EDITORIAL

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Rethinking knowledge and skills in migration: A spatial–temporal perspective

This special issue seeks to extend our understanding of the relationships between migration and knowledge and skills. In the current global migration regime, knowledge and skills play an important role in shaping migrants' ability and experience of moving and staying abroad. Highly skilled workers and future global talents, that is, students, have increasingly been considered as valuable human capital for the (knowledge) economy. Their mobility has been stimulated by an array of public and private institutions and intermediary actors. Although migrants assume a vital role in economies world-wide, we know little about the "fates" of the diverse types and levels of skills migrants bring with them. What opportunities and obstacles do (return) migrant workers face in practicing and further developing their knowledge and skills? This special issue targets this knowledge gap and advances a growing body of work on geography, migration, and knowledge in the last decade (Jöns, 2007; Jöns, Meusburger, & Heffernan, 2017; Leung, 2013; Meusburger, 2017; Vinokur, 2006; Waters & Leung, 2017; Williams, 2007; Williams & Baláž, 2014).

Worldwide, numerous migrants cannot use their skills and knowledge because their job does not require or stimulate them to do so, or they cannot participate in the labour market at all (Bodankin & Semyonov, 2016; Man, 2004; Raghuram & Kofman, 2004). This "job-education mismatch" (Banerjee, Verma, & Zhang, 2019, p. 647) can take the form of working at lower levels than expected, or in a different field, taking into account their educational background (see also Cohen and Eyal, this issue). Migrants whose skills are not recognised, accredited, or validated have limited chances for upward social mobility compared with those whose skills are solicited. On the other hand, migration processes may also enhance the accumulation and circulation of skills and knowledge (Saxenian, 2005). After all, migration requires creativity, resilience, and adaptation. The links between migration and knowledge and skills are thus multiple and multidirectional, dynamic, and highly contextualised.

In the current debate on the relationship between migration and knowledge and skills, the diverse and context-specific institutional factors that mobilise or create friction to skill recognition, transfer, and development require further attention. Here, we adopt a broad definition of "institution," as it applies to both formal institutions (e.g., regulations) created by entities such as the government and informal institutions such as social rules and behaviour patterns important to a society (Martin, 2004). As Sumption (2013) notes, different and "stubbornly persistent" (p. 2) barriers have found to perpetuate "brain waste," including a lack of language proficiency, statistical or taste-based discrimination (e.g., in recognition of foreign credentials or social prejudice), and limited access to networks. Institutions are then conceptualised as related and nested entities, with institutional factors (e.g., policies, intermediary actors, networks, and social norms) contributing to the processes and experiences of "brain drain" (Crush & Hughes, 2009; Teferra, 2005), "brain gain" (Park, 2004), "brain exchange," or "brain circulation" (Jöns, 2007; Saxenian, 2005; Williams & Baláž, 2014) in specific migration and labour market contexts. How and by whom knowledge and skills are identified, constituted, valued, developed, and negotiated in various migration and work regimes forms intrinsically part of such processes. Walton-Roberts (2020), for instance, shows how private intermediaries involved in the mobility of the nursing practice have a pivotal role in interpreting, valuing, and translating knowledge and competences, from one country context to another. Yet, also the complex and contextualised intersections between skill and other social differences, such as nationality, age, gender, residence status, race/ethnicity, language, cultural proficiency, and religion (e.g., Aure, 2013; Kou, van Wissen, van Dijk, & Bailey, 2015), and life course-related factors require further analysis. For instance, the decision to migrate is often intrinsically linked to specific life course events, such as marriage, giving birth or retirement (Bailey & Mulder, 2017). Relatedly, common unidirectional notions of "brain drain" and "brain gain" should be problematized, by interrogating the dynamics that shape the dialectic and multidirectional relationship between migration and skills (see also Glorius, this issue). The spatial and temporal particularities of the specific context play a dominant role in shaping these dynamics (cf. Liversage, 2009; Nijenhuis & Leung, 2014).

The papers in this special issue address the relationship between knowledge and skills and migration, taking into account the knowledge gaps identified above. In addressing the relationship between migration and knowledge and skills, the authors focus on how this relationship is affected by the spatial context at a local, regional, and national level. In addition, most papers address a temporal perspective, placing specific locations and events within individual migrants' trajectories.

The first paper by Parvati Raghuram points towards a lack of attention for the geographies of skills and argues for a reorientation of skilled migration research, beyond the body of the skilled migrant. She proposes to do so by investigating the sites, networks, and spatio-temporalities of skills acquisition and reproduction and to include the structures and conditions in which these skills are acquired and deployed. Drawing upon examples from the IT sector, her paper analyses how these spatio-temporal relations prescribe, produce,

prevail, and preclude some people from mobility and how skills come to be positioned in a global field. As such, it raises political and ethical questions arising from uneven spatialities.

Yvonne Riaño further interrogates the inequalities of skill development of tertiary-educated individuals by employing an intersectional and comparative approach. She examines how Switzerland's gender culture interrelates with migrant-specific barriers to employment, creating a system of advantages and disadvantages of skill development for Swiss-born and foreign-born men and women. Combining Swiss labour market data and biographical interviews, Riaño's analysis reveals the particularities of these advantages and disadvantages, noting how the different opportunities for skill development are shaped at the individual, family, and macro levels of society. In particular, she shows how the division of paid and domestic work within binational couples affects and reproduces skill development. This analysis puts forth critical moments and critical places where professional (in)equalities between partners emerge, testifying to the defining role of formal and informal institutions in shaping the relationships between migration and knowledge and skills.

Next, Metka Hercog and Flavia Cangià explore in their article how highly skilled migrants subjectively make sense of and validate their own skills when in search for new employment in a new country. Using a transnational perspective, they highlight that in the context of migration, skills can only be properly understood by looking at multiple locations and events in people's trajectories. In addition to foregrounding the spatial context, they also use a temporal perspective to explore skills. The country of origin, previous countries of migration, receiving context, and future destinations as well as past experiences and future plans can all play a role in the way individuals make sense of and personally validate what they consider to be their skills. Drawing upon qualitative research among highly skilled migrants in Switzerland, they examine how personal and professional skills intertwine with each other when people engage with the given yet evolving socio-economic environment.

The paper of Birgit Glorius shows how Bulgarian graduates use their knowledge and skills acquired in Germany and beyond for socially innovative projects that benefit local communities in Bulgaria. She shows how both stayers and returnees act within a transnational social space, which develops and deepens during and after student mobility. Important reasons to engage in such knowledge transfer are altruistic stances, a feeling of loyalty towards the home country, and the aim to lead a meaningful life. Such endeavours are not per se successful: they highly depend on the knowledge of local conditions, including formal and informal institutions, and the presence and use of social networks, notably transnational social networks.

Finally, Nir Cohen and Nurit Eyal analyse the nexus between skills mismatch, educational/industrial policies, and brain circulation in Israel. Focusing on the field of life sciences (LS), they argue that migratory movements of highly educated Israelis are fuelled by vertical (inadequate level) and horizontal (inadequate type) skills mismatches. Using primary and secondary qualitative data, their paper shows that whereas many so-called bio-brains migrate due to being under-qualified (lacking post-doctoral training), their return is often delayed or prevented altogether due to shortage of academic positions and the incompatibility between their fields of (academic) specialisation and the (industrial) jobs available in the country's small LS industry.

The papers in this special issue make an important contribution in improving our understanding of the diverse and contextualised links between knowledge and skills and migration. They do so by applying a spatial–temporal lens and by highlighting both formal and informal institutions. While some focus more on individuals' embodied experiences, others emphasise the role of (social) institutional forces and contexts. This diversity of approaches and contexts is highly informative for our analysis of how mobility and production of knowledge relates to migration processes. Together, the contributions highlight the complex nature of migration and knowledge and skills, provide substantiated analyses on its consequences in our contemporary society, and provide input for a future research agenda. Three ingredients of such research agenda can be mentioned in this regard.

First, we observed the importance of the localised institutional context. Worldwide, migration regimes tend to stimulate the mobility of those considered highly skilled, with full access to green card arrangements and short procedures. Lower skilled migrant workers often face more stringent immigration policies and more hurdles to jump. Though migration regimes may be lenient for the first, local institutional contexts may not be aligned and prove exclusionary nonetheless, as is also observed by Riaño in this issue. Moreover, such context-specific institutional factors can be deeply engrained at the national level, and produce adverse effects (Cohen & Eyal, this issue). More research on how migrants cope with such effects is needed. Second, the papers in this issue give impetus to further explore the spatial–temporal dimensions of knowledge and skills (Raghuram, this issue). Taking a life course or trajectory approach (Hercog and Cangià, this issue) can be useful for such endeavour: How do different locations in a trajectory give meaning to skills? How does this change over time? How do knowledge and skills accrue over time, in particular in transnational spaces (Glorius, this issue)? Third, the papers in this issue primarily focus on higher skilled migrants. Yet, knowledge and skills are not only qualities of those deemed to be highly skilled, which should be understood as a fluid and politicised economic construct, as emphasised by Raghuram (this issue). Migrant workers in the so-called lower-skilled sectors also embody, work with and develop specific sets of skills and knowledge. Hence, when we ponder the relationships between migration and knowledge and skills, we need to consider migrant workers and the notion of knowledge and skills broadly. It is important to take into account migrants who are engaged in work that requires different types (codified and tacit) and ordinal levels (lay vs. expert) of knowledge and skills. A cross-fertilisation of the separate migrant worker/highly skilled (and mobile cosmopolitan) literatures may be helpful in achieving a better understanding of both.

Our set of papers illustrates the challenges migrants face when it comes to using their skills and knowledge, and the hierarchies of migrants and places around the globe. We hope that this special issue contributes to new research on knowledge, skills, and migration as well as to the evolvement of ethically sound migration regimes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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