

Summary

Au pairs in Nederland Cultural exchange or labour migration?

The au pair scheme

The purpose of the au pair scheme is to give young people from outside the European Union the opportunity to become acquainted with Dutch society and culture. The au pair lives with a host family, and in exchange for the facilities the host family offers such as board & lodging and a monthly allowance, he or she performs light household chores and/or babysits the children.

To ensure that au pairs do not perform labour in contravention of the Dutch law on labour by aliens and that au pairs have the opportunity to experience Dutch culture and society, several conditions have to be met in order for au pairs to receive and retain a residence permit. Most importantly, light domestic chores and babysitting is not allowed for more than 30 hours or 5 days a week.

Following a policy change³⁰, from 1 June 2013 onwards an au pair can only come to the Netherlands through an intermediary agency that is recognised as an official sponsor by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Office.

Purpose of the study

In recent years, stories about the improper use of the au pair scheme have cropped up on a regular basis. Allegedly, host families sometimes have their au pair perform labour other than light domestic chores or babysitting, or have them work for more than 30 hours a week, or the au pairs remained in the Netherlands for more than a year. Also, some intermediary agencies have recently been accused of (financially) exploiting au pairs. This improper use of the au pair scheme has led to multiple questions in Dutch parliament on the workings of the au pair scheme.

The purpose of this study is first of all to ascertain whether the au pair scheme is being used improperly and, if so, to what extent and in what way. Therefore, this study is designed to show

what au pairs' most important motives are to come to the Netherlands, as well as to explore the reasons for Dutch families to have an au pair. The study also examines how host families and au pairs assess the au pair experience, whether the au pairs have any complaints, and how the au pair scheme is monitored. Finally, the study describes how intermediary agencies work as well as the experiences of au pairs and host families with the agencies.

Design of the study

To answer the questions above, a multi-method and multi-actor study design was used. Both quantitative and qualitative information was gathered with the help of au pairs, host families, intermediary agencies and key informants. In a web survey developed for this study, 129 au pairs and 139 host families participated (a

³⁰ Modern Migration Policy Act.

response rate of 42 respectively 45%). Furthermore, 59 face-to-face interviews were conducted with au pairs, host families and key informants.

Characteristics of au pairs and host families

The sample of au pairs and host families was compared to the total population from which the sample was selected. The sample was representative in terms of the nationality of au pairs: au pairs from the Philippines, South Africa and Latin America are the largest groups in the sample as well as in the total population. Of the host families, 90% has at least tertiary education and household income levels are generally high.

Motives of au pairs and host families to participate in the au pair scheme

Almost all au pairs stated several reasons for wanting to become an au pair. *Getting to know another culture* was mentioned by almost all respondents. *Adventure, personal growth* and *gaining more freedom* were also frequently stated as motives for joining the au pair programme. Of the respondents 50% agree that *earning money* played a role in their decision to become an au pair. However, for only 7% of the au pairs earning money was the main reason to join the programme.

The vast majority of the host families (92%) report that getting help with taking care of the children was one of the reasons for choosing an au pair. Preferring an au pair over other forms of childcare is not only related to the costs of formal Dutch childcare, but also to the flexibility of childcare at home and the benefits of having the same babysitter all year long. Even though many host families acknowledged the added value of bringing another culture into their home, this was the main reason to join the au pair programme only for mixed nationality couples who want to give their children a bilingual and bi-cultural upbringing.

Experiences

Although the experiences of au pairs vary widely, most au pairs generally value their stay as positive. They feel comfortable with their host family and indicate that they learn a lot about the Netherlands. They also mention gaining a lot of life experience during their stay as an au pair. The majority of au pairs state that their expectations before coming to the Netherlands were met, or that their experiences even surpassed their expectations. The only exception concerns the number of hours they have to work. Of au pairs 28% spend more time on household chores than they had expected. Moreover, 50% of au pairs say they spend more than the officially permitted 30 hours on these tasks. This contradicts the information given by host families, who indicate that their au pairs spend an average of 27 hours a week on household chores and babysitting. The discrepancy between the hours indicated by the au pairs and the host families may relate to different perceptions on *what constitutes a task*, although we cannot rule out that host families feel uncomfortable about admitting that their au pairs spend more than 30 hours per week on tasks within the household.

Also, some au pairs report that other conditions of the au pair programme are sometimes violated. Of au pairs 45% mention that they have been left responsible for the children for an extended period of time, for example when the parents went away for the weekend. Almost half of the au pairs furthermore performed household

chores that might be considered as non-light chores, such as cleaning the bathroom. Even though these are violations of the conditions of the programme, many au pairs do not mind, especially if they receive extra pay for these tasks or if they get along very well with their host family.

If the au pairs have complaints about their stay or the programme in general, then these mostly concern the low allowance, the lack of support from the intermediary agency that they used, or the amount of hours they need to work. This study did not find any indications that the au pair programme is being used for human trafficking purposes. All au pairs were in possession of their passport and controlled their allowance themselves.

Intermediary agencies

There are more than 35 intermediary agencies in the Netherlands that mediate between au pairs and host families. Host families pay between € 525 and € 1,750 per year for the services of the agency. Some agencies previously charged au pairs for compulsory preparation courses. However, since the au pair scheme defines the purpose of the programme as cultural exchange, the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Office (IND) does not consider it necessary for au pairs to follow mandatory courses and thereby to spend a large sum of money to receive an au pair residence permit. Therefore, in October 2012 it was decided that intermediary agencies are not allowed to charge au pairs more than € 34 in fees.

Of au pairs 42% report (mostly) positive experiences with their agency while 24% reports negative experiences. Host families much more often report positive experiences.

Monitoring the au pair scheme

The au pair scheme is monitored primarily by the Immigration and Naturalisation Office and the Aliens Registration Office. The IND verify the personal particulars of the au pair and the host family during the application for a temporary residence permit. After the residence permit is granted, the Aliens Registration Office sometimes pays a visit to the household in which the au pair is staying, but neither the au pair nor the host family are checked intensively to verify whether they are abiding by the rules. The labour inspection only takes action if tipped that an au pair is working illegally. This happens very rarely. After the policy change of 1 June 2013, the intermediary agencies were given more responsibility in making sure that the au pair is doing well and that both parties are complying with the conditions of the au pair programme. Intermediary agencies that fail to fulfil this responsibility can be excluded from being an official intermediary by the IND.

Typology

Based on the survey findings, relations between the au pair and the host family can be characterised in four different ways.

- *Au pair as meant to be* In this relation, the au pair and the host family have a relation.
- As intended by the scheme: the au pair lives on equal terms with the rest of the family (is part of the family), and she does not work more than 30 hours.

- *Big sister* This type of relation is characterised by the au pair's sense of being a member of the family. As a result, she feels responsible for the well-being of the family and spends more than 30 hours on household chores and childcare.
- *Live-in tourist* Au pairs in this cluster do not feel they are part of the family and try to engage as little as possible with household chores and babysitting. For this group, being an au pair can be a convenient means to travel and experience Dutch culture, and au pair-related tasks may be seen as a burden.
- *Domestic worker* In this cluster the relation between the au pair and the host family can better be described simply as an employer-employee relationship. The au pair is responsible for a large part of the household work and childcare, yet does not feel part of the family. The au pair may also perform heavier household work (sometimes for an extra fee).

Further analyses show that different types of relationships are not directly related to the nationality of the au pair.

Cultural exchange or labour migration?

According to the au pair scheme, the most important reason to become an au pair should be the opportunity to get to know Dutch society and culture. This was in fact the main reason for the majority of au pairs to come to the Netherlands. The financial aspect is the main motivation for just a minority of the au pairs. The most important reason for the host families to recruit an au pair is to obtain help in caring for their children. Since under the current au pair scheme a substantial number of hours per week can be devoted to tasks within the host family, both parties can benefit from the au pair programme. However, if the work the au pair has to perform includes heavier household work and exceeds the number of hours agreed upon, it is easy to interpret this as a form of (cheap) labour migration.

Whether the au pair scheme is used improperly is often difficult to establish, because some aspects of the scheme are vague. The line between 'light' and 'heavy' domestic chores, a definition of what counts as cultural exchange and what exactly is meant by the availability of an alternative for the au pair are not specifically defined in the scheme. The number of hours an au pair works is difficult to check, not only due to the nature of the tasks but also because they are performed within the private sphere of the household. Moreover, au pairs themselves are unlikely to complain to official institutions; first of all because they do not always perceive a violation of the conditions as problematic, but also because they often feel like a part of the family, and this brings with it a different type of relationship than an employer-employee relationship.

Concluding remarks

Overall, both au pairs and host families evaluate the au pair programme as a positive experience. This does not mean, however, that they strictly and consistently adhere to all conditions set by the au pair scheme. Violations most often concern the numbers of hours worked, the purported lack of an alternative for the au pair, and the assignment of heavy household chores.