

# Chapter 7

## Labour Migration



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This chapter will focus on **labour migration**, that is the movement of persons with the aim of employment or income-bringing activities (e.g., entrepreneurship), developing the topic which was also touched upon in Chap. 3 on conceptual understanding of migration drivers. Research on labour migration has developed across various disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, and geography), but most prominently in economics. It has resulted in a range of theoretical frameworks, starting with neoclassical economic theories and advancing through the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), dual labour market theory, and social network theory, to more recent transnational approaches or theories dedicated to particular forms of labour migration. These diverse approaches offer insights into labour migration on macro-, meso- and micro-levels. Although a dichotomy based on skills (high-skilled vs. low-skilled workers) can be seen as controversial or misleading as a division between workers representing these two types of skills is often vague or difficult to determine, the distinction does reflect recent debates on labour migration. Thus, a high-/low-skills dichotomy serves as a guide to the structure of this chapter.

This chapter outlines the development of the field of scholarship on labour migration and the key trends of thinking in this field. The section on high-skilled migration outlines three major research strands: (1) the effects of high-skilled migration, (2) policies related to this migration, and (3) the mobility of health professionals. In the section on low-skilled migration, the discussion is organised around key sectors of employment (construction, agriculture, domestic service/care, and sex work). This selection is arbitrary, but reflects the main strands emerging in the literature while focusing directly on the labour market rather than on the characteristics of migration itself.

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## 7.1 Overview of Key Concepts and Theories, Methodologies and Disciplines

Originally emerging in the field of economics in the second half of the twentieth century, theories on labour migration have come to dominate current understandings and interpretation of classical theories on international migration (Arango, 2000).

The neoclassical approach considered migration in macro terms, as a development factor that allowed for the redistribution of the workforce from areas of low productivity to high productivity ones (Lewis, 1954). Migration is perceived in purely instrumental terms as a means towards equalising economic imbalances on regional, national, and global scales. In micro terms, neoclassical theory defines migration as the consequence of a sum of individual decisions that stem from a rational appraisal of the costs and benefits of displacement (or of expected gains, as in Harris & Todaro's, 1970 revised version) intending to reap higher returns. This view presents migration as, essentially, a form of investment in human capital (Sjaadstad, 1962) and closely linked to [labour market conditions](#). Another framework, based on push factors in the regions of origin (unemployment, low incomes, etc.) and pull factors in the host destinations (opportunities for access the labour market, higher wages, etc.), spotlights the rational individual approach as well (Lee, 1966). The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) opens the classical perspective, considering migration with regard to [family and household strategies](#) that aim to minimise the impact of market imperfections and the associated risks for employment and income (Stark, 1991).

The structural approaches, rooted in the Dependence and World System theories, also focused on labour migration (Wallerstein, 1974). Castles and Kosack (1972) considered migratory flows to Western Europe from 1945 onwards as a consequence of capital accumulation, caused by inequalities between central and peripheral areas in the world capitalist system. In Piore's Dual Labour Market theory (1979) migrant workers fill jobs in low productivity and low-skilled sectors that the autochthonous workforce is unwilling to take on (due to low wages, poor working conditions, or hierarchical constraints). Other authors consider labour migration in terms of mobilising capital, structural changes to world markets, the interdependence of economies, and new forms of production (Portes & Walton, 1981; Sassen, 1988).

While traditional theories tended to focus on the causes of migration, the network approach (coming from sociology and anthropology) has spotlighted reasons why migratory flows continue, even though wage differentials have disappeared, and underlined the importance of meso-level analysis (Massey et al., 1993). [Social networks](#) are a form of social capital that provides migrants with access to the labour market and other forms of help and support. The work of Wilson and Portes (1980) on the "ethnic enclave" has shown how the inclusion of the ethnic economy is an opportunity for migrants to address the segregation of ethnic minorities in the mainstream labour market. Finally, Transnational Migration theory shed light on how labour migrants constructed and maintained their socio-economic and cultural relationships across borders (Basch et al., 1994; Vertovec, 1999). This theory,

**Table 7.1** Published journal articles by topic (N and % growth rate over the years)

Topics	Labour migration	High-skilled migration	Low-skilled migration
Journal articles published until 1999	1293	216	226
Journal articles published until 2018	5602	1753	1454
<b>Total growth rate</b>	<b>333%</b>	<b>712%</b>	<b>543%</b>
<b>Average annual percentage growth rate</b>	<b>8.02%</b>	<b>11.65%</b>	<b>10.29%</b>

Source: [migrationresearch.com](http://migrationresearch.com)

together with gender and intersectional perspectives, developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Boyd, 1989; Morokvasic, 1984; Anthias, 1992; Kofman et al., 2000), enabled new approaches within labour migration, by shifting the focus from the rational economic actor to the analysis of the productive and reproductive strategies adopted by [transnational households](#) (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Kofman, 2014).

The [Migration Research Hub database](#) documents remarkable growth in the number of journal articles published on topics of labour migration, both high-skilled and low-skilled (Table 7.1). The data indicate that, since 2000, the focus on high-skilled migration has outpaced the focus on low-skilled migration in terms of article publication. The average annual percentage growth rate reflects how much, on average, the output of scholarly literature has increased per year since the 2000s. Importantly, this shift is not only due to changes in the structure of international flows (see next section) but rather it is attributable to a growing overall interest in high-skilled labour, also - and perhaps especially - in the context of public policies, including migration ones.

In terms of methodology, various disciplines follow their own methodological traditions (e.g., economists use quantitative datasets to build models, while anthropologists tend to prefer qualitative data). Ethnosurveys, which bring together ethnography and survey methods, are a rare example of a successful mixed methods approach to studying migration (Massey, 1987, 1999; Kaczmarczyk & Salamońska, 2018). Research interest in more vulnerable groups of labour migrants has also drawn attention to various ethical challenges that need to be taken into account when making methodological choices, including, among others, privacy concerns, issue of informed consent, establishing trust relationship between the researcher and informants (van Liempt & Bilger, 2012).

### Key Data Sources

- [Eurostat data](#) (particularly data on residence permits, EU Blue Cards, and residence permits for intra-corporate transferees).
- [The European Union Labour Force Survey \(EU LFS\)](#)
- [The Database on Immigrants in OECD countries \(DIOOC\)](#)
- [The OECD database of Indicators of Immigrant Integration](#).

## 7.2 High-Skilled Migration

We turn now to one of the strands of literature on labour migration focusing on **high-skilled migration**, defined as the movement of persons who normally possess university education (ISCED 5-6), extensive professional experience, or a combination of the two. Additionally, public policy frameworks in selected cases can use the salary level to define high-skilled migration (e.g., Blue Card). Mobility of high-skilled individuals is at the forefront of public debates on migration, mostly due to narratives on migration that focus on labour market needs and the (assumed) integration potential of foreign professionals (Boeri et al., 2012; Czaika, 2018). The common interest in high-skilled migration also results from global trends. As shown by the OECD data (2018), the number of highly-educated people (i.e., people with university degrees) is over twice as high among migrants than the average for the whole local population, with a strong positive trend that has been only temporarily constrained by the global economic crisis (Czaika & Parsons, 2016). As a consequence, high-skilled migrants make up a significant share of the migrant population in highly developed countries, and, in the case of OECD nations, constituting approximately 30% of the total migrant population. Additionally, a common feature of modern, highly developed economies is that the educational level among migrants tends to be higher than that of the native population (OECD, 2018).

Recent trends in high-skilled migration are attributed to factors on both sides of the migration process. The outflow of highly skilled people is, however, an obvious consequence of **the spread of higher education and the growing aspirations among the highly educated** (in contrast to people with lower levels of education), as well as the relative lack of opportunities in the countries of origin. These factors coincide with structural conditions in the countries of destination, which aim to fill labour shortages in high-tech sectors (Czaika, 2018).

### 7.2.1 *The Effects of the Mobility of the High-Skilled – The Brain Drain/Gain Debate*

For many decades, scholarly and media debates on the effects of high-skilled migration have been dominated by the idea of ‘brain drain’ from the country of origin. This ‘traditional approach’ to the topic was developed in the 1960s and 1970s and focused on the negative effects of high-skilled emigration, such as the tax costs associated with the education of future migrants or the negative impact of labour flows on factor productivity and development prospects (Grubel & Scott, 1966; Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974). Since the mid-1990s, researchers began to challenge this one-sided perception of the impact of high-skilled migration (Mountford, 1997; Stark et al., 1997; Beine et al., 2001). The ‘modern approach’—or the new economics of brain drain—is based on the assumption that the decision to invest in education is driven by expected returns in human capital and the probability that migrating will

increase the returns of this investment (as compared to the no-migration situation). Thus, migration of the highly educated could, theoretically (i.e., if the probability of migrating is smaller than one), increase the level of human capital in the country of origin and foster economic progress, a situation referred to as ‘brain gain’ or ‘beneficial brain drain’. (Mountford, 1997; Beine et al., 2001; Stark, 2005).

In practice, an overall assessment of this issue should take into account additional, related incentives to acquire human capital (‘brain effect’) as well as the ‘classic’ drain effect, which consists in a loss of measurable human capital (Beine et al., 2001). The empirical results so far have been moderately satisfactory, which may result from the fact that theory-based effects are observed only in countries with a moderate outflow of high-skilled migrants. If the scale of this migration is high, the negative effects (i.e., the drain effects) dominate (Beine et al., 2001, 2008). However, smaller-scale studies show that migration opportunities influence not only the tendency to continue education but also to choose specific fields of study (Commander et al., 2004; Commander et al., 2008; Gibson & McKenzie, 2011; Batista et al., 2012). These effects can be strengthened by additional factors like remittances, return migration, or diaspora externalities (Mayr & Peri, 2012; Boeri et al., 2012).

Recent studies suggest that one of the key assumptions of the new economics of brain drain cannot be upheld and, consequently, that the scope for beneficial brain drain should be substantially reduced (Brücker et al., 2013; Egger & Felbermayr, 2009). There is a growing body of literature devoted to the ‘brain waste’ phenomenon (Mattoo et al., 2008), which explores mismatches between [the education/skills of migrants](#) and the professional position they can secure in the destination country. These mismatches are only partly due to the (poor) quality of education or the lack of transferability of skills. The available empirical studies point instead to the role of the structure of demand for foreign labour, which is strongly concentrated in the low-skills end of the occupational hierarchy. Over-education, as a common migration-related phenomenon, has also been studied among post-2004 and post-2007 migrants from the new EU Member States (Brücker, 2009; Fihel et al., 2009; Galgóczi et al., 2011; Tijdens & van Klaveren, 2011; Galgóczi & Leschke, 2014; Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2008; Kaczmarczyk & Tyrowicz, 2015).

### ***7.2.2 Policies Targeting High-Skilled Migrants***

There is a strong contrast between migration [policies focused on migrants who are recognised as professionals](#) and [policies focused on people with lower skill levels](#). The former have been developing with particular intensity since the 1990s and this trend can be linked to the general perception that high-skilled workers are contributing to receiving societies by promoting innovation, increasing competition in the economy, and supporting the destination country’s high position in the global technological race (Czaika & Parsons, 2015, 2016). High-skilled migrants are also seen as having relatively high employability and integration potential (OECD, 2008).

Czaika and de Haas (2013) and Czaika and Parsons (2017) have documented policies that aim to attract, select, and retain high-skilled migrants and showed a substantial increase in the scale of these types of instruments. Even if some policy measures can be shown to be more effective, the overall impact of migration policies on highly educated people is generally considered to be relatively low (as compared with massive recruitment programmes that target seasonal, low-skilled workers).

One reason is the complexity of migration decisions of professionals, which are motivated by wage gaps and depend on factors related to career opportunities, access to advanced technologies, and/or opportunities to cooperate with world-class laboratories. The high-skilled are often in a privileged position as they choose among many employment options, for example, the ‘mutual selection’ between destination countries and countries of origin (Czaika & Parsons, 2017). Generally, the effectiveness of certain policies can be constrained by other migration policies (e.g., family reunification) or factors related to the internal dynamics of migration (i.e., migrant networks). It is unlikely that any specific migration policy instrument will be responsible for the attractiveness of a country. Rather a wide range of factors, including the socio-political climate, living conditions and non-migration policies, play a significant role (Doomernik et al., 2009; Beine et al., 2008; Czaika & de Haas, 2013; Papademetriou & Sumption, 2013; Chaloff, 2016; Czaika & Parsons, 2017; Tuccio, 2019; Weisser, 2016).

This discrepancy between publicly presented expectations and the results of policies focused on the high-skilled is visible in the case of policy instruments dedicated to various professional groups and is well documented in case of the EU Blue Card and other EU directives (Chaloff, 2016; Colussi, 2016; Cerna, 2018) or policies targeting medical professionals (Wismar et al., 2011).

### ***7.2.3 Mobility of Health Professionals***

The migration of medical specialists is not a new phenomenon and has been growing since the 1950s and 1960s, partly as a result of the rapid development of welfare state institutions in highly industrialised countries. The important role of foreign labour in the health sector was demonstrated in a seminal study commissioned by the World Health Organization (Mejia et al., 1979), and, since the mid-1990s, the migration of medical personnel has increased dramatically (Docquier & Bhargava, 2006; Wismar et al., 2011). Besides, this migration is relatively more significant than the general mobility of high-skilled. For example, in most OECD countries, the share of foreign doctors in the total population of health professionals is significantly higher than the analogous rate of high-skilled migrants (OECD, 2018).

In terms of causal factors, the following are seen as the most important: demographic change, changes in family institutions, social changes and transformations in the educational sector, internationalisation of the profession, and migration policies (OECD, 2002, 2015; Bach, 2003; Alkire & Chen, 2004; Vujicic et al., 2004).

In structural terms, numerous empirical studies have documented that the movement of medical professionals is not one-way but multi-directional with inflow and outflow, or what has also been termed, the “migration carousel” (Martineau et al., 2002; Alkire & Chen, 2004). [Step-wise migrations](#) remain common, with migration from rural to urban areas within a sending country often preceding international migration (Martineau et al., 2002; Bach, 2003). There is also a growing body of literature on the [gendered aspect of medical professionals’ mobility](#) (Kofman, 2000; Kofman & Raghuram, 2005; Ribeiro, 2008) and the ethical aspects of health professionals’ recruitment (Jenkins, 2004; Buchan et al., 2008; Bertelsmann, 2015; Mendy, 2018). Comparative and large scale analyses are scarce (OECD, 2002; Bach, 2003; Wismar et al., 2011; Moullan, 2018); however, there is a large number of studies both on highly developed destination countries (Buchan, 2006a, b; Ribeiro, 2008; Chaloff, 2008; Dumont et al., 2008; Yamamura, 2009; Finotelli, 2014; Klein, 2016) and origin countries (Schrecker & Labonte, 2004; Chikanda, 2006; Mareckova, 2006; Leśniowska, 2007; Murdoch, 2011; Walton-Roberts, 2015).

### 7.3 Low-Skilled Migration

On the opposite of the skills continuum, we have [low-skilled migration literature](#) focusing on the movement of persons holding jobs that do not require necessarily high levels of education or extensive professional experience. Public policy frameworks in selected cases can use the salary level to define low-skilled migration. Analysing recent trends in low-skilled migration must be assessed concerning neoliberal [globalisation](#), which brought about restrictive migratory models for less-skilled workers that involve border controls and reinforce neoliberal market strategies (i.e., subcontracting, casual, flexible, contingent, and part-time work) within key low-skilled sectors of the market. The result is a new class hierarchy within the global labour market, not only in terms of human capital, but also in terms of legal status, origin, race, ethnicity, and gender (Castles, 2011).

#### 7.3.1 *The Construction Sector*

Despite being one of the sectors that employ the highest number of migrants around the world, construction work has attracted less academic interest than other unskilled works. Migration for the building industry contributes to the international trend towards urbanisation processes of capital (Harvey, 1985; Buckley, 2012; Torres et al., 2013) and rapid growth of global cities as urban economies (Sassen, 1991; Gama Gato & Salazar, 2018). Neoliberalism, combined with restrictive migratory policies, facilitate ‘precarious employment regimes’ in construction work (economic deregulation, capital mobility and surplus, corporate restructuring, labour

flexibilisation and subcontracting), which leads to a dependence on migrant labour within the sector. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, construction workers (and migrant construction workers, in particular) experienced the most severe job losses on an international scale (Buckley, 2012). Due to fluctuations in the demand for employment, that characterises this sector, workers are hired temporarily, which leads to circular migration. This is the case of ‘posted migrants’, who are sent by their employers to work on projects abroad [on a temporary basis](#). The fact that migrant workers usually live on the construction sites subordinates them for the duration of the building project on which they are employed. The strategy of housing migrants on the work site *de facto* channels all their efforts into the work of earning and saving money, thus isolating them from the broader society (Caro et al., 2015; Del Aguila, 2018). The construction sector uses indirect recruitment practices based on subcontracting or individual recruiters (Reza, 2016; Gama Gato & Salazar, 2018), often through ethnic networks based on bonds of trust and national affiliation (Vargas, 2005). Immigration and employment regimes exert considerable influence over the working conditions of migrant workers in the construction sector (Ida & Talit, 2015; Buckley, 2012; Friberg, 2012).

### 7.3.2 *The Agricultural Sector*

The literature on the migration of agricultural labour has been fundamentally concerned with the study of the Northern and Latin American contexts, and Southern Europe (Semprebon et al., 2017). In the context of a liberalised, global food economy, agri-food firms can improve their profit margins only through workforce control (Preibisch, 2010), thus employ migrant workers as a cost-saving measure. Changes to production objectives that target mainly export markets and, in some regions, specialisation in permanent crops, also drive the sector’s dependence on migrant labour (Avallone, 2013; Santos Gómez & Villagómez Velázquez, 2015; Kilkey & Urzi, 2017).

As in the construction sector, migrants employed in agriculture tend to live in accommodations provided by their employers in the fields, which forces them into flexible labour patterns and enables strict supervision by employers, thus leading to harsh living conditions, social isolation, and dependence on the employers (Perrota & Sacchetto, 2014; Gialis & Herod, 2014; Semprebon et al., 2017). Within the agricultural sector, intermediaries are commonly used for recruiting workers, which leads to ethnic stratification, as well as a system of organisation and [labour relations conditioned by colonial-style systems and racial hierarchies](#) (Avallone, 2013; Rotz, 2017; Semprebon et al., 2017). Due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work, migrant workers are recruited on a temporary basis, leading to [circular migration](#). States draw on migration controls to supply workers to agriculture through several mechanisms, which facilitate an undocumented workforce, the relaxing of border movements between neighbouring states, and the implementation of [temporary migrant worker programmes](#) (Preibisch, 2010). Temporary migrant worker



programmes, especially, have attracted scholarly interest, notably in the US and Canada (Martin, 2017; Ruhs & Martin, 2008; Valarezo, 2015; Martin, 2017; Weiler et al., 2017; Consterdine & Samuk, 2018).

### 7.3.3 *Domestic and Care Work*

In the last 15 years, research into domestic and care work has dominated academic literature on unskilled migration. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, pioneering studies portrayed domestic and care work migration in the context of globalisation, the international division of reproductive labour (Parreñas, 2001), and the development of ‘global care chains’ (Hochschild, 2000). This migration is also explained within the framework of social reproduction crises (Zimmerman et al., 2005) and the ‘care deficit’ that northern countries experience (Bettio et al., 2006; Glenn, 2010). The care deficit is attributed to an ageing population and the rise in the number of autochthonous women joining the labour market.

Research has focused on the migration of women from the Global South to the USA and Western Europe (Dumitru, 2018), although in the last 15 years there has been an increased interest in Asia (*inter alia* Yeoh & Shirlena, 2005; Constable, 2019; Hertzman, 2019; Silvey & Parreñas, 2019). The scholarship has shed light on the specificity of the labour market sector for domestic and care work, much of which is carried out by undocumented foreign workers in the informal economy (Triandafyllidou, 2013). The research points to a range of characteristics that are common to migrant domestic and care work including, low wages, exploitation, and discrimination. The particular nature of this type of employment is worthy of note: as domestic and care work takes place in the private sphere, it is notoriously difficult to regulate working hours and holidays, as well as the paternalistic relationship forged between employer and employee. Thus, domestic and care workers are embedded at the interplay of gender, racial, ethnic, and class forms of oppression (Anderson, 2000; Andall, 2000; Lutz, 2008; Parreñas Salazar, 2014; Marchetti & Venturini, 2014; Christian & Namaganda, 2018).

The commodification of this type of work needs to be addressed in relation to existing policies and the reactions of welfare regimes in response to the demand for care, as they engage with migration and gender regimes (Kofman, 2005; Bettio et al., 2006; Näre, 2013). In comparison to construction work, domestic and care work were less affected by the 2008 economic recession; however, the degree of precariousness in the sector has increased (Babiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2014; Napierala & Wojtyńska, 2017; Maroukis, 2018). Finally, the most recent research also addresses the impact of domestic and care work migration on the family members and communities left behind (Graeme, 2009; Hoang et al., 2012; Siriwardhana et al., 2015; Fan & Parreñas, 2018). The scholarship has adopted an approach rooted in postcolonial feminism, which has spotlighted new and alternative voices on the topic (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Durin et al., 2014; Marchetti, 2014; Gatt et al., 2016).

### 7.3.4 *Prostitution/Sex Work*

A sharp rise in female migration in recent decades has been spurred by the globalisation of the sex industry, and commensurate levels of research on this topic reflect this rise. Although researchers, activists, government representatives, policymakers, and the media have all tended to focus on the issue in terms of **human trafficking** and portraying migrant women as the victims of **sexual exploitation** (Kempadoo, 2007), several authors have begun to challenge this particular framing. These authors question the reliability of the data that undergirds the trafficking approach and emphasise that such a focus relegates women to a passive role of victim, negating their agency and decision-making capacity when opting for sex work (Agustin, 2006; Kempadoo et al., 2005; Weitzer, 2007). Less attention has been paid to the conditions of migrants carrying out sex work, and most of this research has been produced by health scholars who are interested to analyse the health risks for migrant sex workers (Nigro et al., 2006; Tucker et al., 2011; Jie et al., 2012; Ojeda et al., 2012; Richter et al., 2014). The majority of studies in this vein show that migrant sex workers are exposed to the worst working conditions and highest degrees of stigmatisation and criminalisation due to their status as undocumented migrants, which limits their autonomy and pushes them to carry out unsafe sex acts. Policies targeting migration and prostitution affect the conditions for sex work, generating legal irregularities that, in turn, lead to indebtedness and greater exploitation of sex industry workers (Ruiz, 2008; Adriaenssens et al., 2016).

## 7.4 Conclusions

The above overview of labour migration literature would not be complete without noting the research gaps that require more fine-tuned studies. Existing research often applies the high-/low-skilled migration dichotomy, which has left the area in-between largely overlooked. Research gaps also include the effects of labour migration on the wages of native-born workers, as well as the social, political, and economic factors that are linked to unionisation of migrants (McGovern, 2007). Other under-researched areas include bogus self-employment and posted work among labour migrants in the EU (Galgóczi et al., 2009), and the over-education of migrants, including its causes and consequences (Piracha & Vadean, 2012). The gaps noted here are only some of the under-studied issues.

Moreover, research on labour migration needs to address the issue of ‘mixed migration flows’ (Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi, 2013), which complicate the clear-cut distinctions between the standard categories of labour, family, and humanitarian migration. The issue of ‘mixed migration flows’ is especially relevant in studies on labour market performance of non-labour migrants, such as recent refugees in destination countries worldwide.

Finally, in setting the agenda for future labour migration research, a broader political, social, and economic context of the contemporary world should be taken into account. Most importantly, new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are confounding the distinction between migration and mobility (King, 2002). New developments in the 'labour' element of labour migration will require studies to address the links between migration and changes in the world of work, such as automation of labour and structural changes in the economy.

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