

Seele, Peter

## Working Paper

"If your letter was in German, I would not understand a bit, and would have ignored that": Preliminary findings from a survey of highly skilled migrants from India and China with working/education experience in a German speaking country

Discussion Papers, No. 14/2011

## Provided in Cooperation with:

Witten/Herdecke University, Faculty of Management and Economics

*Suggested Citation:* Seele, Peter (2011) : "If your letter was in German, I would not understand a bit, and would have ignored that": Preliminary findings from a survey of highly skilled migrants from India and China with working/education experience in a German speaking country, Discussion Papers, No. 14/2011, Universität Witten/Herdecke, Fakultät für Wirtschaftswissenschaft, Witten

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/49949>

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**discussion papers**  
Fakultät für Wirtschaftswissenschaft  
Universität Witten/Herdecke

Neue Serie 2010 ff.  
Nr. 14 / 2011

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**Preliminary Findings from a Survey of Highly Skilled Migrants from India and China with working/education experience in a German speaking Country**

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Fakultät für Wirtschaftswissenschaft  
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[www.uni-wh.de/wirtschaft/discussion-papers](http://www.uni-wh.de/wirtschaft/discussion-papers)

Adresse des Verfassers:  
Prof. DDr. Peter Seele  
Faculty of Communication Sciences  
USI - University of Lugano  
via G. Buffi 13  
CH-6900 Lugano  
[peter.seele@usi.ch](mailto:peter.seele@usi.ch)

Redakteure  
für die Fakultät für Wirtschaftswissenschaft

Prof. Dr. Michèle Morner / Prof. Dr. Birger P. Priddat

Für den Inhalt der Papiere sind die jeweiligen Autoren verantwortlich.

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Preliminary Findings from a Survey of Highly Skilled Migrants from India and China with working/education experience in a German speaking Country

**Peter Seele**

## **1 Highly Skilled Migration and Cultural Issues: Introduction and Overview**

The three German speaking countries Austria, Germany and Switzerland are in a specific and yet common situation in the global ‘war for talent’: On the one hand the three countries are highly industrialised and integrated in the global knowledge economy. On the other hand compared to classical immigration countries for highly skilled migrants like the U.S., Canada or U.K. their cultural proposition indicated by the common German language has not been addressed adequately in the scholarly literature on highly skilled migration (HSM).

To understand the specific situation the three German speaking countries are in, the paper presents four subchapters on a. the global competition on the highly skilled labour market between nation states and between (transnational) organisations, b. the political institutions in the European Union and primarily Germany having the greatest demand for highly skilled workers, c. the impact of the German language as additional obstacle to attract the highly skilled, and d. the (political) controversy in Germany exemplified by the contradictions to be found in the two

documents „Migrationsbericht 2008“ and „Einwanderungsgesellschaft 2010“, both addressing highly skilled migration explicitly.

Based on the specific situation of the three countries the paper changes perspective to the specific situation of India- and China-born highly skilled migrations and their incentives and motivations for the decision to migrate and to return and their experiences with the specific situation of German speaking countries. .

## 1.1 Global war for talent: The situation in the German speaking countries

With regard to the export-driven economy of the three German speaking countries there is a shortage of highly skilled workers. If we add the demographic challenge the demand for highly skilled workers in order to sustain the pension system in the present and in the future is even more pressing, especially if we take into account that the free movement of human capital is a key factor in a global economy (Zimmermann 2009). Numbers of a shortage of highly skilled workers vary between 50.000 and 300.000 only in Germany causing a loss<sup>1</sup> of 50 Billion Euro as J. Milberg from the German federal government states (Spiegel 21.3.09). Following the Lisboa-strategy for competitiveness in Europe it is necessary to compensate the shortage only because of the growth-strategy that is necessary to maintain status quo and to reduce debt.

First attempts to address the issue of attracting more highly skilled persons from abroad can be seen for the German case e. g. in the new (1.1.2005) German immigration-act (“Zuwanderungsgesetz”) and a Green-Card-Initiative („Sofortprogramm zur Deckung des IT-Fachkräftebedarfs“) in the year 2000 with a focus on information technology. Within four years altogether only 17.931 highly skilled immigrated into Germany. This relatively small number of immigrants becomes even more dramatic with 4.1 % netto-immigration with tertiary attainment in Germany compared to classical immigration countries like the US (12.7 %) or Canada (20.4%) (OECD 2007). One important feature in attracting the highly skilled is a precise and adaptive

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<sup>1</sup>More precisely it would be more correct to speak of additional income that never was earned instead of loss.

legal structure to channel immigration along specific immigration criteria (Borella 2008). The German system for instance is trapped between adjustment and defence (Bommes 2006: 9). The best know system is from Canada, where applicants have to collect ‚points‘ in order to cross the threshold to be eligible to immigrate into Canada according the specific needs defined by the system. The European Union in order to catch up with the success of the classical immigration countries develops a new Blue-Card-Initiative making it more easy for the highly skilled to work in the European Union (Kancs/Ciaian 2007) (however, it should be noted that the new Blue-Card-Initiative is associated with the brain drain discussion (Faini 2003) which applies to all highly skilled migration and which is not within the scope of this study).

The Swiss situation is different, although the quantitatively most important language is German as well. However, not being member of the EU different laws apply as well as a different political system. Last but not least Switzerland has a strong vernacular orientation and a more important apprenticeship-orientation (Sheldon 2009).

Next to the political and legal status of immigration there are other issues the influence the attractiveness of potential immigration countries for the highly skilled. A major cultural issue is the official language of the destination country. Here the German speaking countries are in a less competitive position in comparison to the US, Canada, Australia or the UK as their ‚mother tongue‘ is English being the lingua franca of the corporate world as well as the academic world.

With regard to the specific situation of Europe in comparison to the traditional immigration countries we may observe what can be described as ‚patriotic lock-in‘ due to the limited mobility of the own highly skilled (Florida 2002). A tolerance towards high taxes in France and Germany increases the effect (Qari et al. 2009).

## 1.2 Foreign languages and the political influence on Diaspora-societies

To attract highly skilled persons from abroad cultural factors play an important role next to individual economic incentives of wages. Language can be seen as significant criterion when it comes to the decision where to work abroad and with respect to Germany (German) economists asked “Why Go to France or Germany, if You Could as Well Go to the UK” (Geis et al 2008). Language next to wages and distance can therefore be seen a very important factor as numbers of the German migration report suggest: 95 % of highly skilled migrants in Germany have “good” skills in English, whereas only 60 % have “good” skills in German. Based on observations of the last four years the importance of German for the highly skilled is decreasing (BMI 2010: 108).

In general we can conclude that English has a privileged status compared to other languages for two reasons.

1. English is the lingua franca of globalization. Transnational corporations and organizations use English also outside English-speaking countries as „corporate language“.
2. Highly skilled persons e.g. from India may work in English-speaking countries without learning an additional language. This applies also to non-English-speaking countries increasingly.

Nevertheless, multilingualism matters still when it comes to family migration and if persons along with their peers decide to live in a specific country.

Leaving aside competitive factors such as payment, career perspective, distance or climate the German language may indicate a disadvantage in the global competition because of higher set-up- and transaction-costs. The increasing importance of English-speaking university programs and English-speaking corporate languages as stated by the participants of the survey supports the idea of a disadvantage caused by the German language.

But there are also steps undertaken to address the language issue and the possible disadvantage of German-speaking countries in order to be more attractive to non-German-speaking persons with high skills. In Switzerland e. g. the Swiss Science Foundation (SNF) in April 2011 started to publish its newsletter also in English in addition to the official languages in Switzerland. Already in 2001 the question has been raised whether or not English can be seen as a 5<sup>th</sup> national language of Switzerland (Watts/Murray 2001). These steps can be seen as steps towards greater integration of English as a global professional language being part of the local, yet dominated by colloquial, regional dialects, language culture of the country.

## **2 Individual criteria for the decision to work abroad.**

### **2.1 Economic criteria**

For centuries people by migration seek for economic betterment and opportunities to prosper. The notion of a nation state and the idea of citizenship and national belonging allow us to generate data on the flows of migration between different countries. Based on data from the World Bank the ratio between equivalent jobs in terms of wages is 1:5. This following the Worldbank is the most important criterion for migration (Worldbank 2006).

If migrants keep their expenditures in the destination country low, the ratio increases due to remittances to their peers in the origin country (Straubhaar 2003). At the same time highly skilled migrants after a certain period of experience get the chance to settle and/or to obtain the citizenship of the destination country.

In general we may state: people migrate, when the benefits are bigger than the costs in connection with the decision to migrate (Kancs/Ciaian 2007: 11). Next to purely monetary costs we may also take into account social costs imposed by leaving family and friends. In addition cultural adoption costs have to be paid as well as language barriers. The cost-benefit analysis is for every individual

different as the importance of social embeddedness is individual just as the sense for adventure in a new country.

An additional criterion is the improvement of career perspectives nationally as well as internationally by working in a foreign country.

## 2.2 Cultural criteria, „professional ethnicity“ and homogenisation of language-communities

The economic benefits for highly skilled migrants especially from less developed countries into developed countries are evident. Nevertheless certain opportunity costs have to be taken into account such as leaving family and friends and living in a foreign country with strangers, possibly also speaking a foreign language (Sen 2006: 29: Choice and Constraints). The acknowledgement of “non-economic considerations” increases momentum also in labor economics (Kancs/Ciaian 2007: 11).

Therefore language as criterion for migration decisions certainly is a criteria, especially if we take the trend of what has been described as “homogenization of national languages” (Bhushi 2007: 144) into account. The most important meanings of language in globalisation can be seen in: Exchange of information, language skills, to study abroad, adoption of education to an international level, English as a world language and lifelong learning (Continentan AG laut Statista 2009).

The homogenization of languages also goes along with the decline of local dialects as the society for German language as pointed out. From 1991 to 2008 the use of dialect has decreased from 55 % to below 48 % (GfdS laut Statista 2009). The decline or extinction of local dialect may help highly skilled migrants from abroad to more easily integrate themselves in the destination country as the language is more standardized and (social) exclusion may not be achieved via local language communities. On the contrary English is increasingly important and it can be observed

that a mixture of English and German with the name “Denglish” (GfDS laut Statista 2009) emerges leading to certain negative impacts as a survey has shown:

- Loss of German words (73 %)
- Loss of specific aspects, that characterize the German language (61%)
- German loses importance internationally (42%)

The participants of the survey from the GfDS identify also positive aspects, which nevertheless weight less compared to the negative above:

- Easier communication with non-German-speaking persons (40%)
- German becomes more modern and international (25%)
- Learning English becomes more easy (22%)

Concluding from the data of the survey practical benefits are perceived as less useful than the loss of cultural cohesion and identify related to the influence of English to the German language. For highly skilled migrants, however, the practical benefits of a more prevalent English language are of major importance. In addition as we can learn from regional studies and research on clusters, a common language within professional networks fosters coherence and it also has been observed, that professional networks come up with their own terminologies and private languages within peer groups (Bathelt, Palmberg, Maskell 2004: 45).

In terms of cultural identity concerning the origin country, the discussion in the literature has been about ethnicity. To determine the ethnicity of migrants Jasso (2009) has developed five criteria of ethnicity: country of birth, race, skin color, language, religion. The criteria of ethnicity and religion also has gained momentum in the discussion of highly skilled migration (Baumann/Behloul 2005). Saxenian e. g. coined the term “ethnic professionals” by which she means Chinese and Indian first-generation-immigrants to the US, who by their skills were also able to productively work in their origin countries (Saxenian 2006: 5). Saxenian observed that “ethnic professionals” also share language skills, cultural affinity and to a certain extend a comparable perspective being highly skilled migrants. This as a consequence fosters trust among highly skilled migrants with a common cultural (Saxenian 2006: 14 u. 76).

### 2.3 Language, (colonial-) history and globalization: the case of India

In institutional economics history in terms of pathdependent development has become part of economic reasoning (North 1992). With regard to highly skilled migration pathdependent developments especially concerning colonial history are of major importance, as the example of India indicates. In the case of India the 'heritage' is of foremost importance as English has become one of the 23 official languages and still is the Indian wide standard concerning public administration and education, although English is only the 44<sup>th</sup> language according to the size of its native speakers within the 122 official languages with more than 10.000 native speakers (Azam/Chin/Prakash 2010:3). The official use of English in education and administration matches exquisitely with the fact that English is the language of the global corporate world (Hedrick-Wong 2008:4).

When it comes to highly skilled migration persons of Indian origin therefore do have a substantial competitive advantage. At the same time this advantage appears to be an obstacle to migrate in a non-English-speaking country due to the additional costs of learning an extra language.

Following Azam/Chin/Prakash (2010) the pathdependency of English as an administrative language has played a key role in economic development that was as a consequence enhanced in the cause of globalization. Based on data from the India Human Development Survey 2005 the authors calculated that proficiency in English leads to 34 % higher wages in India. This equals graduation from secondary school and half of the benefit a bachelor degree provides. Even minor knowledge of English leads to wage increase of 13 % (Azam/Chin/Prakash 2010:21).

With regard to German speaking countries it can be claimed that they do not benefit from the specific disposition India has because of the lack of prevalence of English as a corporate language.

# 3 Results of the Survey

## 3.1 The survey: timeline, participants, cooperating partners

The entire survey was conducted in English to reach the maximal amount of participants from India and China. The questionnaire of the survey comprises of seven chapters with the headlines: 1. Introduction (biographical information), 2. Decision for Migration, 3. Transnationalism, 4. Regional Institutions, 5. Cultural Institutions, 6. Social Institutions, 7. End (trends and recommendations). The survey was conducted online. The questionnaire was accessible from Jan. 20th 2010 until March 20th 2010. The first invitation to participate was circulated on Jan. 20<sup>th</sup>. 2010. A brief reminder was sent on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2010.

The survey was sent only to persons with a tertiary education from the two destination countries China and India, who have been to one of the three German speaking countries Austria, Germany or Switzerland. The survey has not been sent to the participants directly. The invitation to participate was sent to alumni of the three academic exchange services: Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), Österreichischer Akademischer Austauschdienst (ÖAD), Schweizer Nationalfond (SNF), International Office Tonji University Shanghai (CDHK) and the foreign student office of Basel university (Switzerland). Therefore it is not possible to give a precise account of the exact return rate of the survey. However it can be estimated that the return rate is between 15 and 20 %. From 586 participants 69,5 % were male and 30,5 % were female. Altogether only a very small number of 2,9 % had a different citizenship than from their origin country India or China. But 17,9 % were residents of a different country than their origin country. Out of this 17,9 % 8,2 % lived in another county than the three German speaking

countries. The biggest share of 3,6 % lives in the U.S.A followed by 1. % UK. Other countries of residence are: Trinidad and Tobago (2x), Norway (2x), Hong Kong (2x), Netherlands (2x), Japan (2x), Denmark, Italy, UAE, Sweden and Mexico. Focussing on citizenship from 2,9 % not having the citizenship of their country of origin only 1,2 % have the citizenship of one of the three German speaking countries, whereas 0,5 % were US and 0,5% were UK citizens and 0,7 % were citizens of other countries like Hong Kong, Singapore and the Indian refugee-program.

Answer	Residence	Citizenship %
China	43.4%	46.7%
India	38.4%	50.3%
Austria	1.7%	0.0%
Germany	5.5%	0.9%
Switzerland	2.6%	0.3%
US	3.6%	0.5%
UK	1.0%	0.0%
Canada	0.5%	0.5%
Australia	0.3%	0.0%
Other (please specify)	2.8%	0.7%

**Table 1: Country of Residence and Citizenship**

With regard to the disciplinary background the majority of 54 % has a degree in Science and 38 % in engineering. In sum the academic exchange services engage in exchange of members of the so-called MINT (maths-informatics-(nature)science-technology) group.

### 3.2 Limitations of the survey

The most important limitation of the survey can be seen in the fact that most of the participants are professional academics. Academics however make an important share in highly skilled migration but of course not all members of the “creative class” (Florida 2002) or the “new Argonauts” (Saxenian 2006) are academics.

A second limitation of the survey can be seen in the fact that 22,7 % still have not finished their education and are not highly skilled migrants in the professional sense although most likely they will be. Altogether the amount of 586 participants of the survey can be seen as a robust foundation to analyse highly skilled migrants from India and China with experience in one of the three German speaking countries.

### 3.3 Research Questions and Assumptions of the study

The first findings presented here derive from a survey containing more findings than just on the German language in highly skilled migration. To explain the context the survey is in, the basic assumptions of the entire research will be briefly introduced: Based on substantial doubts about the data collection by the “per-head-count-metric” following the container-model of “methodological nationalism” we first of all see a lack of robust data concerning skilled migration, especially if skills are not part of the per-head-count-metric like in Germany (SVR 2010: 106). Based on findings from recent literature a dynamic transnationalism has to be taken into account to comprehend highly skilled migration. Terms like “new Argonauts” (Saxenian 2006) or ‘highly skilled globetrotters’ (Mahroum 2000) indicate the mobility that goes far beyond the idea of countries of residence as measured by the per-head-count-metric.

RQ1: Is methodological nationalism sufficient in order to comprehend highly skilled migration?

Based on the findings from the social science (Portes & DeWind 2008 ) the assumption is, that methodological nationalism is insufficient to understand highly skilled migration only by the head count metric. Therefore the first hypothesis is:

H1: In addition to methodological nationalism transnational and also temporary flows of highly skilled are of foremost importance.

To measure the influence of transnationalism beyond the container-model the following areas are of interest:

H1.1: Transnationalism is indicated by regular and temporary change of location.

H1.2: Transnationalism is indicated by the density of international communication.

H1.3: Transnationalism is indicated by geographic diversity within the members of a family.

H1.4: Transnationalism is indicated by the internationality of professional projects.

In traditional labor market economics push- and pull-factors are of importance (Bräutigam 2004). The most important criterion here is the monetary compensation. From a sociological point of view (Portes/DeWind 2008, Pries 2007, 2008) we learn, that social spaces expand beyond the scope of nation states. This in return has impact on the decision to migrate. Especially what is called informal institutions in institutional economics can be seen as relevant for the decision.

RQ2: Are economic hard facts and formal institutions sufficient to understand highly skilled person's decision to migrate?

To examine the importance of informal institutions playing a key role in decision-making basic assumptions with regard to informal institutions are made with respect to region, religion and remittances.

H2: Informal institutions next to economic incentives are relevant for migration decisions of the highly skilled.

To describe informal institutions, a differentiation of informal rules derived from the field of culture and social life is proposed:

H2.1: Regions vary in attractiveness based on cultural, climatic, geographic and cluster-economic criteria.

H2.2: Religion as a symbolic system of beliefs for cultural affinity and identity influences the decision to migrate as well as the integration process in the destination country.

H2.3: Remittances from destination to origin countries make for social relationships within the family, which also influence migration decisions of the highly skilled.

For the specific situation of German speaking countries in the global competition on the talent market it is assumed, that German language leads to a adverse position in the global competition. This is because English can be seen a global 'lingua franca' in business and education, especially in a country like India, where the historical anchoring of English as

an administrative language goes back to colonial times. The present importance of English leads to the following question:

RQ 3: Is the language of the destination country relevant of decisions to migrate?

With regard to the study at hand German as common language of all three destination countries is of major importance.

H3: German language is an additional criterion in the global competition for highly skilled persons.

The importance of the language criterion can be seen in two directions:

H3.1.: For highly skilled persons from India and China the German language is an additional obstacle to overcome.

H3.2.: German speaking countries may become more attractive for highly skilled persons from abroad by introducing English educational programs and corporate cultures.

## **4 Are English-speaking programs a solution to attract more highly skilled professionals from India and China – findings from the survey**

In the following the paper addresses the research questions raised in hypothesis 3 concerning the German language. In the survey the participants have been asked what they would recommend to German speaking countries with regard to language in education programs and corporate cultures. The findings will be presented here briefly.<sup>2</sup> The findings represent solemnly the perspective of the participants and their estimation on how important English speaking programs would be to attract more highly skilled professionals.

When asked if learning a new language is an obstacle to decide to change places the majority of 41,70 % agreed that learning a new language is an obstacle. Only 18,15 % are

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<sup>2</sup> An extensive analysis of the findings will be published as a monograph on the topic.

of the opinion that it is only for a minority an obstacle to learn a new language. The remaining percentage indicates that participants could not decide whether learning a new language is an obstacle. However the result shows that language is relevant in the decision making process of highly skilled professionals to migrate. Language however is a medium and of importance for social matters as well. For instance, it has a strong impact on identity of an individual person as well as on cultures and particular societies. It can be seen as criteria of cultural belonging and cohesion as the example of vernacular cultures within language families' show with regard to club-theory (Kolb 2007). Language therefore can be seen as an important step towards social, private and professional integration at the destination country.

However, learning a new language takes some effort, which also has economic implications: From a transaction-cost perspective learning a new language in a foreign country imposes costs and risks during a transition phase of sometimes several years. The transaction costs can be seen in 'real' money as well as 'virtual' money such as time or insecurity.

- *Time*: Learning a new language first of all costs time. Time that cannot be used for other things like work or leisure. For professionals who work full time and extra hours the additional time effort has to be invested – even if the employer offers language courses during working hours.
- *Money*: Learning a new language also costs money. This can be seen in visiting a language school or having a private teacher. But even if the new employer does cover these costs additional costs e. g. for translations of contracts impose costs.
- *Insecurity and Risk*: Not knowing a language at the beginning at a new location might lead to insecurity when it is not entirely understood what is

communicated. This effects increases when the legal system is different as well as customs in everyday transactions.

- *Psychic costs*: Not knowing a working language or the language of the region imposes psychic costs being an outsider and not being able to understand what is said. This might lead to health issues as recent studies suggest (Buhi & al 2008).

The individual perception whether or not learning a new language is an obstacle might also follow different motives. Nevertheless the survey shows that learning an additional language such as German can be seen as disadvantage to attract highly skilled professionals. An alternative to learning a new language would be to modify the language environments in the destination county. We can see that English as global *lingua franca* has taken over in some transnational corporations and English is increasingly important in academic publication as well. Therefore it might be a solution to introduce more English speaking programs and also services in public administration in German speaking countries to lower the entry threshold for non-German speaking highly skilled professionals. In the survey the participants have been asked if they would recommend to German speaking countries to introduce English speaking schools, university study programs, universities or corporate cultures. The findings are very clear and the vast majority recommends to introduce more English speaking environments.

- 280 participants agree to recommend more English speaking schools (30 disagree).
- 379 participants agree to recommend more English speaking university programs (7 disagree).
- 370 participants agree to recommend more English speaking universities (9 disagree).

- 309 participants agree to recommend more English speaking corporate cultures (15 disagree).

The highest priority from the point of view of the highly skilled migrants from China and India lies on English speaking university programs next to entire English speaking universities and English speaking corporate cultures.

In the survey the participants have been asked about assimilation and integration in the destination country. The results are rather indistinct; nevertheless, 32.1 % answered, the majority of other highly skilled migrants they know is integrated in local society. Nevertheless, 25,8 % answered, that out of other highly skilled migrants they know, only a minority is integrated in the local culture.

## **5 Conclusion and next steps for further research**

Although preliminary, the findings of this first presentation of the survey data shows, that the situation for highly skilled migrants with experience in German speaking countries is different compared to the 'classical', English-speaking immigration countries like the U.S., GB, or Australia. The participants of the survey come from either China or India. Both countries are quantitatively and qualitatively important sending countries of highly skilled professionals to English and non-English speaking countries. Learning an additional language is clearly seen as an obstacle by 41,7 % against only 18,15 % who perceive learning an additional language not as an obstacle.

The participants clearly opt for English speaking educational programs and also corporate languages in German speaking countries to make the labour market of the three German speaking countries more attractive. If the suggestions from the survey participants from India and China were heard and applied, this would raise questions and challenges for the local labour markets in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. If educational programs such

as schools, study programs or entire universities were English speaking in German speaking countries, the local labour market competition would be global. This would have positive effects with regard of the skills and qualifications because the selection process allows choosing from a bigger pool of candidates. However, this deterritorialized (Sassen 2006) or flat world (Friedman 2005) of a global labour market applies mainly for large transnational corporations. On the other hand, small and medium enterprises, which are regionally embedded need to decide if it is better to select higher skilled personnel or to maintain local ties also in terms of an existing language community. This decision also depends on the importance of a local language or also a vernacularized version creating a cultural net of local employees, suppliers, clients and services.

However, the study shows, that highly skilled migrant are an important factor also on the German speaking labour markets and that German speaking countries face different challenges compared to the classical immigration countries for highly skilled. As a next step with regard to the data from the survey it is suggested to better understand the profiles and motivations of highly skilled migrations. Understanding patterns and issues of highly skilled migrants refers to the social and cultural issues involved in the decision to work abroad. Crucial elements with regard to the research questions raised above are social issues such as remittances, cultural issues such as religious belonging and transformation and finally regional issues such as identity. Therefore the next step would be an in-depth profiling of highly skilled migrants (or the New Argonauts (Saxeinan 2006, Seele 2009)) in order to better understand their motives and incentive structures taking into account economic factors such as payment as well as cultural ones like the ones mentioned above.

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