

Career-Driven Migration Decisions: A Holistic Perspective on Skilled Profiles Mobility from Tunisia

Décisions Migratoires Motivées par la Carrière : Une Perspective Holistique de la Mobilité des Compétences Tunisiennes

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Abstract

This paper uses an integrated explanatory framework to explore the decision-making mechanisms of highly skilled Tunisian professionals. By combining structural determinants emanating from the Push-Pull Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior with a career ecosystem and transnational perspective, this study can provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of skilled migration. Based on six qualitative in-depth interviews with health professionals, professors, and IT workers, the findings confirm that career stagnation, lack of institutional support, and limited merit-based promotion are powerful push factors. On the other hand, the ability for professional growth, better working conditions, and psychological well-being abroad are strong pull factors. Identifying workplace respect and pursuit of a higher quality of life beyond material incentives as major drivers for migration, this article concludes that a migration decision is iterative, adaptive, and a continuous outcome of dynamic interaction between structural forces and personal agency along shifting career trajectories.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Decision-Making, Push-Pull Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, Attitude/Intention/behavior

Résumé

Cet article examine le processus de prise de décision des professionnels tunisiens hautement qualifiés en utilisant un cadre explicatif intégré. En associant les facteurs structurels (théorie « Push-Pull ») et l'initiative individuelle (théorie du comportement planifié), en lien avec les points de vue sur l'écosystème de carrière et la dimension transnationale, cette recherche offre une vision globale de la migration qualifiée. En se basant sur six interviews qualitatives détaillées avec des experts en santé, en enseignement supérieur et en technologie de l'information, les conclusions mettent en évidence que la stagnation professionnelle, le manque d'appui institutionnel et l'absence de promotion basée sur le mérite sont des éléments fortement expulsifs. À l'opposé, les opportunités d'évolution professionnelle, d'amélioration des conditions de travail et de bien-être mental à l'étranger représentent des éléments d'attraction importants. La recherche souligne qu'au-delà des incitations matérielles, le respect au travail et la quête d'une meilleure qualité de vie sont des moteurs migratoires primordiaux. La décision migratoire est présentée comme un processus itératif et adaptatif.

Mots clés : Fuite des cerveaux, Prise de décision, Théorie Push-Pull, Théorie du comportement planifié, Attitude/Intention/Comportement.

Introduction

The emigration of advanced human capital from the third to developed nations, otherwise known as "brain drain" in the literature on migration (Beine, et al., 2013), has been a cause of serious concern, particularly to nations such as Tunisia. The persistent emigration of expert professionals, to the Gulf States and Europe has been a cause of national concern and has been repeatedly covered by the media. Brain Drain, or emigration by highly qualified professionals, is a serious worldwide phenomenon these days, particularly in knowledge-based trade sectors (Wanniarachchi, et al., 2022). Developed nations have been pursuing immigration policies over recent decades with the goal of recruiting professional experts, and the world witnessed a phenomenal rise in the movement of professional experts (Beine, et al., 2013). Though these policies benefit host countries, they disproportionately affect developing economies whose constant loss of human capital undermines efforts to grow the country. This is so ironic, countries that invest much in training and education find their human capital pouring into the development of other, stronger economies (Dodani & Laporte, 2005).

Tunisia is a prime example of this, with more and more professionals emigrating from main fields such as medicine, education, and information technology (Bel Hadj Zekri, 2009). The gravity of the situation compelled Mohamed Belidi, Director of the Tunisian Agency for Technical Cooperation, to call the country to mobilize towards a national dialogue on emigration in an interview conducted by Midi Eco in November 2024. Belidi revealed that in the technical cooperation agreements, 3,198 Tunisians had secured jobs outside the country as of October 2024. On a wider scale, around 26,000 specialists have migrated from Tunisia in search of better opportunities, and the majority belong to healthcare professionals (31%) and teachers (37%). Additionally, the information technology sector in the nation is experiencing a rapid draining of talent due to escalating worldwide demand for technology specialists (Minaye & Zeleke, 2017).

This trend has negative economic consequences in that the flight of a country's most skilled and arguably most effective human capital deters development in the long term. Brain drain, whilst extensively studied in economic literature, remains short of being comprehensively covered in the Southern Mediterranean (South Med) context. A thorough assessment is imperative, not only for these nations to evaluate prospects for future economic growth but also for the European Union, the destination for much of these migrants. Its effective addressing needs a multifaceted analysis of migration determinants, including decision, timing, and choice of

destination (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). While a number of theories attempt to account for these phenomena, existing frameworks are inadequate in terms of explaining the complexity of skilled migration (Kumpikaite & Zickute, 2012). The aim of this study is to close this gap by developing an integrated model that identifies and explores the most significant determinants of skilled professionals' migration. This research situates these migrants not just as economic agents but as career- and identity-driven actors (Bakewell, 2010; Carling, 2014), whose decisions reshape both their lives and the frontline industries into which they migrate overseas. This paper is thus driven by the following central research question: To what extent do structural constraints, individual agency, and career ecosystem dynamics interplay to shape the iterative decision-making process of highly skilled Tunisians considering or undertaking migration?

This study intends to:

- Develop an integrated theoretical framework that proposes a holistic outline combining push-pull structural determinants at a macro level with micro-level psychological factors to explain decision-making in migrating skilled persons;
- Identifying the Key Drivers of Brain Drain from Tunisia: Identifying the most important push factors, such as career stagnation, institutional deficiencies, and poor working conditions, and pull factors, such as professional growth, meritocracy, and psychological well-being, that drive or attract highly skilled Tunisian professionals in fields like healthcare, education, and IT;
- To Conceptualize Migration as a Dynamic, Iterative Process: To explain that migration is not a single and linear event but a continuous process, whereby events during the post-migration period create a feedback loop, which continuously reconfigures an individual's attitudes, intentions, and subsequent decisions to stay, return home, or re-migrate.

In order to address this question and objectives, this research takes up a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with six Tunisian professionals from key sectors reflecting brain drain: healthcare, education, and IT. Using a combination of narrative and thematic analysis, this data offers an opportunity to understand the nuanced lived experience and decision-making trajectories of migrants.

The article is organized as follows: after setting the theoretical context, we will discuss our methodology in some detail. The findings are then organized so as to highlight the important dimensions of the migration experience: skills and career development, economic and social impacts, policy and regulatory influences, and the critical role of health and wellbeing. The conclusion synthesizes our findings, discusses their implications, and provides specific policy recommendations

1. Theoretical Framework:

Explaining the choice behind Tunisian high-skilled emigration requires a theoretical approach taking into account both structural constraints and individual agentive agency. This paper adopts a two-theory approach, which combines Push–Pull Theory (Lee, 1966) with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), drawing on career development research (Zimmermann, 2014) and transnational migration research (Bakewell, 2010; Carling, 2014). Complementarily, these perceptions provide a multi-dimensional model of explaining drivers, barriers, and enablers of skilled migration streams.

- Push–Pull Theory (Lee, 1966): Push–pull remains among the most widely applied models for describing migration flows. Push–pull assumes that migration occurs due to a combination of negative push factors in the country of origin and positive pull factors in the destination nation. Push factors in Tunisia include career stagnation, merit-based promotion being low, poor research infrastructure, and socio-political instability. Pull factors, conversely, consist of opportunities to gain access to better technologies, better pay, formal professional development, and desirable working conditions in host countries. Most notably, Lee's model also accounts for intervening barriers—such as visa requirements, credential recognition, and costs—that can facilitate or hinder migration in spite of push–pull forces.
- Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991): While push–pull theory explains structural forces, it cannot explain cognitive and emotional processes of migration decision-making. TPB fills this gap by explaining three determinants of behavioral intention:
 - Attitudes toward the behaviour (e.g., what people think about professional and personal benefits of migration)
 - Subjective norms (e.g., social expectations from family, peers, and professional networks)

- Perceived control of behavior (i.e., belief in ability to work through migration procedures, gain recognition of qualifications, and adapt to new cultures).

In the current study, individuals' accounts show in which ways the determinants meet with structural variables. For example, even though push factors were stringent, migration did not occur if there was perceived behavioral control—such as when participants anticipated impassable visa barriers or a deficiency in language capacity. Nevertheless, benevolent subjective norms by friends who were overseas had a tendency to translate into concrete migration intentions in the instance of benevolent attitudes towards overseas work.

- Career Ecosystems Perspective (Zimmermann, 2024): To more fully understand the career dimension of migration, this research employs Zimmermann's career ecosystems concept. This framework emphasizes that career mobility is guided by the interaction between individual career strategies and the broader institutional career ecosystem that facilitates, or hinders, learning, innovation, and advancement. In Tunisia, the absence of an engaged career ecosystem for sectors like medicine and academia is a powerful push factor, while host countries with robust ecosystems become magnets for human capital.
- Transnational and Aspirations–Capabilities Approaches (Bakewell, 2010; Carling, 2014): Bakewell (2010) argues for a balanced approach which sees migrants as active agents with agency under structural circumstances, and not as passive recipients of economic openings. Carling's aspiration–capability model develops this further by making a distinction between wanting to migrate and being able to migrate, and identifying cases of "involuntary immobility" where there are aspirations but where structural or personal factors hold back action. This mindset is particularly relevant to Tunisian professionals who may closely wish to migrate for professional or personal reasons but are hindered by issues such as unrecognized qualifications or costly migration charges.

2. Methodology:

2.1. Research and Design:

This study employs a qualitative research design, as the life story method sufficiently represents in depth and diversity, she is addressed as valuable tool, to have an understanding of the subjective knowledge of Tunisian talented workers in making migration decisions. Narrating

one's life assists individuals to organize and make sense of their experiences in coherent terms of time (Ricoeur, 1984). As opposed to aggregate surveys that constrain migration to economic determinants, this study aims to have a deep exploration of how structural forces interface with individual inclination. This approach fits with migration research calls for methods which go beyond reductive "push–pull" dualisms and towards more fluid accounts of mobility, decision-making, and aspiration (Bakewell 2010; Carling, et al., 2018). This investigation's design was particularly chosen to capture this process iteratively. The life story method (Ricoeur, 1984) allowed for participants to narrate their migration as a story, not a discrete experience. Interviews were structured to ask not only about the initial choice to migrate but also concerning the post-migration period, to map out how attitudes and intentions shifted after residence and labor abroad.

2.2.Data Collection:

Data for this study come from six professionals in those sectors where the migration of the skilled is most affecting Tunisia-medicine, academia, and engineering. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, a pragmatic strategy when seeking information-rich participants that are readily accessible in qualitative studies (Etikan, et al., 2016). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviewees included associate professors, IT engineers and nurse and chemical researcher, many of whom had worked professionally both in Tunisia and abroad and were conducted in French, Arabic, or English as preferred by participants and later translated and transcribed for analysis. The interview guide covered four topics:

- Career opportunity perceptions in Tunisia;
Motivations and objectives of migration;
- Restrictions and obstacles encountered along the way;
- Professional integration experiences abroad

Transcribed interviews were subjected to analytical rigor through the use of the NVivo software. Thematic analysis was conducted in three stages: Initial, Focused, and Axial coding. In addition, transcripts were independently double-coded to establish inter-coder reliability.

3. Career Development Overseas

Highly skilled Tunisian human capital emigration is motivated, above all, by structural deficits in the national career system, which discourage the realization and mobilization of human

capital. Career development in Tunisia's public sectors, at least the research, education, and health sectors, is too frequently blocked by so-called "promotion paralysis." Professional development opportunities are limited, promotion is painfully slow, and merit systems are absent or underdeveloped. This is supplemented by a misalignment between qualification and demand in the labour market where highly qualified persons are even not in the capacity to secure jobs that match their qualification. One of the interviewed IT engineers complained that "seniority does not act as an employability factor ... there are no relations inside the Tunisian labour market that can open the doors of opportunity according to your competences and experience." These testimonies corroborate the findings of Carling (2002) for involuntary immobility because highly qualified individuals are stopped by structural barriers.

Ajzen's (1991) through the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) illustrates the manner in which the push factors get expressed structurally in migration intentions. Favorable attitude towards foreign employment, predicated on anticipated benefits such as exposure to top-level facilities, international collaboration, and merits-based promotion, rationalize the intent to migrate. Most participants identified long-term career professional advancement as a stronger impetus than short-term increases in salary. For example, an interview with a DevOps engineer who stated, "The priority was career development," supported Hoppe & Fujishiro's (2015) assertion that expected workplace advantages and career aspirations are prime predictors of skilled migration plans. This is consistent with Carling's (2014) "aspiration-ability" theory, which emphasizes that migration is often an active pursuit of opportunity rather than a reactive escape from threat. Besides, career advancement abroad is not solely about building competence but also access to fair and transparent institutions. Work environments where competence is appreciated, there is structured mentorship, and room for vertical mobility are what the migrants look for. In Germany, for instance, a nurse reported experiencing an even workload distribution and good management practices so contrasting with Tunisia's disciplinary-type managerial culture. This concurs with Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986), which relates the sense of institutional support to employee job satisfaction, retention, and performance. Such healthy work environments improve professional development and individual welfare as well, supplementing the pull forces of inducing experienced professionals to migrate.

The pursuit of career opportunity, therefore, is not a one-time consideration but an iterative evaluation process. The findings show that the initial "pull" of better career environments is a continued consideration against the reality of professional life abroad. For others, the host

country delivers on its promise of meritocracy and growth, affirming their intention to stay (high intention-behavior congruence). This has a feedback loop in which their overseas working career is transformed into an alternative consideration in their long-term career planning that can redirect their migration trajectory and complicate the initial assumption of a permanent move (Colic-Peisker, 2010).

4. Policy and Regulatory Impacts on Migrants

Migration decisions are not solely the result of labour market pressures or individual aspirations, but also of the policy and legal structures of movement. Migration pathways for Tunisian skilled workers are shaped, and oftentimes shut off, by a complex set of visa regimes, skill recognition, bilateral agreements, and recruitment policies in host countries. As Czaika & de Haas (2017) emphasize, visa regimes are not merely bureaucratic filters, but rather proactive shaping forces determining who can migrate, where individuals can move, and under what conditions they can work. Respondents with dual citizenship or internationally recognized qualifications in this study reported having more linear, faster migration trajectories and greater career path flexibility.

Migration decisions are not simply a result of individual aspirations or the labor market, but also of the policy and law regimes that govern migration. Channels of migration for Tunisian professional expatriates are structured, and occasionally restricted, by a complex interplay of visa regimes, qualification recognition, bilateral arrangements, and recruitment policies in recipient countries. As Czaika & de Haas (2017) emphasize, visa regimes are more than bureaucratic sieves but are even active moulding forces determining who can migrate, to where, and under what conditions they can work.

By contrast, those who had such privileges enjoyed simpler and more linear administrative procedures, expedited professional recognition of qualifications, and rigidly controlled entry policies. For example, a DevOps engineer rejected an accepted job offer in Cyprus due to migration procedures that lasted more than six months to conclude, but yet another example of how administrative lethargy was a discouragement. These results support Jonitz, et al.'s (2025) multi-level migration governance thesis, in which macro-level legal regimes intersect micro-level agency controls, resources, time pressures, and resilience, to shape outcomes.

Destination country policy contexts also play a central role in determining the post-migration experiences. In the health industry, organized recruitment programs in Saudi Arabia and

Germany purposively hire Tunisian specialists to fill gaps in employment. Although such policies are beneficial in facilitating easy entry and employment, there is also an ethical implication, particularly where the recruitment is being carried out from states experiencing their own shortage issues in key areas. WHO's Global Code of Practice on International Recruitment of Health Personnel (2010) underlines looking for an equilibrium between international demand for manpower and national health system sustainability, a matter of utmost relevance for Tunisia's already stressed healthcare system.

It was also crucial to note that the recognition of foreign qualifications became a significant policy obstacle. A large number of respondents said that though their degrees from Tunisia were officially recognized, they were asked for complementary certification, language testing, or adaptation periods. One associate professor in Saudi Arabia responded, "Even though my degrees were accepted, I needed to complete some administration procedures and prove my proficiency to fully take up the job." While such measures are intended to guarantee standards of service, they slow down career paths and increase the economic and psychological costs of migration, thereby strengthening the demand for bilateral arrangements that would facilitate credential recognition.

Furthermore, the iterative model describes how policy impact is not static but changes as it progresses. A visa policy can manage entry (on initial perception of behavioral control), but permanent residence policies, family reunification policies, and citizenship policies create settlement intentions in the long term. To illustrate, a contract professional with renewable employment holds exists in ongoing insecurity. This constant questioning of their legal status is an extremely effective mechanism of feedback, often precluding full integration and actively maintaining the option for return migration. Successful "mobility policies able to facilitate brain circulation," therefore, must be coherent across the entire migration process, from recruitment and entry to integration and ultimate settlement.

Finally, migration policies of receiving and sending countries affect not only the decision to leave but also plans for return migration. Host-country temporary contract employment, common in academe and healthcare, can initiate episodic rethinking of return. However, as in this research's results, the majority of the professionals who acquire secure legal status and long-term contracts in the host nation are not going to consider coming back, especially if they have invested in a house, family integration, or professional specialization in the destination nation. This interdependence between mobility sets and life-course decisions accounts for the

need for coherent mobility policies able to allow brain circulation instead of one-way brain drain.

5. Health and Wellbeing of Migrant Workers

For the majority of Tunisian capable experts, movement is not only economically motivated but also by the desire for psychological safety, emotional well-being, and increased quality of life. Economic potential and professional advancement are important, but participants in this research all underscored repeatedly the need to escape the emotional burden and social ambivalence they experienced in Tunisia. Nurses, scholars, and engineers alike cited burnout, workload overloading, and lack of supportive working environments as key push factors informing their migration decisions. This is consistent with the emotion and migration conceptualized model by Boccagni & Baldassar (2015), which focuses on emotional preparation, psychosocial resilience, and the quest for personal balance as impelling forces behind migration decisions.

The pressures sustained in Tunisia's working life, specifically healthcare and education—are complicated. Short staffing in the health sector requires nurses to work longer hours, often with multiple roles to ensure a bare minimum standard of living. As one nurse explained, "In order to have a relatively peaceful life, you should have two or three jobs! This incessant tempo not only erodes physical well-being but also contributes to emotional depletion, as outlined in Maslach & Leiter's (2017) burnout model. In universities, members reported systemic stressors that resulted from excessive workload in instruction, administrative inefficiency, and limited opportunities for research, which eroded their job satisfaction and well-being.

Migration, to them, was a way of restoring this balance. A few of the participants highlighted the fact that host countries offered not just better working conditions, but more equitable workloads and stronger institutions to sustain them. For example, a nurse working in Germany highlighted the difference: "We work 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, and you have more days off than in Tunisia." This improved work-life balance is supported by Eurofound (2022) evidence that organized labor policies in advanced economies significantly reduce burnout risk. Similarly, one Saudi nurse contrasted the caring style of her Saudi employer with that of Tunisia's repressive management culture. This type of experience is consistent with Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986), which links perceived support with improved mental health and work engagement.

The subjective norms function (De Jong, 2004) also emerged in participants' experiences. For others, social pressure from families and social networks either attracted migration ("My foreign friends told me about opportunities and encouraged me to migrate") or acted as a restriction, particularly if older relatives or dependent children remained behind in Tunisia. The personal well-being versus family responsibility dilemma is one of the broad sociocultural categories included in the process of migrant decision.

6. Wellbeing as an Outcome and a New Input

The iterative model is particularly effective at describing wellbeing. The demand for psychological safety is a large initial push factor. The outcome of migration, however, whether in fact it brings improved wellbeing, then becomes an important driver of subsequent intentions.

The stories from the participants revealed that post-migration evaluations of wellbeing were complex and multi-faceted. Optimistic evaluations, such as improved work-life balance, access to mental health services, and perceptions of safety, greatly favored the choice to stay abroad. These positive outcomes triggered the feedback loop, confirming the initial choice to emigrate.

Conversely, negative evaluations, such as experiencing racism, social exclusion, or excessive pressure at work in the host country, produced new psychological push factors. This most often led to re-opening of the choice-making process, where people began re-evaluating their options, including going back home despite the original push factors that had driven them away. This shows that wellbeing is not just a final outcome but a dynamic aspect cycling back into the continuous migration decision-making process (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015).

7. Migrant Roles in Healthcare and Social Services

Emotional readiness was another decisive factor. Migrants who perceived themselves as flexible, open to change, and capable of coping with cultural changes were most likely to succeed in their migration. For instance, a clinical project manager described feeling "so excited with this opportunity to go through this experience," illustrating the psychological readiness identified by Hoppe & Fujishiro (2015) as key to migration intention and achievement. Risk tolerance, tolerance for uncertainty, was also important, enabling professionals to deal with the inevitable challenge of foreign relocation (Huber & Nowotny, 2020).

Following migration, many of the respondents had reported considerable enhancements in work satisfaction, mental health, and overall life satisfaction. These were motivated by reasons such

as reduced stress, greater leisure time, health insurance, and possibilities of family integration. A scholar in Saudi Arabia explained that he had more time to engage in research and professional development, which also enhanced her professional fulfillment. This outcome is supported by Berry's (2005) acculturation model, in which successful adjustment to host society leads to improved psychological well-being and resilience.

But all problems were not solved with migration. Some professionals have experienced cultural adjustment issues, discrimination incidents, or feelings of social exclusion in the receiving countries. An IT expert admitted, "The country is lovely, but humans are racist. You always have a feeling that you are a foreigner." These events connect with a study by Hahmann, et al., (2023) on experienced exclusion and identity problems of successful long-term migrants. Limited social networks in the receiving country, especially in the initial years, also discouraged emotional integration, confirming Koelet & de Valk's (2016) study on the relationship between network size and reduced loneliness.

In academic life, Tunisian scholars, especially in the fields of science, engineering, and medicine, help design curriculum, produce research, and teach host university students. Membership in foreign training schools and universities has a tendency to preserve diversity and cross-cultural transfer, for the benefit of international and domestic students. An example was given by an associate professor from Saudi Arabia, where she described how she engaged her bilingualism and multicultural teaching experience to better reach students of various nationalities. These are concordant with Faist's (2014) theory of transnational social spaces, where migrants become agents of exchange of knowledge, pedagogy, and academic networks.

In addition to the professional and technical competencies, Tunisian migrants also enrich host societies by way of their multicultural navigational capacity. In health care, cultural competence is rapidly being recognized as central to patient satisfaction and compliance with treatment. Migrants with linguistic or cultural affinities with minority patients are in a position to close the communication gap and build trust, facilitating the delivery of services to diverse communities. Similarly, in education, professors from different cultural backgrounds can expose students to a broader view of the world, encouraging critical thinking and cross-cultural understanding.

However, the employment of Tunisian professionals in such jobs is not free of systemic limitations. Host-country policies sometimes close off career progression for foreign-trained

workers, particularly where professional development is tied to national credentialing processes or citizenship. In addition, as numerous participants suggested, migrant professionals can also face ignorance of their credentials in the workplace, underutilization of their skills, or assignment to jobs seen as "appropriate" for foreigners, rather than those best suited to their qualifications. This is reflective of overall patterns identified by Colic-Peisker (2010), whereby transnational knowledge workers are able to attain material advantages but still experience symbolic and structural barriers to full integration.

On the positive note, many Tunisian migrants leverage their work abroad to maintain professional and developmental links with Tunisia. Examples in this research include remote home-country student mentoring, joint home-country co-authorship of research articles, and home-country organization of medical missions or academic seminars during visits. They are consonant with the brain circulation model (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012), which advocates for the fact that migration can be useful to the home country's development if return travel, knowledge transfer, and institutional collaboration are triggered and promoted.

8. Economic and Social Impact of Migrant Labour

The emigration of highly qualified Tunisian professionals, especially in healthcare, education, and engineering, has grave economic and social consequences for both the sending and receiving countries. At a macroeconomic level, the scenario illustrates a classic case of brain drain (Docquier & Marfouk, 2005), where a large public investment in human capital is one whose dividends are ultimately harvested elsewhere. It is very expensive public funds to educate a doctor, nurse, or researcher, and Tunisia does not achieve the full return on investment when these individuals emigrate. Exit of experienced staff results in skill shortages in priority sectors with declining service quality and institutional capacity (Beine, et al., 2013). For example, nurses' emigration into the health sector exacerbates already saturated hospital systems, prompting longer waiting times and exhausted remaining professionals.

The impacts extend from sectoral capacity to general social well-being. In the educational sector, the departure of experienced professors and researchers disrupts the diffusion of knowledge, diminishes junior faculty mentorship opportunities, and weakens innovation in pedagogy and curriculum. This alone produces the same exact skills disparity fueling successive emigration, and a talent-devouring feedback cycle is formed. Similarly, engineering and technology have also suffered from an exodus of highly qualified IT experts, which erodes

Tunisia's competitiveness in overseas knowledge-based sectors, further widening the technological gap between Tunisia and its high-tech rivals.

Yet such losses are accompanied by handsome transnational gains. Highly skilled migrants tend to be development agents in their home countries in the forms of remittances, knowledge transfer, and diaspora networking. Under the aspiration-ability model (Carling, 2014), migration not only responds to individual professional and social aspirations but also enables exchange of skills and resources across sending and receiving societies. Several participants of this research mentioned developing professional networks with Tunisian peers, co-authoring papers with them, or providing informal training by way of return visits and e-mentoring. These processes demonstrate Docquier & Rapoport's (2012) notion of brain circulation, in which emigration can end up creating capacity in the country of departure if knowledge channels are effectively maintained.

Operating in the spaces between state policy, private recruitment agencies have become powerful intermediaries directing flows of migration. Though they can reduce the bureaucratic expense of migrants, raising perceived behavioral control, thereby introducing a profit motive to the movement process as well. Instances were cited of professionals going into substantial debt to pay for agency fees, thereby becoming more economically at risk and bound into unpleasant arrangements abroad. This privatisation of managing migration brings yet another level of complexity, since the states' (sending and receiving) purposes are filtered and sometimes changed by market players for their benefit, requiring stronger regulatory oversight to protect migrant rights.

9. The Non-Linear Journey: From Intention to Behavior and Beyond

The findings unequivocally depict that the formation of positive attitude and firm intention to migrate is merely the first step in a non-sequential process. The translation of intention into actual behavior is dependent on an individual's perceived behavioral control, which manifests as:

- Self-efficacy: Belief in being able to cope with the difficult process of securing a job, a visa, as well as acceptance of qualifications (Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015).
- Risk tolerance: Being able to endure the uncertainty of migrating to a foreign nation and starting a career from scratch (Huber & Nowotny, 2020).

- Resource mobilization: Being able to manage the financial, temporal, and social organization of the migration (i.e., securing funds, navigating bureaucratic procedures).

In spite of high intention, intervening variables can hamper the process. These include unforeseen administrative barriers (e.g., visa processing delays), or the powerful pull of family obligations and subjective norms creating the sensation of duty to stay (De Jong, 2000).

Above all, the migration story does not end with arrival. The post-migration evaluation phase begins, whereby professionals weigh their new reality against expectations. This evaluation encompasses both employment-related facets (e.g., good salary, supportive employer, career development) and non-employment facets (e.g., integration, social contacts, work-life balance). The result of this evaluation immediately feeds back to the model, influencing new attitudes and intentions to stay, return, or move to a third country. This feedback mechanism powers the iterative process and is the reason migration is a lifetime, adaptive strategy rather than a single, one-time event.

The non-linear path symbolizes a shift from permanent emigration to what can be characterized as 'provisional migration.' Career migrants envision their transfer as not a permanent departure but a strategic, short-term measure in a global career. They cultivate what Engbersen (2012) calls 'intentional unpredictability,' maintaining professional networks, property, and social relationships in both Tunisia and the destination country. This liquid process of migration means that feedback loop is not temporary; assessments of well-being and vocational success are tried against the ever-present standby alternative of return or re-migration, and therefore the decision-making process is a state of consideration rather than an event, an ongoing, open-ended state of consideration.

Conclusion

This research tried to unpack the complex decision-making mechanisms of highly skilled Tunisian migrants by combining the structural lenses of Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966) with the agentic dimensions of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), further enriched by perspectives on career ecosystems and transnationalism. The findings confirm that migration is not a linear event but an iterative process (Carling, 2014), shaped by continuous feedback between lived experiences and evolving intentions.

The root causes of such mobility lie in deep-seated systemic failures within Tunisia's professional landscape. Career stagnation, a deficient meritocracy, and a lack of supportive career ecosystems (Zimmermann, 2024) are strong push factors. On the other hand, more than higher salaries pull the migration, opportunities for professional growth, psychological well-being, and respect in the workplace often not available in the home context are the central attractors. This chimes with the aspiration-capability model, in which the desire to migrate is mediated by perceived behavioral control, heavily influenced by visa regimes, credential recognition, and gendered constraints (Carling, 2014; Czaika & de Haas, 2017).

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Coordinated, multi-level governance is essential in transforming the current "brain drain" into a dynamic "brain circulation" (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

For Tunisian Policymakers:

Domestic Reform: Pursue root-and-branch public sector reforms that will introduce genuine merit-based career advancement and competitive remuneration, which will directly address the core push factors of career stagnation.

Diaspora Engagement: Go beyond remittance-seeking to build a structured "Knowledge Diaspora" network that will enable the collaboration of experts with Tunisian institutions and attract investment in high-tech sectors.

For EU Host Countries:

Ethical Recruitment: Extend WHO Global Code of Practice (2010) principles beyond health into key sectors such as engineering. Pursue bilateral agreements that incorporate a "replacement cost" contribution to enhance Tunisia's training capacity.

Integration & Fairness: Radically simplify the recognition of Tunisian diplomas and establish direct routes from temporary work permits to permanent residence, reducing the precarious status that prevents long-term integration.

For International Organizations (EU, OECD):



This could be done by facilitating circularity: financially supporting and encouraging targeted "brain circulation" schemes, such as post-doctoral fellowships with an obligation to return into a Tunisian institution, or sabbaticals for diaspora intellectuals to teach in Tunisia.

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