

# More than brains only

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## The life course of highly skilled migrants

**Many of the Member States of the European Union, including the Netherlands, are searching for ways to attract highly skilled migrants as a (partial) remedy against a shrinking and ageing population. In addition to economic motives, it is also important to pay attention to how these migrants want to shape their lives in their new country of residence: knowledge migration may be surrounded by specific aspects of geographic and social mobility.**



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N I D I

### NIDI RESEARCH: LIVES IN CONTEXTS

*Populations change because people change. Demographic trends at the macro level are the results of behaviour at the micro level. To explain why populations change we need to understand why individuals change and thus how 'contexts' affect lives. Relevant contexts include family or household, the generation, and the many institutions in the broader social, cultural and economic settings. 'Lives in contexts' is NIDI's overarching research theme.*

In 2000 the European Union formulated one of its goals in its Lisbon Agenda: to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010. The success story of knowledge economies is dependent on highly skilled professionals. Ageing societies, like many EU Member States, including the Netherlands, are also dealing with a shrinking labour force. Another EU goal, accorded in 2002 in Barcelona, was therefore that by 2010 the EU should have attracted 700,000 researchers but this has not happened yet. It was additionally agreed to spend 3 per cent of GNP (gross national product) on research and technological development per Member State. To achieve this political goal and at the same time combat the sharpest edges of an ageing population, various Member States have developed specific policies to draw highly skilled individuals from elsewhere.

Various sources indicate that about 1.5 million professionals from developing countries are working in the developed world. highly skilled migrants are beneficial for the host country: they contribute to economic growth and innovation, to an increase in productivity, and to new forms of innovation and entrepreneurship. From the perspective of the highly skilled migrant, eco-

nomie theories suggest that migrants leave for labour markets that best fit their qualities, which means that they are searching for the highest possible salary and for other advantages so they can convert education and work experience into maximum returns.

It is important however to realise that highly skilled migrants are seen not only as economic contributors to a more successful labour market or as persons who are only after high salaries. Highly skilled migrants also engage in demographic and social behaviour, and their life course often reflects their own cultural background. It is thus not only their brains which are present in their host country but also their norms and values, their earlier life experiences and their future expectations, for example with respect to the labour market and family formation. To gain more insight into this, we will be looking at higher-educated migrants from a life-course perspective. This focus means that migration gets linked not only to work but also to other life domains of the migrant and his/her family members and personal social network. In this way we hope to gain a much better understanding of the meaning of life-course events in the migration decision-making process.

## Highly skilled migrants in the Netherlands

In 2004 a special visa for 'knowledge migrants' was introduced in the Netherlands. From the beginning, this program was quite successful: according to the monitor *Kennismigrantenrege-ling 2008* (a report of the Dutch immigration and naturalisation service (INDIAC)), more than 13,200 applications were accepted in the first 3,5 years, which corresponds with 95-98 per cent of all applications on a yearly basis. From Figure 1 we can read that the share of higher educated among labour migrants to the Netherlands rose from about 15 per cent in 2005 (almost 3,000) to more than half in early 2008 (almost 9,900). In that period nearly 6,200 applications were also approved for an *extended residence permit*. Knowledge migrants come mainly from India (30 per cent of all applications in early 2008), China (7 per cent), Japan and Turkey (both at 5 per cent). The expectation is for the trend from Asia to keep up. According to the most recent population forecast of Statistics Netherlands, the share of labour migrants and students from China and India will increase.

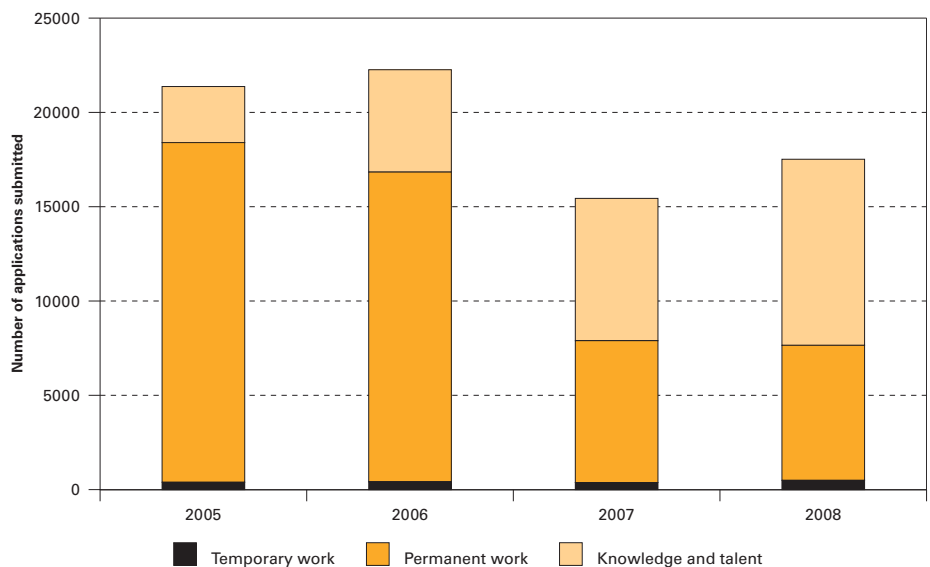
Highly skilled migrants tend to be relatively young, in the Netherlands too: one in two is between 18 and 30 years of age, and one in three between ages 30 and 40. Another trend is that knowledge migrants are usually men, and the Netherlands (at 75 per cent) is not an exception. An INDIAC internet survey from early 2008 points out that nearly one-third of highly skilled migrants worked in the ICT sector or in other business services, 13 per cent in the industrial sector, and almost 9 per cent in retail. Knowledge migrants can also be found in education and research (8 per cent), which may be on the low side, given the Lisbon and Barcelona agreements.

Who exactly is eligible for a knowledge migrant visa? In its widest sense, the proposal of the Advisory Committee on Alien Affairs (ACVZ) reads that highly skilled migrants are labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarced specialised knowledge, generally higher educated, with above-average income and employed in sectors of economic or social importance. More specifically, the criterion for yearly income is € 49,000 for persons aged 30 or older and € 36,000 for migrants younger than 30. For recent graduates a lower amount applies. The duration of the visa is related to the duration of the work contract, with a maximum of five years. After that, a permanent residence permit can be applied for. Family members of a knowledge migrant can also get work and residence permits. Policies to lure the best foreign knowledge migrants must be attractive: a decision to migrate is probably made much more easily if a migrant's spouse and children can come along without too much bureaucratic ado.

## Highly skilled migrants and the life course

The life-course perspective studies how a person's life develops in the course of time. Several parallel life courses are kept track of in the process. For highly skilled migrants these are the life

Application submitted for a first residence permit, 2005-2008\*



\*Until June 2008.

Source: INDIAC (2008) NormalTrendreport.

courses with respect to education, work, migration and household formation. Events in one of these life courses are meaningful not only for that life course but usually also for the other. Let us try to sketch the potential life course of knowledge migrants. He or she begins with an educational career, graduates from university, and looks for a job in the labour market. For a knowledge migrant this labour market is geographically very wide, as it can mean that he or she will be going to another country. And that means his or her migration career gets started. If there is also a partner in the picture, this may mean that, with migration in mind, they get married earlier than they would have normally planned to. Not being married, after all, may mean that no use can be made of spousal facilities. If the knowledge migrant and his or her partner go away for only a short time, they may choose to postpone having children. This has consequences for the household career. All of this means that the choice for a specific position on the labour market has consequences for the way in which migration and household formation get shaped. In addition to the variation in life-course patterns of knowledge migrants, the decision-making process surrounding migration and the resulting migration behaviour should be seen in an even broader perspective, which is with respect to factors that foster or hinder migration.

## Embedding the life course of knowledge migrants

Some of the factors that foster or inhibit migration come from others than the knowledge migrants themselves – primarily from family members. If a family consists of several persons, this can pose an additional restraint on a decision to migrate. All the life courses of these persons play a role here. Elder uses the term 'linked lives' to denote the influence of significant others on the life course. An even broader perspective also pays attention to a person's social network. This is meaningful in terms of information and of material and immaterial



## NEARLY 5 MILLION IMMIGRANTS IN 2050

The Netherlands will have nearly 5.0 million (first and second generation) immigrants by 2050 – 1.8 million more than in 2008. Because the total Dutch population is increasing by 0.9 per cent in the 2008-2050 period, (from 16.4 to 17.3 million), the proportion of immigrants in the population is growing strongly, from 19.6 per cent to 28.7 per cent. Non-Western immigrants account for the largest part of this growth. In 2050 their numbers will reach 3.0 million, as against 1.8 million in 2008. Hence the proportion of non-Western immigrants in the total population will have risen from 10.8 to 17.2 per cent. The increased numbers of Western immigrants is slightly less strong, in absolute as well as relative terms. In 2050 the Netherlands had 2.0 million Western immigrants, which makes them 11.5 per cent of the population (Source: Statistics Netherlands).

**CHILDREN AND WAR**

Worldwide one billion children live in countries that are involved in armed conflict. This is almost one-sixth of the total world population. Of these children, 300 million are not even five years old. They suffer not only from the direct consequences of the conflict, but their development and well-being are also threatened in the long term. The children are increasingly victims of, among other things, land mines and unexploded weapons, bombardments, sexual violence, terrorism and antiterrorist measures. More and more of them are recruited as child soldiers and are targets in attacks to schools and hospitals. Many children no longer get the education they are entitled to (Source: Unicef).

support. Especially knowledge migrants are often able to find jobs via informal networks or contacts. Diasporas form the cultural face of social networks. A diaspora can also have another meaning: the fact that, for example, ethnic or religious meetings are held in the host country, or one can buy certain food products. Such facilities can guide a decision as to whether or not to migrate or a decision about where the knowledge migrant will be living. Professional organisations influence migration traffic to the degree that they make people attentive to vacancies in other countries. Among multinational companies it is common practice to work abroad for a certain period.

**Conclusion**

The Dutch government strives to be one of the pioneers in the knowledge economy of the EU. In order to attain that, and also keeping an ageing population in mind, there is a large need for knowledge migrants. We have to realise that this is not only about getting the brains of knowledge migrants over here. Economic gains can be made especially if knowledge migrants can function and develop optimally as full-fledged members of Dutch society, hence it is important to comprehend the processes underlying high-skilled migration which is much beyond just cost-benefit analysis.

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