

Long read | Who are you calling unskilled?

*Why do we tend to label migrants who do manual, caring and service labour as unskilled? Because, **Patrick McGovern (LSE)** argues, labelling them in this way makes it easier to justify exclusion, especially since the term 'unskilled worker' implies that such a person cannot learn. The government's new immigration policy seeks to completely close off 'unskilled migration' to the UK, which will eventually trigger a series of labour market shortages.*

'Britain is to close its borders to [unskilled workers](#)' was how *The Guardian* introduced the UK government's announcement of a new Australian-style [points system](#) in February 2020. *The Sun* predicted that 'unskilled migration from the EU' would [plummet by 90,000](#) per year, while *The Economist* worried, rather predictably, that fewer unskilled workers might put '[upward pressure on wages](#)'. Though the government policy documents do not actually use the term 'unskilled', it was used repeatedly in reports on the [points system](#) and on [migrants in low-skilled work](#) by the government's own Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). The fact that the experts on the committee use the term gives it a degree of legitimacy beyond whatever the media can bestow.

As a sociologist of work, I am obliged to point out that the term 'unskilled worker' is a hopelessly inaccurate description of a functioning human being and has been ever since the age of mass public education arrived in the middle of the 19th century. If we take a conventional definition of skill as proficiency in a task then the fact that a person can read and write means that they are not unskilled, especially when those skills are recognised by a public system. If they can also count and then do all three tasks in a second language then describing such individuals as unskilled says more about the prejudices of the person applying the term than it does about the people they are supposedly describing.

Part of the problem here is the failure to draw on [an old distinction](#) between the skills possessed by the individual and the skills required by the job. Some immigrants doing semi-skilled and routinised forms of work may, in fact, be highly educated. Some may do it on a short-term basis simply to pay for food and rent until they can find work more in keeping with their education. Others may do so if they have trouble getting their qualifications recognised and have to take a series of ordinary jobs while adding a [local qualification](#). Whatever the reasons, one of the distinctive features of immigrant employment in the UK is that [substantial proportions of highly educated migrants](#) are working in supposedly 'unskilled' jobs. Indeed, the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford reports that '[more than half](#) of highly-educated workers born in new EU member states (56%) were in low and medium-low skilled jobs in 2018.'

Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong in trying to create classifications of the level of a person's education or the content of their jobs. This is what social scientists have to do to make sense of much of what is happening in the world of work. While it is relatively easy to measure education and training, getting to grips with the amount of skill being used in an economy is much more difficult. One basic problem, as [Francis Green](#) has observed, is that there are no universal units of skill in which one quality can be objectively compared with another. How does one compare the skills of a footballer, an electrician, a hairstylist, and a care worker? Some economists try to resolve the problem by attaching a market value to the outputs produced by these workers (which is what the government is proposing to do by a setting a [minimum salary threshold](#)). We might then find that the electrician is paid more per hour than the care worker. But here the market value and the social value might diverge as we would place a much greater emotional value on the care given to our grandmother than that given to the lights in the kitchen.

A further complication in the relationship between education and skill is that distinction must be made between formally certified knowledge and the kind of informal and practical knowledge that is learned on the job. In his classic study [Education and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery](#), Ivar Berg used this distinction to challenge the thesis that investment in education brings a rate of return that compares favourably with other forms of capital investment. As Berg observed, it is often based on this idea that employers can be talked into rewarding the more educated with higher salaries. At the same time, employers know that a university education does little to provide many of its recipients with the skills, abilities or knowledge that can be used directly in [employment](#). So employers accept that graduates will only begin to contribute after the job itself teaches them what they need to know. More controversially, Berg went on to argue that education does not necessarily signal that university types had a greater ability to 'stick at it' than ordinary employees even if this is the quality that employers value most. Rather, he cited a whole series of studies across white-collar, technical and routine occupations to show that the employees who are promoted on merit may not be the better-educated individuals. Following on Berg's insights, sociologists began to take up the somewhat subversive idea that education is better at providing the credentials required to get into a wide range of jobs rather than actually enhancing our ability to do [them](#).

While Berg's challenging views on the value of education to employers is still being [debated](#), it brought home the basic fact that on-the-job learning is an essential component of most of our jobs. But even those that can be learned with a few hours of 'on-the-job training' contain an element of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge or [tacit knowing](#), which was introduced by the British-Hungarian polymath Michael Polanyi, refers to all forms of embodied personal knowledge and includes the physical movements required to complete practical tasks. What this means is that all forms of work involve some form of tacit skill even if it cannot be measured or observed once it has been routinized and internalized.



To take an example, a familiar job on the contemporary high street is that of the coffee shop barista. Now making coffee may not appear to require much skill as it seems to have a limited range of tasks, is highly repetitive in nature, and it is probably something we can all do at home. But even if you own a dainty espresso machine at home this does not mean you will be able to make one to the standard required by a coffee shop, as Eric Laurier discovered when he [trained at Caffè Nero](#). Rather it was a skill that could only be perfected through hours of practice after learning the list of steps by rote and getting detailed advice from the trainer. No matter how large and stylish the coffee machine looked, 'if it does not have properly ground, dosed and tamped coffee, it will never make *un buon café*.' Along the way, Laurier encountered problems that were best resolved by learning the hidden 'tricks of the trade' from experienced colleagues, such as how to get hot milk to accompany the avalanche of froth that comes out of the jug when making a latte (by tipping the jug rapidly into a steep pouring position). The existence of such 'tricks of the trade' simply confirms that there is much to a whole range of jobs than what the terms unskilled or low-skilled might imply.

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of labelling those who have low levels of formal education as unskilled is that it implies that they have an inability to learn (a stereotype that has also provided ammunition for jokes about allegedly stupid [ethnic groups](#)). In an innovative five-year study of the *Skills of the “Unskilled”*, Jacqueline Hagan and her colleagues observed and surveyed Mexican migrants who worked in construction, manufacturing and service jobs in the United States. They found that many of the so-called unskilled came from working-class and farming households in which they had learned how to do a variety of manual tasks simply by helping their parents. Cooking, cleaning, fixing cars and DIY work are all common tasks for the sons and daughters of manual workers. Together with the basic numeracy and literacy skills learned in primary and secondary schools, these young workers have a basis upon which they add other skills when they move to the US. The general lesson from the *Skills of the “Unskilled”* is that labelling people as unskilled fails to recognize the real possibility of life-long learning, especially among people who leave home in order to better themselves.

Given findings of this kind, we have to ask why some social scientists, policymakers and the general public continue to label migrants who do a whole range of manual, caring and service labour as unskilled. The answer must be that labelling people as unskilled makes it easier to justify their exclusion. It says that they have nothing to offer the British economy because they are [‘low value, low skill’](#) people. The British public agree. Or at least they did when some social scientists thought it would be a good idea to include questions within the 2012 edition of British Social Attitudes study that compared ‘highly qualified professionals’ with [‘unskilled labourers’](#). The question is more than a little leading. Perhaps they should have simply called them the unwashed instead.

Of course, the irony is that the jobs that these people do are also unwanted. These are the jobs that are shunned by most local workers in affluent western economies because they are of low status and offer low pay. They are the menial jobs, the jobs that are exposed to the elements, or those that put yourself at service to others and their needs whether in cafés, children’s nurseries or care homes. The problem is also recognised by their employers. Submissions to the MAC report on low-waged migration by the London Chamber of Commerce and the Sector Skills council (for hospitality, travel, and tourism) highlighted an image problem with their industries in that they were seen to only offer low-skilled, transient jobs with no progression or career opportunities (p.[127-8](#)).

The problem for the UK is that it has relied heavily on migrant labour to do this kind of work for much of the twentieth century. In the post-war era, migrant labour came through the [European Voluntary Worker](#) scheme, from the West Indies and the Indian sub-continent as citizens of the [Commonwealth](#) and, more recently, from the European Union under the freedom of movement principle. Then there was always the [Irish](#) who came under the Common Travel Area arrangement that followed the establishment of the Irish Free State in the early 1920s. Like the Turkish ‘guest workers’ in Germany, the Irish built the motorways and railways as well as the [new homes and office blocks](#), served in the [restaurants and bars](#) and as cleaners, [domestic workers, and factory workers](#). Though the Common Travel Area will continue to exist after Brexit, Ireland has changed greatly since it joined the Common Market in 1973. Significantly, one sign of this change is that such jobs are almost as likely to be filled by migrant workers [in Dublin](#) as they are in London.

What all this means is that the UK is engaging in a massive labour market experiment by becoming the first major economic nation to completely close off ‘unskilled migration’. The new immigration policy will eventually trigger a series of labour market shortages that will include the undesirable jobs at the bottom. As the ‘skilled workers’ from the EU will need to have a job offer from an approved employer under the new policy they are no longer likely to do ‘unskilled work’ even on a temporary basis. For sure, this will create vacancies for people to do the cooking, cleaning and caring along with the building and bar work. Continuing to label those jobs as unskilled may only bring that decision forward – while simultaneously making it more difficult to convince the British public that it will be necessary to admit such workers when the time comes.

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