

## Getting in and getting on (and getting out): Skilled migrants' labour market trajectories

*Authors (in alphabetical order):*

**Andrew Kozhevnikov**, University of Leeds

**Tracy Scurry**, Newcastle University

**Steve Vincent**, Newcastle University

Preferred stream: Identities and employee relations

Transferring skilled careers internationally is a pressing issue, not least because migrant careers are often stymied by various boundaries. These boundaries combine to affect migrants' labour market trajectories and calls for more boundary-focussed scholarship have been made (see Inkson et al., 2012; Rodrigues et al., 2016). For example, migrants often must navigate complex, lengthy and costly administrative procedures to win legal rights to work in the host country – usually in form of visas, work permits, relevant and recognised certificates and other credentials (Csedo, 2008; Pearson et al., 2012). At the same time, their skills and expertise are often discounted by local employers who may have imperfect understanding of their value (Nowicka, 2014; Almeida et al., 2015). Further, migrants can be penalised because of their country of origin, ethnicity, class, accent or event names (Nowicka, 2014; Ebner and Helbling, 2016).

Whereas boundaries affecting migrants' careers and their relative positions in the host labour markets are relatively well-studied, accounts of how migrants reach their positions and how their experiences differently influenced by boundaries at different stages are conspicuously rare (for an example see Liversage, 2009).

For this study, we analyse 47 semi-structured interviews with skilled migrants in the North-East of England. The interviews provided rich retrospective insights into our respondents' migration and employment histories, as well as various obstacles they encountered. We explored distinct boundaries the respondents faced when entering the host labour market (*getting in*) and when advancing their positions in the labour market (*getting on*), as well as – in some instances – when considering exiting the labour market (*getting out*). Our analysis paid specific attention to migrants' participation in different sectors of the labour market, their positions within the occupational hierarchy and individual aspirations, plans and satisfaction.

The analysis is still ongoing but has revealed five categories of skilled migrants' labour market positions and trajectories that led to these positions. [1] *Inactive* – those who do not enter the primary skilled labour market but also have little desire to do so. Instead, they find employment in jobs they are overqualified for or opt for periods of voluntary unemployment in search for better work-life balance and more personally meaningful pursuits. This category includes mainly women who are not primary breadwinners in their families. [2] *Foreign* – migrants who capitalise upon their foreign cultural capital either within the core labour market or in more niche ethnic enclaves. Many in this category became employed for their in-depth knowledge of foreign (usually their home) countries and/or proficiency in foreign (usually their native) languages. [3] *Professional* - these migrants, usually educated in the UK, occupy positions commensurate with their degrees and experiences and compete with indigenous workers to advance their positions further. Yet, the opportunities to progress often depend on cultural and professional assimilation and are not guaranteed. [4] *Frustrated*

– these migrants successfully entered the professional labour market, but their progress has stalled and opportunities to progress appear to be very limited. This group included non-White respondents all of whom were planning to exit the UK labour market. [5] *Elite* – these migrants occupy distinctive top-class positions, thanks to their advanced and internationally recognised skills and expertise. Prior to relocation to the UK, they tended to hold high-profile positions in highly reputable companies abroad which enabled them to take positions superior even to indigenous leaders and managers.

Our analysis is still in progress, but the findings are important for understanding skilled migrants' experiences. It emphasises that skilled migrants should not be treated as a homogenous group of workers as their experiences are very differently affected by contextual barriers. Furthermore, our empirical results reveal that boundaries migrants have to deal with when entering the labour market and advancing their positions within it are analytically different and entering the host labour market does not guarantee further progress. We also demonstrate that migrants have different goals and aspirations and not everyone aims to occupy a top-level position (see Pearson et al., 2012). These findings have emancipatory potential as they uncover migrants' personally meaningful objectives and current obstacles they face. The results have implications for migrants themselves in equipping them with better knowledge of how to navigate the host labour markets and for organisations and policy makers interested in reducing the potential 'brain waste' that results in underoccupation and underutilisation of migrants' skills.

## References

- Almeida S, Fernando M, Hannif ZN and Dharmage S (2015) Fitting the mould: The role of employer perceptions in immigrant recruitment decision-making. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 26(22): 2811-2832.
- Csedo K (2008) Negotiating skills in the global city: Hungarian and Romanian professionals and graduates in London. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34(5): 803-823.
- Ebner C and Helbling M (2015) Social distance and wage inequality for immigrants Switzerland. *Work, Employment and Society* 30(3): 436-454.
- Inkson K, Gunz H, Ganesh S and Poper JP (2012) Boundaryless careers: Bringing back boundaries. *Organization Studies* 33(3): 323-340.
- Liversage A (2009) Finding a path: Investigating the labour market trajectories of high-skilled immigrants in Denmark. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35(2): 203-226.
- Nowicka M (2014) Migrating skills, skilled migrants and migration skills: The influence of contexts on the validation of migrants' skills. *Migration Letter* 11(2): 171-186.
- Pearson J, Hammond M, Heffernan E and Turner T (2012) Careers and talents not to be wasted. Skilled immigrants' journeys through psychological states en route to satisfying employment. *Journal of Management Development* 31(2): 102-115.
- Rodrigues R, Guest D and Budjanovcanin A (2016) Bounded or boundaryless? An empirical investigation of career boundaries and boundary crossing. *Work, Employment and Society* 30(4): 669-686.