

Abstract

Highly-skilled migrants are seen as the new contributors to development by much contemporary literature. Their governments seem to feel the same. I seek to understand the realities and aspirations of highly-skilled migrants during knowledge transfer and th

This study develops a typology of knowledge transfer and of barriers met or imagined by skilled Greek

international migrants and refugees from conflict areas (Maroukis 2010; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008).

At the dawn of the 21st

skilled migration has, in the past, been seen as a loss for sending countries; however this is not

transnational economic ties between Greece and its skilled migrants (Labrianidis and Pratsinakis 2016)

Overall, this study moves beyond the aspiration to return. I examine the potential for knowledge transfer and the barriers met along the way. I attempt to fill a gap in the literature on knowledge transfer by adding the idea of experimentation and the connection between knowledge transfer and aspirations. I define experimentation as the attempts of migrants in the receiving country to transfer knowledge back home without risking their position and trying to find more effective ways of transferring. In addition, since the current literature on aspirations focuses partially on the likelihood of emigration (Carling 2014) or of return (Senyurekli and Menjívar 2012), I examine the potential for contributing to development by transferring knowledge either through return or through non-return via diaspora mobilisation.

Methods and data

This study draws on a qualitative research method in order to determine how highly-skilled Greeks in London transfer their knowledge from Greece to the UK, develop new skills within the UK and transfer them back to Greece. My primary research was based on 22 in-depth interviews with young Greek professionals who were living and working in the London area. The target population was composed of those who had studied in Greece and those who had studied abroad for their higher education, corresponding to their qualifications and skills or following an academic career. The sample included both those who had studied in Greece and those who had studied abroad for their higher education, including those who had done both. The length of their stay in the UK varied from 6 months to 10 years. The target population definition was kept deliberately broad in order to capture the variety of experiences of young highly-skilled Greeks with an age range from 25 to 41 years at the time of interview, in June 2016.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in London or via Skype and lasted one hour on average. They were carried out in the interviewee's mother tongue – Greek – and were carried out and recorded subject to informed consent. Interviewees were initially recruited from personal contacts and the sample then expanded by a snowballing method. The sample was gender-balanced: 12 females and 10 males. Informants all were highly educated, from bachelor's degrees up to PhDs.

The interviews were loosely structured around qualitative biographical data from the participants, who were encouraged to share their stories in a chronological sequence: their educational background and their life before emigration; their experiences of working and studying abroad; how

knowledge transfer to be an apparent contributor to development. However, many barriers are perceived during these transfer processes. Knowledge transfer is conditioned by issues of education and career prospects, perceptions and claims of self-development and new knowledge and skills, and social or professional connections with Greece.

In this first empirical part, I set out my informants' experiences, imaginations and motivations before migrating as they perceived them at the stage of moving from Greece to the UK. It is important to discuss their experiences, because it strongly affects what they do currently in the receiving country; how they obtained and developed new knowledge and skills (the subject of the next empirical part following this one); and the most relevant information from the informants' experiences and aspirations of knowledge transfer to Greece and the barriers to it (the topic of the final empirical section).

How and where did they gain their education?

The participants shared many perceptions of their life before emigration – at the stage of earning an education in Greece. According to King *et al.* (2016a) the school/university-to-work transition is mainly based on internal mobility rather than international. Hence, very few people move abroad upon reaching their majority (18 years old) – most of my participants moved abroad around their mid-20s to continue in higher education or for work experience. Indeed, the vast majority of my informants studied at least their first degree in a Greek university and had some work experience in one or other sector there. The main reason for deciding to emigrate was often the unsatisfactory nature of their work experience, such as low pay, precarious conditions and jobs which did not match their qualifications.

Additionally, some others left immediately after their first degree, to obtain a master's degree in the UK. Only 3 out of the 22 in my sample started their university studies in the UK after studying in a Greek private college. They decided with their parents to study abroad directly due to their dissatisfaction with the Greek educational system. They sat the exams of the International Baccalaureate (IB), which gives the opportunity to students from around the globe to participate and study at high-standard universities.

Overall, the underlying pattern in terms of characterising the quality of the Greek education was positive. Respondents often expressed their thoughts about the Greek university as a place where you can access broad and rich knowledge on general topics. Easy-to-learn soft skills, however, were irrelevant for the labour market that they were interested in. The first set of quotes below illustrates the trust and satisfaction of the knowledge gained in Greece.²

I am very satisfied with the knowledge and the technical skills I received from the

Barriers to the transfer of skills from Greece to the UK and finding employment corresponding to qualifications.

Those in my sample who had studied and had some work experience in Greece were very judgemental about the Greek state and system. The increase in unemployment, the employers' unprofessionalism and the difficulty of finding a job in their field were some of their main concerns. The vast majority of them had accepted jobs not related to their studies, such as working in cafés, restaurants or retail outlets. Others had the opportunity to work in their field unpaid, such as on internships, or volunteering for NGOs and other institutions.

This pattern is known as 'brain waste', which refers to the incorporation of skilled human capital in occupations that might not correspond to the skills, qualifications or experience of the qualified individual (Lozano-

all to adapt in my profession. For that reason I had to study on my own again and learn all the terminologies while working to become a more productive employee (Athina, 28, forensic mental health practitioner).

These cultural and linguistic barriers affected interviewees' integration and effectiveness at work. A potential explanation for this difficulty might be the relationship between the time elapsed since the arrival of these skilled migrants in the UK and the likely use of their abilities (King *et al.* 2014). This concept demonstrates that the transfer of migrants' skills is not perfect when individuals move from one place to another (Jasso *et al.* 2002).

It is clear that, in the stage of transferring skills from Greece to the UK, the difficulties are often due to migrants' limited linguistic skills and experience. As Jasso *et al.* (2002) claim in their study, this weak transferability of skills has been observed in many different aspects – in language skills, in labour market skills acquired before migration, in the qualifications achieved in the different educational systems, in the lack of job contacts, and in the non-familiarity of the qualified immigrants with the working practices of the host country.

I applied for many jobs through the NHS. My degree was recognised by the British system and I could apply for any job in the public sector. Only two or three [employers] called me for an interview. They told me that they were satisfied with the interview, however my lack of experience in the British medical sector was problematic. They advised me to gain experience for about two years somewhere else in England and then apply again (Kostas, 41, GP in the private sector).

It is not easy to find a job in the UK. The working system here comes in contrast with the Greek who is coming here and he is looking for employment. I finished my first master and I had over 60 job rejections. I think it is good to come to the UK at an

of those who studied in Greece and moved to the UK for work or university postgraduate studies was fully transferred and recognised by their employers. However full integration in the work culture and place was challenging – a finding common to all the participants. Furthermore, according to Bentley (1998), migration may change what it is considered as ‘common knowledge’ in one place into ‘uncommon knowledge’ in another – meaning, despite their technical knowledge, migrants face particular difficulties using their personal knowledge in the receiving country (Williams 2007).

I met many procedural difficulties. The main problem was the adaptation of the English lifestyle away from my family. The university [where he obtained his PhD] helped me in the procedural issues, and to fit in to the university’s community and system (Marios, 33, marketing lecturer).

Concluding this first empirical section, this quote sheds light on the cultural barriers to integration at a social and professional level. *Encultured* integration in the British system is a challenging obstacle for those who studied in Greece and then moved to England. Another, commonly mentioned barrier was the difficulty of acquiring a specialist vocabulary in some jobs. However, this may not be generalisable throughout my sample, because some of the professionals had a kind of international terminology in their sector and for them it was not problematic. In fact, it

more tolerant, more flexible, and law abiding – not like in Greece (Athina, 28, forensic mental health practitioner).

My manager noticed my thirst for more and she provided me with more training. In all the evaluations I was receiving very good feedback and credit. Nothing to compare with my experience in Switzerland and Greece. In London, I had a very good year in the hotel. It was a very good enterprise for training. My manager was more like a coach for me. I had evaluations every 3–6 months. At the end of the year she told that I was at a very good level and she wanted me to become the new manager of the hotel. And that is what I became (Stella, 27, senior revenue

manager) added to her narrative on her manager that ‘I had to do any task in the way directed by my manager’. Having the freedom to use her skills and creativity to proceed independently with her tasks was not acceptable by her manager. This motive is common in the literature of knowledge transfer and sharing within firms (Williams 2007).

As leader [higher position than before] I had to change my attitude and a new cycle of training started. They built me, they changed me and I gained new skills (Stella, 27, senior revenue manager).

The above quote confirms and applies, in a general pattern, my participants’ career development within their firms/organisations, which illustrates the ‘building’ of a certain kind of productive employee. The interviewees are developing new skills and knowledge which, of course, is tailor-made by their employers’/firms’ strategy or profile.

Summarising, the participants did not experience any obvious difficulty in developing new knowledge and skills. However, hidden barriers were noticed in the areas of co-ordination and linguistic distance – up to the point where they have acquired excellent language competence – not only in understanding and earning new knowledge, but for negotiation and social interaction within the working environment.

Cultural and social barriers life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is examined because it includes the cultural and social obstacles in participants’ daily lives in England. It gives a broader picture of knowledge transfer. As I explained earlier, knowledge is not only about skills but is a broader term which lies at the heart of my analysis. Cultural and social factors not only affect career development, but also explain a major part of the migration cycle’s final step – the transfer of knowledge to the sending country.

Acquiring encultured and embedded knowledge may be challenging for migrants, as Williams discusses (2007). Language does not apply only in conceptual and work-related terminologies; it gives meaning and expresses social contexts. As Wittgenstein (1922) famously stated, ‘The limits of my language are the limits of my world’.

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London-based company. Their responses was: ‘of course we want!’ (Stella, 27, senior revenue manager).

This sense of exclusion is experienced by other participants, too. Athina (28, forensic mental health practitioner) tried to apply a new psychological method in a dementia centre in Athens. She voluntarily organised a seminar, but she experienced ignorance and exclusion by her colleagues in Greece. They were suspicious of her motives, even though it was a volunteer concept. These cultural barriers of ascription were apparent during the seminar and finally the centre only partially followed the method. She felt disappointed and she could not do something similar soon in Greece.

Another notable trend was observed – the experimentation model of transferring knowledge. Participants were trying to transfer knowledge by experimenting from their current position abroad in small groups or peripheral towns until they were ready to expand them. This kind of experimentation is a key finding of my research and an innovative way for participants to experience the barriers and the potential of transferring something to Greece, and to better prepare these transfers. An illustrative example follows:

I want to make Greece the first country on bone marrow. It is difficult to convince everybody of the new methods. For that reason, I decided to start my campaign from my home town. I said to myself that if I can convince the citizens of this town to become donors, then I can convince the rest of the country. It was challenging and I faced particular difficulties – f

Participants expressed their aspirations that their transfers would be a way to make changes in the homeland. However, as a participant pointed out: ‘I want to change things back home, but I need support, I want to benefit from it and see some appreciation and co-operation from the country’s side as well’. They tended to insist on the responsibility and the need for support from the home-country government in improving conditions in Greece. Nevertheless, when asked about possible action to be taken by them, interviewees emphasised first the barriers related to the Greek mentality that could block their actions, and then the economic barriers.

Cultural barriers were encountered in their aspirations to transfer capital from abroad to the country of origin, because migrants saw themselves as changed and they could evaluate in a fresh way the situation back home. The cultural and political conditions in Greece were absolutely central in the migration trajectories of the participants. As Pavlos (33, risk manager at an international bank) put it:

I would like to do something in Greece. But at the moment I don’t see the appropriate circumstances. The political and economic instability, the Greek reality and the constant changes in taxes and policies are major obstacles.

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expanded it. Experimentation is a new way of examining knowledge transfers, because even if these attempts or aspirations are at an early stage, still there is the

Summarising the denialists, these were participants who did not even retain personal ties back home; for them the barriers were not seen just as barriers for transfer but as reasons for not returning or retaining ties with the country due to negative situations and experiences. These denialists clearly resonate with Faist's definition of brain desertification, meaning the highly skilled migrants who 'do not return and do not sustain any ties with those who stayed in the countries of origin' (Faist 2008: 33).

In this overall section on aspirations and barriers, I have to admit that it is impossible to generalise on the participants' perceptions apart from the conclusion that much depends on the support of the state in encouraging the Greek skilled migrants to contribute their new and developed knowledge to help Greece change the scenery and recover from the crisis. Participants might want (or not) to remit their knowledge home, but that depends on the perceptions of barriers during these transfers and state policies should take them into consideration.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to contribute an improved and Greek-situated typology of the concept of knowledge transfer within the migration and development literature. It aims also to arrive at a theoretically nuanced understanding of the typologies on aspirations and knowledge transfer, experimentation and the categorisation of barriers. While the migration and development nexus sees migrants as the new contributors to development, it has so far ignored their voices and more precisely their experiences of transferring knowledge and skills at every stage of the migration cycle. At the same time, the academic literature on the topic seems to ignore the barriers perceived and imagined by the migrants.

Returning to the research question posed at the beginning of this paper, namely 'How do highly skilled Greek migrants in London transfer their skills and what are the barriers to this knowledge transfer?', it is now possible to state that the evidence shows that individuals' trajectories and perceptions of social remittances are shaped by their ongoing ties to the country of origin. The latter reinforces or weakens their will to contribute to the country's recovery after the crisis. The participants remain clear concerning their perceptions of the existence of barriers that prevent ambitions for knowledge transfer, or even push these aspirations away. As a result, their thinking becomes more individualistic and they put their personal gain before the greater good of society.

The study has shown that the extent to which Greek professionals in London aspire to or do contribute by transferring their knowledge to Greece depends mostly on the cultural barriers perceived about their co-nationals. The mentality-related obstacles to sharing new knowledge and acceptance are more central than the economic obstacles. Their transnational actions and aspirations for change in specific sectors or in society in general rely on personal reasons and ties with the country, which encourages or not these transfers. It depends on an understanding of the migrants' experiences during the migration cycle. Their experiences before migrating strongly affect what they currently do in the country of settlement. And what they do in the host country, accompanied by the ties that they retain or not with the country of origin, explains how migrants remit or aspire to promote their ideas and knowledge back home.

The findings fall within the theoretical framework presented in the current literature on knowledge transfer within the development and migration nexus. Some of the most significant outcomes emerging from this study are as follows.

in other European countries or with skilled migrants from other European countries.⁵ Possible further research should focus on determining how to overcome the barriers to knowledge transfer in order for it to be used for development in the countries of origin.

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