

Illuminating the shadows of skilled migration: Highly qualified immigrants from Latin America in Spain

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Abstract

This paper analyses the labour incorporation of skilled Latin American immigrant workers into Spain. It is based on in-depth interviews with 24 Latin American immigrants and it explores reasons for migration into Spain, showing that the interviewees migrated for a great variety of reasons, not necessarily for work. Subsequently, the paper analyses the interviewees' labour incorporation in Spain and defines three paths into skilled work in Spain. In two of the three paths, on first arrival in Spain, a mismatch was observed between education and labour market outcomes. For some, migration even represented a break in their career, implying occasionally a temporary de-skilling process. For this reason, an extended university-work transition was sometimes observed, in order to secure skilled jobs in Spain. Theoretically, human capital hardly explains this migration since it is not associated with upward career movement, although wages might be higher than in the countries of origin.

INTRODUCTION

Skilled migration accounts for a relatively small section of the migration literature, maybe because qualified migrants do not represent a substantial portion of total migration numbers and are generally regarded as socially and statistically "invisible" (Peixoto, 2001; Salt, 1992).¹ The literature has mainly focussed on labour incorporation of the highly skilled in developed countries and on the impacts of emigration in sending countries, to assess whether qualified migrants were of benefit or detriment to sending/receiving countries (e.g. Solimano, 2008; Yeoh & Lam,

2016). From this perspective, it is assumed that skilled workers move in search of higher wages and better career prospects in order to maximize human capital investments (Chiswick, 2011; Fratesi, 2014). In the case of Latin America, literature on skilled migration is scarce, and it has generally been analysed through the lens of the loss of human capital of sending countries and of the economic and demographic impacts of skilled Latin American immigrants on the USA, the main receiving country (see, for instance, Lozano & Gandini, 2011; Pellegrino, 2001). This article throws light on an unexplored area in the skilled migration literature and analyses skilled migration from Latin America to Spain, a medium-sized European economy with high structural unemployment and limited skilled job openings for new labour market entrants such as young people and immigrants (Cebolla-Boado, et al., 2015; Mendoza, 2020).

Although there is little specific research on skilled Latin Americans in Spain (for an exception, see Bradatan & Kolloju, 2015, who found that the 2008 economic crisis caused greater unemployment among skilled Latin Americans in Spain, compared with their local qualified counterparts), literature on Latin American migration into Spain is abundant (e.g. Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2017; Hierro, 2016; Suárez-Grimalt, 2017). Latin American migration inflows rose significantly throughout the last quarter of the 20th century: political exiles (mainly Venezuelans and Cubans) were complemented by economic immigrants from all over the region who decided to try the European adventure, with Spain as their main destination (Herranz, 1998). Indeed, the massive arrival of Latin American immigrants into Spain that happened from the late 1990s until the 2008 economic crisis outbreak is mainly due to the high demand of unskilled workers in labour-intensive sectors (primarily construction and domestic service) during the real estate boom in the country (Hierro, 2016; Ruesga et al., 2010). Besides economic and political factors, the growth in the Latin American population in Spain is also related to historical migratory links between Latin America and Spain, whereby a considerable number of populations in the region with Spanish heritage have the right to reclaim their ancestral nationality; Latin Americans also have better facilities for obtaining residence/nationality once in Spain, compared with other immigrants (García Ballesteros et al., 2009). Thus, in 2020, Latin Americans comprised 43.1% of the population in Spain who were born abroad, and half of these possessed a Spanish passport (INE, 2021a). The migration literature generally assumes that Latin Americans in Spain are economic immigrants (with the exception of Venezuelans and Cubans, e.g., Castillo Crasto & Reguant Álvarez, 2017), who have low formal qualifications in their countries of origin, but this disregards the down-skilling processes that may occur as a result of international migration.

At first sight, however, Spain does not appear to be an attractive destination for skilled immigrants, because its labour market is characterized by high structural unemployment, a large informal sector and a well-documented mismatch between education and labour market outcomes (Consoli & Sánchez-Barrioluengo, 2019; Sala & Trivín, 2014). For the last trimester of 2020, the Spanish unemployment rate was 16.1% of the working population, with this number being higher for women (18.3%) and for those under 25 years old (a striking 40.1%; INE, 2021b). Although the numbers have varied over time, since the early 1980s the unemployment rate has only descended below 10% in the period 2005–2007, with its peak being after the 2008 economic crisis (26.1% in 2012; OECD, 2021). Moreover, the informal economy was estimated to be worth 196,000 million euros in Spain in 2013 (18.6% of the Gross Domestic Product; Iglesias-Pérez et al., 2018). In this respect, immigrants in countries with high unemployment and a large informal sector, such as Spain, are at a clear disadvantage when it comes to finding work, and their jobs tend to be precarious, unstable and badly paid (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2015). However, because the jobs that are available to immigrants are generally of little interest to native workers, migration literature has demonstrated that there is no contradiction between high unemployment rates and immigration in Spain (Domínguez-Mújica et al., 2016; Simón et al., 2014). This might hold true for non-qualified workers, but it is more arguable for skilled immigrants in a labour market characterized by an oversupply of qualified Spanish workers (Landolt & Thieme, 2018), who in many cases chose emigration as the only means of career progression (Mendoza, 2020). These factors may explain why Spain has no specific migration policy for attracting qualified talent – although, in 2011, for the first time, specific permits were implemented for highly skilled economic/social activities (*autorización de residencia y trabajo de profesionales altamente cualificados titulares de una tarjeta azul-UE*). However,

even in this case, and in the same way as other immigrants, highly skilled permits are also subject to the availability of local qualified workers for a specific job.

Filling a gap in the literature, the paper studies the labour incorporation of a group of Latin American skilled immigrants into the Spanish labour market. Considering labour trajectories prior migration, it maps main career paths leading Latin Americans to fully incorporate into skilled work in Spain. The article exposes that these paths are not a straight line, but they occasionally imply de-skilling processes in Spain. In doing so, it discusses the validity of prevailing theoretical approaches on skilled migration (i.e. brain drain, expatriates' mobility and mid-dling migrants), and it concludes that they partially help explain the phenomenon. Therefore, the next section critically reviews theories on skilled migration. There follows an explanation of the paper's methodology, which is based on in-depth interviews with 24 skilled immigrant workers from Latin America who have lived and worked in Barcelona and Madrid (Spain) for at least one year. The third section revolves around reasons for migration within the research group, showing that the interviewed Latin Americans migrated into Spain for a great variety of reasons, not necessarily for work. Subsequently, the paper analyses the interviewees' labour incorporation in Spain and defines three paths into skilled work in Spain. For some interviewees, an extended university-work transition was observed, since they could not secure skilled jobs on arrival in Spain. Some conclusions close the article.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SKILLED MIGRATION

Following underdevelopment and dependence theories, the "brain drain" emerged as the first analytical framework for understanding skilled migration in the 1970s (e.g. Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974; Portes, 1976). For some, this approach is also a valid explanation for understanding current skilled flows worldwide (e.g. Bhagwati & Hanson, 2009; Chiswick, 2011). This literature stresses the loss of human capital in the countries of origin (Grubel & Scott, 1977). Subsequently, "brain drain" has been mirrored by the concepts of "brain exchange" and "brain gain," which reflect increasing mobility globally among the highly skilled and suggest that migration may encourage human capital improvements in countries of origin as well as in host countries (Koser & Salt, 1997; Solimano, 2008). These latter concepts also imply more multidirectional flows in an increasingly integrated world (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012), with mobility and circularity being co-substantial to some professionals' lives (Ong, 1999; Pellegrino, 2001). In this regard, rather than human capital, recent approaches have emphasized the role of cultural and social capital in motivations for emigration among the highly skilled professionals, since it can ultimately contribute to raise immigrants' social status in their origin countries. In this way, migration might be a way of escaping from "class slip-page" (considering that boundaries between the middle and the lower classes are becoming increasingly blurred), and, therefore, a means of improving social and economic status back home (e.g. Kawashima, 2021; Rutten & Verstappen, 2014).

The second prevailing approach in the skilled migration literature relates to migration and mobility within transnational corporations (Millar & Salt, 2008; Salt, 1992). Heavily inspired by the world-system theory, research in the late 1980s and early 1990s used a centre-periphery framework to comprehend mobility within these corporations. In brief, as transnational corporations expand their activities to developing countries, expatriates were transferred from headquarters located in global cities to subsidiaries in developing countries within the safety net of internal labour markets (e.g. Beaverstock, 1991; Findlay & Gould, 1989). With the adoption of this perspective, emphasis was placed on short stays and the temporary migration of expatriates (Beaverstock, 2010; Willis & Yeoh, 2000), rather than on permanent migration. Trying to overcome rigid interpretation schemes, this literature has also approached skilled migration from the perspective of labour trajectories within transnationals, and, therefore, has mapped trajectories in interconnected branches, national subsidiaries and company headquarters (Koser & Salt, 1997), following a logic of upward labour mobility for the TNC employee (Iredale, 2001; Millar & Salt, 2008).

Skilled migration literature has a clear bias towards labour-related topics, and towards neo-classical approaches, such as human theory, when analysing international flows of skilled workers (Mendoza, 2020). It is

somehow assumed that qualified workers move in search of higher wages and career progression, in order to maximize human capital investments (Chiswick, 2011; Fratesi, 2014). However, qualified migrants are far from being a homogeneous group (Nagel, 2005), and reasons for migration depend not only on immigrants' education and wages, but also on personal circumstances, family bonds and personal experiences/assessments of the destination country prior to migration, among others (e.g. Anthias, 2012; Meier, 2015). In this regard, the literature on "middling migrants" (i.e. young graduate migrants from middle-class backgrounds at early stages of their careers, Wiles, 2008) emphasize adventure, self-achievement and even the desire for an international experience and life in a new city as the main reasons for these young people to embark on international migration (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Scott, 2006). Indeed, motivations for emigration are not necessarily centred on economic gains but indicate a quest for improved cultural and social capitals that may further upward mobility, both socially and in labour markets (e.g. Parutis, 2014). As a matter of fact, an increasing number of young people are embarking on short-term international migrations in search of a "global experience" while postponing their full incorporation into labour markets, since mobility has become an important marker for youth in many global contexts (Robertson et al., 2018). Other research on middling immigrants presents a gloomier picture, pointing out to economic factors for emigration, as well as attempts to maintain middle-class status and to escape family pressures (Kawashima, 2021; Rutten & Verstappen, 2014). Certainly, although these migrants possess tertiary education, they do not easily fit into the category of highly skilled migration, because of their relatively low position in labour markets (Favell et al., 2007). The literature has recently drawn greater attention to hitherto unnoticed negative aspects of skilled migration, such as struggles for permanent residence at the destination, non-favourable working conditions and social incorporation issues (Khoo et al., 2011; Tseng, 2011). Considering all these (contrasting) theoretical perspectives, the article analyses the labour experiences of 24 skilled workers from Latin America in Spain. The next section explains the methodology behind this study.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a broader project on skilled immigration from Latin America to Spain. The project analysed two groups of qualified workers: managerial and technical staff in companies and academics. This article specifically focuses on highly skilled Latin American-born immigrants who are qualified personnel (managers – i.e. responsible for co-ordinating and directing working groups and technicians – i.e. in charge of specific qualified tasks in the companies, under the supervision of a manager) in Spain. Since the objective of the article is to study immigrants' vital/labour trajectories, expatriates were deliberately excluded from the research group, because of their explicit characteristics (i.e. they are by definition temporary managerial and technical staff whose migration generally implies upward labour mobility for the transferee on their return home; Beaverstock, 2010; Millar & Salt, 2008).

A total of 24 in-depth interviews with skilled managers and technicians from Latin America were carried out in Barcelona and Madrid (Spain) from December 2020 to February 2021. Due to the lack of official statistics on skilled immigrants in Spain, a snowball sampling technique was used to select them. Participants were assured that the information provided would be treated confidentially, so pseudonyms are used herein. Because of the COVID-19 health crisis, most interviews were carried out via Internet (Zoom and Skype), although a few were held in the interviewees' homes and public spaces at their request. On average, each of the 24 in-depth interviews lasted around one hour and was structured along three lines: work, social integration and geographical issues. Via the interviews, it was possible to discuss reasons for migration, intentions to stay, opinions on Spanish labour market (e.g. views on workmates, professionalism and discrimination at work), day-to-day experiences in Barcelona and Madrid (e.g., living standards, everyday spaces) and links with the home country. Data were analysed through a content analysis method involving several phases. First, the codes were defined. Since the interviews were undertaken by the study's researcher, it was relatively easy to define and classify codes according to the interview

sections. Second, using free MAXQDA software, the interviews were labelled and extracts were grouped into different topics. Finally, a systematic reading and analysis of this information enabled abstracting and the selection of relevant quotations to illustrate the main lines of analysis.

Although the research did not attempt to achieve a representative sample, efforts were made to collect information from immigrants with different backgrounds. Thus, we tried to interview men and women in similar numbers (13 women and 11 men), with varying ages (average 36.5 years old) and nationalities (broken down into very similar numbers between Argentina (5), Brazil (5), Colombia (4), Mexico (4) and Venezuela (6), [Table 1](#)). Unlike expatriates whose migration occurs within the safety net of a company's internal labour market, the interviewees obtained their jobs through head-hunters, professional networks like LinkedIn and even personal contacts. Most of the interviewees (20 out of 24) worked for transnational corporations (TNC), with the remaining four being employed in small-to-medium-sized Spanish companies. They were either technicians (18) or managers (6) working mainly in Information Technologies companies (6), insurance (6) and consulting (5; [Table 1](#)). All 24 had tertiary studies, and 16 also had a post-graduate degree (3 a specialized degree, 10 a Master's degree and 3 a PhD). As for their status on arrival, almost half of the interviewees had an EU nationality prior to migration (11 out of 24), which certainly eased the migration process into Spain. The others entered Spain with student permits (8), highly skilled work permits (3), a family-reunion permit (1) or a non-lucrative permit (1; [Table 1](#)). Finally, – and this is of special interest for this article –, in most cases, the reason for immigration into Spain was not labour-related, but rather linked to studies, political unrest at home, love and adventure. The next section goes deeper into these reasons.

REASONS FOR MIGRATION: BEYOND WORK

Perhaps unexpectedly, work was not the reason for immigration most often given by the interviewees, since studies took pride of place: nine (out of 24) declared that they came to Spain to complete their formal education ([Table 1](#)). Moreover, the post-graduate courses taken in Spain were originally aimed at improving skills (and an eventual return to their home country), since interviewees had already worked in their countries of origin prior to migration. In some cases, a Spanish university offered the desired specialization and this was the reason for choosing the country. Mercedes, for example, is currently implementing the knowledge learned from an MA in design management in her managerial position in an insurance company.

I was working in industrial design in Colombia for four years before Spain, and I liked it, but industrial design is underrated there. I came here to Barcelona because it is well-known internationally for design, and I did a Master's degree in design management, that is, aimed at strategic thinking, not so much applied design (...) This training was based on what I had studied but with a completely different approach.

(Mercedes-38.Bogotá-Colombian-manager in strategic design)

For others, the rationale behind choosing a specific Spanish university was related to an attractive price, plus the opportunity of living abroad (for instance, Lorena said that the MSc was cheaper in Spain than in private Mexican universities), as well as family ties, as in the case of Micaela, who opted for Barcelona because of her partner. Due to an undesirable political situation, this interviewee, who had thought of returning to Venezuela after her training course, finally stayed in Spain. In fact, this was the reason for migration for four out of the six Venezuelans interviewed for this project. Migration from Venezuela to Spain has already been studied in the literature, confirming both political uncertainty as the main reason for migration and the high-skilled profile of these immigrants, who have an extensive social network in Spain (Castillo Crasto & Reguant Álvarez, 2017; Mateo & Ledezma, 2006). In her interview, Micaela also mentioned that "my sister and her husband already lived in

TABLE 1 Profile of the interviewed high-skilled Latin Americans

Sex	Women: 13 Men: 11
Country of birth	Argentina: 5 Brazil: 5 Colombia: 4 Mexico: 4 Venezuela: 6
Age	Less than 30: 2 30–34: 7 35–39: 10 40–44: 4 45 and more: 1
City of residence	Barcelona (city): 10 Barcelona (province): 5 Madrid (city): 7 Madrid (province): 1 Other (Spain): 1
Year of arrival in Spain	Before 2005: 1 2005–2009: 3 2010–2014: 3 2015–2019: 17
Documentation at arrival	EU national: 11 EU family card (work allowed): 1 Student permit (work restricted): 8 Work/residence permit for highly skilled workers: 3 Residence permit (no work): 1
Main reason for migration	Studies: 9 Work: 5 Political situation (origin country): 4 Adventure/Change of life: 3 Love: 3
Studies	All 24 had tertiary studies – of them 16 also had a post-graduate course (3 a specialized course, 10 a master and 3 a PhD)
Current job in Spain	Managers: 7 Technicians: 17
Economic branch of activity	Information Technology: 6 Insurance: 6 Consulting: 5 Banking: 2 Education: 2 Others: 3 (1 chemical industry, 1 health sector and 1 waste management)
Civil status	Single: 12 Married: 11 Co-habitation: 1

Source: Fieldwork (December 2020–March 2021).

Barcelona, so I stayed with them for a few months on arrival.” In this regard, family ties, and more specifically love, was cited as the main reason for migration for three of the interviewees.

It is somehow surprising that work was only mentioned as the main motive for migration by five interviewees. Maybe the reason for this lies in the difficulties in obtaining initial work permits for highly skilled immigrants. As previously stated, qualified workers, like all other immigrants, must fulfil the requirement of a lack of local workers

in the domestic labour market (i.e. no Spaniard or foreigner living legally in Spain is available for a specific post, see Sánchez Alonso, 2011). Manuel is a good example of this. He worked for a business intelligence company in the Emirates and tried unsuccessfully to be transferred to the Spanish branch:

I've arrived in Spain with a residence permit for non-profit activities (...) I had tried to be transferred from the Emirates to Spain, but the company applied for the work permit, and it was denied four times. I don't really know why, so I tried it myself. I got a residence permit to live in Spain, and I am working remotely for my old company. Now I am trying to change my residence status to allow myself to have a work permit in Spain.

(Manuel-36-São Paulo-Brazilian- business intelligence analyst)

In contrast, Salomón, a 36-year-old Mexican, had no bureaucracy problems as regards his work permit in Spain, which was in fact processed by an external accountancy firm. He is an IT technician who works for a large transnational Internet company. Salomón got tired of his previous job in Mexico City and successfully applied for a job with a transnational corporation specialising in digital services. He said in his interview that he could have chosen Stockholm or Amsterdam, besides Madrid, but he finally chose a Spanish city. He said in the interview that "I could work anywhere. There is huge demand for IT specialists worldwide, and I've got more than 10 years of work experience in two of the most important companies in the sector." The reason for his choice was that he is not keen on extremely cold weather and he thought that, apart from the language, Madrid was more similar to Mexico City in cultural terms.

The latter interviewee introduced an important subject into the discussion: despite several possible destinations, he chose Madrid for the linguistic and cultural similarities between Mexico and Spain (plus the weather; see also García Ballesteros et al., 2009; Suárez-Grimalt, 2017). In a similar vein, three interviewees said that they moved to Spain for non-material reasons, because they wanted a change in their lives, a change of scene. This is in line with the literature on "middling migrants." These immigrants emphasize adventure and self-achievement as crucial factors in embarking on international migration (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Wiles, 2008). But, in contrast with the previous literature, our interviewees were not in their 20s or early 30s, and certainly not in the early stages of their career. For them, a crucial factor in their decision to migrate was their ownership of an EU passport. Saúl evoked his desire for adventure with these words:

I had always lived in Buenos Aires. At the age of 42, I started my Barcelona adventure. I wanted a change of scene, and I did not plan it at all. My idea was to be a digital nomad. Of course, I've got Italian nationality through my grandfather. So, documentation was not a problem. I asked my company if I could work remotely, and they agreed (...) I decided to live in Barcelona. I felt like a tourist (...) The turning point was when my company told me to come back, and I felt that I was comfortable in the city and I did not want to move back to Argentina. At that point, I started to search for a job in Spain.

(Saúl-44-Buenos Aires-Argentinian/Italian-IT technician)

There are several general messages arising from this section. (i) First, studies stand out as a solid reason for immigration into Spain. Nine out of the 24 originally came to Spain to pursue their studies, but, in other cases, as will be seen in the next section, studies were undertaken at a later stage in their stay in the country. Studies are seen as an instrument for better incorporation into the host labour market. (ii) Family backgrounds helped almost half of the interviewees to obtain an EU nationality. Those of Italian, Portuguese and Spanish descent did not experience difficulties in obtaining/renewing permits in Spain. Southern European blood-based nationality policies have turned distant relatives and long-departed ancestors into a source of migration capital (Durand & Massey, 2010). Among the dual nationality holders, we found those who declared that they wanted a change of

scene. (iii) Current family and partners are also crucial to making a decision to migrate. Even though love was only mentioned as the direct reason for migration in three cases, it was of relevance when choosing a specific city, and certainly personal contacts in general make interviewees' labour/social incorporation in Spain smoother. (iv) Finally, economic questions do not represent a rationale for migration to Spain. Migration was motivated by work in only five cases (out of 24). Even then, the choice of Spain seems to be related to immaterial factors (e.g. lifestyle), rather than business and career prospects.

PATHS INTO SKILLED WORK IN SPAIN: NO DIRECT LINE

As stated above, all the interviewees were qualified workers in their countries of origin (and they were in a skilled job at the time of the interview). However, we can observe from the information collected in the interviews that de-skilling processes have come into play in their time spent in Spanish labour markets. Despite the variety of reasons for migration, the interviewees' work paths can be narrowed down to three groups. The first group primarily migrated to study and then decided to stay in Spain. The second comprises skilled workers who entered the Spanish labour market through low-skilled jobs and, in most cases, chose to study to fully incorporate themselves as qualified workers, and the final group composed of migrants who were in skilled jobs in both their countries of origin and their destination.

Path 1: Migration for studies and incorporation into skilled jobs in Spain

This group is composed of the nine persons who decided to migrate to pursue studies in Spain. This is a compact group in terms of labour incorporation. They faced similar administrative difficulties when passing from student visas to work permits, due to strict criteria for obtaining a work permit from a previous student status. Mercedes is a very explicit example of this:

In order to get a work permit via settlement [*arraigo*], I needed to be living in the country for three years. I spent one and a half years studying for the Master's and a further year of internship. At that time, a law was passed to stop companies from contracting non-EU residents in internships outside their period of studies. I could only be paid bonuses and perks, like meal vouchers. Finally, I decided to enrol myself in an online Master's programme which was purely instrumental, so my employer could hire me again as an intern, in order to complete the three years.

(Mercedes-38-Bogotá-Colombian- manager in strategic design)

The case of Victoria, a 41-year-old Colombian national, is even more dramatic, because she actually lost her residence permit. She finished her PhD and decided to move to Brazil for a postdoc position which did not turn out to be satisfactory. Once back in Spain, her student permit had already expired. In order to regain legal residence, Victoria had to go into domestic work, for which work permits are issued. Finally, she could re-enter the university as an assistant researcher before finally leaving academia and working for the private sector. At her interview, she said that she had applied for Spanish nationality.

Another type of (perhaps subtler) stress came from the fact that the interviewees had already worked in their countries of origin (and, in most cases, in positions of responsibility), and they had to enter the Spanish labour markets from the bottom in their respective professions. Micaela expressed her frustration as follows:

When I was doing the Master's degree, I started as an intern, from scratch, even though I was 27 years old and I had ample experience as a lawyer in Venezuela. That was the kind of position I had

access to because I had no direct experience in a human resources department. But I possessed a certain level of seniority as a lawyer and work experience, life experience, whatever you want to call it, I wasn't a recent graduate. I turned out to be very subordinate, even if I had more knowledge and experience than the people I was working with.

(Micaela-32-Trujillo state-Venezuelan-Human Resources manager)

Path 2: Periods of underemployment and unemployment and extended education-work transitions

Unlike the previous examples, the five interviewees identified in this type of path experienced temporary de-skilling (with occasional spells of unemployment) during their labour incorporation in Spain. In order to overcome a situation of underemployment and unemployment, four out of the five decided to pursue a post-graduate course in Spain. This had not been their intention before migration, since they expected to incorporate themselves smoothly into the host labour market. This was the case for Daniela, a Colombian national who decided to follow her husband:

My husband got a fellowship to do his PhD in Barcelona. Two months later, I joined him, in April 2015. Once in the country, I would decide what to do, I thought at that time. But it was very hard to get a decent job. I even cleaned houses, worked as a waitress, everything (...) So, I made up my mind to do an MA in risk management and insurance in Madrid, which in fact was related to what I did in Colombia. I ended the course in July 2018 and after months of a very tiring search I got a qualified job in a transnational company in January 2019, almost four years after arriving in Spain.

(Daniela-39-Bogotá-Colombian-actuarial technician)

Similarly, Laura, a Venezuelan national who also possesses an Italian passport, decided to migrate to Spain because she felt that the political situation in her home country was unbearable (plus her sister and brother-in-law were already living in Barcelona). In order to obtain a suitable job, Laura took a Master's degree:

I was told that I had to change my way of thinking, and my first job in Spain could be of something unrelated to previous experience. I was an experienced lawyer in Venezuela. It was very frustrating to notice that employers were not interested either in studies or in work experience outside Spain. I worked in some uninteresting low-skilled jobs, as an insurance seller and shop assistant. This is the reason why I decided to pursue post-graduate studies. (...) I did a one-year postgraduate course in compliance. Several friends who also are lawyers from Venezuela told me that this was a sound option to get a good job in Spain.

(Laura-32-Caracas-Venezuelan/Italian-data analyst)

"Employers are not interested either in studies or in work experience outside Spain". This opinion was fully shared by Ricardo, a 34 Venezuelan national, who had an even more troublesome labour incorporation experience in Spain. He worked for several call centres in different collection companies before he could get access to a skilled job in human resources after five years. The evidence suggests that the occupational status of these immigrants in the Spanish labour market was, at least in the beginning, substantially worse than in their countries of origin. For several years, they observed a severe loss of occupational status, due to the combined effect of the intense initial downgrading they experienced on entering the Spanish labour market and their very slow occupational progress during their stay in Spain (see also Simón et al., 2014).

Path 3: Real skilled migration

This labour path was represented by 10 interviewees who had a smooth labour incorporation into the Spanish labour market in skilled jobs that were similar to those that they had had in their countries of origin. With one exception, however, the occupational position gained in Spain was not superior to the immediately previous one – that is, the occupational move was horizontal. Here, we found very specialized technical/managerial jobs in insurance, business intelligence and digital services. As regards the reasons for migration, this was a heterogeneous group: out of ten interviewees, only half declared that they migrated to Spain for work reasons (while another three wanted a change in their lives, one moved for love and one for political reasons). Also, unlike the previous group, there were no problems of recognition of qualifications and/or work experience. Vítor is a good example of this. He is a 36-year-old Brazilian who reclaimed the Italian nationality of a grandparent to move to Europe. He was not worried about his professional future since business intelligence is in great demand worldwide. In his interview, he was also very clear about the fact that, in his specific labour niche, experience is more highly valued than formal qualifications. In his own words:

I've got a degree in systems technology, systems analysis. I do not have a Master's degree or something similar. In my job a technical specialization is more relevant. In fact, I've done many certifications, technical courses, but not a formal Master's at a university. Experience is what really matters in our world.

(Vítor-36-São Paulo state-Brazilian/Italian-IT technician)

In this group, we also found truly international career paths, as in the case of Salomón, a 36-year-old Mexican, who worked in the United States for three years before Spain, and had the chance of choosing where to live in Europe since he had a “European” position in a transnational IT company. Similarly, Ramiro, a Mexican senior programme manager, also presented a very international career path. He worked for a Spanish transnational in Mexico City, which sent him as an expatriate to London for two years to co-ordinate several projects. Through his previous contacts in England, Ramiro returned to London as an employee for a Spanish bank and, finally, he moved to the transnational headquarters of the same bank in Madrid, where he had been living for two years at the time of the interview. He was thinking of staying for the next five years (including plans for applying for Spanish nationality and buying a house), but Ramiro would be prepared to move again within Europe if a solid job offer arose.

This third labour path is substantially different from the previous two. Here, qualifications and experience were not questioned. With one exception, neither was documentation an issue. This is because the interviewees were dual nationality holders and a relative of an EU national or, if this was not the case, their companies hired specialized consultancy companies to help obtain a highly skilled work permit for them. The profile of this third group is in line with the literature on skilled migration, which suggests that contemporary skilled migration flows are nowadays dominated by the worldwide search for workers, whereas 30 years ago, they were governed by an excess supply of workers (Khadria, 2009; Kuptsch & Pang, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

Latin American immigrants into Spain rapidly grew from late 1990s to the 2008 economic crisis outbreak because of the high demand of unskilled workers in labour-intensive sectors (mainly construction and domestic service) in the country (Hierro, 2016; Ruesga et al., 2010). Even though these migration flows from Latin America into Spain have long been discussed in the literature (e.g. Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2017; Suárez-Grimalt, 2017), the specific skilled in-flow has rarely been analysed, with some exceptions (e.g. Bradatan & Kolloju, 2015; Castillo Crasto & Reguant Álvarez, 2017). This article thus throws light on an overlooked aspect of skilled migration from Latin

America, which until now has been studied with regard to flows from the region to the United States, generally seen from a brain drain perspective (e.g. Lozano & Gandini, 2011; Pellegrino, 2001). Based on in-depth interviews with 24 Latin American immigrants, the article has explored reasons for migration into Spain, showing that the interviewees migrated for a great variety of reasons, not necessarily for work. Subsequently, the paper has analysed the interviewees' labour incorporation in Spain and, in doing so, it has defined three paths into skilled work in Spain. In this respect, the skilled Latin American interviewees living in Spain presented a considerable diversity of personal experiences as regards decisions to migrate and career paths. They suggest a more complex personal landscape than those depicted in the literature.

Out of the three analysed labour incorporation paths, the so-called "real skilled migration" group best reflects the assumptions found in the expatriate literature, because all ten of these interviewees moved from one skilled job in their country of origin to another in Spain. They did not experience any problems with employers failing to recognize their foreign qualifications and experience. Although they had a relatively smooth incorporation into Spanish labour markets, there was no real upward occupational mobility, as suggested by the literature on skilled migration within large corporations (Iredale, 2001; Millar & Salt, 2008). Even if many of them enjoy company bonuses similar to expatriates, their migration was a horizontal movement, as they undertook professional tasks in Spain similar to those that they used to undertake in their countries of origin. Furthermore, for nine out of these ten interviewees, migration into Spain did not represent a movement within a corporation, their work contract was under Spanish regulations, and the country was chosen for specific personal reasons (e.g. weather, language and cultural affinities) and the desire to live in Spain and have an experience living abroad (see also Anthias, 2012; Meier, 2015). In any case, our fieldwork suggests the existence of labour niches available to foreign skilled workers, especially in the fields of insurance, banking and digital services. This is the case despite an oversupply of certain qualifications in the Spanish labour market and relatively high unemployment (Landolt & Thieme, 2018).

On the other hand, human capital hardly explains this migration into Spain since it is not associated with upward career movement, even though wages might be higher than in the countries of origin. Furthermore, at least on first arrival in Spain, a mismatch was also observed between education and labour market outcomes for the interviewees from paths 1 and 2, for some of whom migration even represented a break in their career (implying, in some cases, a temporary de-skilling process). There is certainly no basis here for the assumption that qualified workers move in search of higher wages and career progression, in order to maximize their human capital investments (Chiswick, 2011; Fratesi, 2014). Latin American qualifications and experience are only partially recognized in the Spanish labour market (see also Eich-Kroh, 2013). Indeed, for many of the interviewed Latin Americans, a period of formal education in Spain was required to enter the host labour market. To be specific, 13 out of 24 took a course in a Spanish university prior to their employment. There were various rationales for this step: nine interviewees specifically went to Spain to pursue their studies, and four more decided to take a Master's course after facing difficulties in getting skilled work. Over time, however, career advancement can certainly be observed, but only after studies and, in many cases, periods of internship within Spain itself. This career break gave rise to personal conflicts in some interviewees, who complained about the lack of recognition for their work experience prior to coming to Spain. In this respect, the article shows negative aspects of the labour incorporation of skilled workers in Spain that have been substantially unappreciated in the literature.

Finally, our evidence partially corresponds with the literature on middling migrants (e.g. Conradson & Latham, 2005; Wiles, 2008). Certainly, some interviewees came to Spain for studies purposes, and they see migration as a way of improving human and social capital in a context of greater internationalization (Parutis, 2014). However, this education period does not grant automatic access to skilled stable jobs in the host labour market and, in many cases, jobs were not in tune with their education and training. Few others stress their experience as an "a change of live," and narratives are impregnated with positive tones. This usually is more common among those who entered Spanish labour market with a previously arranged skilled job (and eventually with an EU passport or a permit for skilled workers). In any case, at interview, they were adult professionals with many years of experience (and not young graduates in the early stages of their career), and

their migration is generally seen as a permanent movement (and not a stage in their lives). As a matter of fact, regardless of their initial intentions, the interviewees have extended their stay in Spain. Our results suggest that the immigrants' trajectories cannot be understood solely in relation to economic opportunities but must also be seen through the lenses of social relationships and individual life cycles. All this helps to expand previous assumptions about middling migrants, in the sense that previous literature tends to focus on early stages in immigrants' lives and lacks a longitudinal approach. In this regard, the mapping of three contrasting paths into skilled work in Spain highlights the complexities about transitions between middling migration and permanent migration among skilled workers.

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PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

ENDNOTE

1. Skilled migration is far from being homogeneous, and the concept itself is arguable. For instance, Meier (2015) reckons that the term "skilled migrant" is incorrect, since not all highly skilled migrants can secure a professional position commensurate with their qualifications. Generally, however, the literature agrees that migrants are qualified when they possess a higher education diploma (Eich-Krohm, 2013).

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