# Migrant–local hiring queues in the UK food industry

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## Aims

The aim of this article is to present evidence that demonstrates A2/A8 migrant workers are being prioritised for employment by companies within the UK food industry, in preference to British domestic workers. It seeks to describe the operation of such a dynamic and explain how it has developed since EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007.

## Methodology

- The article is based on interview data from 37 salad growers/processors [covering 30 English horticultural firms] and survey evidence from 268 UK farmers [collectively employing a peak season labour force of 28,206].
- The 30 businesses were spread across England including Yorkshire.

- Interviewees from those companies occupied different roles with different responsibilities including: farm owners, directors, partners, human resource managers and team leaders.

## Key issues

The author argues that a dualistic ‘good migrant worker’ and ‘bad local worker’ recruitment rhetoric has developed in the UK food growing/processing industry. They suggest this is due to perceptions by employers that [largely eastern European] migrants have a strong work ethic, as opposed to British workers who are perceived as lazy. In part, the author suggests this is because the temporary, low paid and unstable character of employment in the sector has led it to be regarded as such low status work in the UK that only very low skilled, poorly educated residents seek it out.

Conversely, it points out those A8/A2 migrants are particularly attractive and preferential to employers. Whole groups can be organised through agencies, which simplifies the recruitment process. But migrants are willing to take on employment in the sector precisely because they do not intend to stay in the long term, wanting to earn money rapidly to take ‘home’ or as a ‘stepping stone’ into another opportunity. This flexibility makes them particularly suitable, even apart from the fact that many are highly skilled/educated, which employers regard positively,

particularly in contrast to local UK workers. However, retention rates are an issue, particularly after the migrant workers been in the UK for some time. This can be offset with new cohorts of workers so that a ‘revolving door’ of workers develops.

The overall consequence is that low-wage ‘migrant–local hiring queues’ have emerged. This dynamic sees UK workers habitually overlooked in favour of migrant workers with migrants seen as bringing ‘added value’, not least by keeping wages [and thus costs] down.

## Conclusions

The author predicts that as time goes on migrants will be less likely to tolerate such low wage work, in part because long term experience of the UK job market will open other, more high status employment opportunities without the need for initial ‘stepping stones’ to provide income. This could present employers with problems hiring workers with the same level of ‘added value’. Macroeconomic trends are key: changes in exchange rates and economic growth among Eastern European nations are just two factors that may mean the flow of cheap labour from eastern Europe may be a time limited event.

## Recommendations

The link between employer perceptions and the actual practices of low-wage labour recruitment should be further explored. Comparisons with other sectors of the economy and other countries to see if migrant–local hiring queues exist there too would be valuable, as would further study into the attitudes of migrant and would-be British workers to low-wage work as a complement to this study.

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Publisher
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5
Pages
459–471
Extra Information

This study forms part of a broader body of research carried out by the author looking at UK food production from the perspective of employers, labour market intermediaries [LMIs], regulators, and the workers themselves.

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