Au pairing after the au pair scheme? New migration rules and childcare in private homes in the UK

The UK is home to up to 90,000 au pairs at any one time. For many families au pairs are the only workable solution to the ‘childcare crisis’, but they are only affordable because au pairing is not recognised as work and poor conditions are justified through discourses of cultural exchange and adventure. However, our research shows that for many families and au pairs this is not an accurate depiction of their experiences.

In November 2008 the UK government deregulated au pairing, and between 2008 and June 2014 there was no official guidance about what an au pair could or couldn’t do and no protections for au pairs in terms of working hours, pay and living conditions. This two-year ESRC-funded research project investigated the effects of this deregulation and considered the importance of au pairing to UK families, au pairs themselves and society more generally. We interviewed au pairs and host families, and stakeholders in the sector and collected data from 1000 advertisements for au pair posts.

Some au pair facts and figures on au pairing in the UK (from analysis of 1000 advertisements on gumtree.com):

- 31% of au pairs were asked to work for more than 25 hours a week, not including babysitting. The average working week (including babysitting) was 38.7 hours.
- Average pocket money offered was £108 per week but over half of the ads did not give a figure and 14% offered an amount below the recommended £85 per week.
- 44% of hosts advertising for an au pair expected prior experience and 26% would only consider applicants who were already in the UK.
- 33% wanted their au pair to care for a child under 3 years old and 14% to care for a child under a year old.
- Despite the withdrawal of the au pair visa au pairing is still booming in the UK.
- There is huge variety in the pay, living conditions and work done by au pairs. Au pairs could be working for anything between 20 and 70 hours per week. Some are not given any pocket money at all and not all lived with their host family. Those working the longest hours are not necessarily the highest paid.
- The majority of au pairs are living and working in conditions which fall outside those described in the guidance provided by government in June 2014 (www.gov.uk/au-pairs-employment-law) and the guidance provided by the British Au Pairs Agencies Association (BAAPA).
- There is decreasing differentiation between au pair and nanny roles with many host families demanding au pairs who are experienced carers to look after young children on a full–time basis.
- Au pairs of different nationalities appear to be paid and treated differently by host families and hosts select au pairs on the basis of their nationality. Au pairs from Western Europe generally work shorter hours and are given more opportunities to study and engage in cultural exchange than those from Central and Eastern Europe.
- Most hosts take on an au pair in order to meet their childcare needs. They are not motivated by a desire to engage in a cultural exchange programme.
- Au pairing is not regulated. There are no voluntary or official support agencies for au pairs and few possibilities for redress if things go wrong for host or au pair.
- Increased use of the internet and online agencies to arrange au pair placements has introduced new risks for au pairs and hosts but online fora, such as Facebook groups and Mumsnet provide important support and information for au pairs and hosts.

Recommendations for policy and practice

A clearer and narrower definition of the term ‘au pair’ is needed. The new guidance from the government is welcome but vague terms such as ‘cultural exchange’ and ‘member of the family’ need to be clarified. The current guidelines would still allow exploitation of au pairs and need to be re-written to better protect au pairs.

The government needs to provide support for au pairs and a means of redress for those who are ill-treated. The Norwegian Government funds an advice centre for au pairs and this could be replicated in the UK.

Families urgently need access to flexible and affordable childcare. Many families feel that hosting an au pair was the only way they could meet their childcare needs. This could make them resentful or even exploitative hosts.

Reproductive labour needs to be recognised as valuable work, even when it is carried out in private homes. The people who do this work – including au pairs – should be recognised as workers and rewarded with appropriate wages and the respect they deserve.

Key findings

Au pairing after the au pair scheme?
Research highlights
The research identified intractable tensions at the heart of au pairing. Host families’ needs for cheap, flexible childcare and au pairs’ need to earn their keep, learn English and be treated ‘as an equal’ do not always coincide. The intimate space within which au pairing takes place, and the lack of clear or enforceable guidance from government, mean that there is scope for exploitation and abuse of au pairs and a pervasive ambiguity about what au pairing is. Better regulation of au pairing is a necessary but not sufficient step towards solving these problems. To address the problem at the heart of au pairing social attitudes towards reproductive labour needed to be addressed. This work needs to be valued and supported by society.

What is an au pair now?
Traditionally an au pair was a young person engaged in cultural exchange who provided some help to a host family with their housework and childcare in exchange for room and board and pocket money. Without adequate guidelines from the Government we now see the term ‘au pair’ used to describe a wide range of full and part time roles many of which would have been done by a nanny in the past. Au pairs are now also being used to provide care for the elderly and to act as full-time housekeepers, pet carers and to work in their host families’ businesses.

One of the most important trends that we have seen is for au pairs to work full time looking after very young children. Until 2008 Home Office guidelines specified that au pairs should not be left in sole charge of young children and this differentiated them from nannies. There now seems to be less differentiation between au pairs and nannies with many hosts wanting au pairs who are experienced and highly capable.

When compared with the £560 (gross) average weekly wage for a live-in nanny in London or the £720 (gross) a week for a live-out nanny (www.nannyjob.co.uk) or the £177 average cost in London of 25 hours’ nursery care for a child under two, hosting an au pair can be a solution to an otherwise unsolvable problem for parents of small children.

“...Y our role is to help with homework, and inspire academic and creative development and to encourage physical activity and expression.
(Advertisement for an au pair/nanny/housekeeper/cook/PA)

Is au pairing work or cultural exchange?
Au pairs are not classed as workers or employees and are not entitled to minimum wage because they are meant to be treated as a member of their host family and are engaged in cultural exchange. In interviews with hosts and au pairs we asked about whether this worked in practice.

Our host interviewees were all aware that they were meant to engage in cultural exchange. Some did this enthusiastically and took time to introduce au pairs to British culture or took much of an interest in their home countries. Others were more reluctant and while they knew that taking part in cultural exchange was ‘the deal’ with hosting an au pair, they considered it as the price they paid for cheap childcare rather than an opportunity.

Cultural exchange was deemed a myth by the majority of au pairs interviewed. Few of their hosts took any time to introduce them to British culture or took much of an interest in their home countries.

“For me, cultural exchange means it is both ways. I learn about England and they learn about Romania. But, no way. You have to adapt yourself entirely to their way.

Au pairing after the au pair scheme?

Any overtime will be paid at £5 per hour [...] there will be babysitting and also some weekend work, sometimes just mornings or all weekend if we go away without the children. (Advertisement for an Au Pair/Mother’s Help to care for Children aged 1 and 4).

Must be Ofsted registered [...] highly responsible, enthusiastic, independent, flexible, experienced, resourceful mature, loving, child-loving, reliable, accountable, punctual and a good communicator: [...] Your role is to help with homework, and inspire academic and creative development and to encourage physical activity and expression.
(Advertisement for an au pair/nanny/housekeeper/cook/PA)
to cook for them the dishes that we eat at home. No, never, they
never liked it. Like, they never had
this openness. I tried, I really tried
... I would talk about how it is in
Romania. They listened once or
twice and that’s it” (Carl, au pair).

One of the most important
elements of cultural exchange is
language learning. Au pairs ideally
should be studying English and able
to practice speaking English with
their hosts. This ideal situation was
rare. Many au pairs found that they
were not given the time to attend
English classes, and others could
not afford them. Many complained
that their hosts hardly spoke to
them, so they could not practice
talking English and others found
that their hosts spoke a language
other than English at home – often
a language the au pair already
spoke.

Hosts also told us about ‘au pair
fatigue’ the feeling that descends
in August or September when (yet)
another new au pair arrives. The 15
host families we interviewed had
between them hosted 50 au pairs
over the years. Some had lost count
of the number of au pairs they had
had. Some who had been hosts for
a number of years told us that while
that had been enthusiastic and
engaged with their au pairs to begin
with, in later years they were less
emotionally involved with them and
less interested in including them as
part of the family. Au pairs told
us it was easy to tell when they were
just ‘yet another’ au pair.

**Why do people host an
au pair?**

Almost everyone in our study hosted
an au pair so that they could meet
the demands of paid work and
childcare. Host families needed
childcare that was more flexible,
for longer hours and more weeks
of the year than that available
in group settings. For families in
London travel times to work and
long working days made nurseries
and after school clubs particularly
unworkable. Increasing trends
towards flexible working patterns
are likely to see demand for au pairs
continue.

“Initially when the au pair came, I
did initially think this isn’t actually
a great help for me, it’s just a great
help for [my husband] because
it means the pressure for him is
off, whereas I’m still in the same
position; I have three children with
one person helping me, it’s just
that it’s a different person now. […]
He has a good job, it’s well paid,
but it’s quite stressful and I think
that I couldn’t expect for him – he
has a good salary and I think “He’s
earning the money”, so therefore
we have some money to throw at a
problem and that’s what we did; just
threw some money at the problem
rather than fighting” (Ellie, host).

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**Childcare is
phenomenally
expensive, and then, so
many people want to come
to London that what you
offer, your
spare room,
becomes a
really valuable
thing.**
## The best and worst of au pairing

### The view from au pairs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Au pairs liked:</th>
<th>Hosts liked:</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Loving relationships with the children that they cared for; being treated like valued members of their host’s family; being in London; becoming independent; learning English.</td>
<td>Having someone on hand to do childcare and housework in the way and at the times they wanted; the flexibility that hosting an au pair gave; the low cost of au pairs; the relationships their children developed with au pairs.</td>
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### The view from hosts

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<tr>
<th>Hosts did not like:</th>
<th>Au pairs did not like:</th>
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<td>Having a stranger in the house; having to get to know a new au pair each year or so; au pairs who liked to stay out late; unreliable au pairs; au pairs who were not flexible about their time or duties; au pairs who were immature or needed too much support; communication problems.</td>
<td>Feeling unwelcome in their host’s home; feeling like a servant rather than a family member; spending many hours cleaning rather than doing childcare; not being spoken to; not being appreciated; always having to fit around their host’s schedules even if it meant missing important events; not being in London.</td>
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“No, I didn’t feel like a part of the family. I remember one evening when some of the girl’s colleagues came on a visit with their parents, everybody was in the living room eating pizza but no one invited me to join them. I was so hungry because I had to look after seven kids then and I was so hungry because I had to do so hard work. After that, the host mother asked me to wash the big plates after they were eating pizza. I didn’t feel that good, I was very unhappy. I felt the humiliation in that part”

**Freya, au pair**

“In the very, very, very first month of having an au pair I felt like I got another teenager in the house and that was really hard because I did really feel the responsibility, but I think it just depends on the individual and what they make of the time that they’ve got. Maybe that’s me, adjusting to having somebody else in the house and also the fact that the language is a barrier, so I did find it hard to start off with.”

**Niamh, host**

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**Selected publications**

Busch, N (forthcoming) *Au pairs within a global political economy of care: outcomes of a deregulated childcare market and au pair policy vacuum in the UK*, Papers in Political Economy/La revue Interventions Économiques.

