

## **Youth Mobility Scheme: The Panacea for Ending Free Movement?**

### **Abstract**

Free movement has been at the heart of the Brexit debate, with the government grappling between satisfying public and business demands for restrictive and liberal approaches to immigration respectively. In response the government have advocated temporary migration as a potential solution, including an expanded UK-EU Youth Mobility Scheme modelled on the current T5 YMS on the assumption that YMS migrants undertake low skilled jobs. Little is known about this visa or the labour market activity of YMS migrants. Drawing on policy analysis alongside survey and interview data from Australian YMS migrants, this paper seeks to bridge some of these knowledge gaps, arguing that an expanded EU YMS will not attract significant EU migrants, and is far from a remedy for free movement ending.

**Key words:** youth mobility scheme, temporary immigration, Brexit, labour market, UK immigration policy

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### **Introduction**

The UK labour market has come to be structurally reliant on EU labour to fill shortages in low and mid skilled sectors for over a decade. With 500,000 EU migrants employed in low skilled/low wage industries in 2017<sup>i</sup>, the prospect of ending free movement raises major questions as to how these shortages will be filled. Expanding temporary migration programmes, such as the UK's Tier 5 Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS), whilst no panacea appears to be an attractive solution for policymakers to this dilemma. Whilst details on the UK's future immigration system remain ambiguous, the government has proposed an expanded EU-UK wide Youth Mobility Scheme, modeled on the UK's current Tier 5 Youth Mobility Scheme<sup>ii</sup>, which allows young migrants from selected countries to live and work in the UK for up to two years. The government has proposed such a scheme because 'it is believed most people who come to the UK under a YMS engage in lower skilled work' and therefore the new scheme will 'provide an additional source of labour for the UK labour market'<sup>iii</sup>.

The UK's Youth Mobility Scheme (previously working holidaymakers scheme) has long been a passage for young migrants to combine tourism whilst working in the UK. This is a middling form of migration that sits on the nexus between tourism and work migration, which has long represented a rite of passage for young people. Tier 5 migrants including YMS migrants remain politically hidden by their association with tourism, and with no employer sponsor requirements for the YMS the labour market activity of this group is largely unknown. With an expanded EU wide YMS being the only current concrete policy proposal, an examination of whether the assumptions surrounding this mobility are accurate is warranted. This paper examines the YMS, including the policy evolution and labour market activity of current YMS migrants to explore whether a EU wide YMS is feasible or even desirable. Drawing on a study of Australian YMS migrants in London, I argue that the YMS is no panacea for free movement ending and is unlikely to attract significant EU migrants to the UK. If

this scheme is to be successful in attracting significant numbers of young EU migrants, various rights under the YMS should be expanded.

Methodologically the article is based on three sources. Firstly, policy analysis of relevant government documents combined with unique immigration policy index (ImPol) to visualise changes in the YMS over time. Secondly, 75 surveys with Tier 5 Youth Mobility Australian migrants living in London. Thirdly, 20 in depth interviews YMS Australians conducted between April 2015 and May 2016. The paper is divided into five sections. Firstly, the UK labour market and consequential dilemma of free movement ending is presented. Secondly, the policy evolution of the YMS is discussed as well as the factors behind the promotion of temporary migration governance in the UK. Thirdly, the paper draws on key results from surveys and interviews with Australians on the UK YMS to examine what the speculative evidence shows of their labour market activity and the motivations to migrate on a YMS visa. The conclusion reflects on whether a EU wide YMS is feasible or desirable based on what we know of current YMS migrants.

### **Liberal labour market**

The plans to end free movement, and with it a loss of EU labour, has panicked many UK employers and not without reason. The Confederation of British Industry estimates that EU workers make up to 30 per cent of the total workforce in different sectors, that the contribution of EU workers ‘will be needed in the future’ and that the ‘current non-EU immigration system is not a solution for EU nationals’<sup>iv</sup>. The loss of EU labour may transcend workforce planning creating spillover effects such as rising food prices<sup>v</sup>, with the Environmental, Food and Rural Affairs Committee concluding that farming and horticulture businesses ‘have big problems retaining labour’ and that ‘the challenge will become a crisis if the government do not swiftly take measures’<sup>vi</sup>. Social work and residential care likewise face a ‘perfect storm’ of high employee churn, skills shortages, low pay, and increasing labour demand’, with up to 87 per cent of EU employees in social care unable to meet the government’s current stringent visa requirements<sup>vii</sup>.

The UK’s reliance on EU labour stems from its mode of capitalism, typically regarded as a liberal market economy<sup>viii</sup> entailing low employment protection, light regulations and a large low-wage sector<sup>ix</sup>. There is consequently a lack of coordinated wage bargaining arrangements, and firms primarily coordinate their activities via competition market arrangements. As a result, there are incentives for employers to delay costly technological advancements in favour of depending on low-wage labour<sup>x</sup>. Declining apprenticeship and training schemes in Britain have further fostered the reliance on importing labour. Coupled with decades of deregulation this has lowered incentives for employers to invest in skills and training for the domestic labour force. As a result, many sectors such as social care, retail and hospitality and construction have come to rely on EU labour to fill labour shortages in key sectors in lieu of a native workforce willing to take up low quality jobs.

Piore<sup>xi</sup> famously argued that labour markets are divided into primary and secondary sectors otherwise known as the dual labour market hypothesis. The primary sector offers stable well-paid employment to skilled workers, whilst the secondary is comprised of low-paid, low-skilled jobs – the so-called 3D jobs – where migrants are concentrated. Piore argued that the variability in economies (high/low of production) create a need for flexible workers who can be dismissed in periods of reduced activity. With limited social status and entitlements to belong, migrants concentrate in the secondary sector as national workers who aspire for ‘long-term career prospects to define their social position, shun such work’<sup>xii</sup>. Key to this dualism is temporal flexibility – not exclusive to migrants but more generally precarious workers – where employers can transfer business risks on to workers through atypical, insecure and precarious contracts.

Specific sectors have come to rely on EU migrants willing to take on precarious or low quality employment including agriculture (99 per cent seasonal work<sup>xiii</sup>), construction (10 per cent<sup>xiv</sup>), social care (8 per cent<sup>xv</sup>/Skills for Care 2018) and retail which employs 15 per cent of the entire UK workforce (six per cent)<sup>xvi</sup>. These low quality jobs are deemed as undesirable by the native workforce with little to no job security, poor pay, limited progression opportunities and often dirty, demeaning and dangerous/difficult otherwise known as 3D jobs in the secondary market. The current points based immigration system offers no legal avenues for non-EU low or mid skilled migrant workers. In lieu of opening Tier 3 (low skilled) for the first time since the inception of the PBS in 2008, or the re-establishment of sector specific scheme, which the government have stated they will not do, ending free movement raises major questions as to who will fill these jobs and potentially the future of these sectors.

At the time of writing, aside from free movement ending, the future of immigration system post Brexit is unclear. However, the government published a long awaited White Paper on Immigration in December 2018<sup>xvii</sup>, which set out a handful of proposals. Its vision is for a migration system where despite a hostile environment the country attracts highly skilled people, while the labour market relies on a churn of temporary workers with limited rights. Broadly, the government advocate temporary migration as the panacea to future labour shortages, with one of the only concrete policies being to expand the current Tier 5 Youth Mobility Scheme to a EU-wide youth mobility scheme presumably as some sort of remedy for anticipated labour shortages. Why are the government advocating temporary migration? What is the Youth Mobility Scheme and who transits on these visas? Most fundamentally, will a EU wide YMS fill residual labour market demands from ending free movement and is a EU wide YMS even desirable?

### **Immigration policy: Temporary migration**

Key to the UK labour market being reliant on EU labour is that free movement requires no certification and in turn no bureaucracy. This has meant that the UK has enjoyed a pool of flexible EU workers willing to take jobs which the native workforce deem undesirable, and in turn government has had the luxury of foregoing establishing any politically contentious low skilled visas. This is in contrast to the principal work entry channel - Tier 2 – for skilled workers where workers must meet stringent eligibility criterion including salary thresholds of £30,000 and employers must undertake lengthy, bureaucratic and expensive sponsorship requirements. For employers seeking highly skilled workers with long-term contracts, such an endeavour is worth the pain. However, low or mid skilled sectors where vacancies cannot fulfil the proposed stringent Tier 2 requirements and job forecasting is more short term have different needs, above all flexible workers willing to undertake low quality, time limited jobs.

Yet whilst the labour market demands a stock of flexible migrant labour, the public has expressed a preference for migration to be reduced. Temporary migration is seen as the in-between solution satisfying both the ‘no borders’ and ‘no migrants’ arguments<sup>xviii</sup>. The popularity of TMPs amongst policymakers stems from the so-called ‘triple-win’ outcomes: the host country can meet labour market demands whilst appeasing electoral concerns over permanent settlement; the sending country benefits from both remittances and skills transfer/brain gain from migrants acquiring skills in the destination state and transferring these skills on return; and the migrants themselves benefit by a mechanism which provides people from low-income countries with better access to labour markets in high-income states. In a context of rising public anxieties over immigration, temporary migration is seen as a potential palatable solution that permits greater labour market flexibility whilst being more acceptable to electorates that, purportedly, find permanent immigration threatening<sup>xix</sup>. As a result, the

UK government has been endorsing temporary migration since the introduction of the net migration target in 2010.

Whilst policymakers advocate for temporary migration, TMPs have rightly been critiqued for being potentially exploitative. This is particularly as visas are usually conditional on employer sponsorship often creating bonded labour. Countless accounts detail the exploitation and vulnerability temporary migrant workers from the Global South and Central and Eastern Europe face in Britain (and elsewhere) in low-skilled jobs, caused by precarity of status and often steered by xenophobia or discriminatory practices<sup>xx</sup>. Australia's equivalent YMS – working holidaymakers scheme – sets a precedent for the dangers of exploitation of young temporary migrants, including 'gross underpayment of wages, excessive hours of work, sexual and other forms of harassment and sub-standard living conditions'<sup>xxi</sup>. Such exploitation has been aggravated by new policy terms that nudge WHMs into specific regional low skilled sectors in return for an entitlement to work for a second year in Australia<sup>xxii</sup>. More generally, policies that discourage long-term settlement provide few incentives to integrate, leading to poor community cohesion.

Despite the dangers of rights violations under badly regulated TMPs, the Coalition government (2010-2015) and the Conservative administrations (2015-2019) have favoured a migration system underpinned by temporariness in pursuant with the net migration target aimed to reduce immigration to 'sustainable levels' introduced by the Conservative led government in 2010. Crucially third country nationals who are present for less than 12 months do not count in the net migration figures. A major component of the Conservative governments' policy has been to ensure that economic immigration is an exclusively temporary phenomenon, or to 'break the link' between permanent and temporary migration as epitomised by Prime Minister May when Home Secretary in 2010:

It is too easy, at the moment, to move from temporary residence to permanent settlement...Working in Britain for a short period should not give someone the right to settle in Britain...Settling in Britain should be a cherished right, not an automatic add on to a temporary way in'<sup>xxiii</sup>.

This appears to be a 'point of principle for the Conservatives'<sup>xxiv</sup>, with former Prime Minister Cameron stating in April 2011 'It cannot be right that people coming to fill short-term skills gaps can stay long term'<sup>xxv</sup>. According to the former UK Border Agency the curtailing of settlement rights would 'discourage over-reliance on foreign workers'<sup>xxvi</sup>, yet past experience suggests otherwise. As Cavanagh puts it 'the more likely result is a shift to a constantly churning population of temporary working migrants – because although the need is permanent, the government is choosing for that need to be satisfied by people who stay only temporarily'<sup>xxvii</sup>.

Whilst at the time of writing the future immigration system post Brexit is unclear, the government published two White Papers in 2018 that signalled the direction of future policy. The new system:

...will have the same core objectives as now...it must create strong borders, protect the vulnerable, enforce the rules and control the numbers and type of people coming to live and work here, in line with the continued commitment to reduce annual net migration to sustainable levels...from an economic perspective, it must support an open, global economy [...] which aims for a highly skilled, innovative and highly productive workforce'<sup>xxviii</sup>

The government's intention to institutionalise temporariness as the norm for all immigration comes in the form of a proposal for a strictly time limited 12 month low skilled visa for 'low risk countries' with no route to permanency or right to bring family. This is proposed as a strictly transitory measure

that will be regularly reviewed and possibly closed. However, the key consistent proposal in both White Papers is the establishment of an EU wide Youth Mobility Scheme. The government have proposed an EU-EU YMS as part of their Mobility Framework ‘to ensure that young people can continue to enjoy the social, cultural and educational benefits of living in the EU and the UK’<sup>xxxix</sup>. The government intend to design the scheme in broadly the same way as the existing YMS ‘taking account of EU specificities’ with the government claiming that ‘it will provide an additional source of labour for the UK labour market’<sup>xxx</sup>. This warrants an examination of the current YMS and how this visa has evolved from tourist mobility to labour migration.

### **Policy Evolution: Working holidaymakers and Youth Mobility**

The UK Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS), formerly known as the working holidaymakers scheme (WHM) is historically one of the longest running youth schemes globally. Concordant with post-war concerns to preserve ties with the Commonwealth – ironically due to Britain’s new dominant geopolitical alliance with the European Economic Community<sup>xxxi</sup> – the Commonwealth project was at the heart of the original Working Holiday Makers scheme. It was designed principally as a cultural exchange programme for young Commonwealth citizens and thus purely intended for tourism and cultural exchange. However, the scheme has been transformed over the years from the perspective of policymakers from Commonwealth tourist mobility and cultural exchange to a labour market route.

Throughout the history of the scheme applicants must always retain entry clearance before being admitted including biometric residence permit. Moreover, both the previous WHM and the current YMS work on a reciprocal quota basis with each participating country being allocated a number of visas based on reciprocal agreements. There were 41,652 YMS visa granted in the year to September 2017, down one per cent on the previous year<sup>xxxii</sup>.

Whilst the broad design of the scheme has remained consistent – allowing participants to stay in the UK for up to two years, with permission to work and little post entry controls – the eligibility criterion and rights attached to this visa have changed over the years, as can be seen from the graph below. The graph is derived from the Immigration Policy Index (ImPol), which measures policy restrictiveness across time and different visas on a basic ordinal scale. The coding is derived from original legal sources in this case the immigration rules<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

#### **GRAPH ONE ABOUT HERE: ELIGIBILITY VERSUS RIGHTS YSM**

In the early 1990s, surprisingly WHM could bring dependents aged less than five years old and there was no specification that the applicant be unmarried, hence why rights for WHM were higher in this period. Moreover, given that all Commonwealth citizens could apply for a WHM, the list of eligible nationalities was higher, hence why policy was more liberal on the eligibility criterion dimension. For the duration of the 1990s, the eligibility criterion and rights attached to the visa remained consistent. The 2000s New Labour governments significantly liberalised the WHM by allowing participants to transit to other visas in country and increasing the age eligibility from 18-27 to 18-30, whilst also liberalising the type of work that could be undertaken. In 2002 the Labour government changed the criterion and effectively transformed this scheme into an economic route, allowing participants to switch to the work-permit scheme after 12 months. The type of work was also liberalised so that Working Holidaymakers could undertake professional, as well as highly-skilled work for the first time. The graph above demonstrates these liberalising policy reforms on the rights dimension in the 2000s. The liberalising changes made to the Working Holiday Makers Scheme, which took effect from August 2003, were in part to ‘make the existing scheme as inclusive as possible of the Commonwealth as a whole’, but the changes were principally made to ‘provide a pool of flexible

labour that can help alleviate recruitment difficulties faced by UK employers [and] help reduce the demand for labour currently supplied by illegal workers'<sup>xxxiv</sup>. However, following 2004 A8 accession and the unexpected wave of immigration this generated, the government began to 'row back' on the previous attempts to expand labour migration<sup>xxxv</sup>, and in 2005 the scheme was restricted, with the old criterion being reinstated.

Following the introduction of the points-based system (PBS), in 2008 the Working Holidaymakers Scheme was consolidated with other temporary routes (such as Au Pair visa) and was renamed the Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS), subsided under Tier 5 of the PBS which is specifically for temporary migration. The age criterion was raised again from 28 to 30 and a maintenance requirement was attached to this visa for the first. Yet the most significant change has been the addition of non-Commonwealth nationals as participants, moving the scheme away from Commonwealth facilitated mobility.

The YMS is currently restricted to eight participating countries, which have a special reciprocal agreement with the UK. These include: Australia, Canada, Japan, Monaco, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea and Taiwan. Each of the participating countries is prescribed an annual allocation of total YMS visas, based on the relative equivalent YMS visas issued to UK nationals on the respective schemes. As was previously the case under the WHM scheme, those with British overseas, British overseas territories or British national (overseas) citizenships' can also apply. The list of countries participating in the scheme is thus much smaller than on the original UK WHM programme. Moreover, the emphasis of the scheme being to facilitate cultural exchange between *Commonwealth* citizens has largely been abandoned. Having said this, the allocation of YMS visas to Old Commonwealth (and therefore predominantly white and English speaking) countries is substantially larger than non-Commonwealth countries. For example, since January 2016 the number of Tier 5 (Youth Mobility Scheme) visas available increased by 20 per cent for Australians, and therefore Australians were allocated 70 per cent of the total YMS visas available in 2016.

As of February 2019, applicants have a maintenance requirement of £1,890 in savings demonstrated through verifiable bank statements. Applicants can apply for an YMS up to three months before they travel to the UK with a visa cost of £244 to apply. Applicants must also pay a £300 NHS health surcharge. The YMS is a one-shot visa meaning that applicants must not previously have entered or spent time in the United Kingdom on a Working Holiday Visa, or a Tier 5 YMS visa. The current YMS visa gives 24 months leave to remain and limited working restrictions<sup>xxxvi</sup>. Applicants can enter the UK at any time while their visa is valid, and leave and come back at any time during their stay without needing to reapply for a visa. Applicants can study, be self-employed and set up a company. Participants cannot extend their stay, cannot access public funds and cannot bring family with them (they must apply separately).

Previously, participants on the WHM could switch into work permit employment if they secured a job before the expiration of their WHM, and at one point WHM could even switch into the now terminated Tier 1 general category, where applicants did not need a job offer. However, the last eight years have seen stringent changes to switching visas, and current policy stipulates that YMS participants must leave the UK before their YMS visa expires. In this respect, the YMS is and always has been a strictly temporary mobility, although the previous facilitation to switch to more permanent visas in-country previously equally made this a transitory route at one point.

There are two fundamental differences of the YMS visa in contrast to all other UK visas. Firstly, the YMS is age specific, and secondly the visa has no sponsorship requirements. In the case of youth mobility schemes, temporal eligibility – referring to the biological age restrictions for these visas

(aged 18-30) – confers particular life stages as desirable bio-political characteristics of migrants where youth is prized<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Young migrants are then constructed ‘as desirable migrants of the neoliberal state, representing labour capacity without the ‘social burden’ associated with being elderly or having dependent children’<sup>xxxviii</sup>. In this sense, YMS migrants’ temporality and life stage create lucrative labour market characteristics.

The second crucial difference in the YMS visa in contrast to all other visas in the UK system is that it does not require a job offer, employer sponsorship or stringent Tier 2 eligibility requirements. Employers can therefore easily hire YMS migrants without bureaucratic processes or the need to conduct a resident labour market test to ensure no resident can fill a vacancy. In this sense, the YMS visa is the most liberal in the UK immigration system. At the same time, the lack of certification criterion means there is a lack of data available regarding the labour market activity of YMS migrants, or indeed their distributional spread across the country. I now turn to the interview and survey results of current Australian YMS migrants living in London to explore the labour market activity and motivations to migrate for this group to reflect on whether an EU wide YMS would be workable.

### **Youth Mobility Migrants: Australians in London**

Whilst considerable attention has been paid to on the one hand the global elite (moving for example between financial sectors), and on the other hand the movement of individuals from the ‘developing’ world to the industrialised world, ‘there has been surprisingly little attention of the “middling” forms of transnational migrants, if we understand middling in terms of socio-economic and class position in a country of origin’<sup>xxxix</sup>. There is a strong element of voluntarism that underpins this type of migration, and the element of pleasure seeking makes this group quite distinct from the economic migration or the political refugee driven by exile<sup>xl</sup>.

Whilst YMS or working holidaymakers globally are far from a homogenous group, there are a number of characteristics that form the typical profile of a working holidaymaker: young, middle class, and often highly educated. The YMS is often undertaken as a rite of passage<sup>xli</sup> for the in-between life stages for example between higher education and professional careers. Between visa (including required savings and the NHS surcharge) and travel costs coupled with savings needed to safeguard against initial unemployment, undertaking a prolonged overseas experience, especially in London, is an expensive endeavour.

The research consisted of a sample of 75 YMS Australians predominantly living in London. This is a non-representative and a small sample but nonetheless with a void of information on YMS migrants due to the lack of certification requirements, our results provide a snapshot of the activity of YMS Australians residing in London. It is important to note that the labour market activity in other towns/cities or other nationalities on YMS may be vastly different yet there is no way of knowing where YMS migrants reside in the UK or why they migrate to specific locations<sup>xlii</sup>. Participants were selected via snowball sampling with the assistance of an expatriate group (Aussies in London) set up specifically for young Australians in London<sup>xliii</sup>. We conducted a closed survey with 75 migrants at various events set up by the group, and twenty of these individuals self-selected for in-depth interviews conducted at a later time in various locations across London between April 2016 and May 2017. The survey sample consisted of 32 male respondents and 43 female respondents, with the majority originating from New South Wales (40 per cent), followed by Victoria (25 per cent) and Western Australia (13 per cent). Interviews were coded manually using a basic coding framework to identify key themes from the interviews including motivations to migrate, integration themes, socialisation, and labour market relations.

From the outset it needs to be stressed that Australian migrants residing in the UK are somewhat unique in comparison to other nationalities due to the deep history of migration and colonial ties between nations. The UK has long been the preferred destination for Australians looking to permanently emigrate, accounting for 20.9 per cent of Australian emigrants in the period 1996 and 2006<sup>xliv</sup>. Migration systems theory suggests that any migration can be seen in terms of the one hand macro factors (namely institutional) and micro structures, such as networks, practices and beliefs of migrants themselves<sup>xlv</sup>. This is certainly pertinent within the mobility under study here. The colonial history explains the long established WHM/YMS and acts as the macro institutional structure that legitimises this movement. On the other hand, the cultural connections and history that the two nations share, including shared language, as well as personal connections such as extended family partly explain why the UK is chosen as a destination. As Wilson et al. suggest that the ‘rite de passage’ year that many spend in England ‘is one of the last remaining vestiges of the British imperial diaspora’<sup>xlvi</sup>.

### ***Labour market activity: assumptions and realities***

While temporary migrants have typically being concentrated in low skilled sectors and often face prolonged periods of unemployment<sup>xlvii</sup>, a striking finding among our respondents was that the majority had no difficulties in acquiring a job and were working in high and mid skilled professional occupations. The sample was overwhelmingly concentrated in teaching professions, however this may be due to a possible sampling bias via snowball sampling. While the majority were working in skilled occupations, many were nonetheless working under precarious contracts, suggesting that young migrants, like many other young Britons, absorb risks of work through precarious contracts underpinned by temporal flexibility<sup>xlviii</sup>. The findings demonstrate that YMS Australians have a positive and inclusive experience in the UK labour market in stark contrast to many other temporary migrants. This stems from presumably employers’ preferences for temporally flexible, ultra-mobile workers arguably coupled with proficient English, the aesthetic labour characteristic of youth, and the acceptable trade-off of precariousness young Australians accept in return for the flexible working arrangements to suit their travel plans.

While the sample were largely highly skilled – defined as possessing tertiary education – over half did not try to get their qualifications recognised in the UK (53 per cent), and of those who did 38 per cent had no difficulties getting qualifications recognised. The majority of our respondents used a recruitment company before leaving Australia to secure employment before arrival, and 67 per cent used a recruitment agency – based in the UK or Australia – to acquire their current job.

The majority of respondents were, unsurprisingly given their temporary status, working on time-limited work contracts. Sixty four per cent of respondents were working on fixed term contracts, seasonal work and agency temping. The majority of those on fixed term contracts were for less than 12 months, with 40 per cent having contracts lasting less than six months. However, with ambiguity on legal definition of zero hour contracts<sup>xlix</sup> and as revealed in interviews with respondents, many were likely working on zero hour contracts without necessarily being aware of it.

YMS Australians were overall content with their precarious contracts; only half of respondents wanted a more permanent or secure job in the UK. Fifty five per cent of the sample stated they were working in their ideal sector, and 70 per cent were working in either their ideal job or sector. Ninety per cent were satisfied with their employer and only five per cent of respondents were unsatisfied with their job. Thus, despite the insecure nature of employment, due to the primary motivation to migrate for tourism and as a rite of passage, the flexibility inherent in these types of atypical contracts seem to



be advantageous for both employer and workers. In this sense, employers utilise the fluid, young, mobile characteristics of young Australians.

The young Australians in our sample were both highly skilled with 69 per cent possessing a bachelor degree or higher, and the majority were working high skilled professional jobs. Strikingly, respondents were overwhelmingly working in the teaching professions (40 per cent), principally as substitute teachers. However, this may be due to a sampling bias as we used a snowball sampling strategy. Moreover, it is possible that the expatriate group may be overrepresented by those in teaching professions due to friendship networks utilising the same service. Eleven per cent were working in professional business and administrative roles, and a further nine per cent were working in clerical roles, with other respondents working in retail and care. A minority were working in elementary occupations. In contrast to other temporary migrants who often face prolonged periods of unemployment<sup>1</sup> the findings suggest that YMS Australians face far less barriers to employment than other migrants do. Young Australians find it easy to acquire employment, with 85 per cent of the sample in employment and 73 per cent of respondents having applied for between zero and five jobs in total in the UK.

The majority of respondents had no trouble in gaining employment in the UK (66 per cent), zero respondents had experienced discrimination, and over half of respondents said that they have never been in the position of looking for work in the UK (52 per cent). Of those that had difficulties in gaining employment, the two key issues were administrative loop holes with acquiring national insurance numbers, and the time-limited YMS visa itself dissuading employers. The latter was especially acute for those seeking high skilled jobs in their specific sector; one male interviewee spoke of having a job offer in engineering before arriving to the UK but the employer cancelled the offer on realising the applicant was on a time-bound visa.

In the knowledge of their two-year visa dissuading some employers, YMS Australians are undeterred by precarious contracts because mobility is principally for leisure and therefore their primary consideration is short-term financial gain with maximum employment flexibility:

*[My friend] she gets paid peanuts but with 10 months on her visa to go she'd rather stick to that as she doesn't think another employer will pick her up...a lot of employers want to see that longer term visas (Female, 25)*

While all participants spoke about being motivated to migrate as a rite of passage and/or time to self-explore before “growing up”, for some – with London’s global reputation – it also served as a way to build their career prospects. Just under a third of the sample cited work experience and improving career prospects as their primary motivation to migrate to Britain, and three quarters of respondents thought their work experience would aid their career when returning to Australia (76 per cent). Broadly, those in the younger cohort (aged 18-24) migrated purely for “play” in contrast to older YMS (aged 25-31) Australians who while seeking a rite of passage also migrate to the UK for work experience and career progression back in their homeland. This in turn highlights the blurriness of this mobility between self-exploration and individualisation and economic calculus:

*Essentially there is more of a competitive market, bigger companies involved so it's more competitive and they attract a range of international talent as well, so I guess it's competitive not just in terms of the actual market but also in terms of human resources as well, in terms of other people wanting jobs. So it's quite multicultural in that aspect so I think working with people from different countries – that's value to bring back to Australia in addition to more of*

*the job specific components and being able to work with, yes, bigger budgets , more difficult clients and different scenarios (Male 29)*

### **Motivations to migrate**

Precarious work was an acceptable trade-off for these young migrants for the pull of London in terms of global transport to Europe: *'You just have to work to sustain travel'* (Female 25). Almost 90 per cent of the sample had travelled to destinations in Europe during their stay in Britain, and 65 per cent of respondents cited travelling in Europe specifically as their main motivation to migrate. It is precisely the integration of long-term leisure travel with employment, which 'extends both the temporal and experiential dimensions of the overseas experience beyond what is commonly understood as tourism'<sup>li</sup>. Yet this mobility is undoubtedly motivated at least in part, if not primarily, for tourism in a broad sense.

What was striking amongst respondents, was that the decision to migrate was not about Britain per se, but London specifically and crucially the ease of travelling to Europe: *In terms of application for leaving Perth I was purely invested in London in hearing about those opportunities... I didn't have any interest in any other city to be honest (Male 27)*. This is not unique to young Australians of course, nor is there anything unique about London to other global cities. Nonetheless, one of the key pulls of London for these young migrants then is its central position in terms of global transport to Europe and more generally hubs of communication flows.

The attraction of London is within its internationally connected cultural and social institutions, and its cosmopolitan environment. Interviewees spoke about being enlightened by living in London and experiencing 'super diversity'<sup>lii</sup>, especially from those who grew up in rural towns in Australia:

*People said London is a multicultural city. And you're like of course it is, it's one of the biggest cities and it's in Europe. But in my head I didn't expect it to be this multicultural. In my head I'd painted a picture of a normal day in London, and I wouldn't have imagined so many varieties of culture, especially coming from Australia where we are multicultural but we're still pretty damn white. So for example we'd never seen an Orthodox Jew before! It's really broadened our ideas of religion and cultures (Female 28, Male 26)*

YMS Australians had travelled all over Europe, with most having visited at least 10 EU countries in the preceding 12 months. Some of these were weekend trips, whilst other trips lasted up to three weeks. Whilst almost 88 per cent of our respondents had travelled outside of the UK during their YMS stay, very few had travelled within the UK; the majority had never left London. This reinforces that, in our sample at least, YMS Australians, are drawn to London and the ease of travel to Europe specifically, as opposed to the UK generally. When asked a multiple choice question on why they migrated to the UK as opposed to any other destination, 34 per cent cited London offering better travel opportunities, 20 per cent said that English being the dominant language made it the ideal destination, 16 per cent cited the YMS visa being one of the easiest to acquire and eight per cent stated that the UK offered better work experience than other countries. It is possible that London is particularly attractive for YMS Australians specifically, yet the overall Australian population in the UK is disproportionately resident in London in contrast to the rest of the UK (53 per cent)<sup>liii</sup>.

Essentially London offers YMS Australians easy travel connections to Europe whilst at the same time being an English-speaking nation with similar cultural, political and social institutions to Australia. Moreover, the UK generally is a familiar place for YMS Australians with almost half our respondents having previously visited the UK (47 per cent). Crucially the UK offers YMS Australians familiar

networks due to either extended family or other Australians being resident in the UK, with 79 per cent of our sample knowing another Australian living in London before arriving. London offers these young migrants – who are usually experiencing migration for the first time – both a level of familiarity and excitement.

## **Conclusion**

Post Brexit immigration policy is currently ambiguous and may ultimately be determined by any trade deals the UK agree with reciprocal countries. Nonetheless, the loss of EU labour is likely to impact on particular sectors, especially low (or fundamental) skilled-based sectors. One of the government's concrete proposals is to establish an EU wide YMS on the belief that YMS migrants undertake low skilled jobs. With no certification requirements on the YMS visa, there is relatively little known about YMS migrants. Drawing on policy analysis alongside survey and interview data from Australian YMS migrants, this paper has sought to bridge some of the knowledge gaps as to the labour market activity and the motivations to migrate of YMS migrants.

Our findings suggest that the assumptions surrounding the sectoral and skill distribution of YMS migrants is potentially inaccurate. Whilst our sample was small and non-representative, the majority of Australian YMS migrants were working in high skilled professions, and were themselves highly skilled. This calls into question whether the proposal for an EU wide YMS would necessarily alleviate any residual labour shortages in low and mid skilled sectors as a result of ending free movement. Whilst it is of course possible that other YMS migrants take up low skilled jobs in other UK regions, the abundance of middle or high skilled jobs in London, albeit precarious, provide little incentive for YMS migrants to undertake low skilled jobs.

Key to the success and attractiveness of the YMS visa is that it provides non-EU migrants an opportunity to travel Europe more widely. This is evidently the critical reason why Australian YMS migrants select the UK as their destination of choice. Given that EU citizens can freely travel, work and reside in all Member States, there is little reason to believe that the UK would be attractive for young EU citizens in this respect. A further reason YMS Australian migrants choose the UK is that English is the dominant language allowing migrants to acquire employment and integrate relatively easily. Evidently, this would not be the case for nationalities of the remaining 27 Member States, thus reinforcing that an EU wide YMS would not necessarily be attractive to EU citizens. Of course EU migrants may wish to improve their English language skills by residing in the UK, but whether this alone is significant enough to attract young EU migrants is highly questionable. London as a global super diverse city with its cosmopolitanism and global reputation in many sectors provides a final motivation for YMS Australians to reside in the UK. Yet it is possible that Brexit, and the likely negative economic impact, may detrimentally effect London's reputation in this regard<sup>iv</sup>, which raises questions around whether London would remain an attractive destination for young EU migrants. Moreover, labour shortages from free movement ending are likely to hit many parts of the UK outside of London. Whether young EU migrants would wish to reside outside of London for such a short period is debatable. All things considered, it is unlikely that the YMS visa would be as attractive to young EU migrants as it is with non-EU migrants. There is simply little to offer which EU migrants cannot acquire elsewhere in Europe with no limitations on their residency and opportunities to settle.

More generally, expanding temporary migration routes runs the risk of increasing exploitation and potentially irregular migration. From the employer perspective, especially those in low skilled sectors, the training necessary for many jobs dissuades employers from hiring temporary migrants, in the knowledge that their workers will need to leave. At the same time, if the government were to propose certification requirements for YMS migrants in order to nudge and control migrant workers into

specific sectors where shortages were rife, this creates the potential for exploitation (as seen in the WHM in Australia see Reilly 2015), and again offers employers little incentive to undergo a heavily bureaucratic and often expensive sponsorship process for workers who will leave within a short period.

The policy evolution of the YMS visa reveals how the numerous administrations have remodelled the visa from a Commonwealth tourism scheme to a labour market route. If the government were to establish this as a EU wide scheme it would need to expand rights in order to make this attractive to EU migrants. This could include reinstating previous rights, such as allowing YMS migrants to transit to another visa whilst remaining in the UK (such as a Tier 2 visa), and providing a route to permanency by allowing the YMS visa time to count towards eligibility for indefinite leave to remain. This is especially pertinent given that our findings suggest that YMS migrants are skilled individuals and thus more liberal rights attached to this visa could potentially be in line with the government's aims to boost human capital and attract high skilled migrants<sup>iv</sup>. Evidently, even providing for a more attractive visa may not be enough to attract EU migrants to a country that is seen to have a reputation for being hostile to immigrants.

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