

# Using the experiences of skilled migrants to reflect on continuing education policies for workforce and sustainable development

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## ABSTRACT

*Many countries emphasise skills shortages as the demand driver of migration policy. In this article experiences of skilled migration in Australia are analysed, drawing on the capability approach and the concept of adaptive preferences. Findings from interviews with skilled migrants illustrate how skilled migrants are encouraged to enter Australia but the skills they bring may not be recognized by employers and they are not deemed to be an education priority target group. The migrants have to engage in different adaptations to fulfill their aspirations for a good life in Australia. Some migrants hold on to their initial aspiration for high skilled work and engage in strategies that help to re-position themselves and gradually pursue opportunities in their preferred areas of employment. Others adapt by downgrading their aspirations; they often find themselves on new trajectories that may limit their opportunities. Still the skilled migrants display considerable navigational capacities in negotiating the difficulties of transnational mobility. The analysis contributes to rethinking the links between education, work and the economy.*

**Keywords:** *Capability – Migration – VET - Adaptive Preferences*

## **Una riflessione sulle politiche di formazione continua per i lavoratori e lo sviluppo sostenibile attraverso le esperienze dei migranti qualificati**

*Molti paesi sottolineano la carenza di competenze professionali specifiche, come ciò che motiva politiche immigratorie. In questo articolo si analizzano le esperienze di migrazione qualificata in Australia, alla luce dell'approccio delle capacità e della nozione di preferenze adattive. L'analisi di interviste con migranti qualificati mostra come questi siano incoraggiati ad entrare in Australia, ma come le loro competenze non possano essere riconosciute dai datori di lavoro e non siano considerati un target prioritario per la formazione. I migranti devono impegnarsi in una serie di processi di adattamento per soddisfare le proprie aspirazioni ad una vita migliore in Australia: alcuni di essi mantengono l'aspirazione iniziale ad un lavoro altamente qualificato e si impegnano nella messa in atto di strategie che li aiutino a ri-posizionarsi, e poco a poco riescono a perseguire opportunità di lavoro nell'ambito professionale prescelto. Altri si adattano al nuovo contesto di vita abbassando le proprie aspirazioni, e*

*si trovano spesso ad intraprendere nuove traiettorie che di fatto ne limitano le opportunità. In ogni caso, i migranti qualificati mostrano notevoli capacità di far fronte alle difficoltà legate alla mobilità transnazionale. Nel suo insieme, l'analisi presentata contribuisce al ripensamento dei legami tra istruzione, lavoro ed economia.*

**Parole chiave:** *Capacità – Migrazione - Istruzione e formazione professionale - Preferenze adattive*

## Introduction

This article contributes to rethinking the links between education, work and the economy through analysing experiences of skilled migration. Whilst the focus of education and training policies in many countries has been on increasing the participation in learning among existing populations (Farrell & Fenwick, 2007), some countries, such as Australia, have also sought to expand their skilled workforce to solve skill shortages by developing policies that prioritise inward migration (COAG, 2011). Skilled migrants and their families are granted entry to Australia on the basis of the prime applicant's tertiary qualifications, resulting in migrants being typically more qualified than the resident born population (ABS, 2012). Yet, entry visa conditions do not necessarily include a job offer. Even if migrants (who are known in policy as primary migrants) enter through visa routes that are dependent on a prior job offer, often, they have partners (who are designated in policy as secondary migrants), who may struggle to find work appropriate to their qualifications and experience; their skills become underutilised (Webb, 2015). Paradoxically, a survey of recent arrivals reports that migrants feel socially included in Australia (Markus, 2014). This article explores the conundrum on the one hand, of migrants' skill underutilisation, and on the other hand, of their satisfaction with life in Australia. Drawing on qualitative empirical research on the partners of skilled migrants, the article seeks to understand how skilled migrants adapt to life outside the main capital cities in regional and rural Australia, where national and state policies have identified that the aim of the migration programme is to contribute to vocational education and training for the economy: to 'fill gaps in the labour market' (Phillips & Spinks, 2012, p. 16).

Migration, increasingly of those with skills, continues to grow world-wide, prompted by many factors in both the sending and the receiving countries (OECD, 2013; Castles & Miller, 2009). Yet, migration, especially from the Global South and South East Asia, is not without difficulties. Globally, the effects of unemployment are experienced unevenly amongst migrant groups, with those from Latin America and North Africa particularly badly affected (OECD, 2013). Quantitative research, in Canada and Australia, has documented the deskilling and skill underutilisation of immigrant professionals, particularly if they are people of colour or visible migrants, from countries where English is not the main language (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Li, 2001; Reitz, 2001). In the Australian context, policy texts such as *Building Australia's Future Workforce* (COAG, 2011) have identified inward migration as a strategy to complement continuing education and training policies to meet skill shortages. Therefore, paradoxically, skilled migrants are encouraged to enter Australia because they bring much needed qualifications and experiences, but when they are unable to secure suitable employment in these areas of skills shortage, they are not deemed to be an education priority target for recruitment to programmes to ease their progression into employment. Instead, such educational policy presumes that skilled migrants' pre-existing qualification levels will ensure their readiness for

employment and social inclusion into the host society (COAG, 2011). Consequently, when some skilled migrants experience difficulties in having their prior qualifications and experience recognised for employment they receive no public funding support to re-qualify or undertake bridging programmes to prepare for employment in Australia.

The article is in three parts. The first part sets out the conceptual framework, which has been used to research and understand skilled migrants' agency and migration trajectories. The concept of navigational capacities and the capability approach, particularly the concept of adaptive preferences, are discussed and explored for their potential to understand the different experiences of skilled migrants. The second part of the paper introduces the empirical research and discusses the research design and data drawn on for the article. The third section applies the capability approach, particularly the concept of adaptive preferences to analyse and discuss findings that illustrate the different forms of agency skilled migrants display in navigating new contexts. Finally, the article concludes by identifying implications for re-thinking the education policy logic of building the future workforce through increasing skills through migration.

### **Learning to navigate new contexts**

Arguably, skilled migrants are at the forefront in learning to navigate new contexts. International migration is a central feature of globalisation. Globalising social and economic processes amplify cross border flows of people, goods and services and the rise in transnational social networks (Castles & Miller 2009). Migratory flows, particularly from poorer to richer countries have shown no sign of declining, despite the global financial crisis in 2009 and pressures in some countries to increasingly restrict inward migration (Tilly, 2011). Therefore, a focus on skilled migrants' agency and transitions to jobs in their new host country should provide an intrinsic case to help understand the relationship between education, skills, mobility and the policy logic of learning and increasing skills for the economy. In addition, since geographic and social mobility are increasingly understood to be key factors in the continued reproduction of inequality amongst people (Bauman 2001; Elliott & Urry 2010; Urry 2007), it is important to understand how people become mobile and the consequences of mobility.

Skilled migrants who become mobile and flexible workers often with multiple careers are archetypes of those whose life trajectory illustrates the globalising influence of changing labour market demands and policy exhortations to take greater responsibility for learning and work (Crowther, 2004, Fejes, 2005; Martin, 2003). Indeed, Pessar and Mahlar (2003) drawing on Appadurai (1990) argue that transnational migrants engage in considerable planning and strategizing indicating that cognitive processes, such as initiative and imagination, need to be recognized within social agency. But, arguably, skilled migrants' social and geographic mobility in the pursuit of a good life demonstrate that the discourse of choice of where to live, work and learn are connected to market related opportunities and structures which can produce restrictions such as 'ambivalence, confusion, doubt, fear, failure anxiety and so on' more than freedom (Bansel, 2007, p. 284). Understanding choice and individual responsibility for life choices – lifelong learning, work and location – not as specific rational individual acts, but as discursively constructed practices enmeshed within multiple social relational practices of other people and the organization structures they affect, allows for recognising unintended policy consequences (Webb, 2013). Sometimes, these consequences are lived by the individual as a failure of the self (Davies & Bansel, 2005). Appadurai (2004) locates these difficulties with the

discourse of individual responsibility and choice in the unequal positioning of individuals in relation to the resources (economic, social and cultural knowledge experiences and means) needed to aspire to navigate mobilities. Appadurai (2004) suggests that the capacity for aspiration is one that is unequally distributed and this impacts on people's navigational capacities:

The capacity to aspire is [...] a navigational capacity. The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbours. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity [...] have a more brittle horizon of aspirations.

(Appadurai, 2004, p.,69)

The question arises, how do skilled migrants develop the capacity to aspire and navigate their futures in the transition to life in Australia? Previously, I have used a Bourdieusian framework to understand how skilled migrants navigate migration and experience migration trajectories as processes of deskilling and downward mobility based on an analysis that presumes a hierarchy of valued work (Webb, 2015). However, such an analysis has generated new questions and puzzles because in spite of some apparently negative outcomes of migration, skilled migrants largely view migration positively. For example, the Recent Arrivals Survey of skilled and highly educated migrants who arrived in Australia between 1990 and 2010 found that 81% were satisfied with their new life, even though 4 out of 10 immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds reported relatively high levels of discrimination on the basis of skin colour, ethnic origin or region (Markus, 2014). To understand these complex and apparently ambiguous perceptions of skilled migrants a capability perspective has been drawn on to reanalyse data on skilled migration. A capability approach has been identified as valuable for understanding migrants' ambiguous perceptions towards deskilling on the one hand, and enjoying a good life on the other hand. This is because a capability approach regards multiple realisations of a good life as more important than a hierarchical ordering of the value of different resources and inequalities (which would be more associated with a Bourdieusian approach). For example, Watts (2013) has argued that a capability framework is more able to recognise different forms of adaptation in contrast to other frameworks that generate over simplified accounts of people's actions by constructing measures that can easily be ordered and counted:

Capability analyses are complicated by the framework's insistence on the multiple realisability of capabilities. Sociological frameworks such as Bourdieusian analyses of the production and reproduction of capital-based inequalities—as well as Boudon's positional theory, Foucault's disciplining of knowledge, and Giddens' structuration—provide a relatively easy means of identifying adaptations because of their hierarchical structures that establish easily countable rankings.

(Watts, 2013, p. 518)

The article will consider the extent to which the capability approach pioneered by Amartya Sen (1999) in the context of welfare economics and developed significantly further by Martha Nussbaum (2000) may be a helpful alternative for understanding people's navigational capacities and diverse adaptations to adversity. At its core the capability approach focuses on what people are effectively able to do, and to be, in other words what they are capable of. It is concerned with individuals' ability to take part in actions and activities that have value and meaning to them rather than presuming that

actions are solely directed towards utilitarian values (happiness, desire, income, expenditure, consumption or basic needs). Applying the framework to public policy, Nussbaum (2000) identifies a list of basic capabilities relevant to all people, which she argues, every responsible government should provide. These include life, health, freedom to move, ability to affiliate and engage in various forms of social interactions and ability to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life. Under this approach restricting or denying people their basic capabilities constitutes disadvantage. Therefore the capabilities approach is a powerful antidote to the neo-liberal logic of many education policies that insist disadvantages should be tackled solely by increasing people's skills through formal qualifications.

Instead, the capabilities approach focuses on the broader role of education (or learning) in enabling people to make choices. Within the capabilities framework, education is valued for its all round impact on learners' capabilities – on all their “beings” (understandings of the self and their situation) and “doings” (agentic activities). This is in contrast to valuing learners' participation in education and training solely for its impact on their human capital, their employment, employability and effects on productivity. Additionally the capabilities approach provides a normative framework for researchers, policy makers and practitioners to evaluate and identify individuals' well-being and the contexts in which they function and live their lives. Put more simply, the framework enables one to map the constraints people experience at the individual level, such as poverty and inequality, and the broader context through which these constraints are mediated by social, educational and welfare policies and institutional practices. However, some argue that the approach may be somewhat limited in understanding and specifying the social arrangements and institutional practices that might restrict people's opportunities (Leßmann, 2009; Robeyns, 2006).

A number of writers have explored the capabilities framework in relation to education and the potential to create individual capabilities for people to live a decent life (Bridges, 2006; Robeyns, 2006; Walker, 2008). Drawing on Sen's idea that education enables critical reflection about the self and people's lives, these writers use of the capabilities approach is premised on a theory of change. Importantly, this use of the capabilities approach to understand people's learning and agency is open-ended about what changes people might value and how people might use education to develop the freedom to live a decent life. For example, Watts (2009) draws on the capabilities approach to argue that the rejection of university education by young working class men who are pursuing vocational qualifications for a trade should be understood as an adaptive preference to choose an alternative career which they value. It should not be considered a working class rationalisation of a failure to access university education based on a deficit view of the young men lacking the social and cultural capital to gain entry to a university. For Watts (2009), the young men's choice is seen as positive rather than negative; it is not the result of a capability deprivation or a rationalisation of a failed transition.

More recently, Watts (2013) has argued that just as the capability approach is helpful for understanding different ways, other than economic, of realising well-being, so there are different adaptive preferences, which may affect the ways people take up opportunities. Watts (2013) argues that recognising different adaptive preferences provide insights into whether or not people's options (or freedoms) are being closed down or opened up. For example, when adaptive preferences involve downgrading inaccessible options and upgrading accessible ones, they become a rationalisation for accepting reduced circumstances, they close down options (and freedoms), which can lead people to become broken and resigned to disadvantage, becoming what Sen referred to as the 'usual underdogs'.

In contrast, adaptive preferences based on misperceptions or on the temporary downgrading of inaccessible options are not so limiting of individual freedom. This is because misperceptions or the downgrading of options can be corrected if circumstances change and the original preference becomes attainable. Adaptive preferences involving misperceptions or the temporary downgrading of inaccessible options therefore have the potential to provide greater substantive freedom for the individual to choose to lead a life they value and have reasons to value. Watts (2013) argues that the distinctions between these different understandings of adaptive preferences are important because they encourage an appreciation of the subtle differences between aspirations and adaptations and the ways that these align with the expectations of the policy logic of using education for personal economic gain. He says:

...it allows a conceptual release of the tensions between aspirations and adaptation that may otherwise force capability assessments into the orthodoxy of the field of education, thus derogating the realisation of capabilities that do not articulate with the logic of the field (in short, those realisations of educational capabilities that generate less cultural capital).

(Watts, 2013, p. 517)

Watts (2013) contribution shows that the first form of adaptive preference (or rationalisation of reduced circumstances) leaves people broken and resigned to disadvantage, whereas the second form of adaptive preference enables people the freedom to realise their well-being through a diversity of achievements, not just those outcomes valued by the logic of education for the economy. Arguably, using these two different understandings of adaptive preferences from the capabilities approach can offer a more nuanced understanding of how skilled migrants adapt to the opportunities and blockages they encounter to realising a good life in the chosen host country.

Furthermore, development of these capabilities is at the heart of education policies for sustainability. For example, the *Education for a Sustainable Future* policy aimed at Australian schools recognises the importance of learning to adapt to new contexts, diverse cultures and life choices (DE 2010). However, in the context of post compulsory education in Australia, the *Green Skills Agreement* between the Australian Government and the States and Territories (DEEWR 2009) that set out how the Vocational Education and Training sector (VET) can contribute to building the skills needed for sustainability among individuals, businesses and communities, VET is still pervaded by the logic of training for growth. As Anderson (2003) has argued VET in Australia is pervaded by the logic of 'productivism' (learning the skills for the jobs that currently exist), rather than pedagogy to enable people to build the capacities to adapt to new contexts and industrial re-structuring. It is in this context that skilled migrants have been entering Australia in increasing numbers since the shift in 1996 to expand migration to meet internal skill shortages as identified on the 'skilled occupation list' (DIBP, 2013; Iredale, 2005). Consequently the research underpinning this article seeks to explore the understanding of the navigational capacities used by skilled migrants in managing their migration trajectories. The analysis also identifies some challenges for the role of vocational education and lifelong learning in this process. I now turn to the empirical work to discuss this issue.

### Methods, concepts and data sources

Drawing on qualitative empirical research conducted in a regional centre in a food bowl area of

Australia<sup>1</sup>, this paper applies a capability approach to understand how skilled migrants, particularly their partners, adapt to the difficulties they encounter in securing suitable employment in regional labour markets and in obtaining recognition of their pre-migration qualifications, skills and experiences for employment in roles for the tertiary educated. The region in the State of Victoria in Australia was selected to reflect a critical case of an area that has seen expanding numbers of migrants settle. The area is not experiencing the boom in employment associated with the mining and extraction industries or lifestyle change mobilities. Instead, it is a typical inland city that expanded significantly during manufacturing developments in the 1970s, but subsequently is growing at slower rates than other cities in Australia (Daley & Lancey, 2011). Yet arguably, skilled migrants are essential to maintaining the infrastructure of these inland cities, such as the hospitals and other health care services as the population ages as a consequence of the movement of young people to metropolitan areas. Therefore, this site forms a critical case to examine the migration, education and employment policy logic since it is a site where one would expect the logic to be working well, and if it is not, (that is skilled migrants do not transition easily to skilled employment), the policy logic will need rethinking (Flyvbjerg, 2007).

The article draws on data collected in 2011-2012 through focus groups and individual interviews with 24 migrant women and 12 migrant men, who identified themselves as partners of tertiary educated skilled migrants and reflected the range of recently arrived overseas born people in the selected region. Alongside the data collected from migrants, interviews with 35 members from 20 different employers and organisations who worked with skilled migrants in a variety of capacities, including government, employer and service organisations, voluntary groups and education and training institutions in the region were undertaken. Using the conceptual frame of capabilities and adaptive preferences as set out by Watts (2013), thematic analysis identified that partner migrants displayed three types of adaptations. In what follows, the article uses three exemplar cases taken from this larger data set to discuss the strategies that migrants follow in managing the transition to employment. Through this focus on adaptive preferences the analysis seeks to understand the ambiguous problem of how it is that migrants who experience downward social mobility and de-skilling, can also claim to feel satisfied with life in regional Australia.

### **Re-thinking the logic of education, work and the economy**

The discussion of migrants' experiences of settling in Australia raises questions about the policy assumption that connects the need for migration of those with high skills and education solely to resolve skill shortages and create sustainable development. The logic underpinning the policy construct is that tertiary education will have individual and wider social and economic benefits. Yet the discussion that follows will show that skilled migrants do not easily 'fill gaps in the labour market where they currently exist' (Phillips & Spinks 2012, p. 16). Instead, migrants often experienced many difficulties in securing a job, and had to adapt their thinking,

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<sup>1</sup> The research conducted in 2011-2012 was funded by NCVET, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research an Australian government funded agency that funds research on the tertiary sector in Australia.

Our understanding was because as skilled migrants, it will be easier to get a job. But that was not the right thinking.

[Archana, female, Indian, secondary migrant]

In order to explore how migrants adapted their preferences and thinking about the logic of migration, education and work, three exemplar migration trajectories will be discussed. These different trajectories illustrate the extent to which different forms of adaptive preferences have been followed and offer migrants the freedom to live the life they have reason to value, that is, enable migrants to realise their well-being and feel satisfied with life in Australia. The focus for the discussion will be on those skilled migrants in the sample who entered Australia without securing a job prior to migration. A number of visa categories permit this entry route including: the general skilled migration programme (whereby entry is permitted solely on the basis of skills and qualifications listed on the skilled occupation list and no job is needed for entry for any of the applicants in a household); family migrants, that is, other dependents, including spouses accompanying primary applicants who have secured a job through employer sponsored routes (both as permanent and temporary migrants); and international students who have completed tertiary study in Australia, fulfilled specific residency requirements and have qualifications identified on the skilled occupation list (SOL)<sup>2</sup>. As argued earlier, securing employment at the level commensurate with the tertiary qualification held and previous employment experience prior to migration is often fraught and results in deskilling and downward migration in the Australian context (see Webb, 2015). Nevertheless when asked about their views on social inclusion, even those who were still struggling to gain jobs at levels related to their qualifications said that they felt included on a cultural and social level in life in regional Australia, thus supporting the survey of recent arrivals conducted by Markus (2014).

The people of [town] I think are wonderful and it's so multicultural. I think the children can grow up seeing the people from every part of the world.

[Roshan, female, Indian, secondary migrant]

For me social inclusion is I'm Australian, you are Australian, so I'm not different than you.

[Antoinette, female, Ivory Coast, primary migrant]

Ultimately you are socially included if you feel home again. It's having a network where you live that supports you.

[Valentina, female, Swiss, partner visa]

These perceptions of social inclusion by migrants from diverse countries and cultures suggests that they have reason to value things other than employment and they have adapted their preferences to realise a good life in Australia. The discussion will now consider three forms of adaptations and identify differences between migrants in how these adaptations provided the freedoms or navigational capacities to enable the achievement of a good life.

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<sup>2</sup> SOL refers to the Skilled Occupation List designed to identify the skills accepted for permanent or temporary migration to Australia <http://www.immi.gov.au/work/pages/skilled-occupations-lists/skilled-occupations-lists.aspx>, accessed 01/11/14.

### Adaptation as a misperception that can be corrected

This first example of adaptation draws on Watts' (2013) idea of misperception of the achievability of an initial preference. In this case, when the preference for a professional skilled job on entering Australia is perceived to be out of reach, skilled migrants misperceive the problem to be that their skills, knowledge and experiences need to be better aligned to the Australian context. Migrants do not regard the goal (achieving skilled employment) as inappropriate for their skills, rather they adapt their thinking about how to gain these types of jobs. In other words, the initial preference is left intact and migrants take responsibility for making themselves more worthy of being employed in a high skilled role, which they hope to acquire once their circumstances change. Watts (2013) argues that this type of adaptive preference, as a form of misperception, provides the greatest freedom to achieve well-being when the misperception can be corrected.

In the context of skilled migration there were a number of examples of migrants who entered Australia without a job and faced many hurdles in finding professional level employment. Skilled migrants' qualifications were not always recognised and their overseas experience was widely discounted. Gaining work at a high skill level depended on obtaining a local reference. Selection processes in areas without skills shortages were seen to favour local (non-migrant) residents. Typically, migrants spoke of application processes that were formalised, yet not anonymised. Such processes prioritised localised cultural knowledge and therefore worked to exclude new migrants, who prior to migration may have been more used to informal family and social network methods of job seeking and recruitment. These practices worked powerfully against social inclusion and impacted greatly on female partner migrants, especially those from culturally and linguistically different (CALD) backgrounds.

However, drawing on Watts' (2013) notion of misperception of preference, some migrants, when faced with these difficulties, formed a false belief about the rightfulness of Australians in not accepting overseas experiences, qualifications or references as relevant.

When I went around to the job agencies to find a job they all told me well there's nothing here for you, you can do reception work but that's about it and I thought oh my God I'm not going to go back to that level. But then I sort of just convinced myself I just had to get that first job to get a reference so I did accounts payable for half a year and I got a good reference and from that then I got my current job.

[Valentina, female, Swiss, partner visa]

Valentina appears to accept the misperception that there's nothing in Australia for her whilst her experience and qualifications are not understood by employers, even though she is qualified to Masters level in Economics and Business Administration in Denmark, speaks 4 languages fluently and 3 others a little and had previously worked as an insurance claims assessor. Nevertheless, she maintains the general belief that she could do better than 'reception work' and maintained her aspiration and preference for professional level work. Valentina's way of navigating this tension between her aspiration and her opportunity was to accept the employment gatekeepers' misperceptions of her qualifications and experiences, but find ways of adapting her experiences to change her circumstances. This example also reflected the way several other Anglo-European migrants (both female and male) dealt with the blockage to employment. Valentina convinced herself she had to get any job in Australia in order to get a reference. With a good reference from this first job in accounts, she gained the

freedom to apply for employment with a public sector employer running large infrastructure projects for the region. Following a promotion within this larger organisation, she is now in a senior role using her graduate expertise providing professional leadership in the area of governance risk and compliance. Clearly, this area of employment is slightly different to the area of business where she had previous experience, but Valentina's adaptive preference of misperception did not undermine her general belief in the value of tertiary education for professional level employment. She is now pursuing a new career by requalifying at university level for a graduate diploma in Corporate Governance, which will provide entry to the professional body for Chartered Secretaries in Australia.

In terms of adaptive preferences and the freedoms these close down or open up, Valentina's experience supports Watt's (2013) argument that although she had misperceived the external situation when choosing to migrate, that is, that her skills and qualifications are not relevant to the Australian context, she retains her belief in the value of herself and in tertiary education for high skilled employment. In accepting the misperception, she takes lower level work in order to obtain a good reference to demonstrate her worth. Ultimately, her belief in herself and the role of tertiary education for employment provides the freedom to enable her to sustain her aspirations to navigate her way through different jobs so that as circumstances change, employers recognise her value and she obtains a level of employment where now she is more fulfilled.

#### **Adaptation by downgrading the inaccessible until circumstances change**

The next example of adaption is similar except that rather than regarding the inaccessible as out of reach because of a misperception of the value of the migrants' qualification, the migrant downgrades the inaccessible until circumstances can be changed. Watts (2013) argues that this adaptive preference whereby the inaccessible is temporary downgraded, still leaves a person with the freedom to obtain the valued life when circumstances change because the original preference or aspiration has not been devalued.

Moncey, a partner migrant from India whose wife, a nurse, entered Australia on a temporary employer sponsored visa before obtaining permanent residency, found it difficult to find employment as a qualified social worker.

The initial four or five months it was very difficult for me to find a job because I don't have any Australian experience. Most of the employers won't accept my qualification because I got an international qualification, everyone is saying that you don't have any job experience in Australia you cannot work here.

[Moncey, male, Indian, secondary migrant]

Like Valentina, he accepted a lower level job, as a child support worker, which did not require the skills and knowledge related to his qualification. But his adaptive preference could be seen as a form of downgrading the inaccessible temporarily, rather than a misperception of the relevance his qualifications and experience. He did not give up on the idea of working as a social worker and so pursued a strategy of gaining experience and greater understanding of the broad social/care field in the Australian context to obtain good references. With this strategy he worked his way back to becoming a case manager in a community organisation and now feels that he has obtained the work-life-style he hoped for in Australia:

The actual role of a social worker and a support worker is very different because as a social worker here I have to manage cases and I have to organise everything for a client but as a support worker I just [did] whatever the manager or whatever the top level people are saying, you need to take this client to a shop that's my role and I don't have any self authorisation to apply any of the principals or any of the things on the clients, but anyway after doing that job it lead to my actual job [now as a case manager]. That's why I'm happy with it.

[Moncey, male, Indian, secondary migrant]

Looking back Moncey rationalises the difficulties he had in obtaining professional level work as an example of needing to downgrade the inaccessible until circumstances changed and he had acquired the localised knowledge essential in his field. He says:

[In] the first year... even though I was a qualified worker, I do not know Australian systems, many times I felt that many of my employer, many of the employers did not accept my application but there was a reason behind it. Now I can understand because as a newly arrived person, to work among the community members I don't know about this community, then how can I work among this community. When I'm looking back, now I can understand why they haven't accepted my [qualifications].

[Moncey, male, Indian, secondary migrant]

### **Adaptation by downgrading the inaccessible and upgrading the accessible**

The third example of adaptive preference involves not just the downgrading of the inaccessible but also the switching of preferences to upgrade the accessible. This form of adaptation means that even if the inaccessible become available, it would be judged as not worth making the effort to reach because preferences and aspirations have changed. Watts (2013) argues that this type of adaptive preference is more likely to reduce a person's overall freedom to achieve the valued life than the first two examples because it can lead to resignation and acceptance of the reduced circumstances. Such resignation is typical of the experience of many of the female migrants from non Anglo-European backgrounds, who also had young children and felt their options were constrained by the increased domestic responsibilities they needed to take on in Australia.

Aanchal and her husband entered Australia through the general skilled migration programme because her husband had always wanted to move from India and live somewhere safer. In India they had both worked in professional occupations; Aanchal had a PhD in Bio-organic Chemistry, and had been a university lecturer and had also taught Chemistry to Year 11 and 12 school students. Her husband had been a chemical engineer. But they both struggled to find employment in Australia. Eventually the husband obtained work in a factory as a supply chain manager in the inland city in a job unrelated to his qualifications and prior experience. Aanchal, with children to care for, without family nearby to help and living in a city with limited higher education employment opportunities, found she would need to requalify and travel to another city to gain the qualification for registration for teaching in Australian schools. Consequently, not only did she and her husband downgrade the inaccessible, that is employment that used their previous skills and knowledge, they upgraded the accessible, that is any job available in the locality that provided an income and would fit around domestic caring commitments. For Aanchal, that route to any job was via volunteering.

It is really hard when you don't have an Australian reference. This is what I learnt. If you don't have an Australian reference, you can't get a job. But if you don't get a job, how will you get a reference? And that's how I was introduced to volunteering.

[Aanchal, female, Indian, secondary migrant]

But opting to volunteer, did not come easily, because it did not fit with Aanchal's cultural assumptions, and so in pursuing this route to employment, Aanchal revealed how reduced her freedom to secure the life to which she aspired had become.

And the concept of volunteering doesn't sit very well with most of the migrants. We don't have a concept of working not for money, because the countries, which they come from, the primary thing is to earn a living. Earning is a primary; and normally when you migrate, it's your necessity.

[Aanchal, female, Indian, secondary migrant]

Aanchal had become a multicultural project worker with a local not-for-profit community organisation at the point that she was interviewed. She secured this work through becoming a volunteer, and to prepare herself for a paid vacancy in this field, she attended the local college and a short term local council project to re-skill to obtain a qualification to become a trainer for programmes to embrace and accept cultural diversity. This qualification was at a lower level than her prior qualifications and experiences teaching in schools and universities in India. Therefore, the experience of re-qualifying in Australia through the vocational education and training system was form of de-skilling and preparation for lowered aspirations. In the language of the capabilities approach, she and her husband have adapted by downgrading the inaccessible and upgrading the accessible as the following indicates,

I applied for many jobs. For me, most of them, I never got called, even for an interview. So I had to think about, 'what am I doing wrong when applying for the jobs?' And that's where I learned that the difference of applying for a job here and from my own country... whereas, here, we have to put more effort to sell ourselves, to sell our skills. That's a learning. So you have to sell yourself more. The second thing is adaptability. You have to learn a lot of things. So being flexible and adaptable helps. So if I would have stuck to my core area, I would be jobless even today.

[Aanchal, female, Indian, secondary migrant]

Whilst she is now content with her new area of employment, Aanchal is aware that her husband is still frustrated and feels undervalued, but they have both accepted the outcome of the move to Australia,

We are on the road where we can't turn back. We only have to go forward. So, we'll stick with our decision, but sometimes, we think [about] whether it was a wise decision or not.

[Aanchal, female, Indian, secondary migrant]

However, not all hope has been extinguished by downgrading the inaccessible and upgrading the accessible since Aanchal has voiced the idea of re-qualifying at some point in the future to return to teaching Chemistry in schools in Australia. Whether or not her degree will still have currency by the time she seeks to do this is an open question. She may find her adaptive preferences have closed down more options than the forms of adaptation followed by the other two migrants discussed.

### Conclusions

The policy context that these skilled migrants have experienced aligned skilled migration with education, training and workforce policies for sustainable development. Arguably, the context is illustrative of neoliberal approaches that prioritise the economisation of education and shift social responsibility away from the state to the individual (Rose, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992). Echoing the globalising effects of policies travelling from, for example, the UK and Europe, Australian policy overwhelmingly emphasises skills shortages as the demand driver of migration policy to complement an education and training system designed to be responsive to employers' requirements (Crowther, 2004; Fejes, 2005; Martin, 2003; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Yet, the experiences discussed in this article reveal that the logic of aligning migration with education and training for workforce and sustainable development breaks down, when the skills migrants bring from their pre-migration settings are misperceived and migrants have to engage in different adaptations to fulfill their aspirations for a good life in Australia.

In the absence of systemic government provided services for settlement, including through the tertiary education system, skilled migrants find Australian employers often do not recognise their qualifications and experiences and they have to 'sell' themselves in job applications or adapt their preferences. Gaining relevant experience for Australian workplaces through accepting lower level work to obtain an Australian reference, undertaking voluntary work to demonstrate their worth and / or by re-qualifying through the existing tertiary system often involves de-skilling that channels migrants on a trajectory to alternative and lower level employment. It seems that whilst migration and education policies have been constructed to complement each other, their practices are often disconnected, even though migrant participation in the VET sector to re-qualify for the Australian labour market is high (ABS, 2010). At the same time, research on the VET sector has found that increased competition amongst VET providers for public funding is impacting negatively on the quality of provision and learner opportunities (Toner, 2014). Others claim the sector operates with 'thin' opportunities for learners to voice their concerns about access and equity and the potential for education to transform learners' lives (Angus et al., 2013). Moreover, Anderson (2003) has argued VET in Australia is pervaded by the logic of 'productivism' (learning the skills for the jobs that currently exist), rather than pedagogy to enable people to build the capacities to adapt to new contexts and industrial restructuring. Reflections from the exemplar cases of migrants' adaptive preferences indicate that skilled migrants who enter Australia without a job are being failed by a workforce development policy that assumes migrants will easily fill existing labour shortages and do not need access to further education and training to enable them to adapt to new contexts.

Nevertheless, as this discussion of different types of adaptive preferences has shown, skilled migrants' display considerable navigational capacities in negotiating the difficulties of transnational mobility (Appadurai, 2004). Their routes to employment often rely heavily on informal learning and building networks of support to adapt to new circumstances. When skilled migrants recognise that their pre-migration skills will not easily lead to high skilled employment, rather than abandoning their aspirations, they take responsibility for adapting and translating their skills to the needs of the new labour market. In rethinking how they will adapt, these case study examples illustrate the arguments of Watts (2013) that adaptive preferences have the potential to open up opportunities or close them down. The article has shown that those migrants that hold on to their initial preference and aspiration for high skilled work, and treat the difficulties they encounter when first seeking employment, as a

temporary phase in misperception, are the most likely to engage in work and informal learning strategies that help to re-position themselves to take advantage of opportunities in their preferred areas of employment, when these arise. In contrast, those who adapt their thinking by downgrading their aspirations and changing their preferences, often find themselves on new trajectories that may ultimately confine and limit their opportunities. In selecting these three examples of different migrant trajectories and different adaptive preferences, these cases also reveal that the extent to which opportunities are opened up or closed down are often gendered and culturally differentiated and can lead to segmentation among migrants from different countries and regions of origin.

Yet, on a more positive note, the findings identify many creative ways that skilled migrants, particularly partner migrants, construct sustainable lives post migration. Although they may have to patch together precarious short-term employment, or seek out new pathways to professional employment or self-employment, in the face of the difficulties they experience in having their qualifications and experiences recognized by employers, overwhelmingly, migrants express satisfaction with life in Australia. Their creativity in demonstrating different ways of achieving a good life other than just following the logic of education for the economy, arguably contributes significantly not only to the sustainability of particular key services and industries that some employer sponsored migrants have been recruited to, but more broadly to creating new businesses and housing demands that invigorate the social, economic and cultural life of regional communities (GSCC, 2012). In order to acknowledge the commitment that skilled migrants are making to communities and workplaces in Australia, reflections from these strategies of migrants' who entered Australia without a sponsored job suggest that the 'productivist' logic of education for the economy needs to be rethought. These migrants have demonstrated that rather than living the experience of skill-underutilisation as a personal failure, migrants' adaptive preferences of misperception and temporarily downgrading the inaccessible until circumstances change, whilst holding onto aspirations for a life to value, reveal strategies and capacities for adapting to new contexts. Many educators could usefully learn from these adaptive strategies, if they desire to develop pedagogy to counteract 'productivism' and build learners' capacities for sustainable development.

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