

# Experiences of Highly Skilled Migrants in New Zealand: Challenges for Professional Integration

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**Abstract** Extensive studies have been conducted on skilled and low-skilled workers to estimate the overall impact of immigration on economic growth and competitiveness. Previous researches suggest that immigration of skilled people is more than 10 times as valuable to the economy as the entry of unskilled workers. Despite the positive impression that skilled migrants provide, the academic literature suggests that the experiences of skilled migrants can often be problematic. The main purpose of this paper is to understand the experiences of skilled migrants in New Zealand. The qualitative research explored settlement experiences from the perspectives of migrants to identify the factors that influence settlement outcomes for migrants located in NZ. This study reveals mixed experiences of skilled migrants at their workplaces. Some of the respondents shared positive experiences such as friendly environment and support system while other mentioned about the negatives experiences such as language barriers, overseas qualifications and no recognition of overseas work experiences.

**Keywords** Immigration · High-skill migrants · Innovation · Economic growth · Social integration · Professional integration · Productivity · Exclusion and discrimination · New Zealand

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## Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a shift in migration policy towards bringing in more skilled immigrants. Now these skilled immigrants are not coming only with required skill-set but having college degrees sometimes advance degrees often in business, IT and telecom sectors. Widmaier and Dumont (2011) conducted one research on OECD countries and found that about 26 million immigrants holding a university degree were living in the OECD. In addition to this, a third of all recent immigrants to the OECD were tertiary educated (5.2 million persons). Lately, several developed countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand and Canada) started to attract highly skilled migrants without considering their ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds rather than their skills (Blitz 2010). An essential question for researchers, therefore, concerns what motivates the migration of skilled workers. Harvey (2012) explains that migrants are moving for different and often multiple reasons such as economic opportunity, proximity to family, lifestyle, adventure, change, challenge or escaping conflict and political strife.

Extensive studies have been conducted on skilled and low-skilled workers to estimate the overall impact of immigration on economic growth and competitiveness. For instance, Puangyoykeaw and Nishdie (2014) conducted a study on low-skilled workers in Thailand context. They found that low-skilled workers are important to labour-intensive industries and workers are employed by Thai organisations to benefits from low labour cost. In contrast, Ben-Gad (2008) work suggests that immigration of skilled people is more than 10 times as valuable to the economy as the entry of unskilled workers. Boubtane and Dumont (2013) conducted a study based on a unique data set from 22 OECD countries between 1986 and 2006. The results show that the impact of migration on productivity growth through the human capital accumulation and capital dilution are significant. In a similar way, Dustmann et al. (2005) provide

evidence for a positive but not a significant impact of an inflow of skilled immigrants with education on wages as match to the local workers in the US and the UK respectively.

Despite the positive impression that skilled migrants provide, the academic literature suggests that the experiences of skilled migrants can often be problematic (Harvey 2012). Sakamoto et al. (2010) explore the skilled immigrants' experiences in a Canadian context. They found that skilled immigrants to Canada experience high rates unemployment. So much so, a lack of recognition of foreign qualifications and experience, language and communication barriers, discrimination against local employees and employers' requirement for local experience all lead to the disengagement. In a study of Basnayake (1999) on Sri Lankan immigrants' experiences in New Zealand, found that about half of the respondents reported that they felt discriminated in finding work despite their high-level tertiary qualifications and fluency in the English language. On the other hand, migrants face challenges from the workplaces whereby managers of host countries put up barriers between themselves and the migrants. Hence, management's expectations and prejudices hinder progress in obtaining a clear understanding of the cultural differences (Hammond and Kleiner 1992).

The main purpose of this paper is to understand the experiences of skilled migrants in New Zealand. The qualitative research explored settlement experiences from the perspectives of migrants to identify the factors that influence settlement outcomes for migrants located in NZ. The research objectives are to identify facilitators and barriers to positive settlement experiences and outcomes, describe how settlement experiences impact on the well-being of migrants and provide strategies for positive settlement of migrants in future. The first part of the paper provides a brief review of the highly skilled immigration programme of New Zealand. The second part deals with research design followed by the key findings, which highlights the challenges faced by these skilled migrants along with strategies and implications.

### Skilled Migrants Working in New Zealand

The main reason for immigration to New Zealand was combating an immediate shortage of skilled labour. Economists such as Bargrie et al. (2016) note: "Skill shortages will worsen as the population ages, so New Zealand needs to import labour". They concluded that in terms of supply/demand cycle, still access demand for skilled migrants out there in the key sectors. Through the 1980s, entry on this basis was controlled by the 'occupation priority list', which designated that occupation for which employers could recruit overseas (Davies and Nyland 2004). With the emergence of globalisation, more countries followed the US lead of setting quota system for skilled migrants but New Zealand relied on a mixed approach of quotas and points system (Blitz 2010). However, the purpose of the immigration is to attract and retain high calibre skilled migrants as explained by Ministry of Business, Innovation and

Employment (2014): "New Zealand's skilled migration policies aim to attract and retain highly skilled migrants by providing a pathway to permanent residence. The Skilled Migrant Category (SMC) policy, which was introduced in December 2003, is New Zealand's main permanent skilled labour migration policy, contributing more than half of all residence approvals". The skilled migrant application process is given in Fig. 1.

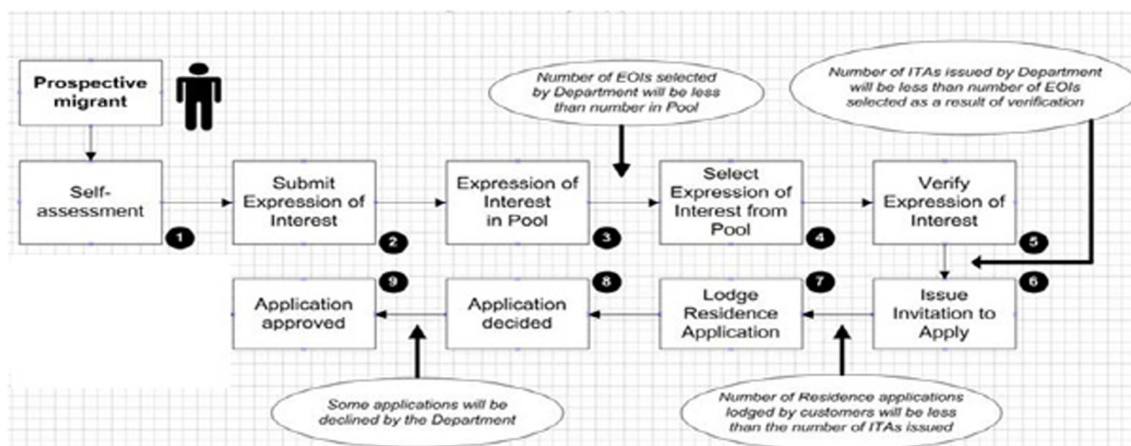
The literature on skilled migrants in New Zealand has focused on the integration of migrants into the labour market. Hawthorne (2011) attempted to compare skilled migration policies in New Zealand and Australia on the data from 2004 till 2009. The research found significant similarities between Australia and New Zealand in terms of the category share, age, and gender of recent skilled migrants. This research, however, highlighted three significant differences. 1. Two-step migration pathway (study or work to residence) adopted by New Zealand was highly effective 2. The skilled migration source countries, Australia focused on non-English speaking background countries while New Zealand attracted English-speaking background countries. 3. The education level, Australia attracted accounting professionals while New Zealand attracted computing and education professional. However, the research concluded that skilled migrants working in New Zealand were earning more than in Australia.

A survey by the Department of Labour (2006) reveals that 70% of the migrants in the sample were working for the organisations they were hired by when their residence or work-to-residence was approved. 56% of employers reported that their organisations had benefitted more from employing migrants than they would have from employing a New Zealand resident. Very few employers (10%) reported the migrants had difficulties in fitting into the workplace culture or had difficulties with the English language.

On a contrary, Edwina (2005) conducted a study on first-generation Indian immigrant women seeking employment in the host country of New Zealand. The research concluded that the majority of women perceived negativity or unpleasantness of their experiences because of discrimination in various areas including employment on the basis of gender, marital status, religious belief, ethical belief, colour, race, national origin, age. Research by Henderson (2004) also confirmed that a large number of skilled immigrants had experienced discrimination, exclusion, prejudice while finding employment in New Zealand.

### Method

The main purpose of this paper is to recognise the experiences of skilled migrants in New Zealand. A qualitative approach (In-depth interviews) was taken in order to understand the experiences of the skilled migrants in New Zealand. Most research in this field is dominated by focus group (Napolitano et al. 2002). However, focus groups are not



**Fig. 1** The skilled Migrant Policy Application Process. Source: Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2014

suitable for exploring sensitive topics such as perception, attitude towards mainstream society and discrimination, since confidentiality is undermined by the presence of other participants (Walvis 2003). In a similar way, Rushkoff (2005) finds that focus groups encourage participants to please one another rather than offer their own opinions and this leads the participants towards groupthink. Therefore, this research adopted interview methodology to gain insight into skilled migrants experience in New Zealand.

A snowball method was used to select the participants. Of the 11 interviewees, 4 were female and 7 male (see Table 1) from four big cities of New Zealand (Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington & Christchurch).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen to get the data. The main focus was to encourage the participants to talk about their experiences working and living in New Zealand. The length of the interviews ranged from 35 min to 65 min. Interviews were conducted at locations convenient to the interviewee, ranging from quiet rooms at their workplaces to cafes. Ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity have been included in this research. All participants were

informed that the survey was voluntary and the results would remain confidential.

Interviews were transcribed and a thematic approach was adopted for analysis of the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes with the data and it describes the data in detail (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcribed data was then read and checked the transcripts back against the original audio recording for accuracy. This process of repeated reading and the use of the recordings to listen to the data results in data immersion (Braun and Clarke 2006). The demographics of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

### Findings and Discussion

This section is mainly concerned with presenting the analysis of the in-depth interviews based on the questions posed to the interviewees. Furthermore, this section has been divided into two subsections to indicate the experiences of skilled migrants. Two main themes are examined:

- I. Motivation of migration
- II. Professional integration and Social integration

### Motivation of Migration

When asked to comment on their motives of migration to NZ, most of the interviewees explained that the New Zealand, as compare to the other OECD countries, had been at the forefront by providing the great professional opportunities for skilled people, quality of life, work-life balance, strong health care and human rights, rich racial harmony and free of corruption. This fact has also supported by the Transparency International. According to Gregory (2013): “New Zealand has long been rated by Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions

**Table 1** Respondents profile

Respondents	Nationality	Years of experience	Gender
A	Indian	16 Years	M
B	Indian	10 Years	M
C	Pakistani	8 Years	F
D	Pakistani	14 Years	M
E	Pakistani	2 Years	F
F	Pakistani	10 Years	M
G	Pakistani	9 Years	M
H	Pakistani	10 Years	M
I	Filipino	8 Years	M
J	Filipino	2 Years	F
K	Filipino	6 Years	F

**Table 2** Participants' demographic data

Variable	Description
Number of respondents	11
Nationality	Pakistani (52%), Filipino (29%), Indian (19%)
Gender	Male (64%), Female (36%)
Average age	32 years
Education	Diploma Level 7 (18%), Bachelor degree (9%), Master's (55%), Doctorate or equivalent (18%)
Job classification	Non-supervisory/ workers (45%), Manager (18%), Senior Manager (9%), University lecturer (18%), others (9%)
Job sector	IT industry, Hospitality sector, Education sector, Retail, Telecom, consultancy
Years of experience	Range from 2 to 16 years
Gender	Male (64%), Female (36%)
Average age	32 years
Education	Diploma Level 7 (18%), Bachelor degree (9%), Master's (55%), Doctorate or equivalent (18%)
Job classification	Non-supervisory/ workers (45%), Manager (18%), Senior Manager (9%), University lecturer (18%), others (9%)

Index (CPI) as having the very lowest rates of corruption". One of the respondents (Respondent E) explained:

*In fact, we did research before applying to NZ or on the best countries to live base on five criteria: crime Rate, work-life balance, economic stability, quality of education and climate. New Zealand placed very well in all five categories, therefore, we chose NZ for our eternal living.*

Another respondent (Respondent A) shared their motives to come to New Zealand:

*It is about wanting to raise our children, in an environment that we consider to be decent, where people are respectful of each other, stable and peaceful place for families.*

Hence, we can summarise the responses into three categories of migration motives:

- Better opportunities for employment (Careers)
- Children's future and their education
- Personal safety and political stability.

This finding is consistent with the view of Dontsov and Zotova (2013) who found that the main motives of going abroad treated in categories of factual constraints and search for a better life including better future for their children. Similarly, Ludholm et al. (2004) examined the interregional migration with the five Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland) focusing on the impacts of migration decisions. They found

that the most frequent motive for migrants in all countries is social (about 40%), and the second most important motives were related to the living environment.

### Professional and Social Integration

In the literature on immigrant adaptation, the terms 'integration' and 'settlement' are often used interchangeably. These two terms almost always appear together in discussion on immigration adjustment (George 2006) but they tend to have different foci (Henderson 2004). Henderson (2004) describes integration as a two-way process that involves adjustment not only of the immigrant but also the host country. Generally, the settlement is considered as the first step which leads to integration (George 2006).

### Awareness and Information about the Job Market before Migrating to NZ

When the interviewees were asked if they were aware of the conditions for working in New Zealand before coming to NZ, most of the respondents (Respondents A, D, F, G, H, I, J and K) confirmed that they had fair understanding about the job market and living in NZ through blogs and immigration website. Most of the respondents appreciated the New Zealand government website for immigration-related information and services. Respondent F was happy with the information available on the NZ immigration website. He explained:

*Yes, I was well aware of the job market, accommodation, and requirements of getting a job. I believe a*

*sufficient information is available on the website and on the blogs. You just need to put efforts to read them.*

Similarly, Respondent K stated:

*Since immigration process is so systematic and research oriented. Therefore, we were quite aware of the conditions related to living and working in NZ.*

It is quite difficult to hire someone from overseas in certain areas because employers prefer face-to-face meetings. In case, if potential skilled migrants do not have an offer of skilled employment in New Zealand, immigration instructions under the Skilled Migrant category require to a formal telephone interview to be able to assess the skilled migrants' ability to settle employment prospects, their familiarity with New Zealand and what steps they have taken to prepare for looking for employment and settling in New Zealand. Hence, it is important for all the potential skill migrants, those who do not have an offer should be very well prepared for this interview.

*I could not get any job offer while I was working overseas.... so my case officer asked me for the interview...I prepared myself for the interview through reading blogs and immigration websites. That interview helped me in understanding and preparing myself for NZ (Respondent G).*

In sum, skilled migrants were unclear at the time of migrating to New Zealand that what kind of difficulties they would face especially from the job market. Therefore this is suggested that government bodies, employers and the potential immigrants should be aligned in the settlement process. Next section discusses the key challenges faced by the skilled immigrants.

## **Barriers and Challenges in Professional Integration**

According to the interviewees, the barriers or factors affecting their professional integration of highly skilled migrants were, in rank order: -

1. Intercultural communication issues
2. Exclusion and Discrimination
3. References and lack of Kiwi-experience
4. Cultural differences

Immigrants from non-native English speaking backgrounds face a myriad of challenges in their day-to-day activities. The biggest challenge is the language barriers that can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. Lim (2002) note that the lack of knowledge of another's culture is one of the major factors causing

intercultural miscommunication. Having intercultural miscommunication can prevent skilled immigrants from securing respective careers. Harvey (2012) supported this notion and stated that the skilled migrants have been excluded and discriminated in the labour market based on their language, skin, colour and gender. Respondent M, who had vast experience in the Telecom Sector in different countries stated that the immigrants from non-English speaking countries were often disadvantaged in the hiring process for their inadequate intercultural communication skills to compete.

*Initially, I faced some communication barriers with my local colleagues because of their native accent. Generally speaking, employers like to have a local accent the way they speak. Therefore, immigrants from Asian countries are discriminated against because of their crude and strong accents.*

A significant number of respondents said they had faced problems securing employment in New Zealand. When they landed in New Zealand, they thought that the key to finding a job is to their previous experience and their qualifications. In some cases, respondents were told their experience would not be counted or they were over-qualified as was the case with Respondent F: "When I came to Auckland (New Zealand), most of the employers were highly inclined toward New Zealand work experience (Kiwi experience). It was quite hard for me to get selected for a job based on overseas qualification and experience. Eventually, I did some volunteering assignments that helped me to secure my first job".

Due to lack of local experience and local references, most of the skilled immigrants have to start from the entry level in their careers as it was happened with the Respondent H: "...before coming to NZ, I was in Telecom Sector but I could not find a relevant position in NZ. Therefore, I had to start from a basic level in a different sector in the different function, which I was not prepared for". As noted by Harvey (2012) that skilled migrants experienced conflict in relation to their skills and qualifications. Their skills and qualifications are appreciated by their colleagues and peers but also considered as a threat to the local workers.

Another important barrier perceived by participants in their professional and social integration in New Zealand was cultural nuances and workplaces practises. Cultural differences can have a huge impact on skilled migrants. As Respondent I shared his experiences: "...I have come from high power distance culture to a low power distance (NZ) culture, so employers have high expectations from their staff in terms of responsibility, initiative taking, and decision making.

Therefore, employees should have good communication skills and soft skills to deal with clients and colleagues”.

One study reveals that the digital and technological managers feel there is too much focus on hard skills while a further argue soft skills are often overlooked compared to the hard skills required for technical roles. Respondent B emphasised that most of the skilled migrants were unaware of the cultural difference:

“...since, I worked in IT sector where we lack in soft skills especially interacting with other colleagues. I have improved it while living here because Kiwi people are quite friendly and polite”.

Because of these barriers and the challenges, most of the skilled migrants had to start from scratch in their careers or accepting the voluntary positions to gain the ‘Kiwi-experience’.

## Conclusion and Implications

Although the current study provides new insights into understanding the experiences of skilled migrants to New Zealand from different countries, however, generalisations must be made cautiously given that the participants were derived from a convenience small sample located in big cities of New Zealand and may not be representative of the experiences of the large population of the immigrant living in New Zealand. As such, the findings reported here may be considered suggestive only. This study is consistent with the previous studies such as Henderson (2004). Henderson (2004) suggests, “...immigration settlement issues in New Zealand indicate a pressing need to address issues associated with settlement and integration and for a move to more holistic settlement support for immigrants if the aims of immigration policy are to be achieved and immigrants are to be successfully settled and integrated into the wider society”.

Despite these limitations, this study has implications for the policy makers and the in-process immigrants. Findings of this study explore different ways to improve skilled migrants’ professional and social integration. The challenges experienced by immigrant have implications for the policy makers and the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment (MBIE) officials to address these issues and design culturally sensitive and appropriate services. New Zealand government can provide incentives to the companies to launch their operations in other parts of New Zealand. New Zealand Government and relevant city councils can promote their cities to attract the skilled migrants as Dunedin and the Bay of plenty are currently promoting their regions by highlighting the vital points to the immigrants (Hall 2015; Elder 2016).

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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