

Report on the Symposium of the RSA Research Network on Migration, Inter-Connectivity and Regional Development: Beyond Economic Contribution - Migrant Identities, Working Lives and Social Embeddedness



Report on the symposium of the RSA Research Network on Migration, Inter-Connectivity and Regional Development (MICaRD) - “Beyond economic contribution: Migrant Identities, Working Lives and Social Embeddedness”

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The University of Lincoln hosted the final symposium of the RSA funded MICaRD network on the 26th and 27th April 2018. Over forty delegates from across the UK (Bournemouth, Swansea, Inverness, Newcastle, Birmingham, Sheffield and Nottingham among others) and beyond (Italy, Serbia and Germany) attended the conference.

The opening keynote presentations challenged the categorisation of migrants (Dr Philomena de Lima, University of the Highlands and Islands) and then examined the dynamic embedding processes of migrants (Professor Louise Ryan, University of Sheffield). The focus on migrants as individuals with diverse and often unpredictable life stories as well as complex social networks, encouraged us to think about their opportunities and challenges from a more personal perspective. The need for more community-based ethnographic studies on migration in rural areas was also identified, as this would help challenge the dominant approaches to migration by looking at belonging and place-making from a broader perspective and beyond reductionist views on migrants and residents. A particularly interesting research question that emerged was to explore the ways in which intended short-term migrants became more embedded due to the non-transferability of skills and the perceived financial risks of returning home.

The third keynote by Professor Anne Green (University of Birmingham) examined migrants in the labour market, with a specific focus on the construction sector, recognising that migrants are not just operating in low-skilled jobs, but that many were in technical and managerial occupations too. Professor Green's work also highlighted the continuing demand for migrant labour and fears among employers and recruitment agencies relating to the impact of Brexit.

Reflecting on economic opportunities and challenges of a large migrant workforce in the light of the earlier keynotes challenged conventional thinking of "economic migration with social side-effects" and instead encouraged us to consider the socio-cultural motivations first. Such an approach raises questions about whether the appropriate economic opportunities exist to support migrants and whether businesses are capturing the best value out of this sector of the labour market.

Day two focused more on the future. Policy-makers and a local employer gave

alternative perspectives allowing us to better understand where research is most needed and where our research could have the most impact. Simon Telfer, Human Resources Director of Branston Potatoes, explained how their company has seen a number of European staff being promoted through their ranks. Perhaps most interestingly, the increased investment in technology and automation was certainly not seen as reducing the need for migrant workers, as it was the more skilled workers, often from other parts of the EU, who were most capable of developing and working with the new technology.

Paul Drury (Lincolnshire County Council) and David Fannin (Lincolnshire Community and Volunteers Service) both highlighted the need for more effective translation of higher level policies into local strategies and impacts. David Fannin introduced a new £1.4m project “Inclusive Boston”, which will support community leaders to strengthen social cohesion in the town – a town that has high levels of EU8 migrants and saw the highest pro-Brexit vote in the 2016 referendum. Paul Drury remarked on the wider growth of Community Interest Companies working to support multiculturalism and social cohesion across the UK and suggested that more research is needed to fully understand their activities and membership as well as mechanisms to better support their work. Throughout the discussions there was also a strong call for new research to consider both the migrants and the indigenous members of local communities when exploring questions of integration or social cohesion.

In the final session, the remaining delegates explored the potential for continuing the MICaRD network, with some very positive suggestions for concrete steps forward. Therefore, we would like to thank everyone that had contributed to our events which started in May 2016 in Belfast (hosted by Dr. Ruth McAreavey) before migrating onwards to Belgrade (hosted by Dr. Danica Šantić) and Warsaw (hosted by Dr. Adam Ploszaj) and concluding in Lincoln. We must also thank the RSA for their generous sponsorship of the network and we hope that we will be re-launching in Santiago next year with new plans to further develop this critically important field of research.