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Highly Skilled Migrant Decision-Making Under Uncertainty: A Literature Review

Ashika Niraula & Anna Triandafyllidou

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Abstract

For the last three decades, highly skilled migration has become a vital component of global migration management and immigration policy debates. However, there has not been much knowledge on the decision-making dynamics of highly skilled migrants, particularly under the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and its aftermath. The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of the literature on highly skilled migration and decision-making and subsequently, to develop an analytical framework of the Highly Skilled Migrant Decision-Making under Uncertainty (DEMA) project. The DEMA project aims to produce new first-hand knowledge of how the pandemic has shaped migration-related decision-makings (i.e., to come, stay, delay, or speed up immigration moves) among prospective highly skilled migrants, both within Canada and outside Canada. Our analysis shows that highly skilled migration decision-making – where, when, and how to move – is a multi-stage and multidimensional process. Nevertheless, there has not been much focus in migration literature on how macro (i.e., social, economic, and political), meso (i.e., networks and culture), and micro (i.e., family situation and individual elements such as hope, aspirations, and imaginaries) factors shape decision-making processes of highly skilled migrants and their families. Furthermore, there has been a lack of knowledge about how social categories of differences, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and age, influence highly skilled migrants' decision-making. The DEMA project hopes to fill these significant knowledge gaps.

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Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded around the world, the importance of migration and mobility, and the challenges and opportunities that they entail, have become dramatically visible. We have witnessed so-called developed countries like Canada closing borders to visitors and migrants, highly skilled for the most part, while at the same time making emergency arrangements to bring in, previously regarded as 'low-skilled', migrant workers in agriculture and care work (Triandafyllidou, 2022). Many highly skilled migrants, often regarded as 'the wanted and welcome immigrants' (Triandafilopoulos, 2013), have been left stranded at origin despite completing their immigration paperwork or having a job offer (Triandafyllidou & Nalbandian, 2020). Many other highly skilled migrants were stranded in the destination country with insecure status as their immigration applications were halted indefinitely in the pandemic emergency (migrantsstuckoutsidenz, 2022).

According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Canada welcomed only around 55 percent (i.e., 184,585 new permanent residents) of the originally targeted 341,000 new permanent residents in 2020 (IRCC, 2021a). For Canada, the pandemic not only posed short-term challenges with regard to reduced immigration flows; it raised possibilities of long-term negative impacts on the nation's economic growth and labor and/or skills shortage (Feenan & Madhany, 2021). As a result, in October 2020, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Marco Mendicino announced the 2021-2023 Immigration Levels Plan, which aimed to welcome at least 401,000 permanent residents in 2021, 411,000 in 2022, and an additional 421,000 immigrants in 2023 (IRCC, 2020). Such a move cemented the perception of economic migrants, the majority of whom are highly skilled, as being a central pillar of Canada's economic recovery in the post-COVID times. As a result, it is crucial to better understand the drivers of highly skilled migration to Canada and the ways the pandemic has affected the migration-related decision-making of prospective highly skilled migrants to Canada. The Highly Skilled Migrant Decision-Making under Uncertainty (DEMA)¹ project aims to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic-related uncertainties and challenges have shaped overall motivations and plans among three categories of prospective highly skilled immigrants to Canada:

- Highly skilled people applying from abroad to come to Canada under Permanent Residency Scheme, Study Permit and Work Permit in highly skilled occupations²;
- Temporary Work Permit holders (highly skilled occupations), including workers under the International Mobility Program currently in Canada; and
- International students and Post-Graduate Work Permit holders

The aim of this paper is to review the relevant literature on highly skilled migration and decision-making with a view to developing an analytical framework for the DEMA project. Highly skilled migrants have become a significant part of global migration management and policy debates over the last three decades (Regets, 2001; Sandoz, 2019). As stated by Sandoz (2019), the rise in highly skilled migration flows could be explained by important policy changes in several industrialized countries after the 1960s. The first point-based immigration program was introduced in Canada in 1967, followed by Australia in 1973. Later, different versions of the skills-based immigration programs were adopted by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European countries. Such so-called "objective" point-based selection was initiated to prioritize applicants on the basis of their qualifications and skills, such as education level, language, and job skills. Despite being recognized as "objective" due to a selection method based on the allocation of

¹ Please see <https://www.torontomu.ca/cerc-migration/dema/dema/>

² Highly skilled occupations are defined as those pertaining to the National Occupational Classification (NOC) Skill Type 0, Skill Level A, and Skill Level B, notably those who work in management-level positions (Skill Type 0), positions generally requiring a university education (Skill Level A), and positions generally requiring a college-level education or trade apprenticeship (Skill Level B) (IRCC, 2022).

points related to one's qualifications and skills, critiques argue that characteristics of the point system (e.g., higher education and types of occupation) tend to reflect class, race and gender biases embedded within them. This is shown by the majority of highly skilled immigrants who are men and belong to the elite and upper-middle class in their country of origin.

As many developed countries began to adopt a more proactive point-based selection approach (Hercog & Sandoz, 2018), it led to the construction of the highly skilled migrants as a form of archetypal 'mobile subject' (Sandoz, 2019). In migration literature and policies, highly skilled migrants are regularly portrayed as 'wanted and welcome' (Triadafilopoulos, 2013) in contrast to 'low-skilled' migrants who are often considered as 'wanted but not welcome' (Zolberg, 1987), and refugees who are labeled as 'unwanted and unwelcome' (Kirkwood et al., 2014). Such privileged status of the highly skilled migrants is essentially connected with their skills, knowledge, and qualifications (Niraula & Valentin, 2019).

Over the last three decades, a large body of literature in economics and political science has examined economic impacts of highly skilled migration at national and global levels (Iredale, 2001; Triadafilopoulos, 2013; Hercog, 2017; Hanson et al., 2018; Czaika & Parsons, 2016; Kasnauskiene & Palubinskaite, 2020). The majority of such literature tends to rely on statistics or policy analysis and centers around discussions of highly skilled migrants as a developmental tool due to their human capital (Kone & Özden, 2017). Consequently, the notions of brain drain and brain gain have gained popularity in academia and policy debates. On the one hand, brain drain refers to the migration of people with relatively high education and earning potential from the country of origin. It is often projected that brain drain leads to significant losses in tax revenues in the home countries, which further amplifies existing inequality between the rich and the poor (Kone & Özden, 2017). On the other hand, the notion of brain gain implies a more positive correlation between the migration of highly skilled people and the transfer of knowledge in the receiving countries. In the so-called 'global race for talent' (Shachar, 2006), national governments and companies have often considered attracting and retaining highly skilled migrants as a strategy to succeed in the knowledge economy (Beverstock, 2010; 2017). Such a positive designation has often constructed imaginaries of highly skilled migrants as transnational elites (O'Reilly, 2007), global talents (Kerr et al., 2016), and travelers who melt through borders (Favell et al., 2007).

Studies on highly skilled migrants from an anthropological perspective appear to largely employ an actor-centered approach, with a focus on lived experiences. Still, these studies primarily emphasized highly skilled migrants' employment and workplace experiences. For example, career progression of mobile managers in the financial and business sectors (Beverstock, 2002; Beverstock & Smith, 1996); life as an expatriate (Cohen & Gold, 1997); 'highly skilled' returnees (Ilkjær, 2015); under-employment and deskilling (Guo, 2009; Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2012) and the role of social networks in labor market integration (Phan et al., 2015; Plöger & Becker, 2015). Lately, a few studies have highlighted a need to focus on the work/non-work experiences of highly skilled migrants (Frykman et al., 2016; Frykman et al., 2020; Frykman & Mozetič, 2019; Niraula, 2020). Nevertheless, previous research has only paid minimal attention to what shapes highly skilled migration decisions, and how these decisions are formed in a dynamic environment. This literature review aims to fill this significant research gap.

This review has been organized as follows: In section 2, we discuss existing research agendas in the field of highly skilled migration. In section 3, we provide a brief overview of highly skilled migration in Canada. In section 4, we review theoretical and empirical evidence related to migration and decision-making, with a focus on highly skilled migration, international students, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the concluding section, we develop the analytical framework to understand how different factors shape highly skilled migrants' migration related decision-making processes.

Highly skilled migrants: The research agendas

The question of who belongs to the highly skilled migrant category has become one of the dominant research agendas in the highly skilled migration literature. Despite the broad conformity of highly skilled migrants as the 'desirable' migrants, there has not been one agreed-upon definition of highly skilled migrants (Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020). The broad category of highly skilled migrants has generally been defined in relation to three criteria – education, occupation, and wages. The most conventional definition of highly skilled migrant includes those with a tertiary or an equivalent educational degree (Salt, 1999; Borjas, 2005). Such a classification reflects an assumption of high skilled migrants and tertiary education as being synonymous, thereby equating education with skills. In this context, what constitutes skills is often taken for granted (Kone & Özden, 2017). Alternatively, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has highlighted the occupational dimension of highly skilled migrants. According to the OECD, highly skilled migrants are individuals with a university degree or an extensive experience in a given field (OECD, 1998, as cited in Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020). Another proxy used to define highly skilled migrants is wages (Borjas, 2005), and/or both occupation and salary (Triandafyllidou & Isaakyan, 2014).

Recently, there has been a rising trend to acknowledge highly skilled migrants as contested terminologies in terms of both their meaning and their scope (Parsons et al., 2015; Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020). Parsons et al. (2015) illustrate differential standards for being a highly skilled migrant, depending on country-specific measures for recognition of skills and qualifications which may include education credentials, professional experience, sector of employment, and income. The authors highlight discordances – namely definitional, occupational, and policy – over how the policymakers, and academics classify highly skilled migrants. Definitional discordance arises when different individuals are identified as highly skilled, depending upon how host countries choose to define them. An occupational discordance results from the same individual potentially being classified as highly skilled or not depending upon each country's occupational classifications. Policy discordance occurs when an individual may be considered highly skilled or otherwise depending on a particular country's immigration policies.

Weinar and Koppenfels (2020) further illustrate inconsistencies in the conceptual frameworks used to define highly skilled migrants. The authors exhibit how scholars who are interested in labor market outcomes of highly skilled migration use a data-driven definition, with a focus on the level of education and/or classification of occupation. Scholars interested in highly skilled migration policies tend to employ policy-driven definitions with a focus on skills and qualifications. Finally, scholars interested in the lived experience tend to contest the dominant conceptualizations of highly skilled migrants. Consequently, there is a need to pay attention to the normative values embedded in the definition of highly skilled migrants, i.e., "first, who sets the boundaries of the definition? Second, what is the purpose of any given definition?" (Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020, p. 9). Furthermore, a great deal of research on highly skilled migrants predominantly centers around migrants from a particular nationality, ethnicity, or profession. Some examples include Swedish business actors of Iranian origin (Leivestad & Olsson, 2020), Russian migrant physicians to Finland (Habti, 2019), Swiss migrant professionals in China (Camenisch, 2019), highly skilled professionals from Spain to China (Masdeu Torruella & Sáiz-López, 2019), highly qualified Irish and Polish women migrants in London (Ryan, 2018), and nurses from the Philippines and India in Canada (Walton-Roberts, 2019). Such a focus on a specific ethnicity or profession fails to unravel multifaceted motives and decision-making processes among highly skilled migration.

A few studies have employed a life course approach to understanding how highly skilled migrants' lives are marked by multiplicities of migratory experiences, legal passages, and professional status (Bailey & Mulder, 2017; Kōu et al., 2015). Some studies have shed light on

the micro-level understandings of highly skilled migrants' transitions and turning points (Brettell, 2002) as well as mobility intentions (Bork-Hüffer, 2017) that include their intents of onward mobility, stay, or settlement. In this context, highly skilled migration is considered, not as a one-time event, but a continuous process in the course of life trajectories (Ryan & Mulholland, 2013). In an attempt to deconstruct the dominant highly skilled migrant category, scholars have included international students, skilled refugees, and spouses as being highly skilled migrants (Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020). Drawing on the case of Switzerland, Sandoz (2019) points to four migration channels for highly skilled migrants, incorporating family-oriented channel, company-oriented channel, study-oriented channel, and protection-oriented channel. Although each channel would embody a form of institutional embeddedness and access to diverse resources, many highly skilled migrants participate in multiple channels throughout their trajectories (Sandoz, 2019). Studies have also revealed how temporary migration of highly educated migrants (for example, those under study permits or work permits) can often lead to (an actual or imagined) permanent settlement (Valentin, 2012; 2014; Akbar, 2022). Recruiting informants from diverse backgrounds (i.e., nationality, educational background, professional status, religion, age, and gender) in Denmark, Niraula (2020) delves into fluidities and contingencies of highly educated migrants' identities – i.e., legal, national, and professional – and argues for highly skilled migrants as a constructed category in specific historical, political and sociocultural contexts.

As an attempt to question the taken-for-granted privileged position of highly skilled migrants, numerous studies have examined the issues related brain waste in the host country, often referred to as deskilling. Deskilling implies non-recognition or disqualification of highly skilled migrants' previous education and skills in the receiving countries as their higher credentials are not accepted in the host labor market (Guo, 2015; Bailey & Mulder 2017; Trevena, 2013; Nowicka, 2012). Subsequently, deskilled migrants are often regarded as passive victims of circumstances and often referred to as marginalized elites (Riaño, 2015). It is often assumed that deskilled migrants have to forfeit their presumed privileged highly skilled migrant status due to their failure to obtain employment matching their education. Piore (1979) asserts that deskilling occurs due to the existence of a secondary market of lower-paying and lower-status jobs, and migrants accept such jobs, as they perceive them as only temporary. Studies on the deskilling process of highly skilled migrants' (Sair, 2013; Guo, 2015) repeatedly claim that skills are not neutral but gendered, classed, and racialized, and that not all foreign credentials and skills are devalued. Such a notion of deskilling illustrates the socially constructed nature of skills (Steinberg, 1990; Shan, 2013) and highlights the country-specific measures for recognizing migrants' prior skills, qualifications, and occupations (Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015).

Drawing on two ethnographic studies on experiences of highly skilled migrants in Denmark, Niraula & Valentin (2019) claim that many deskilled migrants actively gain new skills and knowledge, albeit discreetly, through low-status jobs. Thus, the authors problematize the presumed simple correlation between deskilling and what is often regarded as low-status jobs. In particular, feminist work on migration has theorized and emphasized the gendered dimension on the valuation of one's skills (Kofman & Raghuram, 2006) and interpreted migrants as gendered subjects (Chant, 1992; Fincher, 1993). Feminist scholars have often criticized highly skilled migration scholarship for an essentialist vision of rational and work-oriented men, and of women as 'trailing spouses' due to gender-segregated and racialized immigration policies (Findlay & Li, 1998; Dua, 2007; Gabriel & Macdonald, 2019).

Although there has been a rise in the literature that considers highly skilled migrants as a negotiated and contested subject position, not much work has been done so far to examine decision-making processes of highly skilled migrants. Studies on migrant decision-making largely has focused on irregular migrants and asylum seekers (see: Colson 2003; Missbach, 2019; Kuschminder, 2018), paying less attention to highly skilled migrants. While it may seem that highly skilled migration is voluntary and involves a straightforward cost-benefit calculation, there is a need for acknowledging uncertainty as an important aspect of decision-making, particularly during

times of the pandemic. In the next section, we discuss the theoretical foundations for understanding varied drivers of migration, from economic rationale and utility-maximizing individuals/households to subjective and emotional aspects of migration decision-making. It will be followed by a discussion on previous studies that focus on highly skilled migrants and decision-making.

Migrant decision making: Theoretical frameworks

Migration scholars have often argued that a comprehensive or universal theory about drivers of migration will never arise because migration is too complex and diverse a phenomenon (Miller & Castles, 2009; Salt, 1988). Massey et al. (1993) argue that "only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries" (p. 432). In the post-World War II period, migration research was heavily influenced by neoclassical economic theory. Neoclassical economic theory, situated within the broader functionalist approach, claimed that a decision to migrate is caused by rational economic considerations of relative benefits and costs, primarily higher wages in the destination country (Todaro, 1969). Based on Ravenstein's law of migration³ (1889), Everett S. Lee (1966) developed a comprehensive push-pull theory, which suggests movements within and across borders as outcomes of rational and progressive decisions. The push-pull theory regards migration as the net result of the interplay between costs and benefits, which the potential migrant confronts at the places of origin and destination (Lee, 1966). According to this theory, highly skilled migrant flows are initiated by pull factors such as better wages, career progression, and higher living standards (Portes & Rambaut, 2014). From this perspective, migration is considered a positive force in the process of spreading modernity, and migrants are perceived as agents of change and innovation (de Hass, 2008). However, as stated by Portes and Rambaut (2014), neo-classical economic theories are unable to explain why sizeable migrations occur from certain countries and regions and not from other countries in similar or even worse conditions. Furthermore, there has been growing literature on judgment and decision-making that reveals how most people base their decisions not only on the (neoclassical) concepts of rationality, but also on moral, social, and interpersonal considerations (Grossmann et. al., 2020; Kahneman & Tversky, 2013).

Such criticism has led to the emergence of the new economics of labor migration theory. The critical insight of this approach proposes that deciding to migrate is the result of a collective decision by families at the household level, which is taken to maximize income and minimize risks (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Following the new economics of labor migration theory, high skilled migration researchers have linked family dynamics with decisions to migrate (Bailey & Mulder, 2017; Clark & Withers 2007). Studies have shown that family dynamics, age, and composition of the household, care obligations at origin or destination, are highly gendered and can influence migration decisions (Zickgraf, 2018). Research has shown that women's household responsibilities vary in different spatial and cultural contexts, and they shape women's participation in international migration (Veronis, 2014, Vives & Vázquez, 2016).

Migration scholars have also increasingly adopted an intersectional perspective, paying special attention to gender, race, ethnicity, and class as important dimensions that structure labor market integration and acculturation dynamics of migrants, including those who are highly skilled

³ The geographer Ernst Georg Ravenstein (1889) formulated a series of 'laws of migration' to explain migration patterns. Acknowledging migration as an inseparable part of development, Ravenstein argued that migration increases in volume with the development of industries and transportation, and the major cause of migration was economic as migrants moved from areas of low opportunities to areas of high opportunities (as cited in de Hass, 2008, p. 4).

(Berry & Hou, 2016; Gunasekara et. al., 2019; Kofman & Raghuram, 2006; 2015; Triandafyllidou & Isaakyan, 2016; Veronis & Walton Roberts, 2017). Regarding the process of acculturation, Hijro et. al. (2019) state that multiple levels (individual, organizational, and societal) affect the migrant acculturation process, and thus result in integration-related outcomes in the domains of personal/family life and workplace/career. Furthermore, political and social attitudes toward highly skilled immigrants (e.g., xenophobia or dismissal of previous qualifications and skills) often hinder the acculturation process. Drawing on data on voluntary and forced African migrants in New Zealand, Udahemuka and Pernice (2010) argue that psychological motives to migrate for both voluntary migrants (those motivated by 'family life improvement' and 'exploration') and forced migrants (those motivated by 'escaping') were better predictors of acculturation preferences.

Additionally, there has been a growing interest in understanding transnational dimensions of migratory decision-making. The focus of transnationalism lies in simultaneity, i.e., people can be at different places and still maintain social, emotional, cultural, and economic relations in these places at the same time (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Drawing on the transnational literature, studies have found that decision to migrate and location choice are often driven by migrant's social capital at the place of destination, i.e., social networks (Epstein, 2008; Haug, 2008). Over the past two decades, scholars have used the concept of 'translocality' as partly a critique of transnationalism as being too broad and abstract in its approach to exploring the complex 'trans-border' flows. Accordingly, translocality signifies how physical, political, social, and cultural spaces and localities are (re)shaped by mobility and migration and thus adds more significance to particular structures of place to help explain the existence of given flows and networks (Datta & Brickell, 2016).

Moving away from the economic dimension of migrant decision-making, the notion of cultures of migration examines how migration decisions are rooted in social practices that include migrant related beliefs, desires, and myths (Ali, 2007; Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011; Thompson, 2017). To understand how a decision to migrate develops, scholars have focused on the notions of aspiration (Bal, 2013; Collins, 2017; Czaika & Vothknecht, 2014), hope (Koikkalainen et al., 2019), and imagination (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016; Nakache et al., 2015). Migration aspirations have been conceptualized in relation to migration possibilities, and thus, they are viewed positively by a prospective migrant, and they are also institutionally embedded (Carling & Collins, 2017). Using two Indonesian Family and Life Surveys in 2000 and 2007, Czaika and Vothknecht (2014) conceptualized migration as a function of an individual's capability for migration, incorporating two individual-specific capacities, i.e., the capacity to aspire and the capacity to realize. Employing a case study of educated (lower) middle-class youth in Dhaka, Bal (2014) shows that the yearning to leave for the 'aspiring migrants' were disappointment and disengagement. Collins (2017) argues that the notion of desire can help to reconceptualize migration as an ongoing process of spatio-temporal differentiation and the process of becoming migrants themselves. Carling (2002) introduced the term 'involuntary immobility', or in other words, aspiration/ability model, to explain the prevalence of the aspiration to migrate but at the same time, the inability to do so. Scholars who emphasize hope and imagination concerning migration decision making consider hope as "a complex, many-layered notion resting on the capacity for imagination, on a sense of time and of temporal progress, on a desire to believe in a better future or in the possibility that something can change, and to some extent on uncertainty" (Pine, 2014, p. 96). Based on interview data with Iraqi asylum seekers in search of an idealized version of Finland, Koikkalainen et al. (2019) show hope for a better-imagined future abroad as a critical emotion shaped by both beliefs and real-time opportunities. Nakache et al. (2015) elaborate on ways that four migrants' myths and imaginaries (i.e., "migrant-as-hero", freedom of geographical mobility, (im)migration categories, and the country of destination as a country of better life) influence the relationship between migration policies and migrants' immigration strategies. Such myths and imaginaries were in some ways 'fabricated', produced, or the result of multiple economic, political, socio-cultural, and media/technological flows.

In recent years, there has been increasing attention on migrant decision-making and agency in the middle of contingencies and structural constraints, which looks at how migrants make their decisions to migrate. Drawing on the narratives of migrant workers under Canada's Temporary Foreign Workers Program, Perry (2019) elaborates on temporary migrants' decisions to leave their state-approved employment and seek a better life in Canada outside of state-managed circulatory labor migration. Such an act of 'escaping the farm', as argued by the author, offers these migrant workers an opportunity to decide the fate of their own lives independent of the needs of their employers and the Canadian state. Examining Afghan and Somali movements that included 'mixed migration', encompassing both forced and voluntary migration, Van Hear et al. (2017) provide a more nuanced understanding of the push-pull framework for analyzing complex migration flows that continually confound expectations. Belloni (2016a; 2016b) and Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2019) have pointed out that migrants may decide to face extreme hardship and risks to fulfill their migration dream, engaging at times in a process of self-deception. An increasing volume of work has also investigated the interplay between motivation, opportunity, and ability to migrate (Carling & Schewel, 2017; Carling & Collins, 2018; Creighton, 2013; Kuschminder, 2018; Syed Zwick, 2020). Triandafyllidou (2018) introduced a heuristic notion of navigation to analyze this interaction and reconceptualize migrant agency. Studies have also evidenced how migrant intentions and actions interact with migration specific as well as general policies (Kuschminder & Koser, 2017) and on how migrants navigate migration restrictions (Triandafyllidou, 2017).

Highly skilled migrants and decision making: The empirical field

Highly skilled migration is often considered self-initiated and desired. Consequently, minimal attention has been given to decision-making processes of highly skilled migrants. Most studies have highlighted attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and justifications that may (or may not) play a role in the decision-making of migrants and can only be regarded as post-hoc rationalizations.

Kõu and Bailey (2013) studied specific migration decisions in the life course contexts of highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The findings indicated that although highly skilled Indian migrants used international geographical mobility as a strategy to enhance their professional careers, their migration plan largely depended on their life course stages and their linked movers. Similarly, Meijering and van Hoven (2003) discovered career, money, and personal experience as key factors for the decisions of highly skilled, Indian IT professionals to move to Germany. Similarly, Tabor et al. (2015) argued that highly skilled migrants' decision to move to New Zealand was both intrapersonal and social; it also involved negotiation with their families over an extended period. Wang (2013) examined the intentions and dynamics of highly skilled migration from mainland China to post-colonial Hong Kong. Employing the notion of 'desire,' she found that rather than economic considerations, decisions to migrate were marked by aspiration and fantasy associated with structural factors (social order, rule of law, and freedom of speech) and personal factors (quality of life, children's education, and career prospects) (Wang, 2013).

Yanasmayan (2014) also observed personal and quality of life-related factors as key reasons for highly skilled Turkish migrants' decision to move to European cities, i.e., Amsterdam, Barcelona, and London. Examining the motivation of Finns who have moved abroad to other European Union countries, Koikkalainen (2011) found that lifestyle choices and seeking adventure play an important role in migration decision-making. Papademetriou et al., (2008) point out that highly skilled migrants' decision about where to emigrate is shaped by three groups of variables. The first is decision 'drivers' (i.e., opportunity, capital infrastructure, and presence of critical masses of other talented professionals); the second is decision 'facilitators' (i.e., fair and

generous social model, lifestyle and environmental factors and tolerant and safe society); and the third being the 'total immigration package', including the totality of immigration rules and conditions at destination, recognition of foreign credentials and opportunities for family members.

In the Canadian context, only a few studies have examined decision-making processes in the context of highly skilled migration. Ozcurumez & Aker (2016) identified individual-level gain beyond economic prospects as the main reasons and rationale for highly skilled and entrepreneurial Turkish nationals to move to Canada. Drawing on focus group interviews with highly skilled Bangladeshi migrants, McLeman et al. (2017) found that the decision to migrate to Canada was based on urban environmental problems, beyond environmental problems in Bangladesh, and other social, economic, and political factors. They argued for a need to discuss the importance of 'context' at the macro, meso, and micro levels, discussed later in the paper, to better understand the role of environmental factors on international migration.

Regarding highly skilled migrants and the decision-making process, the work of Meyer (2017) and Scheibelhofer (2017) is noteworthy; it assesses migration between developed countries and it evaluates how adolescents and highly skilled migrants make sense of their migration projects. Drawing on a case study of migration of adolescents from rural, eastern Germany, Meyer (2017) illustrated how migration has become a contested field of expectations from social and political entities besides their attempts of becoming. By exploring aspirations of Western European emigrants, Scheibelhofer (2017) discussed wider processes of migrants' life course and self-development within what she proposed as 'second modernity.' Hidayati (2020) examined ways in which highly skilled Indonesian migrants used social media in migration decision-making processes. The study showed that highly skilled migrants used social media both to gain information about the destination country and to contact their friends and colleagues in the destination country before their departure.

As stated by Weinar and Koppenfels (2020), prevailing definitions and data sources on highly skilled migrants center around those who come explicitly as highly skilled migrants through specific immigration streams; they do not capture other groups of skilled immigrants, such as international students. Previous studies on international students have shown an important linkage between educational mobility and potential migration after acquiring post-graduate employment (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; She & Wotherspoon, 2013), and the intention of policymakers to 'train and retain' international students (Suter & Jandl, 2008). The majority of research on international students and their decision-making tends to stress destination choice and rationale for choosing a particular university and program. Moogan (2018) analyzed the student decision-making model for international postgraduate students in the UK. Central to Moogan's (2018) study were reasons for the international students to choose the UK as a destination, rationale for the program of study, and students' feelings as they progressed throughout the whole service consumption period. Similarly, Hoang et al. (2019) examined Vietnamese students' motives and drives in choosing a university in the UK. Students reported that parents' demands and English higher education qualifications were the main reasons for studying abroad, while tuition fees and living costs were the most influential factors in choosing a university (Hoang et al., 2019). Wadhwa (2016) explored decision-making processes of prospective and currently abroad, Indian international students, with a focus on the push and pull factors driving the mobility of Indian students.

Drawing from reflections in the narratives of three Chinese, international undergraduate students in a Canadian university, Wu (2020) proposes a two-dimensional analytical framework to understand decision-making processes of the international undergraduate students. The first dimension includes three phases of the decision-making process, i.e., the phases of deciding whether to study abroad, selecting destination countries, and choosing target institutions. The second dimension is based on three kinds of hypothetically proposed environmental factors within each phase – policy factors, (family and regional) socioeconomic factors, and information factors – within each phase. Little attention has been paid to international students' decisions to transition

to permanent residency in countries like Canada, the USA, or Australia (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). These studies have highlighted the role of economic and professional factors alongside personal and societal ones (Hazen & Alberts, 2006) and difficulties international students face, including language ability, limited connection with local communities, perceived employer discrimination (Scott et al., 2015), and gender, socio-demographic features as well as cultural and emotional factors (Preston & Akbar, 2020a; 2020b).

Although the existing literature on highly skilled migration and decision-making exemplifies the complex and messy social realities of people on the move, there has not been much knowledge about how the macro (i.e., social, economic, and political) and meso (i.e., networks and culture) and micro (i.e., family situation and individual elements such as hope, aspirations, and imaginaries) factors simultaneously drive highly skilled migration flows. Several studies challenge the assumptions held by the neo-classical and human capital theories that the main factors leading the highly skilled migrants are higher wages and a higher standard of living. However, the research so far tends to focus on highly skilled migrants, including international students, who have already migrated and thus retrospectively reflect on their decision to migrate. This paper complements this line of research by focusing on different groups of prospective highly skilled migrants, i.e., highly skilled people applying from abroad to come to the country, temporary workers or visitors currently in the country applying for Permanent Residency, and international students and post-graduate permit holders who seek to land in Canada. It urges the migration scholars and policy makers to examine how social categories of differences, such as race, class, gender, age, and ethnicity shape migrants' decision-making processes among those categorise as highly skilled individuals.

Pandemic and migrant decision making

Migration is a complex phenomenon shaped by different drivers (including socio-economic, cultural, political, demographic, environmental, and health) that interact with each other. Recent research has studied such interactions among different migration drivers, and it has paid special attention to how an environmental change in combination with socio-economic and political processes shape both low and highly skilled migration (Black et al., 2011; McLeman et al., 2016). This line of research has pointed to the importance of adopting a socio-ecological framework for investigating migration processes that look at interactions between different drivers. However, the emphasis thus far has been on natural disasters or environmental degradation, while the impact of other types of crises such as health outbreaks have largely gone unnoticed by migration experts, particularly in regard to emigration towards developed economies.

As stated by Czaika et al., (2021, p. 2), "all forms of migration decisions are surrounded by often very high and possibly irreducible uncertainty and are conceptualized as driven by some simple decision rules (heuristics) and other shortcuts such as imitation, affect, norms, and commitments." In line with most other (health) crises, the migrant population is more likely to be particularly vulnerable to the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 (Suresh et al., 2020). Hence, there is a need to understand how uncertainty, incorporating risk, ambiguity, and ignorance (Czaika et al., 2021), amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, shapes decision-making processes of highly skilled migrants and their families.

Recent research examining how critical infrastructure systems, financial markets, or health services react to disease outbreaks (Scoones, 2019) points to the need for acknowledging uncertainty and complexity to understand how migration decisions are formed (Williams & Balaz 2012). Nonetheless, medical anthropology and epidemiology have long been interested in health outbreaks and pandemics in the past, such as the HIV epidemic (Goldenberg et. al., 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), the Ebola outbreak, and more recently the COVID-19 outbreak globally and their impact on human migration (Fielding Miller et al 2020; Kluge et al. 2020; Ross et al 2020). Such

impact is multifaceted: pandemics restrict mobility as borders close. In the case of COVID-19, borders were closed to control contagion (Fakir & Bharati, 2012), which also raised the fundamental question of who can and cannot travel across borders. The pandemic has long-lasting impacts on transport infrastructure. A pandemic may also exacerbate inequalities through a global economic downturn, and fuel racism and xenophobia, as we saw in the case of COVID-19 (Gruer et al., 2021; Tuyisenge & Goldenberg, 2021). Migrants and refugees have been allegedly identified as 'threats' to public health because they travel across borders and may have been exposed to viruses, or because they live and work in poor, crowded quarters (Suresh et al., 2020). Pandemics also raise questions of who a legitimate client to the public health system is, while highlighting the importance of migrant workers in the care sector in the host country (Attal et al., 2020).

So far, emerging studies and commentaries on the pandemic's impact on immigration to Canada have analyzed related government challenges and policy initiatives. Little attention has been paid to whether and how the pandemic affects the decision-making of immigrants, particularly highly skilled migrants that Canada and other post-industrial nations seek to attract. An exception to the above is two studies conducted by the World Education Services (WES) surveying 4,615 prospective immigrants to Canada applying for WES services in April-June 2020. The study reports that 35% of respondents in April 2020 were considering delaying their immigration to Canada due to COVID-19 concerns such as travel restrictions, fear of contracting the virus during travel, and a potential recession in their sector of employment (WES, 2020, p. 3). However, in April 2020, 38% of prospective immigrants were more interested in immigrating to Canada, with this percentage rising to 46% by August (Atlin 2020). Another 48% indicated that COVID-19 had no impact on their interest (Atlin, 2020). Even though a few studies have looked at international students' vulnerability under the pandemic (Firgan, 2020), there appears to be no research yet investigating if and how the pandemic affects international students' decisions to permanently settle in the host country.

Highly Skilled Migration: The Canadian context

According to Reitz (2013), Canadian immigration policy has evolved in relation to three main goals: nation-building, expansion of the economy, and population. To fulfill these goals, Canada's immigration policy has long emphasized the selection of highly skilled migrants as reflected in the introduction of the 'points system' for selecting skilled immigrants in 1967. On 1 January 2015, the Government of Canada introduced a new electronic Express Entry System to manage the applications for permanent residence under federal economic immigration programs, including the Federal Skilled Worker Program, Federal Skilled Trades Program, Canadian Experience Class, and the Provincial Nominee Program (Cockram et. al., 2021). According to the 2016 Census, the immigrant population represented almost 22 percent out of the total 35,151,728 population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2016, the majority (i.e., 60.3 percent) of the new immigrants came to Canada under the economic class, a major stream through which highly skilled migrants enter Canada. The economic class includes "immigrants who have been selected for their ability to contribute to Canada's economy through their ability to meet labor market needs, to own and manage or to build a business, to make a substantial investment, to create their employment, or to meet specific provincial or territorial labor market needs" (Statistics Canada, 2017). Apart from the economic class, 26.8 percent of immigrants came under the family reunification class and 11.6 percent under humanitarian and compassionate grounds (Statistics Canada, 2017). Along with permanent residents, international students and temporary work permit holders also constitute a significant share of highly skilled migrants in Canada. In 2019, Canada admitted around 341,000 permanent residents, and it issued over 401,000 new study

permits, and 368,700 temporary work permits (TWP). As indicated in Table 1, the numbers of immigrants in all three categories decreased significantly in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Table 1: Number of immigrants entered to Canada and/or permit issued

Permit types	2019	2020
Permanent Residents	341, 175	184,585
New study Permit	401,050	256,270
Temporary Work Permit*	368,730	312,450

Source: Government of Canada. Available at <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset?organization=cic>

*Note: A small number of IMP workers who did not mention their program and province are excluded from data on temporary work permit.

In Canada, the TWP is the stream that includes migrants with varied work permits characterized by diverse working conditions and skill levels, which includes two distinct overarching programs: the International Mobility Program (IMP) and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). Some high-skilled/high-wage foreign workers are issued an open work permit under the IMP, while others, also under the IMP, are issued employer-specific (closed) work permits, which require the submission of an offer of employment through the Canadian government’s Employer Portal (IRCC, 2021c). Foreign workers who are eligible to apply for a work permit under the IMP do not require a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA), a test conducted by Employment and Social Development Canada to confirm that qualified Canadians or permanent residents are not available for the specific jobs. The majority of foreign workers under the IMP, namely, Post-Graduate Work Permit holders and many International Experience Canada (IEC) participants, have open work permits and are thus not bound to any employer or occupation. Nevertheless, in 2018, about one-third of the IMP holders had a closed or highly restrictive work permit suggesting a great variety of IMP sub-programs (Vosko, 2020). As stated in table 2, the IMP has been designed to include a diverse group of temporary foreign workers. The majority of foreign workers under the IMP are classified under three streams: Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) holders, IEC participants, and Intra-Company Transfers. The increasing number of PGWP holders reveals the Canadian federal government’s desire to retain highly educated immigrants via the two-step immigration process – from temporary to permanent.

Table 2: IMP Work Permit Holders and Year in which Permit(s) Became Effective (2019 and 2020)

IMP Subcategories	2019	2020
Agreements	27,005	18,500
- NAFTA	13,335	6,390
- Canada Provincial / Territorial	11,010	10,280
- All Other Agreements*	2,660	1,830
Canadian Interests	243,125	209,395
- Intra-Company Transfers (ICT)	17,235	11,780
- International Experience Canada (IEC)	30,270	8,095
- Post-graduate Employment	97,450	121,285
- Spouse of Skilled Workers and Students	62,015	51,410
- Other Canadian Interests**	36,155	16,825
Other IMP Participants and Vulnerable Workers	390	90
Total IMP (unique persons)	270, 520	227,985

Source: Akbar (2022). Note: A small number of IMP workers who did not mention their program and province are excluded from the table. *Includes Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), Other Free Trade Agreement (FTA), General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), Professionals and Provincial/Territorial International. **Includes Significant benefit general, Entrepreneur / Self-Employed, Emergency repairs, Exchange Professors, Visiting Lecturers, Reciprocal Employment Other, Post-Doctoral, PhD Fellows and Award Recipients, and Charitable and Religious Work.

The TFWP consists of four main programs, including Agricultural Workers, Caregiver Program, Live-in Caregiver Program, and Other Temporary Foreign Workers requiring an LMIA, including both the Low-Wage Stream and the High-Wage Stream, as shown in table 3. The TFWP holders are tied to one specific employer, occupation, and location, and thus require completing and obtaining an LMIA approval. In 2019, 98, 210 TFWPs were issued, and the numbers only slightly decreased in 2020 with a total of 84, 465 TFWPs being issued (IRCC, 2021b) as they were deemed essential workers during the pandemic. Under the TFWP, much scholarly attention has been given to agricultural workers and (live-in) caregivers due to their economic, legal, and social precarious situation (Haley et al., 2020; Salami et al., 2015; Vahabi & Wong, 2017).

Table 3: TFWP Work Permit Holders and Year in which Permit(s) Became Effective (2019 and 2020)

TFWP Subcategory	2019	2020
Agricultural Workers*	56,680	51,735
Live-In Caregivers	3,455	2,625
Caregivers	3,550	825
Other Temporary Foreign Workers with LMIA (High-wage and Low-wage)	34,525	29,280
Total TFWP (unique persons)	98,210	84,465

Source: Akbar (2022). Note: A small number of TFWP workers who did not mention their program and province are excluded from the table. *Includes Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), Agricultural Stream (non-seasonal) and Other Agricultural Workers

Before the pandemic, migrants under certain temporary programs, such as Live-In Caregivers, Caregivers, PGWP, IMP, and TFWP could obtain permanent residency, initiating a two-step – temporary to permanent – migration. In 2018, 95,283 permanent residents who were admitted to Canada had previously held a work permit, while 53,805 permanent residents had once held a study permit as international students in Canada (IRCC, 2019). In 2019, 63,020 individuals who had a work permit and 11,566 who a PGWP were granted Canadian permanent residency (IRCC, 2020). After the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government has opened other pathways of permanent residency for TFWs and international students in Canada. For example, the launch of the Temporary Resident to Permanent Resident Pathway Program to provide permanent residency to over 90,000 essential temporary workers and international graduates in May 2021, and a lower Comprehensive Ranking System score to qualify for an invitation under the Express Entry system in February 2021.

Due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions in Canada, the admission of permanent residents and other immigrant groups was dramatically reduced in 2020 as stated above. Canada first closed its border to non-citizens and non-residents on March 16, 2020. A few groups (i.e., diplomats, US citizens, and those entering under the family reunification) were exempted from the initial travel restrictions (Harris, 2020). Furthermore, the processing of work permits and permanent residency applications to come to Canada was temporarily closed from March until the end of June 2020. Although Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) started

processing online visitor visa and Electronic Travel Authorization applications on 1 July 2020, there was uncertainty regarding the processing times, travel restrictions, and quarantine (Triandafyllidou & Nalbandian, 2020).

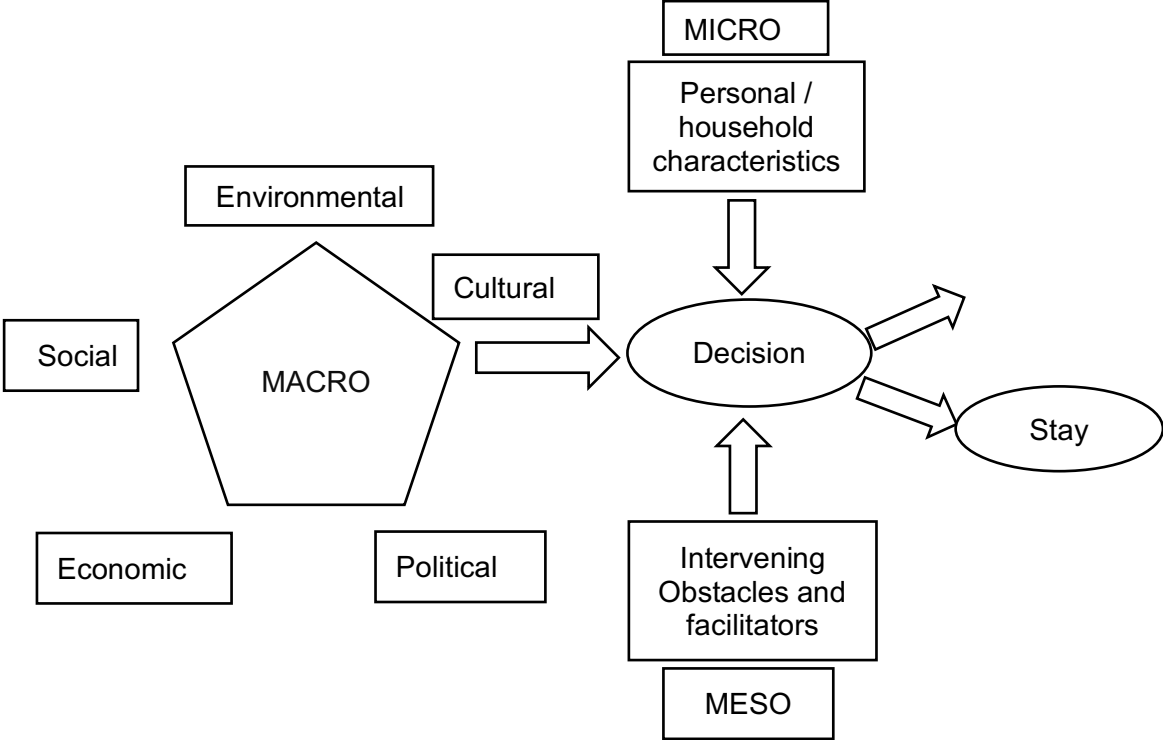
To date, much of the research on highly skilled migrants in Canada has been focused on challenges these migrants have faced during social and economic integration into the Canadian labor market and society (Gauthier, 2016). Previous studies have drawn attention to (un)employment, in particular the issues of deskilling and devaluation of previous education and work experiences (Subedi & Rosenberg, 2017; Wilson-Forsberg, 2015), experiences of discrimination and prejudices in the workplace and society (Esses & Dietz, 2007) and health and wellbeing (Chadwick & Collins, 2015; Dean & Wilson, 2009). Only a few studies (Esses et al., 2021; Shields & Alrob, 2020; Triandafyllidou & Nalbandian, 2020) have identified and assessed the ways the COVID-19 pandemic has affected migration to Canada, restructured the immigrant hierarchy, and settlement approaches. Furthermore, apart from several studies (e.g., Ozcurumez & Aker, 2016; McLeman et al., 2017; Wu, 2020), there has not been much focus on the decision-making process of highly skilled migrants, including international students, to move to Canada in the pre-pandemic era. These studies will be discussed in the upcoming sections.

Highly skilled migrant decision making: Micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors

Against this backdrop, the DEMA project aims to study the decision-making dynamics of prospective highly skilled migrants under the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and its aftermath. The DEMA project brings together and carries forward this literature on decision-making in several ways: (1) It focuses on regular, highly skilled migration and points to the risk factors and uncertainties that highly skilled migrants (including international students) face; (2) It concentrates on the COVID-19 pandemic and its evolution as an example of a critical juncture which has greatly disrupted highly skilled immigration to Canada (and elsewhere) prompting prospective migrants to consider a whole range of issues that were probably not relevant before. Such issues include the uncertainty of border openings/closures in relation to localised outbreaks, the disruption of international transport, the health risks involved in travelling or moving to a new place to work, the health risk factors of specific sectors of employment, the overall economic downturn both at origin and destination, the disruption in education and welfare systems again both at origin and destination, and the relative upturn or downturn of specific sectors; (3) While acknowledging that highly skilled migrants have more options and resources than irregular migrants or asylum seekers, we address the vulnerability that affects highly skilled migrants (particularly international students) as they may be stranded at origin, transit or destination with limited options; and finally, (4) the DEMA project examines alternative options for migration such as digital instead of physical mobility, notably people working from 'elsewhere' for a period of time, a channel that could be a possible and alternative migration pathway for highly skilled workers.

In addressing the above questions, we adopt an analytical model that integrates micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors in a dynamic framework (McLeman et al., 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2017). This analytical framework brings together social, economic, political, demographic, and environmental drivers of migration (macro-level); it takes into account the role of governance actors, institutions, and culture (meso-level); and it eventually converges on how these factors shape the individual and household decision-making (micro-level), including family situations and individual elements such as hope, aspirations, and imaginaries in different cultural contexts (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017).

Figure 1: The role of environment in migration as conceptualized in Foresight (2011, as cited in McLeman et al., 2020, p. 356)



As discussed in this paper, highly skilled migrants are a heterogeneous category, and highly skilled migration decision-making – where, when, and how to move – is a multi-stage and multidimensional process. As a result, there is a need to understand the details of how the macro, meso, and micro factors simultaneously interact across scales to shape highly skilled migrants’ decision-making to migrate. Therefore, the DEMA project sheds light on how individual decisions to migrate are made in a specific social context, which feeds back into the meso and macro levels and also affects migrants’ preferences to apply for Permanent Residency in Canada.

We operationalize the connection of the macro-, meso-, and micro-level outlined above by identifying turning points (e.g., current and future economic political and social stability in home countries, immigration policies, acculturation experiences, support from networks, household social and economic situation, personal desires, hope, and imaginaries) where the (prospective) highly skilled migrant’s decision-making is triggered (McLeman, 2017). Although crises have been theorized in migration research mostly concerning humanitarian factors (Martin et al., 2014), acknowledging the complexity and pitfalls of crisis (i.e., humanitarian crisis, health crisis, and environmental crisis) as a concept, the DEMA project relies on a broader operational definition of turning points or critical junctures. This is because migration trajectories are often not linear moves from one country to another but rather relational and fluid social processes often embodied by uncertainty in migrant life trajectories (Hillmann et al., 2018). The turning points may be slow or rapid onset events at a macro-level (e.g. economic collapse, drought, pandemics), at a meso-level (e.g. urban security deterioration; political crisis, and instability), or a micro-level (e.g. crisis events within a specific household).

Concluding Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic came at a crucial time for international migration amidst the global record-high migration inflows. This paper highlights that migration decision-making – where, when, and how to move – is a multi-stage and multidimensional process. Furthermore, “migration decisions are taken at important crossroads in people’s lives; determine and are determined by long-term life trajectories; and bring lasting consequences for the decision-maker and people affected by the decisions and subsequent behavioral actions” (Czaika et al., 2021, p. 2). Consequently, the paper argues for a need to pay special attention to the notion of critical junctures (Capoccia, 2016), a term that has been used to explain policy changes but which we use here to study changes in the life course of an individual: critical points where decision making on moving (or not) takes place. Critical junctures reflect a heuristic concept that helps us analyze the role of unexpected events that may prompt a decision or reshape a decision already taken. This framework is also predicated on the notion of migrant agency, notably the capacity of (prospective) migrants to shape their lives and exploit opportunities or open new possibilities for themselves and their families (Triandafyllidou, 201, Vives, 2012).

Furthermore, there is a need to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and its evolution as an example of a critical juncture that has greatly disrupted highly skilled immigration to Canada (and elsewhere) prompting prospective migrants to consider a whole range of issues that were probably not relevant previously. By doing so, it will respond to and builds on the relatively new but rapidly growing body of theoretical and empirical research on migration decision-making and will generate insights into individual differences in cognitive decision-making processes among highly skilled migrants.

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