

Essays on attracting and retaining highly educated migrants

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7. IMPACT PARAGRAPH

7.1 OBJECTIVES, MAIN FINDINGS AND RELEVANCE OF THIS DISSERTATION

The main objective of this dissertation was to study how to attract highly educated migrants to and retain them in less central areas, by focusing on peripheral areas in the Netherlands and the Euregio Meuse Rhine. This topic is highly relevant for academia and society and highlights the scientific and societal impact of this dissertation. International highly educated migrants are defined as individuals who have obtained a university degree (i.e., Bachelor, Master, PhD) and moved away from their usual place of residence crossing an international border for a variety of reasons. The research combined the views and experiences of employers (i.e., small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs) and highly educated migrants.

One important contribution of this dissertation to science is a better understanding of the role of employers, especially SMEs in attracting and retaining highly educated migrants. It concludes that many SMEs in less central areas in the Netherlands are willing to and in many cases do employ international workers if they cannot find suitable Dutch candidates. If SMEs wish to hire international workers, they first search for candidates already residing in the Netherlands, cross-border workers from Belgium (especially Flanders) or Germany or nationals from other European countries. Employing migrants from outside the European Union is usually seen as the last resort as this is involved with higher uncertainties and bureaucratic hurdles. SMEs rarely have formal procedures in place to attract and retain migrant workers and are not always aware that migrant employees may have other needs than natives. Even if SMEs have more experience employing migrants and have more specialised procedures in place to support them with the migration process, on-boarding and integration, many face challenges retaining migrants. One possible explanation for this is that migration decisions can be influenced by many different factors, which are often beyond the reach of employers. This means that employers can only do so much to attract and retain migrant workers. As migration is often regarded as one possible solution to addressing skills shortages, which is one key challenge for current economies, these findings also has important implications for society as a whole.

A second focus of this dissertation is the perceived welcoming environment for highly educated migrants in the EMR. Host countries are often assumed to become more attractive for highly educated migrants if a welcoming environment is created. This dissertation has shown that migrants' feelings of being welcome in the EMR are influenced by institutional factors (i.e., services provided for newly arrived migrants, including support from employers), societal factors (i.e., openness and tolerance of the local population, including co-workers) as well as migrants' personal characteristics (i.e., personality traits). Societal factors were identified as most important in shaping migrants' feelings of being welcome as many seek to establish contacts with locals. Feelings of being welcome can also lead to the retention of highly educated migrants, especially those who migrated to the region for work. This is not only an important contribution to migration research, but also confirms that policies to create a welcoming environment for highly educated migrants are justified and do indeed have a certain influence on migrants' experiences and decisions to remain in the host country. More important, however, is the role of the local

population in welcoming highly educated migrants. This shows that they do not only follow jobs, but are also looking for social connection in the host country beyond the international community.

Another contribution of this dissertation to science is that recent higher education graduates in the EMR often act in line with their mobility plans formed while studying. Plans are thus good predictors for actual behaviour. There are cases, however, in which recent graduates cannot realise their mobility plans. Therefore, one cannot automatically assume that graduates' mobility behaviour is in line with their actual mobility preferences. At the same time, it is important to recognise that migration plans can change over time. The fact that graduates often do act in line with their plans formed while studying also has societal relevance. If university regions wish to retain higher numbers of university graduates, they should start to inform students about the opportunities in the region already earlier during their studies, and not only towards the end when plans to leave the study region may already have been formed.

7.2 TARGET GROUP AND DISSEMINATION

The results of this dissertation are interesting for a variety of stakeholders including policy-makers at the national and sub-national level, companies and higher education institutions. First, policy-makers at the national level can learn from this research that migration policies are difficult to navigate for many employers. As employers are the driving force behind many forms of labour migration to the Netherlands as well as in other countries, migration can only be a solution to addressing skills shortages if employers are not discouraged from complicated and costly administrative procedures (e.g., registering as sponsor for employees, applying for visa, work and residence permits). Hence, it seems advisable to simplify migration policies and support employers with administrative procedures.

Second, the findings are relevant for employers because they show that a more specialised HR approach can be useful to attract and retain migrant workers more successfully. HR approaches should distinguish between attracting and retaining migrants, and acknowledge that migrant employees may require different kinds of support compared to natives, that likely goes beyond the on-boarding phase. It is also important to increase awareness among employers about available possibilities for support with attracting and retaining migrant employees, for example municipal services, expat centres, public employment services (e.g., EURES) and other third parties (e.g., relocation services, etc.). Local policy-makers could step in here. In addition, the research results highlight the importance of creating a welcoming environment for highly educated migrants, which is also relevant for local policy-makers who usually supervise the activities of municipal services for migrants, including expat centres. Efforts to create a welcoming environment should not only include support during the migration process and upon arrival in the host country, offer opportunities to connect with the local population.

Third, the findings are intriguing for higher education institutions, which can also play a role in retaining more graduates. For example, they can provide opportunities for them to get to know

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the study region and find out what it has to offer in terms of employment and leisure opportunities. In doing so, they could join forces with employers and local policy-makers, so that students realise on time that staying in the study region after graduation could be an option for them.

Finally, the results point to the importance of language in attracting and retaining international highly educated migrants. This includes both migrants learning the local language and providing information in foreign languages. Facilitating language learning could be a joint task for policy-makers, employers and higher education institutions alike, for example, through subsidising language courses, allowing employees to follow language courses during working hours, and offering language courses targeted towards highly educated migrants.

Results of this dissertation have been communicated through journal publications, research reports, presentations at academic conferences and stakeholder events, and media outlets. Furthermore, the findings have been shared with everyone who contributed to the research, including representatives of SMEs who shared their experiences during interviews. While conducting this research, the author(s) worked closely together with relevant stakeholders in the EMR and the Netherlands among whom the results have been disseminated. This includes the Expat Centre Maastricht Region, the Expat Centre Limburg, the Newcomer Service of the City of Aachen, and the Welcome and Dual Career Service of RWTH Aachen University, who worked together on creating a welcoming environment for international highly educated migrants in the EMR under the framework of the INTERREG project *youRegion* (2018-2022). Some of their activities were informed by the findings of this dissertation. In addition, key findings have been communicated with the Talent Coalition Netherlands, a coalition of various regional stakeholders across the Netherlands, which aims to make sure that matters of attracting and retaining international talent receive a prominent spot on the Dutch political agenda.