

Skill Production Regimes and Immigrant Labor Market Integration

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Abstract

In recent years, Western countries have been experiencing a significant increase in both humanitarian and economic immigration. With the number of migrants, the challenges of integration have also surged. In consequence, host countries have invested a considerable amount of resources in comprehensive and effective immigrant integration policies. Various integration measures, such as foreign credential recognition or education and (re-)training, have been implemented to help immigrants with their transition into the host country's labor market. The success of such policies, we argue, depends not only on their extent and coverage but also on whether they are compatible with other institutional characteristics of the host countries. This contribution hence asks to what extent host countries' immigrant integration policies aligned with these countries' skill production regimes channel immigrants into the labor market and consequently are responsible for the cross-national differences in immigrants' economic integration. We expect that immigrants, particularly those with a less marketable status (e.g., refugees or asylum seekers), should have higher incentives to acquire host-country-specific education or to have their source country education recognized in countries that lay a stronger emphasis on highly specific vocational skills. They also should have higher labor market returns on their investments in countries with more vocationally oriented education systems (such as in Germany and Austria) as opposed to countries with more generally oriented education systems (such as Ireland and the United Kingdom).

CHALLENGES OF IMMIGRANT LABOR MARKET INTEGRATION

International migration is one of the major global challenges of the current century. Western countries have recently experienced a surge in immigration from the Middle East and North Africa, also known as *refugee crisis*, with Europe and particularly Germany being major destinations. Humanitarian migration channels including family reunifications are likely to remain at the top of the scientific and political agendas in the future. Furthermore, in recent decades, industrialized countries have increasingly been competing

for highly skilled immigrants from all over the world, with the United States, Canada, and Australia being the leading net beneficiaries and—in the European context—the United Kingdom and Germany profiting most in absolute numbers (Widmaier & Dumont, 2011). The bulk of highly educated migrants in the OECD comes from the developing world, with one third stemming from Asia, predominantly India (Arslan *et al.*, 2014).

In light of the increasing humanitarian as well as economic migrations, host countries spend considerable efforts to help newcomers with their transition into the host country's labor market, for example, by providing various integration measures, such as foreign credential recognition or education and (re-)training. Despite these efforts, there is considerable variation in the extent of immigrants' labor market integration. Some countries are notoriously known for particular difficulties newcomers have to experience in order to adequately integrate into host country labor markets as well as for immigrants' persistent unemployment and overqualification. In other countries, immigrant labor market insertion seems to work smoother (Fleischmann & Dronkers, 2010; Heath & Cheung, 2007; Kogan, 2007; Van Tubergen, Maas, & Flap, 2004). These various patterns prompt the question why some countries are more successful than others in both preparing immigrants for and providing them with work.

In search of answers, scholars have looked mainly at the impact of host country characteristics, for example, immigration and integration policies, labor markets, educational systems, and welfare regimes (Kogan, 2007; Reitz, 1998; Sassen, 1991). In order to explain why countries differ with regard to immigrants' labor market integration, we have to scrutinize whether host countries' immigrant labor market integration policies are successful, that is, enable efficient utilization of immigrants' skills and transferability of their credentials (Kogan, 2016a). However, it is important to look not just at the integration policies but also at their interaction with other host countries' institutional characteristics. Consequently, one of the guiding questions in this research is to what extent integration policies, aligned with host countries' skill production regimes, channel immigrants' labor market integration.

In pursuit of this question, it is essential to address the micro-theoretical foundations of why immigrants' skills and credentials might be discounted in a new host country context and how this could be remedied. However, it is equally important to take a close look at relevant institutions—skill production regimes and labor market types—that have received extensive scholarly attention in the past with regard to explaining other societal phenomena, such as school-to-work transitions. Linking micro-theoretical mechanisms with macro-level conditions should enable us to formulate some exemplary

hypotheses regarding possible institutional effects of immigrant integration. As our empirical case study illustrates, confronting theory with empirical data is often a challenge. Still, a great deal can be learned from the analyses presented here, which can be seen as a prelude to an upcoming research program.

EDUCATIONAL CREDENTIALS IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION: A MICRO-THEORETICAL APPROACH

Full utilization of immigrants' labor market potential and avoidance of societal exclusion are important goals on the way to immigrant integration into receiving societies. Hence, it is important to understand why immigrants might experience labor market difficulties in general and problems with the transferability of their skills and credentials into a new context in particular.

The dominant pattern of immigrant economic integration is that immigrants arriving in a new country face initial difficulties: they are often downgraded occupationally and earn lower wages than natives of comparable socioeconomic characteristics (Borjas, 1994; Chiswick, 1979). One of the obvious explanations for this is that skills and resources—human, social, and cultural capital—are of limited value because of the difficulties in their transferability from distant cultural, social, and institutional contexts and in their applicability in more individualistic and credentialist receiving societies (Kogan, Kalter, Liebau, & Cohen, 2011). Circumstances of migration might also play a role and determine the nature of immigrants' resources: those who have an opportunity to carefully plan their migration move—mostly economic migrants—are more likely to possess ready-to-use skills and marketable qualifications. Refugees and asylum seekers, by virtue of the circumstances of their escape from war-torn regions or flight from political, religious, or ethnic persecution, are less likely to possess immediately transferable skills and valid educational certificates.

Most newcomers—irrespective of their migration status—find their foreign credentials or skills of little value and are likely to experience occupational disadvantages. This is particularly the case when applying for a job, where immigrants might fall into the trap of informational discrimination (Cain, 1986). Employers generally use credentials to verify if the candidate has the necessary job prerequisites and to determine whether the salary and status of the open position are suited to the candidate. Consequently, immigrants here are at a disadvantage due to the employers' lack of information on the foreign educational credentials. One way to overcome the employers' uncertainties is to increase the possibility of evaluating foreign credentials and therefore the amount of reliable information available during the recruitment process. This

can be achieved, for example, through recommendations or official *certificates of recognition*.

Another instrument to improve the labor market prospects of immigrants is *post-migration human capital accumulation*. According to human capital theory, immigrants' productivity is likely to be enhanced if the host country invests in human capital through education and training, especially when it comes to professional knowledge and host country language skills (Becker, 1964). From the signaling perspective, host country education can serve as a signal to employers, indicating immigrant's perseverance and trainability (Spence, 1973). Therefore, the informational value of the credentials reduces the uncertainty factors in the recruitment process. However, the compensation of this occupational disadvantage for immigrants will only be successful if employers actually use these officially recognized foreign certificates or rely on host-country education credentials in their recruitment decision and if they favor them over foreign educational certificates that lack official approval.

To sum up our micro-theoretical considerations, immigrants whose qualifications are recognized in the host country and who have acquired host country education as well as training are expected to attain employment of higher occupational status. Host-country-specific and recognized educational qualifications should particularly pay off for refugees/asylum seekers because of otherwise possible difficulties with the identification and evaluation of foreign qualifications among this vulnerable group.

SKILL PRODUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION: A MACRO-THEORETICAL APPROACH

Our next point of departure is that the structure of opportunities for immigrants to gain adequate returns on their education—which has been either acquired in the host country or imported from abroad but recognized in the receiving country—is likely to depend on the *skill production regimes* and the *education–job linkages* in the host country.

The skill production regime approach attempts to incorporate arguments about strategies of skill investment at the individual level and skill production at the country level into the welfare regime concept (Estevez-Abe, Iversen, & Soskice, 2001). The main claim is that the ways in which workers invest in their skills and the types of skills they subsequently possess (either general, firm- or industry-specific skills) determine the set of their potential advantages or vulnerabilities in the system of employment, unemployment, and wage protection. Scholars generally distinguish two types of skill production regimes: liberal market economies (LMEs) and coordinated market economies (CMEs) (Estevez-Abe *et al.*, 2001; Hall & Soskice, 2001). While

education in LMEs is usually structured along general skills and subjects, CMEs rather provide highly specialized skills through dual vocational training systems that combine workplace-based training in firms and education in vocational schools. Consequently, the occupation-tailored skills acquired within CMEs are less transferable than the more general skills acquired within LMEs. Building on Estevez-Abe *et al.*'s (2001) idea of the portability of skills, Busemeyer (2009) suggests a further subdivision within CME countries between integrationist and differentiated skill regimes, with Sweden (and its school-based vocational training) and Germany (with its workplace-based vocational training) being their respective prototypes. This further fine-graded differentiation comes closer to another approach to occupational specificity of education systems and education–job linkages, as proposed in the school-to-work transition literature (Müller & Kogan, 2010).

This approach makes a distinction between occupational labor markets (OLMs) and internal labor markets (ILMs) (Marsden, 1999). In OLMs, job matching is highly channeled through educational qualifications, that is, jobs require appropriate skill levels. In contrast, labor market entry in ILM systems is less dependent on educational credentials (Gangl, 2003). Contrasting patterns of employment entry in the two systems are generally found among young people at the (upper-)secondary educational level, where OLM countries typically have a stronger vocational element. OLM–ILM differentiation seems to be equally applicable for post-secondary education graduates as well (Matković & Kogan, 2012).

Both the classical skill production regime approach and the literature dealing with education–job linkages do not refer to the issue of immigrant skills and their applicability in various institutional settings. More recent research argues that immigrants with different types of training (general or specific) and skill levels (both low and high) can be more easily accommodated in LMEs (Menz, 2011, p. 538). CMEs, on the other hand, are predominantly interested in accepting highly skilled immigrants, whose skills largely correspond to the domestic standards. However, Menz (2011) remains vague as to whether immigrants are able to directly practice jobs that correspond to their skill levels because of the importance of certification in determining the portability of vocational skills in OLMs or differentiated CMEs. This certification might appear crucial for vocationally educated immigrants whose credentials hardly match the standards of highly specialized vocational training, carried out in a dual framework of vocational schools and firms, as it is practiced in typical OLM countries, such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and in a limited number of other countries.

Building upon Kogan (2016b), we argue that informational discrimination due to the lack of reliable evidence is more virulent if employers have

to rely strongly on educational credentials in the recruitment process. It might therefore be a bigger issue in OLM/CME countries, where foreign education hardly provides the same signals to employers as host country education under any circumstances. Hence, immigrants who acquired their education and training in the host country of the OLM/CME profile after their migration should fare better in terms of occupational attainment than those with unrecognized educational qualifications. At the same time, the difference in occupational returns on skills acquired from a more generally oriented educational system of the ILM/LME host countries and immigrants' unrecognized educational qualifications from abroad should be smaller. With regard to educational recognition, a similar logic applies: in countries in which educational systems send particularly strong signals to employers, as in OLMs/CMEs, immigrants with educational qualifications that are recognized in the host country should enjoy higher returns on their education than migrants without recognized qualifications. In ILMs/LMEs, in which education is perceived as less crucial for labor market entry and skills are generally considered more portable, recognition of foreign education should be less important for labor market success, and the differences between immigrants with and without recognized educational qualifications should be less pronounced. We further expect that vulnerable immigrants, such as refugees and asylum seekers, in particular, should profit more from training and accreditation within the OLM/CME systems, where employers should be especially interested in obtaining any clues in order to overcome information deficits associated with this group's educational resources.

On a country level, we argue that host countries have different incentives to invest in the transferability of immigrants' education. From the macro interpretation of the human capital theory, we expect more efforts on behalf of the OLM/CME countries to invest in vocational education and training as well as in accreditation of credentials among the immigrant population. These should consequently lead to higher proportions of immigrants acquiring host country education or training and applying for accreditation of their credentials. In sum, we claim that immigrant integration policies will ensure more effective labor market integration among immigrants only if they match the nature of the skill production and labor market setting in the respective host country.

ILLUSTRATING INSTITUTIONAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF IMMIGRANTS' INTEGRATION

Empirical research that links skill production regimes, immigrant integration policies, and immigrants' economic integration is scarce. One exception is

a study by Kogan (2016b), which, however, does not differentiate between the various immigrant statuses (economic, family, refugee) when discussing the role of integration measures in immigrant occupational attainment. Hence, a new empirical case study has been carried out in order to illustrate how integration policies interact with skill production regimes and whether differentiated returns are observed among immigrants of different status with regard to recognized and newly acquired educational qualifications in OLM/CME and ILM/LME countries.

Similar to Kogan (2016b), this empirical illustration is based on the micro-level data of the European Union Labor Force Survey (EULFS) ad hoc module on the labor market situation of migrants (2008) and focuses on immigrants aged 20–64 with maximum 10 years of residence in the host country. The analyses are restricted to immigrants in four countries: Austria and Germany (as typical representatives of OLM/CME regimes), and Ireland and the United Kingdom (as ideal cases of ILM/LME regimes). The following categories of immigrants are in focus: those who arrived with employment intentions (economic migrants), asylum seekers or refugees (immigrants seeking international protection), family migrants (including those arriving for family formation or reunification), and others (including student migrants). The question whether immigrants have used facilities for establishing what the highest educational qualification equates to in the host country encompasses the following categories: attained host country education, gained recognition of foreign credentials, failed to have foreign credentials recognized, never tried to have foreign credentials recognized, and had no need for recognition.

ARE INVESTMENTS IN IMMIGRANTS' HUMAN CAPITAL HIGHER IN THE OLM/CME CONTEXT?

Our theoretical expectations that investments in host country education and training as well as recognition attempts should be higher in OLM/CME countries cannot be substantiated when confronted with the EULFS 2008 ad hoc module data. On all indicators of investments in transferability of skills and education, the ILM/LME countries Ireland and the United Kingdom perform better. In these countries, the proportion of immigrants with host country education is somewhat higher, the share of immigrants with successfully recognized educational qualifications is substantially higher, and the amount of immigrants with no recognition or no need for recognition is lower.

Compared to other categories of migrants, economic migrants are less likely to obtain host country education in both ILM/LME and OLM/CME countries. Furthermore, almost half of all economic migrants (somewhat

fewer in ILM/LME countries) report no necessity for any educational recognition. Regarding those with educational recognition, ILM/LMEs and OLM/CMEs are relatively similar, although slightly more economic immigrants in ILM/LME countries have their educational qualifications recognized. At the same time, slightly more immigrants in ILM/LME countries report not to possess any recognized educational qualifications, which is largely because of never having applied for a recognition procedure.

Refugees have the highest share of host country education among all three categories of migrants within the ILM/LME context. In the OLM/CME context, substantially fewer refugees obtain host country education or possess recognized educational qualifications. The trends in recognition, rejection, and acquisition of host country education among family migrants in OLM/CME countries are rather similar to those observed among refugees. In the ILM/LME setting, refugees and family migrants are much more different with regard to their education. While more refugees than family migrants possess host country education, more family migrants possess educational qualifications recognized in the host country context. At the same time, considerably more family immigrants see no necessity in having their education recognized.

This allows us to conclude that, contrary to our expectations about higher incentives to have foreign education credentials recognized and attain host country education in the OLM/CME countries, much fewer immigrants tend to do so. The differences are particularly glaring among immigrants in stronger need for meaningful educational signals, such as refugees or asylum seekers but also family migrants. It has to be noted, however, that both ILM/LME and OLM/CME countries have accepted relatively few immigrants with refugee status between 1998 and 2008 (which is also reflected in the rather small number of respective cases in our data), and that situation might have changed in times of more significant refugee inflow.

DO IMMIGRANTS' INVESTMENTS IN HUMAN CAPITAL PAY OFF MORE IN TERMS OF ATTAINED OCCUPATIONS IN THE OLM/CME CONTEXT?

Now, the question arises why so few immigrants in OLM/CME countries make use of credential recognition or invest in schooling and training in the host countries. Can this be due to the insufficiently high rewards? Will we observe differences in returns to host country education and recognized foreign education among immigrants of different status? Is there evidence for the theoretically expected country group differences? To answer these

questions, we carry out OLS regression analyses predicting the occupational status of the current employment, which we capture by the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, & Treiman, 1992) scale.¹

With regard to the total sample of immigrants and the sample of economic migrants, we observe no significant differences in returns on host country education and recognized educational qualifications between ILM/LME and OLM/CME countries. In both groups of countries, immigrants with clearer signals of their education (achieved through either recognition or acquisition of host country schooling) attain jobs with higher occupational status than those who do not possess recognized educational qualifications. The ISEI premium is particularly pronounced for economic migrants when it comes to returns on host country education in OLM/CME countries. In ILM/LME countries, the pay-off for recognized and host-country-specific education is rather similar.

More substantial cross-national differences are observed among humanitarian migrants. While refugees reap benefits from their recognized education and host country education (the latter effect is, however, not statistically significant) in the OLM/CME countries, no similar trends are noticeable in the ILM/LME countries. Among family migrants, host country education pays off on the labor market in OLM/CME countries, whereas successful recognition increases the ISEI of the current occupation in the ILM/LME contexts. *Summa summarum*, we observe cross-national differences in favor of OLM/CME countries with regard to returns on successful recognition among refugees and host country education among family migrants. Accordingly, our expectation is largely confirmed: host-country-specific education and training hold higher pay-offs for more vulnerable immigrants in terms of occupational status in OLM/CME countries than in ILM/LME countries.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

In light of the continuing migration flows, the challenges of immigrants' integration have become ever more pressing. Host countries are in search of effective ways to help immigrants acquire resources necessary to navigate in the host country labor market and to make newcomers attractive for

1. The main independent variable is the educational situation in the host country, captured through three categories: possessing host country education, possessing recognized educational qualifications, and not possessing recognized educational qualifications (i.e., never applied for accreditation or failed to have their credentials recognized). Other covariates include sociodemographic variables such as gender and marital status, immigration characteristics such as ethnic origin, age at migration, years since migration, immigrants' participation in language courses, and labour market training programmes, and the type of residence permit.

employers. Host country education and training as well as educational credentials officially recognized in the host country might be helpful in this regard and increase immigrants' opportunities of attaining gainful employment. Numerous studies have shown the labor market benefits of country-specific human capital (Cohen-Goldner & Eckstein, 2010; Ferrer & Riddell, 2008; Kogan, 2012). Building on Kogan (2016b), we here argued that integration policies should not only be tailored to the needs of the labor market but also accord with the host countries skill production regimes in order to be effective. In countries with a stronger vocational specificity of the education system, greater emphasis on occupation-specific skills, and tighter links between education providers and employers (as in OLM/CME countries) signals provided by educational credentials should be particularly strong and occupation specific. In such contexts, employers might have difficulties in assessing immigrants' credentials if these are acquired abroad. In OLM/CME countries, it should hence be worthwhile for immigrants, particularly for those with a less marketable status (e.g., refugees or asylum seekers), to acquire host-country-specific education or to have their source country education recognized. In countries with a less strong and less specific vocational element in the education system and fewer established links between education providers and firms (like in ILM/LME countries), immigrants without host-country-specific credentials should experience less pronounced disadvantages.

Our empirical illustration of immigrants' occupational attainment in the typical OLM/CME countries Germany and Austria and in the typical ILM/LME countries Ireland and the United Kingdom delivered some not entirely unequivocal insights. For economic migrants, we hardly find any differences across the two groups of countries with respect to occupational attainment; similarly few differences are found with regard to host-country-specific human capital accumulation. Despite apparently higher returns on recognized as well as acquired education and training among humanitarian immigrants, much fewer of them possess education acquired or recognized in the host country in OLM/CMEs than in ILM/LMEs. In the latter, however, the lack of host-country-specific qualifications is not necessarily a handicap for refugees' or family migrants' occupational attainment, although many more of them acquire host-country-specific credentials. Overall—albeit not always entirely consistent—the presented empirical evidence is in favor of the thesis that host country education and recognized educational qualifications of humanitarian migrants are better rewarded in OLM/CME systems. A smoother access to host country education and the destruction of accreditation barriers for foreign-source credentials hence represent a key element to enhance the labor market prospects of immigrants, including more

vulnerable ones, such as refugees, particularly in countries with educational systems that tend to emphasize vocational skills. A puzzle about the lack of concordance between the investment patterns and labor market rewards on host-country-specific education remains, nevertheless, unsolved and calls for further scrutiny.

It certainly has to be noted that our illustrative example should be approached with a necessary degree of caution, as results reported here are by no means causal effects of acquisition/recognition of education. Panel data analyses focusing on within-individual variations could contribute to avoid the problem of endogeneity, which is likely to occur in such a type of research question. Furthermore, large-N multilevel approaches or studies exploring within-country institutional change in a (natural) experimental design are necessary in the future to provide conclusive causal evidence with regard to integration policy effects and the role of institutions in micro-level processes, which is not possible with a small-N study at country level such as this one. Another perspective worth exploring is a study of the employers' perceptions of immigrants' qualifications and their approaches in assessing educational signals. Further research along the lines proposed above should provide definitive answers to the following questions: (i) Do OLM/CME systems reward educational credentials that are recognized or required within the host country more favorably than ILM/LMEs? (ii) Do higher returns on host-country-specific educational qualifications have something to do with a more pronounced selectivity of those who succeeded in acquiring host-country-specific human capital in these countries? (iii) Will growing awareness of the importance of educational credential recognition as well as the acquisition of education and training in western receiving countries lead to higher proportions of immigrants who acquire host country education and succeed in translating their qualifications into favorable labor market positions?

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