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The impact of covid-19 on highly skilled migrants' well-being and intention to stay in Brainport Eindhoven

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Camilla Spadavecchia, Mihaela Chelaru

The impact of covid-19 on highly skilled migrants' well-being and intention to stay in Brainport Eindhoven

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1. Introduction

Demographic changes such as aging and the decline of the population have contributed to the shortage of skilled labour in European countries. In this framework, the Netherlands, as other EU countries have, has started to develop policies and strategies to attract and retain Highly Skilled Migrants (HSMs)¹.

¹ TARIQUE, SCHULER, *Global talent management: Literature review, integrative framework, and suggestions for further research*, in *JWB*, 2010, 45, pp. 122-133; SUUTARI, WURTZ, TORNIKOSKI, *How to Attract and Retain Global Careerists: Evidence from Finland*, in AL ARISS (eds.), *Global Talent Management Akram Challenges, Strategies, and Opportunities*, Springer, New York, 2014, pp. 237-248; SEO, *Attracting and Retaining Highly Skilled Migrants in The Netherlands*, SEO-Report, 2015, 2015-88, available online at: <https://www.seo.nl/en/publications/attracting-and-retaining-highly-skilled-migrants-in-the-netherlands>; CERNA, CZAİKA, *European Policies to Attract Talent: The Crisis and Highly Skilled Migration Policy Changes. In High-Skill Migration and recession*, in *Gendered Perspectives*, 2016, pp. 22-43 Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan; SHIRMOHAMMADI, BEIGI, STEWART,

With working sectors and technologies ranging from Energy, Integrated Photonics, Automotive Industry, Printing, and Additive manufacturing to Foodtech and Medtech, the Eindhoven Region – known as Brainport Region – represents the high-tech industrial hub of the Netherlands. Fifteen years ago, the region started attracting highly qualified employees worldwide². Over the last five years, the number of HSMs has risen quickly in the region³. As a result, big corporations and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are now focusing on attracting and retaining more HSMs.

Due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, most countries have introduced measures such as social distancing, travel restrictions, and remote work that affected individuals and society in several ways. After the healthcare systems, the labor market is one of the most harmed sectors by the pandemic⁴.

Further, HSMs have started to work from home due to pandemic-related measures. Several studies have identified loneliness, ineffective communication, and work-home interference factors that have impacted the well-being of those who work from home⁵.

During the covid-19 pandemic, EU member states adopted and agreed on a joint and coordinated approach to restricting the free movement of people to limit infection cases⁶.

The Netherlands started the first (of several) lockdowns on March 15, 2020. The relatively mild measures allowed freedom of movement of people

Understanding skilled migrants' employment in the host country: A multidisciplinary review and a conceptual model, in *IJHRM*, 2019, 30, 1, pp. 96–121; SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *Highly-Skilled Migrants, Gender, and Well-Being in the Eindhoven Region. An Intersectional Analysis*, in *AdS*, 2021, 11, 3, p. 72.

² OECD, *Innovation-Driven Growth in Regions: The Role of Smart Specialisation*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2013.

³ SPADAVECCHIA, *Global Talent Management in Brainport Region. Improving the retention of Talent and the attractiveness of the Region for Highly Skilled Migrants*, Research Report, Sept. 2021.

⁴ ILO, *Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers. Results and Methodology*, Third Edition, 2021.

⁵ DEUTROM, KATOS, ALI, *Loneliness, life satisfaction, problematic internet use and security behaviours: re-examining the relationships when working from home during COVID-19*, in *BIT*, 2021, pp. 1–15; WANG, TIAN, QIN, *The impact of epidemic infectious diseases on the wellbeing of migrant workers: A systematic review*, in *IJW*, 2020, 10, 3, pp. 7–25; TASER, AYDIN, TORGALUZ, ROFCANIN, *An examination of remote e-working and flow experience: The role of technostress and loneliness*, in *CHB*, 2022, 127.

⁶ EUROPEAN COUNCIL, *The EU's response to COVID-19*, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/covid-19-travel-measures/>.

as long as they kept a distance of 1.5 m from each other⁷. In addition, the Government introduced restrictions on all non-essential travel from and to non-EU countries⁸, which in some cases lasted until 2022. Furthermore, until March 23, 2022, a ban on entry into the EU has been in place for people from countries outside the Schengen area.

A growing body of literature has investigated the well-being of migrants⁹ and highly skilled migrants¹⁰. For example, a study by Gerber & Ravazzini¹¹ (2022) investigated the life satisfaction (LS) of HSMs in Switzerland during the pandemic. In addition, Maekawa *et al.* (2022)¹² investigated the impacts of sudden departures due to Covid-19 on HSMs workers in three countries in Micronesia. Nevertheless, no research has been found investigating the well-being of HSMs during the pandemic and its impact on their intention to stay or leave the region of residence.

Against this background, this study investigated how the (changed) well-being of HSMs in Brainport Eindhoven during the pandemic has influenced their intention to leave the region.

To answer this question, we explored several aspects of HSMs' well-being (e.g., career, economic, social, health, and community well-being), and in general, we looked at their LS.

This research is connected to a previous study on HSMs' well-being in the Eindhoven region and how their well-being influences their intention to stay¹³.

⁷ KUIPER *ET AL.*, *The intelligent lockdown: Compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures in the Netherlands*, in *ALSRLP*, 2020, 20.

⁸ GROENIGER, VAN DER WAAL, DE KOSTER, *Dutch COVID-19 lockdown measures increased trust in government and trust in science: A difference-in-differences analysis*, in *SSM*, 275, p. 113819.

⁹ NGUYEN, YEOH, TOYOTA, *Migration and the well-being of the 'left behind' in Asia: Key themes and trends*, in *APS*, 2006, 2, 1, pp. 37-44. WISEMAN, BRASHER, *Community wellbeing in an unwell world: Trends, challenges, and possibilities* in *JPHP*, 2008, 29, 3, pp. 353-366; SAFI, *Immigrants' life satisfaction in Europe: Between assimilation and discrimination*, in *ESR*, 2010, 26, 2, pp. 159-76; GRAHAM, MARKOWITZ, *Aspirations and happiness of potential Latin American immigrants*, in *JSRP*, 1, 2, 2, p. 9.

¹⁰ SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *cit.*

¹¹ GERBER, RAVAZZINI, *Life satisfaction among skilled transnational families before and during the COVID-19 outbreak*, in *PSP*, 2022, p. e2557.

¹² MAEKAWA *ET AL.*, *Highly Skilled Migrant Workers as a Vulnerability of Small Island Developing States During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Cases of Three Countries in Micronesia*, in *JDR*, 2022, 17, 3, pp. 380-387.

¹³ SPADAVECCHIA, *cit.*

2. *Some literature at the core of this study*

2.1. *Well-being models and indexes*

This study is based on the well-being model by IOM (2013)¹⁴ and is strongly informed by the previous research conducted by Spadavecchia and Yu (2021)¹⁵ on HSMs' well-being in Eindhoven. Spadavecchia and Yu (2021)¹⁶ looked at an intersection of previous well-being models and looked at well-being with a deductive approach by exploring respondents' perceptions of well-being.

This study looked at those previously encountered dimensions and the respondents' emotional health, as studies found that people's emotional health has been impacted by the covid-19 (see 2.2.). The analyzed dimensions include economic well-being (financial satisfaction, occurred changes over the pandemic), job and career well-being (job satisfaction, organizational support before and during the pandemic, remote work experience during the pandemic, career track, and how, if so, that has changed over the pandemic), community well-being (including safety perception, volunteering experiences, trust in the government, sense of belonging), social well-being (including the social connections both in the region and in other relevant countries, the changes in terms of social relationships during the Covid-19 measures) and, finally, health-related well-being. For this last dimension, we added two significant parts to the model proposed by IOM (2013)¹⁷, namely emotional health and trust in the health system (and how those factors changed during the pandemic)¹⁸.

2.2. *Covid-19 and well-being*

The recent pandemic of Covid-19 has been associated with trauma and with the development or reinforcement of feelings such as anger, depression, psychological disorders, and anxiety in the workplace¹⁹. Specifically, unpre-

¹⁴ IOM, *World Migration Report: Migrant Wellbeing and development*, Geneve, 2013.

¹⁵ SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *cit.*

¹⁶ SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *cit.*

¹⁷ IOM, *World Migration Report*, *cit.*

¹⁸ SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *cit.*

¹⁹ DI GIUSEPPE, GEMIGNANI, CONVERSANO, *Psychological Resources Against the Traumatic*

dictability, uncertainty, the severity of illness, misinformation, and social isolation, were associated with mental and emotional disorders during the pandemic²⁰.

Several studies have pointed out that due to Covid-19, the employee's perceptions of workload imbalance their family roles and further increase their job stress and dissatisfaction²¹.

In an extensive study of nearly 1,500 people from 46 countries, Cambell & Gavett (2021)²² found that most respondents experienced a decline in general and workplace well-being. Most reported a decrease in mental health, difficulties in meeting basic needs, and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Due to the pandemic, many people were forced to work from home. Vyas and Butakhieo (2021)²³ found that working at home includes the blurred boundary between work and family, distractions, and social isolation. For example, employees might be distracted by the presence of young children or family members while working at home. Furthermore, working from home blurred the boundaries between work and family life, leading to overwork²⁴.

Experience of Covid-19, in CN, 2020, April, 17, 2, pp. 85-87. MOLINO ET AL., *Wellbeing costs of technology use during Covid-19 remote working: An investigation using the Italian translation of the technostress creators scale*, in *Sustainability*, 2020, 12, 15, p. 5911; GUADAGNO, *Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis*, 2020; KUMAR ET AL., *The psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the migrant workers: A cross-sectional survey*, in *Asian journal of psychiatry*, 2020, 53, p. 102252; BLUNDELL, COSTA DIAS, JOYCE, XU, *COVID 19 and Inequalities*, in *FS*, 2020, 41, 2, pp. 291-319; IOM, *Research. Migration Factsheet No. 6 - The impact of COVID-19 on migrants*, Geneva, 2020; BARRON ET AL., *Safeguarding people living in vulnerable conditions in the COVID-19 era through universal health coverage and social protection*, in *LPH*, 2021; BELL ET AL., *Challenges facing essential workers: A cross-sectional survey of the subjective mental health and well-being of New Zealand healthcare and "other" essential workers during the COVID-19 lockdown*, in *BMJ open*, 2021, 1, 11 (7), p. e048107; MONTANI, STAGLIANÒ, *Innovation in times of pandemic: The moderating effect of knowledge sharing on the relationship between COVID-19-induced job stress and employee innovation*, in *R&D Management*, 2022, 52, 2, pp. 193-205.

²⁰ RAJKUMAR, *COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature*, in *AJP*, 2020, 52, p. 102066.

²¹ MONTANI, STAGLIANÒ, *cit.*; SADIQ, *Policing in pandemic: Is perception of workload causing work-family conflict, job dissatisfaction and job stress?*, in *JPA*, 2022, 222, p. e2486; RAFIQUE ET AL., *Investigating the impact of pandemic job stress and transformational leadership on innovative work behavior: The mediating and moderating role of knowledge sharing*, in *JIK*, 2022, 7, 3, p. 100214.

²² CAMPBELL, GAVETT, *What covid-19 has done to our well-being*, in 12 charts, in *HBR*, 2021, 10.

²³ VYAS, BUTAKHIEO, *The impact of working from home during COVID-19 on work and life domains: an exploratory study on Hong Kong*, in *PDP*, 2021, 4(1), pp. 59-76.

²⁴ GRANT ET AL., *Construction and initial validation of the E-Work Life Scale to measure remote e-working*, in *ER*, 2018.

Several studies have indicated that international migrants represent one of the least protected and most affected groups by the pandemic²⁵. Furthermore, factors such as job insecurity, contagion risks, discrimination, and psychological distress, have severe impacts on the well-being of migrant workers²⁶. Additionally, due to the border closures, several migrants have been “trapped” in their host countries²⁷. Finally, a recent study conducted in Switzerland by Gerber & Ravazzini (2022)²⁸, on the life satisfaction (LS) of transnational skilled migrant families, before and during Covid-19 found that the pandemic remarkably harmed highly skilled migrants’ LS²⁹.

2.3. *Intention to stay*

Several studies have examined the factors influencing the intention to stay of migrants in the host community³⁰. Literature has shown that most HSMs intend to stay in the destination country for about five–six years³¹. Batista & Cestari (2016)³², in their studies on transnational migrants, found that the social connections with people in the home country strongly correlated to return within five and ten years, which ties in the destination country did not influence. According to Barbiano di Belgiojoso (2016)³³, attachment to the host country, in terms of economic, migratory status, social connections, and sense of belonging, positively influence the length of stay of migrants. Bijwaard *et al.* (2011)³⁴ argue that some people migrate to accu-

²⁵ ILO, *COVID-19 and the world of work: Impact and policy responses*, ILO Monitor 1st Edition, 2020; GUADAGNO, *cit.*; IOM, *Research. Migration Factsheet*, *cit.*

²⁶ WANG, TIAN, QIN, *cit.*

²⁷ ILO, *COVID-19 and the world*, *cit.*

²⁸ GERBER, RAVAZZINI, *cit.*

²⁹ GERBER, RAVAZZINI, *cit.*

³⁰ SEO, *cit.*

³¹ ICP, *Global Talent. Regional Growth. Working towards an Integrated Attraction and Retention Plan for the Metropolitan Region The Hague/Rotterdam*, Research Report, 2016, <http://www.icp-platform.nl>; CBS, *Statistics Netherlands*, 2020, <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/dossier/migration-and-integration/how-many-people-immigrate-to-the-netherlands->.

³² BATISTA, CESTARI, *Migrant Intentions to Return: The Role of Migrant Social Networks*, Working Paper Series, Working Paper No 1602, in *Nova Africa Center for Business and Economic Development*, 2016.

³³ BARBIANO DI BELGIOJOSO, *Intentions on desired length of stay among immigrants in Italy*, in *Genus*, 2016, 72, p. 1.

³⁴ BIJWAARD *ET AL.*, *The impact of labor market dynamics on the return migration of immigrants*, in *RES*, 2014, 96, 3, pp. 483–94.

multate savings before returning home, while others may migrate to improve their skills that are highly rewarded in the source country.

3. Methodology

Considering the study's exploratory nature, we used a qualitative method to examine what factors influenced the well-being of HSMs in Brainport Eindhoven during the Covid pandemic. A qualitative research design is required to explore the differences in the experienced well-being during the pandemic of the HSMs³⁵. Our study involves in-depth interviews with HSMs who left the region and HSMs still living in the area.

3.1. Research design

The research is deductive as semi-structured interviews were prepared for the two groups of participants around crucial dimensions of well-being, referring to findings from existing literature on HSMs and well-being and from the literature on covid-19 pandemic (*see* 2.1).

3.2. Sample strategy and composition

The selection criteria used for this study are holding at least a Bachelor's degree obtained in a Third Country and having lived in Brainport Eindhoven for at least six months before the pandemic started (2019). Further, for HSMs who left, "having left the region during the pandemic (2020-2022)" was used as an additional criterion. As control variables, we looked at gender (male or female), origin (EU/non-EU), and parenthood (yes/no). Those variables are selected as they proved to be highly relevant to the well-being experience of HSMs³⁶. Based on the selected variables (Gender) 2x (Parenthood) 2 x (Origin) 2, we reached the need for eight respondents for each group.

³⁵ RAMOS, MARTÍN-PALOMINO, *Addressing women's agency on international mobility*, in *WSIF*, Pergamon, 2015, 49, pp. 1-11.

³⁶ SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *cit.* RIAÑO, *Drawing new boundaries of participation: Experiences and strategies of economic citizenship among skilled migrant women in Switzerland*, in *Environment and Planning, A*, 2011, 43, 7, pp. 1530-1546; AURE, *Highly skilled dependent migrants entering the labour market: Gender and place in skill transfer*, in *Geoforum*, 2013, 45, pp. 275-284.

Therefore, we interviewed 16 HSMs who, at the time of the interview, were living (group 1) or had left the region (group 2). Respondents were retrieved through purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews took place between February 15 and April 18, 2022.

Table 1. Respondents characteristics

	Age	Gender	Kids (yes / no)	Origin (EU / non EU)	Currently living in Eindhoven (Yes/ No)	Working status
INT 1	35	Female	No	Non EU	Yes	Entrepreneur
INT 2	45	Female	Yes	Non EU	Yes	Entrepreneur
INT 3	37	Female	Yes	EU	No	Employed
INT 4	42	Female	Yes	EU	Yes	Entrepreneur
INT 5	36	Female	No	EU and Non EU	No	Employed
INT 6	39	Male	Yes	EU	Yes	Self employed
INT 7	31	Female	No	EU	No	Employed
INT 8	40	Female	Yes	Non EU	Yes	Entrepreneur
INT 9	32	Male	No	Non EU	No	Employed
INT 10	34	Male	No	Non EU	No	Not working
INT 11	32	Male	No	EU	Yes	Employed
INT 12	33	Male	Yes	Non EU	Yes	Employed
INT 13	35	Female	No	Non EU	No	Employed
INT 14	31	Female	No	Non EU	No	Employed
INT 15	29	Female	No	EU	No	Employed
INT 16	67	Male	Yes	Non EU	Yes	Retired

3.3. *Research quality indicators*

To enhance the trustworthiness of the research³⁷, the researchers recorded, transcribed, and carefully analyzed (via elective, open, and axial coding) all the interviews. Furthermore, data collection triangulation and researchers' triangulation have been used to address credibility. In addition, the principal author prepared a migration grid that was then used during the interview.

To ensure confirmability, the study is based on substantial literature and models of well-being found in research and uses a script and migration grid³⁸. Finally, the questions had an open character to avoid performativity and desirable answers by interviewees. Moreover, to further mitigate desirable answers, the anonymity of the interviews was guaranteed.

4. *Findings*

The covid-19 pandemic strongly impacted all (except physical health) the explored dimensions of the well-being of almost all respondents. Moreover, for almost half of the studied population, these impacts resulted in their emigration decision.

The following subsections present findings related to the well-being dimensions explored and other emerging factors.

4.1. *Job and career well-being*

The main changes in terms of job and career are due to the overall uncertainty of the situation and the work-from-home measures.

INT. 6, for instance, mentioned that uncertainty about when things would end and he could start working was the most challenging part.

“We were constantly wondering when this is going to end when it's going to be possible to work again. The uncertainty surrounding that, I think, was the most difficult part.” (INT. 6)

³⁷ NOWELL ET AL., *Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria*, in *IJQS*, 2017, 16, 1, p. 1609406917733847.

³⁸ NOWELL ET AL., *cit.*

Further, a remarkable difference in the experience of entrepreneurs and employed respondents is also found.

Entrepreneurs' work had been significantly impacted by the covid-19 measures, mainly because they were all small entrepreneurs with businesses based on the social interaction of people, which was banned for several months between 2020–2021. Finally, three of the five entrepreneurs started their businesses in 2019. On the other hand, none of the employed participants lost their job due to the pandemic. Some of them had changed jobs over the last three years, but for a personal choice. Nevertheless, the work-from-home policy had strongly impacted both negatively and positively the well-being of several respondents and their partners.

4.2. Work-from-home policy and impact on respondents' well-being

The work-from-home policy strongly impacted most respondents' way of working. Respondents with kids mentioned their difficulty in balancing their parenthood and work-related duties. Some mentioned feeling overwhelmed by unclear boundaries between work and family life.

“Nowadays, with Covid and everything online, there is no limit between your job and your life; everything goes on continuously, and people text you at night. So I felt like I was working 24/7.” (INT. 2).

Several respondents mentioned being tired of being on screen all day, and some mentioned experiencing so-called “zoom fatigue”.

Furthermore, respondents living alone mentioned missing interactions with colleagues, mainly because there was no social interaction in other aspects of their lives.

Nevertheless, overall, working from home was positively experienced by most respondents. Most people mentioned that besides the initial struggle, working from home benefited their family, as being together brought them closer.

“On the positive side, my husband started working from home so I was like, happy... yeah, and when he started going to work at least once or twice a week, that was challenging for both of us.” (INT. 1)

Moreover, several respondents mentioned that they or their partners initially did not believe they could work from home. However, in the end, they did, and they were happy with it. Also, some realized they could continue working from home while living in another country (see 4.10.3). Consequently, when asked to return to the office, many interviewees and their partners started negotiating with the company about continuing to work remotely. When companies were not supportive in that respect, they started looking for other jobs in companies allowing remote work.

4.3. *Financial well-being*

We found a difference between respondents employed in a company and entrepreneurs.

For instance, the pandemic had not negatively impacted the financial security of employed interviewees, but it impacted the security of entrepreneurs.

Moreover, most employed respondents could increase their savings as they have not spent money on leisure activities, clothes, or traveling.

“[Covid]made me richer because I did not spend any money on coffee outside or dinners outside or drinking outside; it was all at home. So you save a lot of money. I saved more money during Covid than at any time in my life, which is crazy.” (INT. 13)

Nevertheless, all the respondents who had businesses had been impacted by the pandemic-related measures to a certain extent.

“Very greatly [impacted]. It was devastating. The business, which was focused on connecting, networking events, cultural activities, it was yeah, we were really struggling.” (INT. 2)

Furthermore, the respondents who left the country, but kept their Dutch contract and salary, were highly satisfied with their financial situation. They receive a higher salary than the average salary in their destination countries and could benefit from a lower cost of living.

Moreover, one of the respondents could also benefit from the tax reduction for HSMs returning to their country. On the other hand, respon-

dents who left the Netherlands and found a job in the new destination country mentioned having a worse economic situation.

4.4. Trust in the government

The Dutch Government's pandemic management strongly impacted HSMs' trust in the Government. Twelve out of 16 respondents mentioned that their trust in the government had substantially decreased during the pandemic.

The main complaints regard the long-lasting non-mandatory use of face masks, the continuous lockdowns, and the fast elimination of all measures in June 2021, which led to a new lockdown right after summer 2021.

"I mean at the beginning of the pandemic they were not encouraging the use of masks. And I found that unreasonable." (INT. 3)

Complaints also refer to the lack of economic support provided by the government to small businesses. This, for instance, is the main reason influencing INT.2's decision to leave the Country.

"We were really struggling with how the pandemic was handled in this Country. And the lack of support, the rules there were for, for business for entrepreneurs. Big companies were supported, but the common ordinary entrepreneurs, for us it was impossible. So for sure, we will leave. Not tomorrow, but in a couple of years when my kid finishes school." (INT. 2)

Nevertheless, respondents were generally satisfied that they could still get out of the house and walk-in nature during the lockdowns.

Most respondents' perception of how the Dutch Government managed the situation was impacted by the information they read about how their or other countries were dealing with the pandemic.

In addition, the travel ban constitutes another highly relevant element that impacted the trust in the government. This had been very tough for people from non-EU countries that had a much longer travel ban regarding EU citizens.

4.5. *Volunteering*

More than half of the respondents did some volunteering jobs or activities in Eindhoven. For most of them, volunteering had good outcomes in terms of well-being. It increased their sense of meaning, accomplishment, and community, strengthening their social relationships.

Nevertheless, during Covid, all their volunteering jobs closed, so they felt isolated.

4.6. *Sense of belonging*

Experiencing a sense of belonging positively influences the well-being of respondents.

Nevertheless, only two out of 16 respondents feel a sense of belonging to Eindhoven and the Dutch culture, and another mentioned feeling “adjusted”. This means that 13 out of 16 people do not feel they belong to Eindhoven. Furthermore, the language and the different lifestyles and cultures negatively impact belonging.

The lack of belonging and the need to belong had been crucial in the HSMs’ decision to emigrate.

Furthermore, all respondents who left experienced a sense of belonging to their new destination, which positively influenced their well-being.

For instance, INT 5, who moved to Spain, says:

“The cultural aspect, like, here in Spain, I do feel that, culturally, I’m more like home. And all, like, the culture here makes me feel more at home than the Dutch culture, for instance, there (NL), you know, the relationships are a little bit different”. (INT. 5)

4.7. *Sense of safety*

Fourteen out of 16 respondents mention that Eindhoven is a very safe city, and for most people living in the town, this safety influences their intention to stay.

“I mean, I feel very safe. Very safe country and Eindhoven is a safe city,

even if people sometimes try to paint it as a dangerous place [...]. Of course, that helps in our decision to stay.” (INT. 6)

4.8. *Social well-being*

The Covid-19 and the related measures have substantially impacted the respondents’ social relationships with people living in the region.

Most respondents, especially those living alone, had been strongly impacted by the lack of social contacts, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, when they felt that they had to be more strict in not meeting people.

Further, given the restrictions, during the pandemic, most respondents selected friends to meet. Finally, several respondents mentioned that the lack of deep relationships influences their intention to leave.

4.9. *Health*

4.9.1. Opinions about the Health System

Thirteen out of 16 respondents are not satisfied with the Dutch health system. Most complaints concern health insurance costs, the lack of a proper prevention system, the general practitioner (GP) bottleneck to see a specialist, and the long waiting lists.

“This is my main complaint in this country [...] Because I had bad personal experiences. The doctors not treating you is a huge problem, and in terms of prevention, they do not do any kind of prevention in the health system.” (INT. 11)

“I didn’t really like the health system in the Netherlands, but luckily, we had the opportunity to go either to Belgium or to Germany for extra appointments or something we needed. We should be able to see a specialist whenever we want, but it is not possible here.” (INT. 3)

4.9.2. Physical health

The respondents’ physical health had not significantly changed over the last three years, and neither the Covid nor the related measures impacted their health.

4.9.3. Emotional health during covid-19

The pandemic, and especially the uncertainty related to it, strongly impacted the emotional health of almost all respondents.

“Okay, so I think, in general, what affected this number was the level of anxiety that I had during that year, right, because it was so unexpected, it was a lot of uncertainty.” (INT. 5)

Almost all respondents with teenage kids affirmed that the pandemic had strongly affected them.

Nevertheless, most respondents also mentioned several positive impacts of the pandemic on their well-being.

Most people with kids mentioned that having the family constantly living together was challenging but also increased the bonding between family members (see 4.10.3).

Further, more than half of the respondents mentioned that they liked to slow down a bit and enjoy the small things in life:

“I’ve realized things that you didn’t realize before. You get to understand that small things in life are the most important ... we’ve lost so many relatives because of Covid...so many things have happened, and you just start appreciating small things in life.” (INT. 8)

A significant number of respondents mentioned that they became more resilient and self-conscious.

“I learned a lot. So, for example, how to be satisfied only by myself.” (INT. 11)

Further, six out of sixteen respondents mentioned that they went more often out in nature during the pandemic and realized how important it was for their well-being.

4.10. *Main factors that impacted the respondents’ intention to leave*

The pandemic had strongly impacted respondents’ well-being and,

therefore, their intention to leave. The main reasons people left or intend to leave are the covid-19 measures, the lack of sense of belonging, and the need to stay close to the family of origin.

4.10.1. Travel ban policy and the intention to leave

The travel ban had a significant impact on the well-being of the respondents. In several cases, this has also directly influenced their intention to leave:

“I always had the impression that they [family] were not as far away, right, because I could take a plane and come to [city] and stay with them, which was still the same. But after Covid, we experienced that the distance was, . . . perceived as a long distance. So I think after experiencing covid, I appreciate being in the same city as my family.” (INT. 5)

4.10.2. Having a supportive network

Having a supportive network has been identified as a crucial factor for people who moved, not only for those having kids but also for those planning to have a family in the future.

“To have a bigger support network, like grandparents and family, godparents, uncles, everything in case we needed something.” (INT. 3)

4.10.3. Work-from-home policy as a trigger to leave

The remote work policy had been a trigger for people to leave Eindhoven.

“They [the company] have a completely remote work lifestyle. So I can work from anywhere. I don’t need to be in Eindhoven. I don’t need to be anywhere specific. And then, luckily, [the partner] also found a remote job. So we realized that neither of us works in Eindhoven anymore, and we don’t have very deep connections. So we decided to leave”. (INT 13)

When companies started asking people to return to the office, those who enjoyed working from home and envisioned the possibility of working from home in another country started negotiating the option to work from home permanently. When that was not possible, they left their job.

“When his company said that it wouldn’t be possible for him to work remotely...he found a new job.” (INT. 3)

For three out of seven respondents, the possibility of continuing to work for a Dutch company and enjoying the Dutch working culture and labour conditions was crucial. They explicitly mentioned that they did not want to work for a company in their destination country.

“The factor that really pushed us to move was that our companies agreed with us working remotely in a permanent manner because none of us wanted to work for a Spanish company.” (INT. 5)

Other respondents expected to have the worst working conditions back in their country, but they decided to take the risk and move back.

Further, five out of seven people who left affirmed that the weather played a role in their decision to leave. They all expressed a higher sense of well-being by being in countries with better weather conditions.

“The weather, having long days, even in winter; that we have lighter days until six o’clock in the afternoon. That really impacts my happiness in the level of energy that I have as well.” (INT. 5)

Finally, rather than Covid-19 being the main element impacting their intention to emigrate, for many, the pandemic functioned as a final trigger for their decision to leave.

4.11. Expectations

All respondents’ expectations regarding their life in the new country or region were met.

“So far, yes [expectations are met]. I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s

because I've also started traveling more. And you know, I have the perfect balance of living in Amsterdam, which is beautiful, and traveling, which is also really exciting. So, I think so far, it has been great." (INT. 13)

"I know that I would have found a harder environment workwise... I was prepared, and I was fine with it". (INT. 15)

One respondent mentioned that her expectations were not completely met because their house was still being prepared, so they had to move with the in-laws, which led to family interference in their child's upbringing.

5. *Conclusion and discussion*

This study looked at how Covid-19 influenced the well-being HSMs in Brainport Eindhoven and how their (changed) well-being impacted their intention to stay. Our findings show that besides physical health, all the other well-being dimensions have been affected by the covid related measures. Further, those measures, and especially the work-from-home and travel ban policies, strongly influenced the intention to leave of almost half of the respondents.

The findings show that the pandemic had not negatively impacted the financial well-being of those employed; most could save more money than usual. This finding contrasts with findings on the negative economic impacts of covid-19 on labour migrants³⁹.

This is because our respondents are professional migrants with stable high-end jobs. Nevertheless, those running their own business had a substantial financial setback. This, for one of them, resulted in the intention to leave in the next couple of years. Further, the career possibilities of those employed have not been significantly impacted by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the work-from-home policy affected the well-being of many, both in positive and negative terms. In general, adverse outcomes are related to the invasion of the work on private time and space and the so-

³⁹ IFRC, Report 2020, <https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/IFRC-report-COVID19-migrants-least-protected-most-affected.pdf>; ILO, *COVID-19 and the world*, *cit.*; GUADAGNO, *cit.*; WILSON ET AL., *Job insecurity and financial concern during the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with worse mental health*, in *JOEM*, 2020, 62, 9, pp. 686-691.

called “zoom fatigue”. Other scholars found an increase in symptoms related to technostress (e.g., feelings of exhaustion) and eye-related symptoms during the pandemic⁴⁰.

For those living alone, working remotely, and not being able to meet people triggered a sense of loneliness⁴¹.

In addition, uncertainty on how long the pandemic would last impacted the work of the entrepreneurs.

Further, working from home had both positive and adverse outcomes for those living with their partners or families, as also found by⁴². On the one hand, respondents struggled to combine work and family life; on the other hand, they could strengthen their bonds with the other family members. Similar results have been found by Arntz *et al.* (2020) and Bouziri *et al.* (2020)⁴³.

Nevertheless, several respondents found that they like to work from home. When asked to go back to the office, they started negotiating the possibility of working remotely on a permanent base. When the employers did not grant this possibility, they started looking for other jobs.

Several people decided to leave only when they knew they could continue working from home for their Dutch employer. This is because they prefer the Dutch conditions regarding salary, benefits, and work-life culture. For them, the Covid-19 pandemic functioned as a pushing factor to fulfil all their job and personal life needs. This is a new finding worth to be explored in other studies, for instance, quantitative studies, that can test those findings.

Further, “trust in the government” has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. In this respect, most respondents, who initially trusted the Dutch government, have lost their trust after seeing the government’s pan-

⁴⁰ MOLINO *ET AL.*, *cit.*; BELL *ET AL.*, *cit.*; MAJUMDAR, BISWAS, SAHU, *COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown: cause of sleep disruption, depression, somatic pain, and increased screen exposure of office workers and students of India*, in *CI*, 2020, 37, 8, pp. 1191–1200; RUMP, BRANDT, *Zoom-fatigue. Institute for Employment and Employability IBE Study*, 2021, available online at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnkpcajpccglclefindmkaj/https://www.ibeludwigshafen.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/EN_IBE-Studie-Zoom-Fatigue.pdf.

⁴¹ WANG, TIAN, QIN, *cit.*

⁴² DEUTROM *ET AL.*, *cit.*; TASER *ET AL.*, *cit.*; DE FILIPPIS *ET AL.*, *Collaborating during coronavirus: The impact of COVID-19 on the nature of work (No. w27612)*, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020; XIAO *ET AL.*, *Impacts of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic on physical and mental well-being of office workstation users*, in *JOEM*, 2021, 63, 3, p. 181.

⁴³ ARNTZ *ET AL.*, *Working from home and COVID-19: The chances and risks for gender gaps, in Intereconomics*, 2020 55 (6), pp. 381–386; BOUZIRI *ET AL.*, *Working from home in the time of COVID-19: how to best preserve occupational health?*, in *OEM*, 2020, 77(7), pp. 509–510.

demic management. Groeniger *et al.* (2021)⁴⁴ registered a sharp decrease in trust in the government between December 2019 and early March 2020.

Specifically, several are complaints about the government's management of the pandemic. Respondents' complaints relate mainly to not making mandatory the use of face masks for several months and to the lack of consistent communication. In this respect, Sibley *et al.* (2020)⁴⁵ found that a solid and cohesive national response to exceptional circumstances increases people's trust in politicians and scientists.

Further, another highly shared complaint is about the extended travel bans towards and from non-EU countries. The prolonged ban substantially impacted the respondents' well-being, especially non-EU citizens. Several could not see their family for a long time, even when their relatives or parents fell sick or passed away.

A critical issue emerged from the lack of financial support for the small entrepreneurs, which led to the intention to leave one respondent. Even if the Dutch government adopted a package of financial measures designed to support entrepreneurs and companies during the pandemic⁴⁶, they did not seem adequate for small entrepreneurs.

Finally, people complained about the continuous lockdowns given to the weak measures taken. Nevertheless, some people from countries with a high infection rate felt safer in the Netherlands.

"The sense of belonging" has been highly significant for the respondents' well-being. However, even if many have strong connections to some specific communities or friends, most respondents do not feel a proper sense of belonging in the Netherlands. This influenced their respondents' intention to leave. Barbiano di Belgiojoso (2016)⁴⁷ found that the sense of belonging is strictly related to the intention to leave.

On the positive side, almost all respondents feel *safe* in the region, and their safety perception has not changed during the pandemic. In addition, their sense of safety strongly influences their intention to stay⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ GROENIGER, *cit.*

⁴⁵ SIBLEY ET AL., *Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown on trust, attitudes toward government, and well-being*, in *AP*, 2020, 75, 5, p. 618.

⁴⁶ Government of the Netherlands, March 17, 2020, available at <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2020/03/19/coronavirus-dutch-government-adopts-package-of-new-measures-designed-to-save-jobs-and-the-economy>.

⁴⁷ BARBIANO DI BELGIOJOSO, *cit.*

⁴⁸ SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *cit.*

Further, most people do not trust the health system, and three will leave because of that⁴⁹. Nevertheless, the pandemic did not negatively impact HSMS' opinions about the health system.

Finally, the pandemic strongly impacted emotional and social well-being, and both elements influenced some people's intention to leave. Many have seen uncertainty as a trigger for their anxiety, stress, and in some cases, depressive symptoms⁵⁰.

Further, worrying about one's own and far away family members' health has a considerable impact on the well-being of people. It has been established that concerns about other people's health increase the risk of anxiety⁵¹.

The impossibility of going back home and seeing the family frequently also changed the idea of distance "from home", which influenced two respondents' intention to move "back home".

Nevertheless, Covid-19 also had a positive impact on the lives of many respondents. For instance, several reported increased resilience and self-consciousness. Furthermore, during the lockdowns, people could enjoy a renewed connection with nature. For example, Killgore *et al.* (2020)⁵² found that people's resilience was higher among those who tended to go outdoors more often and engage with nature. In addition, Williams and Hall (2014)⁵³ found a strong relationship between the natural environment and well-being.

Moreover, the pandemic also changed the way of meeting friends. Due to the restriction, most people start selecting friends to meet. Some people felt relieved not to have to participate in social activities constantly. Finally, several people who left or planned to leave mentioned the weather as a relevant reason impacting their intention to leave. The relationship between weather and well-being has also been discussed by Feddersen *et al.* (2016)⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ SPADAVECCHIA, YU, *cit.*

⁵⁰ GUADAGNO, *cit.*; MOLINO *ET AL.*, *cit.*; BELL *ET AL.*, *cit.*; KUMAR *ET AL.*, *cit.*

⁵¹ BELL *ET AL.*, *cit.*

⁵² KILLGORE, TAYLOR, CLOONAN, DAILEY, *Psychological resilience during the COVID-19 lockdown*, in *PR*, 2020, 291, p. 113216.

⁵³ WILLIAMS, HALL, *Women, migration and well-being: Building epistemological resilience through ontologies of wholeness and relationship*, in *GCPS*, 2014, 26, 2, pp. 211-221.

⁵⁴ FEDDERSEN, METCALFE, WOODEN, *Subjective wellbeing: Why weather matters*, in *JRSSSA*, 2016, 179, 1, pp. 203-228.

Abstract

Human capital often referred to as talent, is a pillar of knowledge-based economies. The population aging and decline pushed countries and companies worldwide to engage in the “battle for the best and the brightest”. They do so by looking at international talent, also known as Highly skilled migrants (HSMs). Traditionally, global talent management studies have focused only on HSMs’ career and financial satisfaction. Nevertheless, those studies failed to understand how to retain HSMs, as they did not look at them as whole individuals whose overall well-being would affect their intention to stay.

This paper discusses how the well-being of HSMs workers in Brainport Eindhoven, a critical Dutch technical hub, has changed during the Covid-19 pandemic and how that has affected their intention to stay or to leave the region. Given the exploratory nature of this work, we use a qualitative method. Our findings show that the Covid-19 measures strongly impacted HSMs’ intention to leave the region.

Keywords

Highly skilled migrant workers, well-being, Netherlands, Brainport Eindhoven, intention to stay, intention to leave, Covid-19 measures.