

Formal Recognition and Unequal Pathways: International Physicians' Experiences in Germany

Keywords

Recognition of foreign qualifications; recognition process; educational (in)equity; health sector; migration

Research Overview

This study examines how physicians who acquired their qualifications abroad experience the recognition process in Germany, based on 21 qualitative interviews. The results reveal that perceived fairness is shaped less by formal EU/non-EU distinctions than by the transparency and consistency of administrative procedures, particularly regarding delays, temporary work authorization, and access to institutional support.

Abstract

The recognition of foreign qualifications is increasingly important in healthcare systems facing workforce shortages and growing reliance on skilled migration. Projections by the Central Research Institute of Ambulatory Health Care in Germany (Lipovsek et al., 2024) estimate a shortage of about 50,000 physicians by 2040, while ambulatory care capacity could decline to 74% of its current level without international medical migration. In regulated professions such as medicine, recognition is therefore both a labor market necessity and a central institutional gateway determining whether foreign-acquired qualifications translate into legally recognized professional participation and adequate returns (Becker, 1993; Brückner et al., 2021; Pecoraro, 2023). Because migrant human capital is only partially transferable, its labor market value depends on institutional recognition and signaling processes (Friedberg, 2000; Chiswick and Miller, 2009; Spence, 1973). Recognition of foreign qualifications therefore functions both as validation and as a labour market signal, shaping employability, wages, and occupational matching (Spence, 1973; Damelang et al., 2020; Brückner et al., 2021). At the same time, recognition processes are often complex, fragmented, and lacking transparency, turning formal access rights into unevenly navigable pathways (Döring et al., 2015; Körtek, 2015). Delays, procedural opacity, and uneven support structures can postpone labor market entry, increase overqualification, and reduce skill utilization despite existing workforce shortages (Brückner et

al., 2021; OECD, 2017; Pecoraro, 2023). Although intended as an inclusionary mechanism, recognition systems may simultaneously reproduce inequality through selective accessibility, procedural complexity, and fragmented institutional support (Lodigiani and Sarli, 2017). For internationally trained physicians, recognition shapes not only access to employment, but also residence security, professional identity, career continuity, and long-term life planning (Freidson, 1994). Formal recognition significantly improves employment outcomes, wages, and occupational matching, making it decisive for both structural integration and individual professional trajectories (Brücker et al., 2021; Damelang et al., 2020). Existing research has mainly focused on legal and labor market dimensions, while the lived process of recognition, particularly procedural fairness, psychosocial strain, and biographical consequences, remains underexplored (Körtek, 2015). Procedural opacity and fragmented support structures shift the burden of navigation onto individuals, making outcomes dependent on informal knowledge and personal networks rather than standardized institutional guidance (Döring et al., 2015; Müller and Ayan, 2015). This raises the central research question of how internationally trained physicians perceive transparency, fairness, and institutional consistency in recognition procedures, and how these experiences shape professional transitions, well-being, and skills utilization.

This study is based on 21 semi-structured interviews with physicians undergoing or having completed recognition procedures in Germany, the study applies structured qualitative content analysis with deductive categories to reconstruct recurring patterns of institutional experience, burden, and interpretation (Mayring and Fenzl, 2019). The analytical framework combines human capital and transferability approaches, structural integration theory, recognition theory, and stress and coping perspectives (Becker, 1993; Friedberg, 2000; Chiswick and Miller, 2009; Honneth, 2021; Lazarus and Folkman, 2006; Antonovsky, 1988).

Perceived fairness was shaped less by formal EU/non-EU distinctions than by transparency, consistency, and procedural clarity. Participants accepted different legal pathways but experienced unfairness when decisions were inconsistent, poorly explained, or dependent on individual caseworkers. Non-EU pathways were associated with longer, less predictable processes and higher uncertainty. A temporary restricted work authorization phase emerged as a precarious transition linking employment, residence status, and career progression. Delays, unclear timelines, and limited feedback reduced planning capacity and increased stress, while informal support networks helped navigate procedures but made outcomes partly dependent on individual resources.

Perceived fairness depended less on formal EU/non-EU distinctions than on transparency, consistency, and procedural clarity. Participants accepted different legal pathways but experienced unfairness when decisions were inconsistent, poorly explained, or dependent on individual caseworkers. Non-EU pathways involved longer, less predictable processes and higher uncertainty. A temporary restricted work authorization phase emerged as a precarious transition linking employment, residence status, and career progression. Delays, unclear timelines, and limited feedback reduced planning capacity and increased stress, while informal support networks helped navigate procedures but made outcomes partly dependent on individual resources.

The findings reveal a gap between formal recognition frameworks and experienced procedural fairness, supporting recognition theory, which locates fairness in institutional practice rather than formal rules alone (Honneth, 2021). Unequal pathways and delays increase risks of skill underutilization and delayed labor market integration, confirming that recognition determines whether foreign qualifications generate labor market returns and function as credible signals for employers (Becker, 1993; Spence, 1973; Brücker et al., 2021; Pecoraro, 2023). Recognition also shapes structural integration by linking professional access with employment and life-course stability (Freidson, 1994), while uncertainty and reliance on informal support highlight the relevance of stress and coping perspectives (Lazarus and Folkman, 2006; Döring et al., 2015; Müller and Ayan, 2015).

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