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Untapped talents in Finland

Ana Kupri-Karenmaa and Kosar Mahmoodi

According to public discussions, Finland needs more workforce from abroad in order to improve its competitiveness. However, there are already plenty of talented immigrants living in Finland. Unfortunately, the Finnish working life has not untapped this huge potential. Immigrants are seen as one homogeneous group while, in fact, there are a lot of undiscovered diamonds.

The insertion process could be different for highly educated immigrants. It is inefficient to mould one integration model for all immigrants with the belief that it will work. As known, any successful integration of immigrants into the Finnish society has its own social, economic and security implications. A successful integration improves immigrants' lives and facilitates their belonging as full-fledged members of the Finnish society.

The main reasons for not being employed in Finland are the lack of professional Finnish language skills, scarce knowledge about the Finnish working culture and acquisition of a professional degree abroad.

From an economic point of view, a successful integration and participation in working life facilitates the immigrants' own financial situation, reducing the costs for society. Moreover, participation in working life reduces the risk of exclusion and the subsequent risk of radicalization. The main reasons for not being employed in Finland are the lack of professional Finnish language skills, scarce knowledge about the Finnish working culture and acquisition of a professional degree abroad. This communicates a controversial message regarding our society; on the one hand, by stating that Finland needs more higher educated workforce (Kyhä 2011, 14) to meet

the upcoming labour shortage and on the other hand, by counteracting the precarious labour market not able to identify the real skills of immigrant professionals. This article covers the topic of untapped talents in Finland. It also discusses how the Maahanmuuttajat BisnesAkatemiassa (MaBA) study programme aims to lessen these limitations and support an integrative model by identifying and retaining the current untapped higher educated immigrant population.

According to Statistics Finland (2017), by 2030 half a million foreign-born people will live in Finland. Already in 2014, numbers demonstrate that two out of five immigrants aged 25–54 years have a higher education degree (see table 1); roughly the same proportion as in the Finnish population (Nieminen & Larja 2015).

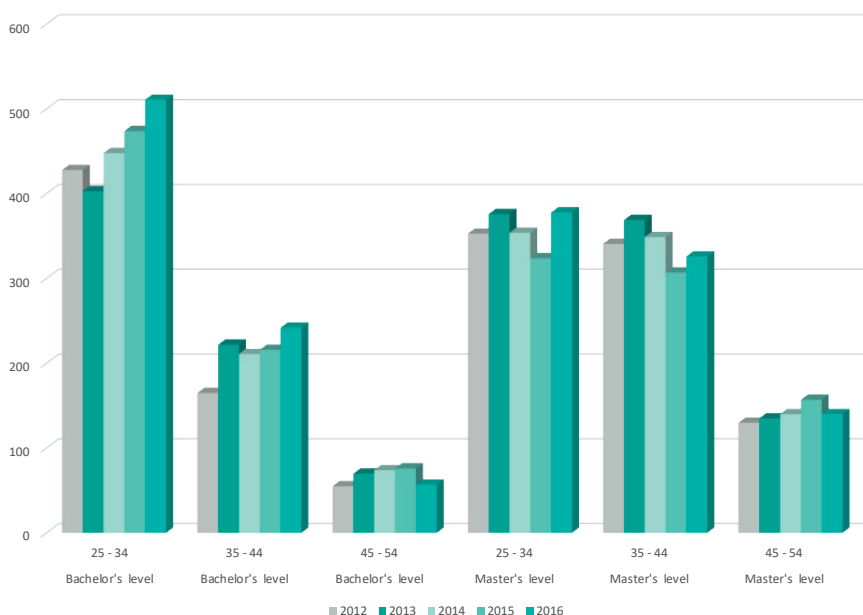


TABLE 1. Migration in Finland: highly educated immigrants aged 25–54 years (Migration, Statistics Finland).

Two out of five immigrants aged 25–54 years have a higher education degree.

According to Nieminen and Larja (2015), these immigrants have most commonly higher education in the field of health and well-being services or in the data processing and telecommunications sectors. Especially in industries with large labour shortage, these immigrant talents can add value and further stimulate regional development (Kauppakamari 2016). Actions led by the Future of Migration 2020 Strategy¹ need the persistence of plans that connect immigrants and employment. By these means, new programmes of insertion renew the regional labour market opportunities within not only the current but also the future economic projections. Previous research demonstrates that proper allocation of untapped talents significantly reduces the cost of brain waste for the regional economy (Batalova et al. 2016, 1). The current skilled aging workforce in combination with the growing economic trend (Ala-Nissilä 2017) creates a favourable gap that benefits our existing untapped immigrant population (see table 2).

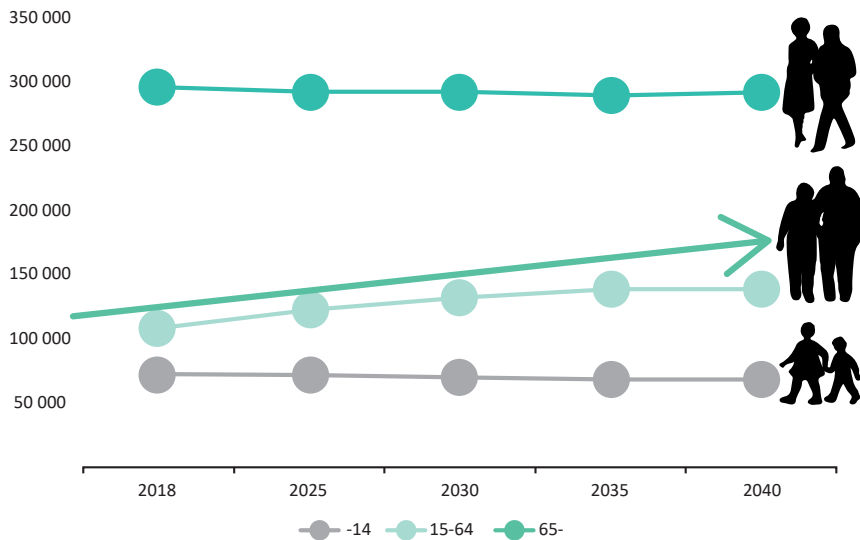


TABLE 2.

Population projection in Southern Finland by 2040 (Statistics Finland).

The elaboration of action plans within concrete measures needs support from the regional community as well (Koskela 2010, 65). A holistic strategy may not succeed without support from all stakeholders. With a popular sentiment that is negative

¹ The aim of the strategy adopted by the Finnish government is to position Finland in a more competitive location for professional immigrants, who can add value and stimulate economic activity.

towards immigration (Bärlund & Brewis 2013, 19), the insertion of highly skilled immigrants may decline. Authorities and stakeholders need to find the right implementations for identifying and assessing international untapped talents living in the region. In addition, they can aim at demystifying the hindering generalizations deeply rooted in the perception of locals as well as new incomers (Batalova et al. 2016). By recognizing and addressing those challenges, expectations can get closer to real opportunities.

The high-educated immigrant population is reshaping the identity of the region that contemplates a rapid response with smart approaches. The unemployment rate, specifically for all high-educated graduates, is rising fast. In consequence, businesses and organizations may be reluctant to recruit foreign labour when Finnish workers are available (Bärlund & Brewis 2013, 15). Conversely, despite the high rate of domestic academic unemployment, there is an imminent need for replacing the baby boomer generation near to retirement (Shumilova et al. 2012, 13). Especially industries keep reminding of the facts validated by the regional demographic realities (Kauppakamari 2016) and the need to attract talented immigrants to sustain the regional economic activity and improve the competitiveness in future (European Migration network, 2013). Highly educated immigrants meet this apparent dichotomy as an additional challenge for gaining a foothold on the Finnish labour market.

Despite all, recent studies and reports confirm the strong regional economic development, leading to the need for more experts from various fields. According to up-to-date figures (Ala-Nissilä 2017), there are over 20 000 enterprises and more than 130 000 job opportunities in the area with prospective increase. Particular success in the maritime and pharmaceutical industry reflects on other fields. Along with estimations, recruitment of highly educated personnel will almost double until mid-2020's, thus giving place to a new permanent level of production capacity. This entrepreneurial approach boosts local development and upgrade a diverse human capital. A multicultural expertise renews the existing cultural savvy, leading to a new know-how and nurturing regional competitiveness. The resulting blending of capabilities reinforces cultural intelligence that bridges distances and reduces misleading perception of exclusion.

Overall, this scenario positions high-qualified immigrants in an inviting quest for insertion into the Finnish society. Many of the immigrant professionals may add

value to the local industries through additional expertise, complementary cultural know-how and language skills that are lacking in the existing settings (Härkönen 2011, 17). It shows an opportunity to identify the yet untapped talents as a key resource for improving the regional workforce and local competitiveness (Lehtimaja 2017).

As a result, the society benefits by integrating immigrants into the social, educational and working life in the region (Stenberg et al. 2017, 2). On this light, several successful projects and initiatives have been implemented and recognized as good practices of insertion (Lehtimaja 2017). In recent years, guidance and counselling services, such as SIMHE² have identified operational and educational opportunities for immigrants based on the recognition of their previous academic and working experiences (Stenberg et al. 2017, 2). Means for those supporting opportunities range from individual vocational courses to a completely new higher education degree obtained in Finland. In addition, international professionals have found support from regional platforms (e.g. Talent Turku³) that may facilitate their integration into the regional labour market. Nevertheless, immigrants still need support with their Finnish language skills (Koskela 2010, 64) and additional assistance in career planning as well as searching for practical training opportunities (Kielimuurin yli 2013, 9).

As stated above, despite these many initiatives, there are still challenges to undertake before reaching a long lasting and permanent insertion of professional immigrants in the region. It is essential to note the importance of a cultural distance perception and its consequent behaviour, which encompasses overall performance. Individuals show their capacity for adaptation and flexibility by their attitudes, therefore they can be more adaptive because they perceive cultural proximity or reactive for a cultural distance perceived. It requires a considerable investment of time and efforts to shape the mindset of both local and international individuals. In order to retain the existing untapped human capital available, advanced programs of insertion are worth to be tested. A blended community shows potential for a more diversified competitiveness.

² SIMHE, Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland network initiated in 2017 financed by the European Union.

³ Talent Turku is a network facilitating interaction between all stakeholders willing to make the city internationally appealing place to live and invest in.

Tuning up for Finnish labour market

The “Maahanmuuttajat BisnesAkateemiassa” (MaBA)⁴ study programme is a great example of how to find the untapped talents and train them to suit the Finnish working life. Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) has developed a Business Academy model which gives students an extensive business knowledge and practice in real working life. Instead of traditional lecture-based learning, Business Academy delivers a blended and guided way of distance and classroom teaching, seminars, projects and studying in a virtual environment combined with visits and meetings with business representatives. The implementation of the Business Academy model started in 2011. Students at Business Academy receive a bachelor’s degree in business administration at the end of their studies.

TUAS has also discovered that there are plenty of talented immigrants in Finland without a job in their own field of expertise. The main obstacles to the employment of immigrants are poor knowledge of the Finnish working life, lack of contacts with the Finnish business community, the incompatibility of a completed degree with the Finnish qualifications and poor Finnish language skills. Taking this into account, TUAS developed a customized fast track programme for immigrants with a higher education background. This efficient study programme enables immigrants to supplement their previous studies with a relevant degree that meets the needs of the current working life. The focus is on improving the students’ Finnish language skills and familiarizing them with the Finnish working life by getting to know the culture better, the business needs and widening students’ networks (Härkönen 2011, 34).

The first immigrants in the Business Academy study group started in the beginning of 2018. This talented group consists of 33 students and 17 different nationalities. All students have studied at different universities around the world but despite their expertise, they experience trouble finding employment. These students have moved to Finland for many reasons. Some of them followed their loved ones, some moved because they were offered a position in an international company, some moved in order to study in Finland, and some were asylum seekers. The main reason why these students applied for this study programme is that none of them is working in their

⁴ The “Maahanmuuttajat BisnesAkateemiassa” (Immigrants at Business Academy) study programme launched by Turku University of Applied Sciences in 2018.

own field. Over time, it gets frustrating to work as a cleaner in new home country after graduating from a university with high marks. The professional background of the MaBA students is varied. To name a few, there are accountants, engineers, economists, a lawyer, a logistic expert, a nurse, a journalist, a business consultant and a language teacher.

The purpose of this initiative is to guide immigrant professionals towards their insertion into the labour market. Business Academy is an exceptional learning environment, where students can develop their entrepreneurial and teamwork competences by actually carrying out business in a cooperative. Through the identification and assessment of previous studies and skills (Kielimuurin yli 2013, 6), graduates renovate their competence portfolio to meet the current demands of the regional labour market.

Language is more than plain words

As previously mentioned, language skills are certainly one of the biggest constraints to insertion (Härkönen 2011, 7). Language seems to be the top challenge and barrier that skilled immigrants face to obtain a job. Finland provides plenty of English-taught education, which has facilitated the graduation of many international students; however, most of these students lack proficiency in the Finnish language at the time of their graduation. In consequence, their employment opportunities are limited because fluency in the Finnish language is a primary requisite in many professions.

Regardless of this indication, some training courses in the Finnish language exclude highly educated immigrants. One reason is the fact that Finnish skills are not required in all studies or work positions. Another reason indicates that courses give priority to less educated group of immigrants, specially those who are not able to communicate in English.. In conclusion, there is no great motivation or sufficient selection of available courses in the Finnish language for highly educated immigrants. The perception of the need for them can however be reverted by considering the right to learn the language. (Lehtimaja 2017). In social life, for instance, language skills provide the possibility of participation in a wider range of discussions and activities and thus have a greater role in immigrants' insertion into work culture

(Koskela 2010, 64; Lehtimaja 2017). Even if the actual work or study do not require Finnish skill; there are many implicit benefits (Lehtimaja 2017) to fluent language skills that influence the work performance in different tasks.

In terms of hiring immigrant workforce, companies need information or assistance in identifying the skills and competences of immigrants as well as in recruiting, familiarizing the immigrants with the Finnish work culture and the Finnish language, and arranging services to help them settle down (Kauppakamari 2016). Social and multicultural skills take time to develop and the lack of proficiency in the Finnish language (Koskela 2010) may result in the feeling of not being welcome or even of being isolated for a skilled immigrant (Shumilova et al. 2012, 64). This is particularly unfortunate in cases when the regional economy suffers from brain waste and loss of human capital, while untapped talents remain underutilized (Batalova et al. 2016, 22).

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Conclusion

Several factors outline the exponential demographic transformation in addition to the growing flow of immigration; both influencing and renovating our society. The diverse range of cultural and academic backgrounds enrich any region, with its associated opportunities and challenges. As part of a solution to this collective phenomenon, the MaBA study programme aims to match the regional expectations and the immigrants' needs in terms of employability. At one end, there are talented immigrants expecting job opportunities that match their professional backgrounds. However, due to several constraints, the immigrants may perceive it as an unmanageable task to find employment in which they can use their skills. On the other hand, the regional workforce is in the need of identification and retention on highly skilled immigrants. Turku University of Applied Sciences aims to help integrate im-

migrants into the regional working life by providing them with tools and updated education through its innovative pedagogy. After receiving their bachelor's degree certificate, graduates have updated their professional competence with cutting edge academic knowledge, which helps them have a more equal footing when compared to native Finns.

In regard to this, the MaBA study programme implements a different type of approach by, for instance, providing services and information alongside integration measures to make immigrants feel at home (Bärlund & Brewis 2013, 17) and perform better in their new host society. Finnish as the language of instruction is a resource available from the beginning (Lehtimaja 2017). The purpose is to implant a realistic awareness of the importance of language skills (Kielimuurin yli 2013). By this, the difficulty of learning the Finnish language is demystified and the integration into the society as well as the employment opportunities raise (Nieminen & Larja 2015). The programme facilitates the learning process by offering Finnish language courses as part of studies, with flexible solutions (e.g. online and integrated language learning sessions). Generally, the learning path depends on the individual's characteristics and motivation. Their mind-set to learn Finnish language also shows their interest and commitment towards the current place of residence. Good language skills remain crucial for improving employment opportunities (Shumilova et al. 2012; Nieminen & Larja 2015) and also by benefiting at every stage of the stay in Finland and, moreover, for the possibility to stay in Finland permanently (Koskela 2010, 64; Lehtimaja 2017). In addition, graduates can extend their employability for the public sector or small, locally based companies. Similarly, working as an entrepreneur is easier when being able to communicate with local stakeholders in their own language and understanding official texts written in Finnish.

In terms of insertion, the knowledge of the Finnish language not only provides confidence and belongingness to the immigrants but also to the rest of the group in which the immigrant professional is inserted. Through a more fluent communication, individuals can find commonalities. This may place professionals in a better position than those who cannot communicate in Finnish (Kyhä 2011, 84). In sum, language skills bridge collaborative relationships, seeing culture as a perspective and focusing on the common traits instead of the differences. It is not distance but proximity that facilitates a better identification of untapped talents among newly arrived citizens. The result is a more diverse, productive and competitive regional working life.

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