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The influence of regional community characteristics on employer recruitment decision making

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Abstract
The Question/Problem: A significant proportion of permanent skilled immigrants in Australia remain underemployed in the labour market relative to their skill sets. Scholarly work attempting to identify the causes of this underemployment of immigrant professionals has tended to focus on immigrants' human capital deficits such as overseas qualifications (Hawthorne, 1994; Productivity Commission Research Report, 2006), overseas based work experiences (Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004; Bauder & Cameron, 2002), and lack of proficiency in English language (Birrell, Hawthorne, & Richardson, 2006; Shields & Wheatley-Price, 2002). Yet other literature suggests that skill utilisation of immigrant professionals can depend on employers - on their values, social conventions, information exchange and awareness in relation to new immigrant skills and on the operation of social networks that may facilitate and impede immigrant access to employment (McAllister & Moore, 1989; Evans & Kelley, 1991; Bauder & Cameron, 2002; Tubergen, Maas & Flap, 2004; Productivity Commission Research Report, 2006; Markus, 2009). Surprisingly, little is known of the role of employers in this process and the social context in which employers operate. We report the findings from a study examining how regional community characteristics and the issue of trust influence employer screening of immigrant professionals.

Keywords
making, regional, community, characteristics, employer, recruitment, decision, influence

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**The influence of regional community characteristics on employer recruitment decision making**

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1. The Question/Problem

A significant proportion of permanent skilled immigrants in Australia remain underemployed in the labour market relative to their skill sets. Scholarly work attempting to identify the causes of this underemployment of immigrant professionals has tended to focus on immigrants' human capital deficits such as overseas qualifications (Hawthorne, 1994; Productivity Commission Research Report, 2006), overseas based work experiences (Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004; Bauder & Cameron, 2002), and lack of proficiency in English language (Birrell, Hawthorne, & Richardson, 2006; Shields & Wheatley-Price, 2006). Yet other literature suggests that skill utilisation of immigrant professionals can depend on employers - on their values, social conventions, information exchange and awareness in relation to new immigrant skills and on the operation of social networks that may facilitate and impede immigrant access to employment (McAllister & Moore, 1989; Evans & Kelley, 1991; Bauder & Cameron, 2002; Tublegen, Maas & Flap, 2004; Productivity Commission Research Report, 2006; Markus, 2009). Surprisingly, little is known of the role of employers in the process and the social context in which employers operate. We report the findings from a study examining how regional community characteristics and the issue of trust influence employer screening of immigrant professionals.

2. The Method

We used a multi-factor, qualitative analysis that focuses on the employment of computing and accounting professional groups: the top two occupations nominated in Australia skill migration program between 2008-2009. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a constructivist, grounded theory approach was undertaken. This was regarded as being the most effective way of collecting from employers and their agents the potentially sensitive empirical data required for this study and enabled the researcher to actively iterate the empirical research with existing literature. The research was conducted in Wollongong (NSW), a regional centre, allowing for the study to be bounded both spatially and temporally.

3. Policy Implications

We describe how the employers' general lack of experience in working with newly arriving immigrant groups such as Asians, and their dense community networks which emphasise relationships of trust, familiarity and service to the local community, lead towards an unfavourable evaluation of minority ethnic immigrant professionals as prospective employees. Our review recognises the need for more focussed research that examines the complex mechanisms by which group identity, including discrimination and prejudice, influence employer behaviour within the screening process of immigrant professionals. We note that the ways that trust, familiarity and community norms operate for and against immigrant professionals within a recruitment situation and in turn potentially contribute to discrimination and prejudice. Although no conclusive evidence could be derived, the paper illustrates how the webs of interconnecting relationships between contextual based community characteristics and social norms can result in either a favourable evaluation and short-listing of skilled immigrant professionals during the pre-employment recruitment process.

4. The Findings

The findings of this research identified some key contextual community characteristics that influenced employers in their assessment and willingness to recruit immigrant professionals. The first contextual community characteristic and as influencing the employers in their evaluation was the dense networks within the regional community. Drawing on Edwards (2004) and Stone's (2001) description of dense networks, this regional community displayed network arrangements built on similarities in terms of background, age, level of education, social status, or shared attitudes and interests. It was not uncommon for the regional Australian community members researched to have established relationships with people who they have known for many years. The next contextual based community characteristic that influenced the employer evaluation was the strong sense of obligation community members felt towards each other and the level of importance the regional community members placed on dealing with people they 'trust'. The community's experiences with previous waves of ethnic migrant groups together with media generated fears created an apprehensive approach towards newcomers resulting in an in-group and out-group mentality. Finally, there was an emphasis placed on the community member's obligations to their community and as a corollary there are expectations of members (Coleman, 1988; Edwards, 2004; Stone & Hughes, 2001). These regional employers expected people who live and work in the region to demonstrate their long term commitment and loyalty to the local community. Such displays of commitment were expected to be carried out through community based voluntary work and/or participation in community based activities and immigrant professionals who contributed to the community through voluntary work were favoured by the local employers. Consequently, the employers' general lack of experience in working with newly arriving immigrant groups such as Asians, and their dense community networks which emphasise relationships of trust, familiarity and service to the local community, lead towards an unfavourable evaluation of minority ethnic immigrant professionals as prospective employees. References Aydemir, A., & Skuterud, M. (2004). Explaining the deteriorating entry earnings of Canada's immigrant cohorts: 1966-2000. In S. Canada (Ed.): Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series. Bauder, H., & Cameron, E. (2002). Cultural barriers to labour market integration: Immigrants from South Asia and the former Yugoslavia. Vancouver: Vancouver Centre of Excellence Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis. Birrell, B., Hawthorne, L., & Richardson, S. (2006). Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories. Canberra: Department of Immigration Multicultural Affairs. Coleman, J. (1988).