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**The Mobility of the “Highly Skilled”  
towards Switzerland**

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**Migrants to Switzerland are better educated than ever before. Yet, while many highly qualified migrants hold highly regarded positions others are still unable to use their skills. Our goal is to understand the implications of uneven access to resources, opportunities and social participation for different groups of highly qualified migrants. We observe that migrants who come as spouses, students, and asylum seekers face specific challenges despite being highly educated. We suggest some solutions aimed at enabling all migrants to participate more fully in the economic and social life of the country where they live.**

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**Messages for Decision-Makers**

- **The needs of highly qualified refugees, recent graduates and reunified family members are not adequately addressed by the current Swiss legislative framework.**
- **Stable residence permits are key to social and economic integration: concerned authorities should provide transparent information to employers, migrants and the institutions that support them.**
- **Processes of skill recognition should be improved: employers and educational institutions should be made aware of the specific needs of highly skilled migrants.**

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Switzerland attracts a significant share of highly qualified migrants by international standards. According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, over half of the migrants who recently moved to Switzerland have a university degree. This is due to the growing knowledge-based

economy and to the evolution of the legal framework, which specifies that non-EU/EFTA citizens can only migrate as qualified workers who are “absolutely needed”, students, asylum seekers, or reunified family members. Yet, “highly skilled migrant” is not a clear-cut category. We observe that the support that highly qualified migrants receive from various actors depends on factors that are not connected to their qualification level. Our analysis of the Migration-Mobility Survey shows that employers and other institutional actors tend to favor highly qualified men from Anglo-Saxon countries; at the same time, married women and migrants from other third-countries receive less support even when they have a similar qualification level and professional status. Moreover, our interviews with highly qualified migrants who come as spouses, students and refugees show that they face specific difficulties in transferring their skills and participating fully in the economic and social life of Switzerland.

**Different Groups Have Different Opportunities**

The channels through which migrants enter the country partly determine the obstacles and opportunities they will encounter during their stay. In addition to observing migrants coming to Switzerland with a pre-arranged job,

our study includes people with a university degree who migrated for different reasons and started looking for a job after their transfer. We find that there are a number of obstacles for three groups in particular.

1. Highly qualified refugees: in addition to experiencing various disadvantages associated with their flight, refugees find themselves in a strictly controlled policy environment that can limit their possibilities to work, travel and make decisions about their life. Today in Switzerland, only few programs address the specific needs of highly qualified refugees.
2. Foreign students coming from non-EU/EFTA countries: although students are often considered a valuable resource for economic actors, many of them decide to leave Switzerland at the end of their studies. We find that this is mainly because they are only offered a precarious, short-term residence status until they find a job.
3. Trailing highly qualified spouses: although the spouses of multinational companies' employees can benefit from a growing offer of public-private partnerships that support their social and professional integration, only few companies offer extensive support for spouses. Faced with a lack of support services adapted to their needs, most unemployed spouses depend on the resources provided by their social networks. Unable to fulfill their professional aspirations, many of them eventually change their career goals, retrain, look for less qualified jobs or leave the country.

### Learning from Migrants' Experiences Is Crucial

Although individual stories vary significantly, some elements are important to all highly qualified migrants regardless of their legal status:

- Networking, mentoring programs and intercultural projects enable migrants to increase their opportunities: exchanging information and developing ties with resource persons is an effective way to get a better understanding of their options.
- Possibilities to contribute, engage or volunteer are appreciated, but they are often not easily accessible due to rigid structures and language barriers.
- Uncertainties and anxiety associated with residence permits are often a consequence of the immigration authorities' lack of transparency and of conflicting information obtained from employers.
- Processes of skill recognition are too rigid: many interviewees, especially among the group of highly qualified refugees, encounter difficulties when trying to validate their qualifications for entering the labour market or higher education programs.

### A Stronger Role for Public Institutions and Civil Society in the Future

Our research shows that the potential for some migrants to fully participate in the economic and social life of Switzerland is lost due to restrictive policies and insufficient support. We claim that this situation arises from a myopic focus on migrants who are defined as immediately useful by the economic sector. We call for a stronger engagement of public institutions and civil society to make Switzerland a more inclusive place where everybody can participate to the full extent of their abilities. Allowing for public spaces where migrants can make their voice heard is important, also because several issues that highly qualified migrants face in Switzerland reflect broader problems of the Swiss society, such as prescribed gender roles, the associated lack of support infrastructure for working parents and the increasing focus of employers on flexible work. Responding to these problems could therefore bring solutions for all.

#### Key Publications

- Hercog, Metka. "The Privileged and Useful Migrant: An Evaluation of Changing Policy and Scholarly Approaches Towards High-Skilled Migration." *nccr – on the move Working Paper Series*, no. 16 (2017).
- Hercog, Metka, and Laure Sandoz. "Selecting the Highly Skilled: Norms and Practices in the Swiss Admission Regime for Non-EU Immigrants." *Migration Letters*, 2018 (forthcoming).
- Sandoz, Laure. "Understanding Migration Policies from Migrants' Perspective." Paper presented at the 24th World Congress of Political Science, Poznań (Poland) (2016). <http://paperroom.ipso.org/papers/view/50601>
- Sontag, Katrin. "Highly Skilled Asylum Seekers: Case Studies of Refugee Students at a Swiss University." *Migration Letters*, 2018 (forthcoming).

