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Challenges Skilled Migrants Face in Accessing Their Previous Vocation in a New Country¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this short paper is to introduce factors that can facilitate or hinder skilled migrants' access to their previous vocation. The approach employed was based on the literature review and some preliminary interviews with the skilled migrants. The results indicate that the factors are located on different levels; there are individual, organisational and societal factors, which interplay with each other. In addition, the factors have dual nature, and they can both facilitate and/or hinder access to vocations. Interviewees have experienced several pathways to their vocation and the labour market in Sweden. Some have chosen another vocation, and some have continued their studies to become vocational teachers in their area. To face challenges and to support skilled migrants' access to their previous vocation and the labour market, actions are needed on different levels.

Keywords

migration, integration, access to vocation

1 Introduction

Integration and inclusion of migrants is a priority for many EU countries. A new action plan on integration and inclusion by the European Commission puts additional emphasis on inclusion for all through targeted and tailored support, enhancing migrant participation and on a long-term integration, to name a few. The main actions include, among other things, improvement of employment opportunities and skills recognition (European Commission, 2020). This is particularly important in relation to re-entering one's previous vocation in the new country.

Sweden has received a large number of asylum seekers in the last five years. During the period 2016 to 2019, almost 206,000 people were received by the municipalities, in other words they received a permanent residence (Statistics Sweden, 2020). Sweden's objective is to mitigate the marginalisation of refugees and to proactively counteract social problems like segregation, unemployment and inequality between refugees and their hosts (Government, 2018).

¹ Part of this paper was published in Eliasson et al., (2020).



To facilitate skilled migrants' access to their previous vocation Sweden has implemented several platforms such as the establishment programme, various introduction programmes and the Fast Track programme (which specifically facilitates skilled migrants' access to their previous vocation). By skilled migrants we refer to people with vocational training or experience from their countries of origins. The aim of this short paper is to introduce factors that can facilitate or hinder skilled migrants' access to their previous vocation in their new country. We ask: What are the hindering or facilitating factors for skilled migrants to re-enter their vocation? The analysis is based on previous literature; in addition, we have some preliminary observations from interviews with skilled migrants.

Hindering and facilitating factors to re-enter a vocation. According to our literature review (Eliasson et al., 2020), there are several intertwined factors, which can facilitate and/or hinder skilled migrants' access to their previous vocation. In addition, these factors has a dual nature and they interplay on different levels. In other words, the same factor can both facilitate and/or hinder migrants' re-entering their previous vocation, and these factors interplay with each other on micro, meso and macro levels.

For example, a language skill is a frequent named factor in different studies. A good language skill may facilitate one's access to a vocation, and a weak language skill may hinder it. On the micro level, an individual can have a good or a weak language skill. On the meso level, an organisation can also facilitate or hinder one's access to language used in the organisation. In other words, organisations develop their social languages, for example, the vocational language of the occupation. Depending on, for example, explicit language policy of the organisation or implicit use of different languages in the organisation, migrants may experience inclusion or exclusion in their community of practice. On the macro level, societies may have different language policies and may offer various trainings and establishment programs, such as vocation-oriented language courses, to promote migrants' access to their previous vocation. Other factors, beside the language skill, we identified in the review, are shown in the Table 1.

Some of the factors the society offers were directed to all job seekers, not just migrants such as job coaching and job tax reduction. Recognition and validation of previous competences are vital measures to support skilled migrants' access to their vocation. But it is not simple, Diedrich's (2014) study suggested that migrants' prior skills were difficult to place into the existing stable, standardised occupation classification system and that the validation process was arbitrary and inflexible. For vocational education and training it is notable to remember that vocational practices can help migrants to learn cultural competences needed in occupations. Rodin et al. (2017) brought out how the opportunity to learn cultural competence was identified as an outcome of vocational practice. In addition, employers' perspective plays a central role in accessing to the labour market. Daunfeldt et al. (2019) found in their study that companies in service sectors were much more likely to hire unemployed non-Western migrants than companies in high-tech and manufacturing industries. Their results also suggested that if the company already had a non-Western manager it also recruited more unemployed non-Western migrants than other companies did.

2 Several Pathways

We have interviewed, thus far, 15 migrants, and we are still collecting interview material, and the analysis is in progress. The interviewees came from different countries such as Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Thailand, Armenia and Chad, but also from European countries as Lithuania and Croatia. They represented different occupational areas, e.g., health care, construction, childcare and restaurant sectors. Already now, we can see from the interviews that the factors, which were identified in the literature review, were similar to those the interviewees named. They spoke about the Swedish language skill and emphasised its importance. They had had teachers, managers, other migrants and relatives who had supported their pathway to education or to the

labour market. Some had started their working already while participating in language courses. Recognition and validation of previous competences were important. All had participated in some form of language trainings, mostly so called SFI (Swedish for migrants).

An interesting observation was that there were several ‘successful’ pathways to previous vocation and to the labour market. After validation, some had obtained access to their previous vocation directly (nurses). Some had decided to change their vocation (a chef). Some had started to work in their field but on a lower level than in their previous country (as assistant nurses) and some had continued their studies in their field to become vocational teachers. What seems to be common to the interviewees was that they did not give up when confronting obstacles and that most of them had social support from people around them. In addition, the society had offered them various opportunities to make it possible to settle in Sweden and to continue their working life.

Table 1
Hindering or facilitating factors

Factor	Level
Language skills	Individual
Cultural/intercultural competence	
Education/skills needed in occupation	
Motivation/willingness to restart	
Career	
Resilience	
Proactive approach/reconciliation	
Social/professional networks	
Commitment to the host country's way of life	
(Professional) identity/status	
Health issues	
Emotions (shock with the new, loss of control, hope)	
Employers values/cultural expectations	Organisation
Recruiting practices	
Mentoring	
Migrants as managers	
Cultural proximity	
Legislation and integration/inclusion policies	Society
Economic support	
Validation	
Imposed identities ('unemployed refugee' 'benefit scroungers')	
Language training	
Start-up jobs	
Job coaching	
Job tax reduction	
Establishment programme	
Possibility for entrepreneurship	
Internship programme	

Note. The factors in the table are not presented in any specific order.

3 Discussion

In this short paper, we have introduced factors, which can facilitate and/or hinder skilled migrants' access to their previous vocation based on a literature review. Furthermore, we have presented some interesting observations from the on-going interviews with skilled migrants, when they were elaborating their vocational pathway and the labour market in Sweden. It seems that challenges migrants face in integrating and re-entering one's previous vocation is an interplay between individual, organisational and societal factors. For example, the individual needs

incentive to look for various opportunities in the new environment. Social support from the nearest ones or from teachers can open up doors to the next training or to the next job. An organisation can support migrants by offering mentoring at workplaces and the society by offering financial support during language and introduction trainings for newcomers. Actors working with skilled migrants need to be aware of these challenges and factors and that actions are needed on different levels.

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