

SUM MAR IES!

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW TALENT IN TOWN: HIGHLY-SKILLED MIGRANTS IN HELSINKI

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The Emergence of New Talent in Town: Highly-Skilled Migrants in Helsinki

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- **“Highly-skilled migrant” is an ambivalent concept**, which requires country-specific and contextual definition, so that academic and policy-level research can offer a more rigorous analysis which will have real-life transformative impact.
- **Highly-skilled migrants are ‘invisible’ in research**, policies and in their cities. In the Finnish context, more empirical research is needed. Moreover, knowledge transfer is necessary between researchers and policy-makers in order to improve the lives and rights of this specific migrant group which is an asset for Finland.
- Future studies can focus on following themes:
 1. **Macro-level:** structural factors and challenges (e.g. visa regimes, residence rights, housing) as well as push-pull factors affecting the highly-skilled migrants’ decisions and life satisfaction.
 2. **Meso-level:** socio-economic links, networks and the role of institutions and labour market dynamics for integration. Furthermore, to what extent these individuals feel that they have access to support in Finland and in their home countries can be explored in parallel to their trans-local and transnational activities.
 - 3.
 4. **Micro-level:** the importance of the place – how do urban and rural contexts make a difference, what kind of neighbourhood environments are preferred, how do the living conditions influence the overall wellbeing of the highly-skilled migrants? In additions, issues related to identity (personal versus collective), home and belonging can be studied in relation to the processes of integration and living with diversity.

Who are the Highly-Skilled Migrants?

The migration studies literature refers to highly-skilled migration as the flow of foreign workers sharing specific characteristics, and who, therefore, qualify for a country-specific visa category (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020: 10). However, **‘highly-skilled migrant’ is an ambivalent and problematic concept**. Firstly because, there is no agreement upon what the concept entails. Secondly, the definition depends on who is using it. For instance, a policymaker, an economist and a sociologist may set different boundaries for the concept.

Scholars broadly define highly-skilled migrants as individuals who possess tertiary degree or extensive specialised work experience (Iredale, 2001). However, ‘highly-skilled’ does not have to refer to formal education qualification. ‘Skill’ can also involve the ability to solve certain tasks regardless of whether those abilities were acquired vocationally or by more formal educational means (Brown & Tannock, 2009).

There are several terms associated with highly-skilled migrants: in non-academic texts particularly, they are labelled as **“expatriates”** or **“expats”**. These are preferred by the migrants themselves especially when they are from the West (Koskela, 2010). When terms such as **“internationals”**, **“global nomads”**, and **“professional transients”** are used, they often aim highlighting the migrants’ identification with a global cosmopolitan culture. In a nutshell, these conceptualisations call attention to highly-skilled migrants’ free-spirited nature and motivation to follow employment opportunities around the globe (Engbersen et al., 2013). **“Transmigrants”** and **“transnational elites”** denote that they are able to “cross cultural boundaries and build multiple or hybrid identities” (Castles, 2002: 1158).

Why are Highly-Skilled Migrants “Invisible”?

Highly-skilled migrants are ‘invisible’ for three main reasons. **Firstly**, it is difficult to calculate highly-skilled migrants from statistical data because they cannot be identified by gender, age, nationality, language or religion. Only if registered, educational and employment status may give an idea, together with the visa type, but it would not be definitive. Some of these individuals have employment contracts that keep them in several countries, hence they may not be registered as a resident in the country they work. In addition, those who later obtain citizenship in the host country will go unnoticed in the national statistics.

Secondly, even though macro-level research and debates focus on highly-skilled migrants, these mostly prioritise the countries’ perspective. Hence, it is more about the influence and benefits of having highly-skilled migrants rather than their migratory experiences, socio-cultural challenges and needs. For so long, the research on highly-skilled migration has been dominated by the economic aspects of the “brain drain”/“brain gain” debate (Stark et al., 1997). Increasingly, more recent discussions consider the possibility of “brain circulation” and “brain exchange” facilitated by globalised labour markets and the highly-skilled migrants’ transnational activities (Lowell et al., 2004; Williams & Baláž, 2005).

Thirdly, they often remain “invisible” because they are thought to be adaptive to their new habitats. Countries recognise them as an “acceptable” segment of modern migration systems due to their human and transcultural capital as well their creative potential (Raghuram, 2000). In other words, they are considered to be free from pressures to integrate. It is assumed, they can “exist ‘outside’ of society” or “escape the coercion of a sociological process” (Favel et al., 2007: 21). Indeed, their repertoire of skills, education and expertise may give them a relatively privileged position compared to other migrant groups. However, for the very same reason, they can lack support both from their home and host countries.

Key Areas for Further Research

Based on the research on international highly-skilled migration, the following areas can be said to be gaining more attention and require further research:

1. Non-economic factors and integration

Recent research suggests that non-employment factors connected to family, social and private domains of life contribute to attracting and retaining highly-skilled migrants in particular localities (Leinonen, 2012; Ryan & Mulholland, 2014). Moreover, **migration & mobility based on skill and talent does not remove the challenges for the highly-skilled migrants**. They may still face difficulties in learning the host country's language(s), adapting to its sociocultural norms and building personal contacts outside of work-related environments (Povrzanović Frykman & Mozetič, 2020). Studies show that economic and psychological adaptation are intertwined, and migrants' overall wellbeing influences their integration and acculturation processes in the host countries (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Yijälä & Luoma, 2019).

Hence, **integration needs to be understood and studied as a reciprocal process where both parties – migrants and the host countries – adapt to the new social realities brought by migration itself**. More research is needed on to what extent highly-skilled migrants are being allowed to participate in the important domains of their host societies (e.g. educational and political system, labour and housing markets) and to feel accepted as part of that society (Alba & Foner, 2015). The empirical and statistical findings from Steinmann (2019) and Helbling et al. (2020) demonstrate, it is difficult even for highly-skilled migrants to integrate when it comes to the transfer of skills from one country to another, when they lack the required social and cultural capital, or when they encounter discrimination.

“Migration & mobility based on skill and talent does not remove the challenges for the highly-skilled migrants”

2. Place and local-local relations

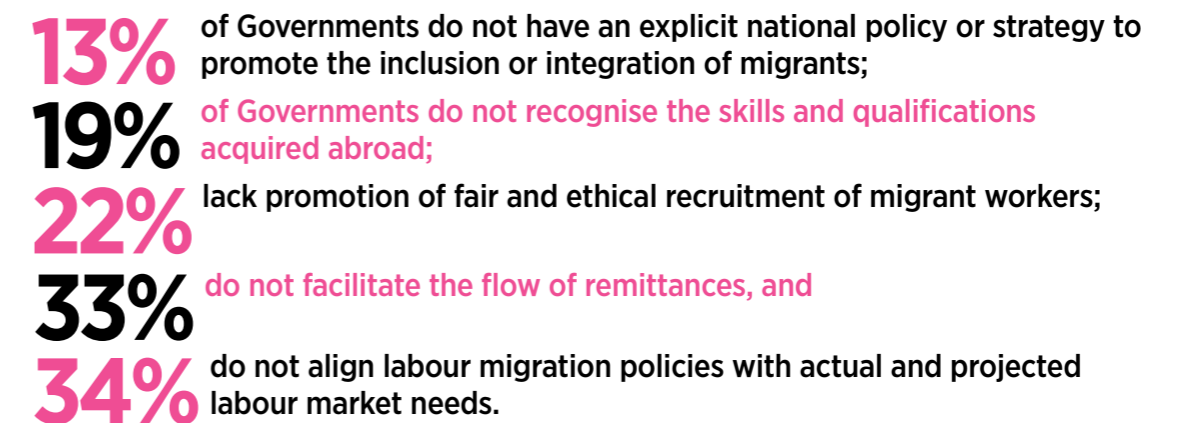
Empirical studies increasingly focus on how particular places make a difference for migrants with their geographical, infrastructural, historical and contemporary socio-economic features (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011). When migrants think and feel that their skills, personal histories, social networks and lifestyles correspond with the settlement place's culture, qualities, structures and opportunities, they are likely to develop an intimate feeling of being 'at home', i.e. "place belongingness" (Antonsich, 2010). Thus, it is important to **focus on the specific contexts of places in analysing highly-skilled migrants' lives because they do not settle in a country per se**; their everyday life experiences are situated in certain localities (Forsander, 2004).

Moreover, they also come from certain places in their home countries which have specific characteristics that give them distinct, subjective positions. This requires a local-local understanding of migrants' experiences; their transnational ties, activities and belonging are grounded in particular locales, thus it is vital to embrace "translocality" to develop an agency-oriented approach and address migrants' "simultaneous situatedness across different localities" (Brickell & Datta, 2011: 4).

3. Connecting research and policy

Governments typically consider both education and occupation in the way they define 'highly-skilled migrants'. Often, the definition of 'highly skilled' requires an educational component (a minimum degree requirement of a baccalaureate) and a threshold defining minimum competence in a knowledge society (Lowell & Findlay, 2001). Governments also list occupations for certain visa types; occupation is important because it naturally eliminates workers with low education, and it also targets skills that are desired (McLaughlan & Salt, 2002).

However, **when immigration policies employ narrow definitions, they may disregard the “creative class” or “creative talent”** such as artists, architects and writers (Florida, 2004). Here, it is important to acknowledge that alternative definitions will tap into different dimensions of highly skilled work. Moreover, it will raise the critical question of, what is important in today's knowledge-based society – education, skills, or creativity? The answer would likely vary, based on each country's needs and goals.



An estimated 28 million highly-skilled migrants (an increase of nearly 130% since 1990) reside in OECD countries, 70 per cent living in the USA, UK, Canada and Australia (Pekkala Kerr et al., 2016). Majority of countries recognise the mentioned positive impact of the highly-skilled migration, nevertheless the UN Migration Report (2019) reveals that, globally, 13 per cent of Governments do not have an explicit national policy or strategy to promote the inclusion or integration of migrants; 19 per cent of Governments do not recognise the skills and qualifications acquired abroad; 22 per cent lack promotion of fair and ethical recruitment of migrant workers; 33 per cent do not facilitate the flow of remittances, and 34 per cent do not align labour migration policies with actual and projected labour market needs. Hence, implementing policies which promote the socioeconomic wellbeing of migrants are essential for maximising the positive development impact of migration (UN Migration Report, 2019).

Moreover, **detailed research is needed to analyse the effects of immigration policies, which regulate who is admitted and allowed to remain in a country**. One recent comprehensive study focusing on 22 European countries demonstrate that, a) more restrictive immigration policies do not increase the number of more educated migrants but the number of migrants from European OECD countries compared to migrants from other countries; b) immigration policies affect some forms of economic, political and social integration outcomes, but only for immigrants from mostly non-OECD countries (Helbling et al., 2020). Nevertheless, country-specific analysis is essential in order to understand how policies shape the migration regimes, and in turn, how these influence migrants' lives and their economic, social and political integration.

Highly-Skilled Migration in Finland

In the last two decades in particular, Finland has been gaining popularity amongst highly-skilled migrants due to the rise of IT technologies, and international students with the increased variety of study programmes in English. In academic literature, the pioneering studies mainly focused on the internationalisation of the labour market and its implications for the Finnish economy. The issues related to integration and social life were rather understudied until the 2010s (Koskela, 2010: 57-59).

Empirical research address that, **there are three main motivations for highly-skilled individuals to settle in Finland.** These often work in combination, and after thorough comparisons to other global options:

- a) increasing economic opportunities and training programmes (e.g. establishment of the European Chemicals Agency in Helsinki in 2007);
- b) lifestyle-related motivations such as work-life balance, living in an equal and safe society, nature, relatively slow pace of life, parental support
- c) social relationships such as marriage and family (Raunio & Sotarauta, 2005; Trux, 2002).

“Highly-skilled migrants are not “unwanted” humanitarian migrants, but also not Finns.”

Edited by Habti & Koikkalainen (2014), a special issue was dedicated to highly-skilled migration in the context of Finland. In this insightful volume, different dimensions of the migratory experience e.g. gender, ethnicity, race are explored in relation to the social and economic life in Finland. The following are the summaries of the special issue’s chapters:

1. Koskela (2014) points out, highly-skilled migrants in Finland are aware of their privileged place in the “migrant hierarchy”; they are not “unwanted” humanitarian migrants, but also not Finns. They feel that they cannot integrate to the Finnish society even if they wanted to, because the Finns would like to see them as the representatives of their native culture, making up the desired cultural diversity.
2. Clarke’s (2014) article reveals, for American women in Finland, the main challenge is the cultural adjustment. They feel that it is not easy to get into the Finnish social circles and learning the language is demanding. Furthermore, they feel dependant on their Finnish husbands, as they cannot improve their career paths. They find getting into the Finnish labour market is difficult even though they are highly educated.
4. Lulle & Balode (2014) discuss how the Latvian women experience family and work life in Finland. This article highlights an important feature of highly-skilled migration; that not all of them are men, and migration through marriage and love can also be a part of highly-skilled migration, which
5. requires further research on how life with children and spouses in a new country interplay with their careers and individual integration. In the case of the Latvian women, learning the Finnish language seem to have a positive impact in their social and economic integration. Furthermore, they consider adopting their husbands Finnish surnames as a strategic decision for the job market.



6. Habti (2014) focuses on the experiences of highly-skilled women from Middle Eastern and North African countries in Finland. Habti’s article shows that, these women run “double-careers”, in their professional lives and also in the home space, taking care of family responsibilities. For them, family space and taking part in language and religion related associations (e.g. Arabic, Muslim) play a vital role to maintain their wellbeing.
8. Korhonen (2014) presents the experiences of integration amongst international degree students. The study shows, students are generally satisfied with the Finnish Higher Education but have difficulties in adapting to the cultural and social life due to lack of language skills and the reserved nature of the Finnish social culture.

In 2019, Koskela published her study on the experiences of highly-skilled migrants in Finland, which is an in-depth analysis of how class, gender, ethnicity and race intersect in the lives of highly-skilled migrants and how these different positionalities change the way they are perceived, valued and included in the Finnish society. Koskela’s sample is a mixed one in terms of race and ethnicity; hence she is able to contrast how migrants’ experiences differ. Koskela claims (2019: 313), “skilled migrants who come from countries outside the Western world are subjected to racialized discourses in very different ways than white Western migrants.” Nevertheless, she also points out the “hierarchies within whiteness” by presenting the narratives of, for instance, Russian highly-skilled migrants – a finding that was also evident in Lulle & Balode’s work (2014) on Latvian women, Lahti’s study (2013) on Russian female professionals in Finland and Krivonos’ (2019) research on young Russian-speaking migrants in Helsinki.

Koskela’s (2019) research demonstrates that, **highly-skilled migrants share a sense of belonging to each other based on similar lifestyles and cultural dispositions; however their intersectionalities create completely divergent experiences and challenges:** for instance, male skilled workers of African and Asian origins seem to suffer from stereotyping, stigmatisation and racial discrimination in Finland which is also a disadvantage for them in the job market (p.323). All together, **these studies call attention to focusing on highly-skilled migrants’ social integration outside the work place in order to inform migration policies.** In this regard, good social policy will likely to help establish a better reputation for Finland as a viable option in the global field of choices (Koskela, 2010: 65).



Helsinki Area in Scope

The previous studies mentioned in this article do not necessarily specify where highly-skilled migrants live in Finland. Nevertheless from the methodological information given, it can be claimed that the majority of the research was held in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the research focusing on highly-skilled migration in Finland in terms of mapping out where these individuals live, how urban and rural contexts shape the migrants' experiences and how policies at local level have an impact on the life quality, labour market integration and social networks.

It would be fair to claim, three studies in particular paved the way to make concrete connections between Helsinki as an urban setting and highly-skilled migrants:

a. ACRE Report 2009

The extensive research of Vaattovaara et al. (2009) explore the ways and which Helsinki is an attractive hub of creative knowledge for highly-skilled employees, managers and transnational migrants. The following are the summary of the research's findings:

- Transnational migrants prefer Helsinki for the similar reasons mentioned by the Finnish peer groups, such as availability of good job opportunities, personal trajectories and family reasons. The further findings are:
- Transnational migrants tend to care more about which neighbourhood to live in as they value the social aspects of the neighbourhood environment.
- Transnational migrants have some concerns such as the difficulty of having access to social networks (both professionally and privately), language problems and low availability of reasonably priced, good quality housing in both rental and owner-occupied sectors (Vaattovaara et al., 2009: 36).

Based on these findings, the study draws the conclusion that, "the city needs to develop in opening up for the transnational talent in all fields of employment" (p.36).

b. ACRE Report 2010

Vaattovaara et al. expanded on their 2009 research and offered detailed insights on how Helsinki can enhance competitiveness for creative knowledge. The study suggests that, one of the reasons why Helsinki region is competitive and attractive is the higher education facilities which are world-famous. Another positive factor is introduced as the high quality of life that Helsinki Metropolitan Area offers and that the city is becoming livelier. One area to focus on and improve is housing which was mentioned as a serious problem by both highly-skilled migrants and local creative knowledge workers. Finally, the authors stress in this research project as well, that quality of neighbourhoods contributes strongly to the satisfaction with the city-region; hence more attention should be targeted to the neighbourhoods (Vaattovaara et al., 2010: 3-4).

c. Founding the European Chemicals Agency

Another pioneering study was published in 2009, in an edited volume by Jasinskaja-Lahti & Laine which focused on the establishment of European Chemicals Agency in Helsinki and the adjustment & integration of the highly-skilled international professional employees. The study reveals the following:

- Socio-cultural challenges are related to the decrease of overall wellbeing. Highly-skilled migrants already feel a high level of stress before arriving to Finland, due to the limited time of preparation for moving and having limited knowledge about Finland. These feelings then can be heightened when the migrants face unsatisfactory social and organisation support (p.95).
- In terms of practical issues, housing and the choice of neighbourhood are among the most critical issues; the authors stress, and draw similarities in the findings with the ACRE-study by Vaattovaara et al. (2009; 2010). Hence, the study suggests that support from the host company already before the migrants' arrival can help them better adapt to their work place and the new social environment.
- In terms of socio-psychological adaptation, the highly-skilled migrants' strong identification with "Europeanness" (i.e. coming from an EU country and working for an EU institution) had a positive affect even though they have had difficulties adapting to the Finnish social life.
- Another positive effect on well-being and work adaptation was related to migrating as a family; the study shows those employees who migrate to Helsinki with their families narrated more satisfaction in terms of social life, work conditions and well-being (p.94).

Policy-level Considerations for Finland and Helsinki

In the case of Finland, it is important to acknowledge that, Finland has developed from a country of non-existent multiculturalism into a country of strong multiculturalism from 1980 to 2010. Paradoxically, this happened while the anti-immigrant and nationalist discourse started rising (Keskinen, 2016). Hence, the Finnish discourse of migration and diversity is characterised by polarisation between the proponents and opponents of multiculturalism (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013). How these translate into the policies regarding migration and mobility needs more attention in academic research: **what are the contemporary migration challenges in Finland, to what extent policymakers and stakeholders are aware of these underlying social dynamics, and what is done in terms of tackling these issues at local, regional and national level** (Aarnikoivu et al., 2019).

Furthermore, for Helsinki region, it is vital to have immigration in the municipal strategies in order to find appropriate cross-cultural responses to the challenges of pluralism. More research on the Helsinki area is necessary to illuminate the context-specific needs and challenges; hence the local policymakers can go beyond immigration-related strategies that are too-simplistic, mechanical and failing to identify local differences (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020).

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