

## **Should I stay or should I go? Unmet migration expectations and out-migration of skilled recent immigrants**

In many knowledge-based societies, economies are facing growing labour needs due to ageing populations and unsustainable fertility rates among other factors (United Nations 2022). At the same time, the ongoing green and digital transitions increase skill requirements for jobs (European Commission 2022), altogether increasing economies' needs for skilled, and particularly highly skilled labour. Against the backdrop of these demographic and societal changes, governments increasingly depend on immigrants, accelerating the global race for talents. As a result, countries such as Germany and Switzerland have tailored specific policies to attract highly skilled immigrants (particularly from non-EU/EFTA countries) and to facilitate their settlement (e.g. through better access to the local labour market and accelerating naturalisation with academic qualifications). Despite such amenities and their often privileged status in host societies, highly skilled immigrants are probably more at risk of leaving their current country of residence compared to their lower-skilled counterparts.

Scholars argue that highly skilled immigrants are more likely to react to unmet expectations of migration because of their high expectations to do well, fare well and be treated equally. These high expectations about life abroad are based on assumptions and demands of adequate results and returns, which evolved from past personal and family investments and accumulated resources (Cooney 2009; Geurts, Davids, and Spierings 2021; Wodtke 2012). The (perceived) substantial investments in their future and the high migration expectations as such both lead to a stronger cognitive vulnerability to disappointment and frustration, and consequently a particularly high frustration in the event of unmet expectations (Schaeffer 2019).

In this study, we investigate whether unmet migration expectations increase the likelihood of out-migration of recent immigrants, and whether this likelihood is particularly increased for the highly skilled. Empirical evidence on the out-migration of highly versus lower skilled immigrants is mixed due to considerable heterogeneity (see Constant 2020 for a comprehensive review). We contribute to this literature by examining whether unmet migration expectations might reveal such heterogeneity. Moreover, we add to existing research on the so-called integration paradox (Verkuyten 2016), which describes the phenomenon that although appearing to be integrated, highly skilled immigrants often do not feel so (Schaeffer and Kas 2023). As unmet migration expectations play a key role in explaining such discrepancies between the actual and perceived integration of highly skilled immigrants, we extend the research scope and examine possible selection effects, i.e. whether disappointed highly skilled immigrants leave the country before they might overcome the discrepancies and resolve their supposedly paradoxical situation.

While we expect unmet migration expectations to negatively affect the likelihood of out-migration in general, the expected outcome for highly skilled recent immigrants in relation to their lower-skilled counterparts can be based on two different perspectives. On the one hand, disappointed highly skilled immigrants might be more likely to leave because they are more likely to cope with the psychological and monetary consequences of the decision to migrate again (Clark and Lisowski 2017; Sjaastad 1962). Relatedly, attractive opportunities in other countries may make highly skilled immigrants susceptible to leave again 'for greener pastures', something they are more able to do than lower skilled immigrants, whose only alternative would often be returning to a place with unfavourable labour market conditions (Wanner, Pecoraro, and Tani 2021). Moreover, highly skilled immigrants are often assumed to have a better understanding of migration-related situations of interethnic contact and are more efficient in adapting to such situations, e.g. because they have more experience of international migration and learn dominant local languages more quickly (Chiswick and Miller 2001; Erlinghagen et

al. 2021). On the other hand, highly skilled immigrants might have better self-regulation that helps them to regulate their emotions and reassert control under stressful and frustrating conditions (Blair and Raver 2015). Moreover, they tend to be more long-term oriented and have a longer breath when it comes to realising returns to their migration-related investments (Stocké 2019). In case of unmet expectations, this may result in stronger resilience and the decision to remain in the country to which they purposefully migrated in the first place.

If recent immigrants are more likely to leave in case of disappointed expectations, integration programmes in destination countries need to better incorporate early strategies for transitions into long-term integration, regardless of immigrants' residence status. If empirical evidence of a brain drain effect is found, destination countries and social scientists would need to pay more attention to highly skilled immigrants as they often fall under the radar by counting as (objectively) well integrated.

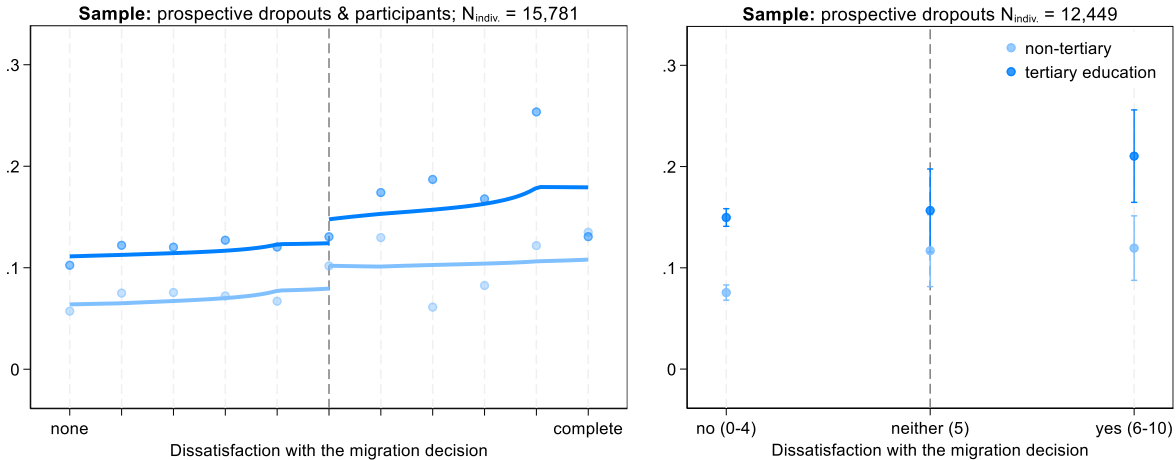
We use 4-wave panel data of the Migration Mobility Survey (MMS, 2016-2022), a large-scale multilingual survey with a register-based representative sample of recently arrived voluntary immigrants to Switzerland (Steiner and Wanner 2019; Wanner et al. 2023). We link these data with administrative data to obtain information on immigrants' whereabouts (either still living in Switzerland or abroad) after they have been surveyed. Switzerland is well suited for our study because it is an economically attractive destination country, but also one where adjustment and integration can be challenging in a context of conservative and anti-immigrant politics (Bennour, Manatschal, and Ruedin 2022). This combination can contribute to increased and unmet migration expectations. Moreover, we capture the initial period of migration in which immigrants' expectations meet reality in the destination country, that is before immigrants may adjust their expectations in face of the reality they met. By studying this period, we also capture the crucial early stage when place-based attachment is not yet well advanced, likely increasing the chances of renewed migration if the first years do not go as planned (Clark and Lisowski 2017; Morrison and Clark 2016).

To measure the extent to which pre-migration expectations have been met or not, we use information on immigrants' *dissatisfaction with the decision to move to Switzerland* (from 0 "completely satisfied" to 10 "completely dissatisfied"). We also use a 3-categories version (0 = values 0 to 4, 1 = value 5, 2 = values 6 to 10). *Out-migration* is the outcome variable, indicating whether immigrants either still live in Switzerland (=0) or have left the country (=1) after being surveyed. Immigrants' *highest level of education* is measured by a dummy variable, distinguishing between "non-tertiary education" (=0) and "tertiary education" (=1). The models further include information on gender, age, residence duration, and residence/naturalisation status.

The analyses make use of waves 1 to 3 because we do not know whether participants of wave 4 will participate again or dropout in the next wave. We estimate logistic regression models, predict average marginal values and use these as a baseline to calculate trend lines using weighted local linear smoothing (Hudde and Jacob 2023). To consider the ordinal nature of our explanatory variable, we apply two smoothing procedures for each education group, i.e. one for the positive and one for the negative scale range.

We find that immigrants with unmet migration expectations are generally more likely to leave Switzerland after being surveyed (Figure 1, left panel). The effect remains if we only look at immigrants that will drop out of the study (Figure 1, right panel). Moreover, highly skilled immigrants (dark blue) are generally more likely to leave Switzerland than lower skilled immigrants (light blue). Importantly, however, we observe that for highly skilled immigrants, the association between unmet expectations and out-migration is comparatively strong, making highly skilled immigrants with unmet expectations particularly likely to leave (e.g. right panel: 4 vs. 6 percentage points increase from "no" to "yes"). Table 1 shows that the educational differences are statistically significant.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities for out-migration



Note: points represent average margin effects based on logistic regressions; smoothed trend lines are based on weighted linear regressions (Stata 18, degree = 0, band width = 1.8).  
 Data: MMS, waves 1-3, own calculations.

Table 1. Contrasts from right panel in Figure 1 (in %-points)

	Dissatisfaction with the migration decision		
	no (0-4)	neither (5)	yes (6-10)
Contrasts between lower and highly skilled immigrants	7.4***	4.0	9.1**

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Data: MMS, waves 1-3, own calculations.

Overall, the findings identify unmet migration expectations as a driver for out-migration, particularly for highly skilled immigrants. The findings suggest an increased risk of brain drain in the first years after arrival if highly skilled immigrants cannot meet their expectations. Moreover, it implies that previous studies may have underestimated the severity of the integration paradox due to selection effects.

We encourage further research in different contexts of reception where we might find even stronger links between unmet expectations and out-migration. Switzerland is often considered one of the best places to live for highly skilled immigrants. This might limit their available opportunities elsewhere, and may cause some of them to stay despite their dissatisfaction.

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