



Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU)

Seminar Speaker Series – Spring 2026 (Term 2)

Speakers: Hatim Rahman

**Research
Team
(alphabetical
order)**

Title: The Making of Pastoral Occupations: How the State Governs the Emergence of a New Occupation

Date: Wednesday 18 February 2026

Venue: WBS, room 3.215 (and online via Teams)

Time: 14:00 – 15:30 (GMT), light buffet lunch served at 13:30

Abstract: Existing research conceptualizes occupational emergence as a process predominantly shaped by the agency of occupational members. These studies theorize the role of the state as a legitimizing authority in later stages of occupational growth. Drawing on over six years of longitudinal, multi-sited ethnography in China's data annotation industry, which includes participant observation as a data annotator, interviews, and archival data, this paper investigates how the state enabled the rise of "AI trainers" (i.e., data annotators). Based on inductive analysis of these data, we introduce the concept of a "pastoral occupation": an occupation governed through state-centered authority and care, wherein the state provides training, legitimacy, and socioeconomic mobility support in exchange for workers aligning their labor and identities with state-defined roles. We found that the state uses its power over residency status to mobilize precarious workers in rural areas and facilitate the emergence of the data annotation occupation in urban areas. Building on this tactic, the state deploys three strategies to scale the occupation: certification systems that elevate occupational standing, impact sourcing initiatives that use the rhetoric of uplifting workers, and training programs that cultivate technical skills alongside moral commitments to national developmental goals. Overall, we show how the state can rapidly scale an occupation but also intensify workers' vulnerability by tethering occupational outcomes to shifting state imperatives rather than worker interests.

Registration: Email IRRUoffice@wbs.ac.uk to reserve your space