



Regulating labour immigration: Labour markets, welfare states and public policy: Martin Ruhs



The regulation of labour immigration and the rights of migrant workers are among the most contested public policy issues in high-income countries. However, labour immigration is often viewed as a discrete area of policy.

The relationships between immigration, labour demand and other public policy areas typically remain unrecognised in public debates and policymaking.

Research by Martin Ruhs and Bridget Anderson, in conjunction with Philip Martin (UC Davis) on how labour markets, welfare states and other public policies shape the demand for migrant workers, has directly impacted on labour immigration legislation and policymaking in the UK, and policy debates in the US, Netherlands and various UN agencies dealing with migration issues.

The insight that the UK's growing reliance on migrant workers is closely related to a wide range of public policies that have encouraged employers to recruit migrants over British workers has had an important impact on the development of a new approach to immigration by the Labour Party.

Ed Miliband's first major speech on immigration (2012) drew directly from the research. After a private discussion with Ruhs, Miliband argued that there was a need for "a new approach to immigration based on building a different kind of economy."

The research shows how labour immigration and employer demand for migrant workers are closely related to a wide range of institutions and public policies that go beyond immigration policy. Labour market policies, housing policies, and a wide range of social policies, have in many countries created incentives for employers, especially in low-waged sectors, to develop a preference for recruiting migrant over domestic workers.

The findings are published in two books:

Who Needs Migrant Workers? Labour shortages, Immigration and Public Policy (Oxford University Press, 2010), advises the Government on labour immigration policy

The Price of Rights Regulating International Labor Migration, (Princeton University Press, 2013) analyses how high-income countries restrict the rights of migrant workers as part of their labour immigration policies and discusses the implications for global debates about regulating labour migration and protecting migrants. It won the 2014 Best Book Award from the American Political Science Association's Migration and Citizenship Section.

UK policy – through collaborative work with the UK's Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), the research on labour immigration and public policy has directly informed and heavily impacted on the MAC's work in drawing up a list of "shortage occupations" (where employers get easier access to migrant workers). All the shortage occupation lists recommended by the MAC since 2008 have been accepted by the Government.

International policy – the research has had considerable impact on debates and legislation on immigration reform in the US as well as informing key individuals working on labour and immigration across Europe. Research which analysed the tension between openness to admitting migrant workers and migrant rights after admission had a major impact on policy debates at various UN agencies and international organisations, including the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Development Programme, and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).



"Ruhs' research [...] has encouraged more explicit debate among international agencies about the potential tensions between access and rights in labour immigration policy, and about the pros and cons of a core rights approach to the global protection of migrant workers." Director of Policy Research at IOM