

Introduction: New Perspectives on Skilled Migration

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Abstract

Skilled migration has been the object of intense scientific and policy debates for nearly five decades. This is quite understandable, as few issues display greater complexity. Skilled migration is marked by a number of fundamental dilemmas and trade-offs, in terms, for instance, of conflicting rights to development, education, (e)migration and equality. It also often opposes political principles, ethical and political imperatives (such as global justice, individual freedom, or the control of people's mobility), as well as actors (such as states, corporations and migrants themselves).

New ideas and perspectives have regularly reshaped the way skilled migration is apprehended; a few buzzwords – brain *drain*, *gain* or *waste* for example – have played a central role in embodying the key arguments and, in some cases, certain policy initiatives. These macro-considerations have developed along more detailed analysis, which addresses different aspects of skilled migration, with a particular emphasis on sophisticated empirical economic assessments of its impact on growth or development. In this context, contributions to this issue attempt to explore the different issues raised by skilled migration in a transversal manner. These include political implications, economic and policy impact, and ethical dilemmas. This introduction provides a short overview of the debates and of the main arguments developed in this issue of *Diversities*.

1. The Diversity behind Skilled Migration

Like many other major policy issues, skilled migration tends to be discussed in general or abstract terms. Such generalization tendency often overlooks the great diversity of empirical cases and the very different situations that the 'skilled migration' or 'brain drain' notions bring together. There is nothing wrong with this; policy debates, especially at the international level, indeed need a simplified cognitive and intellectual framework to move ahead. Yet, looking at the diversity behind skilled migration enables to understand some of the possible biases that characterize current scientific and policy debates.

An obvious starting point here is the definition of 'brains' and of related notions such as 'skills' or 'qualifications'. According to the OECD, 'highly skilled' individuals are those who have completed tertiary education, which in most

countries corresponds to a university degree. It is however common to consider that nurses, IT professionals, school teachers and students are also skilled migrants, even if these professional activities do not always correspond to the OECD definition.

More specifically, the inclusion of students as a particular case of skilled migration raises a number of questions. Students are not (yet) skilled professionals and their emigration does not therefore deprive their country of origin of much-needed workers. Moreover, and as Mary Kritz notes in her contribution to this special issue, their education abroad is often financed by personal/family resources, and/or by host countries' governments and tertiary education institutions (via grants, scholarships, and other exchange programmes). The connection between student migration and brain drain is thus based on the

assumption that students represent a *potential* human capital asset for sending countries; this would then justify policy measures to prevent – or compensate for – the negative outcomes of their emigration.

The definition of ‘skills’ also raises a number of questions. There is a tendency among experts/analysts to focus on a quite reduced number of ‘profitable’ or ‘valuable’ skills, like the ones possessed by engineers, health or IT professionals. Other skills, while also acquired through tertiary education, are rarely considered; graduates in the Humanities or Fine Arts are for instance virtually absent from the discussions. The definition of ‘skilled migrants’ is therefore strongly based on the existing demand (by markets, firms, states), instead of on skills *per se*, or the way they were acquired. ‘Skills’ are thus not neutral or universal, but depend upon a specific socio-economic and political context.

This is all the more clear when one looks at the personal attributes of skilled migrants. Popular notions such as the ‘global hunt for talents’ obscure the fact that the reasons why people move vary greatly, in terms of ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors, or of personal, family or work-related motivations. Sociologists have long argued that the ‘labour market’ is not a uniform and abstract system, but is pervaded with social ties, networks, etc. There is no reason not to apply these findings to the ‘global’ labour market. Skilled migrants also differ in terms of their region of origin, class, sex or age, which has an impact on their capacity to integrate professionally – and to be recognized as ‘skilled’.

In her contribution to this issue, Yvonne Riaño shows how migrant women who came to Switzerland in the framework of family reunification and/or asylum are not ‘counted’ or ‘categorized’ as ‘skilled migrants’, despite the actual competences and degrees they have. In a similar vein, Jean-Marie Muhirwa’s article on skilled migration from sub-Saharan Africa questions the neutral or invariable character of skills. The authors also cast doubt on the role of migrants’ personal attributes in determining who is recognized as a skilled migrant and in shaping individuals’ perspectives on labour markets outside their coun-

try of origin. These contributions also make clear that the boundaries between ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ migration are often quite porous.

These situations are often addressed as cases of so-called ‘brain waste’ or ‘brain abuse’, which refer to situations in which migrants are unable to use their skills and end up occupying un- or low-skilled job positions in host countries and being discriminated in favour of national workers (lower salaries, more precarious contracts, etc.). Such problems are regularly attributed to recognition issues, as migrants’ degrees and experience would not be properly taken into account. But it is quite clear that factors like ethnicity, gender or religion also matter – thus pointing to the biased construction of an ideal-typical ‘skilled migrant’ that actually leaves many cases out of the picture.

2. A Short History of the Debate

The notion of ‘brain drain’ was first developed in the UK in 1963, to refer to the emigration of British scientists to North America. The term was subsequently widely used and applied to migration from poor regions to the Western world, to the extent that skilled migration within the developed world became an issue of secondary importance in the literature. It is usually assumed that countries in the ‘North’ suffer less from the loss of skilled professionals, and that the greater freedom of movement that exists between them makes their migration less problematic. While these assumptions are relevant, there are nevertheless indications that developed countries are also affected by the ‘brain drain’.

Since the 1970s, discussions on south-north skilled migration have been taking place within the broader framework of development debates. The main idea is that less-developed regions are the ‘losers’ of a ‘zero-sum game’ that see skilled professionals from poor regions move to the developed world. The ‘North’ would attract the ‘brains’ from the South, which would then suffer from a continuous loss of human capital jeopardizing its development. Skilled migration is thus understood as a negative and damaging phenomenon and as both a consequence and a cause of under-development. Politically, great

emphasis is then put on states' strategies and the kind of policies needed to counter (or slow-down) the outflow of trained labour force or to limit its negative effects. It is for example in this context that the well-known 'Bhagwati tax' was conceived, as a way of compensating sending states by taxing skilled immigrants. This negative perception of skilled migration fits into the once-dominant historical-structural Marxist paradigm in social sciences; it was also influenced by 'dependency thinking', which challenged modernization theories by arguing that contact with Western capitalism created (rather than solved) underdevelopment in the Third World, as well as by Wallerstein's world-systems theory and its emphasis on the imbalanced relationships between world regions.

This pessimistic paradigm started to be challenged in the 1990s. The stress was then put on the possible benefits of skilled migration for sending countries. Key arguments here are the impact of remittances on development; return or 'circular' migration and its benefits for sending regions; the positive outcomes of the 'expectation to emigrate' on the education and training prospects of populations in regions of departure; and the role of diasporas in economic and political development. In his contribution to this issue, Jean-Baptiste Meyer provides an overview of some of the core ideas regarding diasporas, whose role would go beyond the transfer of capital and technology and display other assets, like the development of sending countries' local industries, the elaboration of formal or informal networks (such as student exchange programs), or the introduction of political change in sending regions.

This change of paradigm was accompanied by a new terminology: the notion of brain 'gain' (rather than 'drain') became popular, while terms such as 'mobility' or 'circulation', thought to be less static than 'migration', were increasingly used. It was also influenced by the crisis of the historical-structuralism approach in social sciences, by the diffusion of post-modernist thinking and by the emergence of new approaches, which recognized the possibility for individuals to display agency and actively change social structures. The 'poor', then, would no longer be a passive

victim of structural forces, but an actor who can seek to improve his/her livelihood. Rather than a flight from poverty, emigration would represent a livelihood strategy by individuals and households. This led to a new articulation between individuals' rights and states' interests, as skilled professionals' right to emigrate was no longer automatically as a 'problem' for sending states; it could be part of the 'solution' in the framework of a so-called 'triple-win' situation, in which all parties (sending and receiving countries, along with migrants themselves) would gain from the migration process – in sharp contrast with earlier understandings of skilled migration as a 'zero-sum game'.

In this view, migration (and especially the 'mobility' of the highly-skilled) would be a normal process in an increasingly interdependent environment; it would no longer be associated with the loss, but with the 'circulation', of trained workers within a global labour market. In the same vein, individual migrants are conferred a particular role as development actors. As is often the case in globalization debates, discussions have also built upon the importance of transnational networks, new communication technologies, and the role of knowledge in economic development.

This optimistic paradigm has however been criticized. The negative consequences of skilled migration are still regularly highlighted, including the 'inverted technology transfer' that it represents. Economic and financial losses, the decline of long-term productivity, the generation of important fiscal externalities (in particular the important tax burden imposed upon the high-qualified who do not emigrate), as well as the deterioration – or even collapse – of certain (public) services/sectors such as education, health, research and technology, are other negative effects often attributed to the emigration of high-skilled individuals. Jean-Baptiste Meyer notes that diasporas' actual capacity to trigger development and change is in fact regularly questioned. Observers argue that some of the 'success stories' that underlie the belief in diasporas' potential, including in particular the role of Indian diaspora in the U. in fostering an IT sec-

tor in India, are difficult to reproduce. Hence, evidence in other parts of the world does not display the same kind of positive interactions between a sending country and its emigrants.

The same doubts are regularly expressed regarding migrants' remittances, which – it is argued – cannot be substitutes for states' investment in basic services, goods and institutions (education, health, public transportation, housing, etc.). It is precisely the lack of consistent and long-term public investments in these areas that 'push' many high-skilled individuals to migrate. Jean-Marie Muhirwa thus develops a very critical assessment of skilled migration for Sub-Saharan Africa; in particular, he suggests that optimistic econometric studies about remittances often overlook the reality of peoples' lives and that the link between diasporas' transfer of capital and/or technology and development is by no means automatic.

As he further argues, the 'brain drain' in Sub-Saharan Africa is deeply linked to the structural adjustment programmes imposed on many of these countries since the 80s by international financial institutions (like the IMF or the World Bank). These programmes, which include privatization and the cut of public expenses on areas such education and health, have proved unresponsive of economic development, eventually inciting many of skilled professionals to search for better positions abroad. From this perspective, the 'brain drain' appears as a symptom of underdevelopment rather than its cause.

3. Skilled Migration between States and Markets

The changing ideas regarding brain 'drain' or 'gain' do not develop in a vacuum, but reflect broader economic, political and geopolitical trends. This section outlines some of the contextual elements that frame the debates and policies surrounding skilled migration.

The first is the well-known recognition of the role of knowledge and human capital in post-Fordism growth and development. Coupled with demographic changes and ageing in many rich countries, this has spurred policies to attract 'talents' from abroad to address situations of

skilled labour shortages. This gives employers, and especially large transnational companies, an important role. In a context of labour market deregulation and neoliberal beliefs in the virtues of a global 'free' market, the private sector emerges as a key actor in organizing the mobility of skilled workers; the 'brain attraction' and 'circulation' capacity of firms and private companies is enormous in certain fields (such as IT and new technology), and can be further reinforced when coupled with migrants' transnational networks.

Another related indication of these changes is the privatization and internationalization of education. As Mary Kritz details in her contribution, universities and other tertiary education institutions have developed different strategies to attract the most promising 'brains' from all over the world. Scholarship and exchange programmes, along with the creation of international *campi* and diplomas, are some of these 'brain attractive' methods. Given the growth of tertiary education needs in certain parts of the developing world, and the continuous lack of (material, human and institutional) resources and investment in (higher) education in these areas, developing countries have been traditionally the most affected by these 'pull' policies. In terms of funding, these developments rely less on states than on private institutions and the resources of individuals themselves, for whom education becomes an investment to enable higher earnings on the world labour market.

Both the role of private companies and of international education institutions could represent a challenge to states and to their capacity to regulate and control admissions of foreign workers. Yet, it is also apparent that these actors do not necessarily 'compete' with states, but rather work in cooperation with them in the search for the 'best and brightest'. They cannot indeed do without governments' policies (in the field of education, immigration, or labour market) to create the legal and institutional migratory channels for the skilled individuals they wish to bring in. States may also have an interest in attracting promising individuals to study as a way of having access to skilled labour force. Many OECD countries have in the last years tried to facilitate

the transition of foreign students' legal status, smoothing their access to working permits. Foreign students are also a kind of 'investment', as tuition fees have come to represent an important amount of capital transfer, highly profitable to tertiary education institutions and host states' economies. Likewise, some developing countries have encouraged part of their youth to study abroad to benefit from a 'zero cost' education with – hopefully – high returns (if they manage to attract them back or through remittances).

These trends could make up for an ideal world, in which states would help private actors organize the smooth mobility of people. Individuals from all countries, especially from less-developed ones, would thereby have increased access to better quality education and training, and thus improve their chances to find better positions in the international labour market. This would in turn make their personal financial investment in training and education worth the effort. Likewise, by enabling "the right people to be at the right place", this global labour market would enhance economic growth for the benefit for all. There are however a number of reasons to be skeptical of this model. From a political perspective, there are reasons to question the supposed efficiency of states' withdrawal from key sectors such as education and health. From an ethical perspective, the framing of these services in terms of costs and investments, rather than of social benefits and rights, is also quite problematic and echoes some of the main debates of social theory and theories of justice. What is more, the emphasis on skilled migrants overlooks the importance 'unskilled' migrants – who are often viewed as unnecessary or threatening, despite their equally important role in host countries development and economies.

In the same way that 'free trade' is criticized for not being equally beneficial to all, the global mobility of brains does not seem to equally contribute to the development of all states in a balanced and fair manner. As Jean-Marie Muhirwa and Jean-Baptiste Meyer point out, developing countries, such as those of Sub-Saharan Africa, are often not able to make the most of skilled migration, which may in turn create (or rein-

force) inequalities within and between countries. Based on empirical evidence, Meyer argues that developed economies are in reality those that can effectively benefit from skilled migration. They have both the human and economic resources needed to trigger (and maintain) the 'virtuous circle' that skilled migration is supposed to generate. The most underdeveloped and isolated countries, on the other hand, can hardly 'gain' much from the loss of their most skilled.

The case study of school teacher's emigration from the Pacific Islands to New Zealand and Australia, by Robyn Iredale, Carmen Voigt-Graf and Siew-Ean Khoo in this issue, is a good example of countries' structural inequality in the face of skilled migration. The disparities between Australia and Fiji are particularly enlightening: both countries experience structural shortages of school teachers, but only Australia has the (economic, human, institutional) resources to properly address this situation. While Australia has adopted 'brain attractive' immigration policies, many of the small, poor and isolated islands of its neighbouring Pacific have seen their qualified professionals 'fly away' without being able to do much to retain or bring them back.

The situation is made further complex because many countries are in what Isabel Estrada Carvalhais calls a 'semi-peripheral' position. Because they display a mix of developed and less-developed economic features, semi-peripheral countries often need to address both phenomena (the emigration of their 'brains' and the attraction of skilled migrants from abroad) at the same time – without necessarily counting on the best political and policy tools. This situation is quite similar to the so-called 'emerging countries', which have spurred important changes in the dynamics and geography of skilled workers' mobility. The traditional 'poles' of knowledge production and 'brain attraction' (like the United States, Western Europe, but also Russia, Japan and Australia) have been slowly losing their monopoly. They still occupy prominent positions, particularly when considering the number of 'top-quality' education institutions they possess, but no longer hold the privileged positions they used to have in the 80s and 90s.

As both Jean-Baptiste Meyer and Mary Kritz point out, other 'poles' of brain attraction and production, most notably China, India and Brazil, have appeared. Kritz notes that in the past decade Asian countries have increasingly raised the number of students they send abroad. Supported by several policy instruments and incentives to bring back their qualified students, China has for instance been quite successful in the development and diversification of its education, and research and technology sectors. Many African students – the continent with the highest (relative) growth of higher education enrolments in past years – have been choosing 'non-traditional' countries, like China and Malaysia, as destinations to complete their qualification and training abroad.

Likewise, the dynamism of their economies, translated into strong GDP growth rates in the past ten years, has transformed many of these emerging countries into attractive job markets, especially for trained workers. Even if their 'zone of attraction' remains quite regional, as Meyer shows, skilled professionals from different parts of the developed world have increasingly been looking at China, India, Brazil, or even South Korea as potential countries of destination.

4. The Ethics of the 'Brain Drain' and the Responsibility Debate

The mobility of skilled professionals raises some of the deepest ethical dilemmas associated with international migration. If, as argued above, the emigration of trained workers is detrimental to their country of origin and if, in addition, these workers move from poor to rich states, then skilled migration creates winners and losers – and the issue regards whether and how the former should be solicited to compensate the harm done to the latter. This is an extremely tricky and delicate issue, for at least two reasons.

The first regards the nature of the debate, which is inherently political and difficult to ground in unquestionable empirical evidence. The 'loss' of sending states is very complex to assess, to the extent that – as noted above – some analysts argue that there is actually no loss at all and that

the emigration of skilled workers benefits countries of origin. But even if one assumes that there is a loss, determining its exact nature or quantifying it is almost impossible. It follows that the debate on possible compensations always faces a lack of evidence that makes it almost exclusively dependent upon moral and political considerations.

The second issue is even more complex and concerns whom to blame for the loss incurred by the brain drain. There are two main options. The first is to criticize developed receiving countries for attracting and recruiting workers that are much-needed in their developed sending state. Countries in the North would then be obliged to take measures to reduce the impact of skilled migration. These can include for example stricter admission policies, development aid, 'ethical' recruitment codes or return programmes. Yet, the success of such measures in alleviating the costs for countries of origin remains open to debate.

Alternatively, it is possible to argue that individuals themselves are responsible for the burden: by emigrating, skilled professionals jeopardize the socio-economic development of their country and should therefore be asked to compensate. This is indeed the underlying claim of the Bhagwati tax, which proposes that skilled migrants' earnings should be taxed to 'pay back' the benefits they received from the country. Individuals' responsibility to compensate or pay back also underlies return migration claims, even if the 'return' and 'compensation' in these cases are rather less compulsory. Speranta Dumitru's contribution to this issue proposes an assessment of the ethical foundations of these different views. She questions the legitimacy of individual-based penalizing measures, and stresses their incapacity to conciliate states' 'right to development' and individuals' right to emigrate or, more generally, to 'a better life'.

In addition, this focus on either receiving states or individuals omits the responsibility of other actors, like the private sector which, as noted above, plays a central role in shaping the mobility of trained workers. Likewise, sending states also have their share in the responsi-

lity debate. Many experts point out that trained workers who would like to stay in their countries of origin cannot make the most of their competences given the poor institutional, material and economic conditions in which they live. Unless these individuals are given by their home countries the effective means to use their skills and qualification, they will end up suffering from another form of 'brain waste' or 'abuse'.

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All the issues addressed in this special issue that follow are still unresolved. Despite years of

debates, some of the major controversies remain – and are unlikely to disappear from the agenda. What indeed seems clear is that skilled migration, while not new, is at the heart of several major trends in today's world. Knowledge economies, the privatization of education and other services, the emergence of new poles of 'brain attraction', the multiplication of selective migratory policies and the increasing need for trained labour-force in different parts of the world, these are all factors that will make skilled migration an issue of on-going importance in the next decades. In this context, this special issue will hopefully contribute to the still much-needed discussions on the challenges raised by skilled migration.

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