

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.

Key findings

- 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.



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.

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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/house keeper/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 and enjoyed learning about their au pairs' 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. I come from eastern Europe and we have different views of things, we have different ways. For example, I tried

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 become au pairs?

Motivations for au pairing varied amongst our interviewees and we found that au pairs from different countries were quite often au pairing for different reasons. Au pairs from Northern Europe tended to be quite young and would be an au pair for a gap year before or after university in order to improve their English. Au pairs from Central and Eastern Europe were more likely to be older and were au pairing as part of longer term migration projects. Au pairing could be a good first step in moving to the UK permanently or moving on to a third country. Au pairs from Spain told us they were in the UK because of the very high unemployment rates at home. This group were often very highly

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qualified. Au pairing gave them an opportunity to add knowledge of English to their skills or just to wait out the economic crisis.

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.

“It was affordable. Our hours can be very irregular so that just helped. Also my partner is away a lot so it's kind of nice to have someone else living in the house and we had that space anyway. So we just felt that it was a really productive use of the house that we have. We live in London, we have a spare room. Childcare is phenomenally expensive and then – and so many

people want to come to London that then what you offer, your spare room, then becomes a really valuable thing” (June, host).

Au pairs were also hosted as a result of an unequal gendered division of labour in the home. Most of our interviewees saw the au pair as allowing the woman in the home to go out to work. Few families saw au pairs as enabling both men and women to work. Au pairs could also ease stress over housework and who does what.

“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).

The best and worst of au pairing

The view from au pairs

Au pairs liked:

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.

Au pairs did not like:

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.

"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

The view from hosts

Hosts liked:

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.

Hosts did not like:

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.

"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

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.

Busch, N (2015) *When work doesn't pay: Outcomes of a Deregulated Childcare Market and Au Pair Policy Vacuum in the UK* in Cox, R (ed) *Au Pairs: a Global Perspective: Sisters or Servants?*, London, Palgrave.

Cox, R (Ed) (2015) *Au Pairs' Lives in Global Context: Sisters or Servants?*, London, Palgrave.

Cox, R (2014) *Domestic workers and au pairs' in Migration: A COMPAS Anthology*, B Anderson and M Keith (eds.), COMPAS: Oxford. Available at <http://compasanthology.co.uk/domestic-workers-au-pairs/>



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