

**Migrant biographies:**  
**A life course approach to high-skilled migration**

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**Abstract**

The rapid decline in transportation and telecommunications costs are encouraging the swift mobility of skilled migrants. Concurrently, many of the European Union countries search for the ways to attract highly skilled migrants in order to deal with the consequences of population decline and shortage of skilled labour. It is not only important to examine labour migrants as economic bodies but also as people who experience various life transitions. As previous research has rarely linked high-skilled migration and life course, this paper aims to propose a theoretical framework for studying the interdependencies of knowledge migrants' parallel careers of migration, employment, and household. Applying life course approach enables to gain deeper understanding of the influence of life paths, social networks, diasporas, and immigration policies on the migration decision-making among highly skilled migrants.

**Keywords:** high-skilled migration, life course approach, migrant biographies

## **Introduction**

During the past decade, the rapid development of telecommunication technologies and decline in transportation costs are facilitating migration at highest pace ever (Portes et al., 1999; Mahler, 2001; Levitt et al., 2003; Vertovec, 2004). Diverging demographic trends between the developed and less developed countries too encourage the swift mobility of migrants. Given the population ageing and shortage of potential skilled labour force, competition for the best talent from abroad is not a new phenomenon in developed countries (Koser and Salt, 1997). Iredale (2001) estimates a pool of 1.5 million professionals from developing in the industrialised countries. Nevertheless, the need for highly skilled migrants is still continuous as the European Union (EU) would need 700,000 additional researchers by 2010 in order to reach the Barcelona European Council target of three per cent of the member countries' GDP as expenditures on research and technological development (IOM, 2004).

Several EU member states have therefore implemented specific programs and policies to attract highly skilled migrants to deal with the consequences of population decline and lack of high-skilled workers. However, the main aim of these policy programs seems to be importing labour but not people (Castles, 2006: 742). The prevailing economic approach to high-skilled migration does not take into account the social behaviour accounts of migration. Despite the clear need to include family dynamics in the migration process (e.g., Clark and Withers, 2007), migration motivations other than economic gain are often left aside in the high-skilled migration research, thus neglecting *homo sociologicus* apart from *homo economicus*. In order to overcome these shortcomings, this paper proposes a framework for linking the discourses of high-skilled migration and life course approach. By using the lens of the life course, migration behaviour is viewed not only in response to labour market triggers, but also in relation to other domains of life of the highly skilled migrants and their significant others. The research questions to be answered by means of this framework then consider the ways in which highly skilled migrants construct their life course, and the different factors that form their migration path in particular. Establishing a connection between high-skilled migration and life course approach allows for deeper micro level understanding of the influence of life path and various aspects connected to it on the migration decision making of highly skilled migrants. By means of exceeding the boundaries of economic reasoning, we are able to examine and explain the patterns of the life course that both constitute and are determined by high-skilled migration.

## **High-skilled migration**

### *Definition*

Describing the characteristics of the central agent of high-skilled migration has been a subject to a lot of debate in the field and consensus is still sought. Generally, a highly skilled migrant is considered to be a person with a tertiary education or an extensive specialised working experience equivalent to it (Iredale, 1999), whereas defining the notion of 'equivalent experience' remains ambiguous and requirements for the level of university degree differ per country policies for the admission of highly skilled migrants.

For instance, ACVZ, an advisory committee for the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Office, in its report on regulation and facilitation of labour migration defines highly qualified labour migrants by means of combining both education and occupation as well as their importance for the state, regarding them as “labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarce expertise; generally highly educated and earn an above average wage; employed in sectors of great economic or social importance” (2004: 144). Mahroum (1999) further specifies five main categories of skilled labour migrants based on the type of work: professional and managerial, engineers and technicians, academics and scientists, entrepreneurs, and students. The push and pull factors for migration then vary across these types from salary conditions to gaining international working experience. Many scholars advocate the distinction between skills-based (i.e., working experience) and qualifications-based (i.e., educational attainment) professional expertise (Koser and Salt, 1997; Williams and Baláz, 2005; Zaletel, 2006; Csedő, 2008), however, the current paper remains to use the term ‘(highly) skilled migrants’, given the assumption of working experience that is equivalent to completed tertiary education.

### *Theoretical background*

The theoretical argumentation underlying high-skilled migration is usually presented in terms of human capital of the individuals. People are assumed to move to labour markets that fit their education and working experience, and where from they expect to receive the most satisfying pay-off for their investment in human capital (Borjas, 1989). This line of reasoning thus views migrants only as economic agents but not as social agents (Iredale, 2001). Numerous studies have found other factors apart from economic well-being influencing the decision making of highly skilled migrants who consider personal development, creating own professional network, gaining international experience, and better working conditions and opportunities than in the home country equally important or even more substantial than highest economic returns (McLaughlan and Salt, 2002; Guth and Gill, 2008; Khoo et al., 2008). Many researchers have also observed the concentration of human capital itself in the region as a remarkable attraction factor for high-skilled migrants (Gottlieb and Joseph, 2006; Whisler et al., 2008). Fielding (1992) describes such areas as ‘escalator regions’, which attract young and qualified people outside the region and facilitate their upward social mobility, often distributing them thereafter to other regions. This concept exemplifies the common temporal dimension of high-skilled migration: it tends to be temporary rather than permanent, circular rather than unidirectional (Koser and Salt, 1997; Vertovec, 2002).

### *Brain circulation*

The circular nature is of crucial importance for the macro consequences of high-skilled migration and determines whether the international mobility of professionals causes brain drain, brain gain or, the term used more recently, brain circulation. Migration of high-skilled labour is beneficial to both the migrants themselves and to the receiving countries, but also the sending countries can profit from the initial outflows of knowledge migrants. The receiving countries benefit from the accumulation of skilled labour which leads to increase in the level productivity (Commander et al., 2003), stimulation of innovation capacity, international dissemination of knowledge and increase in the pool of human capital in general (Salt, 2006). In the Netherlands the Central Planning Office concluded

in a study that highly skilled immigrants are a net benefit to the country (Roodenburg et al., 2003). Kapur and McHale (2005) discuss the benefits of having young highly skilled migrants in countries with ageing populations, the migrants contribute to the welfare systems and their taxable earning are much higher due to higher income potential. In the literature espousing the benefits of brain gain on the source country different groups of researchers (Miyagiwa, 1997; Mountford, 1997; Starks et al., 1998) find that skilled emigration increases the average level of human capital per worker. The professional expertise and networks of expatriates can be transformed to the development of and investments in the home country (Meyer and Brown, 1999; Iredale, 2000), even without the knowledge migrants having to physically return to their country of origin. According to World Bank (2006), remittances of migrants are twice as high as the amount of money received via development aid programmes.

#### *High-skilled migration policies*

For governments it is thus for economic and demographic reasons desirable to attract flows of high-skilled labour. Several member states of the EU have therefore adopted policies to facilitate and regulate the immigration of knowledge migrants. In 2000 the European Union put forth the Lisbon agenda where it announced the intention to make the EU “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010”. Brinkley (2006) broadly defines knowledge economy in terms of technology and knowledge based industries which reflect research and development intensities, high information and communication technology usage, and the deployment of large numbers of graduates and professional and associate professional workers. Zimmermann (2005) finds that the European Union economies have a lack of flexible highly skilled workers, this situation coupled with the population ageing and a decline of the workforce has resulted in an immobile workforce. A solution according to Zimmermann (2005) is to have a single migration policy and provide institutions the facilities to compete for skilled workers.

The arrival at a consensus for the introduction of the highly skilled migrants programme has been challenging within the EU. The EU published a Green Paper (European Commission, 2005) on a common approach to economic migration and is increasingly adopting policies of managed migration. This managed migration is based on a common framework of rights for all third country nationals in legal employment including less and highly skilled. Facing strenuous opposition to the Green Paper from France and Germany, these proposals were withdrawn and replaced by a more limited proposal for a blue card for the highly skilled. The Blue card scheme was announced in September and then confirmed on October 23, 2007 (European Parliament, 2007). At the recently held Doha trade summit the EU signalled that it was willing to set a quota of 80,000 temporary visas a year for skilled workers (BBC news, 2008). Visas are to a large extent granted on the basis of education, working experience, previous earnings, and language skills.

#### *Human capital and migration*

However, it is not only the receiving countries that have to compete for the high-skilled, also sending countries have to make return migration attractive for their expatriates. Among the select group of foreign students in Western universities who invest in

education and thus increase their human capital, the decision not to return to countries of origin has been related to differences in the labour markets (Baruch et. al., 2007). An accompanying reason could also be that highly skilled migrants perceive that they would get higher returns from their investments in education when they work in knowledge based economies (Borjas, 1989; Beine et al., 2001). It is this skill set that increases the propensity to move as the skill set is constantly in demand and many countries compete for the same. One has to also take into account that the migration among the highly skilled is not a one-off event. The acquisition of skills and work experience can trigger many movements. These movements are dependent on the life paths of the individuals and the interrelatedness with the life paths of his or her significant others.

## **Migration and life paths**

### *Life course approach*

Life course approach was developed in the social sciences as a tool to examine the evolution of life trajectories of individuals over time and social processes (for an overview of the emergence of life course approach, see Elder, 1985, 1994; Kulu and Milewski, 2007). The focus of this approach lies on life events—or transitions—of individuals and the ways in which these events constitute their life trajectories (Elder, 1975, 1985), also referred to as life careers or paths. The events under consideration take place in various domains of life, of which education, employment, migration and household are essential in the present paper. The transitions concern status passages or roles that account for particular change in the life of individuals (Elder, 1985; Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999; Clark and Davies Withers, 2007), such as entering the labour market or becoming a parent alter employment and family status, respectively. Moreover, due to the interdependence between different trajectories, an event in one path can bring about status changes in other paths of the individual (Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999). The effect of ‘parallel trajectories’ is particularly well exemplified by migration that is frequently accompanied with alterations in several other life domains (Mulder and Wagner, 1993; Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999): the completion of higher education or starting cohabitation often imply a change in one’s place of residence.

### *Timing*

The variability of timing and sequence of transitions across different trajectories underlines the diversity and unpredictability of life paths (Elder, 1975; Clark and Davies Withers, 2007; Geist and McManus, 2008). The interdependencies of parallel trajectories are two-dimensional: direction of causality and type of dependence between trajectories (Mulder and Wagner, 1993). The relationship between different paths can take the form of either one- or a two-way causality, the life course framework, however, rarely assumes unidirectionality. At the same time, status and event dependencies play a role in the interconnectedness of different trajectories. The former assumes that the occurrence of an event in one trajectory is affected by the status occupied in the other, whereas according to the latter, it is due to the occurrence of the event in the same trajectory (Willekens, 1999). Time is thus a crucial element in the life course approach. Elder (1975) distinguishes between three different dimensions of time. Individual time concerns the chronological order of life events in the life of an individual; social time includes

influences from social institutions, roles, norms and values on the transitions; and historical time sees the events from the perspective of historical changes (Elder, 1975; Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999). Timing of the events also derives from the strategies set in career and family life. Short-term are often connected to ambitions in career advancement, whereas long-term goals also relate to aspirations in family formation and childrearing (Bonney et al., 1999; Lindstrom and Giorguli Saucedo, 2007).

#### *Central dimensions of the life course approach*

The various dimensions of life course approach are summarised in a framework proposed by Elder (1975, 1994), which consists of four central themes. First one, 'lives in time and space', refers to the historical and geographical context that influences the life paths of individuals, or in other words, the cohort effect is studied. Second component, 'timing of lives', looks at life course in terms of occurrence, duration, and sequence of transitions. The concept of 'linked lives' emphasises individuals' embeddedness in social relationships, and recognises the role of the lives of other people in forming the transitions and trajectories of an individual. Last element, 'human agency', connects the previous ones as it states that human beings are consciously and planfully making choices in order to construct their own life paths. Rossi's (1955) pioneering work on linking family life cycle and residential mobility was one of the early attempts to move towards those four elements of the life course approach. However, the life cycle approach assumed a predetermined set of events in a predetermined sequence which all individuals undergo. So were the main transitions of a family life cycle leaving parental home, marriage, child-rearing, retirement, and widowhood as major triggers for relocations, whereas the life course approach also recognises transitions such as cohabitation, separation, remarriage. Thus, the main advantage of the life course approach is that it allows for diversity in the pattern of transitions and trajectories.

#### *Previous findings*

Despite the 'predetermined diversity' assumed in the life course approach, some general patterns of the interrelations of life events and paths can be pointed out, bearing in mind the context of high-skilled international migration. Several studies have confirmed that highly educated people are more likely to move often and longer distances (Courgeau, 1985; Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999; Flowerdew and Al-Hamad, 2004; Whisler et al., 2008). This is furthermore supported by the finding that long-distance moves undertaken are mainly employment-related (Kulu and Billari, 2004; Clark and Davies Withers, 2007). Many studies suggest that migration propensity clearly depends on the family status and composition. The larger the family size, the less likely people are to move (Sandefur and Scott, 1981; Courgeau, 1985; Boyle et al., 2008; Kulu, 2008; Whisler et al., 2008). Married people are found to be less prone to relocation (Sandefur and Scott, 1981; Courgeau, 1985; Clark and Davies Withers, 2007; Whisler et al., 2008). The explanation for the latter phenomenon could be (un)conscious recognition that the likelihood of union dissolution is considerably higher among couples who move frequently over long distances (Boyle et al., 2008; Muszynska and Kulu, 2007). On the reverse, migration can lead individual to access larger marriage markets in the host country (Boyle et al., 2008). In a study on Mexican immigrants' marriage patterns and life course events, Raley et al. (2004) found that Mexican immigrants in US married earlier than their counterparts in

Mexico, the same was found for Puerto Ricans (Singley and Landale, 1998). With regard to family formation trajectory, the fertility of highly educated appears to be lower than that of low-educated (Kulu, 2005). Some studies have concluded that migration is shortly followed by the birth of a child (Andersson, 2004; Kulu and Milewski, 2007).

#### *Facilitating and hindering factors*

Given the four life course framework characteristics developed by Elder (1975, 1994) and the probable life path patterns of migrants, it is crucial to consider migration decision making and the resulting migration behaviour in a wider setting of factors that either facilitate or hinder migration. Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999) distinct between factors derived from the individual or household itself (the micro context) and factors that are created externally (the macro context). They view micro context factors as resources and restrictions that promote or hamper migration, respectively. As for the highly skilled, education is the major resource for migration since it provides with the necessary qualification required for a specific job. An important restriction stems from the composition of a household, namely, if it consists of more than one person, the migration decision making is more complex as its influence on the lives of all household members has to be taken into account. Mincer (1978) uses the term 'tied movers' to refer to migrants who move in order to advance the partner's career and thereby often give up their own employment-related ambitions. Women have dominantly been found to be the tied movers, as they tend to undergo downward mobility after migration (Clark and Davies Withers, 2002; Boyle et al., 2008; Cooke, 2008). On the macro level, factors that enable and discourage migration are opportunities and constraints (Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999). For highly skilled migrants, opportunities would include the availability of particular jobs in the host country, and constraints, or the absence of opportunities, would be shortage of these vacancies. Thus, resources and restrictions are derived from the life paths of the individual and linked lives; opportunities and constraints are prescribed by the social context (Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999).

### **Social networks and diasporas**

#### *Social networks and life paths*

Apart from partner or other direct family members, one's friends and social network more generally also influence the life course of an individual. Drawing on Elder's (1975, 1994) concept of linked lives, life trajectories of the significant others are a necessary component in understanding the life path of an individual. Social ties both provide information on settlement destinations, and provide means for interpreting migration as a social phenomenon, not only as an outcome of economic decision-making (Boyd, 1989). Watters (2003) examined why highly educated never-married individuals in their 30s create social networks and redefine the meanings of friendship, family and commitment. He concludes by highlighting the importance of social networks and its impact on the life paths towards union and family formation. From a comparative mode of analysis life paths have been generally compared between parent generation to child generation (for instance, reproductive careers of mothers and daughters), however, the current paper aims to provide a framework for examining the similarities in the life paths between members in the social network of highly skilled migrants. Social networks aid in



creating a social capital for the migrants. Migrants make use of the networks to share information and aid in the adjustment process when new in a city. Their role with the network keeps changing from the tasks of information receiving to information giving. Emphasising the importance of social networks in migration, Massey et al. (1998) observe that the cost of migration is reduced for each new migrant when he utilises the social capital from the networks. Nevertheless, critique remains to this theory as largely oriented to the economic aspects of migrant networks. For the highly skilled migrants, one of the most important benefits from the social networks is finding employment and recruitment via informal contacts (Alarcón, 1999; Meyer, 2001).

### *Diasporas and migration*

Diaspora then is the cultural face of the social networks, although much broader defined to include people, institutions and educational services. Although individual migrants, who constitute diaspora, live outside the boundaries of their homeland, are nevertheless re-attached to their homeland through space (Laguerre, 1998). Networks of migrants with a strong sense of homeland and nationalism/ethnicity come together to be known as diasporas. Apart from markers such as identity, migration research has shown that the migrants have an agency by which they apprehend, negotiate, and transform the social structures that influence their lives (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003). With this agency they also reorganise places or structures to reflect their homeland, such as the presence of Chinatowns in large Western cities. This reorganisation of spaces acts as a coping mechanism when new migrants arrive, providing them a sense of home. Thus the extent to which the migrant draws his identity from such diasporas and the extent to which the diasporas are embedded in the host countries can have an influence on the migrant's decision to stay or to move.

## **Framework for studying high-skilled migration from the life course perspective**

### *Conceptual framework*

Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for studying high-skilled migration from the life course perspective. It illustrates a theoretical setting for examining the interconnectedness between parallel trajectories of migration, work, household and together their impact on migration strategies. The relationship between these three paths is not linear but circular in order to stress the interconnectedness of parallel trajectories.

### *Life paths*

Life-course events and transitions exert powerful influences on mobility and work strategies. We view migration as an inherent dynamic phenomenon, as part of the life path of individuals within the context in which they live. This approach fits into the broader view of the life course as the central framework from which to study migration. This framework is not one integrated body of theory, but rather a set of specific lenses for looking at migration. By using this set of lenses, we are able to focus on traditional themes and discover new ways of description, of theorizing, and analyzing existing and sometimes even new migration themes. Decisions surrounding migration usually take place around decisions concerning education, entry and exit in the work force, and are also strongly related to the defining events of family formation and transition. The life

course offers a framework to study the dynamic causalities between these domains of life in a coherent and integrated fashion.

For the highly skilled the trigger for the intention to migrate is the life event of graduation from tertiary education. The skill set acquired pushes the individual to look for opportunities to enter the work force and start his or her work career. At this stage the individual evaluates if he or she is getting the right returns for the investment in education. If the individual decides to migrate, to get higher returns for the investment, this transition begins his or her migration path. Parallel to the migration and employment paths is the household path, consisting of union and family formation. In terms of union formation the individual could have postponed the event till the completion of education and entry into workforce. The decision to migrate adds another element to the decision making process.

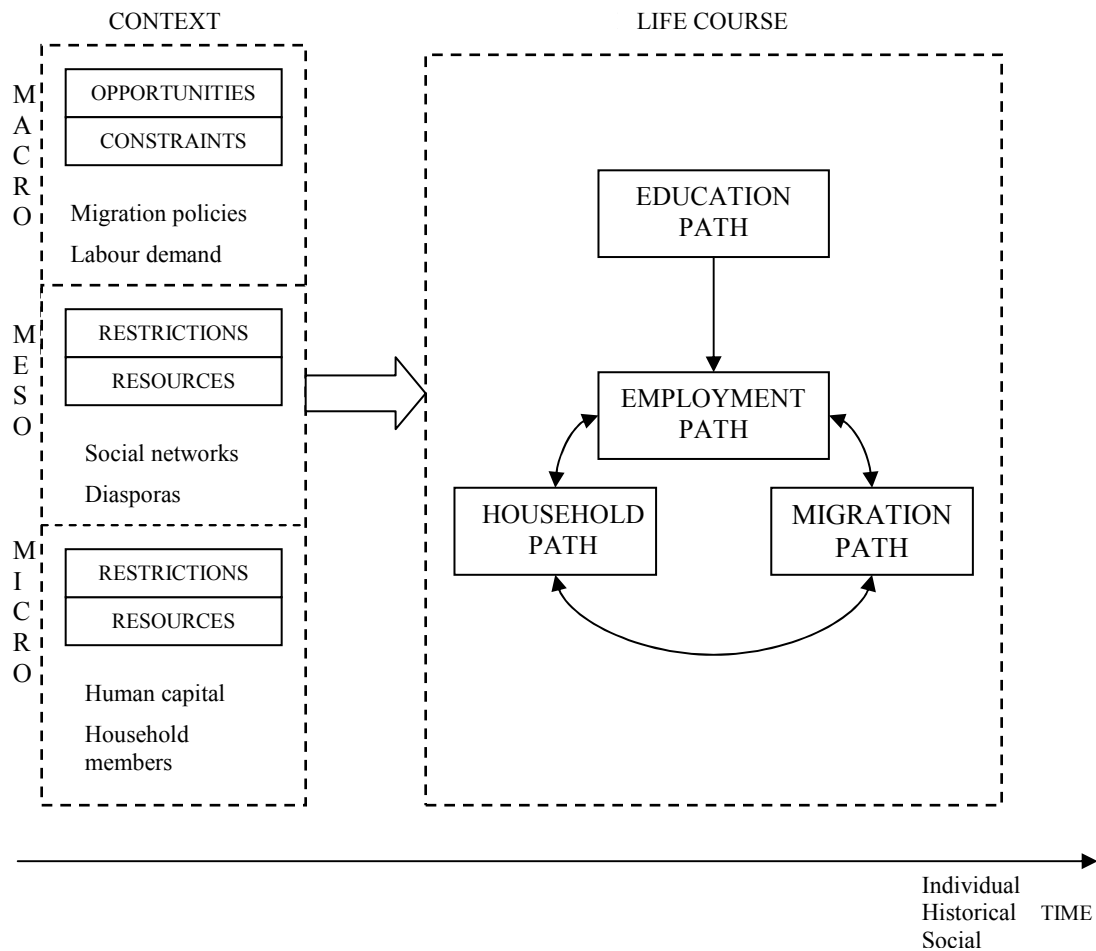


Figure 1 Life course and migration decision making of highly skilled migrants

### *Facilitating and hindering factors*

As for the facilitating and hindering factors for migration, on the individual level, qualifications and skills, i.e., human capital, required for the particular job are the main resources. As already discussed, other household members may restrict migration if their daily (professional) lives would be negatively affected by being a tied mover. The macro level opportunities and constraints concern the availability or shortage of job vacancies for the highly skilled, the demand and supply of those jobs in the receiving country, immigration and emigration policies for knowledge migrants. Social networks and diasporas affect the life course from the meso level. For instance, closer members of the social network can be expected to influence choices made in other trajectories than only that of migration; the presence of home community diaspora in the host society may lead to choose a particular country as destination.

### *Methods*

The methodological approach to be adopted in studying the life paths of highly skilled migrants is a biographical one, as it provides understanding of migration processes from the much-needed micro perspective. Biographical approach lays emphasis on the social embeddedness of individuals and its influence on their decision making (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Findlay and Li, 1997; Ní Laoire, 2008), hence recognises all the central themes of life course approach (historical and geographical context, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency). The individual narratives underline the “role of the teller in constructing her/his own life narrative, through a process of selection, ordering and giving meaning to particular events and stories” (Ní Laoire, 2008: 198). Examining migrant biographies provides insight into how individuals construct their life course in terms of both geographical and social mobility (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003). This approach combined with the life course framework is thus means to comprehend the motivation and decision making process of the highly skilled migrants in the historical, social, and cultural context which is much beyond just cost-benefit analysis.

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