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Should I stay or should I go? New European citizens' decision making on length of stay in the UK: a preliminary exploration

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Abstract

This paper focuses on post-2004 migration from A8 and A2 countries and discusses how changes in the economic situation in the UK and countries of origin affect the decision making processes of European citizens living and working in the East of England. Data from the first year of a longitudinal study on migrants' decision making (being carried out for the East of England Development Agency) is considered in the context of the existing migration literature (e.g. Faist, 2000) and insights on the complex, multi-layered and bounded nature of decision making by Sen (1982) and Simon (1985). The 'circuits of power' model developed by Clegg (1989) also offers a potential framework for understanding decision-making as embedded in interconnected, multi-level, power-imbued processes. As such, the many factors mediating decisions on length of stay – explicitly known as well as unknown (i.e. unrecognised) – can be built into the analysis of individual decision-making to generate a deeper, contextualised understanding. By referring to semi-structured interviews (from a core group of 40 A8/A2 citizens), diary contributions and a survey of 160 participants from the first year of a three year study, the paper underlines the finding that the economy is only part of a complex bundle of factors which influence decisions on length of stay. Even though migrant workers are often assumed to be motivated primarily by economic factors and the ability to maximise personal welfare, the assumption that migrants will return at a time of recession has not necessarily been correct in the past (the failure of the 'buffer' theory in the 1970s) and will not necessarily be confirmed in the current situation characterised by transnationalism, and high skills and aspirations of many A8/A2 citizens in the UK.

Introduction

This article presents a discussion of some of the issues and findings from the first year of our three year longitudinal study on European citizens from chiefly Accession 8 (A8) countries¹ in the East of England, with a focus on decision making processes regarding length of stay². The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) commissioned us to carry out research that would provide meaningful answers to some practical questions, and which would require more than a static snapshot approach to capture the dynamics concerned³.

The understanding of migrants' decision making processes has been researched to a large degree by migration scholars (e.g. Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Constant and Massey 2002 and 2003; Dustmann 2001). Decisions can be temporally classified as before, during and after a 'migration phase'. In the context of the intra-migration of European citizens, migration is understood as a fluid concept whereby individuals may be part of several 'migration phases' with shorter or longer intermissions in countries of origin. This paper's main focus is on migration decisions which have been taken by A8 (and A2) European citizens *during* their stay in the UK, although some references will be also made to decisions / motivations related to their initial decision to migrate. After a brief overview of statistical information on migration from A8/A2 countries since 2004 the paper will outline the theoretical context of the study followed by an overview of our

¹ A8 refers to the eight East and Central European countries that acceded to the European Union in May 2004 (Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary and Estonia). A2 refers to Bulgaria and Romania, acceding to the EU in January 2007 and whose citizens are subject to different employment eligibility criteria in the UK to A8 citizens.

² The research began in 2008. The paper is based upon the first year's report published in March 2009 (Schneider and Holman, 2009).

³ EEDA's interest in the many small pictures as well as, and contributing to, the bigger picture has provided us with an excellent opportunity, therefore, to engage in research that is both policy relevant and theoretically exploratory in the pursuit of a temporally and relationally appreciative understanding of A8/A2 migrants' decision making – decisions that could have a profound impact on the Eastern region's economy.

mixed methodological longitudinal approach before proceeding to a selective discussion of qualitative and quantitative findings from the first year of the research project⁴.

A note on definitions

There are a number of labels used to define 'new European citizens' working in the UK all with distinct political connotations. The term 'migrant worker' has been used by policy makers, researchers and others, including the popular media⁵. Unfortunately, it is often adopted and used in a derogatory way by elements of the popular press as well as a number of antipathic nationalistic actors, to suggest that (a) British jobs are being taken by non-British workers and, at the same time, (b) British benefits are being targeted by non-British workers and their families. There is also the tendency to group intra-European migrants into the broader category of 'migrant'. Whilst this is a generically acceptable label and can be usefully applied, again, like the term 'migrant worker', the connection to the European Union and, thereby the supplementary European citizenship status conferred on citizens of all member states, is not made explicit; indeed, this connection often appears to be explicitly removed from debates as if this is a further complication that cannot be accommodated.

Despite the rather jumbled popular discourses on migration and the unhelpful political connotations, we use the terms 'migrant', 'migrant worker' and 'new European citizen' interchangeably in our research denoting someone who is from one of the A8 or A2

⁴ Ultimately, given the relatively early stage of the research, our ongoing synthesis of theoretical insights and a mixed methodological approach - and a more dynamic environment than we could have anticipated (our 'kick in the context') - the discussion and conclusions we draw here are tentative.

⁵ The Labour MEP for the Eastern Region, Richard Howitt, for example, sees it as a positive term which emphasises that people have come to the UK to contribute to its economy (and, by implication, are not 'benefit tourists') (discussion, MINEM Conference, Brussels, 2008).

member states and has been living and working in the UK from any point in time since or just prior to the date of the 2004 accession.

Statistical Overview

A long-standing issue has been the limitations of the statistical data available about international in-migration; in particular, on the number of A8 migrants entering the UK since May 2004 and on the duration of their stay. There is no systematic register of people entering or leaving the UK. This has had a major impact on the ability of government to facilitate adequate funding and provision of services, and to provide accurate information and support to public service providers, employers and employees in regions. Definitional issues also complicate the collection of data and can unhelpfully contribute to misleading discourses on migration and migrants. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) is working to improve the quality of statistics available in the future (Chappell, 2009). However, problems remain in relation to the variable quality and scope of data and the different criteria applied by different agencies collecting data, and which continue to fuel claim and counterclaim of the *economic* impact of new EU citizens working in the UK (as evidenced in the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs reports, Volumes 1 and 2, 2008a and 2008b).

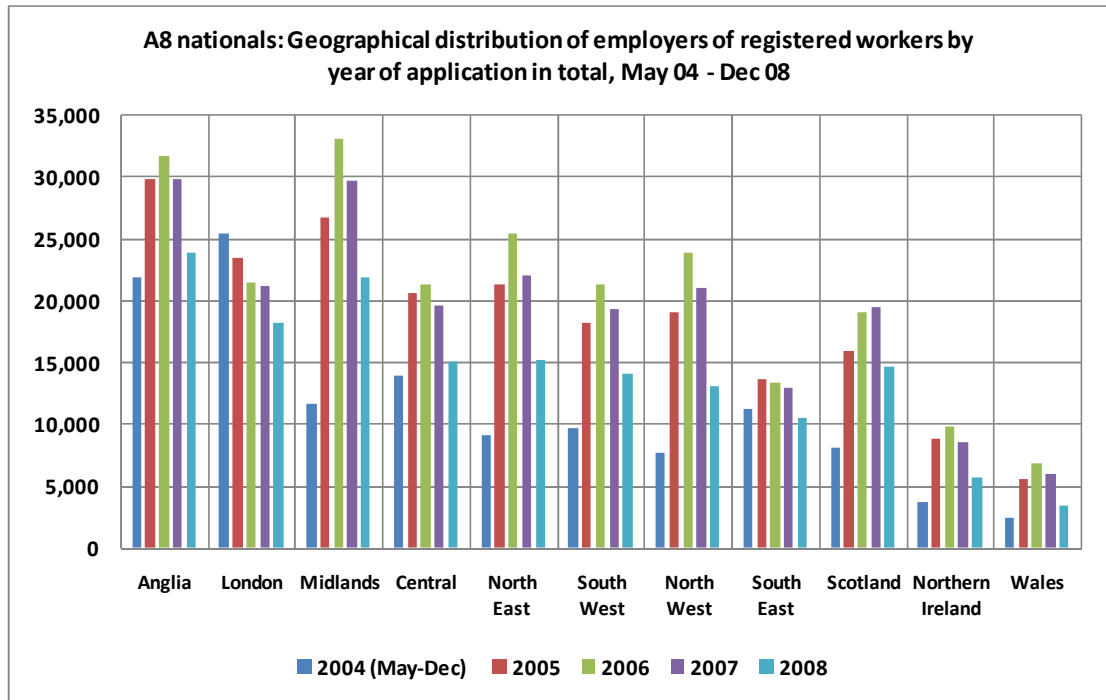
To arrive at an estimate of the number and profile of A8 citizens coming to work in the UK, a combination of national insurance numbers (NINOs) (Department for Work and Pensions - DWP), the International Passenger Survey (IPS) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) (now part of the Integrated Household Survey, ONS) contributing to the Total Immigration statistics (TIM) (ONS), and applications to the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) (Home Office) are used (Rees et al, 2009). Nevertheless, an incomplete picture of the number and profile of A8 workers in the UK remains, not least because the

number of non-documented workers cannot be accurately gauged, the self-employed do not need to register on the WRS, and because there is no requirement for those leaving the UK to de-register from the WRS. Further, the IPS only asks for information on *intended* length of stay, which may very well differ from *actual* length of stay.

Quarterly Accession Monitoring reports have been produced since 2004 (on a quarterly basis since 2005). The most recent report (at the time of writing) based on information from the WRS, benefit claims, tax credit applications and requests for support with housing and homelessness, does not include NINOs. This is a joint report produced by the UK Border Agency within the Home Office, DWP, HM Revenues and Customs, and Communities and Local Government (DCLG). It demonstrates a decline in new applications to the WRS in 2008 across the UK, especially when compared with the 2006 figures (see Figure 1 below). Of the three major receiving regions, applications for the East of England (Anglia) appear to remain comparatively buoyant (Home Office et al, 2008). However, it needs to be stressed that the number of WRS applications is not a measure of people returning to home countries or moving on to third countries from the UK, nor does it indicate how many of the previous applicants remain in the UK, it simply reports that there are fewer new and revised applications to the WRS⁶.

⁶ Even so, it tends to be 'picked up' in debates as a significant indicator of a drop in the number of A8 citizens living and working in the UK and of large scale returns primarily attributed to a deepening economic recession. We would advocate a more cautious and calibrated analysis as our first year's research suggests that there is little evidence so far of an indiscriminate mass exodus from the UK in the face of an economic downturn.

Figure 1: Total applications to the WRS by year of application, 2004-08



Source: 'Accession Monitoring Report July 2004 – December 2008. A8 Countries' (Home Office et al, 2008), available online at: http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/reports/accession_monitoring_report/

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical backbone of the study is based on (1) a sociological perspective which emphasises the structure-agency link (2) general approaches of decision making and, (3) specific approaches and studies of migrants' decision making regarding return (or stay).

(1) Sociological perspectives regarding the structure-agency link

The sociological basis of the study is based on a perspective which links structure and agency. The structure-agency link is a long established debate in sociology (see Archer 1995, Bhaskar 1989 and Giddens 1984) but has been less systematically applied to

studies of migration (see Schneider 2006). Although a study of decision making processes invites an agency approach, our research emphasises that both structure and agency are important factors to understand migrants' decisions. This has been highlighted by previous authors such as Cassarino (2004), Faist (2000) and generally authors who represent approaches of transnationalism and social network theory (see Al-Ali and Koser 2002, Portes *et al.* 1999).

Whilst factors in the structure and agency realms need to be studied independently, it is important to research how agency and structure interlink. Authors such as Archer (1995) and Giddens (1984) have developed analytical strategies to study the structure-agency link, however, this paper will conceptualise the link in a more 'simplistic' way by researching how actors *perceive* and *interpret* their structural environment. This is mainly due to the fact that the first year of the longitudinal study has focused on the agency level, i.e. actors' perceptions of their closer and wider environments, their goals and their normative principles such as national identity (further outlined below).

Our decision has been to explore the applicability of Clegg's (1989) circuitry model⁷ from his work on power alongside the insights offered by Faist (2000). At this point in our research, within the data and analytical limits of the first year of the study, we can begin to probe Clegg's notion of agency as 'something which is achieved' (1989:17) - referring to the organisational capacity of individuals or groups – and note the structural context

⁷ Clegg developed his model from an exhaustive analysis and discriminating synthesis of ideas previously set out by other theorists of power, moving away from a straightforward structure-agency dichotomy and proposing a more complex and dynamic understanding. The model is comprised of three levels of interconnected circuitry: episodic power relations at the agency level (equivalent to activity at the micro level and relating to causal types of power); rules of practice at the level of social integration (equivalent to activity at the meso level and relating to dispositional power); and, domination at the level of system integration (equivalent to activity at the macro level and relating to facilitative power (Clegg, 1989: 214).

that, as suggested by our findings so far, research participants may or may not be explicitly aware of.

Evidence from the first year of empirical research suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that resources, environment, opportunities and constraints are core factors to consider in relation to the achievement of organised agency and actors' specific orientation to decision making on length of stay and future goals (infused by particular orientations to relationships with others). The next two years of the longitudinal study therefore will more explicitly incorporate research on the structural level (in the local, regional and national contexts of home countries and the UK) and research the link between new European citizens' agency and their surrounding structures, alongside a relational proximity mapping exercise at each interview (see Schluter, 1996).

The following briefly outlines general approaches to decision making utilised as an analytical basis for the construction of data collection tools.

(2) General approaches to decision making: procedural rationality versus substantive rationality

Analytical tools for migrants' decision making processes can be found in approaches of rational choice theory and, here, especially those that follow 'procedural rationality' rather than 'substantive rationality'. The substantive approach investigates individual action by applying a framework that is based upon egoistic utility-maximisation within a perfect environment. Procedural rationality focuses on both egoistic and altruistic goals and the actor's perception of the environment (see Simon 1985).

Decision making processes for this study are conceptualised as an interplay between goals, normative principles and perception of the environment (see Sen 1982 and Simon 1985).

- The perception of the environment relates in our study to the migrants' conceptualisation of characteristics of their surrounding structures and their relationship to these structures. Structures (including economic, social, political, developments) refer to their country of origin and the UK.
- Goals refer to both egoistic and altruistic matters which could be short, medium or long term. Goals are prone to change according to shifting structural circumstances in migrants' countries of origin, host countries or third countries. For example, typical goals of migrants are 'to earn better money', 'to learn English', to 'support family back home' or 'to have an adventure'.
- Normative principles refer to fundamental value schemes which are less easily challenged by changes in the structural realm; identity, aspirations and a belief in self-reliance have been classified under this dimension. At time, short term goals may contradict normative principles of migrants. For example, after arrival the majority of the research participants were keen to make a living in the UK irrespective of what job they occupied; however, after two or three years many showed dissatisfaction as they increasingly felt a contradiction between their more fundamental life ambitions and aspirations and their short term goals. As a consequence, migrants considered moving to a third country, contemplated a career move and/or considered further education and training.

These insights fed into the development of the study's conceptual framework and the development of data collection instruments. The three dimensions (perception of

environment, goals and normative principles) also structure the documentation of our findings below with a particular emphasis placed on perceptions of environment.

(3) Approaches and studies of migrants' decision making regarding return (or stay)

Approaches to migrants' decision making can be classified along the lines of structure and agency (see, for example, the overview by Cassarino 2004). Traditional approaches such as neo-classical economics and the new economics of labour migration focus on agency and ignore structure to a large extent. They view migrants as 'egoistic utility-maximisers' and, in that respect, apply an approach of substantive rather than procedural rationality, as outlined above. Neo-classical and the new economics of labour migration reflect a classic approach of upward determinism which assumes that agency determines structural developments in migration. Transnational approaches and social network theory criticise the limitations of economic approaches and embed the analysis of agency into the wider context of national and international structures offering, therefore, an analytical opportunity to investigate the structure-agency link. Faist (2000) has developed an analytical framework for understanding migration flows which distinguishes between micro, meso and macro levels. His micro level focuses upon the ability or 'freedom' of migrants to move or stay in their home country; the meso level represents the social and symbolic ties of immigrants and the macro level investigates the political, economic and cultural structures in the national and international environment. Although Faist's (2000) framework applies to the initial decisions of remaining or leaving the home country, the framework provides a useful analytical tool for our study. While the first year focused especially on the micro level the next two years will also emphasis the meso and macro levels when considering migrants' decision making processes.

Applying Clegg's (1989) circuitry model should help us to broaden and deepen the application of Faist's analysis enabling the mapping out of inter-related multi-level factors impacting migration decisions, and providing a clearer understanding of the interconnections and the quality of those interconnections (e.g. empowering or disempowering) between different levels of system integration, social integration and episodic relations. The aim is to achieve a non-reductive understanding of decision making in specific and dynamic contexts over time that is at once comprehensively intimate (actor/social focused) *and* comprehensively appreciative of the 'bigger picture' (social/structure focused).

Methodology

Our longitudinal study⁸ (Schneider and Holman, 2009) uses a mixed methods approach combining primary with secondary research and quantitative with qualitative methods of data collection. The research is being conducted in three waves over a three year period with three early, mid-term or late arrival cohorts of 40 interviewees/diarists (with arrival dates from 2004 – 2008) and two waves of data collection from 160 survey respondents (early, mid-term and late arrivals). The expectation is that this will enable a systematic analysis of change over time and, where possible, to discern any collective impact of substantive factors on each temporal cohort as well as those factors pertinent to particular individuals and groups across the whole sample.

The study prepared a literature review on current themes of migration and theories regarding decision making processes, reviewing over one hundred documents. Polish internet blog sites were used as another source of secondary data and the first interim

⁸ This is a three year project involving three phases of data collection with interviewees, and two phases with survey respondents and stakeholders in each county of the Eastern region.

report provides findings of a 'pilot project' sampling two weeks of contributions to five sites (after an initial scoping of fifteen), for one week early in the year prior to the breaking of the economic crisis and for one week later in the year as the crisis showed signs of deepening. Blog content revealed no deviation from the themes and issues raised by participants in interviews and diary contributions; specifically, there was no mention of the economic crisis spurring a return to home countries (Schneider and Holman, 2009).

For the primary research a core group of forty European citizens from A8 and A2 countries were selected for semi-structured interviews and diary contributions. Interviewees were recruited via organisations working with and for migrants, ESOL classes, a 'poster campaign' in localities with a high percentage of migrants and snowball sampling. The participants of the 'core group' reflect diverse backgrounds with regard to countries and areas (rural/urban) of origin, date of arrival, area of settlement in the UK (rural/urban and different regions within the East of England), skills, educational and employment background, language proficiency, age, gender and marital status. The initial interviews were approximately two hours long focusing on the following areas: personal profile, arrival and reasons for migration, life before migration, perceptions of the UK, perceptions of Europe, expectations, goals, migration decisions, and length of stay; in particular, probing plans regarding length of stay, factors which influence decision making processes, perceptions of economic, political and social situations in countries of origin and the UK and barriers regarding employment and social inclusion.

Following the interview, diaries were sent to the participants of the core group. Engagement with the diaries was fairly limited and by the end of December eleven

contributions only had been received. Other researchers such as Spencer *et al.* (2007) have encountered similar problems regarding the use of diaries as data collection tools.

A survey was conducted to complement the qualitative data collection methods with a larger sample of migrant workers (161 questionnaires). The questionnaire – made available in English, Polish and Russian - covered similar areas which were discussed in the interview using closed-ended questions. Questionnaires were distributed via some of the same channels used for the recruitment of interviewees and analysed using SPSS. The team is aware the sample for the quantitative research is relatively low; however, it has substantiated trends which were identified in the qualitative research *and* in the literature review.

From the end of year two, a group of case studies from our sample of forty interview participants will be developed where, by drawing on the combined insights of Clegg (1989) and Faist (2000), a more precise mapping of endogenous and exogenous change can be documented in relation to situationally-specific individual narratives.

The range of methods we have deployed clearly indicate a significant volume and complexity of data, expanding as the project progresses, and requiring careful management. Our approach so far, guided by the conceptual framework, has been to separately analyse data from quantitative and qualitative sources with the support of SPSS, data immersion, 'table-top' coding and tabular documentation, before bringing our respective data sets together for comparative analysis at compatible points. As a longitudinal study, in years two and three, we face the further challenge of combining synchronic and diachronic analyses (Thomson and Holland, 2003) of multiple data sources. It is anticipated that an elaboration of our initial strategy developed to provide

an overview of interview data and participant profiles in tabular form will prove a useful tool summarising data for years 2 and 3. It bears a rudimentary resemblance to the framework matrix analytical technique developed by Lewis (2007) (and we are exploring the possible advantages this approach may offer alongside NVIVO software as our data accumulates).

Findings from the qualitative and quantitative research: Year one of the longitudinal study⁹

The following outlines the key findings from our qualitative and quantitative research. The findings of the first year of the study represent micro level data looking at decisions of length of stay and factors which may have an impact on these decisions, i.e. participants' perceptions of the social, economic and political context in the UK and their home country, their goals and normative principles. As mentioned above, the link between agency and structure is conceptualised in the first year of the study (and this paper) via the more 'basic' strategy of identifying *perceptions* of the social, economic and political developments in countries of origin and the UK by new European citizens. The structure-agency link will be more systematically conceptualised and investigated in the next two years of the longitudinal study by utilising a synthesis of Clegg's (1989) comprehensive analytical strategy with Faist's (2000) micro, meso, macro framework.

⁹ Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the analysis of the survey data. Although differences between variables were detected these differences were not significant. Findings presented in this section are based on differences with regard to percentages (unless stated otherwise) and cannot be generalised in a statistical sense - although many findings were confirmed by our qualitative research and the existing literature.

(1) Decisions on length of stay: an overview

The first year of the longitudinal study highlights the ambiguity and complexity of decision-making on length of stay. Migrants themselves are aware of a variety of factors which can potentially affect their decisions which might partly explain why the majority (59%) of migrants have a 'let's see attitude' with regard to length of stay¹⁰.

Changes in initial decisions are fairly frequent and those who changed their intention of length of stay are more likely to stay longer than for a shorter time. Half the respondents stated that they had changed their decision on length of stay since their arrival in the UK whereby 79% indicated that they wanted to stay longer than originally planned. The survey showed that at least 25% of migrants perceived the following (subjective) factors as important in their decision making processes:

- 'I have settled in the UK' (38%)
- 'I like the area where I live' (37%)
- 'I need to earn more money' (28%)
- 'My level of English is not good enough' (28%)
- 'I have a good social life in the UK' (28%)
- 'The economic situation in my home country has not improved' (26%)
- 'I miss my home country' (25%)

The above list indicates that participants were more likely to select factors which supported a stay in the UK rather than a return to their home country; only the factors 'my level of English is not good enough' and 'I miss my home country' corresponded potentially with a decision to return.

¹⁰ 12% indicated a stay of up to 3 years, 11% intended to stay indefinitely, 10% indicated that they wanted to stay longer than three years and 7% intended to stay short term.

A more objective analysis of factors (comparing different variables with length of stay) revealed links (non significant) between length of stay and marital status, arrival time in the UK, employment barriers and aspirations:

- Marital status: migrants in a partnership were more likely than single migrants to stay indefinitely and less likely to have a 'let's see attitude'); participants with children were more likely than other migrants to stay indefinitely in the UK (16% compared to 5% without children) and were less likely than migrants without children to stay short term (i.e. up to one year).
- Arrival time in the UK: survey data indicate that there was a link between arrival time and length of stay. The longer participants had been in the UK the more open and flexible they were with regard to their plans regarding length of stay. Participants who had been long term in the UK (2004 and before) were most likely to state that they had 'no specific plans – let's see' (71%), followed by participants who had arrived in the medium term (2005/6) with 59% and those who had arrived in the short term (2007/8) with 49%. The likelihood of staying up to three years decreased with length of residence while intentions to stay short term increased with length of residence. The findings show that a longer term stay does not necessarily lead to a more permanent stay.
- Employment barriers: migrants who felt their skills were reflected in their employment positions in the UK were more likely to stay long term or indefinitely.
- Aspirations: participants with career and educational aspirations in the UK were more likely to stay long term or indefinitely.

Generally, our findings show that 'length of stay' is not at the centre of migrants' discussions with family members or friends at home. Only 24% indicated that they discussed length of stay with their family in their home country; this was also reflected in

our interview findings where some participants highlighted that it was a sensitive area for their parents which may explain the reluctance to discuss it with them. Further, length of stay was not very often discussed with friends (16%). 42% of survey respondents stated that they were more likely to discuss their intentions with family members in the UK (possibly more likely to be siblings). The survey indicates that the decision on length of stay is a very 'personal issue' with 35% indicating that they do not discuss length of stay with anyone.

Despite this reluctance to discuss length of stay decisions with home-based family members, a common reflection in interviews and diary entries was of missing home and family: the separation from the familiar and distance from loved ones. Thus, whilst most interviewees considered that they made their migration decisions independently without influence from family or friends many also noted that returning home would be expedited by concerns for family members. Frequent travel between the UK and home countries, visits from home and ongoing communication with family and friends were commonplace experiences recounted in interviews and noted in diaries. Indeed, maintaining personal networks appears to facilitate a transnational sensibility on the part of interviewees rivalling that of the formally acquired 'freedoms' of EU membership. Cheap travel costs and proximity to airports in the East of England have helped to sustain participants' connections with family and friends at home - and perhaps also the general 'let's see' attitude consistent with a much more fluid and open migratory process.

(2) Potential explanatory factors for decision making processes: perceptions, goals and normative principles

As outlined above migrants' decision making processes have been conceptualised via the three dimensions of perceptions, goals and principles. The first year of the study has

emphasised the role perceptions play in the decision making process; distinguishing between perceptions of the social, economic and political situation in countries of origin and those on the UK; followed by perceptions of barriers in the UK.

(2.1) Perceptions

(2.1.1) Perceptions of social, economic and political context in countries of origin

Migrants who intended to stay longer in the UK than initially planned had a negative or very negative view of the **political, social and economic situation** in their home country (58%, 54%, 52% respectively); only a small number had a positive or very positive view of the social and political situation in countries of origin (15% and 11% respectively). However, 20% of those who intended to stay longer showed a positive perception of the economic situation in their country of origin indicating that migrants do not necessarily consider returning to their country of origin even if the economic situation in their country is regarded as being good.

There was a note of despondency in interviews with quite a number of participants in relation to the political, economic and social situations in home countries and their negative impacts on interviewees' personal situations. The majority of interviewees from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were critical of the political situation in their home countries and distrusted politicians. Some also criticised the close link between the media and the government in countries of origin. It was commonplace for interviewees to comment on how corruption, discrimination and ponderous bureaucratic practices combined to make life very difficult, especially for individuals without powerful connections.

Survey data showed that migrants' perception of the **economic situation** in their home country was slightly less negative than their perception of the political and social situation with 48% ranking the economic situation as being 'negative' or 'very negative'; only 14% thought it was positive (33% selected neither good nor bad). Interviewees highlighted the lack of job opportunities and job flexibility in their home countries which they often saw closely related to political problems, including extant political cliques.

The majority of interviewees felt that the **economic and political situation** in their countries was worsening. Regional economic and developmental disparities were noted as likely spurs to migration and, whilst the majority of interviewees felt that their migration decision was a real choice (in theory) in that they had alternatives, many noted that for some compatriots, particularly in Eastern and rural regions, migration had become the only option. Interviewees also highlighted that the economic situation at home created dependency on parents. Many interviewees could not afford to further their education and live away from their parents in their home countries. The long hours of study per day and the unavailability of flexible and part-time work were reasons why combining study with independent living was impossible. Despite assurances that life had improved in home countries encouraging some interviewees to return (after spending from 5 months to 2.5 years in the UK) on average re-return to the UK occurred three months later, with interviewees claiming no discernible improvement in the economic and political conditions at home.

Several interviewees (from Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and Romania, in particular) perceived the **social situation** in their home country in a critical way highlighting the 'unfriendliness' people showed towards each other and lack of 'community feeling' or contact with neighbours. Interviewees mentioned frustration and anger with the

economic and political situation as a cause for the negative social climate in their home country. A number of younger interviewees also spoke of the dispersal of friendship networks based in home towns as a result of intra-European migration and relocation to cities.

(2.1.2) Perceptions of social, economic and political context in the UK

Migrants who intended to stay longer than initially planned had an especially positive view of the **social situation** in the UK (77%), followed by the **economic situation** (55%) and the **political situation** (46%).

Interviewees expressed general trust in the **political situation** and political actors in England. Such sentiments were often accompanied with expressions of relief as interviewees' recounted examples of reliable institutions and considerably reduced levels of bureaucracy. For many, a sense of security was expressed as a very positive aspect of life in the UK. Findings from the qualitative research were consistent with quantitative findings; survey respondents had a positive perception regarding the political situation in the UK with 39% selecting 'positive' and only 7% finding it 'negative' or 'very negative' (30% indicated 'neither good nor bad').

- "Maybe it is not logic but I feel more safer here" (Polish interviewee)
- "More freedom here... I feel more safe" (Czech interviewee)
- "Life in England is better organised" (Polish interviewee)
- "A more liberal country than Slovakia" (Slovakian interviewee)
- "The government protects workers here" (Polish interviewee)

Very few interviewees had specific knowledge about policies in place for migrant workers or immigration rules. The EU freedoms (e.g. the freedom to live and work in other EU member states) and the British Government's Workers Registration Scheme were the

only policy areas directly referred to. Knowledge of rights and benefits was also patchy. Some interviewees, a few before arriving in the UK, were aware that they could vote in local and European elections in the UK, but, overall, only a small number of interviewees felt they would exercise this right. The reasons given for not voting were: they had insufficient knowledge of local politics and of candidates and policies in general; as impermanent residents it would be improper to do so; or, they had no interest in politics. The majority of interviewees were also unaware of the UK's body of legislation protecting workers' rights, promoting equality, anti-discriminatory practice and other protections, or of union support in the workplace. Notwithstanding the limitations for workers employed through agencies, this has proved to be a very attractive and unexpected feature of working in the UK for interviewees, comparing very favourably with the limited protection for workers in home countries.

47% thought the **economic situation** in the UK was 'positive' and only 8% perceived it as 'negative' (36% viewed it as neither good nor bad). Interviewees highlighted the trustworthiness of the employment system and the quality of treatment in the workplace was generally seen as an unexpected improvement to that experienced in home countries. Fair treatment in the workplace was not a unanimous experience, however, and interviewees also gave examples of sexual discrimination, discrimination perceived to be based on the migrant status, and, in one case, a sustained campaign of bullying by a shift supervisor.

- "I can have a normal life without worrying what the next day will bring" (Polish interviewee)
- "You can change here: jobs, skills. A different way of thinking here, where age is not an issue." (Polish interviewee)
- "You are well treated in the workplace here" (Romanian interviewee)

But:

- “Work for migrants is low grade; you cannot go higher no matter what your qualifications” (Polish interviewee)

Interviewees thought the **social situation** in England was generally friendly with regard to work colleagues and neighbours, despite noting that the attitudes of local people were not always as positive as would be liked: English people ‘kept their distance’. Where particularly difficult or hostile situations were discussed, most interviewees contextualised these: too much alcohol, misleading and negative press coverage, stereo-typing and ignorance, for example, and empathised with the feeling of competition and threat experienced by some British citizens. A greater sense of community, or connection to the local community was voiced as a desire by some (open and long-stay) interviewees, particularly by those who had experienced a good community life in countries of origin. Interviews with migrants who had children living with them in the UK noted the opportunities to develop community links via children’s activities, at school or on the local playground, helping to enhance a sense of belonging.

The generally positive perception of the social situation in the UK by interviewees was reflected in our survey data where the social situation in the UK was viewed as being especially positive with 52% indicating ‘positive’ and 15% ‘very positive’; only 5% thought it was ‘negative’ or ‘very negative’; (22% thought it was neither good nor bad).

(2.1.3) Perceptions of barriers

Although survey respondents (64%) confirmed language as a main barrier, non-recognition of skills in their employment was also an important issue noted by 73% of participants. Other major barriers highlighted in the survey were non-recognition of qualifications (33%), access to suitable housing and healthcare (24% and 23%,

respectively) and access to language classes (21%). 44% said they dealt with problems themselves. 39%, on the other hand, said that they had not experienced any barriers/problems. Whilst the majority of barriers did not indicate a concrete link to intended length of stay, 'reflection of skills in employment' showed a significant link to intended length of stay and those participants who saw their skills reflected were more likely to indicate an indefinite stay. This survey has highlighted that migrants' employment positions in the UK still fail to reflect their skills. Considering that this factor has a strong impact on length of stay and on the British economy it is hoped that policies can be established to facilitate a better use of migrants' skills.

Interviewees did report problems with housing, employment, access to language classes, the non-recognition of skills, discrimination and scams. However, they rarely characterised these and other issues encountered during the migration process and living and working in the UK as 'barriers'. Some hair-raising stories and stressful events were related to us, but the dominant response of interviewees was one of resilience with the adoption of pragmatic coping strategies: self-help techniques, followed by mutual aid and use of formal support (Schneider and Holman, 2009:26-27).

(2.2) Goals of participants

Decision-making on length of stay relate to individuals' goals in life. The survey indicated that the selection of multiple goals suggests how open the situation is perceived to be by participants (more fully illustrated by interviews) and how flexible they are prepared to be in response. In a 2006 study of Polish migrants in London, Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich constructed a four-fold typology of migrant goals: 'hamsters' (one-off migrants) accounted for 16 per cent of those questioned; 'storks' (circular migrants) accounted for 20 per cent; 'searchers' (open options) 42 per cent; and 'stayers' (self-explanatory) 22

per cent. Using the same typology we asked interviewees to identify their own broad migration goals. In line with Eade *et al's* findings, the majority of our interviewees located themselves in either group three or group four (searchers and stayers), or *between* groups three and four. In addition, some interviewees were also able to recount how their migration goals had changed, shifting from group one (hamsters) to group three (searchers) and then, in four cases, to group four (stayers)¹¹.

Specific goals for migration are variable and rather fluid; however, from interview data, we were able to identify a significant clustering of goal responses in eight policy-relevant areas arising in the short-term, medium-term and long-term:

- Short-term – ‘open’, earn money quickly, find a job, improve English/and education in the UK;
- Medium-term – to save/increase savings, to improve career prospects/ promotion and, education in the UK (again);
- Long-term – to stay in the UK.

Medium term aims to improve job situations/career prospects as well as opportunities to study in the UK are particularly notable and, although not derived from generalisable data, suggest that policy makers, employers and educational institutions ought to consider how to raise awareness of existing opportunities for these workers as well as the potential benefits to be had in creating opportunities for this group.

¹¹ No interviewees self-identified as storks.

(2.3) Normative principles: (lack of) migrant worker identity, national and European identity, aspirations and beliefs of self reliance

Whilst public, political and often academic discourses label people who have arrived from the A8 and A2 countries as 'migrant workers', interviewees did not generally identify with this concept (nor necessarily the concept of East European). Instead, a large number perceive themselves as European citizens (in combination with their national identity). This finding appears to underpin the normalisation of living and working in another country, considered as unexceptional as working in a major city in the home country for some interviewees.

A sense of 'Europeanness', however, does not necessarily correlate with voting intentions in the 2009 European elections: 31% of survey respondents said that they would vote which is less than the UK turnout in 2004 (Rallings and Thrasher, 2007) – although still relevant, especially considering the 20% turnout recorded in Poland in 2004 (Mohedano-Brethes and Soufflot de Magny, 2005). 30% of survey respondents indicated that they would vote in a local election in the UK. We reported that local government and political parties should do much more to facilitate the democratic participation of new European citizens living and working in the region and who make a contribution to its economic and social infrastructure¹².

Interview and survey data reveal that migrant workers are ambitious and seek personal development and advancement; 'making money quickly' is not their chief concern. Given that so many migrants, at least initially, downgrade in terms of their qualifications, skills and employment history, and have high aspirations, goal satisfaction may prove to be

¹² At the time of writing, the 2009 EU and local government elections had not been held and, clearly, this is a subject we will revisit in the second phase of the study.

crucial for the retention of key workers. The survey highlighted that migrants with career and educational aspirations in the UK were more likely to indicate a longer term or indefinite stay than those who did not have these intentions. Interviews underline that, for most interviewees, goals over time become increasingly focused on job satisfaction and status elevation achieved through work and education.

Both the qualitative and quantitative research findings emphasise a high level of self reliance amongst migrants. Interviews, blog contributions and diaries revealed high levels of resilience and determination. A large number of our participants did not discuss decisions regarding length of stay with anyone and did not join friends or family in the UK. Although many migrants experienced barriers they showed a strong determination to cope with problems and barriers did not appear to directly affect their intended length of stay. The only barrier which has a clear impact on length of stay was the 'non reflection of skills in employment'.

Conclusion

As recent studies of A8 migrants have highlighted before (e.g. Holman and Schneider, 2008; Paraskevopoulou and McKay, 2007), migrants' decision making processes regarding return or stay are complex and multi-layered. A simplistic approach which perceives the individual as an 'egoistic utility-maximiser' is not satisfactory.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews, diaries, blogs and survey showed that one needs to be careful not to overemphasise the economic factors with regard to decision making processes of new European citizens from the A8 (and A2) countries. Although these new European citizens are often labelled as 'migrant workers', they are individuals who are embedded in complex social, political and economic situations both

in their home countries and the UK; and, similar to the 'failure of the buffer theory' in the 1970s, so-called 'migrant workers' (economic migrants) will not necessarily leave the UK due to an economic recession. Fewer people might arrive (as reflected in the WRS statistics), however, that alone does not indicate an indiscriminate mass exodus. Reasons for a lack of 'mass return migration' are likely to lie in the negative perceptions of social, economic and political factors in countries of origin, and relatively positive perceptions of the social, economic and political situation in the UK. Although barriers are perceived they may be 'compensated' for via normative principles and, as demonstrated in our findings, a self-reliance and general outlook on life which reflects high aspirations and ambitions. Identification as European citizens, a transnational sensibility, and medium to long term goals to achieve educational qualifications and satisfying careers are also significant in understanding that short-term economic goals do not necessarily take priority in the decision making processes regarding return or stay.

This paper has focused on the micro level emphasising agents' perceptions, goals and normative principles. The next two years of the longitudinal study will focus more explicitly on meso and macro level data and the link between structure and agency by utilising Faist's (2000) model in combination with Clegg's (1989) approach.

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