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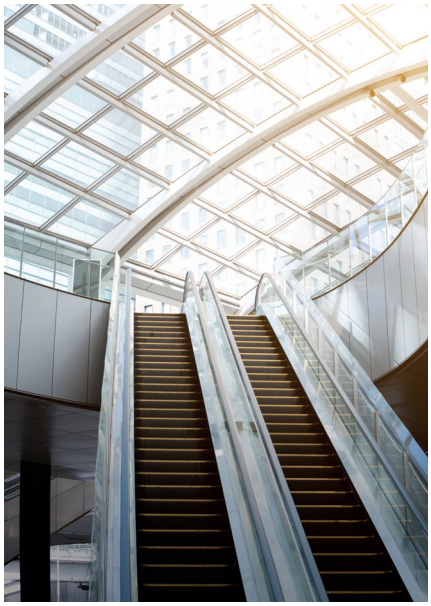

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The Mobility of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland

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Recent encouragement of skilled immigration is mostly explained by the changing needs of the Swiss economy. However, access to the labor market differs not only according to foreigners' level of skills, but also according to their country of origin, mode of entry, and field of specialization. The aim of this project is to reflect on the notion of highly skilled migrant by (1) analyzing its role in Switzerland, (2) observing the strategies of highly educated migrants to access better life prospects and, (3) investigating their influence on today's society.

Research Questions

The main assumption of the research project is that the category of "highly skilled migrants" cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, the project firstly aims to analyze how different actors understand who the highly skilled migrants in the Swiss context are (Parsons et al. 2014). This is done by observing policy objectives and implementation as well as the practices of private recruiters and companies interested in hiring skilled labor.

Secondly, the project will investigate the "resource environment" (Levitt et al. forthcoming) of different groups of highly educated migrants and their corresponding strategies to achieve their personal and social objectives.

Within this framework we address the following research questions:

1 What kind of strategies do highly educated migrants develop in order to access new life prospects, and what are the material and symbolic constraints under which they operate?
2 In what ways do highly skilled migrants in Switzerland engage in and influence political as well as civic processes of the country and beyond?

We postulate that specific structural barriers have an impact on the experience of highly educated individuals, and that these barriers work differently depending on the migrants' situation and characteristics. Regarding migrants' influence on host societies, we hypothesize that certain skilled migrants show a high level of interest in their local environment and are taking actions to pursue these interests – despite short-term stays and the widespread image of them living in a parallel world. More fluid patterns of mobility call to attention the need to observe forms of engagement, which are not restricted to the practices of state citizens. We are interested in expanding on the phenomenon referred to as "substantive citizenship" (Glick-Schiller and Levitt 2004), which goes beyond political citizenship.

By finding examples of individuals engaged in either political or civic causes, the project will analyze how these people act and mediate their interests and how their foreignness plays a role within this.

By answering these scientific questions, our project also aims at acquiring a more comprehensive depiction of the social environment of highly-qualified immigrants in order to contribute to the adjustment of the regulatory framework regarding integration efforts.

Methodology

A survey representative of recently arrived skilled population in Switzerland allows us to answer the descriptive questions of socioeconomic characteristics of new migrants to Switzerland, as well as questions related to their insertion into social, political and economic spheres. At the same time, it enables international comparisons with migrant populations in other countries and in that way shows specificities of the Swiss case.

In addition to the survey we undertake policy analysis and qualitative research. First, we conduct expert interviews in order to observe processes of definition, evaluation, and negotiation of skills. Our findings are complemented by an analysis of policy documents, websites and statistical figures on the mobility of people towards Switzerland. By so doing, we acquire a better understanding of the institutional context which regulates the selection, admission, employment and support of immigrants arriving in Switzerland. Second, we rely on biographical interviews with skilled individuals in order to provide a detailed analysis of their strategies to achieve better life prospects and the kinds of barriers they face on the way. This closer look at individual stories also provides us with information on how institutional practices are experienced and challenged by individuals.

Preliminary Findings

The restrictive admission system for third country nationals strongly contrasts with the open policy for EU and EFTA citizens based on free movement. Even though Swiss immigration policies specifically address highly skilled foreigners, the admission system for this category of people is far from attractive. There is no open track for low-skilled workers in the normal admission system, which implies that only qualified workers can, under certain conditions, be admitted into Switzerland. In this regard, the goal of the Swiss immigration policy is not so much to attract skilled workers as to select as strictly as possible the non-EU/EFTA workers who can be admitted into the country. This is a crucial distinction which sets Swiss policy apart from other highly skilled migration policies.

In the current policy system, work immigrants from non-EU/EFTA countries are expected to create new jobs and wealth by occupying economic niches thanks to their very specific skills and qualifications. In this sense, the economic activity undertaken by foreigners once in Switzerland must be of interest not only for the employer alone, but also for the community represented by the canton.

Our research shows that the whole admission procedure is first and foremost subordinate to the understanding that cantonal authorities have of the notion of economic interest. This notion as practiced in Switzerland first implies the protection of the local labor market: Employers are allowed to recruit third country workers only if they can convince authorities either that hiring a specific person will have positive repercussions on the local job market, or that not hiring this person will have negative local repercussions.

Second, the notion of economic interest implies a restrictive understanding of admission rules, because the admission of third country nationals is always regarded as an exception subject to a quota system and to a discretionary evaluation.

Finally, the notion of economic interest implies an important flexibility for cantonal authorities, since the absence of detailed legal definitions enables them to adapt admission decisions to social and economic circumstances. In this context, perceived needs play a more important role on admission decisions than skills of an individual: Skills can lead to admission only if they have the potential to fill an identified employment gap, and if cantonal authorities consider that this gap needs to be filled.

References

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