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THE INTEGRATION EXPERIENCES OF CAMEROONIAN IMMIGRANTS IN HELSINKI

ABSTRACT

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Finland has witnessed an uptick in migration into the country from the 1990s up to current times. For varied reasons, more migrants are making Finland their new home and the Cameroonian immigrant constitute part of the migrant community mostly settled in the Helsinki area. Like other immigrant groups the Cameroonian immigrants grapple with issues of integration into their new host society.

The purpose of our study is to explore the integration experiences of adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. We aim to shed light on the challenges adult Cameroonian immigrants face as they integrate to Finnish society and propose recommendations to ease their integration. These proposed recommendations can be useful to immigrant integration policy makers and organisations working with immigrants.

To capture these experiences we employed a qualitative research method. Four adult Cameroonian immigrants were selected for the research and we conducted individual interview with each participant. We used semi-structured interview questions to collect data for the research and analysed the data using thematic analysis.

The results from our research point to challenges with desired employment, language barrier, and stereotyping of immigrant roles as the challenges faced by adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. To assuage these challenges, possible solution were to harmonize and streamline various integration schemes, to make language courses more accessible for the immigrants and for the Finnish society to be responsive to the Cameroonian immigrants integration efforts by giving them more opportunities to thrive.

Keywords: Immigrant, Immigrant integration, integration challenges

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1 INTRODUCTION

As a result of the accelerated interconnectedness in today's world, immigration and the subsequent integration of migrants into host societies have become increasing focus of public attention in the past few decades. Immigrants seeking better life opportunities and refugees fleeing various forms of persecution in their countries have resulted in ever increasing number of migrants into Finland in the recent decades. Among the migrants, the Cameroonian immigrant community in Finland has witness a remarkable increase. From single digits representing this community in the 1990s, the total number as of the year 2022 is 2,026 (Statistics Finland, 2024). In this context of heightened migration, governments across the EU and Finland in particular have put in place functional processes to ease the integration of immigrants into the host country. Within the current context of increasing immigration into Finland and how this relates to immigrant integration, studies have been carried out that mainly focus on labour market integration experiences of the immigrants in part because the integration mechanisms in Finland priorities integration via the labour market as the input of all residents has been seen as necessary for the financing of the welfare state (Martikainen et al. 2012; Koikkalainen et al. 2011; cited in Franzke,& Ruano (Eds.) 2000 p.2). However research into immigrants' integration experiences from a holistic perspective still remain scant within the context of Finland.

Our research seeks to understand the embodied integration experiences of adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. We aim to capture the comprehensive challenges Cameroonian immigrant face as they integrate Finnish society. Furthermore, by working collaboratively with a Cameroonian immigrant association-CAMFIN on this research we enhance our study because the association has valuable insights into adult Cameroonian immigrants as a result of the aforementioned being members of the association.

Through the exploration of the challenges faced by adult Cameroonian immigrants, our research will be able to inform practices and programs focused on the

integration of not just Cameroonian immigrants but the wider immigrant community as a whole in Finland as it identifies possible areas of improvement and offers recommendations for better integration of immigrants. Our research can also contribute to more inclusive practices that take into account the multifaceted dimensions of immigrant integration.

2 BACKGROUND AND WORKLIFE PARTNER

2.1 Background of the research

Finland has witnessed an uptick in migration into the country from the 1990s up to current times. For varied reasons, more migrants are making Finland their new home and the Cameroonian immigrant constitute part of the migrant community mostly settled in the Helsinki area. Like other immigrant group the Cameroonian immigrants grapple with issues of integration into the host society. Our qualitative research aims to capture the experiences in the form of challenges faced by Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki.

The concept of immigrant integration is complex and multidimensional (Kunwar, 2020 p.203, Kempainen et al. 2020 p.788). The literature highlights areas such as cultural, structural, social, political integration (Heckmann, 2015, p.72; Freeman & Mirilovic 2016; Prettell & Hollifield, 2000 cited in Franzke & Ruano, (Eds.) 2000; p.2, Martikainen, 2013). With this complexity in the very nature of the concept of immigrant integration it can be said that challenges arise as the immigrant encounter new cultures and institutional setups in the host countries. From the available literature documented in chapter 5 in this report, it is evident that sufficient studies into the challenges of Cameroonian immigrants to highlight their plight still remain scant. Our research fills the knowledge gap in this area by exploring these challenges and providing possible recommendations to strengthen integration into Finnish society.

Cameroon is located in central Africa along the Atlantic ocean with a population (2021 estimate) of over 27.2 million (The World Bank, 2024). Cameroon has an estimated 250 distinct ethnic groups (Wikipedia, 2024) and these ethnic groups have their own languages and cultures embedded within the national Cameroonian culture. From mostly multiple culture environment, the Cameroonian immigrants move to Finland which is mostly culturally homogenous and this divergence in cultures sets the agenda already for integration challenges. To explore

these challenges, we use a qualitative research approach because it is best suited to gain insights into the experiences of the Cameroonian immigrants. We also collaborated with a Cameroonian immigrant association CAMFIN which works to better the integration and inclusivity of its members into the Finnish society.

2.2 CAMFIN Association

Our research work life partner is CAMFIN association based in Helsinki. The association was established in 2019 by Cameroonian immigrants and aims to further the inclusion of its members and the Cameroonian community within the Finnish society through activities such as dance, and display of Cameroonian arts and culture. CAMFIN members are adult Cameroonian immigrants with diverse working life backgrounds and diverse immigrant paths to Finland. The association is run entirely by volunteers and works towards creating supportive and welcoming environment for Cameroonian immigrants. CAMFIN associations prides in values such as upholding and show-casing the richness and diversity of the Cameroonian culture to the Finnish society, Inclusivity of Cameroon immigrants in Finland irrespective of diverse Cameroonian ethnicity, providing communal support to the members and show respect amongst members. During the association's activities such as a dance event, Cameroonian immigrants learn and share experiences on integration challenges and ways to handle different situation thus promoting their integration into Finnish society. Through their voluntary work, CAMFIN provides a platform where the Cameroonian immigrant community can meet and address and overcome integration barriers.

With over four years of existence as an association, CAMFIN has a deep understanding of the integration challenges of adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. Members of the association have different longevity stay in Finland which makes it relevant for our research interest. The association helped in the selection of research participants. Since CAMFIN is trusted by its members, they facilitated access to Cameroonian immigrants who were willing to volunteer and share their experiences by participating in the research interview. Also, CAMFIN has an

established network within the Cameroonian community and this brought diversity viewpoints to the research interview.

Our research is beneficial to this association in that findings from the research can provide the association with directions in their efforts to overcome integration barriers of Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. From the findings, CAMFIN can diversify their activities and develop targeted initiatives that will further strengthen the Cameroonian immigrant's integration into Finnish society. Our research also gives them exposure and also an opportunity to engage in something meaningful for the wellbeing of their members.

3 RELEVANT CONCEPTS ON IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

3.1 Definition of Terminologies

Our research seeks to explore the integration experiences of adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. In this section we define and explain some relevant concepts as they apply to our research interest. The main concepts here are immigrants and immigrant integration. Understanding who an immigrant is at an international level and in the Finnish society context is important to avoid ambiguity in our research.

3.1.1 Immigrant

According to the United Nations (UN), an international migrant is any person who has changed his or her country of residence. The UN definition is broad and encompasses all migrants regardless of their legal status, or the nature or motive of their movement (United Nations, 2023). For the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) an immigrant is a person who move away from his or her place of usual residence, this could be within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for varied of reasons (International Organisation

for Migration, 2023). In the context of the European Union (EU) an immigrant is a person who establishes their usual residence in the territory of an EU Member State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least 12 months, having previously been usually resident in another EU member state or a third country (European Commission, 2023). In Finland an immigrant is a person who has moved to Finland, who resides in the country with a permit issued for purposes other than tourism or similar residence of short duration, whose right of residence has been registered or who has been issued with a residence card (Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (A 1386/2010))

3.1.2 Immigrant Integration

For Alba and Nee (2003) integration is the process in which immigrants, newcomers and the communities in which they settle both the individuals and the host society institutions mutually adapt to one another. The immigrant integration is considered achieved when he or she only minimally perceive themselves and the rest of society in ethno-racial and national terms, when the ethnic and racial attributes have at most, a negligible negative impact on opportunities and life chances within the host society (Alba & Nee 2003; cited in Franzke & Ruano (Eds.) 2000; p.2). In the same vein, Martikainen (2013) considers integration as the processes by which individuals and groups of immigrants are incorporated to various social arenas and segments of the new host society. Integration is thus a two-way process whereby both the immigrants and the host society adopt new features as a result of their interaction. For Lacroix (2010), integration refers to the inclusion of newcomers as well as to the internal cohesion of the societies that are affected by the processes of immigration. In the context of Finland, integration is a continuous two-way process in which society is changing as the population is becoming more diverse and immigrants acquire knowledge and skills that they need in society and working life. It involves broad-based multi-sector cooperation with the immigrant at the focus. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and employment of Finland, 2024). While these definitions emphasis a two-way integration process; that involve changes taking place in both host society and immigrants; integration is also viewed as a one-way process in which the immigrants

are expected to integrate into the existing culture and society without any reciprocal accommodation (Lacroix, 2010; p.11). This will be further discussed under section on integration models below.

3.2 Immigrant Integration Models

Integration models reflect approaches adopted by different host societies as part of their integration strategies to deal with immigrant integration issues. We briefly look at these models of immigrant integration in this section so as to further articulate, and expand on the definitions of the concept of immigrant integration. These models have been categorized into assimilationism, multiculturalism, universalism, differentialism and transnationalism.

Assimilationism as a model of immigrant integration defines immigrant integration mainly through how the migrants adopt the culture of host society (Grans 1997; Park & Burgess 1921; cited in Scholten, 2011 p.43). Assimilationism phrases integration primarily in terms of social-cultural adaptation of immigrants and the preservation of social cohesion. Immigrant integration in the assimilation model involves the expectation that the social-cultural adaptation of the immigrant to the native way of life is a prerequisite for the preservation of host country national social cohesion and a viable path to better the social status of the immigrants in the new societies (Scholten, 2011, p.39). This model implies both the expectation that immigrants will adapt to the dominant culture and all spheres of life of the host society and the limitation of difference, which include language acquisition, civic participation and naturalization (Herold & Contini (Eds) 2017; p.9)

Multiculturalism as a model of immigrant integration emphasizes cultural pluralism and a more culturally neutral and open form of citizenship (Koopmans & Stat-ham 2000; as cited in Scholten, 2011, p.40). In this model immigrant integration is named in terms of cultural diversity and the need for emancipation of groups of varying cultural backgrounds, it looks and upholds compatibilities between groups and tolerance of those domains of social life that groups do not have in common. This model of immigrant integration holds that cultural diversity is a

value in itself and it is a phase of the ongoing process of modernization not to be interfered with as the cultures themselves will determine the identities of cultural group members (Scholten, 2011; p.40). Multiculturalism thus allows for coexistence of immigrants original cultures as well as the host culture and is perceived as enriching everyone in society. Immigrants under this model have equal rights in all spheres of life as the autochthonous population (Herold & Contini (Eds) p.9).

Differentialism as a model of immigrant integration relies on the institutionalisation of differences. Cultural diversity in the community is institutionalised and a form of parallel societies emerge with immigrants and natives living side by side. Immigrants' rights are separate from the rights of natives of host society (Herold & Contini (Eds) p.9). Immigrant integration is named primarily in terms of accommodating differences between groups that are as much possible, autonomous or sovereign within their own community. The underlying thought in this model is that immigrants are on a short term stay and integration is unfeasible (Scholten, 2011; p.40).

According to Koopmans & Statham (2000), the universalist or 'civic republican' model of immigrant integration adopts a more liberal egalitarian view on immigrant integration (Koopmans & Statham 2000; cited in Scholten, 2011; p.41). This model does not focus on the commonalities or compatibilities between groups but is more oriented towards individual citizenship in a culturally neutral society. Culture and religion are considered private and personal issues and the need for immigrants to stand on their feet is emphasized through effective institutions and the fight against discrimination (Scholten, 2011; p.41).

Transnationalism as a model of immigrant integration stresses developments at the transnational level such as links between country of origin and host country and the development of a universal human rights discourse. This model of immigrant integration sees trends in global movement of people and the cultural diversity that comes with this in host society as inevitable and the need for adaptation of host society and its institutions to the reality of these trends (Scholten, 2011; p.42). Transnationalism links migration and integration to the process of

internationalisation, and encourages the formation of transnational migrant communities (Faist 2000; Kivisto 2001, cited in Scholten, 2011; p.42).

From these immigrant integration models, Finland's has been said to have a multiculturalist leaning with a strong emphasis on immigrant integration via the labour markets as the input of all residents has been seen as necessary for the financing of the welfare state (Martikainen et al. 2012; Koikkalainen et al. 2011; cited in Franzke, & Ruano (Eds.) 2000 p.2). Multiple channels are available dedicated to ease immigrant integration some of which include websites that offer information on immigrant integration, Centres of Expertise for immigrants and multilingual guidance and counselling services in municipalities (Koutotuminen, 2024).

3.3 Dimensions of Immigrant Integration

In order to add depth to the variety of definitions and existing models of immigrant integration we look at dimensions of immigrant integration. There are four distinguished dimensions of immigrant integration identified as cultural, structural, social, and emotional dimensions (Esser 1980, p.221; 2006b, p.27 cited in Schunck, 2014 p.32). The cultural dimension of immigrant integration represents the acquisition of new skills in the host society such as language skills and the cultural norms and customs of the society. The structural dimension is concerned with the participation of the immigrant in relevant spheres of the host society like education sector or participation in the labour market. The social dimension mostly concerns the social interactions that take place between the migrant and host society in spheres like marriage, friendship etc, and the emotional dimension of immigrant integration encompasses aspects of identity and belonging in the new host society (Schunck, 2014 p.32).

Further to the above dimensions, Ager & Strang (2008) conceptual framework is useful in understanding the integration experiences of the adult Cameroonian immigrant in Helsinki. Ager & Strang (2008) identify ten principal domains arranged under four levels in a hierarchical structure presented in the form of an inverted triangle. At the foundation level Ager & Strang (2008) note citizenship and rights

as determinant for assimilation or multiculturalism approach to the integration of immigrants. In the domains of housing, health, employment and education, Ager & Strang (2008) observe that immigrants' gains in these areas are identifiers of successful integration into the host society and call this level means and markers. Language and cultural knowledge, and safety and stability Ager & Strang (2008), classify these as facilitators and notes that broad cultural and linguistic knowledge of the host society are necessary for successful integration while safety and stability encourages the immigrant to stay and establishes him/herself as member of their new community. In addition Ager & Strang (2008) include social bridges, social links and social bonds at the level they call social connection. Bridging behaviours is associated with lateral relationships outside the immigrants' cultural group which will create connections and relationships with host community. These social bridges if achieved can foster feeling of safety and bring about economic benefits to the immigrants but may impede further efforts at integration if not welcomed by host society. Linking behaviours encompass the immigrants' relationship with state institutions and reveal through other methods like political participation in the host society. While bonding behaviours relate to interaction and cooperation within the immigrants own ethnic group which can foster positive social, health and psychological outcomes and play a positive role in the wider social connection. There is interconnection between the ten domains and gains in one domain favour achievement in the other (Ager & Strang 2008; cited in Enns, et al., 2013). This conceptual framework provides a structure to understand the various facets of the integration experiences of the Cameroonian immigrant in their integration into the Finnish society. Ager & Strang (2008) conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1 below.

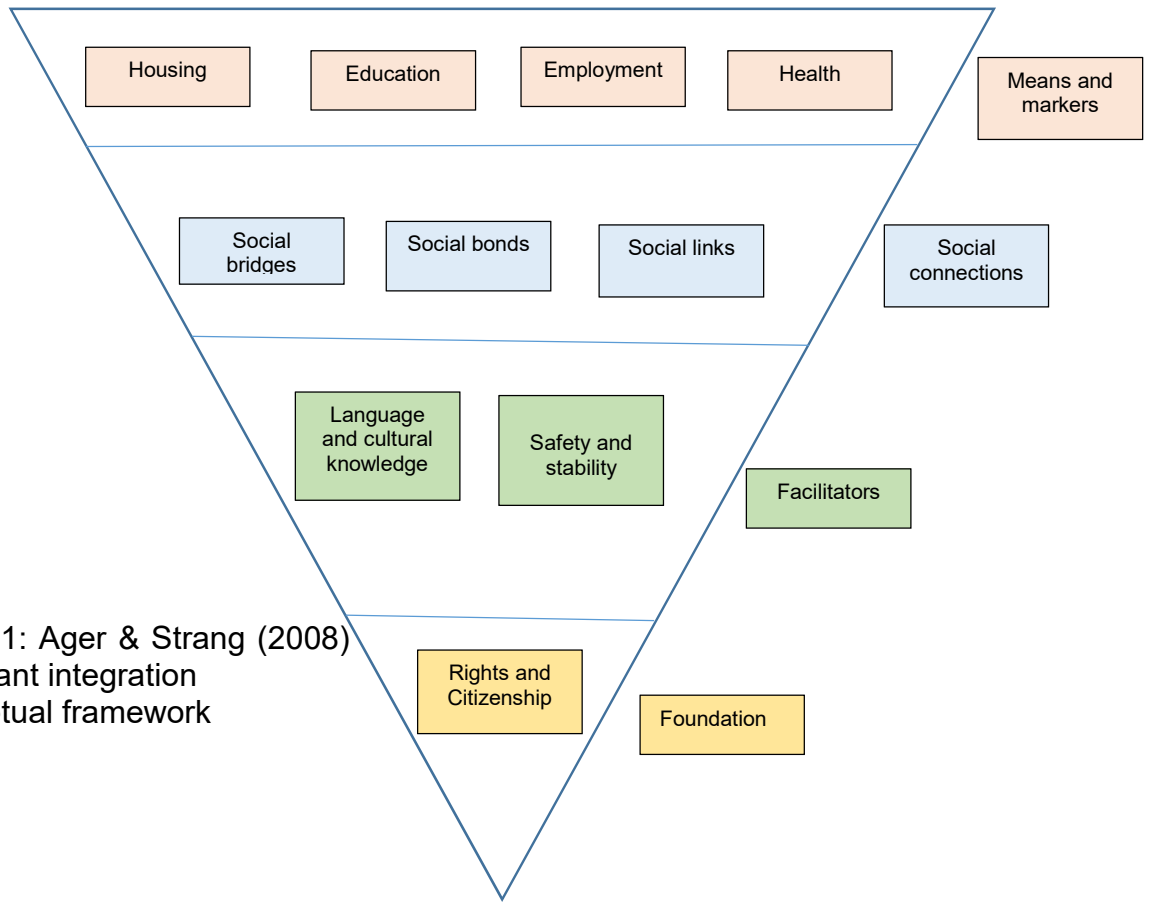


Figure 1: Ager & Strang (2008)
immigrant integration
conceptual framework

4 IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION SERVICES AND LEGISLATION IN FINLAND

In Finland, strategies to enhance immigrants' integration into Finnish society is the responsibility of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland and implemented through services in municipalities and Employment and Economic Development Offices (TE offices). The strategies are framed in line with the government legislative act on the promotion of immigrant integration.

4.1 The Integration Act (1386/2010)

The Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (A 1386/2010) is the legislation in Finland on the integration of immigrants with the purpose to promote diversity by supporting immigrants' inclusion in society. The act aims to provide all immigrants having a valid residence permit with basic information about Finnish society, labour market and services that provide integration. Furthermore, the act spells out the roles of the various actors (Municipalities, Employment and Economic Development Offices (TE offices), Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centres), Regional State Administrative Services) in the integration process while laying emphasis on the immigrant's role in the integration process. The Integration Act applies to all immigrants regardless of the grounds of immigration whose right of residence has been registered (Kou-tuminen, 2024)

4.2 Services to enhance immigrants' integration

To enhance labour market integration of immigrants, a specifically tailored programme for immigrants who meet certain criteria is available. The programme called the Integration Plan is a personalized plan prepared by the employment services and Economic development Office, the TE office or the municipalities. The main aim of the plan is to support immigrants' access to society as equal members, especially during their early stages of integration. According to section 12 of the Act on the promotion of immigrant integration (A 1386/2010), an immigrant has the right to an integration plan if he/she is a jobseeker which can be determined during the initial assessment phase. Also the first integration plan is

drawn up for a maximum of one year and can be drawn up no later than three years after the first residence permit or registration of the right of residence. The plan includes services and measures that will support the immigrants in learning Finnish or Swedish and help them acquire other knowledge and skills needed in society and the labour market. After an initial assessment in which the immigrant's prior education, work experience, age, health is taken into consideration; a personalized plan is drawn up with matters agreed such as starting or continuing to learn Finnish, or Swedish, integration training and other measures that promote integration, job search and its goals, and services that support job search and promote employment (Koutotuminen, 2024).

Since the Integration plan is specifically suited for certain immigrants under certain criteria, other services are available through government-run webpages and also services in the municipalities to facilitate the integration of immigrants into Finnish society. The 'Welcome to Finland Guide' of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland is given to the new immigrants by statutory bodies when their right of residence is registered. The guide provides information to the immigrant about living and working in Finland, explains how Finnish authorities work and gives basic information about Finnish society (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2024). InfoFinland.fi provides information in multiple languages about moving and living in Finland for example comprehensive information in matters relating to health and healthcare services in Finland is provided (InfoFinland.fi, 2024).

4.3 Centres of Expertise for Immigrants

The Centre of Expertise in Immigrant Integration produces and disseminates information on integration to decision-makers, authorities and experts involved in integration. The Centre monitors the progress of integration and the state of the immigrant population through its databases and with this information the Centre strengthens the knowledge base of integration by commissioning and producing reports and studies on different integration-related topics. The Centre of Expertise organizes research webinars and publishes policy briefs all geared towards strengthening knowledge based approach to work on promoting integration. The

Centre also works in collaboration with people working with immigrants providing information about best practices, factors and phenomenon affecting integration, and reforms and development work related to the promotion of integration. Practically the Centre provides information materials, training, tools, current news, blogs and events on immigrant integration matters (Koutotuminen, 2024)

4.4 Role of Civil Society Organisations in immigrants' integration

Besides the services mostly provided through government run agencies the civil society organisations in Finland play an important role in immigrant integration into Finnish society by supplementing government services especially those geared towards labour market integration of immigrants. Some of the service areas in government integration schemes identified by Bontenbal & Lillie (2022) as gaps like limited availability of services, lack of labour market connections, and limited flexibility to serve individual needs are being provided for by civil society organisation. By organizing activities that support immigrant integration, these NGOs support and supplement available government services (Koutotuminen, 2024). As earlier discussed in chapter 2, our work life partner for this thesis works within this framework and supports immigrants' integration.

5 PREVIOUS STUDIES ON IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION CHALLENGES

Existing literature on challenges of immigrants especially within the Finnish labour market (Teinye, 2013) reveals that immigrants lack the relevant work experiences to fully participate in their desired jobs thus limiting their prospects for effective structural integration. The same study further shows that immigrants are a disadvantaged group in competitive job market and this is a barrier to their labour market integration. Other challenges highlighted in Teinye (2013) research include covert and overt discrimination in the labour market, language barrier, psychological inhibitor to structural integration, technological gap between immigrants skills sets and demands of labour market and degrees that are irrelevant to the applicable jobs all pose challenges to immigrant labour market integration in Helsinki. In the same vein, Ansu (2018) shows that discrimination by employers during the recruitment phase and lack of self-confidence on the part of the immigrants were challenges to integration into the Finnish labour market. Elsewhere, Kunwar (2020) survey reveals that immigrants who are older, are educated better, have been in Finland for longer duration are better integrated economically in the Finnish society. In addition, Laguinday (2020) study on labour market integration of African diaspora in Finland points to language barrier, racial prejudices among employers, lack of work experience as challenges to immigrants integration efforts to Finnish labour market. Furthermore Bontenbal & Lillie (2022) study highlight the role of civil society organisations in Finland in fostering the labour market integration of immigrants by supplementing services offered by the government. Their study assess the level of civil society organisations engagement in supplementing the limited available government services and addressing immigrants challenges in lacking government service areas such as limited availability of services, labour market contact challenges to facilitate immigrants integration, and flexibility to serve individual needs as areas of challenges to immigrants labour market integration and how civil society organisations work to mitigate these challenges (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2022).

In related study on immigrant integration experiences outside Finland, Udah et al., (2019) show racialized modes of discrimination based on skin color, language

proficiency, non-recognition of qualification obtained overseas, lack of Australian work culture experience, and lack of connections in local networks that would help secure employment as challenges to immigrant labour market integration in Australia. In a study on men's integration challenges in Canada, (Okeke-Ihejirika, & Salami, 2018) identified challenges with economic integration (lack of credentials, lack of host country labour market experience, racism in the work place), changing ideals about masculinities, gender relations across transnational space, and tensions in the parent-child relationship as integration challenges faced by immigrant men in Canada.

6 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

From the literature review it is evident that studies have been carried to explore immigrant integration experience from a labour market perspective. However, there is paucity of research on the integration experiences of immigrants with consideration for the other integration dimensions (social, cultural, and emotional) within the Finnish context. The studies thus far focuses on integration experiences from a structural dimension leaving other important dimensions to the immigrant integration efforts.

The purpose of this study is to explore the embodied integration experiences of adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. In chapter 4 of this thesis report, we discussed the different strategies to enhance the immigrant integration in Finland. By focusing on the challenges Cameroonian immigrants encounter, our research can serve as assessment of the overall integration strategies for immigrants. Focusing on challenges can also raise social awareness on immigrant integration issues that can lead to meaningful discussion on problem facing immigrants as a whole. To help us explore these experiences, we shall be guided by the following questions:

- 1) What kind of challenges do adult Cameroonian immigrants face as they integrate into Finnish society?
- 2) What recommendations (development proposals) do adult Cameroonian immigrants have to further ease immigrant integration into the Finnish society?

The aim of the study is to shed more light on the broad immigrants' integration experiences from a Cameroonian immigrant's perspective. This could be beneficial for work life organisations engaged in work with immigrants. We also aim to propose possible solutions to the Cameroonian immigrants' integration challenges. These proposed solutions can alleviate integration challenges in the wider immigrant community if considered and implemented.

7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of our research was to explore the integration experience of Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. To this end, we used a qualitative research approach in the study. Qualitative research mainly focuses on how people interpret and construct their worlds and what meaning they give to their experiences. Qualitative research can help in understanding these experiences from the participants perspective and therefore suitable for our research interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

7.1 Sampling method

To select participants for the study, we used non-probabilistic purposeful sampling. This form of sampling is based on the assumption that in order to gain useful insights and understanding into the experiences from the participants' perspective, participants must be selected from which the most can be learned or information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To get information-rich participants we used criteria such as being adult Cameroonian immigrants living in Helsinki, right to residency in Finland (basic prerequisite to be called an immigrant in Finland), at least four years of residence in the country (this duration gives adequate experiences to share), and Finnish or Swedish language skills (at least one participant in order to get diverse input); and being employed. Through our work life partner CAMFIN, we selected participants who were willing and consented by filling the consent form (Appendix 2). The sample size was four Cameroonian immigrants in line with Taylor & Francis (2013) fitting observation that qualitative research generally focus on the richness and quality of the research process and the data collected, not on high participant numbers and the quantity of data (Taylor & Francis, 2013; p.192).

7.2 Data Collection

Data for the study was collected through individual interview. The individual interview in qualitative research has been defined as the process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study (DeMarrais, 2004; p.55 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We sent the interview question to each participant before the interview through our work life partner acting as liaison between us and our interviewee. With each participant voluntary consent to be interviewed ascertained by signing the consent form (Appendix 2), we audio recorded (with the participant permission using personal password protected mobile phone) the interview for later transcription. Our interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 17 -30 minutes per interview. Data collection and subsequent analysis was done between January 2024 and February 2024.

We used semi-structured interview (Appendix 1). Semi-structured interviews are interviews in which the interview guide include a mix of more and less structured interview questions. This type of interview provides for more flexible wording of the questions, allowing the respondent to provide in-depth answers to their worldviews on the topic (Merriam,& Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured interview allows us as interviewers to have greater say in focusing the conversation on the important issues as they relate to our research topic (Brinkmann, 2013). Furthermore, semi-structured interview gave us the chance to participate in the knowledge produced during the conversation as it gives the options of follow-up questions during the interviews (Brinkmann, 2013). A setback for the semi structured interview is that the interviewer can get lost in excess information and viewpoints diverging from the original question from the respondent (Merriam,& Tisdell, 2015). This we checked by being attentive and steering the conversation in directions relevant to the research topic since an affordance of the semi structured interview is that it allows the interviewer leeway in focusing the conversation on important issues as relates to the research topic (Brinkmann, 2013).

We conducted four individual interviews. The individual interviews are advantageous in that it is easier to steer the conversation in a direction useful for the

research interest. It is also easier to create an atmosphere of trust and maintain confidentiality with the individual interview. In addition, the participant get to talk about their experiences without being interrupted by other participant (Brinkmann, 2013). Audio files from the interviews were stored as encrypted files behind password protected computer for later transcription and analysis.

Considering our position as researchers and that we have our own notions about the topic since we are Cameroonian immigrants as well, we employed the technique of bracketing to minimize our presuppositions (Patton, 1980; cited in Taylor & Francis, 2013, p. 87). Bracketing means acknowledging and setting aside what one already know about a research interest, so that you do not impose your prejudices on what emerges from the research methods and processes (Taylor & Francis, 2013, p. 87).

7.3 Data analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data; the step by step process that we used to arrive at answers to our research questions (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2015, p.195). We used thematic analysis as our data analysis method. Thematic analysis is defined as a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning with the aim of coming out with the most salient meaning in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; as cited in Harper & Thompson (Eds) 2011; p.209). We transcribed (using Microsoft 365 transcribe feature) our audio recorded interviews to text as a Microsoft word document. Our transcription resulted in a combined 43 pages of text which we saved as encrypted files behind password protected personal computer.

First we read the whole transcript text several times to get a general understanding and familiarity with the content (Saldana, 2011). We then proceeded with category construction (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2015). Using MS Word Text Highlight feature we highlighted potentially relevant (to our research objective) sections in the text then assigned codes using MS word comment feature to them in margins. A code is a word or phrase that captures the main idea within segments of the transcript (Saldana, 2011). With our research objective in mind, we grouped the

codes into categories. From these categories, we extracted emerging themes. Themes are encompassing phrases or sentences that summarized the apparent and underlying meanings of the data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998; as cited in Saldana, 2011). The table 1 below is a sample of how we applied thematic analysis in practice to our data.

Table 1: Sample of data analysis process

Relevant Extract from interview transcript	Code assigned	Category	Theme
<p>“the society is not really easy when it comes to employment of immigrant”</p> <p>“I contacted many companies, not only writing I wrote then I go there personally those companies that were producing things that are related to my studies. I visit them, many of them around here that I knew by then. And so all the results were they don't have possibility to take us in”</p>	<p>Difficulty to find job</p> <p>Efforts made to find job</p>	<p>Challenges</p>	<p>Challenges with desired employment</p>

<p>“You know, they don't really have time to look into your degree what you have studied or how can they help you to work in what you have study”</p>	<p>Insufficient support system for job search</p>		
<p>“I tried like two or three times to learn the language. But due to the other commitment I have, I didn't have time to concentrate”</p> <p>“And more to that while driving, customers who come, you have to take the address when they talk to you and you Cannot speak Finnish. They go to the next taxi.”</p>	<p>Efforts to learn the language</p> <p>Language impact on life chances</p>	<p>Challenges</p>	<p>Language barrier</p>
<p>“people with engineering degrees, Masters at the end, they end up doing cleaning</p>	<p>Society expectation of immigrants</p>	<p>Challenges</p>	<p>Systemic stereotyping of immigrants role</p>

<p>food delivering, work in the kitchen, you know, and the society. They Finnish society. They're looking as good.”</p>			
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We went back and forth the transcribed text and our themes to ascertain they answer our research questions and finally the themes represent our results reported below. These themes are depicted in the figure 2 below.

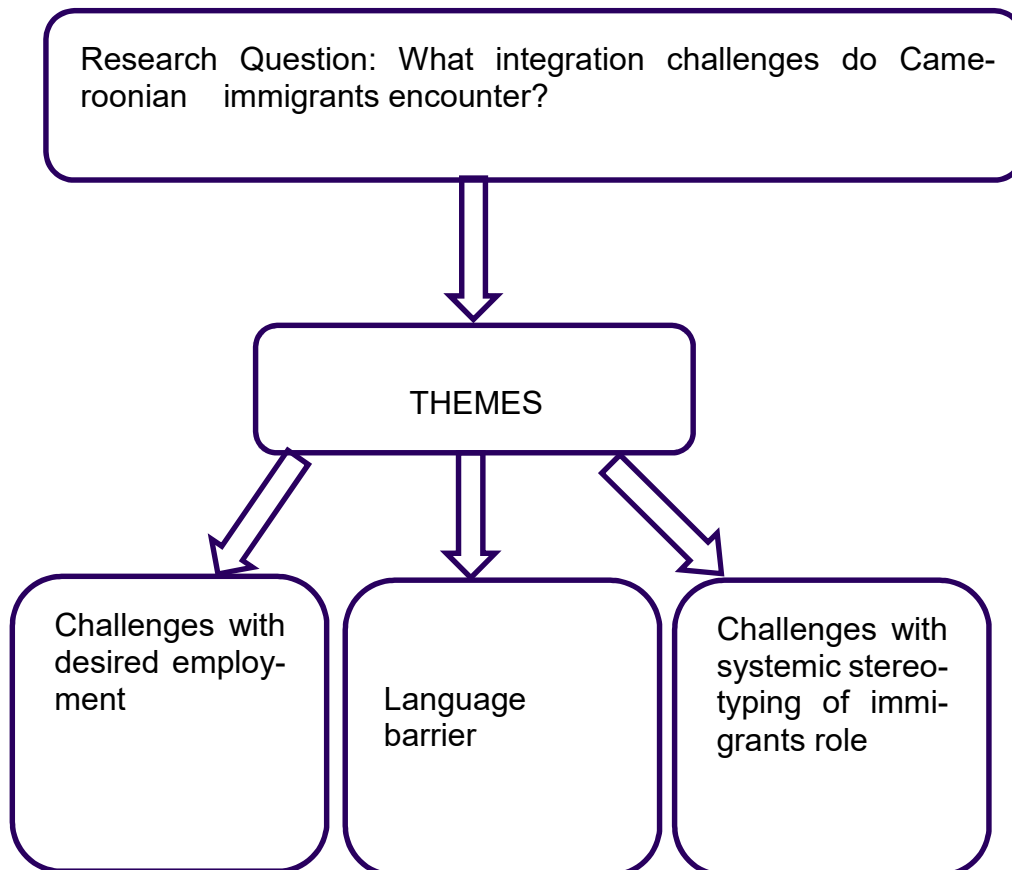


Figure 2: Themes from the transcripts

These steps are in line with Braun & Clarke (2006) six steps of familiarization with the data, generating initial code, searching for themes among the codes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; as cited in Flynn & McDermott, 2017)

8 RESULTS

In our study of the integration experiences of adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki, a total of four participants were interviewed. The average duration of stay in Finland for the participants is ten years and two of the participants could speak the Finnish language. This is shown in table 2 (participant profiles) below.

Table 2: Participant Profiles

Participant (P)	Years in Finland	Finnish language
P1	17	
P2	7	
P3	4	Yes
P4	12	Yes

The three major themes that emerged from our analysis of the data are challenges with desired employment, Language barrier, and challenges with systemic stereotyping of immigrants roles.

8.1 Challenges with desired Employment

One of the major recurrent theme from the interview transcripts was that Cameroonian immigrant face challenges in finding jobs that were equivalent to their level of education and training. The interviewees discussed how they result to do whatever they find in order to integrate themselves into the Finnish society via the labour markets.

“You know when like you go to employment office as a job seeker even though you have a degree, but they always keep on publicizing some types of jobs like cleaning and all those things to you they don't really have time to look into your degree what you have studied or how can they help you to work in what you have study but they are generally like telling you that, but you can try cleaning, you can do dish washing, you can go to kitchen. But those are not people goals. So I cannot come and spend 4 years here to have a degree. Then at the end I go and do cleaning. So why did I study? It didn't make any sense.” – P1

The easiest and most accessible jobs for most immigrants in Finland are cleaning related jobs. Every human institution be it family, organisations, or companies requires cleaning services of some sort such as factory cleaning or office cleaning. Such jobs do not require active communication with customers and can easily be designed for immigrants. Another interviewee puts this challenges of finding the desired job that matches their actual skill set thus:

“...Yeah, before coming to Finland, I read on social media that Finland was very good, very welcoming and so upon my coming, I knew from back home with my degree that I obtained from the university, I'll just come and maybe integrate and get one of the white collar jobs but I came and it wasn't what I was thinking so I feel very, very disappointed when it comes to integration” – P2

Many immigrants upon coming to Finland already have university degrees from their home countries. Moreover, migration from Cameroon to Finland generally cost a lot of money. Some Cameroonian immigrants are forced to sell some of their valuable properties like lands to raise money for their migration to Finland with the prospects of securing desired jobs in Finland. The failure to achieve such goals could have a huge negative impact in the psychosocial wellbeing of such immigrants. One participants also recounts this challenge in finding the desired employment that matches the skill level as follows

“...no matter how you've gone to school in your hometown, you come to Finland there is nothing that you can do. ...In the days of the university I did psychology so I thought that when I will come here, I will expand more on my psychological field so when I came here I was taught details. I was like I know some things, but where I'm currently working, I don't have the opportunity like to showcase my talent what I've learned in school.” – P3

There are many academic programmes like a university degree programme in psychology, medicine, and law that Finland does not offer in English. Hence immigrants with previous studies on such fields cannot easily integrate into the Finnish work life in such domains and are forced to switch to undesired jobs.

8.2 Language barrier

Challenges with acculturation is mostly accentuated by language barrier. Across the board participants revealed that the lack of sufficient skills in the official languages used in Finland posed a challenge to their integration efforts into all segments of the Finnish society.

“...So I faced a lot of difficulties because I couldn't speak Finnish. So my main problem is language. Yeah. And more to that while driving customers who come, you have to take the address when they talk to you and you cannot speak Finnish they go to the next taxi. They don't enter your taxi. So you are like, lost in the society.” – P2

French and English are the official languages of Cameroon. Communicating in English language in Finland is increasingly accepted and practiced. This pushes most of the Cameroonian immigrants to comfortably use English language as means of communication in Finland. However, in some situations like the case above, some customers may decide to communicate in Finnish language which poses a challenge to the immigrant. Another participants sums it up as follows;

“...The challenges was to learn the Finnish language. And based on the fact that I've already been in another European country that I have really mastered the language of that country, have been there for years, you know, coming again to start again, learn another language and I tried like two or three times to learn the language. But due to the other commitment I have, I didn't have time to concentrate on the language”- P1

Most Cameroonian immigrants come from a nuclear extended family. It is common for a Cameroonian family in Cameroon to have as many as 9 children to a

given couple. This increases the financial dependency ratio of relatives to Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. Hence committing to learn the Finnish language may be seen as a waste of time to some Cameroonian immigrants. Additionally, participants who could speak the Finnish language at a basic level still emphasized that their language skill were not sufficient enough for effective integration into the Finnish society.

“...The problem of language is killing our career its killing most of what we've done back in our country because going through the Finnish language, we have to go professional and the most common one like I just did, is the practical nursing....let me let you to understand that yes, I've study a lot. I've gone to school for 2 1/2 years, that's been done for us because of the language but it's just the basics”-P3

Basic Finnish language is enough for a day-to-day activity but not sufficient at a professional level especially in sectors like social service and health care. In situations of documentation, reporting and administration of drugs, basic Finnish language is not sufficient. The above quote is put in other words by another participant who explains thus:

“.. The main challenge I face is the Finnish language. Finnish is the working language in nursing and not being able to communicate in this language is very challenging and exhausting. Sometimes I have to repeat what I am trying to say a couple of times before the patient client understands what I am saying and vice versa.”- P4

Accent plays a key role in communication. A native Finnish person who speaks the Finnish language extremely fast and a Cameroonian immigrant who is unable to pronounce certain Finnish words correctly will definitely have a challenge in understanding each other.

8.3 Challenges with systemic stereotyping of immigrants role

The interviewees discussed facing challenges with the Finnish system in place and noted that they perceive the system as unfavourable to their integration into the society.

“...I have come to realize that there are certain jobs that the society have already branded them for immigrants. I do not really like see myself like having any prospect I don't have any prospect to having something like be like when it comes to job because already I know that most of the jobs here are already coded with the society.”-P1

The immigrants say some jobs are reserved for immigrants because most of them do not require Finnish language skills and little interaction to the active population, for example after hours cleaning, working in these settings negatively affect them as they feel left out and looked down in the society. Most of the participant express a feeling of being outside of the system or having a preset place for them within the system.

“I think the integration system doesn't favor immigrants. Yeah, because day in, day out as I go along my daily activities, I meet people from different walks of life...they're not doing something that reflects what they love to do, me too. So I think there is a problem somewhere, so we are outside in the town, we're in the city doing what we can do to earn a living.” -P2

“So I think that when I look at myself and the Finnish system, the way it operates, I think that in the next five years, I'm still gonna be in the same position, except that I have to go for further education and even the further education I'm seeing myself in the same position in the next five years, because that's Finland for us.”-P3

As noted above, participants highlighted their encounter with a Finnish system which they feel has left them behind. This aspect is also revealing of subtle marginalization that exist vis-à-vis the adult Cameroonian immigrants.

8.4 Participants recommendations

To overcome these challenges participants recommended the following:

Firstly, participants suggest the harmonization of the integration programmes in Finland. The integration programme available for an immigrant who come to Finland as an asylum seeker is not the same as the immigrant who come as a student.

“There is integration of immigrants that came like a student and the second is the integration of immigrant that came because of persecution in their home country. and the integration of an immigrant that came like family reunion that is wives or husbands that came to join their families here in Finland and what I've realized, I don't think enough have been done in that perspective of student integration, but when it comes to integration of immigrant that came like asylum seekers or like family reunion, I believe that what the government they are doing at the moment, they are focusing most on those type of immigrant. They have forgotten about the immigrants that came like students.”-P1

Thus the need for consistency in the integration schemes to give all immigrants regardless of their path to Finland an equal chance to integrate into Finnish society.

To overcome the language challenge, participants suggested more language services for the immigrant at their municipalities of resident and directly accessible to the immigrants. For immigrants who come to Finland as students, the Finnish language should be taught in school for an hour a day throughout the time of study.

“For international student, maybe you have Finnish language once a week and it's not enough because you are studying in English, then you have the language just once a week. Those ones you can cram them and you pass the course and that's why you cannot speak the language. Language should be like almost every day, maybe even one hour every day for the Finnish language Yes. So they should put an emphasis on language from day one.”-P1

This will ensure that upon graduation, the immigrant will be equipped with the necessary language skills to better integrate society.

Participants also recommended that society be more open and accepting of immigrants and give them more opportunities to showcase their skills and talents so they can thrive in the Finnish society.

“They could be other areas that you can maybe work you know apart from doing cleaning or doing all these other jobs, so, so my advice is that they should really take a structural adjustment in their society.”-P3

“I will say that they should give more opportunity to the immigrants. My advice will be give more opportunities to the immigrant because immigrants have so much potential and they are not given the opportunity.”-P2

“...so I can only recommend that maybe Finnish society can open up to immigrants into Finland to give them that space to showcase what they've learned back home..”-P4

By being responsive to the Cameroonian immigrant integration efforts, the Finnish society will enable them resolve related issues of better job prospects and an overall increase in their social mobility which will further strengthen their integration into the Finnish society.

9 Ethical Consideration, Reliability and Limitations

To ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research, it must be conducted in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; p.259). During our research we followed established ethical guidelines as laid down by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK; ethical principles for research with human participants (TENK, 2024). During the field work we explained to participants the overall purpose of our study highlighting that it was strictly an academic endeavor, we treated participants with respect for their dignity and autonomy, we ensured anonymity of the participants by not asking their personal information and using pseudonyms when referring to what was said and we made sure that our research caused no risk, harm or damage to participants. Before engaging in interviews we obtained informed consent from participants through a consent form (Appendix 2) filled and signed by participant. There was no need to obtain a research

permit to conduct the interviews since membership at the CAMFIN association is voluntary and the association lack the staff to process permits. All participants were engaged in the process voluntarily and were free to withdraw from the interview at any time if they feel uncomfortable. Their collected data was stored as encrypted files behind password protected computers to ensure confidentiality. Finally we explain to each participant that all the data including transcriptions will be completely destroyed once the thesis is approved and published.

We solicited respondent validation (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2015 p.259). This means we presented our findings to the participants and asked them if it was accurate representation of their insights into the topic which they validated. Given we are Cameroonian immigrants as well, seeking respondent validation was also an important way of eliminating our biases being projected into the finding and eliminating any possibility of misinterpretation of what participants actually said (Maxwell, 2013 pp126-127 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015 p.246).

It is important to bring to the fore the limitations encountered in our qualitative research study on the integration experiences of adult Cameroonian immigrants in order to be able to pinpoint potential constraints that could have influenced the results of our study. We must acknowledge that the sample size of the study was limited to the Helsinki area and as such may not be generalizable to the entire Cameroonian immigrant community in Finland. Moreover, our interview sample size of four participants is not enough to solidify the general experience of Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. Qualitative interviewing is normally based on a few cases and cannot be generalised. (Brinkmann, 2013). Furthermore, the results of our study were entirely based on the views of our research participants who may be biased or influenced by other circumstances prevailing at the particular time of the interviews. Since we relied solely on this data collection method, this might have potential limitations on our results. Also, language barrier could have played into our research results as we used the English language to conduct our interviews potentially sidelining French speaking Cameroonians immigrants whose input might have impacted the results of the study. In addition, time constraint may have limited our potential to explore in-depth the integration challenges of Cameroonian immigrants as we were working within a specific

timeframe. We strive to be as objective throughout our study as possible but we can also acknowledge that there may be some biases not obvious to us that might have influenced the results of our study. Research interviews depend on the specific meetings between the interviewer and interviewee, and they cannot be repeated in the same form with other people involved. Different analysts of the same empirical interview materials will interpret these interviews in different ways (Brinkmann, 2013, p 143). These limitations are important to consider and subsequent studies should avoid any or all of the pitfalls.

10 DISCUSSION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In this section we discuss our findings from the research and also look at some professional competences which we enhanced as a result of the research process.

10.1 Discussion

In our research into the integration experiences of Cameroonian immigrants, participants identified language barrier as a major challenge to their integration into Finnish society. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Teinye, 2013; Laguinday 2020; Udah et al., 2019) that spotlight language as key impediment to successful immigrant integration. The insufficient language skills revealed by our research also highlight participants' challenges with cultural dimension of integration into the Finnish society (Schunk, 2014). The role of host country language in the integration process cannot be overemphasized. Proficiency in the host country language play a pivotal role in sociocultural adjustment (El Khoury, 2019; cited in Udayar et al., 2021). Proficiency in host country language also give the immigrant the ability to seize career opportunities (Zacher, 2019 cited in Udayar et al., 2021) and language proficiency also acts as a facilitator to immigrants integration into other domains like housing, education, health and employment in the host society(Ager & Strang 2008; cited in Enns, et al., 2013). Lack of

Finnish language skills therefore is an impediment to the Cameroonian immigrants' quest for full integration into the Finnish society. Against this backdrop, participants' recommendation for increase in the language courses provided for immigrants is worth taking into consideration as this will better equip the immigrant with the most effective tool in their toolkit for better integration.

Participants also noted challenges with accessing employment that matches their skill set. Previous studies have highlighted this aspect as discrimination in the labour market (Teinye, 2013), lack of work experience (Laguinday, 2020; UDAH et al., 2019). These barriers to structural integration of Cameroonian immigrants via the labour markets which is one of the core aspects of structural integration of immigrants (Esser 1980, p.221; 2006b, p.27 cited in Schunk, 2014 p.32) can drive the immigrants into the fringes of the Finnish society as employment has been shown to be a means and marker of immigrant integration (Ager & Strang 2008; cited in Enns, et al., 2013). In addition, participants discussed challenges with the Finnish system and noted how they perceive it as stereotyping immigrants' role in society. This can be understood in terms of Ager & Strang (2008) level of social connections accentuated by an inadequacy in social bridges and social links (Ager & Strang 2008; cited in Enns, et al., 2013).

In our qualitative research, we set out to capture the integration challenges of adult Cameroonian immigrants in Helsinki. The first research question focused on the challenges Cameroonian immigrants encounter as they integrate into the Finnish society. The results revealed that these challenges were employment related, language barrier and systemic stereotyping of immigrants role. These challenges pose a barrier to the integration efforts of Cameroonian immigrants. The second research question explored possible solutions from the Cameroonian immigrants to ease their integration. From our research process, the results show that harmonization of integration programmes in Finland, accessible and more language courses for the immigrants and a society that is accepting of the immigrants will assuage the integration challenges faced by Cameroonian immigrants. For additional research we suggest the same study could be carried out across different immigrant groups so as to identify if these integration challenges are consistent across immigrants groups. This will provide a more robust results that

can alter policy on immigrant integration and lead to development of a better support system for the immigrants to integrate into the Finnish society.

10.2 Professional Development

Inasmuch as professional development is concern, we can point to various aspects in which we strengthened our competences when we compare these with the competence requirements for Bachelors of social services (Diak, 2024). To start with, the entire process of conducting a qualitative research, especially the field work was an opportunity for us to implement the theoretical knowledge in a practical setting. This is in line with the competence requirement to be able to plan, implement and evaluate social sector development projects in co-operation with various actors (Diak, 2024). Key aspects of the qualitative research process worthy of note being the ethics involved was observed in a real-world environment. These ethical principles such as confidentiality, treating participants with dignity and respect, anonymity of participants, participants data protection, no harm done during the research also resonate with the ethical competence of act in accordance with human and fundamental rights regulations, social values and professional ethics (Diak, 2024) in the social services competences which were enhanced during the entire research process. The thesis process also gave us the opportunity to deepen our knowledge on immigrant integration discovering challenges Cameroonian immigrant face in their integration efforts and possible solutions to make their integration into the Finnish society easier. This relates to the competent requirement to support the growth, development and everyday life of individuals, groups and communities in different life situations and in a goal-oriented manner (Diak, 2024)

Furthermore, by working with our partner organization we further strengthened skills in networking, professional communication, discipline, and time management. These skills are essential for practice in the social work milieu.

At the data analysis stage in the research process, we strengthened our skills in critical thinking. By reading through the entire data and discerning relevant findings related to our research question using coding, categorization and thematic analysis we enhance our critical thinking skills.

The process also introduced us to learn how to do a qualitative research by actually doing a qualitative research. From thinking up a research interest to design, then relevant literature search and onto collecting, storing, transcribing, analyzing and presenting the findings in the form of a thesis report we acquired skills on doing a qualitative research which we can use to pursue further academic education. These competences are also in line with the competency requirement to be able to apply research, development and innovation methods and produces and analyses data to promote well-being (Diak, 2024).

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APPENDIX 1. Interview questions

GUIDE QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEW

QUESTIONS TO ESTABLISH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

- a. How long have you lived in Finland?
- b. Do you have a valid residence permit in Finland at the moment?
- c. What do you do at the moment?
- d. Do you speak any of these languages; Finnish/Swedish?

MAIN QUESTIONS

1. What is your opinion on immigrant integration programmes in Finland?
2. Tell me about your experiences as an immigrant in Helsinki
4. What are the challenges that you are facing in your integration into the Finnish society?
3. I'll like you to describe examples of situations in your life that capture these challenges
5. Before you moved to Finland, what were your expectations about the immigrant integration into the Finnish society? Compare with the experiences in Question 3.
6. What developmental proposals can you recommend to improve the immigrant integration into the Finnish Society?
7. As a result of your integration into the Finnish society, where do you see yourself in the next 5 years in Finland in sectors such as in work life, education or more?

APPENDIX 2. Consent Form

Dear participant, we are conducting an academic qualitative research on the integration challenges of adult Cameroonian immigrants and possible solutions for our bachelor's thesis at Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Diak). We kindly request your voluntary participation by answering our questions. With your permission we shall record the conversation with our own password protected mobile phone to be transcribed and analysed later. All your answers shall be confidentially stored as encrypted files behind password protected personal computer and your anonymity is assured by using pseudonyms if we must refer to some quotes from you. All the interview data shall be completely destroyed when our thesis report is accepted. We also request that you sign the consent form to indicate that you understand and accept to be interviewed. We can meet for the interview at CAMFIN meeting hall at a time convenient to you and you can withdraw from the interview if you feel uncomfortable at any time. We abide by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK); ethical principles for research with human participants and no harm is intended throughout the interview.

Diak

Written consent to use study module assignments in research and development

Module and assignment name

Person(s) responsible

The results will be published in the development report / research article/ further development work for the project.

I have been told about the purpose of the aforementioned assignment and that the written material will be used in Diak's research and development work. I am aware that participation is voluntary. I am also aware that my identity will remain known only to the researcher(s).

Date

Signature, name in capital letters and student number:
