

Beyond The Desire to Migrate: A Five-Dimensional Measurement of International Migration Intention among Skilled Workers

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ABSTRACT

International migration intention is widely used to anticipate prospective mobility and skilled-worker emigration, yet its measurement remains conceptually fragmented. Existing studies variously operationalise future migration as desire, aspiration, intention, plan, preparation, expectation, or likelihood of moving. These approaches are useful for particular research purposes, but they can obscure the difference between wanting to migrate and having a more developed, actionable orientation toward migration. Using an integrative conceptual review, this paper synthesises migration survey practices, aspirations-capabilities scholarship, and migration decision-making research to derive and delimit five proposed dimensions of international migration intention. The paper conceptualises international migration intention as a multidimensional pre-migration orientation comprising desire, plan, preparation, timing, and perceived migration control. The proposed International Migration Intention Five-Dimensional Measure (IMI-5D) integrates established distinctions in migration survey research with scholarship on migration decision-making, temporal horizons, and agency. Fifteen candidate items are proposed, with three items representing each dimension. At this conceptual stage, IMI-5D is positioned primarily as a multidimensional profile measure rather than as a validated composite scale, and no overall IMI score is assumed. The dimensions are treated as related components rather than compulsory stages because prospective migrants can display different profiles, such as strong desire but limited preparation, or clear planning but low perceived control. The paper argues that this multidimensional approach can improve construct clarity, cross-study comparability, and the interpretation of skilled-worker mobility intentions. The proposed structure, items, scoring approach, and response format remain provisional and require staged empirical validation before IMI-5D can be described as a validated measurement scale.

Keywords: international migration intention, skilled workers, multidimensional measurement, perceived migration control, IMI-5D

INTRODUCTION

International migration is not only a completed act of crossing a national border. For prospective migrants, mobility begins earlier as a cognitive and practical process in which they imagine a future elsewhere, compare alternatives, form intentions, consider what would be required, and assess whether relocation is feasible. This pre-migration process is especially important in research on skilled workers because the movement of professionals and other highly qualified workers can affect organisational continuity, sectoral capacity, and the stock of human capital in countries of origin. Recent research continues to distinguish between general aspirations to migrate and more concrete plans among tertiary-educated populations whose skills may be internationally transferable (Kulka et al., 2025).

Despite the policy and theoretical importance of prospective migration, the construct used to represent it remains unsettled. Migration research employs a broad vocabulary that includes aspiration, desire, willingness, preference, intention, plan, expectation, preparation, and migration potential. Mjelva and Carling (2023), in a comprehensive inventory of migration surveys, show that research on aspirations, plans, and intentions is methodologically diverse. This diversity is useful because it captures different aspects of pre-migration

thinking, but it also creates a measurement problem: studies may use the same label for different phenomena or different labels for closely related phenomena.

The distinction between wanting to migrate and being ready to pursue migration illustrates the problem. Gallup-based research separates a general wish to move from more concrete planning and preparation. Migali and Scipioni (2019), for example, distinguish migration aspirations, represented by a wish to move abroad, from migration intentions represented by preparation to migrate. Other studies define migration intention as a plan to move, while some use a direct statement of willingness or intention as the outcome variable. Consequently, two studies reporting 'migration intention' may be capturing different degrees of commitment and actionability.

The intention-behaviour relationship adds another layer of complexity. Intentions matter because they precede behaviour and allow prospective mobility to be studied before movement occurs, but they do not automatically become migration. Longitudinal evidence indicates that stated emigration intentions are associated with later behaviour, while financial, legal, family, occupational, and policy constraints can prevent intended moves from materialising (van Dalen & Henkens, 2013). At an aggregate level, Tjaden et al. (2019) also report a strong association between emigration intentions and migration flows. These findings support the usefulness of intention data while showing why a general preference alone may be insufficient when researchers want to distinguish weak aspirations from more developed orientations.

This paper therefore proposes that international migration intention (IMI) should be conceptualised and measured through five related dimensions: desire, plan, preparation, timing, and perceived migration control. Desire captures the attractiveness of working abroad; plan captures a formulated course of action; preparation captures early efforts to ready oneself for possible migration; timing captures the temporal horizon or life-career point associated with the intended move; and perceived migration control captures the extent to which individuals believe they can make migration happen. The dimensions are related, but they are not presented as compulsory stages that every prospective migrant must pass through in a fixed order.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it clarifies the conceptual boundaries among common terms used in migration-intention research. Second, it integrates five aspects of prospective migration that are often measured separately into a single measurement architecture suitable for skilled-worker research. Third, it introduces a proposed 15-item International Migration Intention Five-Dimensional Measure (IMI-5D), with three candidate items for each dimension. The purpose is not to claim a validated scale at this stage, but to offer a theoretically grounded measurement proposition for subsequent testing across occupations, countries, and migration contexts.

Conceptual Review Approach

This paper adopts an integrative conceptual approach rather than a formal systematic-review design. The synthesis prioritises studies that explicitly define, distinguish, or operationalise migration aspirations, desires, intentions, plans, preparations, timing horizons, and migration-related agency. Particular weight is given to sources that document survey practices or develop conceptual models of migration decision-making, including Gallup-based migration research, QuantMig and MIGNEX work on migration aspirations, the aspirations-capabilities perspective, and peer-reviewed studies linking stated intentions with later migration behaviour.

The conceptual development proceeds in four stages. First, international migration intention is distinguished from actual migration behaviour and from adjacent concepts. Second, limitations created by fragmented and single-item measurement are identified. Third, the conceptual meaning and boundaries of the five proposed dimensions are developed from prior scholarship. Finally, the synthesis is translated into candidate measurement items for skilled workers. The item-generation principle is deliberately conservative: each item is intended to represent its assigned dimension without implying that migration is certain, imminent, or fully prepared. The proposed instrument therefore remains a conceptual measurement until its empirical properties are established.

Conceptualising International Migration Intention

International migration intention refers to a prospective orientation toward living and working across national borders. Unlike actual migration, which can be observed after movement occurs, intention exists before the move and therefore reflects decision-making under uncertainty. Prospective migrants do not know with certainty whether they will obtain employment, a visa, professional recognition, sufficient resources, or family support. Czaika et al. (2021) capture this uncertainty by describing migration decision-making in terms of aspirations, information processing, timing and planning horizons, and locus of control. Their framework is important because it moves analysis away from a single decision point toward several interrelated dimensions of prospective mobility.

The aspirations-capabilities perspective similarly distinguishes wanting to migrate from being able to migrate. De Haas (2021) conceptualises migration as an outcome of aspirations and capabilities, helping to explain why some people with strong aspirations remain immobile while others are able to act. Carling and Schewel (2018) make a related distinction between aspiration and ability, while Aslany et al. (2021) show that migration-aspiration research itself draws on varied conceptual and empirical traditions. For measurement purposes, these perspectives indicate that a simple question about whether a respondent would like to migrate should not be treated as equivalent to migration readiness. Desire is analytically meaningful, but it represents only one aspect of the pre-migration orientation.

Empirical terminology remains non-uniform. Mjelva and Carling (2023) document surveys using aspirations, plans, intentions, desires, and related concepts, while Carling (2019) argues that interpretation should follow the substantive meaning of the survey item rather than the label assigned to it. Migali and Scipioni (2019) operationalise aspiration as a general wish to move and intention as concrete preparation, whereas Kulka et al. (2025) distinguish an ideal desire to emigrate from current plans. These recurring distinctions suggest that migration intention contains conceptually separable elements even when researchers use different terminology.

In this paper, IMI is therefore conceptualised as a multidimensional pre-migration orientation comprising five related dimensions: desire, plan, preparation, timing, and perceived migration control. The term 'intention' is retained because the focus is prospective, but the construct is made explicit through five dimensions so that researchers can identify which aspect of the orientation is present. This approach does not deny narrower definitions used in other studies; rather, it makes the component parts transparent and allows future empirical research to examine how they relate.

The focus on skilled workers strengthens the case for multidimensional measurement. Skilled migration often involves occupation-specific conditions such as professional licensing, credential recognition, employer sponsorship, language certification, and the relocation of dependants. A worker may strongly desire migration while undertaking little preparation or may have started preparing while remaining uncertain about timing. Conversely, someone may believe that working abroad is feasible but may not prefer it. A multidimensional measure can represent these different configurations more precisely than a binary or single-item intention measure. To consolidate these conceptual distinctions, Table 1 summarises international migration intention as the focal construct and clarifies the specific meaning and measurement role of each of its five proposed dimensions.

Table 1: Conceptual Distinction Between International Migration Intention and Its Five Proposed Dimensions

Term	Core meaning	Measurement implication
International migration intention (overall construct)	A multidimensional pre-migration orientation toward future international relocation for work, represented through desire, plan, preparation, timing, and perceived migration control.	Should not be represented by one general intention item alone when the aim is to capture the broader structure of IMI.
Desire / aspiration	An ideal preference or wish to migrate.	Captures attractiveness of migration, but not necessarily commitment or action.

Plan	A formulated course of action to pursue migration.	Indicates stronger commitment than a general desire, but does not require action to have started.
Preparation	Early actions taken to ready oneself for possible migration.	Shows that intention has begun to translate into action without implying that preparation is complete.
Timing	The intended timeframe or life-career point associated with migration.	Distinguishes vague future possibilities from temporally anchored intentions.
Perceived migration control	Perceived ability and agency to pursue and manage the migration process.	Captures perceived feasibility and control rather than preference alone.

The Measurement Problem In International Migration Intention Research

The first measurement challenge is construct underrepresentation. A single item such as 'I would like to work abroad' is efficient and may be appropriate for large population surveys, but it primarily captures desire. It does not establish whether the respondent has formed a plan, begun preparing, attached the intention to a timeframe, or believes the move is manageable. Conversely, a question about moving within the next 12 months introduces timing but may not reveal whether any practical preparation has occurred. When these different questions are treated as interchangeable indicators of IMI, differences in findings can partly reflect differences in measurement rather than differences between populations.

A second challenge concerns the boundary between aspiration and intention. Gallup-based studies demonstrate the analytical value of distinguishing people who would ideally like to move from those who have made concrete preparations. Migali and Scipioni (2019) show that the correlates of a general wish to migrate are not necessarily identical to those of preparation. The transition from wanting migration to trying to make it possible can be constrained by resources, information, eligibility, and opportunity. Collapsing these states into one score can therefore obscure how developed the migration orientation actually is.

A third challenge concerns time. Czaika et al. (2021) identify timing and decision horizons as a key dimension of migration decision-making. Two skilled workers can express the same general intention to work abroad, while one associates that intention with an identifiable period or career milestone and the other sees migration only as a distant possibility. Timing should therefore capture temporal anchoring, not simply whether the intended move is immediate. A 12-month horizon can be useful in particular surveys, but it should not be treated as the only meaningful indicator of timing because skilled workers may deliberately defer migration until a qualification, contract, or family milestone is reached.

A fourth challenge concerns agency and feasibility. Migration is not fully under individual control because visas, employer demand, credential recognition, finances, family responsibilities, and policy conditions can affect whether an intended move can be realised. Czaika et al. (2021) identify locus of control as an important dimension of migration decision-making, while migration studies also link perceived control-related characteristics to mobility intentions and behaviour (Caliendo et al., 2019; Fouarge et al., 2019). For the present measure, this idea is reframed as perceived migration control to emphasise migration-specific agency rather than a general personality trait.

Finally, measurement diversity complicates comparison across studies. Mjelva and Carling (2023) show substantial variation in survey terminology and question design. Such diversity is not inherently problematic when researchers define their constructs carefully. The difficulty arises when desire, plan, preparation, timing, or agency are all interpreted as equivalent expressions of 'migration intention'. A multidimensional approach can preserve these distinctions while still placing them within a common IMI measurement architecture. Table 2 summarises the key literature traditions that inform the proposed five-dimensional measurement of international migration intention and shows how each contributes to the conceptual distinction among desire, plan, preparation, timing, and perceived migration control.

Table 2: Literature Foundations of the Proposed Five-Dimensional Measurement of International Migration Intention

Source / tradition	Primary emphasis	Key distinction	Relevance to IMI-5D
Gallup World Poll / Gallup-based research	Desire, plan, preparation	General wish versus more concrete planning or action	Supports separation of desire, plan, and preparation.
Carling (2019); Carling & Mjelva (2021)	Conceptual clarity in survey items	Mental constructs should not be treated as interchangeable	Supports explicit specification of each dimension.
Migali & Scipioni (2019)	Aspiration versus intention	Wish to migrate versus preparation to migrate	Shows that aspiration and actionable orientation can differ.
Czaika et al. (2021)	Migration decision-making under uncertainty	Aspirations, information, timing, locus of control	Supports timing and the adaptation of control into perceived migration control.
Mjelva & Carling (2023)	Survey practices	Variation in terminology and questionnaire design	Demonstrates the need for transparent and comparable measurement.
Kulka et al. (2025)	Migration aspirations and plans	Ideal desire versus current plan to emigrate	Confirms the value of separating desire from planning.

Five Dimensions Of International Migration Intention

Building on the measurement problems and literature foundations identified above, this section develops the conceptual boundaries of the five proposed dimensions of international migration intention. Each dimension captures a distinct aspect of prospective migration while remaining part of the broader IMI construct.

Desire

Desire represents the initial preference or attraction toward living and working in another country. It answers the basic question of whether international mobility is wanted. This dimension is closely related to migration aspiration in surveys that ask whether a person would ideally like to move abroad if the opportunity were available (Carling, 2019; Carling & Mjelva, 2021). Studies among engineers, professionals, and medical workers likewise use expressions of wanting, looking forward to, or intending to work abroad to capture this early orientation (Assfaw & Minaye, 2022; Balu, 2018; Norhayati et al., 2018; Sabti, 2022). Desire can therefore arise without a plan and without any action having been taken.

For skilled workers, desire may reflect the attractiveness of pursuing professional experience, career development, or life opportunities abroad, but the source of the desire is not part of the present measure. The objective is to capture the preference itself. A person can therefore score highly on desire while remaining low on planning, preparation, timing, or perceived migration control. This separation prevents a positive attitude toward migration from being interpreted automatically as imminent departure.

Plan

Plan represents a deliberate cognitive orientation in which an individual has begun to formulate how working abroad could be pursued. It reflects the development of a prospective migration pathway and the incorporation of international employment into future career thinking. Kulka et al. (2025) distinguish ideal migration desire from current migration plans, while Manchin and Orazbayev (2018) conceptualise migration intention in terms of a clear plan to migrate. These perspectives support the inclusion of planning as a distinct component of international migration intention.

In skilled-worker contexts, planning may involve considering potential employment routes, identifying suitable destination countries or professional pathways, and thinking about how international employment could fit within a longer-term career trajectory. Such planning reflects cognitive formulation of a possible migration pathway. The individual has begun to organise the idea of working abroad into a more structured future course of action, even though the plan may remain conditional on professional, personal, or institutional circumstances.

Preparation

Preparation captures the point at which international migration intention begins to generate preliminary action. It does not imply that all migration requirements have been completed or that departure is imminent. Instead, preparation refers to early efforts undertaken to make possible international employment more actionable, such as seeking relevant information, beginning selected administrative or professional requirements, or taking initial practical steps. Gallup-based migration research uses preparation to distinguish a general aspiration to migrate from a more actionable migration orientation, while Migali and Scipioni (2019) similarly associate migration intention with concrete preparation. Fresnoza-Flot (2024) further supports viewing migration decision-making as situated, conditional, and potentially reversible rather than as a fixed progression toward departure.

Preparation is particularly relevant for skilled workers because international employment may require occupation-specific processes such as credential recognition, professional licensing, language certification, employment applications, or financial arrangements. Individuals may begin addressing some of these requirements while others remain unresolved. Preparation therefore captures the translation of migration intention into preliminary effort rather than the completion of the migration process. The defining feature of this dimension is that some migration-related action has begun.

Timing

Timing refers to the temporal anchoring of international migration intention. It captures when working abroad is expected to fit within an individual's future rather than how long the individual intends to remain abroad. Czaika et al. (2021) identify timing and planning horizons as important dimensions of migration decision-making because intended mobility may be immediate, deferred, conditional, or linked to particular life and career circumstances. Research also shows that migration intentions are embedded within broader career and life-course considerations rather than occurring as isolated decisions (de Jong & de Valk, 2020; Williams et al., 2018).

For skilled workers, the anticipated timing of migration may be linked to the completion of postgraduate training, professional registration, an employment contract, a promotion cycle, or a family milestone. The proposed dimension therefore captures whether an individual has an approximate timeframe or identifiable career or life point associated with working abroad. This allows temporally anchored intentions to be distinguished from migration possibilities that remain open-ended or unspecified. Importantly, timing does not imply urgency, because a migration intention may be clearly defined even when the intended move is deliberately deferred.

Perceived migration control

Perceived Migration Control (PMC) refers to an individual's perception of their agency and ability to manage the process of pursuing international employment. The concept is informed by migration decision-making research that identifies locus of control as relevant to prospective mobility (Czaika et al., 2021). However, PMC is deliberately framed as migration-specific because it concerns perceived control over the pursuit of international work rather than a general belief about control over life outcomes.

Conceptually, PMC is narrower than general locus of control, which concerns broad expectations about whether outcomes are determined by personal actions or external forces (Rotter, 1966). It is also more context-specific than general self-efficacy, which refers to perceived capability to organise and perform actions

required to achieve particular outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Perceived behavioural control similarly concerns the perceived ease or difficulty of performing a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In IMI-5D, PMC specifically captures whether an individual believes that the major requirements involved in pursuing international employment are sufficiently manageable and within their agency. Its empirical distinctiveness from these related constructs should therefore be examined during subsequent validation.

Taken together, the proposed dimensions represent different aspects of the broader pre-migration orientation. Plan captures the cognitive formulation of a migration pathway, Preparation captures the initiation of migration-related action, Timing captures the temporal anchoring of the intended move, and Perceived Migration Control captures perceived agency and manageability. These conceptual boundaries are proposed to reduce overlap among the dimensions, but their empirical distinctiveness remains to be established through subsequent validation.

Proposed International Migration Intention Five-Dimensional Measure (Imi-5d)

The preceding synthesis supports a measurement architecture in which IMI is represented through five related dimensions: desire, plan, preparation, timing, and perceived migration control. The proposed IMI-5D contains 15 candidate items, with three items assigned to each dimension. Three items are proposed to provide broader conceptual coverage within each dimension and to reduce dependence on any single wording during subsequent validation. At this stage, IMI-5D should be understood as a theoretically derived multidimensional measurement proposition rather than an empirically established scale structure. It is intended primarily to generate a five-dimension profile of how migration intention is expressed; a single overall IMI score is not assumed.

The candidate items are newly worded from the conceptual synthesis rather than presented as verbatim reproductions of existing scales. Item wording follows the conceptual boundaries developed above. Desire items capture wanting, attraction, and preference. Plan items capture cognitive formulation of a migration pathway without requiring action to have started. Preparation items deliberately use terms such as 'started', 'begun', and 'initial' so that behavioural enactment is captured without implying that every requirement has been completed. Timing items capture temporal clarity or anchoring rather than assuming that stronger intention must always mean migration within a short period. Perceived migration control items capture migration-specific agency and manageability, not general confidence in life or adaptation after migration. Table 3 presents the proposed 15-item IMI-5D measure, with three candidate items representing each of the five dimensions and the specific conceptual focus intended for each item.

Table 3: Proposed 15-item International Migration Intention Five-Dimensional Measure (IMI-5D)

Dimension	Code	Proposed item	Item focus
Desire	D1	I would like to work in another country in the future.	Basic desire
Desire	D2	The idea of living and working in another country appeals to me.	Attraction
Desire	D3	Given the choice, I would prefer to pursue part of my career in another country.	Preference
Plan	P1	I have formed a plan to pursue work in another country.	Existence of a plan
Plan	P2	I have considered how I would go about finding work in another country.	Planning the route
Plan	P3	I have thought about how working abroad could be incorporated into my future career path.	Career-path integration
Preparation	PR1	I have started finding out what I would need to do to work in another country.	Initial information-seeking
Preparation	PR2	I have begun preparing for some of the requirements involved	Requirement

		in working abroad.	preparation
Preparation	PR3	I have taken some initial steps towards making it possible for me to work abroad.	Early practical action
Timing	T1	I have an approximate timeframe in mind for when I might start working abroad.	General time horizon
Timing	T2	I have a clear idea of when working abroad would fit into my future career plans.	Career timing
Timing	T3	My intention to work abroad is linked to a particular stage in my career or personal life.	Life/career timing anchor
Perceived migration control	PMC1	Whether I pursue work in another country is largely within my control.	Personal agency
Perceived migration control	PMC2	I believe I can take the necessary steps if I decide to work abroad.	Ability to act
Perceived migration control	PMC3	I feel able to manage the main requirements involved in pursuing work abroad.	Perceived manageability

The five dimensions should not be interpreted as an inevitable sequence. Migration decision-making can be iterative, conditional, and reversible. A respondent may show high desire but low preparation or may have begun preparation while remaining uncertain about timing. At the present conceptual stage, IMI-5D is therefore intended to be interpreted primarily as a multidimensional profile measure. Dimension-level scores can make these different configurations visible, whereas an overall composite score could conceal meaningful differences between profiles. The empirical relationships among the five dimensions, the status of timing within the measurement structure, and whether aggregation into an overall IMI score is psychometrically and substantively defensible should be determined in future validation rather than assumed in advance.

Response format and preliminary scoring

For initial pilot testing, a four-point agreement format may be considered as one provisional option: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. This option is consistent with the original instrument-development context from which the five-dimensional idea was developed, but it should not be treated as a fixed feature of IMI-5D. The optimal response format has not yet been established empirically. Future validation should compare four-, five-, and seven-point response structures in terms of response distribution, reliability, dimensional performance, respondent burden, and interpretability across populations.

For pilot work, each dimension may be summarised provisionally as the mean of its three items, producing five separate dimension scores. Higher scores would indicate stronger desire, more developed planning, greater preparation, clearer temporal anchoring, and stronger perceived migration control, respectively. Dimension-level interpretation should be prioritised because IMI-5D is presently proposed as a profile measure. An overall composite score should not be calculated routinely unless subsequent empirical evidence demonstrates that aggregation is both psychometrically defensible and substantively meaningful.

Why A Five-Dimensional Measure Is Valuable For Skilled Worker Research

The first advantage of IMI-5D is improved construct clarity. A direct intention question cannot reveal whether a response represents a general preference, a formulated plan, an attempt to prepare, an intention tied to a timeframe, or a belief that the migration process is manageable. Decomposing the construct makes the meaning of a high or low score more transparent and can improve interpretation across professional groups with different regulatory and career pathways.

The second advantage is improved comparability and explanatory precision. Migration-intention research spans health, engineering, education, economics, demography, and other fields, yet Mjelva and Carling (2023) show that the literature draws on diverse survey measures. A common multidimensional instrument would not replace established population surveys, but it could provide a standard option when IMI is a focal construct. It would also allow researchers to examine whether different antecedents are associated with different components of the pre-migration orientation rather than being absorbed into one general intention score.

The third advantage is practical usefulness for workforce research. From a retention perspective, workers who simply view migration as attractive represent a different situation from workers who have begun preparation and attached the intention to an identifiable timeframe. Dimension profiles could therefore help organisations and policymakers interpret aggregate mobility risk more carefully. The measure should not, however, be used as a punitive screening tool for individual employees. Migration intention is sensitive career information, and responsible use requires voluntary participation, confidentiality, and proportionate reporting.

Agenda For Empirical Validation

The proposed IMI-5D remains a conceptual measurement proposition and requires a staged empirical scale-development programme before it can be described as a validated scale. The programme should progressively establish content adequacy, respondent comprehension, dimensional structure, reliability, construct validity, cross-group comparability, and predictive usefulness. Consistent with established scale-development guidance, conceptual boundaries should remain open to revision when empirical evidence indicates that items or dimensions do not perform as intended (Boateng et al., 2018).

Table 4: Proposed Staged Empirical Validation Programme for IMI-5D

Stage	Primary purpose	Key procedures	Main decision focus
1. Content validation and cognitive pretesting	Establish content coverage and respondent interpretation	Expert ratings of relevance, clarity, representativeness, and dimensional fit; I-CVI/S-CVI; qualitative review; cognitive interviews	Retain, revise, relocate, or remove candidate items
2. Exploratory dimensional assessment	Examine initial item structure	Independent development sample; exploratory factor analysis; inspect loadings and cross-loadings, especially Plan-Preparation and Preparation-PMC	Assess whether the proposed five dimensions are empirically distinguishable
3. Confirmatory validation	Test the proposed structure and validity	Independent validation sample; confirmatory factor analysis; reliability; convergent, discriminant, criterion, and predictive evidence; compare plausible alternative structures	Determine defensible dimensional structure and whether any overall score is supportable
4. Cross-group generalisability	Establish comparability across populations	Measurement invariance across occupations, countries, career stages, gender, and regulated versus non-regulated professions	Determine whether group comparisons are meaningful
5. Longitudinal prediction	Establish behavioural relevance	Follow respondents over time; examine subsequent information seeking, applications, licensing/visa steps, and actual migration	Test whether Plan, Preparation, Timing, and PMC predict mobility beyond Desire alone

Expert content validation and cognitive pretesting

Expert content validation should use a purposive multidisciplinary panel rather than a homogeneous convenience group. Experts should meet at least one of three criteria: (i) a research record in migration aspirations, intentions, or decision-making; (ii) expertise in psychometrics, scale development, survey

methodology, or HR measurement; or (iii) professional or regulatory knowledge of international mobility in skilled occupations. Collectively, the panel should cover both migration theory and measurement practice as well as more than one skilled-profession context. Experts should independently rate each candidate item's relevance, clarity, representativeness of the assigned dimension, and dimensional fit. Item-level and scale-level content-validity indices can be calculated alongside qualitative comments, with low-performing or ambiguously placed items revised rather than retained solely for conceptual symmetry (Polit et al., 2007).

Content assessment should be followed by cognitive interviews with skilled workers who resemble intended respondents. Interviewing should probe how participants understand key phrases such as 'formed a plan', 'started finding out', 'approximate timeframe', and 'within my control', and whether they can distinguish planning from preparation and preparation from perceived control. Cognitive interviewing is particularly useful for identifying hidden ambiguity, retrieval difficulty, and unintended interpretations before large-sample testing (Willis, 2005).

Exploratory dimensional assessment

A first independent development sample should then be used to examine the empirical structure of the candidate items. Exploratory factor analysis should evaluate whether the three items proposed for each dimension cluster coherently and whether unexpected cross-loadings appear. Particular attention should be given to the conceptual boundaries identified in the conceptual analysis above: Plan versus Preparation, and Preparation versus Perceived Migration Control. If items repeatedly cross-load or dimensions cannot be distinguished adequately, wording, item allocation, or the dimensional architecture should be revised rather than preserved because of the original conceptual proposal (Boateng et al., 2018).

Confirmatory validation, reliability, and construct validity

A separate validation sample should subsequently be used to test the proposed structure through confirmatory factor analysis. The correlated five-dimension model should be evaluated against plausible alternatives rather than treated as the only admissible structure. This stage should determine whether Timing behaves as a distinct latent dimension or is better represented as a contextual temporal characteristic, and whether the remaining dimensions retain adequate distinctiveness. Internal consistency, convergent evidence, and discriminant evidence should be examined at the dimension level. Criterion-related evidence should include relationships with established migration-intention questions, while predictive evidence should assess links with more proximal migration-related actions.

The discriminant status of Perceived Migration Control requires specific attention. PMC should be compared empirically with established measures of general locus of control, self-efficacy, and perceived behavioural control because conceptual proximity is expected even though the proposed construct is migration-specific (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1997; Rotter, 1966). This stage should also determine whether the five dimensions justify any higher-level aggregation. Until such evidence exists, an overall IMI composite score should remain optional and unreported rather than being assumed from the conceptual model.

Cross-group measurement invariance

Cross-group testing is essential because skilled workers differ in the international portability of qualifications and in the constraints attached to mobility. Kulka et al. (2025) show that perceived international applicability of education varies across fields and is associated with migration aspirations and intentions. Future studies should therefore test measurement invariance across occupations, countries, career stages, gender, and regulated versus non-regulated professions. Appropriate invariance procedures should establish whether the same construct meaning and measurement parameters can reasonably be assumed before substantive group comparisons are made (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016).

Longitudinal and predictive validation

Finally, longitudinal validation should determine whether the five dimensions predict subsequent migration-related behaviour differently. Existing evidence supports the general predictive value of stated migration

intentions (Tjaden et al., 2019; van Dalen & Henkens, 2013), but the five-dimensional approach permits a more specific test: whether Plan, Preparation, Timing, and Perceived Migration Control add predictive information beyond Desire alone. Follow-up outcomes could include intensified information seeking, overseas job applications, professional-registration or licensing activity, visa-related steps, and actual international migration. Longitudinal evidence would provide the strongest basis for judging the practical value of the proposed profile measure.

Limitations of the current conceptual proposal

The principal limitation of the present paper is that IMI-5D is conceptually derived and has not yet been empirically tested. No statistical evidence currently demonstrates that the 15 candidate items reproduce the proposed five-dimensional structure, that the dimensions are sufficiently distinct, that Timing functions as a psychometric dimension rather than a contextual characteristic, that Perceived Migration Control is empirically distinguishable from adjacent control-related constructs, or that any particular response format is optimal. The paper also does not establish that the five dimensions can or should be combined into a single overall IMI score. Consequently, the dimensions and items should be regarded as candidate content domains and indicators for validation rather than as an established psychometric scale. These limitations define the empirical programme required to evaluate, refine, or if necessary revise the proposed architecture.

Theoretical And Practical Implications

Theoretically, the proposed measurement contributes by treating IMI as a structured pre-migration orientation rather than a single undifferentiated mental state. It brings together strands of migration scholarship that distinguish aspiration from planning, preparation from desire, temporal horizons from general preference, and agency from wanting. The five-dimensional approach is consistent with the aspirations-capabilities perspective because it recognises that wanting to migrate and being able to pursue migration are not the same (Carling & Schewel, 2018; de Haas, 2021). It is also consistent with migration decision-making research that emphasises timing and control under uncertainty (Czaika et al., 2021).

Methodologically, IMI-5D provides a concise but more differentiated candidate instrument for studies in which international migration intention is a focal construct. The 15 items create room for three indicators per proposed dimension while remaining short enough for organisational and professional surveys. At the current conceptual stage, its principal value lies in generating interpretable dimension profiles rather than a single composite score. If the proposed structure is supported through staged validation, the measure could support more transparent comparison across occupations and countries and reduce the tendency to interpret desire, planning, preparation, timing, and perceived control as equivalent forms of intention.

Practically, the dimensions can help policymakers and human-resource managers interpret workforce mobility more carefully. High migration desire may indicate attractive overseas alternatives or dissatisfaction with current opportunities, but it does not necessarily indicate imminent attrition. A profile characterised by preparation, a defined timing horizon, and stronger perceived migration control would represent a different form of prospective mobility from desire alone. Such distinctions could support earlier and more proportionate retention responses, provided that intention data are used ethically to understand workforce patterns and improve employment conditions rather than to penalise individuals for considering international opportunities. These practical interpretations remain provisional until the dimensional and predictive validity of IMI-5D is established empirically.

CONCLUSION

International migration intention should not be reduced automatically to a single question about whether someone wants to work abroad. Prospective mobility can involve a general preference, a formulated plan, initial preparation, an identifiable timing horizon, and a belief that migration is manageable. This paper integrates these distinctions into a five-dimensional conceptualisation of IMI among skilled workers and proposes a 15-item IMI-5D measure covering desire, plan, preparation, timing, and perceived migration control. At this stage, IMI-5D is best understood as a theoretically derived multidimensional profile measure,

not as a validated scale or an established composite index. The contribution lies in making the components of migration intention explicit without claiming that they form a fixed sequence, that every component necessarily functions as a reflective latent dimension, or that all five should automatically be aggregated. The proposed items should now be evaluated through expert content assessment, cognitive interviewing, exploratory and confirmatory dimensional testing, reliability and validity assessment, cross-group invariance testing, and longitudinal prediction of migration-related behaviour. If supported, IMI-5D can provide a clearer and more comparable way to examine not only whether skilled workers intend to migrate, but how that intention is expressed and developed before migration occurs.

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