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Beyond Initial Boundaries: Two Decades of Polish Young Adult Migrants' Labour Market Positionalities in the UK Post-EU Enlargement

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Abstract

Since the 2004 European Union enlargement, the United Kingdom has seen a significant influx of Polish migrants, many of whom initially found employment in low-skilled roles due to their immediate availability and low entry barriers. This study explores the career changes of young adult Polish migrants in the UK over the past two decades. Using data from British public statistics – the Annual Population Survey (APS) and in-depth interviews – we comprehensively analyse their labour market positionalities in the UK. Our findings reveal a shift from initial deskilling and confinement to the secondary labour market to diverse, upwardly mobile career changes. This study emphasises the critical role of practical skills, work ethics, experience, and social networks in migrants' professional development. This research contributes to the broader discourse on post-EU enlargement of

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Central and Eastern European migration, providing a nuanced understanding of young adult Polish migrants' labour market experiences in the UK.

Keywords: Polish young adult migrants, UK labour market, May 2004 EU enlargement, labour market positionalities, career changes

Introduction

Since the European Union's enlargement in 2004, the United Kingdom has experienced a significant influx of Polish migrants, who have become an integral part of the UK labour force. Initially, many of these migrants found employment in low-skilled positions, such as – anecdotal – 'kitchen porters' in the hospitality sector, due to the immediate availability and low entry barriers of these roles. Despite starting at the bottom of the occupational ladder, the career trajectories of these migrants over the past two decades offer a narrative of choice-making, adaptation, and upward or parallel mobility.

Predominantly young and well-educated, Polish migrants have become a substantial component of the UK workforce. By 2020, individuals of Polish nationality constituted the largest ethnic group in the UK (ONS 2021). However, the Office for National Statistics discontinued publishing data on nationality and country of birth after June 2021 following methodological changes.

Early studies by both Polish and British researchers sought to capture the scale and impact of this migration (Eade, Drinkwater, and Garapich 2007, 2015; Trevena 2009, 2011; White and Ryan 2008), often focusing on migrant strategies and labour market performance. Over the years, the nature of Polish migration to the UK has evolved. The prevalence of circular migration has decreased as many migrants have opted to stay longer, establish roots, and start families. Improved English proficiency, accumulated work experience, and insider knowledge of the labour market have progressively enhanced their professional circumstances (Parutis 2014).

Despite a proliferation of qualitative studies on Polish migration (e.g. Kaczmarczyk, Tyrowicz 2015), there remains a gap in comprehensive, quantitative analyses of the positions Polish migrants occupy within the British labour market. This article aims to fill these knowledge gaps. By leveraging data from British public statistics – the Annual Population Survey (APS) – one of the most reliable and comprehensive sources of data on economic activity in the UK – and complementing it with in-depth interview data, we present a detailed picture of Polish young adult migrants' labour market positionality and career changes.

This study contributes to the ongoing debate on Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants in the UK by extending the understanding of young adult Polish migrants' labour market performance and their diverse career paths over 20 years since EU enlargement and opening up the UK's labour market. The distinctiveness of this

article lies in two main aspects: (1) the extensive volume and comprehensiveness of the data used; and (2) the development of a typology of migrants' labour market situations, enriched by a qualitative, dynamic perspective to analyse the trajectories leading to these situations and its juxtaposition with existing typologies of Polish migrants developed in the UK's context.

Our findings challenge the narrative prevalent during the initial post-accession phase when the majority of CEE migrants experienced deskilling (Currie 2007; Voitchovsky 2014) and were confined to the secondary labour market (Piore 1979). Today, Polish migrants exhibit a diversity in occupations and career changes, capturing a more detailed and higher-volume process of professional advancement. Furthermore, our qualitative data indicate that Polish migrants' labour market trajectories generally follow a complex path, though there are exceptions driven by personal choices and motivations.

This article is structured as follows: after this introduction, we discuss the theoretical framework, focusing on literature regarding the effects of migration on professional trajectories, with a particular emphasis on Polish young adult migrants in the British labour market with references to the latest literature. We then describe the British Annual Population Survey data and the interviews from project *"CEEYouth: The comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit"*[2] used in this study. Subsequently, we present the results of our quantitative cluster analysis, providing a broad overview of the occupational situations of young Polish adult migrants in the UK. Each cluster is then investigated in detail using both qualitative and quantitative data to highlight the subjective and temporal dimensions of migrants' occupational paths. Finally, we discuss our findings and present general conclusions, linked to each of the research questions in this article and two decades of post-EU enlargement migration from Poland.

Conceptual approach – dual labour market theory and existing typologies of Polish migrants in the UK

In the years following the EU enlargement, studies highlighted that Polish migrants were predominantly young, economically oriented, motivated, and relatively well-educated, yet frequently employed below their qualifications; mostly in low-skilled jobs (Trevena 2009, 2011; Parutis 2014; Knight et al. 2014).

Therefore, the theoretical framework of this article engages at the beginning with Michael Piore's (1979) dual labour market theory, which distinguishes between the primary labour market, characterised by stable, well-paid jobs with good working

[2] The project was funded under DAINA 1 scheme by the National Research Center/Narodowe Centrum Nauki (2017/27/L/HS6/03261) and the Research Council of Lithuania (contract No. S-LL-18-11).

conditions, and the secondary labour market, involving low-paid, unstable jobs with poor working conditions. Our study illustrates how many Polish migrants initially experience deskilling and entry into the secondary labour market upon arriving in the UK, reflecting Piore's segmentation concept. The article also addresses structural barriers, such as the glass ceiling, which impede even highly skilled migrants from reaching top-tier positions, resonating with Piore's observations on the limitations within the primary labour market. Additionally, it takes into account the broader economic and political contexts, particularly the impact of Brexit, which might have influenced migrants' career strategies and integration, thereby providing a comprehensive analysis of Polish migrants' labour market experiences through the lens of dual labour market theory.

This theoretical perspective is further enriched by a seminal typology of early post-accession Polish migrants in the UK by Eade, Drinkwater, and Garapich (2007; published later in 2015), which categorises Polish migrants in London into four main types: storks, stayers, searchers and hamsters. Storks are temporary migrants who frequently travel between Poland and the UK, often young and single, working low-skilled jobs to support their families in Poland or save for specific goals. Stayers plan to settle in the UK for the long term, typically having higher education and professional qualifications, and often bring their families with them, seeking economic benefits and better opportunities. Searchers are undecided about their future plans, remaining flexible about staying in the UK or returning to Poland, and they are diverse in age, education, and employment, exploring various opportunities for economic improvement and personal growth. Hamsters are migrants who stay in the host country temporarily with the goal of maximizing savings to bring back home for specific investments or purposes. These categories are fluid, with individuals potentially shifting between them based on changing circumstances and aspirations, highlighting the complex interplay of class and ethnicity in shaping their experiences and integration in London.

Various smaller-scale qualitative studies delved into young Poles' motivations, professional strategies, and future plans. For example, Trevena (2009, 2011) identified three types of migrants based on interviews with young graduates: (1) target earners, focused on saving money to invest back in Poland; (2) career seekers, aiming to develop their careers abroad; and (3) drifters, pursuing non-career-related goals with a spontaneous approach. Among these, only career seekers were determined to advance in the labour market.

Similarly, Szewczyk (2014) classified Polish graduates in the British labour market into three categories: continuers, who pursue careers aligned with their education in Poland and often seek further education in the UK; switchers, who alter their educational or professional trajectory and are more flexible; and late awakeners, older migrants who face difficulties finding jobs that match their qualifications due to a lower proficiency in English and self-confidence. Both typologies align with Parutis' (2014) concept of gradual upward mobility among Central and Eastern European migrants,

facilitated by linguistic skills and EU citizenship rights. While these typologies offer valuable insights, they are predominantly based on small-scale qualitative studies, often biased towards well-educated migrants. Additionally, strategies such as circular and short-term migrations have evolved, with migrants tending to prolong their stay in the UK (White, Ryan 2008). Therefore, re-examining migrants' occupational positions and strategies is necessary to understand how these positions evolve over time and what factors contribute to these changes.

We engage mostly with Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich (2007; 2015) following their mixed-method approach. Our article extends the analysis over two decades, highlighting the occupational trajectories of these migrants. It shows how many initially faced deskilling and entry into low-skilled jobs but gradually moved towards more diverse and upwardly mobile career paths. Our study underscores the importance of practical skills, work ethics, and social networks in achieving professional advancement and explores some of the impact of Brexit on their long-term plans. Together, these articles provide a detailed, evolving picture of Polish migrants' integration and career changes in the UK.

Our analysis builds on existing knowledge collected over the last 20 years by using a comprehensive dataset to provide a broad picture of Poles' positionalities in the British labour market and the dynamics of transitions between these positions. This leads to our first research question: *How do the occupational positions of young adult Polish migrants in the UK evolve over time, and what factors contribute to these changes?*

In another, latest portion of literature on Polish migrants in the UK, Sadura (2022) examines class-related educational strategies and the national capital's role among Polish migrants in the UK, highlighting education's significance in career progression. Studies provide insights into the socio-occupational paths of Polish and Lithuanian returning migrants (Czeranowska, Winogrodzka, 2024), and reveal different career trajectories post-migration. Kloc-Nowak and Ryan (2023) explore how family dynamics influence career decisions, essential for understanding migration's broader social implications.

Additionally, in this context, it is important to define – through a literature lens – a young adult person/migrant – who is featured in the title of this article. Young adulthood, defined as ages 19–34, is a developmental stage marked by significant identity exploration and the assumption of new social and professional roles. According to Arnett (2000), this period, referred to as "emerging adulthood", is characterised by instability, self-focus, and openness to possibilities as individuals explore various life options before achieving long-term stability. Similarly, Cohen-Scali (2003) emphasise that young adulthood is crucial for forming one's vocational, familial, and social identity amidst contemporary societal pressures. This is particularly true for young adult migrants, who must simultaneously navigate leaving their familiar comfort zone, new environment, language barriers, and social integration while striving to establish themselves in the destination society. Schulenberg, Bryant, and O'Malley

(2004) note that the developmental tasks of young adulthood influence well-being trajectories, which can be further complicated for migrants due to a separation from family and limited social networks. In the context of changing societal and economic structures, Côté and Bynner (2008) observe that young adults, including migrants, are more focused on building educational and social capital to meet the demands of an increasingly complex labour market. Therefore, for young adult migrants, this stage involves a dual process of personal identity formation and adaptation to the challenges of a new environment, making it a uniquely complex and formative period in their lives with international migration experience on top of it.

The second research question emerges from these insights: *What strategies do Polish migrants employ to navigate the British labour market, and how do these strategies impact their occupational trajectories?* This question is vital to understanding the tactics migrants use to overcome challenges and seize opportunities in their professional lives.

This article enriches the existing body of literature by providing a detailed and nuanced analysis of young adult Polish migrants' labour market experiences in the UK, integrating quantitative data from British public statistics and qualitative narratives from the project *"CEEYouth: The comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit"* to contribute to the discourse on migration strategies, labour market positionalities and career changes in the context of the post-EU enlargement 20 year period, when Brexit – leaving the EU by the UK – also took place.

Methodology

This article integrates quantitative data from the Annual Population Survey (APS) and qualitative data from in-depth interviews with young adult Poles from our research project *"CEEYouth: The comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit"* to answer two theory-driven, embedded into literature research questions formulated above.

The Annual Population Survey (APS) is a comprehensive British study conducted by the Office for National Statistics, which enhances the Labour Force Survey (LFS) with a larger sample size, making it particularly useful for examining migrant populations. Our research focuses on Polish migrants, as data for other Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants is unavailable for non-UK users due to sensitivity issues. Poles aged 19–34 constitute approximately 60.5% of all A-8 migrants in APS. We utilised APS data from 2019 to maintain consistency with our qualitative analysis.

We used variables on ISCO-08 skill levels, age at which education was completed, managerial duties, and gross weekly pay to identify homogeneous groups of Polish migrants in the UK labour market. Variables about ISCO-08 skill level, managerial

duties and gross weekly pay were used without the need for a significant transformation. We recoded the variable concerning the age of finished education into the levels of education based both on the Polish and British education systems. Based on the above variables, we checked the underemployment of Polish youth in the UK. Despite the first intentions, we excluded the variable about the length of migration, unemployment and place of living due to their irrelevance.

The cluster analysis revealed five distinct clusters, providing insights into the occupational situations and career trajectories of the migrants. All statistical analyses were performed with IBM SPSS software v. 26. The choice of variables was motivated theoretically by covering various aspects of the respondents' occupational situation, but also by the availability of variables in the APS dataset. Since the Polish population is a minority in the UK, not all variables were accessible or there was a significant proportion of missing values.

The sample used for analysis consists of 953 young Polish migrants (over 60% of them are women). Over 75% of young migrants resided in England, with the remainder spread across other parts of the UK. More than 60% were single and never married, while almost 40% were currently married. The majority (98%) arrived in the UK after Poland's EU accession in 2004. Over 40% had been in the UK for more than 10 years, and slightly over 50% had left education at age 19 or younger, with a smaller percentage completing education later, indicating higher education (43%). Elementary occupations were most represented (27%), followed by process, plant, and machine operatives (18%). Economically inactive (128) or unemployed (23) respondents were excluded from the clustering model along with respondents with missing values for one of the clustering variables, leaving us with 530 observations in the cluster analysis. The full characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1 below.

In this study, we utilise two-step cluster analysis to group similar objects based on multiple attributes, enabling the identification of patterns within complex datasets. This methodology involves several steps, including variable selection, application of an appropriate clustering algorithm, and validation of the quality of resulting clusters. Two-step cluster analysis, as described by Bacher et al. (2002), first organises cases into smaller groups (pre-clusters) and then incrementally merges these pre-clusters to form final clusters. Unlike many traditional clustering techniques, this approach accommodates both categorical and continuous variables within a single model (Chiu et al., 2001), making it an optimal choice for data with mixed types of variables. The analysis is performed in two distinct stages: in the initial phase, a sequential clustering approach is employed to create pre-clusters; in the second phase, these pre-clusters are further analysed using a hierarchical algorithm. The final number of clusters is determined using a two-phase estimation procedure, ensuring the most suitable solution is selected (Chiu et al., 2001). This approach provides a robust framework for uncovering hidden structures in data, particularly when dealing with varied types of variables.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics of data subset from Annual Population Survey for young adults from Poland (19–34)

Duration of stay		
0–4 years	182	19.1
5–9 years	349	36.7
Over 10 years	416	43.7
ISCO occupational categories		
Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	44	4.6
Professional Occupations	44	4.6
Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	62	6.5
Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	66	6.9
Skilled Trades Occupations	98	10.3
Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations	68	7.1
Sales and Customer Service Occupations	79	8.3
Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	175	18.4
Elementary occupations	254	26.7
Age of ending education		
19 or less	484	50.8
Over 19	406	42.6
Still in education or never had an education	50	5.2
Country within England		
England	742	77.9
Wales	59	6.2
Scotland and Scotland North of Caledonian Canal	113	11.9
Northern Ireland	39	4.1
Marital status		
Single, never married	575	60.3
Married	352	36.9
Separated/divorced	23	2.5
Age		
19–24	171	17.9
25–29	289	30.2
30–34	493	51.7
Female	567	59.5

Source: Own analysis based on APS data.

The qualitative data was gathered from 41 semi-structured synchronous and asynchronous in-depth interviews conducted for the research project *"CEEYouth: The comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit"* with young adult migrants from Poland in the UK. This project examines the experiences of young Poles living in the UK post-Brexit referendum. Interviewees were recruited via Facebook ads, posts on Facebook group pages, and invitations sent to Polish migrant organisations. Conducted in four waves between 2019 and 2021, the interviews provide a longitudinal perspective on participants' lives, offering both retrospective data on career development and insights into changing perceptions of aspirations and opportunities in the British labour market. All interviews were conducted in Polish, audio-recorded with participants' permission, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis focusing on professional trajectories.

The first wave of the study (W1) was conducted synchronously in March 2019, just before the planned date of the United Kingdom's departure from the EU. During this phase, we carried out partially structured interviews, either in person or via Skype, involving a total of 41 participants. The second wave (W2) took place several months later, between June and July 2019, and involved asynchronous interviews. Communication during this phase was conducted through email exchanges and social media platforms. The third wave of the study (W3), which occurred at the beginning of 2020, employed a mixed-method approach: with selected participants (20 individuals), we conducted traditional in-depth interviews, while with the remaining 17 participants, we continued asynchronous communication. The fourth wave (W4) took place June–July 2021 and involved synchronous interviews (similar to the second wave).

The qualitative sample at the beginning (in March 2020) consisted of 41 post-2004 Polish migrants, diversified by residence in the UK and life situations (e.g., family, job). The participants (25 women and 16 men) were aged 20–34 (M=30.5, SD=4.1), living in Britain for 2.5 to 14 years (M=7, SD=3.8). The sample was biased towards individuals with higher education degrees, which is common in migration and sociological studies. During the qualitative research, there were some dropouts between the waves (finally there were 17 fewer people in W4 than in W1). For the clarity of our message, we present the socio-demographic data of respondents from the first wave.

Table 2.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees

Gender	
Woman	25
Man	16
Having own apartment/house in the UK	
Yes	6
No	35

Table 2 cont.

Having children	
Yes	6
No	35
Migratory status	
Migrant	36
Return migrant	5
Education	
Secondary	10
Higher	26
PhD	5
Total	41

Source: Own analysis based on qualitative research from Project *"CEEYouth: The comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit"*.

This integrated approach of quantitative and qualitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of young Polish migrants' labour market positionalities and career changes in the UK.

Findings: Clustering Analysis of Polish Migrants in the British Labour Market

Using two-step clustering, we identified five distinct clusters of Polish migrants in the British labour market. The clusters were similar in size, with the largest containing 132 people (24.9% of the total sample) and the smallest 80 people (15.1%). The ratio between the largest and smallest clusters was 1.65. Overall, ISCO skill level was the most critical predictor of cluster membership, while educational attainment and managerial duties were more significant within-cluster predictors for clusters 2–4. A mean silhouette coefficient of 0.5 indicates a good fit of objects within their assigned clusters, while not matching well with other clusters.

The cluster analysis revealed five types of positions occupied by young adult Polish migrants in the British labour market. These positions ranged from elementary roles (cluster 1) to high professional and managerial roles (cluster 5). The middle three clusters represented medium-skill positions according to ISCO's second level of qualification. Clusters 4 and 5 included individuals in managerial roles. Clusters 2 and 3 were distinct in terms of educational attainment: all respondents in cluster 2 lacked higher education diplomas, whereas almost all in cluster 3 had them. Gross weekly pay increased with job position qualification level, being lowest in cluster 1

and highest in cluster 5. Cluster 3 is an exception since the gross weekly pay in it is lower than in cluster 2. It might be partly explained by the fact that it is feminised while cluster 3 is masculinized. However, a more precise explanation is unavailable due to the limitations of our dataset. There was no significant relationship between the length of stay in the UK and occupational position. In clusters 2 and 5, the majority had stayed in the UK for over 10 years, while in other clusters, the "6–10 years" category was most represented. All clusters, except cluster 2, had a higher proportion of women, and age differences between clusters were minimal. Characteristics of the clusters are presented in the table 3 below.

Table 3.

Outcomes of the cluster analysis

Number	CLUSTER 1.	CLUSTER 2.	CLUSTER 3.	CLUSTER 4.	CLUSTER 5.
ISCO	1 (100%)	2 (100%)	2 (98%)	2 (76.2%)	3 (100%)
Manager	No (100%)	No (100%)	No (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (52%)
Higher education (HE)	Yes (50%)	No (100%)	Yes (92.1%)	No (48.8%)	Yes (66.3%)
Gross weekly pay in the main job (in pounds)	303.33	380.03	359.33	419.11	543.71
Single	No (66.7%)	No (56.3%)	No (63.4%)	No (51.2%)	No (54.1%)
Length of stay (in years)	6–10 (38.6%)	>10 (42.9%)	6–10 (37.6%)	6–10 (38.8%)	>10 (49%)
Gender	Female (62.9%)	Male (52.9%)	Female (56.4%)	Female (60%)	Female (74.5%)
Age	28.52	28.18	29.21	29.25	30.28
N	132	119	101	80	98
% of the sample	24.9	22.5	19.1	15.1	18.5

Source: Own analysis based on APS dataset.[3]

To complement the quantitative analysis, we incorporated qualitative interview data from individuals fitting into each cluster based on their career trajectories and socio-demographic characteristics. This approach provided a "real-life" illustration of the more abstract clustering model. We are aware that the two datasets come from

[3] ISCO:

1 – elementary occupations

2 – administrative and secretarial occupations/ skilled trades occupations/ caring, leisure and other service occupations/ sales and customer service occupations/ process, plant and machine operatives

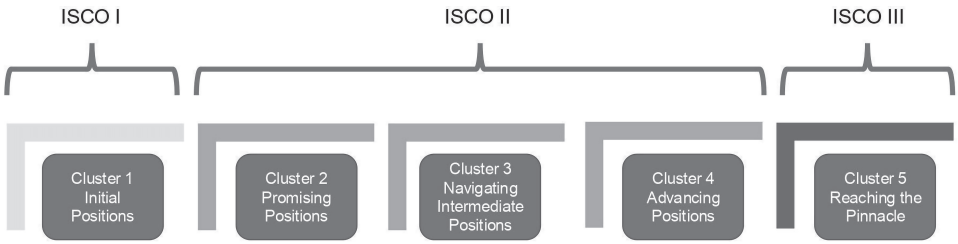
3 – associate professional and technical occupations/ professional occupations/ managers, directors and senior officials

different populations and are not complete. Therefore, the choice of qualitative cases for the quantitative cases is subjective and was the result of the research team's work in the project *"CEEYouth: The comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit"*. Nevertheless, we consider our approach as a new and enriching study about Polish post-accession migration to the UK.

Initially, we employed the metaphor of stairs and steps to depict the labour market positionalities and career changes of intra-EU young adult migrants. However, given that the career progression does not always follow a linear path, it is more appropriate to refer to the identified clusters as "positions" rather than "stages" or "steps". The five identified clusters reflect the various positions within the objective career paths of migrants. It is essential to note that not all interviewees will experience upward socio-occupational mobility. Some are content with their current positions in the secondary labour market, while others may face structural barriers that hinder their advancement. Figure 1 visualises the positions metaphor, where the specific International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) skill levels are matched to particular clusters according to the methodology described above. The naming of the subsequent "positions" is based on the results of our analysis (including qualitative data) and is described in detail in the sections dedicated to each cluster. Both Figure 1 and namings of clusters are simplifications of real-life processes using available data.

Figure 1.

Qualitative visualisation of clusters based on labour market positionalities of young adult migrants from Poland in the UK



Source: Own elaboration.

The cluster-based model above highlights the diverse labour market positionalities and varying degrees of upward and downward socio-occupational mobility experienced by Polish migrants in the UK, shedding light on both the opportunities available and the barriers they face within the labour market. By examining these distinct positions, we gain a deeper understanding of how structural factors influence career progression and the extent to which migrants can move between clusters, revealing patterns of both advancement and stagnation.

Cluster 1: Initial Positions (and Sometimes Sticky Floors)

The first and largest cluster, termed "Initial positions", consisted of respondents working at the lowest ISCO skill levels. These individuals held elementary jobs and did not occupy managerial positions. Interestingly, half of this cluster had higher education diplomas, highlighting a mismatch between their education and employment (cf. Voitchovsky 2014). While "initial" might suggest early post-migration employment, the largest group in this cluster had been in the UK for 6–10 years. Although only a few interviewees were in low-skilled jobs at the time of the interviews, qualitative data showed that many had started in such roles, indicating a trajectory where many migrants begin at lower levels before moving up.

Qualitative data provided insights into the diverse circumstances affecting interviewees' job choices. For example, Ksenia (1987, 4)[4] intentionally chose a low-skilled job. She left a position at an exclusive department store to work in small family manufacturing, aiming for a balance between a decent salary and the flexibility to pursue her passion for travel. Similarly, Nora (1988, 4.5) spent her initial years in less demanding jobs, giving herself time to explore life until she turned 30. She then aimed for stability, seeking to start a family, buy a house, and secure a job that matched her education. She succeeded in becoming a preschool teacher, although her salary in this role was lower than in her previous warehouse job, indicating that the effort required to "climb the stairs" often leads migrants to remain at initial steps for financial reasons.

Krzysztof (1985, 14) who had been in the UK for 14 years, worked primarily in physical labour due to the flexibility it offered: "I cared about a stable job and a lot of flexibility, and this job gave me such flexibility". To compensate for the lower-skilled job, he took on additional roles consistent with his formal education, such as teaching at a Polish Saturday School.

Cluster 1, termed "Initial positions", highlights the experiences of Polish migrants working at the lowest ISCO skill levels, often in elementary jobs that do not utilise their higher education diplomas. This phenomenon of deskilling is well-documented in the literature, with Voitchovsky (2014) noting the mismatch between migrants' education and employment. The concept of accepting lower-skilled jobs as a temporary strategy aligns with Eade, Drinkwater, and Garapich's (2007, 2015) profile of "hamsters"' and Trevena's (2009, 2011) "target earners", who aim to accumulate savings or gain initial stability before pursuing more career-aligned opportunities. The narratives of Ksenia, Nora, and Krzysztof illustrate the diverse motivations and circumstances influencing job choices, from seeking flexibility to balancing work with personal passions and future aspirations. Their choices reflect a broader strategy of navigating the labour market by initially accepting accessible jobs while planning for upward mobility or compensating through additional roles and volunteering, as discussed by Trevena

[4] Socio-demographic details about interviewees are described according to the following pattern: (year of birth, the number of years spent abroad at the beginning of the research).

(2009, 2011). The experiences of the interviewees described above underscore the initial challenges faced by migrants and the strategic use of deskilling as a stepping stone towards achieving long-term career and personal goals, contributing to the nuanced understanding of migrant labour market integration.

Cluster 2: Promising Positions

The second cluster, termed "Promising positions" consisted of Polish migrants working in occupations at the second ISCO skill level who did not hold managerial positions. Notably, no individuals in this cluster had higher education diplomas.

The second ISCO skill level encompasses five large occupational groups: clerical support workers, service and sales workers, skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers, craft and related trades workers, and plant and machine operators and assemblers. Despite the theoretical similarity in required skill levels across these fields, the levels of job investments and rewards can vary significantly.

Interviewees in this cluster viewed the UK labour market as more accessible and diversified for individuals without a higher education degree compared to Poland. Job opportunities extended beyond manual labour, offering more varied roles. For example, Stefania, who held an administrative position in the Home Office, remarked: "Even though I only have secondary education, I was able to get a job in the Home Office and I have opportunities to take part in workshops and possibly get promoted (…) There are competences, not diplomas, that count here" (1994, 6[5]). Stefania had initially worked in a factory for four years. After this period, she secured a part-time job at the Home Office while also working in a drugstore, eventually obtaining a full-time contract at the Home Office. She felt a sense of advancement moving from a manual job to a desk job and observed that, unlike in Poland, UK employers valued practical skills, work ethics, and experience, as well as courses, certificates, and qualifications other than university diplomas.

Cluster 2, termed "Promising positions" highlights the experiences of Polish migrants working in second ISCO skill-level occupations without holding managerial positions, yet demonstrating significant career aspirations and mobility. This cluster aligns with Trevena's (2009, 2011) concept of career seekers, individuals who actively leverage diverse learning opportunities to advance their careers. Interviewees like Stefania illustrate the UK's labour market's accessibility and diversity, which values practical skills, work ethics, and sector-specific qualifications over formal education. This perspective resonates with Morosanu et al.'s (2021) findings, where Eastern and Southern European migrants in London expressed a strong sense of advancement and satisfaction. The progression from low-skilled entry positions to more stable and rewarding roles, as seen in Stefania's career journey, underscores the opportunities

[5] This means: year of birth and years spent in the UK.

for self-development and professional growth in the UK. Additionally, the perceived difference in wage levels between the UK and Poland, allowing migrants to lead a "normal life" even with lower-skilled jobs, echoes McGhee et al. (2012) and their observations on the economic benefits of migration. The qualitative data emphasises the importance of practical competencies and continuous self-improvement in achieving upward mobility, contributing to the broader understanding of how non-degree-holding migrants navigate and succeed in the UK labour market.

A key difference identified by interviewees between the Polish and UK labour markets was the wage level for equivalent jobs. They felt that even lower-skilled jobs in the UK provided sufficient income to lead a "normal life" (McGhee et al. 2012).

Cluster 3: Navigating Intermediate Positions (Sometimes Facing the Glass Ceiling)

Cluster 3, termed "Navigating intermediate positions" consisted of individuals working at the second ISCO skill level without holding managerial positions. This cluster differed from Cluster 2 as it primarily included individuals with higher education degrees, indicating they were working in jobs below their formal qualifications.

For some, staying in occupations below their qualifications had temporary advantages. For instance, Kornelia (1985,11) worked as a shop assistant despite holding a master's degree because the job offered her the opportunity to improve her English. Although she eventually left due to low wages, she valued the practical communication skills she gained.

Other interviewees in this cluster managed to progress from elementary occupations to jobs more aligned with their qualifications. Janka (1987,7), who held a law degree, started her UK labour market journey in housekeeping at a hotel. She then moved into hotel administration and eventually secured a desk job in business event planning. Janka's career path exemplifies the transition from any job to a good job, and ultimately to a dream job, as described by Parutis (2014).

However, not all interviewees felt they had opportunities for further upward mobility. This was often due to labour market segmentation, where migrants are relegated to the secondary segment with limited access to the more attractive, stable, and secure primary segment positions (cf. Piore 1979). Konrad, who held a degree in Technical Sciences but worked in real estate, expressed frustration: "I thought that I've hit some kind of a glass ceiling, and despite my earnest will and [work] results that should help in some career development or getting a promotion, I could not prove it [that he deserves promotion]" (1983,10). Konrad's stagnation in an intermediate position may stem from the limited transferability of his technical qualifications and the pervasive glass ceiling phenomenon.

Cluster 3, termed "Navigating intermediate positions" highlights the complexities faced by Polish migrants working below their formal qualifications despite holding

higher education degrees. This cluster's experiences align with the literature on labour market segmentation and the challenges of skill transferability. As described by Piore (1979), migrants often find themselves in the secondary labour market, where upward mobility is limited. The frustration expressed by individuals like Konrad, who face a glass ceiling despite their qualifications and efforts, mirrors the findings of studies on occupational immobility and deskilling among migrants (Currie 2007). However, the ability of some migrants to transition from low-skilled jobs to positions more aligned with their qualifications, as seen in Janka's career progression, aligns with Parutis' (2014) concept of moving from any job to a good job and eventually to a dream job. This cluster also resonates with Trevena's (2013) observations of career seekers among Polish migrants who initially accept lower-skilled positions to gain language proficiency and practical skills, which are crucial for further advancement. The challenges and successes within this cluster reflect the broader issues of labour market integration and the barriers to full utilisation of migrants' skills and qualifications, contributing to the ongoing discourse on migrant career trajectories and the impact of structural barriers in host countries.

Cluster 4: Advancing Positions

The fourth cluster, termed "Advancing positions" represented the final stage within the second ISCO skill level. Unlike clusters 2 and 3, this cluster included respondents who performed managerial duties. Slightly over half of the members held higher education degrees, making it the smallest cluster.

Similar to those in cluster 2, interviewees in cluster 4 indicated that qualifications beyond higher education diplomas, especially those from Polish institutions, were vital for career development. They also highlighted other critical factors such as fluency in English, sector-specific experience, and additional qualifications. In some cases, employers facilitated the acquisition of these qualifications. For example, Maja began her career in the UK in an elementary position at a fast-food restaurant and later held a managerial role: "I did the managerial [course], they [her employer] propose various courses, send you to these courses, you can even get the equivalent of Polish A-Levels, they pay for the exam" (1989, 10).

Similarly, Karina's experience illustrated the potential for career progression within the restaurant industry: "It turned out that the job in the restaurant may actually be a career. And that you can climb higher, that there are different levels, you are a waitress, then you are a manager, then a manager of the whole restaurant and prospectively you may even reach the level of operational manager" (1984, 14).

Overall, many interviewees, particularly those without higher education diplomas, emphasised the openness and diversity of the British labour market compared to the Polish labour market. They found more opportunities for developing career paths in the UK. However, developing a career in the UK could pose challenges when

transferring acquired skills back to Poland or another country with a less open and diverse labour market, especially in cases of narrow specialisation.

The fourth cluster, termed "Advancing positions" aligns with literature highlighting the importance of qualifications beyond formal education, practical skills, and sector-specific experience for career development among migrants. This cluster underscores the findings of Parutis (2014), who noted the role of linguistic skills and EU citizenship in facilitating upward mobility among Central and Eastern European migrants. The experiences of interviewees in this cluster, such as Maja and Karina, who progressed from elementary positions to managerial roles through employer-supported training and additional qualifications, reflect the broader narrative of gradual career advancement found in Trevena's (2013) and Szewczyk's (2014) typologies of Polish migrants. These studies emphasise the significance of continuous learning and skill acquisition in the UK labour market, where practical competencies often outweigh formal education, particularly those obtained from Polish institutions. Furthermore, the perception of the UK labour market as more open and diverse compared to Poland aligns with Morosanu et al. 's (2021) findings that Eastern and Southern European migrants see greater opportunities for career development in the UK. However, the challenge of transferring these skills back to less open labour markets, as noted in the experiences of cluster 4 respondents, also echoes concerns in the literature about the limited portability of skills across different national contexts (Sadura, 2022). This cluster provides a detailed example of how migrants navigate and leverage the UK's labour market to advance their careers, contributing to the broader understanding of migrant career development and integration.

Cluster 5: Reaching the Pinnacle

The fifth and final cluster, termed "Reaching the pinnacle" corresponded to the highest level of ISCO skill classification. Two-thirds of the individuals in this cluster had higher education diplomas, while one-third did not but were still able to secure high-skilled jobs.

Qualitative data revealed that many interviewees had obtained their diplomas in the UK or elsewhere in Western Europe. Unlike the previous clusters, these individuals did not experience deskilling (Currie 2007) and entered the primary labour market (Piore 1979) immediately after completing their education. If they held low-skilled jobs, it was typically during their studies. Many interviewees in this cluster could be described as "Eurostars" (Favell 2008), with the UK being just one stop in their broader European migration journey and possessing a cosmopolitan mindset. As Witold noted: "After completing my PhD [in Italy] I was looking for a job somewhere in Europe, and the offer from a university in the UK was the best" (1984, 5).

For these professionals, migration is closely tied to their careers, becoming an integral part of their occupational path and a space for learning and growth. This

aligns with the concept of the "migration career project" (Grabowska, 2016), which often begins in high school for those who choose programs like the International Baccalaureate (IB). Teresa explained: "I did IB already in England. I was in boarding school (...) It was connected with the fact that I was convinced that I would want to study in the UK, and I thought that this step would help me to achieve this" (1997, 4).

Most interviewees in this cluster worked mainly with British colleagues or other highly skilled migrants and were conscious of their privileged position in the labour market, distinguishing them from the majority of their co-nationals. Artur, a recent graduate from a London university, reflected: "I had all those good internships and stuff, so I would see myself in this 'bubble'" (1996, 3). For these migrants, upward mobility involved either promotions within their organisations or moves to more prestigious employers.

However, even at the "pinnacle", some interviewees encountered a glass ceiling. Antoni remarked: "It is hard to succeed in this country (...) people from these elite British high schools know each other from schools, so they succeed" (1996, 3). This suggests that despite their comparative advantages over other clusters, migrants in the top echelons of the labour market still face limitations and barriers in reaching the highest positions.

The fifth and final cluster, "Reaching the pinnacle" highlights Polish migrants who have attained the highest levels of occupational success in the UK, corresponding to the highest ISCO skill classification. This cluster aligns with the literature that discusses the diverse career trajectories and integration of highly skilled migrants. Many individuals in this cluster had obtained their higher education diplomas in the UK or elsewhere in Western Europe, allowing them to bypass the deskilling phenomenon identified by Currie (2007) and directly enter the primary labour market, as described by Piore (1979). Their experiences reflect the "Eurostars" concept by Favell (2008), which characterises highly mobile professionals with a cosmopolitan outlook, viewing the UK as part of a broader European career journey. This group's career trajectories often align with the "migration career project" (Grabowska, 2016), where early educational choices, such as participating in programs like the International Baccalaureate, set the stage for their international career paths. The interviewees in this cluster were aware of their privileged position, often working alongside British colleagues or other highly skilled migrants and navigating career advancements through promotions or moves to prestigious employers. Despite their successes, some faced the "glass ceiling" effect, suggesting that even at the highest levels, Polish migrants encountered barriers typical of elite occupational structures. This nuanced understanding of their career paths provides a deeper insight into the integration and upward mobility of highly skilled Polish migrants, contributing to the broader discourse on migration and professional achievement in the UK.

Conclusions

Since the 2004 European Union enlargement, the occupational positions of young adult Polish migrants in the UK have evolved significantly. Initially, many of these migrants experienced deskilling and were confined to low-skilled jobs in the secondary labour market. Over time however, their careers have become more diverse and upwardly mobile. The study identified five distinct clusters representing different types of occupational positions, ranging from elementary to highly specialised and managerial roles. This leads us to our first research question: *How do the occupational positions of young adult Polish migrants in the UK evolve over time, and what factors contribute to these changes?*

The quantitative analysis of young adult Polish migrants in the UK identifies significant variations in occupational positions, categorized into five distinct clusters. These range from low-skilled elementary roles (Cluster 1) to high-skilled managerial and professional roles (Cluster 5). The ISCO skill level is the predominant descriptor of occupational positions. Educational attainment and managerial responsibilities significantly differentiate between the medium-skilled positions in Clusters 2 through 4, rather than spanning across to the high-skilled Cluster 5. Additionally, the duration of residence in the UK is not associated significantly with career advancement, suggesting that mere longevity in the country does not guarantee upward mobility. Instead, qualifications and the transferability of skills are crucial in shaping career trajectories.

Qualitative data further illustrate that many Polish migrants initially perceive low-skilled jobs as temporary, utilizing them as stepping stones towards better opportunities. Despite possessing higher education diplomas, individuals often start in elementary roles within Cluster 1 to stabilize financially and enhance their language skills. Over time, some advance to medium-skilled positions in Clusters 2 and 3. However, barriers like the glass ceiling and limited recognition of Polish qualifications impede further progression, especially within Cluster 3, where higher qualifications do not necessarily lead to managerial roles or substantial income increases.

Polish migrants have employed a set of strategies to navigate the British labour market, significantly impacting their occupational trajectories. This brings us to our second research question: *What strategies do Polish migrants employ to navigate the British labour market, and how do these strategies impact their occupational trajectories?*

Polish migrants in the UK employ a set of strategies to adapt to the British labour market, which significantly influences their career paths. Our research goes into these strategies, particularly concerning migrants' educational and managerial backgrounds. While our quantitative analysis indicates that higher education and management experience are associated with placement in medium to high-skill job clusters (Clusters 3–5), we acknowledge that this association does not imply causality

or predict career progression. This is especially notable as higher education does not exclusively lead to high-skill positions; a significant number of highly educated migrants also occupy lower-skill roles (Cluster 3). This highlights the complexity of the job market and the varied impacts of education levels on employment outcomes.

Our qualitative data further elucidate that the strategies employed by migrants are nuanced and tailored to their initial qualifications and goals. Migrants in lower-skilled positions often view underemployment as a strategic and temporary means to gain stability, improve language skills, and accumulate local work experience. Conversely, those in higher skill clusters tend to seek additional education and professional training in the UK, which is more highly regarded by local employers than foreign credentials. However, barriers such as the glass ceiling still impede many from advancing into top managerial roles. Moreover, for those in the highest skill cluster, pursuing education in the UK or Western Europe enables them to bypass lower-tier positions altogether, facilitating a smoother entry into skilled roles and avoiding many challenges faced by other migrants.

In light of these insights, our analysis should be interpreted with caution. The association observed between educational and managerial qualifications and higher job clusters does not necessarily dictate career trajectories, as our cross-sectional data captures only a snapshot in time, without showing dynamic career progressions. Therefore, future research should consider longitudinal data to better understand the long-term impact of these strategies on migrants' career advancements.

This study's findings engage with Michael Piore's dual labour market theory by illustrating the initial entry of Polish migrants into low-paid, unstable jobs (secondary labour market) and their subsequent upward mobility into stable, well-paid positions (primary labour market). Initially deskilled, many migrants used practical skills, work ethics, and social networks to advance their careers. Social networks were crucial for finding job opportunities and gaining support, aligning with Piore's emphasis on the informal nature of the secondary market. Practical skills and work ethics were valued over formal education, facilitating upward mobility. However, some migrants encountered a glass ceiling, facing barriers to top-tier positions despite qualifications, reflecting structural limits within the primary market. The impact of Brexit added complexity to their career strategies, underscoring Piore's point that broader economic and political contexts shape labour market dynamics. Overall, the study shows how Polish migrants navigate and advance within the UK's dual labour market, achieving professional growth despite structural challenges.

To conclude, it is essential to emphasise the theme of two decades of labour market positionalities and career changes of young adult Polish migrants in the UK, as indicated in the title. Initially, many faced deskilling and were concentrated in low-skilled roles within the secondary labour market due to the limited recognition of their qualifications, language barriers, and the need to adapt to a new socio-economic environment. However, over time, a significant transformation took

place: many leveraged their practical skills, strong work ethics, and social networks to achieve upward mobility and transition into more skilled and managerial positions. The findings reveal that young adult Polish migrants have increasingly overcome initial barriers, accessing a wider range of occupational opportunities and demonstrating greater professional integration. These evolving career paths highlight not only their capacity to navigate the UK labour market but also their agency in actively reshaping their roles within it, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of migrant labour market integration.

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