

Highly skilled refugees in Sweden: Labour market and workplace experiences

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Background

In 2015, Sweden received approximately 163 000 asylum-seekers (Swedish Migration Agency 2020), which is the highest ever received to date (SCB 2020) and one of the highest per capita of any European state in that year (Eurostat 2016). In 2024, almost ten years later, many of these arrivals will have had experiences of applying for and obtaining various forms of employment in Sweden, after long processing times for permanent residency, completion of language courses and the Swedish Establishment Program.

Studies have shown, however, that refugees experience many obstacles to labour market and workplace integration (Diedrich et al. 2020:5; SOU 2003:73; Bevelander 2011; Delmi 2015; Åhs and Daryani 2019). Migrants, and particularly refugees, are repeatedly shown to be far from the labour market. Refugees in high-income countries have lower labour participation than the majority population and other immigrant groups, and this trend remains persistent even ten years after immigration (Brell, Dustmann and Preston 2020:103–104). This “refugee gap” (Fasani, Frattini and Minale 2022; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2017) is also present in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2019; Statistics Sweden 2023; Dessimirova, Grondin and Williams n.d.:11). While these statistics give us vital information about migrant and refugee groups, they say little about individual experiences on their path to employment. Much can be learned from refugees themselves about their labour market integration and the opportunities and constraints they face that provides nuances to these previous findings. Moreover, they can help contextualise the underlying processes for the “refugee gap”. Importantly, this information can also be useful for bridging this employment gap and contributing to a more successful “integration” process.

This study therefore focuses on the workplace experiences of highly skilled refugees and the workplace and labour market integration process. The study’s research questions are the following:

1. What are highly skilled refugees’ labour market and workplace experiences? What opportunities and constraints exist for highly skilled refugees on their path to employment and while integrating at a workplace?
2. How can we understand the statistical “refugee gap” in light of these opportunities and constraints?

Methods and Data

The study employs a qualitative approach with three types of data gathering in order to examine highly skilled refugees’ labour market and workplace integration experiences. Primarily, the thesis builds upon 53 semi-structured interviews—33 with actors from integration initiatives and 20 with refugee engineers. The interviews are focused on the labour market and workplace experiences of the refugee engineers, and the constraints and opportunities that they face when trying to obtain employment.

In addition, data was also collected through observations—at two refugee engineers’ workplaces as well as job fairs, labour market internship programmes, labour market mentoring programmes, and labour market training courses. These observations provided background information about opportunities that exist for highly skilled refugees, as well as insights from their actual workplace about workplace practices and formal and informal communication between

colleagues. I have also conducted complimentary desk research that has consisted of reading official reports about labour market initiatives and examining informational material about the Swedish Public Employment Service, migration and labour market regulations, and legislation that was relevant for highly-skilled refugees labour market integration and the diploma accreditation process.

The interviews, observations and conducted desk research served as the basis for analysis in the study. The analysis was based on transcripts and notes taken during observations. Coding was done in the qualitative data program NVivo as well as manually, focusing on understanding in what ways agency could be exercised or constrained and what opportunities and constraints highly skilled refugees experienced on the labour market and workplace. The coding process included finding semi-regularities across the interview material and creating subthemes from the highest number of occurring codes. These were then used to hypothesise larger underlying structural mechanisms which could have given rise to these observed results, in accordance with a critical realist research methodology.

Theoretical Starting Points

Theoretically, the study takes on a structure and agency perspective. Refugees are seen as agents who manoeuvre through structural landscapes of opportunities and constraints. Refugees, like all other individuals, have agency but this agency can be constrained to a higher or lower degree by e.g. institutional factors which can make their path to employment longer or shorter, or more or less difficult.

Structure and agency are viewed through a critical realist lens. According to Bhaskar (1983), social structures are capable of enabling and constraining agency and social action (Banai 1995:567). Humans are “causally influenced by external factors”, but human action at the same time “may be affected by social causes without being *fully determined* by them” (Elder-Vass 2010:87). Different agents can experience more or less severe structural constraints, and this impacts the opportunities they have to influence their situation (cf. Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010:229). Moreover, structures are, in turn, also affected by human agents. Critical realism maintains that while social structures ontologically exist, they are (re)produced and transformed “through our decisions and actions (human agency)” (Banai 1995:567). Human agents, like structures, also have causal properties (Elder-Vass 2010:114), which means that they can affect their surroundings. This critical realist perspective allows for examining both agency and structure, and how they relate to workplace and labour market integration processes, without focusing solely on one and risk not seeing causal effects associated with either individual agents, or the organisations and social institutions with which they come into contact.

Moreover, labour market and workplace integration is also theorised within a structure and agency framework, and the often under-theorised concept of “integration” is clearly defined in terms of being able to exercise agency on the labour market and at the workplace.

Preliminary Findings

The study’s results show both opportunities and constraints to highly skilled refugees’ labour market and workplace integration, both on an individual and institutional level. Opportunities for agency on the labour market path exist due to e.g. multitudes of integration initiatives, and the transferability of engineering science across national contexts. At the workplace itself, experiences of workplace integration are created due to helpful mentors, colleagues, onboarding and inclusive social and physical environments. However, obstacles to workplace and labour market integration occur because of a lack of informed agency – both on the side of institutions as well as refugees, who do not know the best procedures to gain employment for this group. Case advisors at the Swedish Public Employment Service are for example not considered to be equipped to deal with

highly skilled refugees, having more knowledge and resources for helping obtain lower skilled jobs. Moreover, institutional discrimination on the labour market make it difficult to obtain access to jobs, and lack of funding for transport and unpaid internships create further obstacles. On an individual level, participants must also take e.g. family into account when making labour market decisions. All of these factors shed new light on highly skilled refugees' labour market and workplace experiences, and help contextualise the so-called "refugee gap" in previous findings, showcasing how refugees with an education prior to arrival manoeuvre through a structural landscape of opportunities and constraints.

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