

Let young people move: why any post-Brexit migration deal must safeguard youth mobility

blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/07/19/let-young-people-move-why-any-post-brexit-migration-deal-must-safeguard-youth-mobility/

19/07/2016

*Restrictions on free movement are likely to be an important aspect of the UK's new relationship with EU countries post-Brexit. **Richard Bronk** argues that safeguarding youth mobility should be a major principle behind any immigration reforms. He explores the economic, political and social case for preserving it, before suggesting some ways to do so – based in part on existing provisions for youth mobility with certain Commonwealth and other non-EU allies.*



Following the Brexit vote, it seems politically inevitable that some restrictions on free movement of workers between the United Kingdom and other EU member states will be a feature of any divorce settlement. It is widely accepted, though, that these restrictions should be designed in way that will not impede the ability of the UK to attract skilled workers from overseas, where they have much to contribute to UK public services, business, scientific research and the cultural life of the nation. This post outlines a case for also privileging another important principle in the formulation of any new migration deal with other EU countries – that of preserving youth mobility as a desirable social and economic goal.



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The social and economic case for safeguarding youth mobility

It has long been understood that a key part of the rounded education of young people is to encourage them to live, study or work abroad for a period in order to broaden their perspectives, enable them to experience the textures of other ways of living or working, and help them form cross-border networks of friendship and business or research collaboration. Furthermore, in the increasingly interdependent world in which we live, it is essential for cutting-edge UK research establishments, IT start-ups, biotech companies and cultural organisations to have the ability to attract young talent from across the continent to work for them – initially, at least – on an informal and temporary basis.

The provision of student visas for EU citizens (and reciprocally for UK citizens in other EU countries) would clearly not be sufficient on its own to allow for youth mobility. For example, if students (and their partners) cannot do significant temporary or part-time work while – and immediately after – studying, they will very often not be able to afford to study abroad. This would not only hit the ability of UK universities to recruit EU students (a key revenue source), but it would also deprive universities and related sectors of access to mobile talent from other EU countries at the key early stage in their careers.

Nor would the provision of work permits for those with explicit long-term job offers and proven skills do the trick on its own, since it ignores the reality of early careers, which are highly fluid and rely on short-term contracts, internships etc. For example, one of the best ways for companies to decide whom to hire is to allow large numbers of young graduates to work for them on a temporary basis as interns or agency staff. Without youth mobility between the UK and the continent, UK companies and universities will be restricted to a much smaller pool of talent. Furthermore, our own youth will be disadvantaged by any reciprocal restrictions on their ability to gain experience from working in other EU countries.

The political case for privileging youth mobility

It has been widely remarked that the referendum revealed startling divergences in preferences about free movement and EU membership between the young and the old, and between metropolitan and university cities, on the one hand, and the smaller towns and villages of England, on the other. Those aged 18-24 voted about 3:1 in favour of remaining in the EU, while the cities of London, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast, Bath, Bristol, Cambridge, Exeter, Liverpool, Manchester, Norwich, Oxford, Reading, York, Aberdeen, Dundee and Glasgow all voted heavily for Remain. The relevance of this to the issue of youth mobility is obvious. Those cities with large student and young graduate populations generally voted heavily Remain suggesting positive support for (or at least little appetite for restrictions on) youth mobility in these places. A UK government keen to address the concerns of those in other parts of the country about unrestricted immigration without antagonising unnecessarily the very large minority comfortable with free movement (especially the young) would do well to isolate youth mobility – particularly for students and graduates – as a key exception to any new restrictions. Recognising youth mobility as a key principle within a controlled immigration system would help assuage the dismay felt by young voters at the Brexit decision.

The danger otherwise is that an un-nuanced focus on an overall target for maximum net inward migration will lead politicians to focus on cutting numbers among precisely the group – young students and graduates – whose continued mobility is so important economically, socially and politically to the UK's great cities, universities and young people. Moreover, there is precious little evidence that youth mobility among students and graduates is the cause of the perceived strains on public services and housing in deprived parts of the country, or a significant cause of downward pressure on wages for indigenous workers.

The legal precedents and possible shape of youth mobility provision post-Brexit

The best policy outcome would be for the UK government to exempt all students and recent graduates of bona fide UK universities coming from other EU countries entirely from any restrictions to free movement up until, say, the age of 30. (To this end, it would help to leave students out of the net immigration numbers). Failing this, the second best option would be for student visas to be generous in allowing students to work part-time (including full-time during university vacations) while studying and to work full-time for a period of between two and five years after graduation.

It should be noted that there is a strong legal precedent for exceptions to strict immigration rules to promote youth mobility. The UK has a well-established [scheme](#) for young people from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Taiwan and Monaco that allows them to work in the UK (in addition to any time spent on a student visa) for any two-year period before their 31st birthday. It would seem very odd at a minimum not to extend such an arrangement to young people from the UK's ex-EU partners and close European allies. This general youth mobility visa should ideally apply to all young people from EU countries – whether or not they are graduates – so long as reciprocal rights are granted to young UK citizens on the continent.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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