Navigating Highly Skilled Migration in Czechia: Soft Landing or Chilly Reception?

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Abstract

The lives of highly skilled migrants are often seen as unproblematic due to their education and experience, yet this view is misleading. Based on 73 in-depth interviews this article examines key challenges faced by highly skilled migrants in four sectors in Czechia: academia, corporate business, ICT, and healthcare. The findings show that their situation is far from satisfactory and varies across sectors. While language barriers play an important role in healthcare, migrants in academia face insufficient funding to cover basic needs. The study also identifies differences linked to migrants' previous personal experiences. Based on the experiences of the interviewed migrants, several policy recommendations are proposed to better support the development and utilization of the full potential of highly qualified migrants.

Key words

skilled migration, qualified migration, problems, ICT, healthcare, academia, corporate

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Introduction

Highly skilled migration is distinctive because it involves individuals with specialized skills, advanced education, and extensive professional experience. The arrival of such migrants is generally viewed as beneficial, as it can boost economic growth and innovation, or fill gaps in high-value sectors. Their needs also differ from those of other migrant groups, focusing more on career development and favorable working conditions (Oliinyk 2023), rather than on basic necessities, housing, or initial adaptation (Nesterenko – Chekotun 2023). At the same time, distinctions between skill levels are not always clear-cut, as employment and skill mismatches may lead highly qualified individuals to work below their level of competence (Landolt – Thieme 2018).

The article examines four professional sectors: academia and research, corporate business, ICT and healthcare. These categories were selected to capture the heterogeneity of highly skilled migrants in Czechia and to reflect professional trajectories characterized by different institutional logics, language requirements, and mobility regimes (Weinar – Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020; Iredale 2001). Such differentiation corresponds to established classifications in the highly skilled migration literature, which considers both education and sectoral embeddedness in global labor markets (Mahroum 2000; Findlay et al. 1996). Importantly, ICT professionals are not included in the "corporate business" category because the ICT labor market functions as a highly globalized, project-driven field with recruitment patterns, mobility dynamics, and linguistic demands that often differ markedly from managerial or financial roles in multinational firms. This distinctiveness is documented in studies on expatriate communities in global cities and reflected in policy frameworks that treat ICT as a specific field (Findlay et al. 1996; Ewers – Dicce 2018). Moreover, the revised EU Blue Card Directive explicitly recognizes professional ICT experience as equivalent to tertiary education.

The resulting categorization is therefore not created ex post but rather builds on established typologies of highly skilled mobility across professional fields (Mahroum 2000; Iredale 2001) and reflects findings that integration strategies and dependence on local language/capital vary systematically across sectors (Favell 2011; Weinar – Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020). While the boundaries between groups are not rigid, the institutional and linguistic differences across sectors justify this analytical distinction and ensure comparability with previous research on highly skilled migration in Europe and global cities (Findlay et al. 1996; Ewers – Dicce 2018). As will be shown later, these sectors differ in their work environments, skills

demand, and financial rewards, yet they share one central feature: all are open to highly skilled migration and generally tolerant toward international workers. These high-profile areas tend to be multilingual or at least comfortable with English as a working language, which becomes a natural part daily operations (Kankaanranta et al. 2018; Alastrué – Pérez-Llantada 2015; Wood 2001). Such contexts reduce pressure to adapt linguistically and, due to frequent contact with foreigners, foster greater cultural tolerance. This creates a relatively low-barrier environment for highly skilled migrants, often enhancing their sense of being welcome and facilitating the transferability of their skills (Reinold – Hooijen – Özer 2024; Chahine – Al Ariss – d'Armagnac 2023).

The main aim of this article is to analyze the conditions across these sub-groups of highly skilled migrants in order to identify both shared and distinctive features. It is essential to differentiate between the sub-groups in order to understand their specific needs, inform policy improvements and design tools tailored to the challenges they face, including those related to social interactions. Targeted policy interventions allow for a more efficient use of resources and depend on precise data collection and analysis. By offering a detailed focus on the differentiated sub-groups, we hope to contribute to these efforts. However, given that the qualitative design supports only analytical generalization (transferability), rather than statistical generalization, we delimit our claims to the mechanisms identified within the four sectors studied and specify contextual conditions under which similar patterns may plausibly occur.

Although research on highly skilled migration is abundant, few studies examine the specific challenges migrants face within workplaces that are generally open, tolerant and characterized by the absence of language barriers. As Chahine et al. (2023) note, there is a lack of comprehensive work analyzing processes that precede and follow the employment of highly skilled migrants. Existing literature often highlights mismatches between qualifications and job placements, yet rarely investigates how migrants become embedded in sector-specific labor markets (Chahine – Al Ariss – d'Armagnac 2023). Much scholarship remains focused on macro-level mobility patterns or on formal barriers such as credential recognition, offering limited insight into how sector-specific environments shape migrants' opportunities to use their skills. While Czechia is generally described as demanding and restrictive for migrants – marked by the "Kafkasque reality" of fragmented bureaucracy (Hlaváčová – Macková 2020) and one of the EU's most migration-averse societies (Drbohav – Janurová 2019) – we know little about how these broader barriers interact with sectoral contexts that appear more tolerant and cosmopolitan. This gap is particularly visible in

Central and Eastern Europe, where highly skilled migration is increasing but everyday workplace experiences remain understudied.

To address this gap, this article asks: How do highly skilled migrants in Czechia experience and navigate sector-specific working conditions, and what barriers shape their ability to utilize their skills across different professional environments? Sectors such as ICT are relatively unregulated and more accessible, whereas healthcare remains a tightly regulated field where nostrification and approbation serve as significant hurdles (Drbohlav – Janurová 2019; Leontiyeva – Pokorná 2014). Furthermore, while corporate business and academia may benefit from programs targeting highly skilled migrants, these initiatives are rather viewed as restrictive, short-term tools that lack a strategic vision (Drbohlav – Janurová 2019). By analyzing four distinct sectors (academia and research, corporate business, ICT and healthcare), the study provides new evidence on the nuanced and often contradictory realities of highly skilled migration in Czechia, where institutional openness does not necessarily translate into workplace or labor-market inclusion.

This article proceeds by reviewing the existing literature on highly skilled migration, with particular attention to relevant theoretical frameworks. It then presents the methodological approach used in the study, followed by a sector-organized analysis of empirical data. It concludes with a discussion of the key findings in light of the theoretical perspectives, followed by a final reflection on the policy implications.

Human capital theory and highly skilled migration

The concept of highly skilled migration is closely linked to human capital theory, which offers a framework for understanding the patterns and paradoxes observed in qualified migrants' experiences across sectors. Human capital theory, pioneered by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), views skills, knowledge, and competencies as forms of capital that individuals accumulate through education, training and professional experience. These investments are expected to yield returns in the form of higher wages, better employment opportunities, and improved career prospects.

Applied to migration, the theory assumes that people relocate based on expected returns on their human capital (Sjaastad 1962). For highly skilled migrants, migration decisions typically involve assessing where their qualifications and experience will be most valued. The theory predicts that individuals with higher human capital will experience smoother labor-market integration and better outcomes in their destination countries. However, an important extension concerns the transferability of skills

and credentials across borders. Contrary to the assumption of universal valuation, research shows that the recognition of foreign qualifications is often limited (Syed 2008).

As Landolt and Thieme (2018) note, highly skilled migrants frequently struggle to have their foreign human capital recognized in host labor markets. Several factors hinder this transferability. First, formal recognition: host countries often impose strict rules for credential acceptance, particularly in regulated fields such as healthcare (Kerr et al. 2016). Second, country-specific human capital: some skills and knowledge are embedded in national contexts and lose value when transferred abroad. As Zwysen (2018) demonstrates, host country-specific human capital (including language proficiency and understanding of local norms) substantially shapes integration outcomes. Third, employer perceptions and discrimination: employers may discount foreign qualifications due to unfamiliarity or bias, leading to trade-offs between unemployment and over-qualification (Khattab – Fox 2016).

A recurring challenge among highly skilled migrants is the mismatch between their qualifications and the jobs they obtain in their destination countries. This "brain waste" or de-skilling, contradicts human capital theory's expectation of rational returns on investment (Gomes et al. 2014; Boeri et al. 2020). Our empirical findings similarly reveal highly educated migrants employed below the level of their skills. These cases echo Grieshaber and Seibel (2015), who document widespread over-education among immigrants. Several explanations have been proposed. Migrants often lack complete information about host country labor markets and may accept suboptimal jobs as a temporary strategy (Syed 2008). There are also institutional barriers, such as regulatory frameworks, licensing requirements, and labor market structures that prevent access to appropriate positions (Grigoleit-Richter 2017). Furthermore, highly skilled migrants may lack the social networks necessary for securing jobs that match their qualifications (Baruch et al. 2023). As evident in our findings, limited proficiency in the host country's language can significantly constrain employment options despite high levels of expertise.

Human capital theory also clarifies the sectoral differences observed in our research. Lulle et al. (Lulle – Janta – Emilsson 2021) argue that the value of human capital, skills and competencies is context dependent, which helps explain why some sectors recognize foreign human capital more readily than others. In contrast, sectors requiring intensive communication with clients or patients, particularly healthcare, depend heavily on language proficiency, making it a crucial component of human capital and a significant barrier for migrants. This distinction between general

and specific human capital (Becker 1964) further illuminates these sectoral variations. Some industries value general skills applicable across contexts, while others require specific skills tailored to local contexts. This helps explain why migrants in the ICT sector generally reported higher satisfaction and fewer obstacles compared to those in healthcare and academia, where country-specific norms, credentials and professional requirements play a larger role.

Classification of highly skilled migrants

Existing literature identifies several criteria useful for classifying highly skilled migrants and distinguishing subgroups. Wallinder (2019) highlights differences in mobility, contrasting internationally mobile EU citizens with those locally empowered (Wallinder 2019). Highly-skilled migrants also vary in employment quality (e.g., gender disparities persistent across high-skill professions (Riaño 2021)). Further differences arise from nationality or sector-specific backgrounds—both in positive and negative ways. Wickramasinghe and Eleperuma (2022) show distinct migration patterns among highly skilled and prospective Sri Lankan IT workers. Focusing on Poland, Bielewska (2021) similarly identifies sub-groups differentiated by nationality, expertise and employment sectors, which impact their integration and recognition (Bielewska 2021). Differentiation further reflects motivations, experiences and other conditions influencing migration trajectories (Triandafyllidou – Gropas 2023).

In this study, we define highly skilled migrants primarily through their human capital, following Bielewska (2021), Landolt and Thieme (2018) and others who conceptualize skill via education and expertise rather than current job placement. We therefore include migrants with tertiary education and specialized professional experience, even when their qualifications are underutilized in the Czech labor market. This corresponds to our sample, where some respondents experience skill underutilization or work outside their field. Rather than excluding these cases, we treat them as analytically important for understanding barriers to skill transferability and de-skilling. Accordingly, "highly skilled migrants" refers to individuals with high levels of education and expertise, even though their current job may not match their qualifications

Because migration is a very complex phenomenon with many layers, highlighting a single criterion may lead to oversimplification or the underrepresentation of other relevant factors. At the same time, there may be clear patterns in the interrelationships between individual criteria (or variables, if preferred). For example, geographic origin is closely related to

social and cultural issues that affect the perceptions migrants. Educational background often influences professional experience, and professional experience in turn determines occupational category. Social interaction is closely related to the level of language proficiency, etc. In other words, some patterns common to migration in general also apply to highly skilled migration, while others do not.

Despite working in environments that are relatively internationalized and tolerant, highly skilled migrants may still face specific problems. For example, highly skilled migrants often find themselves in positions that do not match their qualifications, leading to underemployment (Risberg – Romani 2021; Saunders – Nieto 2014). In this way, corporate organizations often protect their corporate "normality" (Risberg – Romani 2021). Moreover, in some cases, their qualifications may not be recognized, forcing them to accept precarious or temporary positions instead of stable employment (Hari – Nardon – Palic 2024). With respect to the specific characteristics of these environments, one of the aims of this article is to identify the particular problems highly skilled migrants face even within relatively friendly settings. Apart from qualification recognition, qualified migrants may also face administrative barriers that prevent their employment (Kotavaara – Prokkola 2022), which often runs counter to the interest of the state in enhancing the economy through a highly skilled workforce.

The precise analysis is complicated as, on one hand, each sector is specific, while, on the other, all sectors have a high degree of variability or even overlap (horizontal variability) and differences in positions (vertical variability). For example, the experience of a Slovak doctor who is also active in academia is very different to an African engineer working at the lowest level of the IT company. That is why the following text further explores the individual environments, and interviews are placed within the context of statistical data.

Methods

Dataset and sampling

The interviews used in this article are part of a larger dataset collected within the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR)-funded project on the experiences of highly-skilled foreigners living in Czechia. The original dataset consists of 73 in-depth semi-structured interviews (38 males and 35 females). For the purposes of this article, we analytically selected 27 interviews (15 males and 12 females) that met the criteria of highly skilled employment across the four sectors examined. The selection was purposive

and based on the respondents' occupational status and relevance to the research questions.

Recruitment

Respondents were recruited through several channels. First, an online questionnaire targeting foreigners living in Czechia was disseminated through professional networks and social media groups. Individuals who expressed interest in participating in a follow-up interview were contacted via email. Additional respondents were recruited through Facebook groups dedicated to expatriates and foreigners living in Czechia. This recruitment strategy ensured diversity in nationality, length of stay, and professional background.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted between April and September 2024 in locations chosen by the respondents, often in public spaces. Interviews were conducted both in person and online, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews were carried out by trained members of the research team, including one of the authors of this article. Each interview followed a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 20 questions focusing on migration and life in Czechia. Interviews typically lasted around 30 to 40 minutes, with the longest lasting more than two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Ethical considerations

Before each interview, all respondents were informed about the aims of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to recording. All interviews were anonymized and any identifying details were removed during transcription to protect the participants' privacy. The study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical guidelines for qualitative research in the social sciences.

Data analysis

The transcripts were coded and analyzed using the qualitative software Atlas.ti, following a thematic analysis (Braun – Clarke 2017). In selecting illustrative quotes, we followed the principles of thematic analysis, choosing

excerpts that reflected recurring patterns rather than isolated statements. The coding process involved the refinement of categories, and quotes were selected to exemplify the core themes identified across the interviews. For the purpose of this article, the analysis focused on identifying sector-specific patterns as well as cross-cutting challenges experienced by highly skilled migrants.

Research limitations and reflexivity

The quality and depth of the interviews were influenced by several contextual factors. Respondents differed in their level of openness and communicative style, which affected the richness of the data. Gender dynamics between interviewer and interviewee might have occasionally affected the degree of trust and willingness to share sensitive information. Practical constraints such as limited time availability, the choice of interview setting, and the positionality of the researchers also played a role. Furthermore, some respondents occupied overlapping roles (e.g., Ph.D students working in ICT, medical doctors engaged in research), which complicates strict sectoral categorization. These factors are natural limitations in qualitative research but do not undermine the analytical value of the material.

ID	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Length of stay	Field-job match	Sector
Interview 1	Male	29	South Africa	2 ½ years	yes	Academia
Interview 3	Female	50	Russia	6 years	yes	Academia
Interview 7	Female	40	Slovakia	n/a	yes	Corporate
Interview 11	Female	37	Brazil	n/a	yes	Academia
Interview 12	Female	34	Ukraine	2 years	no	Corporate
Interview 17	Female	31	Spain	n/a	yes	Academia
Interview 19	Female	24	Russia	1 year	no	Healthcare
Interview 26	Female	32	Poland	5 years	yes	Academia
Interview 27	Male	45	USA	11 years	yes	Academia
Interview 29	Female	23	Ukraine	7 years	not yet employed	Healthcare (future position)
Interview 30	Male	24	Germany	n/a	yes	Healthcare
Interview 31	Male	45	Turkey	15 years	yes	Academia
Interview 34	Female	39	Slovakia	20 years	yes	Academia

Interview 36	Female	40	Ukraine	3 years	no (low skilled)	Corporate
Interview 38	Female	38	Slovakia	n/a	yes	Healthcare
Interview 45	Male	49	USA	14 years	yes	ICT
Interview 47	Male	27	India	4 years	yes	Corporate
Interview 53	Male	57	Australia	n/a	yes	Academia
Interview 55	Male	27	Jordan	5 years	yes	ICT
Interview 56	Male	32	India	3 years	yes	Healthcare
Interview 57	Male	36	Ecuador	6 years	no*	Corporate
Interview 59	Male	27	Nigeria	2 years	yes	ICT
Interview 61	Male	29	Ghana	4 years	partial	Corporate
Interview 62	Male	45	Nigeria	2 years	yes	Academia
Interview 65	Male	47	Turkey	8 years	yes	Academia
Interview 68	Male	50	Spain	3 years	partial	Corporate
Interview 72	Female	32	India	n/a	yes	ICT

Table 1 Characteristics of the respondents included in the analysis.

Note: For several respondents, information on length of stay was not available because it was not explicitly provided during the interviews. Field-job match refers to the correspondence between the respondents' field of study and their current occupation at that time. A "no" does not imply low-skilled employment; several respondents worked in highly-skilled positions outside their original field of study. *Only one respondent worked in a low-skilled position (as explained further in the article). "Partial" refers to cases where the respondent worked in a highly-skilled position that drew on some aspects of their education or expertise but did not fully align with their original field of study.

Work environments

This article deals with four specific environments that differ according to culture, skills requirements, fluctuation of workers and income level. Table 2 outlines some basic characteristics of each environment.

	Academia and Research	**ICT**	**Corporate**	**Health Care**
Culture and environment	Cooperative and relaxed, emphasizing long and stable output	Dynamic and fast paced	Highly competitive	Depends on institution

Skill requirements	Acceptable theoretical skills, but blend of practical and theoretical skills is better	Focus on practical skills	Focus on practical skills	Both practical and theoretical
Fluctuation of workers	Low to Medium	High	High	Medium
Income level	Medium	High	High	High

Table 2 Characteristics of environments of highly skilled migration. Source: Authors, own elaboration.

It is important to note that Table 2 represents, to some extent, a simplified description of the key variables characterizing the different sectors, and that in practice these environments may vary based on public/private domain, area of focus, center/periphery, location, etc. These variations may be characterized as horizontal. For example, academia represents a wide variety of faculties, ranging from social sciences and humanities to biological engineering and STEM fields. While some ICT companies make large profits and engage in cutting-edge applications of AI, others might focus on less prosperous sectors of the ICT economy. As a result, the environment for the skilled workers is highly diverse, which underscores the importance of personal experience.

Moreover, there are also vertical variations that are natural for every sector, which relate to subordination and seniority. People on the frontline face different challenges and needs compared to middle management, and the issues faced by middle management are different to those of top management. The same applies to people at varying stages of their careers, which may also be influenced by migration status. Finally, it is important to mention that there are exceptions from both horizontal and vertical categorizations of sectors, as qualified migrants sometimes work in segments that differ significantly from their original qualifications or experience.

Academia and Research

The academic environment is generally portrayed as supportive and collegial, defined by respect, professionalism, and collaboration. Saunders et al. (2021: 2) describe healthy academic workplaces as "positive, supportive, safe, collaborative, empowering, motivational, collegial, professional, respectful, caring, and satisfying," contributing to strong faculty development, student outcomes, and institutional effectiveness. Yet, despite being considered a welcoming space for skilled migrants—especially given univer-

sities' international orientation—academia presents persistent challenges, particularly for women and international scholars who encounter distinctive structural barriers (Neale – White 2016). These difficulties stem from the sector's internal diversity, spanning multiple organizational units and staff categories, whose interactions shape complex professional dynamics.

Compensation remains a central pressure point. Salaries in Eastern European academia are markedly lower than in Western Europe and significantly below those in corporate or ICT sectors. In Czechia, higher-education teachers earned an average of 61,209 CZK in 2023, with a variation of 0.52 (ČSU 2023). Research-related skilled migration reflects similar patterns: scholars are drawn to strong research institutions offering collaboration and advanced facilities (Ghiri et al. 2023; Kaiser et al. 2018). Research roles often combine academic and industry expertise, situating the sector between ICT and higher education. As Crowley-Henry (2024) observes, corporate environments privilege immediate results, whereas research emphasizes long-term intellectual contributions. Although research-sector salaries are relatively high, they still typically fall short of ICT or corporate remuneration. In Czechia in 2023, laboratory and scientific assistants earned an average of 48,587 CZK (variation 0.27), while managerial research roles exceeded 100,000 CZK (ČSU 2023). Income variability within academia is substantial and requires contextualization. Large disparities exist across disciplines and academic ranks: assistant professors in the humanities or education may earn around 37,000 CZK, whereas associate or full professors in natural sciences or technical fields may receive up to 133,000 CZK (Stiburek 2025). This broad range contributes to widespread dissatisfaction with academic compensation.

During the interviews, we noticed that there was a difference between highly skilled academics originating from Africa or the Middle East and those from or who had experience in highly developed countries. For example, a professor from Turkey (Male, 65): "*I'm very satisfied because it's typically a university. There's… it's very liberal. So I'm, I would say I am highly satisfied with the job*." (Interview 65) A university teacher from Nigeria (Male, 45) noted: "*Yes, I am satisfied. Because I am receiving support from the dean and other departments, they give more support*." (Interview 62) Support was also mentioned by another migrant from Turkey (Male, 31): "*If you ask me about working at* (my) *university and colleagues, I like the guys, they're very friendly and very open to working together internationally*." (Interview 31) It seems that people from developing countries or countries with lower income levels tend to appreciate the predominantly liberal environment at universities, the lack of discrimination, and the support received in general, whereas

concerns about low-incomes were more frequently mentioned by those with experience in developed countries.

A professor from Southeast Asia (Male, 57) said: "*In general, I'm satisfied, as you may know, we're not satisfied with the wages. So, I think my wage here is about a quarter of what it was in Singapore*." (Interview 53) The level of income plays a crucial role when it is combined with the gender factor. This is illustrated by a comment from an assistant professor from Slovakia (Female, 29): "*Now I have tried for six years intensive teaching. It was just 0.5 part-time only, but it was too much. I am considering quitting my academic career, because I'd like something else from the job. And with small children it is also a matter of survival.*" (Interview 34)

It is also not only a matter of gender, but also of the center/periphery divide with the special position of Prague, which is characterized by its high cost of living. A professor from the USA (Male, 45) conducting linguistic research commented:

> "*As you know, financially it sucks. It is leading many people to have other jobs, but, at the same time, there's an institutional policy that you shouldn't have other jobs somewhere else. I understand that, but they should pay more to provide at least average salary in the Czech Republic, especially in Prague. In my case, I don't want to be overworked, but I have to do many things not directly linked to my job. I do not want to have a second job, and that's why I live on my low salary. Fortunately, I have some savings, so I'm using them. Fortunately, I have them, so I'm not in such a bad situation.*" (Interview 27)

A researcher from Poland (Female, 32) with a Ph.D. degree put it: "*I highly appreciate the work of a woman at the cash desk working in Lidl* [supermarket], *but I do not understand why a senior researcher or assistant professor should have the same salary, comparable to a tram driver.*" (Interview 26)

The issue of recognition also emerges. A linguist and language teacher from the UK (Male, 47) said:

> "*If I didn't know how much secondary school teachers earned, I think I would be satisfied, but when you know that secondary school teachers earn 50% more… I guess financially it's a little bit demotivating. But work wise and working with colleagues is fine. I think I'm fairly satisfied, but I feel as a faculty that we are not very valued as language teachers.*" (Interview 1)

It seems that in academia, it is common for people to seek other employment to meet their financial needs. This is illustrated by a comment from a senior assistant who had just received a Ph.D. (Female, 32):

> "*I like the students, the atmosphere, I like that I have flexible time, because I can teach only Monday and Tuesday, and the rest of the week I can do something else. I was writing the thesis, but now I have more time. Now, maybe I can write some papers. Maybe I will teach at the high school to improve my situation. The only thing is payment. The salary is too low. It's not great, but it seems that things will improve, after the protest. I don't know…*" (Interview 17)

The way to improve the situation seems to be to apply for grants, for example, for EU funds. A senior researcher (Female, 50) from the Russian Federation stated:

> "*Unfortunately, I do have some issues. Like, I applied for several grants. I really would like to secure some money. Because I need to go for field work to do research, at least a week in China, to Kazakhstan, and the Russian borders, so I would like to do research in that area. But the department doesn't have such sources of money, and that's why I'm applying for grants, but with no success. I feel my citizenship probably matters. Probably it is only my perception. I don't know. So, I'm happy to become a member of some other bigger projects, because it looks like it's not a good time for me to win money for small projects.*" (Interview 3)

A researcher from Brazil confirms this (Female, 37):

> "*I'm very happy, I'm very happy. Yeah. No, I really wanted to be here and to work on this project. And I'm also happy because I'm quite autonomous in the project, because the money came for this specific project from the European Union. So not paid by the internal agencies, because I see that the GAČR has quite a lot of bureaucracy. So, the European Union is quite easier, and also the reports are in English.*" (Interview 11)

However, the perception of income also appears to be subjective, as a researcher from South Africa (Male, 29) commented: "*I would have to say I'm very satisfied. It pays better than what I would be paid in South Africa.*

It's only slightly better, but I'm satisfied. You also have greater freedom of research here." (Interview 1)

Corporate business

Globalization has enabled the expansion of multinational corporations, whose operations span diverse markets and therefore rely on an international workforce. As Iyiola and Osibanjo (2012) note, corporate environments are inherently international, making highly skilled migrants attractive employees who can help firms navigate global customer needs. The corporate sector's dynamism further contributes to the mobility and turnover of international staff. Compared with other sectors, corporate salaries are relatively high, though they are position-dependent. In Czechia in 2023, economics specialists earned an average of 74,897 CZK (variation 0.66), marketing specialists 72,865 CZK (variation 0.59), and HR, development and marketing managers typically exceeded 100,000 CZK per month (ČSU 2023). Yet corporate workplaces remain highly heterogeneous. The interview data indicate that institutional culture and hierarchical position significantly shape employee experiences, with middle and top management facing challenges distinct from those of workers at lower organizational levels.

During the interviews we noted that it was primarily people at the top and middle management levels that were satisfied and were concerned with issues related to time flexibility or further professional development. A CEO (Male, 50) from Spain commented:

> "*But finally when you are CEO you have to develop your skills in people management. Yes, that's it. About communication, about project management, about mainly being able to work in a team way… it is not a matter of technical skills, it's a matter of human skills mainly*." (Interview 68)

Flexibility is also important at middle-management level, as highlighted by the head of a purchasing department from Slovakia, at a large company specialized in electronics marketing (Female, 40):

> "*After maternity leave, I have accepted a new position in purchasing. It is time flexible, I can do a lot of things from home office, but it is so boring! I am happy with the salary, but now I am trying to get back into marketing, which is less flexible but more analytical. In purchasing I suffer.*" (Interview 7)

As these two examples illustrate, the nature of issues is somewhat different from those working in corporate environments at the lowest levels, such as entry positions or manual labor. At the lowest level, people face difficulties which are often characterized by necessity. For example, refugees from Ukraine in Czechia take jobs which do not match their qualifications. This was the case of a historian from Ukraine (Female, 34) who was at that time a night-shift worker at Amazon: "*I needed money and to stay in Prague, so I took the job through the agency… I am tired but happy.*" (Interview 12) Gratitude at having a job was a characteristic of another woman from Ukraine, originally an English teacher who was working at the cash desk of a supermarket owned by a supranational corporation: "*I like to work with people. If there was a job in the office and I was there alone, I would feel like I was in prison.*" (Interview 36) While this respondent appreciated the role of the agency, another respondent from India criticized the unfair practices against him (Male, 27):

> "*Yeah, the team leader and even I try to meet the boss. They literally threaten us: 'if you don't move then we'll give you bad performance,' like three times. So, I have no choice, I* [wasn't] *able to fight because I have to move on somewhere. Because now I cannot fight and cannot be here without a job.*" (Interview 47)

It is quite natural that even in the corporate world people work outside their original field of qualification and face constraints linked to their migratory status. A male from Latin America (Male, 37) commented:

> "*I'm a process coordinator. It's an American company, and basically I coordinate between several teams in order to get our processes done. It's funny because I work in the technical team. I don't have any technical knowledge. I'm a journalist, actually a political journalist*." (Interview 57)

An IT specialist from Ghana (Male, 29), who was working as sales support noted:

> "*For now I would say, because it's not directly in my field, it's not really satisfying. Maybe 50% or something, because it's not directly in my field, and because I need the money. I need the permit. You know, I need the insurance. Typical things for a foreigner, I would say.*" (Interview 61)

To sum up, the corporate sphere is very diverse and different levels within corporations face different needs, strongly reflecting Maslow's hierarchy of needs. However, at the very lowest level, we find people who are highly qualified, but are not doing the work they are qualified for. This is due to language barriers and requirements, the exploitative culture of some companies, and the personal decisions of the migrants themselves. Clearly, even for highly skilled migrants it is necessary to deal with migrant-status related administrative procedures.

ICT

The ICT sector is marked by intense demand for skilled labor, driven by rapid digitalization and continual technological innovation. This dynamism requires workers to adapt quickly and develop specialized competencies. As Rodríguez (2021) notes, the sector attracts talent globally and frequently draws skilled workers from other fields. A defining feature is its emphasis on practical, technical skills, contrasting with academia's openness to theoretical expertise. Visvizi et al. (2019) emphasize that ICT organizations integrate skilled workers more fluidly, prioritizing applied capabilities over formal academic credentials. Compared with academia, ICT environments are fast paced, project-oriented, and structurally closer to competitive, deadline-driven corporate settings. Salaries in ICT are high relative to most sectors: in Czechia in 2023, software developers earned an average of 102,869 CZK (variation 0.55), database developers 74,468 CZK (variation 0.48), and ICT client-support specialists 61,854 CZK (variation 0.51) (ČSU 2023). The interview findings align with these structural characteristics.

It should be noted that there were no respondents who complained about the salary during the interview and most evaluated their jobs as highly satisfying. A respondent from Nigeria (Male, 27) reported:

> "*I am very satisfied, I am trying to stay at my best. I have been there almost for three years, and I want to stay here for five years, because as much as it's a good platform, I want to stay there for a long time. So far, I have not really felt tired of the job, and I think that it is still going pretty well. This is one of the good sides of working with big organizations: you are stable and you don't have to think about so many things. So, yes, enjoying it.*" (Interview 59)

What was noted is the decreasing motivation of people employed in the sector over time. For example, we can compare the attitude of an IT project manager (Male, 27) from Jordan:

> "*It is good, I am learning new things. As I mentioned, I moved to a different department last May, so I was a project manager and now I am an IT project manager. So, it is a more complicated position, but I like it. I like these types of challenges.*" (Interview 55)

with a software coder from the USA (Male, 49):

> "*I guess I'm not satisfied, I'm definitely not as motivated as I used to be. But in the early days, when I was learning, and it was all fresh and new, I would easily spend 16, 18 hours a day, seven days a week, I'd just be completely immersed in it. Nowadays, I definitely don't want to work so much, a way, way better work-life balance. In the beginning, I never meant to be a CEO, I wanted to just be in the background coding… Now I'm already eyeing retirement, how to get to that. So now it's just about making money, and doing stuff for the kids.*" (Interview 45)

However, also working in the IT sphere is a matter of perspective influenced by previous experience, as reflected in the following comment:

> "*In India we worked 12 hours, here, first, the timing and work-life balance is important. I feel I can come back and be with my kid, spend time with my family. And even if there are, because we are working in place where we support clients, and if I work on Saturday, obviously on Monday I will have leave. Monday is the day off. So they make sure that every employee is, like, you know, comfort, that you are comfortable, get the day off. But in India we worked on Saturdays and Sundays, we never got any compensation or holiday.*" (Interview 72, Male, 32)

Healthcare

The health sector is highly heterogeneous, shaped by center–periphery differences, institutional size, and professional specialization. Highly trained medical specialists are in strong demand and enjoy salaries well above sectoral averages, whereas qualified nurses and support professions (particularly those with a social-care component) remain undervalued. This imbalance reflects the structural features of the Czech system, which imposes high qualification requirements but offers limited remuneration, especially in state hospitals. Consequently, Czech doctors and nurses often

leave for better-paid positions abroad, prompting a compensatory inflow of skilled migrants from Eastern Europe (Šídlo 2010). In 2023, doctors in Czech bed-care hospitals earned an average of 101,408 CZK, while nurses earned 58,552 CZK (ČSU 2023). However, entry-level medical salaries start much lower—41,380 CZK before personal bonuses—highlighting the steep internal stratification of the sector. Moreover, working conditions vary significantly across institutions. A persistent shortage of personnel results in extensive overtime for both doctors and nurses, further illustrating the structural pressures shaping the Czech health-care environment.

In relation to foreigners, the labor market in this sector is shaped by two key constraints. The first is proficiency in the Czech language, which is crucial for communication with patients, and, as a result, skilled migrants from Slovakia have a certain advantage. The second concerns qualifications, which in many cases does not play an important role for Slovaks, as they have often studied in Czechia. Due to the overall tendency to undervalue foreign qualifications, foreigners face certain prejudices, which was confirmed from multiple perspectives. For example, an internist from Ukraine (female, 23) who finished her studies in Czechia and who was working in a hospital said: "*I have an accent and it happened that people had a negative attitude toward me or were suspicious. I had to explain to them that I have a degree from a Czech university and the same qualifications as the others.*" (Interview 29) In many situations, it seems that people who have foreign qualifications face challenges. A Ph.D. student in health sciences, holding a master's degree in general medicine from Russia (female, 24) stated: "*I had to start a Ph.D. in order to get a visa here. But I am not satisfied, as I want to work here as a doctor… Czech language is necessary for me.*" (Interview 19) A German doctor who studied in Brno (Male, 24) reported: "*Czech language was part of the program at my University. In anatomy and chemistry, we had Czech language, because we needed it when taking anamnesis and examinations in hospital with the patient.*" (Interview 30)

A certain prejudice towards migrants from Ukraine was reflected in a comment from a Slovak doctor working in Czechia (female, 38):

> "*Sometimes I have a feeling that people do mind, that there are different nationalities working in the hospital and lack of communication plays a role. Doctors from Ukraine… maybe it's their qualifications, or the language barrier, I don't know. Sometimes it seems to me that they didn't even study medicine… or that their education was at a lower level. I don't know, it is hard to say*." (Interview 38)

The respondent's comment reveals that language barrier may sometimes be mistakenly interpreted as a lack of qualifications. However, problems

with language or qualifications are not the only problems skilled migrants face, as certain positions are underpaid.

Some positions in healthcare are similar to those of research or academia, as doctors might work in university hospitals and engage in the education of future doctors or participate in research projects. However, for Ph.D. students, research projects are often the only way to earn a sufficient income, which still may barely cover living costs. A pharmacist from India (Male, 32) who is developing a specific analytical method for lung cancer diagnosis said:

> "*I used to work in KFC, though I'm doing a doctoral degree, but still my salary was so low that I used to work in KFC. Now why did I used to work in KFC? Because I don't speak the language, so you just have jobs only in KFC and McDonald's, that's it*." (Interview 56)

Discussion

This study examined four subgroups of highly skilled migrants—academia and research, corporate business, ICT and healthcare—to identify both shared and sectorspecific dynamics. Our findings challenge the assumption that highly skilled migration is inherently advantageous. Despite operating in fields generally more open to international talent, migrants encounter substantial sectorbased barriers that complicate their integration. Using human capital theory, we reveal marked differences in how migrants' skills are valued across sectors. Although classic formulations suggest that investments in education should lead to better employment outcomes (Sjaastad 1962; Becker 1964), our results support Landolt and Thieme's (2018) argument that crossborder transferability of human capital is frequently constrained.

In academia and research, many migrants face precarious conditions driven by insufficient funding and low remuneration. Respondents with experience from highincome countries often reported significant wage dissatisfaction; one professor from Southeast Asia reported earning "about a quarter of what it was in Singapore." This aligns with Syed's (2008) claim that human capital is contextdependent rather than universally valued. The academic environment clearly illustrates "brain waste" (Gomes et al. 2014), with highly educated migrants struggling financially despite strong qualifications. The healthcare sector highlights how countryspecific human capital (Zwysen 2018) shapes integration. Czech language proficiency emerged as a key obstacle: limited communication skills were often interpreted

as insufficient professional expertise. This echoes Khattab and Fox's (2016) findings that employers may discount foreign credentials due to unfamiliarity or bias, reinforcing barriers to the full recognition and utilization of migrants' qualifications.

The ICT sector showed the strongest alignment with human capital theory, with respondents expressing satisfaction with both their roles and earnings. This parallels Visvizi et al. (2019), who argue that ICT organizations integrate skilled workers more fluidly by prioritizing technical competencies over academic credentials. The high crossborder transferability of technical skills supports Lulle et al.'s (2021) view that human capital outcomes are highly contextdependent. In contrast, corporate environments displayed pronounced vertical stratification, with job satisfaction strongly tied to hierarchical position: senior managers emphasized development opportunities and flexibility, whereas entrylevel staff faced challenges linked to migration status. This reflects dual labor market theory (Klimczuk – KlimczukKochańska 2016), whereby even highly skilled migrants may experience secondarymarket conditions when language barriers or credential issues impede entry into primarymarket roles.

Our findings further highlight three patterns that human capital theory helps explain. First, although highly skilled migrants often access primary labormarket positions—especially in ICT and corporate sectors—limited language proficiency can lead to downward mobility into secondarymarket roles. Second, labormarket segmentation also occurs within the highly skilled population itself. As one Polish respondent observed, academic salaries comparable to those of tram drivers illustrate academia's atypical placement within the dualmarket structure. Third, structural barriers—especially credential recognition procedures and language requirements—reinforce divides between primary and secondary markets, even for wellqualified migrants.

The term "highly skilled migration" often suggests privileged, wellpaid individuals who integrate easily. Our findings challenge this assumption. Migrants face obstacles tied to their status, origin, and language proficiency. Slovaks benefit from linguistic and cultural proximity, while Ukrainians encounter heightened scrutiny in a politically polarized context shaped by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These tensions are most visible in healthcare, where daily patient interactions make linguistic competence essential and where limited communication is often misinterpreted as a lack of qualification. Such dynamics create environments prone to distrust, leading to an underestimation of skills and an inefficient use of human capital.

Given the persistent personnel shortage in Czech healthcare, targeted adaptation programs—cofunded by local authorities—could help by sup-

porting Czechlanguage training and structured qualification adjustment in exchange for service commitments. Yet such programs require greater system flexibility and accessibility for professionals with diverse backgrounds. Mechanisms such as job shadowing, supervised practice, and modular certification could help, although the rigidity of the Czech education system remains a constraint.

Notably, many highly skilled migrants work outside their fields due to language barriers or systemic obstacles. A Ph.D. student in cancer diagnostics employed parttime in a fastfood chain, and academics forced into secondary jobs due to low pay, exemplify this "waste of potential." In this respect, junior academics resemble overqualified migrants in lowlevel corporate roles. Country of origin matters significantly: migrants from higherincome or more secure contexts tend to criticize Czech salaries, while those from environments marked by war, inequality, or poverty emphasize safety and nondiscrimination.

The ICT sector stands out for offering stability, financial security, and opportunities for skill development. As one respondent remarked, "*I never meant to be a CEO… but nobody wanted to do it, so I took it*" (Interview 45), illustrating both upward mobility and contentment once stability and acceptance are achieved. This challenges assumptions about a constant drive for upward corporate advancement; rather, after overcoming initial integration barriers, many skilled migrants prioritize recognition and stability over continuous promotion. Overall, our findings offer both theoretical and policy implications, particularly for understanding dual labor market dynamics (Klimczuk – KlimczukKochańska 2016). First, the theory explains why most highly skilled migrants enter the primary market, while less qualified migrants rely on the secondary market. Second, even within the highly skilled group, languagerelated barriers can push individuals (especially in healthcare) into secondarymarket conditions. Third, hidden administrative obstacles (e.g., credential requirements), funding constraints (e.g., limited support for foreign Ph.D. students), and structural barriers help explain persistent earnings and mobility differences across sectors.

Conclusion

This article identifies key factors shaping migrants' experiences that correspond with existing classification schemes. First, our findings support Bielewska's (2021) view that highly skilled migrants are heterogeneous, differentiated by nationality, professional background, and employment sector. The "game of labels" she describes is reflected in how respondents positioned themselves, and were positioned by others, within the labor mar-

ket. We also found that migrants from higherincome countries tend to stress salary dissatisfaction, while those from lower-income contexts emphasize non-discrimination, echoing Triandafyllidou and Gropas's (2023) argument that premigration environments shape postmigration expectations. Consistent with Wallinder's (2019) distinction between internationally and locally employed mobile citizens, sectors with strong international orientation, such as ICT, facilitated smoother integration than locally embedded sectors such as healthcare. Language proficiency emerged as a critical but sectorspecific factor. Finally, qualification devaluation and mismatch were evident across professional fields, confirming Risberg and Romani's (2021) observation that organizations often maintain their institutional "normality" by underemploying highly skilled migrants.

Human capital theory offers a useful lens for interpreting the experiences of highly skilled migrants, yet our findings reveal several important limitations when applied to real-world settings. Although the theory assumes that individuals with advanced education and specialized skills should achieve strong labormarket outcomes, our research shows that barriers such as limited language proficiency, non-recognition of credentials, and sectorspecific constraints often hinder migrants from fully realizing the value of their human capital.

Our study further demonstrates that professional sectors shape the institutional conditions under which language requirements, recruitment practices, qualification recognition, and mobility regimes operate for highly skilled migrants in Czechia. Across the four analyzed sectors—academia, corporate business, ICT and healthcare—we observed systematic differences in three areas: (1) the extent to which Czech language proficiency is necessary for daily work and career progression; (2) the degree of recruitment standardization and transparency of qualification criteria; and (3) the institutional logics linked to funding models, organizational autonomy, and expected career paths. These sectoral variations appear in migrant integration strategies, including choices about language investment, building local versus transnational networks, and navigating the transferability of qualifications, whether through direct recognition or through retraining and additional certification.

The interpretation remains closely tied to the respondents' accounts. In sectors with lower language demands and more internationalized recruitment (most notably ICT) we identified conditions that more readily supported migrants' entry and effective use of qualifications. Conversely, in sectors with strong locally embedded requirements (e.g., licensing procedures, intensive client/patient communication in Czech, or adherence to specific norms of "organizational normality"), qualification conversion was often delayed or only partial. These patterns are not presented as

normative evaluations of sectoral performance but as recurring tendencies that illuminate the varied integration trajectories of highly skilled migrants in our sample. This study has several limitations. First, its findings derive from qualitative data and reflect the respondents' subjective experiences rather than a representative sample; therefore, generalization to the wider population is limited. Second, our focus on professional sectors did not include a systematic assessment of public policies or programs, and references to institutional contexts serve as interpretive background rather than tested variables. Third, boundaries between sectors can be fluid, with some roles spanning multiple domains. Nonetheless, the sectoral categorization employed proved analytically effective in capturing key differences in language requirements, recruitment practices, and mobility conditions.

The Czech labor market forms a distinctive institutional environment for highly skilled migrants, shaped by three structural features widely noted in the literature: the centrality of Czech language proficiency for regulated professions and clientfacing roles, the heavy reliance on formal credential recognition in sectors such as healthcare and education, and the coexistence of internationally integrated and locally embedded segments of the economy. Prior studies on highly educated migrants in Czechia have consistently identified overqualification, limited transferability of prior experience, and uneven recognition of foreign degrees, alongside significant variation across sectors and organizational cultures (Leontiyeva – Pokorná 2014; Valenta – Drbohlav 2018; Münich 2014; Eurostat 2025; Gheorghiev 2023; CELSI 2022; Macková – Medová 2023). Building on this scholarship, our contribution lies in a crosssectoral comparison based on 73 interviews, allowing us to capture both shared barriers (e.g., languagerelated constraints) and sectorspecific mechanisms (e.g., licensing regimes, organizational norms, and recruitment logics). Rather than examining a limited number of fields in depth, this comparative design highlights structural regularities across the labor market and explains why migrants' experiences diverge depending on the institutional and linguistic demands of their sector. Overall, this article advances understanding of how sectoral logics shape opportunities for qualification transfer and the integration strategies of highly skilled migrants in Czechia.

These findings provide a foundation for more targeted hypotheses on the interplay between sectoral requirements, language investment, and career mobility. Future research could explore how institutional logics, linguistic demands, or professional cultures influence migrants' trajectories across labormarket segments; how hybrid or crosssectoral professional profiles challenge existing typologies; how organizational practices contribute to underemployment or talent waste; how remote and hybrid work affect sectoral boundaries; and how career pathways differ across gender, origin,

and generational groups, thereby shedding light on the reproduction or mitigation of inequalities within highskill migration regimes.

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