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**IF THERE WERE A ‘HIGHLY SKILLED  
RED OCTOPUS’? THE CASE  
OF ITALIAN HIGHLY SKILLED  
MOBILITY AT TIMES OF CRISIS**

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**ABSTRACT.** The aim of the present paper is to provide an analysis of the recent growth in emigration of highly skilled workers from Italy and to put it in the context of the overall crisis influencing Southern European countries. In doing so, a comparison of two recent studies on the phenomenon will be presented, highlighting the fact that nowadays highly skilled flows tend to have distinctive features, both in terms of forms and trajectories. Attention will be given to under-studied determinants surrounding the decision to move to urban centres that are not traditional poles of attraction for highly skilled people. This paper aims to warn of the need to revise, or at least complement, existing studies on the phenomenon with more updated theoretical paradigms.

**JEL Classification:** F22, I23,  
J60

**Keywords:** highly skilled mobility, economic crisis, Southern European countries, Italy.

**Introduction**

In the era of globalisation, the demand for highly skilled workers has grown faster because of an increasing reliance on technological and scientific innovation. Concurrently, the population ageing, which characterizes most industrialized countries in the twenty-first century, is causing a decrease in production capacity, which is needed to improve the competitiveness of national systems in the global market (Balduzzi and Rosina, 2011). In this scenario, many industrialized countries have become competitors in what has been defined “brain gain”, namely the acquisition of highly trained, foreign-born professionals.

In times of crisis, the brain gain becomes even more evident, as innovation is a crucial factor to boost growth (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou, 2013). Although Europe as a whole is likely to remain an attractive destination for highly trained professionals, it is undeniable that some Northern European cities, as traditional poles of attraction, are more “magnetic” than others. However, the case of ‘alternative’ highly skilled mobility in Europe – such as the cases of mobility intra-Southern European countries – is particularly interesting to discuss. On the one hand, indeed, the effects of the current downturn have been particularly severe in these countries, namely Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. On the other hand, recent studies conducted on the mobility of highly skilled Italian have begun to show that a number of talented Italians are moving to those countries. Yet, not much research has been focussed on

these flows. This means that the dynamics have been poorly understood so far. Then, there is the need to understand who is actually moving and for how long. On this basis, the main purpose of this paper is to discuss critically contributions in the study of highly skilled people, using the Italian case as a reference example. In doing so, a complementary perspective will be presented, by drawing on two recent studies on Italian highly skilled mobility at times of crisis.

Starting from this preliminary consideration, the first section of this paper is dedicated to discussion of the very definition of a highly skilled worker, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of common classifications. It follows a brief discussion on the most significant contributions offered by traditional literature, before moving to more recent studies made towards the end of the 1990s. Then, particular attention is paid to some of the current forms and directions of highly skilled mobility in Europe, trying to better understand the main features of this phenomenon in its current context.

The second part is intended to provide a general overview of the socio-economic situation in Italy. In particular, the focus is placed on old structural weaknesses of the country to see how they have affected, and continue to affect, the mobility of human capital from Italy. Emphasizing the features of the Italian labour market today allows a better sense of the circumstances in which the phenomenon is developing.

In the third and last part of the paper, a brief overview of the results of the two recent studies mentioned above will be tabled. This is intended to outline the utility of an approach which takes into account the different forms and directions of highly skilled mobility within Europe nowadays.

## **1. Definitional problems: who are the highly skilled?**

Despite a growing interest in the phenomenon, particularly since the 1990s, the international scientific community has not provided a universally accepted definition of highly skilled workers so far, because of differences between countries in terms of education systems and recognition of qualifications. It is not surprising, then, that in recent years, institutions such as the European Union have pointed to the standardization and mutual recognition of qualifications through the so-called Bologna Process (Milio, Lattanzi, Casadio, Crosta, Raviglione, Ricci, Scano, 2012).

Over time, scholars have provided a number of different definitions, all of which reflected the socio-economic and historical context in which they were coined (Lindsay Lowell and Batalova, 2006). At the most general level, some of the existing definitions focus on the level of education of the highly skilled worker, others on the type of occupation in the country of destination and, others, on combination of both. Commonly, economists tend to define highly skilled workers as people possessing a tertiary level education – university degree – and beyond (Lindsay Lowell, 2002). One limit in the use of this definition is that it is particularly extensive and tends to include people with very different kinds of qualifications, flattening these qualifications to the formal education (Beltrame, 2007). Another weakness, then, is related to the fact that it assumes that those with a tertiary degree are automatically employed in highly skilled jobs, whereas this is not always the case (Milio, Lattanzi, Casadio, Crosta, Raviglione, Ricci, Scano, 2012). In other words, formal education cannot be considered a sufficient condition to define a highly skilled worker, as cases of brain waste are frequent, particularly at times of crisis. As pointed out by Lindsay Lowell and Batalova, in fact: ‘some immigrants could have completed a college education abroad but because of non-transferability of their credentials or some other reasons work in less skilled occupations’ (2006, p. 3). For this reason, part of the literature highlights the fact that to evaluate properly the professional level of highly skilled workers both the formal qualification acquired through

education and the one acquired through experience must be taken into account (Koser and Salt, 1997). This means that, although access to specific professions is usually linked to holding a university degree, in some cases the possibility of gaining prestigious jobs can be associated to previous experience or specific training courses.

Taking into consideration the variety of situations that can occur – and the differences in terms of classification criteria – it is essential to be precise when referring to highly skilled workers. In this paper, it has been decided to follow the standard classification, based on the possession of a university degree, as it is the one normally used by the authors to which reference is made.

## **2. Theoretical background: the standard view**

Over the last two decades, a growing recognition has been accorded to international movements of highly skilled workers. However, the pioneering *studies* on the subject dates back to the 1960s, when economists proposed two theoretical models providing an explanation of possible effects of this migration: the theory of human capital and the neo-Marxist dependency theory (Iredale, 2001; Docquier e Rapoport, 2007). The first one is a micro sociological theory, as it assigns a central role to the individuals and sees them as rational actors, whereas the neo-Marxist dependency theory is a macro sociological model, and it assigns a record to external forces that affect individuals' actions (Becker, 1962).

Both these interpretations – which make up the so-called *standard view* or *traditional view* – assumes that most highly educated people coming from developing countries moved where their education reaps the highest benefit, that is industrialized countries. Over time, this push-pull model has been criticised for several reasons. Firstly, for being a static model viewing the migration as a linear and unidirectional movement, particularly from developing countries to industrialized ones (King, 2012). Secondly, for largely aiming to define the effects of highly skilled migration on the countries of origin and of destination (Beltrame, 2007-2008). Finally, because it departs from the assumption that the movement of highly skilled workers depends on a defined and limited set of factors, pull or push, more than a combination of both (Beltrame, 2008).

## **3. The impact of globalisation on the study of highly skilled mobility**

Towards the end of the 1990s, empirical evidence – particularly flows directed to emerging countries, in the Persian Gulf and South-East Asia, (Rudolph and Hillmann, 1997) and return migration flows (Boulier, 1999), – lead scholars to believe that the standard view framework is no longer appropriate (Brandi, 2001). The very definition of highly skilled movements as 'migration' may not be appropriate, because the reality shows highly skilled flows are often temporary and multidirectional (Carr *et al.*, 2005; Agullo and Egwana, 2009).

In this regard, Al Ariss (2010) and Tharenou (2010) have respectively focused on possible differences among the use of the terms 'migration' and 'mobility' in current literature of highly skilled workers. While the term 'migration' would imply a forced movement – or moving out of necessity – 'mobility' would commonly be associated with free choice. Yet, it is likely that the gradual shift of terminology in much of the current literature also reflect the willingness to make a subtle distinction between the concept of mass migration – flows mostly involving low skilled workers – and elite flows, bringing out an issue which is not free from judgement and simplification.

Over time, different schools of thought have been consolidating. Between them, Gaillard and Gaillard's one (1997) and Iredale's theoretical model (1999-2001), which have reflected on the effects of globalization on the phenomenon of highly skilled migration,

undoubtedly providing an updated vision of the phenomenon. On the one hand, the “circulationist” perspective of Gaillard and Gaillard (1997) focus on new directions of contemporary professionals’ mobility and replaces the old dynamics of brain drain with the concept of brain circulation. On the other hand, the “structurationist” approach of Iredale aims to explain how the study of skilled migration cannot be separated from a reflection on the political and institutional dimension.

In the “circulationist” paradigm, the concept of brain circulation is introduced to show that globalisation can allow the phenomenon of highly skilled mobility without necessarily benefitting one country at the expense of another. Firstly, because with the emergence of a knowledge-based economy, the labour market for professionals has become increasingly global, and thus the flows of highly skilled workers might stop following the traditional South-North direction. Secondly, because as mentioned above, the processes of relocation led to the creation of new centres of attraction of human capital (Gaillard and Gaillard, 1997).

The emphasis of the “structurationist” approach is placed, instead, on the fact that contemporary migration of human capital does not depend on the rational decisions of individuals, but it is shaped by institutional and political interventions made by the receiving countries, through bilateral or multilateral agreements and policies that promote the entry of foreign skilled workers. In this sense, political and institutional policy measures made by a series agents – such as the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Mercosul – could selectively affect the composition and direction of highly skilled flows (Goss and Lindquist, 1995).

Within the context of broad literature on the effects of highly qualified mobility, few contributions focus on talented Italians. This is possibly because the Italian debate on the phenomenon is more recent than the one which begun on an international scale and dates back to the last decade. Much of the existing research on Italian situation are offered by economists, frequently adopting a quantitative approach and statistical indicators to evaluate whether Italy is experiencing brain drain (Becker, Ichino, Peri, 2003; Rosina, 2010-2011). At the most general level, this literature gives great prominence to economic determinants of migration outflows, hence supposing that the decision to move mainly depends on perceived earnings growth in the host country.

For what concerns, instead, social phenomena, which can operate as an incentive to move, only few explanations have been provided so far. Morano-Foadi’s (2006) Beltrame’s (2007-2008) and Reyneri’s (2011) predominant focus has been on current labour market situation and policy measures taken by Italian governments. At a macro and micro level, however, the impact of the recent crisis on these flows is still unexplored.

#### **4. Beyond the “circulationist perspective”?**

Recently, an increasingly range of work has highlights the fact that scholars should be aware of the tendency of idealizing the movements of human capital (Bönisch-Brednich, 2010). Looking at the specific case of researchers, Bönisch-Brednich (2010) has pointed out that part of the literature tend to propose an idealistic image of the academic migrant, as an individual perfectly mobile and independent, whereas nowadays most academics simply do not fit into this concept. Indeed, the idea of human capital flows as “fluid shift” from a country of origin to many others is clearly very charming, but it seems quite unrealistic at the micro level.

Although the international mobility of highly skilled workers must be considered a natural interaction to be encouraged in a progressively globalized world, it is important to keep in mind that the theoretical perspectives are usually the result of the historical moment in which they have been thought. Hence, the idea of highly skilled mobility conceived during the

1990s is likely to be quite optimistic, disguising the problematic issues linked to these movements, which are instead coming up nowadays (such as cases of non-transferability of credential, underemployment, administrative and bureaucratic obstacles). For this reason, the understanding of the phenomenon provided so far by the mainstream literature, may not be entirely applicable to the present day.

Reflecting on different forms and trajectories of contemporary highly skilled flows means, above all, considering the phenomenon as constantly changing and following the contexts in which it occurs. In this respect, recent empirical studies have begun to study new waves of highly skilled mobility developing in some Southern European countries, namely Greece and Italy, as a response to the recent economic crisis (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014). Little is known up until now about these flows: who is moving and where? For how long? However, it seems that these flows have distinctive features, both in terms of form and direction.

Regarding new forms, a singular feature of the current mobility of highly skilled Italians is that the number of ‘more experimental’ movements is significantly increasing. This includes movements of young graduates, often experienced, initially perceived as temporary and becoming stable only after a successful fulfilment of personal aspirations. In turn, personal aspiration are satisfied only if the country of destination recognizes the qualification of the migrant (Finocchietti, 2011). Unfortunately, nowadays a growing number of young European graduates are employed in low skilled job in the country of destination, which clearly shows that cases of “brain waste” and underemployment are becoming more and more frequent (Trevena, 2010).

With regard to different directions, the case of Southern European professionals moving to another Southern European country is meaningful for two reasons. Firstly, because all the Mediterranean countries are currently suffering the effects of the current crisis and secondly because the choice of the country of destination may not follow the traditional pull factor of higher pay level. In this paper, two recent studies on highly skilled Italians mobility to another Southern European country will be illustrated, trying to reflect on possible motivations of such a choice.

## **5. The crisis in Italy or Italy in crisis?**

It is important to have an understanding of the mobility of talented Italians framing it into the socio-economic context of the country as a whole. This is particularly necessary to understand the main causes of the present growth in the outflows and the poor attractiveness of the system for foreign highly skilled workers. Indeed, this is not only due to the recent recession, but much has to do with older structural weaknesses. In this context, the economic crisis has merely exacerbated the situation, highlighting those effects that have begun to emerge in the course of the last decade.

The Italian pre-crisis period has been characterised by a lack of economic growth since 2001, population ageing and debt crisis. This situation has affected the employment rate, particularly the young employment rate (Garibaldi and Taddei, 2013). According to the Eurostat, the 2007 employment rate for the labour force aged 20-24 and 25-29 – and thus preceding the impact of the economic downturn – were respectively 40.8 per cent and 64.3 per cent, whereas in the EU 27 the same rates were more than ten points higher, respectively 54.9 and 75.5 per cent (Balduzzi and Rosina, 2011).

As Garibaldi and Taddei underlined, one of the main characteristics of the Italian labour market – which is common to other Southern European countries – is the fact that it is so strongly segmented that it produces a youth-old age dualism. In this context, ‘a large share of temporary contracts, employing for the most part young workers, coexists alongside a

stock of open-ended contract with much stricter employment security' (Garibaldi and Taddei, 2013, p.4). Consequently, it is not surprising that the role of the young Italian generation in society, economics and politics has been progressively reduced, causing an inter-generational conflict (Balduzzi and Rosina, 2011; Garibaldi and Taddei, 2013).

The current downturn and austerity measures are undoubtedly worsening this framework. The Italian unemployment rate has jumped from less than 7 per cent in 2007 to more than 12 per cent in 2013. For what concerns young Italians, in 2008, the youth unemployment rate was little less than 20 per cent and five years later, it had doubled reaching 40 per cent. If we look at the general trend of the unemployment rate in Italy, it becomes very clear that the youth unemployment rate has grown much faster than the total one, clearly showing that the impact of the economic crisis has been stronger among the youth. Yet, it is necessary to stress the fact that youth unemployment is not a new phenomenon in Italy, but a historical feature of the labour market that the crisis has aggravated.

Alongside this, the number of Italians exiting the country is growing faster. According to the Anagrafe degli Italiani Residenti all'Estero (Aire) – the Registry of Italians Living Abroad – the number of young Italians aged between 20 and 40 living abroad increased of 316,572 between 2000 and 2010, with a rate of more than 30,000 departures per year (data provided by the radio broadcast “Giovani Talenti”). Furthermore, a recent study conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (Istat) on international and internal migration of the resident population indicates that in 2013 there has been a significant increase in the emigration flows of Italian citizens, whose cancellations to the national registry have increased from 68,000 in 2012 to 82,000 units in 2013 (+ 21 per cent). Among the 24 years old and beyond Italian citizens, 30 per cent had a university degree (Istat, 2014).

It is reasonable to suspect, however, that both these statistics provide an underestimation of the phenomenon. The Italian Aire and Istat, indeed, only take into account the people who voluntarily decide to cancel from the Italian register to enrol themselves in the register of Italians living abroad. In other words, many other graduates may have decided to move abroad without informing the Italian registry office. Looking at the general trend of the phenomenon, however, it is significant to highlight that among the Italians exiting the country many are young and highly skilled, as confirmed by international studies (International Migration Outlook, 2013).

With regards to the number of highly skilled Italian workers living in a different countries – including in this definition people with a tertiary degree, without considering their professional activity – few quantitative studies have been provided so far. Beltrame (2007-2008), Balduzzi and Rosina (2011) have made the most significant steps in this direction, highlighting that the exceptional nature of the Italian case, compared to other European countries, is not merely the inability to retain the graduates within the national boundaries, but rather the inability to attract human capital from abroad. In other words, the outflows of talented Italians seems not to be compensated by human capital inflows, with a simultaneous lack of brain circulation.

In the recent past, few qualitative studies on the mobility of researchers in Italy have been done. They show that, among the many reasons for leaving the country, push factors are still strong (Morano-Foadi, 2006; Beltrame, 2007). In particular, this part of the literature focuses on the lack of funds devoted for research and innovation and the lack of adequate infrastructure, the higher level of bureaucratisation of the Italian research system, the lack of competitive opportunities and the low wages (Morano-Foadi, 2006; CENSIS, 2002). Finally, Reyneri (2011) gives a greater prominence to the macroeconomic framework, highlighting the fact that the Italian economic system was, and still is, characterized by a lack of technological

innovation and therefore the number of young academics is higher than the Italian economic system absorption capacity.

Looking at the specific case of Italian researchers' mobility, thus, this appears to be highly oriented as a unidirectional outflow, due to a result of a concatenation of old structural problems weighing on the economic system even before the 2008 crisis. The responsibility for this situation is mostly attributed in the literature (Beltrame, 2007; Balduzzi and Rosina, 2011) to the scant heed of the Italian government, which – following Lindsay Lowell classification (2002) – supported the adoption of return policies, measures to encourage the return of native talent that has moved, more than retention ones, aimed at giving a boost to certain sectors.

## **6. Highly skilled Italians on the move: comparative analysis**

Considering the difficulty of collecting comprehensive structural data on highly skilled mobility from Italy today and, more specifically, finding recent studies focusing on new highly skilled flows within Europe, here two recent studies will be taken into account. These two studies are particularly interesting for several reasons. Firstly because, to my best knowledge, they are the latest studies accomplished on the mobility of graduates and beyond in Italy. Secondly, they give a snapshot of the Italian situation in the very recent past. Finally, they help to better outline the phenomenon, in quantitative and qualitative terms, as well as bring new questions, which I will try to answer.

1. From December 2009 and February 2010, the National Institute for Statistics (Istat) has carried out a study on the employability of Italian early stage researchers who held their doctoral degree in Italy in 2006 and 2009, in order to analyse their employment status after three and five years from their Ph.D. One of the topics taken into account in this study consists of work experience abroad. Hence, this make it possible to quantify the number of Italian early stage researchers who were living abroad in late 2009 and early January 2010. For this survey, 15,568 academics have been involved: 8,443 got their Ph.D. in 2004 and 10,125 in 2006 (Istat, 2011).
2. The second study consists of a number of e-survey conducted in late spring and summer 2013 by Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou and Prof. Ruby Gropas in Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain. In the paper recently published, the two authors focus only on Greek and Italian citizens who had already left their country and were living abroad at the time of the interviews. 901 highly educated Italians were interviewed and 919 Greeks. Among the Italian respondents, 46.3 per cent had completed postgraduate studies and 17.9 per cent held a Ph.D. (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014).

## **7. National Institute for Statistics (Istat) – Mobility of early stage researchers**

As stated in the report, nearly 1,300 early stage researchers who held a Ph.D. in Italy in 2004 and 2006 were living abroad at the time of the interview in 2009-2010, which means approximately 7 per cent of the total (Istat, 2011, p. 3). Unfortunately, it is not possible to make any comparison with previous data since this was the first project realized by Istat on the topic. As clearly synthesized in *Figure 1*, among interviewees, the number of researchers with a hard science background was by far the greatest. Indeed, the highest share of early stage researchers residents abroad is found among those who held a Ph.D. in physical science, followed – with much lower share – by other scientists (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014).

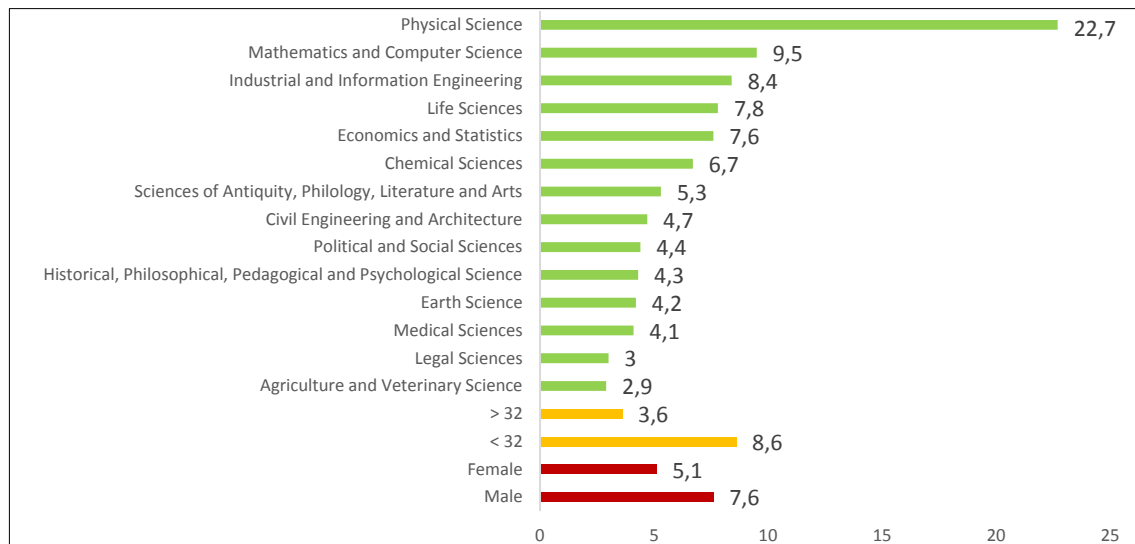


Figure 1. Italian early stage researchers who received their Ph.D. in Italy in 2004 and 2006, living abroad in 2009 (per cent)

Source: Calculations based on Istat data

This feature is not new, and can be explained by the historically low Italian investment in R&D (in 2012, 1.26 per cent of GDP, about half of OECD, Eurostat 2012) that, in practical terms, results in the lack of laboratories and suitable equipment in Italian universities and research institutes (Morano-Foadi, 2006; Beltrame, 2007).

Regarding the favourite countries of destination, *Figure 2* shows that more than half of these movements have been made within the European Union. According to these data, the favourite countries of destination have been, in order: United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Spain. United States, United Kingdom, Germany and France are traditional poles of attraction for highly skilled Italians, whereas Spain is not. How can this South-to-South movement be explained? Why do these early stage researchers decided to move to another country similarly suffering the effect of the downturn? Unfortunately, the study does not provide any justification about choice of the country of destination. This justifies, on its own, the need for further study on the topic and particularly qualitative studies.

Clearly, a number of factors has affected this decision. Among them, realistically, are the geographical and cultural proximity. Next, the fact that some Spanish cities, such as Madrid and Barcelona, have recently developed economically – and consequently improved – their international image, for example, through the organisation of “mega events” (Guala, 2002; Metaxas and Tsavdaridou, 2013). Then, the possibility of living with a good quality of life at a lower cost, compared to other capital cities in Europe, such as London or Paris. In this regard, Numbeo – a global database used to compare information about the quality of life and cost of living in specific countries and cities – shows that Madrid offers a higher quality of life at a lower cost of living than, as mentioned above, London or Paris (Numbeo, 2015).

Mercer’s 2014 cost of living rankings – a survey comparing the cost of living in 211 cities worldwide – confirm that the cost of living in Madrid is far lower than the cost of living in London and Paris. Indeed, among the 211 cities examined in this survey, London is the 12th most expensive city, Paris the 27th, while Madrid occupies the 61th place (Mercer’s Cost of Living Rankings, 2014). However, according to Mercer’s 2015 quality of living rankings – which measures world’s most liveable cities – Paris is classified the 27th best city to live in, followed by London at the 40th place, while Madrid only occupies the 51st place (Mercer’s Quality of Living Rankings, 2015).



To better understand the differences between the results of Numbeo and Mercer, it is important to keep in mind that “quality of life” is commonly measured by taking into consideration a number of objective indicators, such as political stability, economic and social indicators, as well as subjective well-being indicators, such as personal safety. Broadly speaking, it follows that ‘the best place to live in’ may be good for some people, because of their preferences and priority, but not for others. In this sense, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods would certainly help to provide a more proper overview about factors influencing the choice of the country of destination.

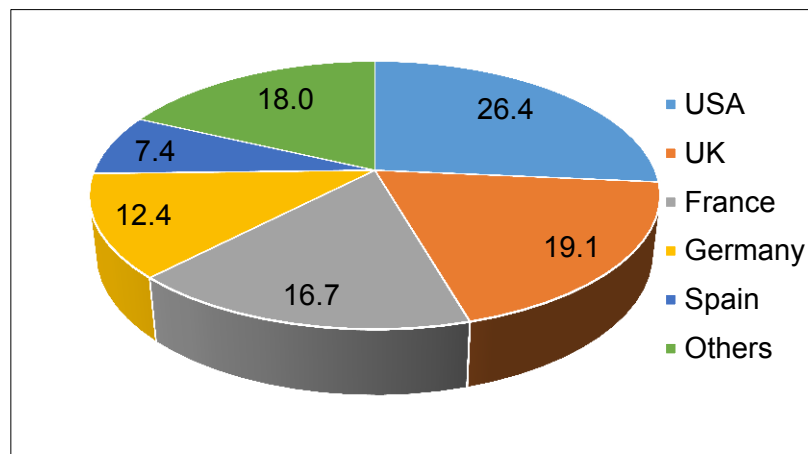


Figure 2. Mobility of Italian early stage researchers (2009) – main destinations (per cent)

Source: Calculations based on Istat data

## 8. Triandafyllidou and Gropas – e-survey among Italian and Greek respondents

This e-survey comprises approximately 70 questions, and is designed to obtain detailed information and personal data of the respondents as well as reasons for leaving the country of origin and general evaluation of the migratory patterns (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014). Although the number of respondents is clearly lower than in the previous case – and so we cannot confidently make any generalisations – this study explores the reasons for leaving the country of origin and choosing a specific country of destination. This will enable to draw some important considerations, as I illustrate below.

Firstly, a new large variety of countries appears in this research. Still, the traditional poles of attractions occupy an important position among the main host countries, namely United Kingdom and Germany. Looking at the Italian respondents, a significant number of them chooses a neighbouring country, namely Switzerland and France. These are countries where Italian migrants traditionally settled in the past, as well as Belgium. Interestingly, approximately 40 per cent of them chooses a European country that is not included in the list<sup>1</sup>, namely Norway, Southern and Eastern Europe (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014, p. 10).

Focusing on the Eurozone, both studies confirm that a certain amount of contemporary Italian human capital outflows is headed in a range of countries, which are not part of the commonly known ‘blue banana’ (Brunet, 1989). On the other hand, the idea that the traditional core – the ‘blue banana’ – has been transforming into a ‘red octopus’, embracing new areas, namely in Southern and Eastern Europe, is not new (Van Der Meer, 1998), but too

<sup>1</sup> The countries included in the list are United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, France, United States, rest of Europe, rest of America, Asia, Africa, Oceania (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014).

often underestimated when it comes to the movement of highly skilled workers. It is to be said, however, that some exceptions do exist. Following Mahroum's interesting thesis, (1999) the current movement of brain drain and brain gain, is nowadays going in all directions: North-North, North-South, South-North and South-South. However, it remains to be seen how these 'alternative' centres manage to be attractive to the eyes of many highly skilled workers. In the case of Southern European countries, in particular, it does not seem to be plausible that these professionals are moving to gain a better-paid job. If they did so, it is reasonable to believe that they would choose other countries of destination.

Considering the main causes for leaving Italy reported in the second study – and by contrast with what one might expect – economic reasons do not exercise a great power of attraction for many of the respondents. A significant number of the Italian respondents seem to be pushed much more by better opportunities, better quality of life and the possibility to work in an environment with greater meritocracy, than by higher wages.

To take but one example, in 2007 the European Commission published a report, based on an online survey, comparing researchers salaries across Europe. In this report, it is clearly shown that the average of researchers' remuneration in 2006, adjusted to the cost of living, in Italy was € 36.201, hence higher than in other Southern European countries (Spain € 34.908, Portugal € 29.001) (European Commission, 2007). At the same time, taking into account Numbeo's quality of life index, in 2012 (first year available) despite the impact of the economic crisis, Portugal and Spain offered a higher quality of life than Italy, as their indices were respectively 105.10 and 100.93, while the Italian one was 49.65 (Numbeo, 2012). For what concern the existence of a meritocratic career progression system abroad, it remains to be seen whether the other Southern European countries offer better employment condition than Italy.

On the other hand, Triandafyllidou and Gropas agree that higher wages are not a reason enough to move to another country. They suggest interpreting this situation drawing on the concept of *relative deprivation*, originally proposed by Stark, Taylor (1991) and Massey (Massey *et al.*, 1993) and recently taken up, for example, by Czaika and de Haas (2011). The idea is that when the economic and social features of a specific labour market change, the ones who were in a better position are less keen to tolerate a drop in their standards of living. In this sense, a growing number of highly skilled Italians – professionals and academics – may be pushed to leave because they do not feel that their potential can be fully realized in their country, rather than for fear of real unemployment.

## Conclusions

This paper has looked at the dynamics of highly skilled workers' mobility from Italy considering the phase of economic crisis that the country is still experiencing. Although the available literature on current highly skilled migration from Italy is still in its infancy, two recent empirical researches have been critically discussed. These two studies are relevant mainly because they provide evidence of the fact that a certain amount of talented Italians is headed in a range of countries, which are not part of the traditional 'core', namely Southern and Eastern European countries. Thus, it is reasonably clear that reducing the mobility of highly skilled Italians today to a South-North movement represents an oversimplification of reality. Indeed, the 'blue banana' – and, by extension, the migrations for economic reasons – can only partially explain the wide variety of movements that is taking place nowadays among the highly skilled Italians.

On the other hand, because of the lack of studies adopting a prospective form below, it is still a bit unclear what is leading them to move to another Southern European country, equally suffering the effects of the economic crisis. Hence, there is a real need to support the

available quantitative studies – more interested in providing an estimation of the human capital outflows and inflows – with qualitative studies, considering highly skilled workers as the main actors of these movements.

To conclude, choosing to consider at the same time the phenomenon of highly skilled workers international mobility and the times of current crisis may be useful to understand the effects of the crisis itself. In other words, it is clear that the crisis tends to have a greater impact on workers who move for economic reasons, but it is less clear whether today highly skilled workers are moving especially for these reasons.

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