Challenging trade-offs of temporary skilled migrants

Abstract
Temporary skilled migrants are frequently portrayed as mobile individuals who freely trade off short-term disadvantage in the destination country for long-term economic gains that can secure their future in the departure country. This paper examines and queries the ‘trade-off’ argument on the basis of recently completed research on the experiences of temporary migrant nurses on 457 visas. It challenges three assumptions that underpin the common interpretation of temporary skilled migration: a) that migration decisions are well-informed and centred on economic considerations; b) that this form of migration always results in financial returns; and c) that temporary migrants return to their departure country once these target returns have been achieved. The findings highlight the complex, contingent and evolving nature of migration decisions and the individual and structural constraints on temporary skilled migrants’ agency in shaping their pathways.

Keywords
Temporary skilled migration; 457 visa; migration decisions; economic migration; trade off
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Introduction

Temporary skilled migrants, understood as skilled migrants who have been admitted to reside and work in Australia for a limited time, are a large and growing segment of migrants in Australia, yet their migration decisions and experiences are still relatively little understood. The legal framework treats temporary migrants differently from permanent migrants, which is most evident in their exclusion from welfare provisions. Recent policy and media discourse has framed temporary migrants primarily as economic migrants who compete with local workers in the Australian labour market (O’Connor 2013; Hall 2013), and occasionally as victims of exploitation by employers (McKenzie and Schneiders 2013). These understandings and representations of temporary skilled migrants as independent individuals driven single-mindedly by the prospect of economic gains, bear some similarity to longstanding theorisations of migrant decision-making in social and economic sciences (Borjas 1989; Chiswick 2000; Sancak and Finke 2006). While rational choice models have less currency in recent sociological analyses of migration, temporary migrants still tend to be viewed primarily as economic actors and autonomous architects of their migration experience, free from structural constraints. This is particularly evident when the acceptance of adverse experiences such as discrimination or labour market exploitation is interpreted in terms of a trade-off of short-term disadvantage in the destination country for long-term gains in the departure country (Mares 2013).

Leaving the ethical implications of this interpretation aside, this paper challenges dominant notions about temporary skilled migrants and their decision-making by investigating the experiences of the specific group of overseas-trained nurses on 457 visas. The analysis draws on interview data from a recently completed research project on temporary migration in the nursing sector. The first section reviews different theorisations of migration decisions.
The next section introduces the research project and methodology. The core of the paper focuses on an analysis of the factors and influences that have shaped the migration-related decisions and pathways of temporary migrant nurses in the research sample. The paper concludes with a critique of the trade-off argument in the light of the research findings.

**Migration decisions in theory**

Migration decisions have been a longstanding subject of scholarly analysis in several social science disciplines. The trajectory of this intellectual engagement has been shaped by the dominance of notions of rational choice, a disproportionate focus on economic dimensions of migration, and a poor integration of agency and structure. Classical and neoclassical economic analyses of migration-related decisions have largely relied on conceptualizations of migrants as rational actors who base their decisions on cost-benefit calculations in relation to labour market opportunities, wage differentials or the generosity of the welfare system in the destination country (Borjas 1989; Sancak and Finke 2006; Mayda 2010; Koopmans 2010). Such interpretations of migration decisions depict migrants not only as calculating decision-makers but also as particularly entrepreneurial and ambitious (Chiswick 2000; Borjas 1987). Temporary migrants are often seen as a particularly calculating group. For example, Michael Piore (1979) highlighted the role of identity and biographical contexts in permanent migration but regarded temporary migrants as a case apart because of their ‘purely instrumental’ migration motives. He described them as ‘probably the closest thing in real life to the *homo oeconomicus* of economic theory’ (Piore 1979, 54).

Sociologists of migration have also highlighted the role of economic factors in the initiation of migration, generally within a discussion of push and pull factors. Thus they point to employment availability, higher wages, and an overall higher standard of living as pull
factors, and, vice versa, poverty, a lack of jobs or career opportunities in the departure
country as push factors for migrants (McKay 2009). Some sociologists have however
contested exclusively economic explanations of migration and highlighted other social and
structural influences and motives (Castles 2013). Recent sociological migration theory has
explored the structural influences of racialized and gendered differentials of privilege and
disadvantage at the macro level (Castles and Miller 2009; Bonacich, et al 2008; Sassen 1988),
as well as the role of family households, social networks and diasporas at the micro and meso
level (Faist 2000; Faist and Özveren 2004).

Missing from theories of migration overall is an adequate integration of structure and agency
(Bakewell 2010). Such integration is also pivotal for a better understanding of the migration
decisions and experiences of temporary migrants, which seems to have been obstructed by
the tension of viewing the latter either through a utilitarian lens (Boese 2009) or as victims of
labour market exploitation (Velayutham 2013; Toh and Quinlan 2009).

The category of ‘economic migrants’, increasingly used in the public domain as well as in
migration theory to distinguish voluntary migrants from forced migrants (McKay 2009),
exemplifies the reduction of complex and contingent migration-related decisions and motives
to the dichotomies of voluntary (economic) versus forced (refugee) migration, and rational
(benefit maximizing) versus emotional (fear of persecution) motives for migration. These
dichotomies reduce migrants to their - real or imagined - migration motives and simplify their
migration projects, which are often based on a mix of choice and constraint, rational
decisions and emotions (McKay 2009). In the public domain, consistent with the dominant
paradigm of economic rationalism, these categories are frequently associated with
assumptions about the costs and benefits of these arrivals to their destination countries, as the attributes ‘useful’ (temporary migrants) and ‘needy’ (refugees) suggest (Menz 2006).

The pursuit of a more balanced and integrated analysis of structure and agency in migration is hindered by the burden of representation carried by migration researchers, whose findings are readily used for a range of political purposes. The prioritising of either agency or structure in analyses of migration decisions and experiences can be shaped by an ethical concern with the social, political or economic vulnerability of their research subjects. Such a politics of representation thus adds further complexity to the task of analysing migrants’ migration-related decision-making.

**Temporary migrant nurses: the research**

To examine the issue of agency more closely, this paper draws on data from a research project on temporary migrant nurses in Australia.iii The research methods included examination of statistical sources and legal documents; interviews with 21 key informants from different government departments, trade unions, and employers; and in-depth interviews with 26 migrants who have worked as registered nurses in Australia while holding a 457 visa. The paper draws primarily on the qualitative interviews with registered nurses currently or previously on 457 visas. The interviews were conducted by phone and followed a semi-structured interview schedule that covered the nurses’ biographies, with questions on their pre-arrival education and employment, migration motives and expectations, the recruitment, visa application and nurse registration processes, employment and more general settlement experiences in Australia.
The interviewed nurses came from 12 countries, ten nurses were from the main English-speaking countries while 16 were from other countries. The sample included five men and 21 women. Most of those with immediate family had come to Australia with their families.

We recruited potential participants through ads in two issues of the *Australian Nursing Journal*, a monthly publication of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF). Using the union journal to recruit participants may have imparted a bias, though we can note that union density is high and the journal is widely available at the workplace, even to non-members. Possible limitations of the sample are a bias either to nurses with positive experiences or to those with negative experiences that have subsequently been overcome. However, there remains substantial diversity in the interviewees and in the experiences recounted.

**Contextualized temporary migration decisions**

The notion of a trade-off made by temporary migrants in the migration process tends to rest on three implicit assumptions; firstly, that these migrants make a well-informed and economically centred migration decision; secondly, that their temporary migration always achieves financial returns; thirdly, that they return to their departure country once economic benefits have been achieved. I will now investigate each of these assumptions on the basis of the interview data.

**Assumption 1: Well-informed, economically motivated migration decisions**

A wide range of motives influenced migration decisions amongst the interviewees. These included the expectation of better career opportunities or better employment conditions in the health sector (6 interview participants); and higher incomes, especially in the context of the economic downturn in Europe (5). But beyond these economic motives other factors cited
included: the hope for a higher professional status (1); a better life for the children (3); a better work-life balance (1); freedom from discrimination and an overall better or safer life (2); a sense of adventure (4); a desire to explore other work contexts (2); to improve one’s prospects to work in an English-speaking country (2); social and family connections (3) and the weather or the Australian lifestyle in general (3).

Australia was the first choice for some research participants, partly based on earlier visits, partly based on their ideas about Australia. Others, however, decided to come to Australia because of circumstance, for example because the processing of the 457 visa turned out to be much swifter than a temporary visa to their preferred destination country; or because colleagues in their departure country had migrated to Australia. Some nurses with work experience from the UK chose Australia because the nursing system was seen as comparable; others mainly because it was seen as English-speaking. Information levels about life and work in Australia were often minimal. Rather than calculating costs and benefits before departing, several research participants were caught by surprise when faced with the specific conditions of living as temporary migrants in Australia, including the higher than expected living costs, unfamiliar work environments, and their position as tax payers without access to the welfare system.

Even where economic motives were in the foreground prior to departing, migration decisions were rarely based on high levels of reliable information. If a trade-off was expected, then this expectation was based on hope rather than an informed calculation of costs and benefits, as the example of Victoria from South Africa suggests:
Actually to be honest I was very ignorant. To me I was just thinking of my brother and the money that I am going to make and then the fact that I will be able to send him to the university. This was my main, but I must tell you it was a big shock.

**Assumption 2: Achieving financial returns**

The expectation of gaining economic benefits through working abroad emerged hence as just one of several motives for migration in our research sample. Contrary to such an expectation, many of the research participants described their experience on the temporary visa as tainted by financial stress and economic adversity. An important contributing factor was the cost of compulsory private health insurance due to the exemption of 457 visa holders from Medicare and welfare payments. In some cases financial shortcomings were exacerbated where the nurse was a sole earner due to their partner’s difficulties in finding work as temporary visa holders. Education costs for children and higher than expected living and rental costs often added to the financial burden, especially when the 457 visa holder came from a poorer country of origin.

Daya from Zimbabwe who moved to Australia from the UK explained:

(R)ight now because (my husband) finished Uni two years ago, he did banking and finance and obviously can’t get a job in banking sectors at all. And just looking for any job even in cleaning, the first question is, are you permanent resident or citizen, if you’re not they won’t employ you. Yeah that’s how hard it is, so we are living on my salary and it’s just difficult to get to pay rent other bills, food, transport.

Those migrants who had to complete a bridging course before being able to register and practice as nurses, or nurses who were experiencing delays in their nurse registration,
additionally suffered from periods without income for which they had not budgeted. Furthermore, it is this latter group of 457 visa holders that emerged as more likely to pay money to migration agents and send remittances to their family overseas. iv

Assumption 3: Return after achieving economic benefits
The notion that temporary skilled migrants exercise unfettered control of their migration pathway and freely return to their departure country after achieving financial gains, does not correspond with reality in most cases. All but two research participants were either considering an application for a permanent resident visa (PR), had already applied for a PR or already held a PR at the time of interview. Other research suggests that this trend is not confined to nurses (Khoo, Hugo and McDonald 2008). However there is no guarantee in the current regulation of the scheme that the aspiration for a PR can be realized. The most straightforward pathway to a PR is via employer sponsorship, and usually this means requesting sponsorship from the current 457 visa sponsor. This puts obvious pressure on the aspiring applicant to be compliant in their job to not jeopardize future sponsorship for permanent residency. Rather than being free to go back home if they are not satisfied, many 457 visa holders are indeed ‘sticking it out’ until they gain a PR, as Amor from the Philippines suggests.

And then when I apply (for) my PR, I’d probably look at changing not changing careers but maybe find other employers.

The accounts of the interviewed nurses highlight the contingent nature of their decisions, plans and hopes for the future, dependent on a mix of regulatory constraints, personal
ambitions, economic interests of third parties such as employers, and needs of other family members to name but a few.

The bureaucratic labels of permanent and temporary migrants evoke a dichotomy between migrants who come to stay and those who don’t, but this dichotomy does not capture the fluidity and open-ended nature of migrants’ pathways. As accounts of migration have long shown, migrants routinely divert from their original pre-departure plan, and settle permanently where they intended to stay only temporarily, or vice versa. In our research sample, one of the few nurses who came with a definite - and economically driven - plan to stay for one year and earn enough to finance her brother's education back home, ended up marrying an Australian, having a child and applying for the Australian citizenship. Most others have long harboured the wish to become permanent residents and have encountered significant obstacles in achieving this goal.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In the public domain and even some scholarly discourses on migration, adverse living or working conditions are frequently presented as a quasi-price that migrants must pay in the short-term in order to secure long-term economic gains. This perspective is based on three premises, which this paper has challenged on the basis of interviews with nurses on 457 visas. Firstly, the data suggests that for these nurses economic motives are only one of several motives for their decision to migrate to Australia. Secondly, the assumption of guaranteed returns through such migration is challenged by the economic pressures, which most research participants experienced due to a number of factors. These included the exemption of temporary migrants from Medicare and social welfare payments; the difficulties in entering the labour market experienced by many partners of 457 visa holders; and the additional costs
of bridging courses, migration agents and remittances, especially for 457 visa holders from non-Main English Speaking countries. Finally, most nurses in the sample strive for permanent residency yet are largely dependent on their employer’s sponsorship to realize this aim.

It is clear from the nurses’ accounts that the figure of a temporary skilled migrant, who bases her migration decision as *homo oeconomicus* merely on cost-benefit calculations and leaves when the sums have worked out, is overly simplistic. It needs replacing by a more nuanced analysis that is sensitive to the contingent nature of migration pathways and decisions and examines migrants’ agency in the context of the wider political economy of global migration, the role of national regulatory frameworks, the interests and influences of employers, and social and family relations of migrants. The neat, bureaucratic category of skilled temporary migrant might fit the governmental imaginary of self-sufficient labour units that come and go depending on economic needs, yet its heuristic value for research is limited.

**References**


Hall, B. (2013) ’457 visas: more than 10,000 are rorting system, says minister’, The Age 28 April 2013.


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1 In this paper the term ‘skilled migrants’ is used as a shorthand term to describe entrants in the Skilled Migration stream. It is not within the scope of this paper to problematize this category which falsely suggests a clear distinction between migrants who hold skills and those who do not, and thus conceals the fuzziness of the notion of ‘skills’ and ‘skilled’ (see Anderson and Ruhs 2010).

2 Introduced in 1996, the 457 program is the main migration program that allows temporary entry of skilled migrants for the specific purpose of employment. The applicant needs to be sponsored by an approved employer. The visas can last from one day to four years and can be renewed several times. 457 visa workers, the ‘primary visa-holders’, are entitled to bring immediate family members (‘secondary visa-holders’). Under the regulations applicable to the visa holders in the research sample, the latter can transfer employers within 28 days of leaving or losing a job, provided that the new employer meets the relevant migration requirements (Tham and Campbell 2011).

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iv For a discussion of this link, see Boese, Campbell et al. 2013.