

Teräs, M., Osman, A., & Eliasson, E. (2020). Challenges of skilled refugees' access to their prior vocation in Sweden. In C. Nägele, B. E. Stalder, & N. Kersh (Eds.), *Trends in vocational education and training research, Vol. III. Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)* (pp. 292–300). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4007966>

Challenges of Skilled Refugees' Access to Their Prior Vocation in Sweden

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Abstract

The position of refugees at different levels in the labour market has become the subject of heated academic and political debate in Sweden as well as in other EU countries. The debate generally revolves around factors that affect the macro level structure such as employment of refugees and their descendants, economic costs and the benefits of migration and integration. The position of underrepresented groups in the labour market is explained as a consequence of either discrimination or lack of relevant social capital, language skills, job search strategies and job skills, to name a few. This paper has two parts. First, we introduce the project, Integration and inclusion of migrants in and through their vocation and work. Then we explore literature and identify factors that can promote or hinder skilled refugees' access to their original vocation in Sweden. The systematic review points to several factors as central, such as networks, language and knowledge of cultural practices.

Keywords

skilled migrants; vocation; integration; access to vocation

1 Introduction to the project, Integration and inclusion of migrants in and through their vocation and work

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to introduce the theoretical background and the rationale of the project, and second, to present the status of research *vis a vis* factors that facilitate or impede refugees' access to their vocations in Sweden. The paper is structured accordingly — we will first briefly describe the project, then describe the Swedish research in the area and finally, discuss this research in relation to relevant international research.

The position of refugees in the Swedish labour market has been, and still is, a subject of academic and political debate. Sweden is not unique. This debate is on-going in all EU member states and beyond the borders of the EU member states. In addition, there is a common theme in this debate: refugees are depicted as unable or are marginalised in the labour market (e.g., Dahlstedt, 2011; Joyce, 2015; Petersson, 2014). However, there is an increasing number of refugees who have accessed their prior vocations in Sweden. This category of refugees is not



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the focus of the debate; rather, research and political debate tend to focus on those who have difficulties accessing the Swedish labour market. Our project focuses on “successful refugees”. That is, refugees who have re-entered their vocations in Sweden, and the pertinent question is: what have they done differently to access their vocations when many with similar backgrounds (education and training) have failed? The objective of the research project is, hence, to identify mechanisms that can contribute to the integration of skilled refugees into their vocations in Sweden. By skilled refugees we mean people who are not labour-market migrants and who have vocational skills from their countries of origin. We are interested in the perspectives of refugees and of their employers.

1.1 Community of practice and integration as conceptual resources

The theoretical framework of the project is grounded in the socio-cultural perspective, according to which we mediate the world through language, artefacts and practices. Vocational knowledge is considered embedded in vocational communities of practice. By vocational practices, we mean interaction and communication at the workplace as well as the local rules, norms, tools and technology used in a vocation. “Community of practice” is Lave and Wenger’s (1991, p. 98) concept, “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world that “is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge”. Here, the community of practice refers to the relations, knowledge and activity of a vocation in a workplace. Participation in a community of practice is consequently a process of becoming and being an accepted member of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). “Becoming” is a process of accessing, while “being” is a process of achieving a legitimate participant status. In both processes, it is about acquisition of different types of cultural skills and competences as well as acceptance from the community of practice. To understand the processes of becoming and being a legitimate participant in a community of practice, we adopt a socio-cultural perspective that departs from the notion that we interpret and describe the world in different ways and exchange experiences (Säljö, 2015).

It is important to stress that “legitimate peripheral participation”, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), is a position an individual occupies when they are a novice in the vocation in relation to “old-timers”, who are considered experts. The majority of refugees, irrespective of their experience, are at the periphery of their communities of practice when they arrive in Sweden. When the individual finds employment, the appropriation process of becoming and being starts — learning cultural tools, vocational language, artefacts and local rules (Säljö, 2015). In this process, skilled migrants’ participation in vocational practices, including professional communication, is important for learning. The use of vocational knowledge both acknowledges and legitimises a vocation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The concept of community of practice and the ideas it presents has its critics; for example, Cairns (2011) stated that the concept does not fit well with the realities of modern workplaces where participating in and learning practices is insufficient — one also needs to cross the boundaries of different practices and transform practices. Refugees’ struggles are about crossing boundaries and integrating the knowledge and skills acquired outside Sweden into the different communities of practice in Sweden.

The concept of integration has been debated over the years. Some define it narrowly, to mean that migrants must conform to the norms and values of the dominant societal majority. This view has been sharply criticised by Penninx and Garcés-Mascarena (2016). They argue for a broader definition of integration, in which migrants are engaged in multiple fields or systems. Penninx and Garcés-Mascarena define integration as an open, non-normative “process of becoming an accepted part of society” (2016, p. 14). Accordingly, in this study, we perceive integration as participation in the different life domains of the host society, focusing on the integration of migrants into their vocations in the Swedish labour market.

The research design is a comparative case study and data collection methods include interviews with refugees and employers and observations at workplaces. The study focuses specifically on three vocational areas: the health care sector, the construction sector, and the food sector.

There is critical research on the participation of refugees in the Swedish labour market, as the literature review below will point out. These studies can be reduced to the following themes: a) finding employment or not; b) factors that facilitate or impede refugees' access to their vocations; c) measures to promote access to employment and d) employers' perspectives. It is important to point out that there is a conceptual confusion in the use of the notion "immigrant". In Sweden, anybody who has moved to Sweden from another country, whether they came to Sweden as a labour immigrant, a refugee or as an asylum seeker, are regarded immigrants. In this short paper, we use the notion a refugee because we focus on people who have entered Sweden as refugees or asylum seekers in 2000-2020 and who have been awarded permanent residency. In addition, we use the notion of a migrant to highlight the broader phenomenon of migration.

1.2 The general employment status of refugees

There are many studies that show that the employment rate among foreign-born people in Sweden varies among people from different countries (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2005; Osman & Andersson, 2011; Petersson, 2014; Schierup et al., 2006). Refugees from Latin America and migrants from the EU have approximately the same employment rate as native-born people. Individuals from Asia and Africa on the other hand, have lower employment rates than the native-born Swedes, while individuals from the rest of Europe are somewhere in the middle. For example, refugees from the former Yugoslavia, after ten years in the country, show a significantly higher rate of employment than refugees from Somalia (Petersson, 2014). In addition, this pattern is constant even for those people who have lived in Sweden for years. In other words, for some refugees, the country of one's birth is an important factor in getting a job. Furthermore, employed refugees are often appointed to positions below that which their qualifications should reasonably entitle them to (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Andersson & Osman, 2008; Bengtsson & Mickwitz, 2019). There are various explanations for this.

One explanation is the refugees' lack of relevant networks. A study by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ, 2019) showed that foreign-born people's lack of social networks constrained their ability to find work on par with their educational level. This lack of relevant networks is essential and can be partly a consequence of the fact that refugees have a shorter history in the Swedish labour market than a person born in Sweden (e.g., Joyce, 2015; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2005; Osman, 2012; Vesterberg, 2015).

Another common explanation identifies the sociocultural dimensions of vocation and skills — in other words, the difficulties transferring refugees' skills into a new context — as an obstacle to employment. This is particularly critical for non-European refugees who have acquired their skills, qualifications and competences in developing countries. Potential employers treat the qualifications of this category of jobseekers as irrelevant or inferior to local or EU qualifications and experiences (Andersson & Osman, 2008).

Finally, discrimination and racism have been identified as a major obstacle for non-European refugees. Butorac (2014) stressed intersectional factors — besides language, gender and race, Johansson and Sliwa (2016) examined gender, class and nationality. In other words, previous studies have focused on different types of deficits. These deficits, or a combination of these deficits, such as language, poor networks and discrimination, are said to lead to different types of social ills such as residential segregation of migrants and their descendants and the ethnification of certain niches in the labour market (Andersson & Osman, 2008).

We now shift to the literature review to see what facilitates or impedes the access of refugees to their vocations. We will limit our findings and exclude, for example, European citizens' migration to Sweden.

2 Measures to facilitate or impede refugees' access to their vocation

In collecting relevant literature, we used databases such as ERIC, Scopus, EBSCO and Science Direct. We employed the following search terms (the frequency of resulting hits is shown in parenthesis): migrant*¹ labor market integration Swed* (168); Skill* migrant* labor market integration Swed* (15); migrant* validation Sweden (23); migrant* fast track Sweden (3); migrant* labor market measures Sweden (23). These search terms were located in "key words"; articles were published between 2000 and 2020 and were peer reviewed. In addition, we did several manual searches based on relevance for the review. The research team read 232 article abstracts and removed duplicates. In the final selection, we included 37 articles based on the relevance of the review question: "What factors facilitate or impede refugees' access to their vocations in Sweden?"

Generally, it takes about five to seven years for refugees to establish themselves in the Swedish labour market (e.g., Joyce, 2015). To facilitate and reduce this time, Sweden has implemented several programmes such as the establishment programme, various introduction programmes and the Fast Track programme. The aim of the Fast Track programme is to help newly arrived skilled migrants to enter the labour market faster (Vågen et al., 2019). Thus, the programme contributes both to matching employers' labour needs and to faster access for refugees to their prior vocations. A limitation of the programme is that it targets only those vocations and sectors where there is a shortage of employees. In the evaluation of the Fast Track programme by the Swedish Public Employment Service (Vågen et al., 2019), which also hosts the programme, statistics showed that about 50% of programme participants were employed 19-21 months after the start of the programme. The rate was lower (40%) in higher-level professions where a license was required such as medical doctors. An underlying assumption beyond the programme was that the cooperation between the Employment Service, the labour market, authorities and educational organisers nationally, thus facilitating continuous dialogue between the different sections of the labour market, was key to success (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2017; Vågen et al., 2019).

Validation is an important measure in all national programmes such as Fast Track. Andersson and Fejes (2010) raised the question of transferring knowledge and skills between different contexts. Diedrich (2014) stressed that migrants' prior skills were difficult to categorise into a stable, standardised occupational classification system and that the validation process was arbitrary and inflexible. He called for a more open assessment that could capture the heterogeneity among skilled migrants. The Fast Track evaluation also called for clarification of the process of matching people and vocations (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2017). Participants in a study by Rodin et al. (2017) perceived another obstacle in the validation process to be the complexity and lengthy administrative procedures, also described by Bucken-Knapp et al. (2019). They pointed out that Fast Track participants with academic backgrounds said that their failure to access their former professions gave them a feeling of loss. Rodin et al. (2017) stated that skilled refugees were a group with cultural capital advantage but seemed to struggle with how to operationalise it in their new context.

2.1 Language skills and cultural competence

In the evaluation of Fast Track, one of the challenges mentioned was the migrants' weak language proficiency despite the activities to strengthen skills in the Swedish language (Vågen et

¹ * means that it included different forms of search words

al., 2019). Rodin et al. (2017), who interviewed participants in the Fast Track programme, claimed that despite their appreciation for language training, the migrants perceived the training to be insufficiently linked to vocation-specific language. Bucken-Knapp et al. (2019) explored how Syrian refugees experienced the Swedish introduction programme, their findings suggesting that the migrants, mostly the well-educated, were critical of the quality of language lessons. The lack of teacher-driven lessons, mixed groups, lots of self-study and arbitrary assessment of participants' language skills were criticised. A study by Andersson and Fejes (2010) that looked at validation of vocational competence produced similar findings about migrants' experiences of arbitrary assessment. Migrants claimed that validators of vocational competence had various arbitrary assumptions about the language level needed for employment, something that affected their assessment (Osman & Andersson, 2011). However, the importance of mastering a vocational language was an opinion shared among the validators interviewed by the researchers. Andersson and Fejes (2010) said that migrants who lacked the terms and concepts of the vocational language risked having their competence remain invisible.

Another important aspect is cultural competence. Teaching participants about Swedish society is integral to many introduction programmes and is something that has the potential to gradually change participants' values. For example, findings from a questionnaire survey conducted with participants in the Fast Track programme for teachers in Sweden, suggested a significant development towards more participation-oriented beliefs about learning (Economou & Hajer, 2019). The opportunity to learn cultural competence was identified as an outcome of vocational practice (Rodin et al., 2017). Besides cultural competence and lack of language skills, familiarity with the context was stressed as an explanation for the lower employment rate among refugees (Dehghanpour Farashah & Blomquist, 2020).

2.2 Employers' perspectives

There are significant differences among firms that recruit non-Western refugees, as Daunfeldt et al. (2019) found in their study of Swedish labour market statistics. According to their results, companies in service sectors such as hospitality, transport, and healthcare are much more likely to hire unemployed non-Western migrants than companies in high-tech and manufacturing industries. Furthermore, firms with non-Western managers recruit more than four times as many unemployed non-Western migrants than firms that have no managers with non-Western origins. The researchers explained this by highlighting the importance of social networks or that employers prefer hiring individuals who are demographically similar to themselves (Osman & Thunborg, 2019).

3 Discussion

Several different ways are used to explain poor participation or the difficulties refugees face when accessing their prior vocations in Sweden. The deficit model is typical, and implies that refugees have weak language skills, and lack the relevant cultural capital, networks and cultural competence. Many international studies support findings that weak language skills limit the employment prospects of refugees. For instance, researchers in sociolinguistics have stressed the importance of migrants' linguistic proficiency, and that the degree of language proficiency can either widen or limit migrants' employment opportunities (Johansson & Śliwa, 2016; Musgrave & Bradshaw, 2014). But they also pointed out that language proficiency in the host community does not automatically lead to social inclusion (Johansson & Śliwa, 2016; Piller, 2014). There are also studies suggesting that the focus on migrants' language deficiencies can itself create a feeling of exclusion (Butorac, 2014; Major et al., 2014; Piller & Takahashi, 2011). Roberts' (2013) study showed that a lower employment rate among migrants could be the consequence of a lack, not only of language knowledge, but also cultural skills and familiarity with the context. An Australian study by Major et al. (2014), especially relevant for this study,

highlighted the central role language plays in the social inclusion and exclusion of migrants in workplaces. For example, both self-imposed exclusion due to lack of confidence in using English and active marginalisation by colleagues and customers were identified as critical factors in the work context. In line with our study, the researchers emphasise that social inclusion is not solely about getting a job, it is also about feelings of connectedness, acceptance and opportunities for development and advancement in working life. In this respect, interpersonal relationships at the workplace play a crucial role and language learning and social inclusion are dialectically related (Major, et al., 2014; Piller, 2014).

Unlike the studies focusing on deficits, Ganassin and Johnstone Young (2020) focused on success factors in a British study of skilled refugees who had re-entered their prior vocations. Many of the factors they describe were found in the Swedish research too, like language proficiency and cultural competence, but the researchers also stressed the importance of individual motivation and resilience, and the ability to build social and professional networks. Ganassin and Johnstone Young (2020) use the concept of intercultural communication and interaction, meaning that factors contributing to migrants' successful access to their prior professions were, for example, curiosity and openness to another culture and an ability to interpret and evaluate other perspectives and practices.

An important aspect is the employers' view. Dehghanpour Farashah and Blomquist's (2020) findings suggested that migrants' employment and career outcomes were not merely influenced by their human capital and qualifications but also by employers' values and cultural expectations. The researchers concluded that for the managers, migrants' commitment to the host country's way of life was more important than their job skills, educational level and language proficiency. This indicates that socio-cultural competences are important for employment. For an individual, the ability to interpret and evaluate perspectives and practices in a workplace and act on the basis of this knowledge can be a real door-opener. This is in line with the concept of intercultural communication (Ganassin & Johnstone Young, 2020) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of becoming part of a community of practice. But talk of adaptation can lead to the assumption that migrants are forced to abandon their cultures and traditions to fit in and gain employment in their new societies. To avoid such a conclusion, one need only compare migrants with anyone entering new employment, where the keys to success are the same as mentioned above: observe, interpret and act accordingly. According to Daunfeldt et al. (2019), when firms already have non-European employees, they are more likely to hire non-European persons, which makes the entrance of the first employees even more important. If they are accepted as participants in the community of practice, they can function as door-openers for others and contribute to the development of a more inclusive workplace.

When we compare the Swedish with international studies it is apparent that, regardless of context, studies identify similar factors that impede the access of refugees to the work sectors in which the RDIy have prior competence. Factors that make it more difficult to gain employment in a prior vocation are lack of competences, difficulties with transferring vocations and vocational knowledge between different societies, difficulties with matching, difficulties with validation process and long administrative processes. Some studies highlight criticism of language training.

These impeding factors can be turned around and highlighted as promoting factors. Good language skills, socio-cultural competence, networks in the new context and resilience may facilitate access to employment, despite a jobseeker having lower qualifications. Furthermore, quality in language training and validation processes as well as co-operation between different agencies, such as employment services, education organisers and employers may benefit migrants' access to their vocations. Thus, accessing one's previous vocation is a complex interplay between the individual, the collective and societal processes. In the coming study, we will examine both those factors which impede and those factors which facilitate the successful

inclusion of refugees in the professions that suit their prior knowledges, experiences and competences.

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Acknowledgments

This paper is part of a larger project called "Integration and Inclusion of Migrants in and Through Vocation and Work" funded by The Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE) Grant 2019-00832.