The Mobility of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland

A project of the nccr – on the move

Walter Leimgruber, University of Basel

Migrants to Switzerland are better educated than ever before. Yet, while many hold highly regarded positions, others are unable to use their skills. Our goal is to understand the implications of uneven access to resources, opportunities and social participation for different groups of highly qualified migrants.

In a nutshell #18 is based primarily on the project “The Swiss Abroad” (associated with the nccr – on the move) by Walter Leimgruber, Aldina Camenisch and Seraina Müller; and on the project “Living and working in different places: biography and labor migration of highly qualified people from a cultural-anthropological perspective” by Jacques Picard, Walter Leimgruber, Monika Götz and Katrin Sontag.

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies and aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics and law. Managed from the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises fourteen research projects at ten universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Zurich, ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Northwestern Switzerland.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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Further reading


Swiss citizens choose to emigrate: what are the policy implications?

in a nutshell #18, July 2020

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The Migration-Mobility Nexus

National Center of Competence in Research – The Migration-Mobility Nexus

nccr-onthemove.ch

The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). They bring together researchers from different disciplines, universities and other research institutions to address urgent questions of national and international importance.
Why do some 30,000 Swiss citizens choose to leave Switzerland each year — a country that scores highly in international rankings in terms of income, quality of infrastructure, stability and safety of life? Who are these people, what are their reasons for emigrating, what is their experience of living in other countries, how do their attitudes towards Switzerland change over time, and what are the implications for Swiss domestic and foreign policy?

Switzerland is a country of emigration as well as immigration. Most emigrants leaving Switzerland in the early 20th century were driven by poverty, whereas today people emigrate for many different reasons. Since the 1950s, influencing numbers of Swiss citizens have moved abroad, forming a “fifth Switzerland” that at the end of 2019 amounted to about 770,000 people. There is also an unknown number of Swiss citizens who reside partly or entirely abroad, but have retained their official residence in Switzerland. The statistics show that Swiss nationals living abroad are predominantly of working age, female, and dual citizens. Most of them live in Europe, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy. 37% have moved to another continent, mainly North America and Australia, but Asia is the fastest-growing continent of destination.

Based on two case studies of Swiss nationals emigrating to China and Northern Europe and several interviews with highly qualified Swiss residents of Asian and North American cities, this policy brief presents further insights into this phenomenon.

What reasons prompt the decision to emigrate?

Migration is often seen as the search for more economically and politically stable living conditions. But this simplistic explanation is clearly not relevant to the decision to emigrate from such a prosperous country as Switzerland. It was precisely this high and standard of living and stability that made our interview subjects feel somewhat warmer and more affordable locations upon retirement, but similarly, many Swiss living abroad also move back at this stage of their lives.

What kind of work do the Swiss abroad do?

Many opted to leave after completing their education, because of a separation, on reaching a significant birthday, or after meeting a new partner. Conversely, a concern for children’s education can be a motive for returning to Switzerland. Increasing numbers of citizens move to warmer and more affordable locations upon retirement, but similarly, many Swiss living abroad also move back at this stage of their lives.

Another reason cited particularly by Swiss migrants to rapidly developing economies was the innovation potential to be found there, and the possibility of participating in a dynamically evolving economic and social development process, as an entrepreneur or a specialist. Some destinations are also seen as providing a better work-family balance. Often the impulse to migrate is associated with a life transition. Many opted to leave after completing their education, because of a separation, on reaching a significant birthday, or after meeting a new partner. Conversely, a concern for children’s education can be a motive for returning to Switzerland. Increasing numbers of citizens move to warmer and more affordable locations upon retirement, but similarly, many Swiss living abroad also move back at this stage of their lives.

What new forms of migration and mobility are emerging now?

Most Swiss nationals living abroad do not see their decision to relocate as permanent, but rather as a venture undertaken for a limited period. They give themselves a period of several years to make a go of it, but are quite willing to contemplate returning home or traveling onward to another destination. Migration, therefore, becomes a process potentially leading to onward travel to other countries, moving back and forth between two or more permanently, and the development of a transnational activity focus. International start-up entrepreneurs, for example, tend to follow a global business model, and build their everyday lives, social connections, and cultural orientation around constant mobility. This lifestyle depends on the ability to always be on the move, having the right kind of qualification and adequate financial resources, and having a “strong” passport and the right sociocultural attributes.

“...what form of inclusion to be considered for the Swiss abroad? But what are the implications for a society, if it is partly utilized and constituted by members, who are rather mobile and transnational? Who should participate in the political process or recognize it in a globally interconnected world, in which more and more people are at the same time foreigners in their place of residence and external citizens of their home country? Since their voting rights in referendums and elections can only be exercised via the procedure of the Swiss abroad, they have limited their political voice ineffective. Some other states give their nationals living abroad a greater measure of political recognition than granting their number of seats in parliament for them. This enables nationals living abroad to compensate for an excessively introverted view of politics at home. A highly connected country like Switzerland has much to gain from acknowledging and utilizing the resources that migrants leaving and entering the country represent, both socially and politically...