



## What do highly skilled French migrants in London teach us about European talent migration?

Drawing on qualitative data from an ESRC-funded project, this presentation will explore the nature and dynamics of intra-EU talent migration through a particular focus on the French highly-skilled working in London's financial and business sectors.

Talent migration has become an increasingly important dimension of global mobility, and lies at the heart of European aspirations for labour market and economic integration. Attracting talent has become central to the priorities of most European nations and cities.

Talent mobility is seen as fundamental to both economic growth and the supporting of a greater pan-European meritocracy. However, intra-EU highly-skilled migration runs at levels significantly lower than would have been anticipated by the architects of the European Union. There remains much to be understood in respect of the dynamics, experiences and outcomes associated with intra-EU highly-skilled migration.

### A 'test-case' for intra-EU talent migration to London – The French

The UK has become a destination of particular attraction for the highly skilled, with one third of all EU non-nationals in the UK having tertiary-level credentials (Recchi and Favell, 2009). Within the UK, London has become a prime destination of European free movement (Government for London Office, 2011; Braun and Arsene, 2009). Striking amongst the migratory movements of the highly skilled in Europe is the migration of the French to London. Data drawn from the issuing of national insurance numbers indicate that between 2006/7 and 2009/10, over 80,000 new allocations were made to French nationals.

### London as an Encounter with Opportunity

Research reveals that for the highly-skilled migrant, London is appreciated as a place of encounter with opportunity (Conradson and Latham 2007). Focussing on the French highly-skilled, we will explore the meanings attributed to London as Europe's epicentre of opportunity in work and life.

#### *'It's About What You Can Do'* (Colette)

Sennett (2006) argues that, within the new economy, a craftsmanship model (and associated qualificationism) is being replaced by a focus on performance measures of 'talent'. Our data was replete with accounts of London as definitively open (meritocratic), in direct juxtaposition to Paris. London was seen as embracing the logic of the 'new economy' (Sennett 2006), with a corresponding willingness/capacity to recognise and grant opportunity to 'pure talent', even in the absence of traditional qualification-based credentials. London was marked by a liberalisation of attitudes to how talent may be measured.

#### *'Here, you know, it's hire and fire...'* (Céline)

'Hire and fire' was seen as defining the character of the working environment in London, as a neo-liberal economic environment. Such an environment was seen to offer career opportunity to the talented and served as a mechanism for injecting new personnel and ideas into the economy. This was contrasted with the more tightly regulated, and rights-orientated, environment in France.



***'If you are good at what you do, you would be given a chance, whether you are black, white, from Asia, Muslims, Catholics, Hindu...'*** (Odile)

The working environment in London was generally represented as non-discriminatory, with the absence of age, and ethnicity-based, discrimination commonly cited. However, more probing questions quickly revealed dramatically contrasting opinions on the position of women, especially in the financial sector. Many made reference to discriminatory attitudes and practices associated with a 'glass ceiling', particularly in relation to the role of women as mothers.

### ***Flexibility and the 'Anglo-Saxon style' of business*** (Jean)

London was extolled as a location that, in its definitive flexibility, enabled 'career sovereignty', and as a direct outcome of its capacity for talent recognition. Such recognition was seen to express a particular business culture in London. Whilst the terminology varied, there was some consensus on the existence of a characteristically different (to much of Europe) business culture in London. Exposure to, and competence in, this business context was highly prized by our participants.

"..It's not uncommon in the UK or in the US, which is what we would be calling, coming from Paris or from France in particular; the Anglo-Saxon style, to identify early the skill of talented people or good ideas, and give these people or these ideas a chance" (Jean).

### Challenges at Work –

***'There's a clash of culture'*** (Valentine)

Our data identified obstacles to successful inter-cultural relations at work. Our research highlights differences in business practices, language use, and styles of communication, as potential barriers. The cultural and social capital acquired in, and pertinent to, one national context, cannot be assumed to be transferable to another (Erel 2010). Csedö (2008) points to the fact that skills are socially constructed, such that the nature and sufficiency of skills must be negotiated in any national context. This finding has implications for the nature and extent of intra-EU mobility.

### Conclusions and policy considerations

- London offers career opportunities for highly skilled migrants unparalleled in Europe
- A neo-liberal economic model, and the adoption of the forms of talent recognition and reward associated with the 'new economy', are central to the attractiveness of London for highly-skilled migrants
- Florida (2005) has pointed to the importance of the particular qualities of place in attracting the 'creative classes'. The qualities of place associated with London as a location for life, were found to be of particular importance – amenity, diversity, 'mixity', libertarianism and cosmopolitanism. Sennett (2005) predicts, for the highly-skilled working in the 'new economy', an increasing disinterest in their cities of residence, characterised by superficial and disengaged relationship to the places where they live. Our data are not supportive of this claim but rather point to the ongoing capacity of London to exploit its unique and particular qualities in attracting talented migrants.
- Much of what appealed to these highly skilled professionals revolved around London's neo-liberal economic environment. However, in the wake of the banking crisis, economic recession and debates about the regulation of financial institutions, what are the potential risks and gains for London as a global financial centre and world-leading talent pool?

#### **About the speakers:**

**Dr. Jon Mulholland** is a senior lecturer in sociology in the Department of Criminology and Sociology, and **Louise Ryan** is Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the Social Policy Research Centre, both at Middlesex University. More detail about their work on highly-skilled French migrants in London can be found at <http://frenchlondon.co.uk/>



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