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New explorations in Finnish migration studies: the emerging case of the skilled migrants

Kaisu Koskela

Finland has traditionally not been a country of immigration. The number of immigrants is still comparatively small. Research in the field has concentrated on culturally distant groups and their problems in integrating into Finnish society. The first studies of 2nd generation immigrants have recently also added to the academic discussion.

However, a new field within Finnish migration studies is now emerging, that of the study of the highly-skilled migrant labour force. This is still a very small group within the immigration statistics, but one that differs vastly from the immigration that Finland has previously received. The skilled migrants are generally seen as an economic concern, and much of the research reflects this.

Therefore issues related to the social sphere and integration have been to a large extent ignored. This article will look at the initial results of this emerging research field, and offer recommendations for future research while drawing links between relevant research and policy making.

Introduction

Immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in Finland. The first noticeable groups of immigrants arrived in the early 1990's from Somalia as refugees. Before that there had only been very small numbers of refugees coming from Chile and Vietnam in the late 1970's (Forsander, 2002). Migration in larger numbers started even later when the government passed a law allowing so called ethnic return migration¹ of people of Finnish descent from the territory of Ingria in today's Russia. An estimated 25 000 – 30 000 Ingrian Finns² have arrived to Finland since 1990. Finnish immigration is also characterised by an un-proportionate number of marriage-migrants³ and family reunifications.

All in all, immigration is characterised largely by humanitarian reasons. Immigration from other EU nations is still small, but has slowly picked up since Finland joined EU in 1995. At the end of 2008 there were 143 256 people of foreign nationalities living in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2008). The largest groups come from Russia, Estonia, Sweden and Somalia. The overall number of immigrants is very small compared to other European countries, making up only 2.7% of the whole population of Finland compared to for example 12.3% in Sweden (UN Department

¹ The law is based on the kindred peoples thinking; 'return' migration is allowed for those that are able to prove that at least two out of four grandparents are ethnic Finns.

² Estimates vary largely because return migration in its early stages was largely uncontrolled. In addition, Ingrians get lost in statistics as Russian nationals.

³ I.e. people migrating to Finland because of a Finnish spouse. Foreign wives most often come from Russia, Estonia and Thailand, and husbands from UK, US, and Turkey (Janinskaja-Lahti et al, 2002).

of Economic and Social Affairs' Population Division, 2007).

All of the existing immigrant groups can be described as non-labour force migrants. In fact, labour or economic migration has not been an issue in Finland until very recently. The 'baby boom' generation of post-war Finland, together with an economy in its baby steps, meant that there was little need for the imported labour force necessary for most of Western Europe to work in labour-intensive industries. In fact, while Finland's neighbours sought labour migrants from Southern Europe and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, Finns themselves emigrated in masses in search of better opportunities. During the late 1960's and early 1970's one tenth of the baby boomers emigrated, mainly to Sweden, but in large numbers also to North-America and Australia. Today 1 million people of Finnish descent still live outside of Finland (Sagne et al, 2005). Immigration into Finland started to exceed emigration only at the turn of 1980's to 1990's (Forsander, 2002).

The early 1990's also saw Finland starting to heavily invest in the development of internet and communication technologies. The continued development of this sector has made Finland's economy competitive in the global scale. However, the aging of the native population poses a problem that is expected to be an even bigger economic concern in Finland than in most other Western European nations. By 2015, it is estimated that there will be an equal number of those working to those being dependents in Finland (Forsander, 2002). In 2000, a controversial study estimated that even as many as 2,1 million foreign employees (both skilled and unskilled) are needed by the year 2020 if the current levels of welfare state and its support ration are to be maintained (Wallenius, 2001:12). At present, Finland is not attracting anywhere near such numbers. Furthermore, even fewer of those arriving are considered highly skilled. In comparison

to other EU countries, Finland rates very poorly in attracting managerial and professional staff from abroad. Despite the success of the ICT industry, Finland attracts roughly the same amount of skilled workforce as countries such as Greece and Portugal⁴ (Forsander and Raunio, 2005).

To make matters worse, Finland is one of the very few OECD countries that are actually suffering from brain drain⁵, as its own highly educated people are leaving the country for employment opportunities elsewhere at the same time that it has failed to establish itself as a desirable location for skilled migrants coming in (Dumont and Lemaître, 2005). This situation poses a double threat for a country expecting the same labour shortage in the coming years that its western neighbours have been preparing for a while already⁶. The Finnish government has been criticised for being late to react to the need to attract skilled immigrants. As Forsander puts it: *Finland's immigration policy has not been determined by labor market considerations; instead it has developed as a result of external pressures, such as international agreements, or on the basis of ethnic loyalty* (2003:56). Recruitment of skilled labour from abroad is still low compared to other EU-countries (ibid, 2004) and policies designed to attract skilled migrants are few. At present, employment permit procedures

⁴ The share of non-nationals in managerial level employment in Finland is 1,3%, while the EU average is 4,1%. For comparison, the same figure in Sweden is 4,3% (Forsander and Raunio, 2005:29. Figures based on Auriol and Sexton, 2002).

⁵ More educated Finns leave Finland than educated immigrants move to Finland. Finland together with Ireland are therefore the only EU-15 countries that are not beneficiaries of worldwide skilled migration flows.

⁶ Many countries have adapted their labour migration policies to facilitate the entry of skilled migrants and to allow foreign students to access their labour markets after graduation. Some have also launched specific recruitment programmes. In addition, tax deductions are commonplace (e.g. skilled migrants in Sweden pay no taxes from the first 25% of their income for the first 10 years, and Norway grants a standard 15% deduction for a period of 4 years) (Dumont and Lemaître, 2005:25).

are restrictive and slow, and only a few tax deductions are offered for foreigners working in Finland⁷.

The situation is one that needs conscious efforts. Policies that attract and motivate skilled migrants to Finland, and most importantly commit them to stay here, are needed. These policies should be grounded in relevant research that is case-specific to Finland. The right type of research into skilled migration is therefore crucial for Finland not to be left out of the skilled migrant flows so very important in today's global economy.

Research in the field

Research in the field of skilled migration to Finland is in its baby steps. Studies in the migration field so far have concentrated on longer established, culturally distant groups and their problems with integrating in Finland. Recently the field has also witnessed the first studies of 2nd generation immigrants, an issue that has only become a reality in the past decade. Skilled migrants first started to appear in Finnish academic research in the early 2000's, mainly in discussion of the internationalisation of the labour market and its implications for the economy. The establishment of the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) in Helsinki in 2007 seems to have spurred a new wave of interest in the subject. There are several interesting ongoing research projects, such as 'InterProF'⁸ that tracks the integration of ECHA workers as a longitudinal study from a social psychology perspective. 'ACRE'⁹ in

its turn is in the field of social geography. This international project examines the strengths and weaknesses of the Helsinki metropolitan region as a living environment for highly skilled workforce. My own ethnographic research deals with issues of alterity, social identity and integration among skilled migrants in the Helsinki region¹⁰. All these studies will no doubt add to our understanding of the specificities of skilled migration to Finland. Furthermore, they will offer insights to the social reality and social integration of these migrants, an issue that has largely been ignored and one that I will concentrate on in this article.

Considerations for terminology

A few words should be said about terminology. There are many terms used to define what are here referred to as 'skilled migrants'. *Expatriates* is a term that is often used especially in non-academic writing and also by skilled migrants themselves. However, expatriation in relation to global employment entails an expatriate contract from outside the host country (as opposed to local employment agreement) and therefore implies a predetermined, limited stay. Furthermore, expatriate contracts often retain the person also in the country of the company, making them only partial immigrants, at least at legislative level. In this way expatriates are often what Appleyard has termed *professional transient*; migrants whose careers keep them in constant transition from place to place (Appleyard, 1989).

A relatively new term in the field is *internationals*. This term is not related to employment, rather describes the character of the type of people in question; they have lived their lives in various countries, and identify with a global cosmopolitan culture.

⁷ A foreigner working in Finland may qualify for a special tax at a flat rate of 35% during a period of 24 months if he receives any Finnish-source income for duties requiring special expertise and earns a cash salary of €5,800 or more per month. This law provides that the expert has not been resident in Finland any time during the five preceding years. (Dumont and Lemaître, 2005:25).

⁸ InterProF: *Factors Ensuring Integration Among International High Skilled Professionals in Finland*. For English summary of the project see Yijälä, 2008.

⁹ ACRE: *Accommodating Creative Knowledge* –

Competitiveness of European Metropolitan Regions within the Enlarged Union. See project web-site: <http://acre.socsci.uva.nl/>

¹⁰ Ongoing PhD research conducted at the Department of Sociology at University of Helsinki

They are *global nomads*, free spirits who supposedly go wherever they please, as opposed to *nomads of global economy* (Trux, 2002:181) who follow employment opportunities. In this sense the term also juxtaposes them against the 'typical' immigrant, which in laymen's terms implies a longer stay often not of one's own choice (i.e. humanitarian immigrants).

'Skilled migrants' is not without its problems either. First of all, measuring who is 'skilled' is difficult. Levels of education have often been used as measurement, but they are seldom included in national statistics on immigration. Furthermore, appreciation for certain skills is dependent on need. Is a construction worker or a nurse then any less skilled than a biotechnology expert or an IT engineer? The final report of the Global Commission for International Migration even suggests that: *the traditional distinction between skilled and unskilled workers is in certain respects an unhelpful one [...] While they may have different levels of educational achievement, all of them could be legitimately described as essential workers* (2005:7).

Calculating skilled migrants from statistical data is made difficult because of their 'invisibility'. Skilled migrants cannot be identified by gender, age, nationality, language or religion. They also cannot be defined by educational status, visa type or employment status alone. Many are not even registered resident in the country where they work because of employment contracts that keep them in two or more countries. In addition, those who arrive to a country as immigrants but later acquire citizenship get lost in the statistics. The most comprehensive attempt so far to shed light on these issues and to combine national statistics is a 2005 OECD working paper (Dumont and Lemaître, 2005).

Still, actual numbers are hard to provide. Immigration to Finland for work reasons is estimated to account for around 10% of the total immigration flow

(Forsander et al, 2008). For the purposes of this article, skilled migrants should be viewed as an umbrella term; many of them may be (or may have been originally) expatriates, most are certainly international (if not international), all are immigrants, and some might even identify themselves as 'transient' and 'global'.

Case studies

Whereas previous migrants arrived into Finland mainly due to humanitarian reasons and were therefore seen as a moral issue, skilled migrants are primarily seen as an economical concern. Much of research has followed this logic. Studies have concentrated largely on the legislative and economic issues of skilled migration (e.g. Kananen, 2006; Forsander, 2002), or on finding out how employers can better attract foreign workforce (e.g. Trux 2000; Sippola et al, 2006). Little is known about the social aspects and the actual experience of living in Finland as a skilled migrant. As is argued, this type of research is paramount for attracting and later committing skilled migrants to Finland.

The following is therefore an overview of case studies that have taken into consideration also life outside the workplace. Reading between the lines of these studies shows that Finland's supposed trump cards of high quality of living standards, safety and nature are not strong enough pull-factors for attracting, and certainly not for committing, skilled migrants to Finland. Furthermore, they imply that the social sphere is where most problems are felt and that it is considered very important when deciding whether to stay on in Finland or not.

Finland in the 'global field of choices': the pull factors

One of the only long-term researchers of skilled labour migrants in Finland is Mika Raunio. Although much of Raunio's research is also from the point of view of

economic considerations for companies hiring skilled migrants (e.g. Raunio, 2001; 2005), some is from the perspective of the skilled migrants themselves, on their motivations and choices (Raunio, 2002a; 2002b; 2003). His research gives some insight into the motivations of skilled migrants coming to Finland.

Because of the globalization of economy, skilled migrants move and work in a 'global field of choices' that consists of interconnected nodes or places (rather than states and cities per se). Finland does not fare well in this field. It is often considered distant, expensive, unfamiliar and cold. In addition, Finnish migration and labour policies and their late awakening to the competition for global talent create a major problem; Finland is very little known even as a viable option for skilled migrants. Raunio notes that an actual absence of knowledge creates doubts about the chances of a country to offer meaningful career opportunities or even a decent quality living environment (Raunio and Sotarauta, 2005). In this way Finland's little known reputation may place it outside the 'global field of choices' all together.

Actors in this field of choices can be said to follow three types of reasoning: there are 'global nomads' following economic opportunities, 'quality-of-life migrants' and those migrating for social relationships (like marriage and family) (2002b:6, see also Forsander et al [2004:121] for similar division). In a number of cases the reasons for coming to Finland were related to social relations. However, Raunio finds the majority of his informants to follow the 'global nomads'-logic, motivated by career advancement and financial gain. Other studies (e.g. Hautala, 2006) contradict this and name 'quality-of-life' migration as the main motivation among skilled migrants coming to Finland.

Raunio and Sotarauta's later research (2005) shows that Finland is rarely chosen

because of itself. Rather it is chosen because of the job that has been acquired prior to coming to Finland. Similarly, Trux (2002) has found that people choose to work here not because of Finland or because of particular company per se, rather because of the combination of both of them as a package, and in careful comparisons to other (often global) options. Also, again, a central role in this package is played by existing social relations in Finland.

The good and the bad: committing and distancing factors

Those that do choose Finland, report to appreciating it because of the low-stress character of working conditions and flexibility of the workplace. This relates to long holidays, short working days, and consideration for family responsibilities (Raunio, 2003). Finnish working culture is also considered a 'humane alternative to Silicon Valley' for the possibilities it offers to combine work and family life (Forsander and Trux, 2002:230). Other positive points have been named as equality, safety and the generally slow pace of life (Forsander and Raunio, 2005), as well as nature and cleanliness (Raunio, 2003).

Finnish modes of interaction, associated with poor communication skills and limited conversation, were seen as distancing factors. This also relates to an often reported difficulty in forming social relationships, both with Finns as well as other foreigners. Raunio's research shows that forming friendships and acquiring acquaintances is felt to be especially difficult in Finland because of the small sizes of foreign nationality-clusters. There are also marked differences in social interaction between the immigrants' own culture and Finnish culture, and the Finns are felt to be unfamiliar with foreigners and multiculturalism in general (2002b).

Trux (2002) also reports disappointment in the language skills of

officials in public services, and a lack of forms and available information in English. In addition, culture and climate are often reported as reasons to leave. Some of Trux's interviewees said they had difficulty in tolerating both 'the cold climate and cold people' (ibid:208)). The remoteness of the country is felt both geographically as well as culturally, and this feeling is magnified by Finland's small size (although this can also be a positive factor for some).

However, the most strongly felt negative factors for skilled migrants living in Finland are connected to the level of salaries and taxation, and to poor opportunities for career advancement. Majority of those interviewed by Raunio did not think it likely that they would seek further employment in Finland after their contracts run out. Their chances of getting a local contract were seen as slim because of lack of social networks and the (often unnecessary) requirement for Finnish language skills (Raunio, 2003). However, those whose (often Finnish) spouse's work was tied to Finland were more willing and likely to try finding further employment in Finland¹¹. In fact, it seems that those with any type of social contacts were not only more likely to come to Finland, but are also more likely to stay in the long term.

As for the dissatisfaction in salaries and taxation, only six percent of respondents in Raunio's research 'strongly agree' that their salary is satisfactory and only three percent that their level of taxation is tolerable (ibid:37). Furthermore, the Finnish welfare state, the supposed trump card attracting immigrants, was not seen as a positive, rather a negative factor. Trux has dealt with this in her research (2002). She has concluded that the Finnish welfare state model, upheld by heavy taxation, is simply

not compatible with skilled migrants' wants and needs; its pension schemes, free education and health care are not relevant to most skilled migrants. For many, children's schooling is not even an issue (many are single, and/or have no children), and as far as health care was concerned, it is often provided by the company itself through the private sector, making free public health care useless. Where the public health care was used, its quality (waiting times, payments per visit) was not found satisfactory. Furthermore, as most of those interviewed were not planning to stay in Finland, they were not trusting that they would ever get return for the payments they made every month. All in all, the general feeling is that the skilled migrants are paying to a system that they neither want, nor use themselves. In short, they felt they were paying for the Finnish people's health care and schooling.

Economic versus social factors

It therefore seems that the logic of skilled migrants themselves also works according to economic considerations, and would thus justify the bias in research. At closer look, however, social factors come to play a larger part than their proportional presentation in statistics might lead one to believe; although decisions to come to Finland are often made according to economic and career related considerations, the decision to stay is largely influenced by social factors. For example: *those planning to leave felt less frequently that their place of residence was open and the people easily approachable than those planning to stay* (Raunio and Sotarauta, 2005:23) and *Failure of adjustment of the spouse is among the biggest reasons for the departure of a foreign employee from the company* (Trux, 2002:204).

Although one of the biggest complaints from skilled migrants in Finland is connected to levels of wages and taxation, these are not sufficient factors to push them out of the country. Rather that decision rests in the social sphere. Raunio and Sotarauta

¹¹ Over 70% of those planning to remain permanently in Finland had a Finnish spouse or partner. The committing effect is emphasized if the couple have children of school age or if the spouse's professional skill was linked to Finnish society (e.g. teacher) (Raunio and Sotarauta, 2005:25)

agree: *Being an outsider both in one's own work community and in society is formed from many factors, but from the perspective of the individual it is clearly a factor which disconnects or even pushes from the region. High quality of living environment or safety will not be sufficient to keep skilled migrants in Finland if other factors are not right* (2005:23).

Living environment

Lastly, the importance of living environment is another factor that has started to attract attention. Kepsu and Vaattovaara's (2008) report for the ACRE project states that 'soft' location factors, which include cultural and leisure amenities, people's attitudes, as well as availability of open green spaces, should be paid more attention to (as opposed to only the 'hard' location factors of salary, transportation and public services). Kepsu and Vaattovaara follow economic geographer Richard Florida's claim that companies will follow where the right workers are available (Florida 2002; Florida and Tinagli, 2004). This would imply that employees do not solely migrate where the work is, rather the work will be available where they are already willing to migrate to. Therefore, for development of urban policies attention should be paid to the movement patterns of people rather than firms, as their consequential relationship may be opposite to that assumed. Kepsu and Vaattovaara interviewed national migrants moving within Finland working in the creative and knowledge intensive industries. In these interviews, soft factors consistently ranked among top four important factors when considering where to live. Especially diversity of leisure and entertainment opportunities was seen as important.

Raunio's research shows that among the skilled migrants in Finland many of these soft factors received low satisfaction ratings. Around half of the respondents felt that their home region did not offer enough cultural activities and night life, and that

people were not open and approachable¹². However, the importance of cultural services and night life were most often *not* considered as 'very important' nor even 'quite important' factors in the choice of place to live (Raunio and Sotarauta, 2005:20). Therefore, contrary to Kepsu and Vaattovaara's hypothesis, it could be assumed that most of the skilled migrants who do decide to come to Finland are not too concerned about soft location factors in any case. Perhaps those who want a big global city with active cultural and night lives leave Finland out of their field of choices altogether. Kepsu and Vaattovaara's ACRE study is continuing with results from interviews with transnational workers (i.e. skilled migrants). Hopefully it will offer more data for future discussion¹³.

Linking research to policy

The reviewed studies show that Finland is largely seen as a transitional place. Skilled migrants move here because of interesting and challenging work opportunities that will further their careers, and are therefore willing to put up with low wages and high taxes. However, lack of social contacts (needed both for career advancement and social life), limited or no knowledge of language, difficulty in understanding Finnish modes of communication, and lack of cultural and social activities are all reasons that push skilled migrants to leave Finland. Many see no factors other than their work that would commit them to stay. All in all, it seems that

¹² The cultural activities of my home region are sufficient (58.2% 'strongly' or 'mostly agree'); Night life in my home region is lively enough (55%) (Raunio and Sotarauta, 2005:19, figure 5); The atmosphere of my current home region is open and people approachable (49.2%); I have enough friends or/and a well functioning social network in my current home region (61.5%); The atmosphere of my current home region is international (53%) (ibid:22, figure 6).

¹³ Note: since the writing of this article the results of Kepsu and Vaattovaara's interviews with transnational migrants in Helsinki have been published (see References: Kepsu et al, 2009).

skilled migrants are poorly integrated into the Finnish society.

Towards social integration: the role of the third sector

A recent report (Carroll et al, 2009) commissioned by the City of Helsinki Urban Facts centre recognises three stages in successfully attracting and committing skilled migrants to Finland. First stage is to find and recruit the right type of migrants. Secondly, the company must educate and integrate the *skills* of these migrants in order to get the best benefits from their 'investment'. The third stage should be to integrate the migrant *as an individual*, as this is the only way to gain long term benefit by committing the person to stay. This last point is often ignored or poorly executed. Therefore integration stops within the work place, leaving the migrant disconnected from Finland and its society.

Having a life outside the workplace is naturally important for quality of life. The studies previewed show that various levels of social integration, finding meaningful activities and having friends are recognised as important factors for skilled migrants who consider remaining in the country. At the very least, unhappiness in one's social life can bring added pressure to leave. These issues are not, however, part of the official integration programme designed by the state, or even part of the private relocation services often provided by employers¹⁴.

Issues with social life are therefore left for the individuals themselves to figure out. Help in this matter could be provided by the third sector. The Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO), a working group appointed by the Ministry of the Interior, has recommended that the role of the third sector should be clarified and emphasised in

the integration of immigrants, and made into an official part of the integration programme. So far the role of third sector organisations has been to work against racism and to maintain cultural contact within any one ethnic/cultural group. Third sector organisations and projects could, however, be very helpful in working as avenues of cross-cultural understanding, as well as integrating and committing also skilled immigrants (ETNO, 2008).

Carroll et al's report agrees. They conclude that the involvement of third sector services geared at establishing social contacts and activities is needed for successful social integration of skilled migrants (2009)¹⁵. These services can improve knowledge of cultural and communicational differences on both sides and are therefore ultimately what may change the unflattering views of the Finnish culture, people and styles of communication from the negative column to the positive. Third sector is also where important peer support could be organised. Trux (2002) has remarked that as well as wanting to make contacts with Finnish people, many skilled migrants feel the need to meet their compatriots and partake in activities in their own language. As one informant puts it: *The coldness of Finnish people is starting to get to me. If I had not been able to talk about my impressions with other foreigners at our company, I would have probably gone crazy* (ibid:205).

Paying more attention to social integration outside the workplace would complete the continuum of successful skilled migration policies from recruitment to arrival, and to integration that aims at committing the migrants to stay. In this aspect research into the social sphere of the lives of skilled migrants in Finland can be

¹⁴ These relocation services concentrate only on the practicalities after arriving in Finland, such as finding an apartment, getting permits, schooling and healthcare, and finding employment for spouses.

¹⁵ There are already such services, but the field functions mainly on voluntary and hobby basis and attracts hardly any public funding. For an example, see Jolly Dragon, a Helsinki based activities organisation bringing together Finns and foreigners in a social setting (www.jollydragon.net).

helpful in the global competition for skilled talent. Good social policy will also help to establish a better reputation for Finland as a viable option in the global field of choices.

Conclusion

Having long been a country of (labour) emigration, Finland has seen the tide turn towards immigration. This trend needs to be actively strengthened to counterbalance the effects of a rapidly aging population in order to maintain the current levels of welfare state and its support ration.

Research in the field has showed that skilled migrants see the Finnish levels of wages and taxes as major draw-backs. It is clear that adjustment of preferential taxing systems and possibilities for opting out of welfare state services should be implemented. Furthermore, the possibility for a type of Green Card scheme or points system for skills-based admission should also be explored in order to establish Finland as a serious contender for global talent.

However, research into the social sphere of skilled migrants' lives shows that social integration programmes are also desperately needed. Finland and its people are seen as distant, unfamiliar and cold, and the skilled migrants feel unattached from the society at large. These issues have been left out of discussion about policies concerning skilled migration. Skilled immigrants are viewed as temporary employees rather than permanent additions to the Finnish workforce and society. Therefore designing policies for social integration has not been considered necessary.

This attitude has been proven wrong before; integration policies only became an issue after humanitarian migrants ended up staying against predictions. In relation to skilled migrants, integration policies should be an issue in order to *persuade* them to stay, against predictions.

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