated, you know, who are very qualified.

And a lot of them find it difficult to engage with digital system for, for various reasons whether it's because they don't understand how the system work and the explanation isn't quite clear, whether it's because, you know, employers are asking... They're finding that employers are less informed about those changes.

It's actually showing that digital skills is one thing, but actually there is a wider understanding of those changes and I think employers find it quite difficult to keep up with those constant changes within the system. And there isn't necessarily a time for them to, you know, get to know, ask questions, try that system first and feedback on it. I think a lot of those changes are done to them and not with them.

[00:17:40] **Marketa:** Okay. So in the, in the context of all those, like immigration changes, changes to status, immigration status checks, can you say something about the wider regional strategy on migration, by Migration Yorkshire and possible partnerships with other actors like local authorities, integration plan. Is there a regional plan for social inclusion?

[00:17:57] **Ewa:** So Migration Yorkshire - we do have that strategic role, ultimately with different stakeholders. And we do have quite a lot of projects that are going on at the moment. And a lot of them are engaging with different partners.

So just to provide a bit of information about those. So we do have refugee integration strategy, so engaging with different stakeholders. Making sure that our region is inclusive to refugees and that refugees can access different services easier. And that includes employment.

We do have a resettlement scheme. That's UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) and Afghan Relocation Assistance scheme. We've got um, Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children National Transfer Scheme that are bringing young children or children who are seeking asylum and dispersing them in and with training.

We have a program welcoming refugees, working with local authorities to develop the fostering services, the training foster carers to help them understand different changes. We do have connecting opportunities project. We work with voluntary sector organization to support migrants into employment.

We've got refugee integration service, that transition period for, for people who have received refugee status and are transitioning from being as an asylum seeker to refugee and helping them to understand all the changes and all the things that they have to do.

You know, Hong Kong welcome program that we, I'm leading on, that are engaging again with different stakeholders to, to support them, to understand which migrant groups are coming to the UK, what rights they have, what barriers they may be facing. So there is a lot of work that is going on across the region at strategic level, and also at local level, engaging with local partners, engaging with the volunteer sector organization, you know, we've got research projects going on as well, engaging with universities to put together, you know, those example of good practice - looking at what works and what can be expanded to different regions or expanded, what may be working for one group to see whether that works may be working for other groups.

So, so yes, I think there is a lot going on in Migration Yorkshire, a lot of different projects and working with different partners.

[00:20:23] **Marketa:** Thanks Ewa. That's great. That sounds like there is a huge amount of work going on. And we could talk probably for much longer, but I think this is all we have time for. So thank you Ewa, for joining me today.

[00:20:33] **Ewa:** Thank you very much. Thank you for having me. And all the best with your research project.

[00:20:37] **Marketa:** Thank you. And thank you to those listening today. If you'd like to find out more about the project and follow us on social media, the details are in the episode show notes. Goodbye.