Employment Networks and Labour Markets in Migrant Communities: the case of learning and employment regulation

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There are various dimensions to the way migrant workers may find themselves within the most vulnerable parts of British society and also in a position where they cannot effectively deploy their skills, abilities and qualifications. First of all, their experiences of the initial stages into employment may be highly chaotic, disorganised and the product of a relatively de-regulated labour market. Secondly, the nature of the jobs many typically undertake means that they are unable to provide a framework of inclusion and support sufficient to allow an individual to prepare a clear plan for self development, or for using their skills and relevant qualifications. There is a failure within much of the labour market for skills and qualifications to be effectively recognised. Employers’ perceptions of migrant workers’ menial position within the labour market, and thus low salary expectations, means that some employers are effectively recruiting to low skilled positions on the basis of ethnicity as opposed to suitability. We therefore witness the situation where the acquisition of human capital by migrant workers generates no financial improvements, and worse still subjects migrant workers to a process of de-skilling. This is a generic problem but it affects the newly arrived more directly as they do not have the access points and local knowledge to overcome this challenge. Third, the uneven nature of employment regulation as in the case of Britain, for example, means that getting a basic wage and good working conditions is an all-consuming task for many migrants who work in some of the most vulnerable forms of employment. This leads to a fourth challenge in terms of mapping social support and being able to use networks and services that can alleviate many of their economic conditions. Many migrants have to use their own ethnic communities in order to gain information, services and a sense of dignity. This has implications on how they are able to use their experiences and qualifications to map their way into an improved and dignified existence. The paper attempts to map these dimensions of migrant activity and networks - explaining how institutions at the local level fail to map onto these experiences. The paper will look at how new social movements in terms of migrant organisations and traditional social movements such as trade unions have in various European cases (especially in relation to the United Kingdom) used the discourse and strategy of learning as a key element of their politics of connection with the broader needs of such communities. The paper will draw from a range of sociological sources to show that networking requires a multidimensional understanding of the employment relationship and the local spaces it is structured within. The role of the local state is a vital feature of this process and its form is a determining variable in terms of developments.

The research methods adopted for this paper were detailed interview case studies of five specific union learning strategies across the UK, most with some community network element.