

Labour market experiences of skilled British migrants in Vancouver

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the paper is to explore the labour market experiences of highly skilled migrants from developed countries who are not linguistic or visible minorities in the host country.

Design/methodology/approach: The results of the paper derive from interviews with 64 highly skilled British migrants in Vancouver. Participants were asked open- and closed-ended questions and the data from the interviews were coded and analysed manually.

Findings: British migrants were divided with their labour market outcomes. Some cited positive experiences such as better responsibility, treatment and salary, while others cited negative experiences such as having to re-accredit, unduly proving themselves to their employers and not having their international experience recognised.

Research limitations/implications: The results are particular to a single case study, hence they cannot be generalised or taken to represent the experiences of all British skilled migrants in Vancouver.

Practical implications: Governments and organisations should ensure that they fulfil any promises they made to highly skilled migrants before the migration process and manage their expectations. Otherwise they face problems with brain waste and migrant retention in the short term and attracting foreign talent in the long term. They should also consider taking a more flexible approach to recognising foreign qualifications, skills and international experience.

Originality/value: The paper adds to our understanding of migrant groups from countries who share similar social and cultural characteristics to the host population. The paper shows that labour market integration challenges are not exclusive to low skilled visible minority migrants, but also to highly skilled migrants who speak the same first language and have the same skin colour as the majority of the host population.

Keywords: Highly skilled migrants; expatriates; labour market; integration; work; British; Vancouver

Article classification: Research paper

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Introduction

As the world experiences an unprecedented movement of people within and between countries, the type of migrants is also becoming more varied (e.g. highly skilled, skilled, semi-skilled, asylum-seekers and refugees), as is the length of their migration (e.g. permanent, semi-permanent, seasonal and temporary) (De Haas, 2010; Iredale, 2001; Skeldon, 2012). Most migrants have better access to information than ever before, meaning that they are moving for different and often multiple reasons, including but not limited to: economic opportunity, proximity to family, lifestyle, adventure, change, challenge, or escaping conflict and political strife.

In the last two decades, there has been a particular emphasis on the ‘war for talent’ (Chambers *et al.*, 1998; Ewers, 2007; Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009). Much of this discussion has focused on the knowledge-based economy and how organisations need to place greater resources into attracting and retaining high quality employees. However, more recently both governments and organisations are recognising the significance of attracting foreign talent in order to fill skill shortages and increase their competitiveness (Koh, 2003). The H-1B visa in the United States (US), the Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) visa category in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Subclass 457 visa in Australia are three of many government initiatives that seek to attract highly skilled professionals and meet labour market demand. This highlights the importance of studying the numerically small, but economically and politically important group of highly skilled migrants.

Despite the positive impression that governments and organisations provide about the value they place on highly skilled migrants, the academic literature suggests that the experiences of this group can often be problematic (Kofman, 2000; Purkayastha, 2005; Walsh, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to expand on the workplace experiences of highly skilled migrants in host countries through analysing the labour market experiences of British expatriates in Vancouver, Canada. This is an important area of research because it is not clear whether this group, who speak the same first language and have the same skin colour as the majority of the host population, and who hold strong historical and cultural ties with Vancouver as well as university and professional training which is largely well-respected, also experience difficulties in the labour market.

Skilled migrants working abroad

The theoretical literature on skilled migrants finding work has tended to engage with the seminal writing in economic sociology on social networks. Granovetter (1995), for example, claimed that individuals who are more satisfied with their jobs have frequently found them through social contacts. The argument is that personal contacts often have detailed information both about the job posting and the potential candidate, meaning that they are in a strong position to match the two. The same argument has been applied in the context of migrants finding work. For instance, Poros (2001) found that social networks have been critical in enabling Asian Indian migrants to find work in the high technology sector in London and New York. Harvey's (2008) research also showed that highly skilled British and Indian scientists working in

Boston used social networks to find work, both before they moved to the US and once they were already working in the country and wanting to move jobs. More importantly, it is not merely social connections that enable people to find fulfilling work. Strategic location and hierarchical positions of these contacts, as well as the values instilled within these networks, what Lin (2001) terms ‘social capital’, play a fundamental role. It has been well-documented how certain social groups have been marginalised in the economy based on their lack of social networks (Ibarra, 1993).

Even social groups with high levels of professional skills and training have experienced labour market discrimination. Iredale (2005), for example, found that skilled female migrants faced additional barriers due to family structures and obligations which often delayed their accreditation process or the learning of a language. This inevitably hampered their ability to find work or secure promotion. In addition, in many cases overseas skills are not recognised and although there is often the promise of language training, work experience and subsidised training programmes, these are often not available for the non-principal migrants (Iredale, 2005). This links to Harvey’s (1998) concern that organisations often fail to recognise and address the needs of the increasingly common dual-career couples, which could help to prevent professional and family-related stress. In short, skilled migrants who have high levels of skills and training and who are in high demand from national governments and organisations continue to face labour market barriers.

Employer and industry protectionism is another reason why workers have faced labour market integration challenges. Zulauf (1999) suggests that employers are likely

to be risk-adverse in their recruitment, particularly when they are unable to verify the quality of qualifications and skills, and this creates a potential for exclusion. She also found that EU migrant women working in the banking sector in Britain, Germany and Spain had little guarantees that their qualifications would be recognised despite formal EU regulations. Similarly, Salaff *et al.* (2002) found that the matching of jobs in Canada with the human capital of Chinese migrants was ‘socially constructed’. This raises the question of whether the attraction of foreign talent from national governments and organisations at a macro level is synonymous with the realities of the labour market experiences of highly skilled migrants at a micro level.

Skilled migrants have also been included or excluded in the labour market based on their language, skin colour, gender and class (Dustmann, 1994; Khadria, 2001; Mogalakwe, 2008; McDowell, 2009). In terms of language, Alarcón (1999) found that one of the reasons that Indian migrants used social networks more than Mexican migrants for job purposes was because English is the official language for higher education in India, which gave Indian professionals a competitive advantage when forming professional contacts in the US. Economists such as Dustmann (1994) also agree that verbal and written language skills are critical determinants for labour market performance.

However, Williams (2007) argues that it is less a migrant’s language ability and more the location of where someone obtained his or her qualification that determines whether organisations deem their training as legitimate. Skin colour, gender and class have also determined labour market experiences. Mogalakwe (2008: 430) found a

‘labour aristocracy’ in Botswana where a two-tier salary structure was introduced: one for white, mainly South African expatriates, and another for the black indigenous Batswana. The findings show a strong bias towards white expatriates over the local population, which has also been reflected in other countries, such as Singapore (Koh, 2003). Similarly, Moriarty *et al.* (2012: 1882) extend the notion of aesthetic labour from a person who ‘looks and sounds right’ to the social construction of ‘embodied skills’:

“Here a process of change occurs through the migratory process whereby the perceived attitudes of particular groups or nationalities intersect with presumptions around certain types of bodies resulting in a stereotype where certain nationalities or ethnicities are considered more suitable for certain types of work.”

McDowell (2009: 27) argues that among large groups of the British-born population whiteness is clearly a ‘marker of privilege’. Other social markers such as education and class are also key determining factors of success in the labour market. Zulauf’s (1999: 685) research on EU migrant women in the banking sector, for example, found that “[...] public schooling and the reputation of degree-awarding institutions are of great importance in Britain’s selection criteria, particularly in the City”. McDowell *et al.*’s (2005) research on the intersection of gender and class is one of many studies to show that although there have been positive recent developments in terms of the economic opportunities for minority groups, there is a lot of scope for improvement. Within the migrant population in Dubai, Walsh (2006, pp. 274-275) suggests that there is a hierarchy with British expatriates holding a higher social position amongst

the Emirati population than the majority of the migrant population who tend to hold fewer professional skills and originate from South Asia.

The previous overview of the literature on the labour market experiences of skilled migrants shows that many of this group have faced difficulties finding jobs, integrating into the workplace and gaining promotion. Much of this body of work has focused on biases towards country of origin, or discrimination based on language, skin colour, gender and class. However, an important gap in the theoretical literature concerns whether labour market discrimination exists for skilled migrant groups who are linguistically and visibly similar to the host population.

A critical rationale for focusing on highly skilled British migrants in Vancouver is that they speak the same first language and largely have the same skin colour as the majority of the local host population. In addition, they hold strong historical and cultural ties with Vancouver and have university and professional training which is generally well-respected. Nonetheless, our understanding of their labour market experiences remains limited. This leads to the following research question: What are the labour market experiences of highly skilled migrants from developed countries who are not linguistic or visible minorities?

Methods

In the context of this paper, highly skilled British migrants are defined as those who were born in the UK, hold a bachelor's degree qualification or equivalent training, and hold at least three years of paid or unpaid work since their qualification or

equivalent training. British migrants were chosen because they are a historically mobile group and have largely made a positive economic impact on sending and receiving countries (Sriskandarajah and Drew, 2006). British migrants in Vancouver were selected because they hold similar educational and social backgrounds to the local population.

This is important because much of the theoretical literature has focused on disadvantages that marginalised migrant groups have faced in the labour market based on their country of origin, whereas the intention here is to establish whether a migrant group with closer educational and cultural similarities, and therefore a relative advantage over other migrant groups, also face challenges within the labour market. In addition, despite a wave of research on highly skilled migrants from developing countries (Saxenian, 2006; Montgomery, 2008), there has been relatively little in the way of research on highly skilled migrants from developed countries (Meyer, 2001; Harvey, 2011a). This is significant because it is not clear whether highly skilled migrants from developed countries also face difficulties within the host country labour market.

The results in this paper are part of a larger project on the migration, integration, social networks and job-seeking activities of highly skilled migrants in Canada. The data derive from 64 interviews conducted with British expatriates in Vancouver between September 2008 and March 2009 (see Table 1). Vancouver was chosen for the research because it is an attractive destination for migrants. It consistently ranks amongst the highest cities in the world in Mercer's quality of living survey and The

Economist's liveability survey (Mercer, 2010; The Economist, 2011). It is a regional economy with historical strength in forestry and mining, and now burgeoning economic growth in biotechnology, video games and film (Barnes and Hutton, 2009).

Vancouver is also highly ranked for its size in terms of its level and connectivity of business activity, categorised by GaWC (2010) as 'Beta+'. There are strong historical ties between the UK and Vancouver with the city being named after the British naval captain, George Vancouver in 1792. There has also been a large flow of British migrants to both cities and in the 2006 Census, 63,935 people in Vancouver identified themselves as British-born which was 8% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Different strategies were used to gain access to British migrants, including making requests at local sports, social clubs, and on British expatriate websites; contacting the British Consulate and relocation companies, and through snowballing at the end of interviews. The rationale for these was to ensure interviews from a wide spectrum of highly skilled migrants, rather than from one particular network. Interviews were largely conducted face-to-face (69%) either in participants' workplaces or in a mutually convenient public space such as a quiet café. On a number of occasions (31%), interviews were conducted by telephone in order to give participants flexibility, particularly when they were travelling for work purposes. Interviews were not digitally recorded because respondents preferred to speak off the record. In most cases, including where quotations are provided below, I was able to write responses verbatim.

The interviews were structured, which offered two major benefits: first, it enabled me to write responses accurately because of the direct nature of the questions and second, it was the most efficient way to obtain relevant data in a relatively short time period, particularly from leaders and senior managers who were not able to offer longer appointments (Harvey, 2011b). Despite the structured nature of the interviews, there were opportunities for participants to answer both open- and closed-ended questions. This did not impede on the quality of the interview, which lasted for approximately 45 minutes, as participants were very willing to provide me with additional contacts. All respondents agreed to be contacted again for follow-up questions, which I only requested for points of clarification.

A high proportion (83%) of respondents was male, which reflects the gendered nature of skilled migration (Kofman, 2000; Purkayastha, 2005). The discussion below includes and analyses the labour market experiences of both men and women. The results were categorised in Microsoft Excel and coded manually. Open codes relating to the labour market experiences of highly skilled British migrants were created on the basis of the principal research gaps previously outlined in the theoretical literature. I use pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of participants and their organisations.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1: Background information on British respondents in Vancouver

Labour market experiences of skilled British migrants working in Vancouver

Positive treatment, responsibility and salary

A large number of respondents said that they had experienced different levels of work responsibility in Canada compared to their previous jobs in the UK. Over two-fifths of British migrants said that they had been expected to take on particular projects and tasks for their company because they were British (see Table 2). James Higham, Programme Director of an IT firm, said that he spent a lot of time working with clients and subsidiaries in the UK because he is from the UK and therefore is more aware of the country's culture and customs than his Canadian colleagues. He mentioned how his work was not exclusively with British clients and most of his Asian-born colleagues were doing work in Asia. In terms of obtaining this particular job and fulfilling his duties, it was clear that being British was an advantage to him because he was selected since he had particular knowledge of the British market. Brenda Beare, National Manager of a publishing company, thinks being British has been an advantage for her because she has been allocated difficult accounts and diverse clients and this has given her greater challenges and opportunities. The reputation of the publishing industry in the UK as well as the perceived worldly outlook of British migrants has meant that she is given additional responsibility. In both cases, it was the respect of their qualifications and skills in the UK, as well as the trust instilled in their social skills which resulted in them being given more

responsibility. This links to Walsh's (2006) findings that British expatriates in Dubai receive greater opportunities than other migrant groups.

Another reason for some British migrants receiving positive labour market experiences in Vancouver was because of particular skill shortages. Over two-thirds of respondents (69%) felt that there were skill shortages within their company and their appointments were often part of a strategy to fill this shortage. For example, Iain Patterson, an engineering consultant, noted, "I seem to be recognised as the only person [with a particular type of skillset in the company]". This was more evident in sectors with less industry regulation surrounding the requisite qualifications required for practice.

Dennis Neale, Principal and Partner of an architecture firm, indicated that compared to his Canadian colleagues, his treatment was: "Probably a little better. Years ago I think British architects were held in pretty high esteem [...] that's still the case but not as much as in the eighties. British-educated people have a good experience, with parliamentary effect, with dealing with big groups of people." In this instance, Neale gives a positive impression of his British training and accent in the architecture sector, although he is quick to point out that this is not as prominent as in the past. The above examples show the value of professional qualifications from the UK as well as the favourable bias towards the British accent. The timing of entering the labour market as well as the sector was also important in determining positive outcomes. Hence, it is not merely the social characteristics of migrants, but also multiple contexts which determine their workplace experiences.

Respondents were highly satisfied with their employers in Canada. Jane Smith, a government advisor, said: “There is no easy answer. I’m very happy with what I do and I’m happy with that.” In general, British migrants felt valued by their Canadian employers (mean 0-10 score: 8.3). For instance, speaking about her current employer in Canada, Nicole Churt, Project Manager of a telecommunications company, said that, “They treat me well; I’ve got no complaints, am happy in the job.” In general, respondents were also satisfied with their Canadian salaries (mean 0-10 score: 7.3) (see Table 2). Douglas Cameron, Manager of a transport company, had a very similar attitude to his income as most respondents: “Everyone would like to have more. My salary over the years has gone up on a regular basis.” In short, he was satisfied with his remuneration but could be paid more. Anthony Brain, Manager of an accountancy firm, made a similar point about his salary: “Again, it was adequate, but you know you can get more elsewhere.”

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2: Different labour market experiences of British respondents

Negative experiences with industry protectionism and proving oneself

A significant number (29%) of respondents said that they had faced problems obtaining work in Vancouver or having their skills recognised. In most cases, this was either because they arrived in the country during a recession or because they had to re-accredit. In some cases, respondents were told that they were over-qualified, as was the case with Iain Patterson: “There was a period that I was being turned away from jobs because I was seen as over-qualified. The issue is there is a certain amount of

protectionism of professions. They don't want foreigners; it's never far under the surface. Basically, it's the fear of the unknown."

A number of skilled migrants experienced conflict in relation to their skills and qualifications. On the one hand, their skills and qualifications were recognised and valued by their colleagues and peers, but on the other hand, they were perceived as a potential threat or competition to local workers. At the same time, in several instances employers and professional bodies in certain sectors, such as engineering and law, did not recognise these skills. This relates to Zulauf's (1999: 683) observation that:

“Employers and training institutions have considerable discretionary powers to put their own rating on a person’s training and qualificational background, which will then determine access to the level of entry to the profession. In many ways, access depends on the extent to which employers are willing to make allowances for different credentials in their selection criteria.”

British migrants were unclear at the time of migrating whether they would face such difficulties, which highlights the conflicting message at the macro level from the government compared to the reality of the migrant’s labour market experience at the micro level. As Salaff *et al.* (2002: 462) aptly put it in the context of accreditation: “Although the government selects immigrants along the human capital dimension, institutional forces isolate these newcomers from the professional labour market.” This barrier, which many British migrants experienced, is an important finding as it highlights that governments and professional bodies are not always aligned in their policies.

An example of national governments and professional bodies implementing conflicting policies is the former promoting open-door immigration policies to allow skilled migrants to enter the host country, whilst the latter implement closed-door labour market policies which restrict skilled migrants from working in the host country, or vice-versa. An open-door immigration policy may be effective at attracting skilled migrants; however, a closed-door labour market policy is less effective at retaining skilled migrants. It reduces skilled migrants' capacity to work in certain professions, which in the long-term may also reduce a country's ability to attract them. Table 3 presents a matrix of how open and closed immigration and labour market policies may have different outcomes in terms of attracting and retaining skilled migrants. British migrants in Vancouver working in sectors such as engineering and law seemed to experience open immigration policies, but closed labour market policies. This would suggest high levels of attraction, but potentially low levels of retention of this group.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Table 3: The impact of open and closed immigration and labour market policies on attracting and retaining skilled migrants

A significant number of British respondents faced negative workplace experiences on the basis of their migration background. Liam Morris, a design engineer, for example, noted that his start-up salary was lower than his colleagues', but it has turned-out similar: "Basically I think for the first eighteen months I had to prove myself, and not

just professionally but in my long term intentions. I was told that I should get my residency and P.Eng [Professional Engineer] and that it would be career limiting not to. I don't blame them for this attitude as I suspect Canadians at my age would be expected to have their P.Eng.” The fact that Morris accepted to prove himself demonstrates his long-term commitment to Canada. In addition, his re-qualifying shows, as was the case with a number of respondents, the enormous labour market challenges faced when British skilled migrants first start working in Vancouver.

Sam Benson, a lawyer, described Vancouver as having an “insular environment” and “not recognising international experience”, which he resented given his extensive experience working abroad, which would be highly valued elsewhere. This extends Salaff *et al.*’s (2002) argument as even skilled migrants from countries with similar institutional contexts experience difficulties in relation to having their qualifications and experience recognised. As a result, ‘familiarisation’ and ‘institutionalisation’ need to take place at an organisational level in order to gain professional recognition in their new workplace. The results from this research show that it is not only formal qualifications which are not recognised, but also softer business experience, such as international training, which is not taken into consideration by employers in Vancouver.

Overall, respondents were quite divided in terms of whether they received better or worse treatment than their Canadian colleagues. In part, this is likely to be because although being highly skilled, British, English-speaking and white holds labour market advantages in Vancouver. As McDowell (2009: 29) points out, there are many

other markers of discrimination such as class, religion, age and gender. In short, being an English-speaking and non-visible highly skilled migrant from a developed country did not present labour market problems for a number of British respondents. However, some still faced challenges because of other social characteristics and owing to their country of origin, contextual factors and strict professional body requirements.

Conclusions

This paper sought to understand the labour market experiences of highly skilled migrants from a developed country who were not linguistic or visible minorities. This is an important area of research given that a lot of work on skilled migration and employment experiences has focused on vulnerable minorities from developing countries. The results from this study show mixed experiences for highly skilled British migrants working in Vancouver. On the positive side, a number of respondents indicated that they received additional responsibilities and opportunities as well as challenging project assignments because they were British.

This is an important finding since there is little evidence from the skilled migration and integration literature showing that migrants actually have preferential labour market experiences. In addition, although salary was not a significant factor in why most respondents moved to Canada; most noted that they were pleasantly surprised by their income. One explanation for the positive salary and treatment may have been less about the fact that respondents were British and more closely related to the serious skill shortages experienced by organisations in Vancouver as a result of a

significant transition in the economy (Barnes and Hutton, 2009). Hence, there was a particular market demand to provide respondents with different incentives. This was not always the case as some migrants arrived during a recession, but in all cases timing was important in determining labour market outcomes.

A number of British respondents confronted negative labour market experiences. Many spoke about having to prove themselves to their employers as well as demonstrate their long-term commitment to Canada and their employers before they would be considered for promotion. Other respondents in professions such as engineering and law found themselves having to re-qualify in order to practice their profession at the equivalent level that they were working in the UK. This caused a lot of resentment and despondency as many respondents found that their qualifications and experience, which were highly valued by their peers, were not recognised by professional bodies. Indeed, a number of respondents complained that their qualifications and skills were at least the same as their Canadian counterparts and in some instances they were told that they were over-qualified. This is an important finding because although there has been extensive research on the non-recognition of skilled migrant qualifications, there has been little work conducted on skilled migrants being marginalised on the basis that they are over-qualified.

In summary, this paper has made two important contributions which bridge the literatures on migration and employment relations. First, highly skilled British migrants were not homogeneous with regard to their labour market outcomes, with the same group experiencing both positive and negative labour market biases. As

discussed above, some participants experienced better responsibility, treatment and salary than their Canadian counterparts, while others found themselves having to reaccredit, unduly prove themselves to their employers, or justify why their international experience should be deemed relevant. Second, despite the fact that this group held an advantage over other migrant groups in terms of their social characteristics, historical and cultural ties, and educational backgrounds, many of them still experienced labour market barriers.

Directions for future research

This paper highlights that our analysis of discrimination in the labour market must extend beyond linguistic, visible and cultural characteristics. A major concern is that, if a relatively privileged group of highly skilled British migrants is experiencing labour market discrimination in Vancouver, what barriers are other skilled migrant groups confronting in this and other regional economies? The paper also emphasises the problem of ‘employer protectionism’ and ‘professional protectionism’, which are important areas for future research because the rationale for such protectionism is not clear in the context of different skilled migrant groups. Furthermore, ‘brain waste’ of skilled migrants is evidently a problem for some British migrants in Vancouver and a well-documented problem in other settings.

This is concerning given that it is a socially and economically undesirable and unsustainable situation in the short- and long-term. In the short-term, it is highly demotivating for skilled migrants, hampering their contribution to the workplace and society as a whole. In the long-term, host countries lose large pools of skilled labour

as potential migrants learn through their social networks about the labour market barriers they would face if they were to migrate. Additional research is needed to explore not merely the extent of brain waste in different contexts, but also the ways in which it can be reduced.

Another important area for further research is the degree to which governments, professional bodies and organisations are transparent about labour market opportunities. To date, like many national governments, the Canadian Government has been quick to promote the promising work opportunities for skilled migrants in the country. However, the reality for even the most highly skilled has in many cases been very different and divided. A number of British respondents indicated that they would not have moved to Canada had they known about all the workplace barriers they would face.

Further research is needed to compare the immigration and labour market signals from governments and industrial bodies with the individual labour market experiences of highly skilled migrants. Given the growing war for foreign talent, this is a timely moment for governments and professional bodies to take a more flexible approach to recognising qualifications, skills and international experience, and in the process benefit from the invaluable and diverse resources of highly skilled migrants.

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Table 1: Background information on British respondents in Vancouver

Time of fieldwork	September, 2008 – March, 2009
Total number of respondents	64
Economic sector	Cross-sector including: creative, university, engineering, accountancy, IT, consultancy, government, law and banking
Average age	46
Percentage of male respondents	83%
Percentage of face-to-face interviews	31%
Visa status	Citizens (53%); Permanent residents (20%); Other (27%)
University qualification	Bachelor's (53%); Master's (20%); Doctorate or equivalent (27%)
Job title	CEO, Founder Director or Partner (10%); Senior Manager (50%); Manager (19%); Early career (21%)

Table 2: Different labour market experiences of British respondents

Allocated different projects to Canadian colleagues (%)	42
Provided with a different salary to Canadian colleagues (%)	26
Treated differently to Canadian colleagues (%)	22
Problems with gaining work or having skilled recognised (%)	29
How highly valued by Canadian employer (0-10 scale)	8.3
How satisfied with current Canadian salary (0-10 scale)	7.3

Table 3: The impact of open and closed immigration and labour market policies on attracting and retaining skilled migrants

