Going up or going down? Occupational mobility of skilled migrants in Australia

Susan Ressia Griffith University, Australia
Glenda Strachan Griffith University, Australia
Janis Bailey Griffith University, Australia

Skilled migration programs are now widespread among western settler societies, but little is known about the recent outcomes of skilled migrants. Using a feminist framework and qualitative interviews of 22 migrants, this article sheds light on the job-seeking experiences of professional skilled migrants in Australia, who are from non-English speaking backgrounds. The article reveals that many are unable to find commensurate employment post-arrival. They experience downward occupational mobility; that is they find jobs that are lower in skill level compared to the job held pre-migration. The range of job-seeking strategies is examined to determine whether migrants can improve occupational outcomes, revealing differences between the mobility of women and men. Job-seeking for women is more complex due to the gendering effects of family responsibility, making their job search more difficult. The research further highlights the underutilisation of human capital, which is in need of addressing for skilled migrants, and the wider economy.

Keywords: Australia, downward occupational mobility, employment, job search strategies, migrants

Key points

- 1 Migrants expect that migration will lead to better employment outcomes and increased economic opportunity.
- 2 Migrant women and men have different experiences of job-seeking post-migration.
- 3 The mobility trajectories for women are more difficult due to gendering effects.
- 4 The study reveals the underutilisation of human capital in the Australian labour market.
- 5 The research presents issues for consideration by government, organisations and migrant support networks around immigration policy and the outcomes of independent skilled migrants.

Correspondence: Dr Susan Ressia, Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Nathan Campus, Brisbane, Qld 4111, Australia; e-mail: s.ressia@griffith.edu.au

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1 Migrants are increasingly entering the major settler societies of Australia, Canada, New
 2 Zealand as well as the United Kingdom through skilled migration programs. Based on a
 3 human capital approach, these programs use points systems to select immigrants according
 4 to a mix of skill, education and language levels, age and occupational experience (Anderson
 5 2010; Boucher and Cerna 2014). The points system is a Canadian innovation, first
 6 introduced in 1962 and adopted by Australia in 1973 (Papademetriou and Sumption 2011;
 7 Walsh 2008). These points-based skilled migration programs were originally offered in
 8 conjunction with existing family reunion and humanitarian immigration programs. More
 9 recently, greater emphasis has been placed on using such programs to fill skill gaps in local
 10 labour markets, and therefore immigration flows have increased in the skill-based streams.
 11 Canada and Australia are often considered exemplars of such policies (Boucher and Cerna
 12 2014). Australia led the way in 1979 with a system focusing on the economic attributes of
 13 migrants (Walsh 2008) and in 1996 introduced two new programs, the independent skilled
 14 and the employer-nominated programs (Wright 2012). These more recent programs
 15 require applicants to achieve a set number of points based on their human capital; the
 16 employer-nominated program enables pre-arranged employment for a migrant on arrival.
 17 Many countries, including Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, the
 18 Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and the United
 19 States, have since modelled their immigration policies on these programs (Papademetriou
 20 and Sumption 2011; Walsh 2008). The United Kingdom introduced its own points system
 21 modelled on the Australian system (Anderson 2010; Clarke and Skuterud 2014) in June
 22 2008. The UK system was modified in 2011 to provide two schemes: the Tier 1 Exceptional
 23 Talent (highly skilled) scheme and the Tier 2 Skilled scheme (Kofman 2013).

24 While these programs are achieving migrant intake levels to support the economic
 25 objectives of the receiving countries, and counteract declining birthrates and ageing
 26 populations (Phan et al. 2015), it appears that employment outcomes for skilled migrants
 27 are unsatisfactory (Birrell and Healy 2008; Rynderman and Flynn 2014) – migrants are not
 28 finding good employment outcomes post-migration (Bertone 2009; Ho and Alcorso 2004;
 29 Misko 2012); that are equal in occupational standing to the job held in their home
 30 country. However, we know little about the job search processes skilled independent
 31 migrants and their partners undertake once arrived, or how they adapt to their new home
 32 country. Specifically, it would be useful to know what constrains their choices when
 33 seeking work (Fossland 2013), and how downward occupational mobility (Ho 2006; Ho
 34 and Alcorso 2004; Vianello 2014) occurs when skills, qualifications and knowledge are not
 35 adequately recognised and/or are undervalued (Bartram 2010; Shan 2013). Thus, there is a
 36 pressing need to examine and understand how skilled migrants respond when faced with
 37 unemployment and other challenges. This includes how gender and race ‘play out in the
 38 context of migration’ during the negotiation of family roles (Kofman 2013, 121; Phan
 39 et al. 2015).

40 The issue of gender and migration is important. Female migration is increasing
 41 globally, and the number of primary female applicants now equals or exceeds male ones
 42

(Docquier, Lowell, and Marfouk 2009). Because national policies emphasise skilled migration, many more women are entering Australia as independent skilled migrants with high-level skills, qualifications and experience (Syed and Murray 2009). There are also many highly qualified migrant women arriving as spouses of male applicants (Kofman and Raghuram 2006). However, to date the job-seeking experiences and outcomes of skilled migrant women have been less visible than those of men (Kofman 2013; Shinozaki 2014). This paper contributes a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the complex issues that women and male migrant job-seekers face, when searching for work in the Australian labour market.

Drawing on the occupational mobility (Long and Ferrie 2003) and migrant mobility literatures (McAllister 1995), and **considers** gender and race categories within the labour market (Browne and Misra 2003), this article explores the lived experiences of 22 skilled migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) who arrived in Brisbane, Australia between 2004 and 2008. It aims to fill a significant gap in the literature on skilled migrants and employment by analysing the job-seeking experiences of such migrants from varied ethnic minority and racial backgrounds. The research focuses on the experiences of primary applicants, who are migrants to whom the approval to immigrate was granted (Chiswick, Lee and Miller 2005), and of skilled migrants who have arrived via a spouse (secondary applicant) or humanitarian visa. This article addresses three questions: 1) Do skilled NESB migrants achieve good employment outcomes post-migration, and if not, what strategies do they use to overcome downward occupational mobility? 2) What are the experiences and outcomes for migrating partners who have equally high skill levels? 3) How do gender and family roles impact job search outcomes?

Occupational mobility and migrant mobility

The literature on skilled migrant employment hints at considerable underuse of skills; that is, migrants often cannot find jobs at their skill levels. This leads to downward occupational mobility. In the case of skilled migrants, the act of migration creates the initial change in social standing as a result of their 'migrant mobility' (McAllister 1995). Occupational mobility is defined in terms of class systems where a person belonging to a particular class, such as low, middle or upper, is determined by their education and occupation, and by other factors such as cultural and social interests (Jackson 2009). In the case of migration, class becomes disrupted, as skilled migrants voluntarily cut ties to their former social class system. Left with their human capital (education and skills), which they may find difficult to transfer (Bertone 2009; Birrell 2009; Birrell and Rapson 2005; Chiswick, Lee and Miller 2005), they face a change in social class as a result of their 'new migrant' status (Ressia 2014). Furthermore, they unexpectedly face perceived discrimination in local employment processes of which they may have little knowledge (Birrell and Rapson 2005; Rynderman and Flynn 2014), and may find themselves occupying jobs which are at a lower occupational level (if they do find work). Thus, skilled migrants – despite their educational and professional achievements – suffer as a result of

1 their move, and experience ‘downward occupational mobility’ (Ho 2006; Ho and Alcorso
2 2004; Vianello 2014), becoming relegated to lower level occupations, and/or experiencing
3 unemployment leading to ‘brain waste’ (Papademetriou and Sumption 2011).

4 Occupational mobility is a concept widely studied in the economic and sociology
5 literatures. The economic literature uses the overarching concept of ‘labour mobility’,
6 encompassing both occupational and geographic mobility, describing (respectively) the
7 changes that occur across a set of jobs for an individual, and changes that occur across
8 space (Long and Ferrie 2003). The mobile employee’s intention is that improved
9 employment and economic benefits will occur as a result of these moves (Groutsis and
10 Arnold 2012; Hawthorne 2005; Iredale 2001). The sociology literature focuses on
11 occupational mobility, deriving from Weber’s concept of social mobility that occurs
12 within and between class structures (Smith 2007), where social class is measured through
13 an individual’s occupation (Glæsser and Cooper 2014, 464). Much of the ‘mobility’
14 literature has investigated **on** jobs, with many studies of occupational mobility tracking
15 intergenerational employment outcomes between white, Anglo fathers and their sons
16 (Goldthorpe, Payne, and Llewellyn 1978; Long and Ferrie 2013; Sørensen 1991). More
17 recently, however, research has considered women (Goldthorpe and Payne 1986), as well
18 as the occupations of both mother and father in relation to the occupational outcomes of
19 children (Glæsser and Cooper 2014; Jackson 2009). This literature recognises that certain
20 characteristics such as ‘family background, parent’s education, occupation and income,
21 race and gender... play a key role in shaping future trajectories of social position and
22 status’ (Adkins and Vaisey 2009, 100).

23 ‘Migrant mobility’ (McAllister 1995, 447) ‘applies solely to immigrants ... who have
24 **worked prior to migration**’ and compares the differences between a migrant’s occupation
25 **achieved in their home country and the first job held in their new country** (McAllister
26 1995). Migrants expect that the act of migration will lead to better employment outcomes,
27 and thus increased economic opportunity (Dean and Manzoni 2012; Groutsis and Arnold
28 2012; Iredale 2001). The limited research undertaken to date reveals the reverse; that is,
29 employment and economic opportunities decline (Simón, Ramos, and Sanromá 2014;
30 Vianello 2014). Even where improvement in occupational status occurs over time, the level
31 eventually achieved may never make up for the initial loss (Simón, Ramos, and Sanromá
32 2014). However, there is little recent qualitative research examining the labour market
33 experiences of skilled migrants (Syed and Murray 2009). Quantitative (survey) research in
34 various international labour markets, including Germany (Bauer and Zimmermann 1999),
35 Spain (see Simón, Ramos, and Sanromá 2014), Sweden (Rooth and Ekberg 2006) and the
36 United States (Akresh 2008) confirm that migrants experience downward occupational
37 mobility, as their first jobs are typically lower in status than their former positions in their
38 home countries (Akresh 2008; Chiswick, Lee and Miller 2003; Ho 2006; Ho and Alcorso
39 2004; Rooth and Ekberg 2006). Bauer and Zimmermann (1999, 15) found that highly
40 skilled migrants tend to suffer more than others, due to the ‘imperfect transferability of
41 skills between different countries’. Employment outcomes for migrants in Australia have
42 recently been captured through the *Continuous survey of Australia’s migrants* (CSAM;

Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) 2012a) and the *Longitudinal study of immigrants to Australia* (LSIA). Both studies confirm that migrants have less favourable labour market outcomes than similarly qualified local-born employees, and experience lower wages (see Mahuteau and Junankar 2008).

Two theories of migrant mobility may explain the experience of downward occupational mobility: the ‘assimilation model’ and ‘segmented assimilation theory’ (Simón, Ramos, and Sanromá 2014). The assimilation model holds that migrants initially may be able to gain employment only in lower level occupations but, over time, their occupational status improves as they build upon their human capital. Chiswick, Lee and Miller (2005, 335) refer to this process as the ‘U-shaped pattern’ of migration, meaning that high skilled migrants’ skills are not perfectly transferable, and so they will experience a ‘decline in occupational status from the last job in the origin [country] to the first job in the destination [country]’. The assimilation model suggests that skilled migrants need to undertake additional training, improve their language skills, obtain workplace experience and develop career networks to enable them to achieve better career outcomes (Chiswick, Lee and Miller 2005). In other words, it is essentially a ‘deficit’ model; where the cause is located in the individual, while the surrounding social structure is ignored, so the responsibility rests with the migrant to make up the perceived human capital shortfall.

Segmented assimilation theory, in contrast, examines on migrants who experience a more permanent form of occupational downgrading, that is, those who find employment only in lower skilled jobs. This theory suggests that this downgrading prevents migrants from improving their occupational outcomes (Simón, Ramos, and Sanromá 2014, 224–225), which can be subject to broader macro/national and meso/organisational factors and impact upon the employment chances of migrants. For example, limited policy at the national level in areas such as anti-discrimination and managing diversity programs, and indirect forms of discrimination at the organisational level, can work together to exclude skilled migrants from achieving better occupational outcomes in the labour market (Syed 2008; Syed and Murray 2009). The empirical literature shows that migrants experience both a dislocation and a disruption in achieving employment in their career of choice (Anthias 2012; McDowell 2008). As their social and occupational mobility trends downwards, their occupational identity fractures, their self-confidence suffers, and they may experience physical and emotional impacts (Remennick 2005).

The migrant job search in Australia

As noted above, economic pressures in the latter part of the twentieth century saw a shift in Australian immigration policy to a focus on increasing skilled migrant intakes. To fill labour shortfalls, two general skilled migration (GSM) categories were made available in 1996: independent and employer-nominated (sponsored) migration. Currently, 68% of migrants enter via the skilled program (Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) 2015a). It was envisaged that this policy change would have a positive effect in reducing the unemployment rate of NESB migrants which at that time was 12%

1 compared to 7.9% for the Australian-born (ABS 1996). Improvements were reported, as
 2 government statistics (DIAC 2012a) showed that in 2010 the employment participation
 3 rates of primary applicants within the independent and business employer-nominated and
 4 the regional sponsored schemes were in excess of 95%. However, this does not tell us about
 5 the type of job gained, nor disaggregate English speaking and NESB migrants, or women
 6 and men.

7 Studies (Ho 2006; Rynderman and Flynn 2014) confirm that initial employment
 8 outcomes for women and male independent skilled migrants are problematic, and the
 9 challenges they face are many and varied. In addition to the challenges highlighted, issues
 10 include their lack of familiarity with the Australian economy, and lack contextual
 11 knowledge about local job search processes (Bertone 2000; Chiswick, Lee and Miller 2003;
 12 Rynderman and Flynn 2014). They may also lack knowledge about selling their skills
 13 effectively (Ressia 2014). Another challenge is racial discrimination by employers, evident
 14 in a study on migrant employment in Australia by Booth, Leigh and Varganova (2010).
 15 The authors found that after submitting a range of fictitious job applications to employers,
 16 the call-back rate for applications containing Chinese and middle eastern names was
 17 'significantly lower than for Anglo and Italian names' (Booth, Leigh and Varganova 2010,
 18 9). They (2010, 13) also found that Chinese job-seekers in Brisbane would need to submit
 19 on average, a total of '57 per cent more applications' in order to achieve the same number
 20 of interviews as an applicant of Anglo decent. Hence, migrants are not only disadvantaged
 21 by their lack of knowledge about labour market processes, they face discrimination at the
 22 point of applying for a job, and lose out on valuable feedback that they could achieve
 23 through this process.

24 To further complicate the migrant job search, women and men appear to have different
 25 experiences of job-seeking post-migration. This can be attributed to the operation of
 26 gender norms and differing structural constraints around employment. For example, a
 27 man's identity is strongly connected to highly gendered economic breadwinner norms
 28 (Campbell, Whitehouse and Baxter 2009; Hibbins 2005), and migrant men, in the process
 29 of seeking employment, may often struggle to reach an occupational status and economic
 30 identity equivalent to their previous status and identity. They then must accept work in
 31 lower skilled jobs unrelated to their profession, simply to survive (Raghuram 2008).
 32 Migrant women can also face particular difficulties in finding appropriate work, which can
 33 be the result of social structures such as the division of labour within households, thus
 34 emphasising the gendered role of the male breadwinner (Campbell, Whitehouse and
 35 Baxter 2009; Phan et al. 2015). The provision of economic security for the family can be a
 36 major reason women need to gain employment and, like men, they are willing to
 37 undertake less skilled work (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). Thus, many migrant women
 38 face dual imperatives: the impetus to partake in the public sphere to improve their own
 39 and their family's economic security (Alcorso 1991; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007;
 40 Iredale 2005, 2001; Ressia 2014), while managing family responsibilities in the home.
 41 Gendered family roles often place additional burdens on women when seeking work
 42 (Kofman 2013) as do social and cultural expectations (Cooke 2007). These may include

lack of spousal support, limited access to appropriate childcare and other support systems, and loss of established networks of family and friends (Ho and Alcorso 2004; Kōu et al. 2015; Shinozaki 2014). For both women and men migrant job-seekers the picture is quite complex, and both sexes face economic disadvantage and lower class status.

Research methods

This research explored the lived experiences and outcomes of recently arrived NESB skilled migrants seeking employment within the Brisbane urban region of southeast Queensland, Australia. To understand the job search experiences and strategies of participants, it was clear from the outset that qualitative techniques were required, and would add to the existing research developed from quantitative data sets. The interview is an important means of gathering information that provide insights into, develops understanding of, and voices the individual's experiences (Fontana and Frey 2000). A semi-structured interview process was used, and a narrative analysis technique adopted, to focus on the specific stories of individuals and preserve the integrity of personal biographies and events contained within them (Riessman 2002, cited in Chambliss and Schutt 2006).

Situating the research within an occupational mobility and migrant mobility framework, and highlighting outcomes due to gender and race differences (Browne and Misra 2003), interviews were conducted with NESB skilled migrants (17 women and 5 men) from 16 countries. They were sourced via government bodies and community-based organisations which assisted in advertising for participants. The participants were skilled, with high levels of education, and all had good English language ability (see tables 1 and 2). Participants had been living in Australia for between 6 months and 5 years prior to being interviewed, with the majority having arrived within the previous 1–3 years. Each participant was interviewed twice, 12 months apart (phase 1 and phase 2), to explore their experiences and elucidate the 'journey' that each had taken. Each interview lasted 30–90 minutes, and was tape-recorded and transcribed. The interview questions featured in phase 1 reflected issues that emerged from the literature, where the themes explored included individuals' reasons for migrating; initial employment expectations; difficulties and barriers faced in job-seeking as well as their spouse or partner's experiences of seeking work. Phase 2 interviews analysed how their job search had progressed over the preceding 12-month period. This enabled us to learn more about the impact of their job-seeking journey, whether migrants were still happy to have migrated to Australia, and what strategies they were using to continue their job search if they had not found commensurate employment.

The transcripts were analysed using NVivo 9 software (QSR International Pty Ltd 2010) beginning with open coding of each transcribed interview. The transcribed interviews were also sent to each participant to ensure that their stories had been represented accurately and truthfully. Themes from the transcript data were identified from a review of the literature, in addition to new themes that emerged from participants' own stories (Böhm 2004). The analysis drew on a model devised by Charmaz (2000) which emphasised a reflexive approach throughout the research process. Axial-coding processes

Table 1 Early entrant group – labour market status, phases 1 and 2

Name ^a	Country of origin	M/F	Age ^b	Time	Married/ Children	Qualifications	Experience	Job at Phase 1 interview	Job at Phase 2 interview
Ana	Spain	F	30	1 year	Yes/No children	B Soc Work	Social worker: 4 years	P/T Social Worker	No Change
Andrei	Russia	M	36	1 year	Yes/2 children	B Mgmt B Social and Regional Planning	Accounting: 6 years	Unemployed	F/T Security guard
Debbie	China	F	30	1 year	Yes/1 child	B Econ/Account	Accounting: 9 years	Work placement	F/T (Contract) Payroll officer
Fareeza ^c	Iraq	F	41	6 months	Yes/2 children	B Civil Eng	Civil engineer: 15 years	Unemployed/ studying	No Change
Hayat	Iraq	F	28	1 year	Yes/2 children	B Civil Eng	Civil engineer: 5 years	Unemployed/ studying	Casual childcare worker
Jasmin	India	F	27	9 months	Yes/2 children	BSc Industrial Microbiology M Ecology and Env B Ed	Primary teacher: 6 months	Casual in food service/studying	Unemployed
Khalid ^c	Iraq	M	38	6 months	Yes/2 children	B Agriculture	Landscaping: 2 years	Unemployed/ studying	No Change
Nairi	Indonesia	F	30	1 year	Yes/3 children	Cert 2/Diploma 2: Accounting	Accountant: 7 years	Unemployed/ studying	No Change
Sunita	Bangladesh	F	30	2 years ^d	Yes/1 child	B BusAdmin MBA	Accounting/admin: 4 years	Unemployed/ studying	Change: Had another child

Shading is used to highlight whether there was a change or not, in job outcomes, between phase 1 and phase 2 of the research.

^aPseudonym. ^bAge at time of arrival. ^cMarried couple. ^dDefined as an early entrant as she had started seeking work 9 months prior to her first interview (as she had a young child).

Table 2 Experienced seeker – labour market status Phase 1 and 2

Name ^a	Country of origin	M/F	Age ^b	Time	Married/ children	Qualifications	Experience	Job at phase 1 interview	Job at phase 2 interview
Ayanna	Ethiopia	F	21	2 years	Yes/1 child	Dip Marketing Dip Appln Software	Office admin Commercial TV, 6 months	Work placement	F/T (contract) Administrative assistant
Christopher	Slovenia	M	44	2 years 4 months	Yes/2 children	B Architecture/ Planning	Urban and regional planning, 10 years	Work placement	F/T (contract) Facilities planning officer
Cristina	Brazil	F	32	3 years	Yes/no children	B Art (Mkt) GDip Ind Admin G Cert BusAdmin	Marketing, 13 years	F/T (contract) employment not in field	F/T (contract) Manager/ marketing
George	Albania	M	34	2 years	Yes/No children	Diploma: Enriching Eng of Solid Metal B Law	Mining engineer, 10 years	Form worker (labourer/ roadworks)	Form worker (labourer/ road works)
Julietta	Columbia	F	26	2 years 4 months	Yes/no children		Lawyer, 2 years	Unemployed/ studying	No change
Jun	China	F	35	2 years 9 months	Yes/No children	B Educ (equiv)	Primary teacher, 12 years	Work placement	Started own business
Kim	Vietnam	F	45	3 years	Yes/No children	B Education M Education	Teacher trainer, 20 years	Work placement	P/T (contract) Assistant librarian

Table 2 (continued)

Name ^a	Country of origin	M/F	Age ^b	Time	Married/ children	Qualifications	Experience	Job at phase 1 interview	Job at phase 2 interview
Miranda ^c	Philippines	F	20	4 years	No/No children	B Art (Comm)	Nil, casual work only	F/T (equivalent) Community services officer (2x P/ T positions)	P/T Community services officer P/T Administration officer Unknown
Nareem	India	M	38	1 year 4 months	Yes/No children	Engineering Mechanic II	Petty officer, navy, 15 years	F/T Marine Engineer and taxi driver	Unknown
Nimala	Sri Lanka	F	30	2 years 8 months	Yes/3 children	B Law	Paralegal, 1 year	Work placement	Returned to Sri Lanka
Rani	India	F	35	1 year 4 months	Yes/1 child	B PrimaryEd	Primary teacher, 8 years	Casual housekeeper	F/T (permanent) Housekeeper
Sarah	South Africa	F	47	5 years	Yes/2 children	Dip Jnr Primary Dip Higher Ed B Arts (Psych and History)	Primary teacher, 31 years	Supply teacher	F/T (contract) Primary school teacher
Sofia	Russia	F	42	2 years 9 months	Yes/1 child	Dip Economics = B Level	Economist, 15 years	Work placement	F/T (contract) Payroll officer

Shading is used to highlight whether there was a change or not, in job outcomes, between phase 1 and phase 2 of the research.

^aPseudonym; ^bage at time of arrival; ^cmigrated with parents.

were undertaken during the middle and later stages of the analysis (Böhm 2004). Selective coding and theory development were undertaken by integrating all the collected information, including the coded interview data, diary notes and memos from the analysed stories (Böhm 2004).

Demographic details of each participant, including their qualifications and employment experience prior to migrating to Australia, are outlined in Table 1 (the *early entrant* group who had been seeking work for a period of 1 year or less) and Table 2 (the *experienced job-seeker* group who had been in Australia for longer than 12 months). The majority of job-seekers in the latter group had been looking for work for between 2 and 3 years. The tables also provide information on labour market status, including details of the type of job (if any) the participants had at the time of the two interviews.

Experiences of downward occupational mobility

This group of NESB skilled migrants did not find the employment that they expected prior to migration. Many believed they would achieve good employment outcomes as they had the skills and attributes required to achieve entry into Australia under what seemed to them a fairly rigorous set of standards. As their occupation had been listed on the former Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL), or the Skilled Occupations List (SOL) (for examples see DIBP 2015b), they supposed that their job search would be relatively easy. Participants also expected that by finding good employment – in most cases relatively quickly – they would be able to develop their professional careers.

At the time of the phase 1 interviews, two-thirds of the *early entrant* participants were unemployed (see Table 1). Of the remaining participants in this group, one was undertaking a work placement and two were in jobs not equal to the occupation held pre-migration. Four of the participants were employed but all had experienced downward occupational mobility. For three participants their new work was insecure as well as lower in status, with participants employed on a contract, casual (temporary) or part-time basis. Outcomes were much better for the *experienced seekers*. In phase 1, only one participant, Julieta, was unemployed (see Table 2). Five had found work placements and 7 were employed, although not in jobs commensurate with their professional qualifications. Many of the participants had engaged or were currently involved in work-placement programs, often after internet searches, or hearing about them from a friend or a community-based organisation. Nevertheless, the majority of participants had experienced downward occupational mobility. However, by phase 2 there was a noticeable shift in employment outcomes for those who had participated in a work-placement program developed by a local authority, and a few had found a route back to their profession – for example, Sarah was a teacher (although on contract rather than permanently employed).

Counteracting downward occupational mobility: job-seeking strategies

Participants used a range of strategies in their search for work, confirming research which suggests migrants try to build upon their human capital by developing their own 'career

self-management strategies' (Fang, Novicevic, and Zikic 2009, 474). The migrants in this research used a range of strategies (see Table 3), including: volunteering; finding any job to bring in income and gain local experience; internet searches; assistance from recruitment companies; work placements; contact with community-based organisations, and utilising social networks. Further education is noted as a strategy widely used by migrants seeking employment (Fang, Novicevic and Zikic 2009). Consistent with this finding, many participants indicated that they were pursuing further study as a way to improve employment outcomes in four (related) ways: to improve language skills; to assist them in meeting professional registration requirements; to gain an Australian qualification; and to change career. For some, like Ana, Cristina, Fareeza and Khalid, English language courses were viewed as essential as they perceived that inadequate language skills hampered their quest for employment. Teachers Jasmin, Jun and Rani, were particularly keen to gain registration, and undertook further study to achieve this outcome. Some participants decided that further study was needed to achieve an Australian qualification in a similar or related field to their professional degree in order to improve contextual knowledge of local practices, and to increase the likelihood of finding work. Miranda and George both said that they saw importance in forming new connections, and viewed further study as a mechanism for this. Study was used to change career (for example, Hayat and Rani who chose to study childcare). In all of the cases above, we observed that the changes in occupational status led each skilled migrant to experience downward occupational mobility.

Of course, while skilled migrants concentrate on their career self-management strategies, they still need to find work to exist. For instance, Andrei expressed the importance of his first job as a means to provide financial resources to the family: 'this job [is] not actually what I [am] supposed to do, but it gives money, and money to pay bills, rent ... all the necessary stuff'. This work, while unsatisfactory from a career perspective, may have some benefits: Andrei found that the job gave him the opportunity to improve his English language skills, and provided him with valuable local work experience. Andrei's experience could potentially be explained by the assimilation model of occupational mobility. While obtaining a job in a lower level occupation (Chiswick, Lee and Miller 2005), he is undertaking further study to help him move upward in occupational status, and reclaim his occupational identity. Jasmin too was concerned with making enough money for the family to survive, similar to the findings of Raghuram (2008), but said her catering job was an opportunity to form networks by making friends, and to gain new knowledge about Australian workplaces. This became part of her overall strategy, as she was intent on providing the means to fund additional studies to meet professional requirements, and increase her occupational mobility while considering the care of her children around school hours.

Decision-making around employment and family

The data show that the decline in occupational status affects both women and men, but in different ways. Decision-making and job-seeking strategies are shaped by traditional

Table 3 Strategies of skilled migrant job-seekers

Name	Sex	Time	Pre-migration job	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Early entrant								
Ana	F	1 year	Social worker	Study – language	Volunteering			
Andrei	M	1 year	Accountant	Study – language	Find any job	Study in field	Internet search	Social networks
Debbie	F	1 year	Accountant	Study – language	Work placement			
Fareeza	F	6 months	Civil engineer	Study – language	Study in field			
Hayat	F	1 year	Civil engineer	Study – language	Study – another field	Work placement	Internet search	Community-based organisation
Jasmin	F	9 months	Primary school teacher	Find any job	Study in field	Community-based organisation		
Khalid	M	6 months	Landscape architect	Study – language	Study in field			
Nairi	F	1 year	Accountant	Study in field				
Sunita	F	2 years ^a	Accounting/ Admin	Find any job	Study in field	Internet search		
Experienced seeker								
Ayanna	F	2 years	Office admin commercial TV	Study – language	Internet search	Work placement	Study – another field	
Christopher	M	2 years 4 months	Urban and regional planning	Study – language	Recruitment companies	Find any job	Work placement	Internet search
Cristina	F	3 years	Marketing	Recruitment companies	Work placement			

Table 3 (continued)

Name	Sex	Time	Pre-migration job	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
George	M	2 years	Mining engineer	Recruitment companies	Internet search	Study in field		
Julieta	F	2 years 4 months	Lawyer	Study – language	Find any job	Study – another field	Volunteering	
Jun	F	2 years 9 months	Primary school teacher and academic dean	Study in field	Work placement	NEIS programme		
Kim	F	3 years	Teacher trainer	Internet search	Volunteering	Work placement	Study – another field	Social networks
Miranda	F	4 years	Unemployed – student	Community- based organisation	Study in field	Volunteering	Find any job	
Nareem	M	1 year 4 months	Marine mechanic	Study in field	Community- based organisation	Study – another field		
Nimala	F	2 years 8 months	Paralegal	Study in field	Work placement			
Rani	F	1 year 4 months	Primary school teacher	Study – another field	Volunteering			
Sarah	F	5 years	Primary school teacher	Temporary work in field	Study – another field	Internet search	Community- based organisation	Work placement
Sofia	F	2 years 9 months	Economist	Find any job	Study in field	Internet search		

Shading is used to highlight whether there was a change or not, in job outcomes, between phase 1 and phase 2 of the research.
^aDefined as an early entrant as she had started seeking 9 months prior to her first interview.

gender norms as expressed by notions such as the male ‘breadwinner role’ and the gendered role of homemaker (Campbell, Whitehouse and Baxter 2009). In many cases, financial necessity (Raghuram 2008, 2010) and gendered notions about the care of children influenced couples’ decision-making. Sunita, for example, tried to find work and was unsuccessful. Her husband was successful, however, so she decided to take a part-time job and study while caring for her young child, as this seemed her only option. Nimala was in the same situation. She wanted to find work to help family finances, and a job in a local supermarket was the only way she could manage employment and the needs of her young family. Women’s employment search is not as straightforward as men’s. While they face the same barriers in understanding the nuances of the labour market and the perceived discrimination of employers as do men, women with children are more likely to deviate from their career of choice to care for children (Pereira 2012; Phan et al. 2015). In addition, the complexity of the job search can be more constrained if the woman has young children (Ressia 2014).

Despite these challenges, women do want to find work and contribute to family finances but, by necessity, the woman’s role is often one of support for the family while her male partner seeks work, at the expense of her own career. She experiences more casualised forms of labour, in low-paid (and highly gendered) occupations (Raijman and Semyonov 1997; Syed and Murray 2009) such as in cleaning, housekeeping and childcare. Nevertheless, these women do try to turn these adverse outcomes into a positive experience, as most were eager to gain local experience and begin to form networks with other workers, as evident in Jasmin’s case, and to achieve economic independence in their own right.

The experiences of these women bring into focus the gendering effects of the migration process which inhibits opportunities for seeking work (Kofman 2013). Lack of knowledge about family support services also constrained women. Sunita reported that she did not know that services such as after-school childcare were available to families. Financial costs were another challenge. The cost of childcare often prevented women from seeking employment, limiting them in their choice of work. For example, Hayat, a civil engineer, found that the cost of childcare forced her into taking on the care of her family while her husband pursued further study. This disadvantaged her access to a government-funded specialised training program in her occupation, and she ended up undertaking studies in childcare and finding precarious work within the sector. The current research confirms the ongoing problem faced by migrant women, as highlighted by other scholars who have examined migration and care-giving (Boyle, Feng and Gayle 2009; Cooke 2007; Phan et al. 2015) in this context.

Like men, the women also suffered from difficulties around qualification recognition (Casimiro, Hancock and Northcote 2007; Ressia 2010). However, due to financial and family constraints, their ability to access additional training and courses was restricted. This situation undoubtedly increased stress, and as time progressed the women felt less certain about gaining a job in their field (Liversage 2009). Hayat explained that staying at

1 home prevented her from using her knowledge and skills, as she was not keeping up with
2 the changes in her profession:

3 It's a very difficult life, it's not easy . . . I lost all my skills. I'm not sure what happened around
4 me? I can't work on computers because I stay at home . . . [and] I didn't know what happened,
5 what's the new thing [technology]?

6 Feelings of loneliness and isolation also increased due to the loss of established social
7 and familial networks (Boyle, Feng and Gayle 2009; Shinozaki 2014). Cristina said: 'I had
8 moments that I just wanted to run out and go back to my country, to my family, to my
9 friends, to my comfort zone.'

10 The analysis confirms the significant problems that some NESB migrants experience in
11 finding professional work equivalent to their previous employment. They each experience
12 downward occupational mobility, a phenomenon which is echoed in the findings of much
13 of the migrant employment literature. The study tracked migrants' occupational
14 trajectories through exploring and understanding their job-seeking strategies. The research
15 highlights that the human capital of these migrants is not perfectly transferable; however,
16 they each implemented a range of strategies to try to counteract downward occupational
17 mobility, which is in part explained by assimilation theory (Simón, Ramos and Sanromá
18 2014). The research indicates that males may be more likely to move upwards, but it is too
19 early to tell whether they will achieve jobs that will improve their occupational mobility, or
20 not. In addition, this research highlights that the mobility trajectories for women are more
21 difficult due to gendering effects, they are more likely to experience worse outcomes
22 (Iredale 2001; Kofman 2013) depending on where they are at in terms of their own life
23 course, and the age of their children. This outcome aligns with the experience of
24 segmented assimilation theory, where more permanent forms of occupational
25 downgrading are occur (Simón, Ramos and Sanromá 2014), attributed to the
26 combination of seeking work and managing a young family. Therefore, despite these
27 women arriving with high levels of human capital, the gendering affect in terms of
28 employment outcomes is.

29 30 **Contribution and limitation of the research**

31 While it is reported (DIAC 2012a) that skilled migrants in general experience low
32 unemployment, this does not paint the full picture. Such reports do not drill deeply
33 enough in distinguishing outcomes between migrants from English speaking countries and
34 NESB migrants, nor do they consider the issue of downward occupational mobility, which
35 is masked by broad statistics. Further, the CSAM (DIAC 2012b) reports only on primary
36 applicants, who are usually male, and details regarding outcomes for women and skilled
37 migrant couples are lacking. This research has made an empirical contribution through
38 explaining the experiences of women and male migrants, uncovering at a deeper level, the
39 complex issues NESB skilled migrants and their families face.

40 This research was limited to a small sample of 22 participants and we are unable to
41 make generalisations about the experiences of skilled migrants who do achieve good
42

employment outcomes. We suggest that future research considers skilled migrant groups which fall under the sponsored migrant immigration schemes, and those who have recently arrived under humanitarian programs. In addition, it would be interesting for research to consider differences in outcomes in terms of migrants' cultural and ethnic background. While we acknowledge these limitations, the research has also opened up topics requiring further investigation, and suggests that a closer examination be paid to try to find out why employers hesitate to employ skilled migrants in professional jobs. In addition, understanding what supports could be offered to organisations to encourage hiring, and what could improve a migrant woman's prospects of finding work around trying to manage family is important for improving opportunities for this group. This research reveals issues that government, organisations and migrant support networks can consider around immigration policy and migrant employment, with the aim of reducing the underutilisation of human capital. This in turn would be advantageous for the wider economy, and at the same time, provide better employment outcomes for highly skilled migrant women and men.

Conclusion

Migration has been important to Australia both economically and for population growth, and today is increasingly tied to filling labour market gaps, especially at the 'skilled' end of the spectrum (Markus, Jupp and McDonald 2009). However, the experiences of the NESB skilled migrants in this research, consistent with statistics (ABS 2011), reveal the difficulties of obtaining employment after arrival that is commensurate with their previous position. While amendments to immigration policy have attempted to address issues of unemployment and underemployment, there are still problems in need of attention and resolution. Our article contributes to the literature by providing understandings of the lived experiences of skilled migrants, as they attempt to traverse the labour market in Australia, and the strategies they use to counteract outcomes of downward occupational mobility by increasing their human capital. This article has also shed light on the experiences of female migrants, to fill a gap in the literature identified by others (Cooke 2007; Shinozaki 2014), by providing a more nuanced understanding of the complex issues these skilled migrant job-seekers experience in their search for work. This research has demonstrated that while women and men encounter similar difficulties and use similar strategies in seeking and securing employment, women face additional challenges due to the operation of gender norms associated with family responsibilities.

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Susan Ressia (PhD, Griffith Univ) is a lecturer within the Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources at Griffith University, Nathan campus. Her thesis examined the job-search

experiences of independent non-English speaking background skilled migrants in Australia. Susan's research interests include skilled migrant workers, intersectionality theory, equality and social justice issues.

Glenda Strachan (PhD, UQld) is emeritus professor in the Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources at Griffith University. Her research interests focus on contemporary and historical workplace change especially issues relating to women's working experience. The impact of organisational and national employment policies, especially EEO and diversity management, is a centre of her work. She is co-author of *Managing diversity in Australia: theory and practice* (2010).

Janis Bailey (PhD, Murdoch Univ) is an adjunct associate professor with the Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia, and is a member of the university's Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing. Her research interests include union strategy and campaigning, vulnerable workers including youth and women, and teaching and learning in business. She is currently working on projects on developing professional identity in ER and HR graduates, and gender equity in universities.

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