

MOBILE BRAINS AND THE QUESTION OF 'DESKILLING': *High-skilled South Asian migrants in Denmark*

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Abstract

Based on two ethnographic studies on the experiences of high-skilled migrants in Denmark, we argue that it is problematic to presume a simple correlation between 'deskilling' and what is often regarded as low-status jobs. We claim that many of these migrants are, albeit discreetly, actively gaining new skills and knowledge through low-status jobs not related to their qualifications and/or utilising their existing knowledge and skills in their everyday lives. We approach skills as a social construct that differs according to context and under particular historical circumstances, not merely as a neutral, measurable and easily transferable human capital. The article offers critical analysis of simultaneous processes of skilling–deskilling–reskilling–upskilling linked to migration and generates new insights into debates on highly educated migrants in a Nordic context.

Keywords

High-skilled migrants • geographical and social mobility • immigration • ethnography • Denmark

Introduction

As migrants enter a new country, be it for economic, political or educational grounds or due to family reunification, it often contributes to heated debates on the national labour market's ability to accommodate them and to help bridge their path to becoming part of the wider society. At the moment, in many countries around the world, and especially in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries including Denmark, policies favour migrants¹ who possess high-level of academic qualifications and skills. This is partly because of the need for qualified human resources in these countries, partly because migrants are expected to become self-supporting and not a burden to the

state (DEA 2016; EU 2016). In both academic debates and policy documents, this category of migrants is mostly referred to as 'high-skilled', yet there is not necessarily clarity as to what kind of skills the term refers to. In a Danish context, terms such as '*højtuddannede indvandrere*' (highly educated immigrants), '*højtuddannet udenlandsk arbejdskraft*' (highly educated foreign labour) or '*højt kvalificerede udlændinge*' (highly qualified foreigners) are used in policy documents and are by key actors on the Danish labour market, such as the Confederation of Danish Industry,² translated into the English term 'highly skilled immigrants'. While the Danish terms *højtuddannede* and *højt kvalificerede* point to formal education and thus the possession of academic qualifications as a key criteria, the English term 'skills' is much more diffuse and open to interpretation. In this article, we unpack the term 'high-skilled' in the context of recent political initiatives to attract more highly qualified, foreign labour to Denmark, and we thereby contribute to the burgeoning scholarly literature on skills transfer in processes of high-skilled migration.

The relatively privileged social and economic position of high-skilled migrants is, contrary to their less-skilled counterparts, intrinsically linked to the (educational and professional) skills, knowledge and qualifications that enable them to perform a given job. It follows from this that migrants who are not able to find a job corresponding to their high academic and professional qualifications lose the justification for claiming a privileged status based on their skills, knowledge and qualifications. Furthermore, it is often claimed that high-skilled migrants accepting low-skilled jobs that do not correspond with their educational background are likely to lose previously acquired skills and thus devalue their qualifications and waste previous professional experiences. Such a 'deskilling' narrative often features a foreign-born migrant presumed to come from a country regarded as part of the 'Global South' with a university degree. Revolving around a devaluation of migrants' educational credentials and prior work experience, this narrative illustrates and perpetuates existing global inequalities and values attached to skills, knowledge and qualifications in different parts of the world (Bilecen & Van Mol 2017; Brooks & Waters 2011). In turn, it calls into question the notion of 'the global race for talent' (Shachar 2006), which has become a vital dimension of a competitive global market, and thus of current global migration policies.

The Confederation of Danish Industry asserts that Denmark needs high-skilled migrants because they contribute to high productivity levels in Danish industry and help finance the welfare state. According to a recent report (DEA 2016), high-skilled migrants without an accompanying family will, on average, contribute with a net amount of 130,000 DKK (equivalent to approximately 17,500 Euro) annually to public finances for the approximately five and half years that they in average spend in Denmark. High-skilled migrants accompanied by their families contribute a net amount of approximately 220,000 DKK (approximately 30,000 Euro) for the approximately ten years of their stay. However, a large proportion of high-skilled migrants, especially those from countries in Asia and Africa, struggle to find a job matching their level of education with many ending up in low-skilled employment, often in the service sector as housekeepers, cleaning assistants and kitchen workers (Rambøll 2010). This is now manifest in distinct ethnic employment

hierarchies similar to the situation described by Friberg & Midtbøen (2018) in the context of Norway, a country with a parallel immigration and welfare state history to that of Denmark.

Based on our two ethnographic studies among high-skilled South Asian migrants in Denmark, we claim that this tendency is especially evident in the case of the Danish Green Card Scheme (henceforth referred to as GCS), targeting non-EU citizens holding minimum a bachelor's degree. The GCS was introduced in 2007 to boost the pool of high-skilled migrants but was discontinued again in 2016 because of a claimed mismatch between the academic qualifications of the green card holders (from now on GCHs) and the low-skilled work, many ended up performing. Although the GCS in itself did not distinguish on the basis of nationality, an evaluation of the scheme by Rambøll (2010) explicitly identified GCHs from India, Pakistan and African countries as groups that primarily found low-skilled employment. For the majority of these people, the huge financial, social and emotional investments made in migrating, often at the expense of jobs and families in their home country, did not pay off in terms of a high-skilled job. It is noteworthy that the majority of the GCHs, at least those reported in our study, claimed to belong to the middle class in their country of origin and hoped to use high-skilled migration as a means to climb the social hierarchy (cf. Bailey & Mulder 2017). Many, though, were compelled to take up low-skilled job, which they themselves often associated with a low status. However, as illustrated later through empirical cases, this did not necessarily prevent them from utilising previously acquired skills and knowledge or from gaining new skills and knowledge within or beyond their professional domains.

This article claims that it is problematic to presume a simple correlation between 'deskilling' and such low-skilled jobs. In the following, we first review prevailing literature pertaining to deskilling among high-skilled migrants. We then present the article's methodological basis, followed by a discussion that places the issue of high-skilled migration in the context of Danish immigration history and current policies. Drawing on the cases of three high-skilled migrants, the final part of the article sheds light on subjective experiences of such deskilling and migrants' attempts to counter them.

High-skilled migrants and the 'deskilling' debate

The debate on 'deskilling', in both the academic and the political domains, has focused on patterns of occupational change among high-skilled migrants often to low-paying, low-skilled jobs unrelated to their educational and occupational backgrounds. This is reflected in recent reports (EU 2016; Ostling 2013), which point to a persistent flow of high-skilled migrants from countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East to the USA, Canada, UK, Australia and Europe. By now, there is also a growing body of scholarly literature documenting the difficulties many of them face in entering professional fields corresponding to their formal qualifications and skills in the host societies (e.g. Iredale 2001; Raghuram and Kofman 2004). This corresponds with studies conducted among different groups of Eastern European high-skilled migrants in the UK, a country that has

received high-skilled migrants for centuries. These studies point to the multiple factors that either facilitate or hinder the transition into the labour market, stretching from structural barriers and social networks to individual motivations and trajectories (Trevana 2012) as well as to the importance of time in negotiating access to the labour market, which becomes particularly salient in the case of short-term migrants (Pietka, Clark & Canton 2012). The issue of racialisation has been addressed by, among others, Guo (2015) and Bauder (2003), who in the context of Canada, a proclaimed multicultural society, have highlighted that migrants' skills are not only gendered and classed but also racialised and that this is key to the devaluation of their international credentials and prior work experiences. In a Nordic context, the issue of high-skilled migration has so far received limited scholarly attention, which, as we will return to in a later section, is largely related to the particular history of labour and refugee migration into the region. In a Finnish context, though, Eskelä (2013) has problematised the conceptual overlap between student migration and skilled migration pointing to the fact that many international students are (future) skilled workers. Moreover, a recent study on Polish doctors in Sweden by Boström & Öhlander (2012) supports the existing literature by pointing to the challenges of being recognised as full professionals. Studies conducted in Norway (Aure 2013) and Denmark (Liversage 2009) have emphasised the gendered dimensions of this, mainly through a perspective on high-skilled accompanying spouses and their difficulties in getting a foothold on the labour market. Far from representing an exhaustive list of the existing literature on high-skilled migration, the abovementioned studies point to the commonly observed devaluation of skills, knowledge and qualifications among high-skilled migrants and the larger contexts within which this must be explored.

Questioning taken-for-granted notions of skills, we will explore ambiguities regarding what constitutes a skill by its divergent, and often contradictory, usages as a concept in political discourses and as a subject of study in migration research. Influenced by the neoclassical concept of human capital (Attewell 1990), the notion of skills is often defined in terms of concrete and measurable attributes, acquired by an individual through education and training in order to deliver economic value and productivity. This understanding is embedded in the 'brain drain/brain gain/brain exchange' debates (Straubhaar 2000), which dominate much political and public debate regarding high-skilled migrants. In this perspective, skills are seen as human bound and measured in terms of formal qualifications and occupational categories; it implies that they are quantifiable, easily transferable and applicable across borders and contexts. However, such framing neglects complexities and nationally defined knowledge hierarchies used for the recognition of qualifications and skills.

In this article, we argue that in order to understand the unexpected trajectories and complex social mobility processes of migrants, skills must be approached as a discursive and relational social construct (Attewell 1990; Shan 2013). From this perspective, skills are a social construct that differs according to context and under particular historical circumstances and are therefore not neutral. It is necessary to pay attention to the social values, economic conditions and political discourses that dictate and determine criteria

for a 'valued' skill (Steinberg 1990). Such an approach highlights the complexity and contradiction of assessing skills, especially soft skills. Recently, scholars (Duncan & Dunifon 2012; Grugulis & Vincent 2009) have suggested that soft skills, such as personal qualities and attitudes, are in greater demand than technical skills among employers. Understanding skills as a social construct raises concerns about the ways an increasing emphasis on 'soft skills', often associated with gender and racially stereotyped roles and relations, may further reinforce existing class-based, gendered and racialised discrimination and power relations in the labour market (ibid; Guo 2015).

Shan (2013) and Warhurst, Till & Gatta (2016) have noted that what is labelled and counted as 'skilled work' and 'a skilled worker' is actively shaped and co-constructed by an interplay of the social, economic and political organisation of work and workers. Such an understanding of 'skilled workers' can create a differential classification of skills for workers and their employers. For the former, skills can be regarded as a combination of the knowledge, expertise and experience they have acquired during their careers; for the latter, skills are usually understood in terms of the requirements of a particular job (ibid). Such an approach can help us both question the positivist assumption that skills are easily transferable between different contexts and understand the conditions under which occupations are socially demarcated as 'skilled' or 'unskilled'.

Methodology

This article draws on two ethnographic research projects anchored at the intersection between education and migration studies. Both focus on the life trajectories of migrants under different visa categories and their transition to the Danish labour market. The first project³ focussed on young Nepali migrants entering Denmark with a study permit with limited working hours to enrol in institutions of higher education, mainly short-cycle educational programmes at business colleges. It was based on 30 semi-structured, recorded in-depth interviews with students and informal conversations with more than 200 students, spouses and job-seekers encountered through extended participant observation over a period of approximately four years. The project examined, among others, how educational programmes helped them acquire new skills, which, in a long-term perspective, could potentially facilitate their entry to the Danish labour market. Particularly relevant for this article is, first, the fact that study residence permits at the time were handled by the Danish Agency for Labour Retention and International Recruitment (*Styrelsen for Fastholdelse og Rekruttering*) under the Ministry of Employment, the purpose of which was to retain and recruit highly qualified professionals from outside Denmark. In other words, given the forecasted lack of highly educated human resources, it was partly in their capacity as potential future high-skilled workers that foreign students were welcomed by the Danish authorities (Valentin 2012). Second, upon completing their studies, many of those who had entered Denmark on study residence permits extended their stay through GCS or permanent residence (PR hereafter) and thereby changed their social and legal status in

Denmark. Many, though, had difficulties finding a job that matched their formal academic qualifications.

In the context of rapid internationalisation of the Danish labour market, the second,⁴ still ongoing, project explores the challenges and opportunities that migrants admitted to Denmark based on their high-level academic qualifications encounter in the course of their entry to the Danish labour market. It is based on biographical narrative interviews with 35 high-skilled migrants representing 17 different nationalities. These informants had arrived in Denmark via a variety of visa categories: GCS, study permits, work-related schemes and family reunification visas. Their educational backgrounds include computer science, health, engineering, business, humanities, natural sciences and social sciences. Human resource personnel, international recruiters and career guidance professionals were also interviewed, and participant observation was also conducted in various GCS-related events and mentoring programmes. Out of the 35 informants, 16 were of South Asian origin, including migrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Some were working in a sector/position related to their education, while others were engaged in more temporary, often part-time, low-status jobs at the time of the interviews.

Both projects included categories of migrants that the Danish authorities want to attract and retain in order to boost the national economy (DEA 2016; Regeringen 2007). Furthermore, they were granted temporary visas upon initial entry to Denmark and thus were not expected to settle down in the Danish society on a permanent basis. Nonetheless, many have sought to extend their stays in Denmark and, by implication, moved (or plan to move) across different visa categories, for example from student to GCH, from family reunification to student permit or from GCH to various forms of work-sponsored visa. It is not our intention to compare the two categories, international students and high-skilled migrants, per se but to draw eclectically on the data to illustrate our informants' experiences and expectations at different junctures as they navigate across legal, educational, professional and social categories while obtaining and employing their academic qualifications and skills in the Danish labour market. In combination, the data gathered from these two projects provide unique insight into the paradoxes arising from the political targeting of high-skilled migrants and the simultaneous realisation of the implied challenges for migrants and host societies alike.

Danish immigration policies for high-skilled migrants

Denmark is often considered as one of 'the happiest countries in the world' (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2016), with an image as an egalitarian society with a liberal mindset. In the meantime, in political discourses, academic literature and everyday lives, Denmark is regularly portrayed as a monocultural nation-state characterised by a homogeneous sense of Danish identity and protective welfare ideology grounded in a universalistic principle of economic redistribution through high taxation (Jöhncke 2011). The fear of losing such historically achieved welfare benefits to 'newcomers' has made many Danes sceptical

towards internationalisation and rising multiculturalism over the last three decades (Rytter 2018). However, the number of immigrants and descendants living in Denmark has gradually increased over the last three decades from constituting 3.0 percent of a total population of 5.12 million in 1980 to 12.9 percent of 5.75 million in January 2017 (Statistics Denmark 2017). With Denmark's agreement with the other Nordic countries in 1954 regarding free movement (of workers) and the membership of the European Economic Committee (EEC) in 1973, the vast majority of migrants came from other Nordic or other European countries until the 1990s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, labour migrants arrived from the Balkans, the Middle East, Pakistan and North Africa to fill the labour shortage in Danish factories. Since the economic recession in 1973 and until 2000, the main immigration channels for non-European citizens were asylum, family reunification and study permits. Since then, the Danish government has prioritised high-skilled migrants through the introduction of various work permit schemes, such as the Positive List, the Green Card Scheme, the Pay Limit Scheme and the Fast-Track Scheme.⁵

In this article, we focus on the Green Card Scheme because it accentuates the dilemmas associated with high-skilled migration. Launched in 2007 at the time of economic boom and shortage of high-skilled workers in certain sectors, it allowed non-EU citizens with a minimum bachelor's degree equivalent to Danish standards to enter the country for job-seeking purposes up to an initial period of three years, with possibilities for further extension of maximum five years. It was based on a point-based system in which academic degrees, language skills, work experience, age and 'adaptability' counted. Thus, to support the Danish labour market's ability to compete globally for high-skilled migrants, the primary prerequisite for gaining a green card was solely a matter of formal qualifications and skills. There was no requirement for applicants to have a concrete employment offer unlike the other schemes mentioned earlier.

The GCS sparked off a debate concerning significant nationality-based differences in the extent to which GCHs succeeded in finding employment matching their educational qualifications and skills. According to an evaluation of the scheme, 43 percent of the 5829 GCHs were doing low-skilled work (Rambøll 2010). Most of them were Indians, Iranians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Nepalis and Chinese, people who by Danish politicians and media were often classified as 'low-paid labourers' with 'low status' in the Danish society (Copenhagen Post 2014; 2016). This called into question the intentions behind applying for a green card and cast suspicion on GCHs for using the Green Card Scheme as an avenue to residency in Denmark, especially among the nationalities mentioned earlier. As a result, the GCS was reformed in 2015 as part of the international recruitment reform. The criteria for obtaining bonus points were tightened, the total duration was reduced from a maximum of eight years to five years, and the extension became dependent on a minimum income requirement corresponding to the average salary of new graduates with a bachelor's degree of around DKK 323,198 (approximately 44,000 Euro) during the preceding 12 months. Despite these changes, the Danish parliament discontinued the GCS in 2016, deeming the scheme 'a failure' as the majority of the GCHs ended up working in lower status jobs.

Interestingly, although the Danish parliament regarded the GCS as ‘a failed scheme’, the policy itself enabled high-skilled migrants to accept low-skilled jobs as it stated that the required salary could be earned in any kind of job. As the majority of GCHs were from countries in the so-called ‘Global South’, this scheme more than any other has been politicised due to the counterproductive effects it was presumed to have. In particular, GCHs were often accused of taking jobs from Danes or refugees and for contributing to social dumping, thereby undermining national systems of collective bargaining and labour market regulation. Hence, the GCS and its repeal can be regarded as a strategy to regulate the profile of high-skilled migrants in order to protect the national labour market. Moreover, the GCS provides an interesting case for exploring the unfulfilled expectations, unexpected trajectories and social mobility processes of high-skilled migrants.

High-skilled migrants, career transitions and processes of skilling

Given the last two decades’ intensification of economic globalisation and internationalisation of higher education, there has been a rise in ‘new’ populations of high-skilled migrants, which has led to overlapping categories of high-skilled professionals and international students (Eskelä 2013; Shachar 2006). In addition to work permits explicitly targeting people who already hold a degree, the student visa has become one of the most viable initial options for prospective migrants from South Asia who seek to enter labour markets and potentially obtain PR in the future in Europe, North America and Australia (Valentin 2017). After the expiry of their student visa, many shift to other visa schemes either in the country in which they studied or elsewhere.

This is no less true in the context of Denmark where, as elaborated upon in the previous section, the number of high-skilled South Asians on various work-related residency schemes for high-skilled foreigners is high. In the remainder of this article, we present three cases, one Pakistani and two Nepali men, to illustrate how they experience and tackle interrelated career transitions, shifts in legal residency status and attempts to actively maintain skills. As has been highlighted by several migration scholars, high-skilled migration is, like any other form of migration, highly gendered and women have until recently been neglected in much research (Raghuram & Kofman 2004). By portraying three men, we are aware that we may contribute to reproduce male-dominated representations of migration practices. This partly reflects the demographic composition of the GCHs though we of course recognise that they are embedded in highly gendered worlds and that many are accompanied by spouses, who educated or not, also have to find their way into the labour market (cf. Aure 2013). However, it is beyond the purpose of this article to engage in an elaborate gender analysis.

Saj: Making the best of an unexpected and undesirable situation

Attending a job counselling meeting for GCHs, Saj seemed optimistic about finding a job related to his own field after obtaining Danish PR in 2016. Originally from Pakistan, he came to Denmark in 2010 on the GCS. He had worked in Pakistan as an IT developer and university lecturer when he first moved to Sweden for his master's degree in Computer and Information Systems in 2006. When he came to Sweden, he was determined to return to Pakistan after completing his study. However, Saj feared that it might be difficult for him to find relevant employment in Pakistan as companies would expect that a returnee like him holding a foreign degree would demand a higher salary than those with domestic qualifications. He therefore applied for a Danish Green Card before moving back to Pakistan in 2009. In 2010, he received his residence permit under the GCS and moved to Denmark. In the beginning, he struggled to find IT-related jobs despite his attempts to learn Danish and his efforts to circulate his CV to eight–ten different companies each week. After six months of frustrating job search, he was forced to take 'an odd job', a term used by many GCHs to refer to low-skilled jobs, both to fulfil his and his family's basic needs and visa requirements. Mirroring the politically articulated weakness of the GCS, Saj suggested that, while the scheme was intended to ensure the integration of high-skilled migrants into the labour market, the government did not necessarily provide access for the GCHs to the high-skilled positions. He related his argument to the tightening up and eventual repeal of the GCS. Consequently, like the majority of the GCHs, he argued that the scheme was not intended to ensure that GCHs had the opportunity to make the best use of their skills.

Amidst a lack of support from the Danish authorities, Saj explained 'the odd jobs' to be a transitional phase to adjust to the Danish labour market and a strategy to ensure a future PR. After obtaining PR in 2016 and gaining 'a level of certainty in life', as he expressed it, he tried to reskill and upskill himself through short-term IT-related courses. Elaborating on his plans, he stated:⁶

Yes, but after 1.5 years, I have no grip on my study. Because in IT, it is very complicated, and if you have been out of the job in IT for six months, you have to recover a lot. You need to study again, because the technology moves. That's why I couldn't find [a job]. Then I continued the job, the odd job, and went along with that. Then I had a plan that it's two tracks: first, I have to stay here and get some permit, PR, and after that I recover, I make a plan, because if I go back to Pakistan then I have lost everything, like I have not studied. (...) Then I made a plan that I have to stay here and do whatever, any job I have to do. So after that I get PR, so my plan is to get some training in IT, one or two months, and after that I apply again and hopefully I get my IT-job.

Saj realised the need to constantly revise and upgrade his IT skills, especially if he had been working in 'the odd jobs' for a long period of time. Although Saj failed to find a job allowing him to properly utilise the knowledge and skills that he had acquired from his Swedish master's degree and years of work experience in Pakistan, he was determined to employ these skills and knowledge even in 'the odd jobs'. In contrast to the prevailing 'deskilling'

narratives, Saj actively countered the ‘deskilling’ process. Sharing his experiences of working as a kitchen helper, he explained:

So I went there, as a kitchen helper. It's a very small company. We work five or six people and they really don't know about the computer IT field. So I told them I can handle the computer as well. They handed me different tasks to handle the website, to install the themes, to promote their Facebook.

Although the successful integration benchmark for GCHs is considered to be the ability to find jobs corresponding to one's educational and professional background, Saj was determined to tackle his ‘deskilling’ process by implementing his skills and knowledge in a job that did not require his qualifications. In the scholarly migration debate, it has often been claimed that ‘deskilling’ happens because high-skilled migrants are willing to accept low-paid jobs (Piore 1979, cited in Siar 2013: 7-8). However, as in the case of Saj, migrants are compelled to take such low-paid jobs due to visa requirements; a lack of support from authorities, both financial and legal; and the structure of the labour market. This is not to say that Saj did not experience frustration and humiliation. As he lacked the opportunities to properly utilise his qualifications and skills, he sought to integrate them in ‘the odd jobs’ on what he perceived as a temporary basis. Although the complexity of the IT skills required to perform these tasks was not high and they were not part of a formal employment contract, he used it as a strategy to make the best of an unexpected and undesirable situation.

Aadi: Learning new skills in everyday life

Aadi came to Denmark from Nepal in 2015 as part of the GCS. He held a master's degree in business studies from Nepal and had worked as an administrator in a reputable company in his home country for more than five years. Before coming to Denmark, he had heard from his brother-in-law, a GCH himself, that life as a GCH was ‘not easy’. For Aadi, the GCS was an opportunity to have his qualifications recognised by the Danish immigration authorities and learn new skills and knowledge in a new and, in his view, a more developed society than Nepal. As he already had a family network in Denmark, he assumed that it would not be too difficult for him to find accommodation and work. When he came to Denmark, he was also willing to engage in ‘any type of job’, as he anticipated that it might be difficult to have his skills and qualifications in business administration from Nepal formally recognised in the Danish labour market.

Aadi reflected repeatedly that he, despite his formal academic qualifications, did not feel like ‘a highly skilled’ migrant because of all the struggles he faced trying to gain access to the Danish labour market. However, he stressed that every job needs skills as he elaborated:⁷

You know what? You need skills, high level of skills, in any work. I was just kicked out of the dishwashing job at a restaurant because I was not fast enough, so I lacked skills there.

I tried a cleaning job but I just could not finish it in time. It took me five hours more than normal, so I did not have skills for that either. I had never done work like this in my life. So we need skills for any job. Now I am working as a cashier at the video game parlour in the night. It is more dangerous than the two previous ones, but then I could at least find a job that was related to my business administration background. It is difficult, but I have now started enjoying it and, most importantly, utilising my time there. When I have free time now at work, I log on to the internet in the cash register. I am taking the online courses and search for new courses. Now I have time to keep an eye on the stock market. After coming to Denmark, I have bought some shares in Apple. You know, not that many, but still, it's Apple (laughing). I used to buy and sell stock in Nepal and I am glad that now I can do that, although on a small scale, but at an international level.

What is particularly noteworthy here is the way Aadi problematises the categorisation of types of job based on skill requirements, since every job needs a high level of skill. Although Aadi was working in a low-skilled position, he was utilising his spare time to upskill himself by taking online courses. He considered the online courses as a long-term investment, and the qualifications gained from these courses could help to conceal a gap in his CV. When reflecting on his experiences from low-skilled, low-status jobs at a restaurant, a cleaning company and a video game parlour, he stated:

I do not feel that I have lost anything working in these positions. I still have my knowledge and skills that I had. Moreover, I am experiencing and learning so many new skills in my everyday life here, from using bus cards to using machines to wash dishes, to use different chemicals to clean the floors, to maintain video game machines and keep track of daily income. [...] You learn new skills and expertise in every job, so why would I feel that I am experiencing deskilling? On the contrary, I feel that I am reskilling and in many senses upskilling everyday.

This illustrates that there is a need to go beyond the prevailing 'deskilling' narrative in order to comprehend migrants' attempts to cope with simultaneous processes of skilling–deskilling–reskilling–upskilling and thus to understand skills as a continuously evolving process of learning (Fenwick 2006) that can occur in various contexts in everyday lives. Although one might have higher formal educational qualifications, these do not necessarily qualify one to perform the specific tasks associated with a particular job, including those often regarded as 'low-skilled' jobs. Furthermore, Aadi's experiences illustrate that it is problematic to presume a simple correlation between 'deskilling' and the possession of low-status jobs.

Ram: The importance of soft skills

Inspired by seeing all his friends going abroad, Ram came to Denmark from Nepal in 2008. He had already obtained a bachelor's degree in business studies and had worked

as a teacher for several years, but found the overall situation in Nepal difficult, partly because of the political instability and economic constraints in the family home. Through savings and loans, Ram nonetheless managed to raise money to cover the expenses for an education consultancy, an initial six months of tuition fees and travel to Denmark, where he enrolled in a business college for an Academy Profession (AP) Programme in Leadership and Management. The short-cycle higher education programme AP is below a bachelor's degree in the Danish education system, but because of the fundamentally hierarchical and uneven nature of the international education market (Brooks & Waters 2011), academic degrees are assessed differently in Denmark and Nepal (Valentin 2012). This meant that Ram had to 'step down' in his academic career in order to be accepted at a Danish higher education institution, but like many other Nepali students, it was also the beginning of a longer educational career in Denmark. He continued at a diploma level and finally obtained a master's degree in business relations in 2012. He appreciated the 'practical orientation' of the studies, which helped him link theoretical concepts with concrete problems and equipped him with the ability to undertake strategic analyses of business and customer trends, which is key to his field of expertise. His ambition was to pursue a PhD, but he also realised that the possibilities for this were limited. Indicating that this was also a means of securing a long-term future for him and his wife, he stated:⁸ *'If I don't get a PhD [scholarship], then the Green Card will do. After three years on Green Card, I can also get PR'.*

During his studies, Ram worked part-time, first as a kitchen worker and later as a cleaning assistant. Soon after his graduation, in 2013, Ram obtained a Green Card, which allowed him to stay in Denmark and search for work. However, he did not get a PhD position or a job, which formally required a master's degree; instead, staying in the cleaning job, he had worked part-time while studying, gaining PR and becoming the union representative of 700 people with 60 different nationalities. Difficult for him to express in concrete terms, he pointed to the 'soft skills' that he had acquired from these jobs, especially his ability to create networks and engage with people:

Sometimes it so happens that I have learned so many things but I don't know what I have learned. I cannot say, but very visibly I can see that I have learned to make a relationship with different people from different cultures and I am quite adaptable [...] We have to be adaptive and very flexible.

Ram also realised the importance of mastering Danish language skills at an early stage: partly in order to further expand his networks and thus enhance his opportunities within the labour market and partly because he had realised that it helped significantly to speak Danish when approaching the immigration authorities. It took him just three months to get a visa for his wife, which he ascribed to the fact that he, in his own words, 'overconfidently' had communicated in Danish.

His experiences as a union representative combined with an early political engagement from his youth in Nepal, analytical competences gained from his studies and a strong personal drive encouraged Ram to enter Danish politics at the local level. In a conversation, which took place early summer 2017, he reported that his application for Danish citizenship

was in process, that he was preparing to stand in local elections later that year and he was volunteering as a mentor for Syrian refugees – amidst all his other ordinary works and family obligations as a husband and father of two young children.

Ram differs from the other two informants as he entered Denmark on a study permit and had thus spent several years in the country before he had to approach the labour market. This gave him some obvious advantages, with regard to both his mastery of the Danish language and the development of a network. Ram was not successful in getting a job reflecting his level or field of education. However, drawing on the array of competences he had gained from both his studies and part-time work, he continuously upskilled himself and thus managed not just to make a living and secure PR but to actively participate in the society. The latter has become an important and highly valued criterion for eventually obtaining citizenship and is also an important formal criterion for being recognised as a ‘desirable foreigner’.

These three cases are in many ways exemplary of a relatively new category of migrants in Denmark: the highly skilled from countries in the Global South whose skills and qualifications become devaluated as they move across dominant global knowledge hierarchies in their migratory journeys. These cases also exemplify increasing diversity among high-skilled migrants in terms of origin, social position, educational and professional background and migration trajectories. There is a tendency in the existing body of literature on ‘deskilling’ of highly skilled migrants (Boström & Öhlander 2012; Trevena 2012) to ascribe difficulties in properly integrating migrants within the labour force to personalised deficiencies – in terms of skills, knowledge and/or networks. Our study adds to this literature by emphasising the simultaneously occurring processes of deskilling–reskilling–upskilling in migration and thus portraying high-skilled migrants from particular parts of the world not only as victims of structural exploitation but also as agents who intentionally and unintentionally make the best out of an at times undesirable situation. Highlighting the professional and/or everyday life skills and knowledge that informants in our studies gained within or beyond their low-skilled jobs, this article has critically analysed the notion of ‘human capital wastage’ in relation to highly skilled migrants and their low-skilled jobs. Furthermore, the classification of GCS as a ‘failure’ and its following termination similarly illustrate how notions like ‘skills’ and ‘the high-skilled migrant’ have become highly politicised and thus instrumental in regulating migrant flows in Denmark. It reveals a hierarchisation of the high-skilled migrants based on nationality and visa status in which GCH has become a designation for a racialised social category.

Conclusion

Our findings mirror prior studies on struggles of high-skilled migrants to access the labour in the Nordic countries (Aure 2013; Boström & Öhlander 2012; Liversage 2009; Mosneaga & Winther 2013). As we have illustrated in this article, it is not unusual for high-skilled migrants to endure unfulfilled expectations and unexpected trajectories where they are

relegated to low-status jobs. As skills, knowledge and qualifications are constantly (re) shaped by the dynamics inherent in broader social, political and labour market contexts (Brooks & Waters 2011), we have highlighted the need to move beyond the conventional understanding of skills as only human capital (Attewell 1990) in relation to the 'skilling' and 'deskilling' of high-skilled migrants. Rather than focusing merely on migrants' current occupational status, it is crucial to explore the acquisition and utilisation of skills and knowledge as continuously evolving processes of learning (Fenwick 2006) that can occur within 'the odd jobs' or in various everyday contexts.

Doing so can illuminate how highly skilled migrants actively negotiate and redefine what is otherwise perceived as a 'deskilling' process, regardless of their occupational status. Such an approach aims to (re)define skills as discursive and relational social constructs (Shan 2013). The high-skilled migrants who are granted residence permits as part of schemes to attract highly qualified foreigners, for example the DGC, are by definition considered 'highly skilled'. Once categorised as 'highly skilled', their success depends entirely upon their success to obtain 'skilled' jobs, that is, jobs related to their educational qualifications, and the very moment they accept 'the odd jobs', there is a tendency to regard them as 'failures.' Amidst differing national conceptions of skills, global inequalities and educational hierarchies, we have demonstrated the need for a broader understanding of 'skilling,' 'deskilling' and 'reskilling' than is often present in debates concerning migration among the highly skilled. Such an understanding will contribute, in turn, to a new appreciation of interrelated mobilities of skills and status among highly skilled migrants and thus help expand limited representations of highly educated migrants as either 'transnational elites' or a 'deskilled precariat.'

Notes

1. We use the term 'migrants' instead of, for example, foreigners or professionals to emphasise interrelated aspects of geographical and social mobility that, irrespective of social class, are integral to processes of migration. As such, we aim to detach the notion from normative assumptions about particular kinds of mobile subjects.
2. The Confederation of Danish Industry is a private organisation representing approximately 10,000 private companies in Denmark.
3. The project was part of a larger, collaborative research project '*Education, mobility and citizenship: An anthropological study of educational migration to Denmark*' (2010–2014) financed by the Danish Council for Independent Research. The main corpus of data was collected during the project period but has been supplemented on an ongoing basis with follow-up interviews and conversations.
4. A PhD project entitled '*Exploring the relationship between education and mobility in a world of qualifications: A study of highly skilled foreign professionals in Denmark*' (2015–2019), financed by the Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University.

5. For the further details of various work permits, please see <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/You-want-to-apply/Work>.
6. The case is part of Niraula's study. There has been minor editing to shorten the length of quotes.
7. The case is part of Niraula's study. Interview was conducted in Nepali and has been slightly edited for the readability after being translated into English.
8. The case stems from Valentin's study. Interviews were conducted in a combination of English, Nepali and Danish and have after translation into English been slightly edited for the readability.

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