

# INTERNATIONAL HIGHLY SKILLED MIGRATION: THE CASE OF FINLAND: AN INTRODUCTION

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The mobility and migration of highly skilled persons—defined as tertiary-degree holders and those with rare labor market expertise—has shot to the top of policy agendas around the globe, as the transfer of knowledge and talent has become recognized as crucial for growth and competitiveness. So is the case also in Finland, where the objective of the national *Future Migration 2020 Strategy* is “to create an immigration policy which supports the building of an unprejudiced, safe and pluralistic Finland, and enhances Finland’s international competitiveness” (Ministry of the Interior 2013a; see also Komulainen 2013, 119). This special issue of the *Journal of Finnish Studies* examines highly skilled migration that *originates from* or is *directed towards* this country at the Northern European periphery, outside of the more numerous global flows of highly skilled migrants.

The twenty-first century Finland is a net receiver of migrants: the number of those entering the country each year is higher than the number of those leaving. Finland became a net receiver of immigrants as late as in the 1990s, and the share of foreign citizens living in Finland is still only 3.4 percent. The share of the foreign-born is 4.8 percent of the population. In Sweden, for example, the share of foreign citizens is 6.8 percent and of the foreign-born 15 percent of the population (Eurostats Statistics Explained 2012). In the year 2012, a total of 31,280 migrants moved to Finland—the highest number since the country’s independence in 1917. More than half of those moving to Finland originate from other European Union member states (Statistics Finland 2013a). The largest groups of foreign citizens living in Finland are from the neighboring countries Estonia, Russia, and Sweden, followed by those originating from Somalia, China, and Iraq (Komulainen 2013, 113). In addition to the 183,133 foreign citizens living in Finland in 2011, there were

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also 60,000 individuals with dual citizenship. Among this group, the most common combination was to be both a citizen of Finland and of Russia, Sweden, or the United States (Ministry of the Interior 2013b, 4). The most common reasons stated in residence permit applications for moving to the country are family ties to Finland. According to Komulainen (2013), in 2011, 44 percent indicated that the reason for immigration to Finland was family; this reason was followed by employment (27 percent) and studies (25 percent). It is good to note that those who move from other European Union or European Economic Area countries, such as Sweden, Norway, or Estonia, for example, do not need to apply for residence permits.

Statistics Finland data on the education levels of incoming migrants are unfortunately incomplete, as they do not include information on all degrees completed abroad. Therefore, estimations of the numbers of highly skilled migrants living in Finland have to be taken with a grain of salt. Based on the data available, however, it can be noted that in 2010 24,682 foreign citizens living in Finland had completed a university or other tertiary level degree (18.2 percent). The share of those with a tertiary education was highest among those originating from China (33 percent), Germany (30 percent), and France (30.9 percent), and lowest among those originating from Somalia (1.5 percent), Afghanistan (5.6 percent), and Vietnam (7.3 percent) (Statistics Finland 2012a, 48–49). Research into migrant labor market integration has revealed that even a high education level does not guarantee employment in Finland (e.g., Kyhä 2011). In fact most migrants living in Finland are employed in occupations classified into the low- or medium-skilled sector, such as agriculture, gardening, and catering (Komulainen 2013). The unemployment rate of foreign citizens has generally been twice as high as that of the overall population: in 2011, 24 percent of foreign citizens living in Finland were unemployed, compared with 9 percent of the general population (Ministry of the Interior 2013b, 12; see also Heikkilä 2005).

It has been estimated that during the past one hundred and fifty years over 1.3 million Finns have emigrated abroad (Martikainen, Saukkonen, and Säävälä 2013, 26). The two largest waves of Finnish emigrants have headed to North America, mainly during 1880–1915, and to Sweden after World War II, especially during 1961–1970. Prior to the mass migration to the Americas at the turn of the twentieth century, and the migration of Finns to other distant countries such as Australia, various short-term and seasonal migration routes operated between Finland and its neighboring countries—Sweden, Russia, Estonia, and Northern Norway—for several centuries (Korkiasaari and Söderling 2007, 255–56). Current migration from Finland is much more diverse than it was before, as those leaving today make individual choices based on their own motivations for moving abroad either temporarily or permanently (see, e.g., Heikkilä and Koikkalainen 2011). For some, the motivation is grounded in career aspirations, while for others it is linked to love, family, or a personal lifestyle

choice—for instance, wanting to experience life in a global city such as London or New York or retirement in the sunny Spain or exotic Thailand. The importance of Sweden as the main destination of Finns moving abroad has been decreasing since the 1980s: in 1980, 79 percent of Finnish citizens who left Finland headed for Sweden, while in 2006 their share had fallen to 28 percent (Korkiasaari 2008, 16–17).

The countries attracting most migrants from Finland in 2011 were Sweden (2,754), the United Kingdom (1,066), the United States (991), Germany (938), and Estonia (751) (Statistics Finland 2013b). This number, however, includes also foreign citizens who have been resident in Finland. If the migration of only Finnish citizens is taken into account, Estonia drops to the ninth position (269 Finnish citizens) while Spain (576 Finnish citizens) takes its place as the fifth most popular destination country (Statistics Finland 2012b). However, these figures include only those who leave Finland for a period longer than a year. Many short-term forms of international mobility, such as student exchange, summer jobs, traineeships, and short company secondments abroad, are missing from these figures. The share of tertiary-educated migrants of all Finnish citizens moving abroad has varied between 21 to 36 percent within the past twenty years. In terms of numbers, this has meant that 1,115 (in 1991) to 3,802 (in 2001) highly educated Finns have moved abroad each year (Statistics Finland 2012b). The share of educated migrants has been the highest among those moving to China (57.0 percent), Luxembourg (54.5 percent), and Belgium (54.4 percent) and the lowest among those moving to Greece (21.2 percent) and Sweden (22.4 percent).

In the following sections of this introduction, we first describe some key global trends in highly skilled migration, define the key concepts used in this special issue, and highlight the reasons why it makes sense to examine this type of migration in the Finnish context. After noting the common themes that bind the articles chosen for this special issue together, the introduction ends with a short description of each of the articles: five of them focus on incoming migration to Finland, and four examine Finns who have moved abroad.

## **GLOBAL TRENDS IN HIGHLY SKILLED MIGRATION**

Highly qualified migrants with tertiary education accounted for thirty percent of all adult emigrants in the world in 1990; however, by 2000, this group had increased to thirty-five percent of the worldwide migrant stock (Lowell 2007). Thus, it has been argued that this increase in the numbers of highly skilled migrants was one of the “central migration stories of the 1990s” (Lowell 2007, 14). UNESCO further indicates that the number of international students, often seen as future highly skilled migrants, increased by more than seventy-five percent between 2000 and 2009 (Dervin 2011, 1). Highly skilled migration has undeniable impacts on both ends of the migration trajectory, but the effects on the countries vary. This type of

mobility has been referred to also as “the flight of the creative class” (Florida 2005) or “the mobility of knowledge workers” (Ackers and Gill 2008); highly skilled migrants themselves have been characterized as “the only truly accepted migrants of today” (Raghuram 2004). While crossing borders, these mobile professionals accumulate and develop academic traditions, *savoir faire*, and social networks, and they gain different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). The production and dissemination of knowledge generated by their activities has scientific and socio-economic impacts on countries and—increasingly—also on regions.

The numbers of highly skilled migrants crossing borders vary between different countries and regions. At the beginning of this decade about twenty million tertiary-educated immigrants resided in the OECD area, representing about eleven percent of the total highly skilled population living there. About 40 percent of the highly skilled migrants residing in the OECD originate from other OECD countries, and, thus, follow a pattern of *brain circulation* rather than being part of the *brain drain* of educated workers moving from less to more developed countries (Boeri et al. 2012; Habti 2012b). Many policy measures have been initiated in the departure countries to attract these expatriates “back home” so as to benefit from their competencies, management experience, and entrepreneurial skills. There are important benefits connected to this type of mobility: the financial remittances sent from abroad are an important source of income for many developing countries (e.g., Skeldon 2005). Understanding this mobility as a simple loss of talent for the sending country also ignores the fact that return migration can stimulate the transfer of knowledge, skills, innovations, and technological expertise to the countries of origin (Bertoli et al. 2012). Highly skilled migrants do not always intend to stay in their countries of destination permanently: circular mobility, return migration, and global careers built on a series of company secondments to various countries are important features of this particular type of migration.

Understanding highly skilled migration as a one-way flow of educated workers from developing to developed countries is an oversimplification that may obscure the fact that developed countries—such as Finland in our case—both receive and send highly skilled migrants. Most Western European countries are net senders of highly skilled labor to other OECD countries when the stocks of tertiary-educated incoming and outgoing migrants are compared. The following figures testify to the fact that international highly skilled mobility is a globally significant phenomenon, with clear policy implications: only in the United States (+3.4 million), Australia (+708,000), Canada (+643,000), Switzerland (+97,000), Belgium (+60,000), Sweden (+20,000), and Luxembourg (+8,000) were the estimated stocks of highly skilled migrants positive in 2001. Countries such as the United Kingdom (-970,000), Germany (-370,000), and Italy (-340,000) are experiencing significant outflows that are not being replaced by matching numbers of incoming skilled workers. So is the

case also for Finland, which according to the 2001 data had sent 72,500 tertiary-educated migrants to the other OECD countries, while it had received only 8,300 equally highly educated individuals in return. (Bertoli et al. 2012, 26–27)

With this collection of articles, published as a special issue of the *Journal of Finnish Studies*, we wish to diversify the current understanding of highly skilled migration and to give “a human face” (Favell, Feldblum, and Smith 2006) to highly skilled migrants who either originate from or choose to move to Finland. The real-life contexts where such migrants live and work play a crucial part in the structuring of their social life, as well as their social and career mobility (Habti 2012a) because their social relations build upon the intersection of three major fields: the workplace, family, and community. Their international mobility experiences and social relations are also formed by the relational nature of places (Urry 2007; Williams, Chaban, and Holland 2011). We are happy to note that in recent years the theoretical and empirical focus in the interdisciplinary field of highly skilled migration research has moved from the macro-level perspectives to include also research targeting the micro-level and including relational approaches (Ackers 2005; Williams and Baláz 2008; Habti 2012a; Koikkalainen 2011).

It is important to specify the difference between two key concepts used in this field, namely *migration* and *mobility*. In some current literature these terms are used interchangeably, while in other texts their meanings differ. The term *migration* usually entails movement from one country or location to another for necessity or with enforcement, while the term *mobility* infers a free and self-initiated move (e.g., Al Ariss 2010; Tharenou 2010). Migration is often also perceived to be somewhat longer in duration, while mobility refers to a shorter stay abroad (e.g., Carr, Inkson, and Thorn 2005; Agullo and Egawa 2009). Al Ariss (2010) refers to the difference in the terms “migrant” and “self-initiated expatriate” based on four features: geographical origin and destination of international mobility, the forced/chosen nature of this move, duration of stay abroad, and the symbolic status of a “migrant” as compared to a “self-initiated expatriate” in the country of destination.

In this special issue, both terms, *mobility* and *migration*, are used interchangeably as we have noted that circumstances and opportunities matter for the migration/mobility decision-making of a highly skilled migrant: an IT-engineer who intends to stay abroad only for the duration of her two-year assignment may decide to stay for good while a doctor who said farewell to his home country permanently may choose to return because of family, career, or lifestyle reasons. We prefer not to use the terms *emigration* and *immigration* in this context, because highly skilled migrants rarely see themselves as migrants, or the move abroad as final (e.g., Koikkalainen 2012; Tharenou 2010). As the articles of this collection testify, mobility of highly skilled individuals *to* and *from* Finland has many forms, and the paths leading to the country

of destination are diverse depending on the migration motivation, age, career, and life situation of each individual migrant.

Another important concept that needs to be defined is that of a *highly skilled migrant*. Migrants' skill levels are often determined by the number of years they have spent in formal education, professional training, or working in an occupation. The most basic definition, according to Lowell (2008, 52) is "restricted to persons with tertiary education, typically adults who have completed a formal two-year college education or more."<sup>2</sup> However, Lowell also concludes that "[m]ost frequently, governments define highly skilled migrants not in terms of either/or, but in terms of both education and occupation" (Lowell 2008, 53). Mahroum (2001, 29; see also Iredale 2001) identifies five different groups of highly skilled migrants: 1) senior managers and executives, 2) engineers and technicians, 3) scientists, 4) entrepreneurs, and 5) students. We have adopted a rather broad definition to emphasize the diversity within this migrant type: all migrants with a tertiary level degree, regardless of their occupation or migration motivation, are here seen as highly skilled. The individuals who feature in the articles of this special issue, and to whom we are grateful for sharing their life stories and experiences, include students, expatriates on global careers, seconded employees, i.e. persons who temporarily transfer to another post within their employer organization, women migrating for love and family reasons, young adults taking advantage of free movement in Europe, as well as those moving from the Global South to the Global North.

This special issue attempts to deconstruct the complex phenomenon of global highly skilled mobility from a new individual and relational perspective by providing new lessons and evidence from Finland. Because of the varied disciplinary backgrounds of our authors, a number of theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding, explaining, and interpreting the various dimensions of this migration phenomenon are represented. Moreover, the articles try to tune between different disciplines and theories, agents and organizations, politics and policies, the local and the global, the individual and the contextual, and the structures that affect transnational highly skilled migration. Yet, what all the articles of this special issue have in common is an in-depth, empirically driven examination of highly skilled migration in the Finnish context.

## LESSONS FROM FINLAND

Finland is interesting in several respects with regard to mobility and migration. From the outside, looking in, the country enjoys a media valorization that many might envy. *Newsweek* magazine has repeatedly singled out Finland as one of "The world's best countries," placing this small Nordic nation of slightly over 5.4 million

2 Tertiary education generally refers to degrees completed at universities and other institutions providing post-secondary education, such as colleges, technical training institutes, and nursing schools, for example.

persons in a leading position on the list in terms of education, quality of life, economic dynamism, and political environment (*Newsweek* 2010). In addition, educators from around the world travel to Finland in attempts to understand how this tiny country consistently tops the tables in the OECD's comparative research on learning outcomes for middle-school students, better known as the PISA survey (see, e.g., Ravitch 2012). "For Moms in Finland, every day is Mother's Day," declared the *TIME* magazine in its recent article, which noted that according to a study by the non-governmental organization Save the Children, Finland is the world's best country to be a mother (Subramanian 2013). Not only is Finland praised for its welfare state services and peaceful quality of life; the country is also on the third place on the World Economic Forum's ranking of competitive economies (Schwab 2013, 15), and Nokia, one of the success stories of the mobile phone industry, originates from and is headquartered in Finland. The birthplace of Rovio's Angry Birds game and the open-source LINUX operating system are in Finland's innovative information and communications technology sector. Finland has a booming game industry exemplified by the recent sale of a 51 percent share of the Finnish mobile game startup Supercell to the Japanese telecom and Internet giant Softbank and its subsidiary Gungho Online Entertainment for 1.53 billion dollars (Griffiths 2013). In addition to these entrepreneurial markers, Finland also belongs to the shrinking list of countries that offer its population tuition-free access to its small but competitive tertiary education system. Viewed in this light, why would a highly skilled migrant not move to Finland? It is also natural to assume that highly skilled Finns are keen to move abroad, in search of new horizons, ripe for Finnish innovation.

The answers are closely associated with the geographical, cultural, and linguistic isolation of the Northern European periphery and a historically rooted perception of control by distant powers. From inside Finland, despite its spot on an international pedestal, Finns invariably characterize *their own society* with references to a language not spoken anywhere else and the highest suicide rate in Western Europe. According to self-perpetuated myths, Finns are a grim, silent people, living in an environment too harsh—in terms of climate and taxation—for most and whose disdain for small talk is only matched by the difficulty of their language (see Hoffman 2007). At around three percent of the population, the number of foreign nationals living in Finland is among the lowest in the European Union, and the labor market integration of the immigrant population has proven exceptionally difficult (e.g., Koikkalainen et al. 2011; Komulainen 2013, 115–16; Kyhä 2011). Furthermore, an anti-European populist backlash surfaced in the 2011 parliamentary elections, giving voice to an isolationist undercurrent reluctant to see Finnish taxes used to assist some struggling economies of the EU. Moreover, the populist party called *Perussuomalaiset*—boldly translating their name as *The Finns Party* in English—from its inception taps into the uneasiness many natives have regarding migration.

It is specifically the tension between these paradoxical images of Finland, characterized at one moment as a non-hierarchical, high-tech wunderkind, surfing the ICT boom of twenty-first century Networked Knowledge Societies and, the next moment, a small and continually frustrated population, geographically, culturally, and linguistically relegated to the periphery of the far North, alternatively subjugated to the Swedish Crown, the Russian Empire, and, now, the Brussels Bureaucrats. The unforgiving math of demographics now forces a choice on this small population. The number of people in the workforce needed to support those outside the workforce—the dependency ratio—will weaken from the current level of 52.9 children and pensioners per one hundred persons of working age to 60 dependents in 2017 and 70 dependents by 2028 (Statistics Finland 2013c). Yet, Finland currently has little experience of replacement migration, and the country has few convincing policy approaches to immigration, or ideas on how to attract highly skilled migrants from abroad.

In this special issue of the *Journal of Finnish Studies* a fresh, in-depth look at the phenomenon of global highly skilled migration brings Finland into a unique focus: in these articles, Finnish researchers and international scholars shed light on what are often overly simplified highly skilled mobility/migration discussions and debates. Our approach calls into question lay beliefs concerning the way in which countries like Finland could—or should—compete in the global battle for brains. So far too little has been known about why highly skilled migrants leave Finland: do they move abroad for higher salaries, global careers, or purely for the adventure of living abroad? Do they find highly skilled jobs, or end up working below their skill levels? And what about highly skilled migrants entering Finland? What are their expectations and career prospects? Does Finland live up to the valorized media image of the early twenty-first century—or does the country turn its back on those who are trying to integrate and find work at the level of their skills and qualifications?

### **THE ARTICLES OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE**

Studies on highly skilled mobility and migration often tackle topics associated with national policies and immigration status. There is still much to discover about the relationship between highly skilled mobility, economic growth, the process of transferring human capital across borders, and how this mobility affects the countries of origin and destination. The contributions in this special issue focus on less discussed, but more nuanced and problematized issues related to the topic at hand. The articles primarily look at questions pertaining to group and individual experiences of highly skilled migrants in Finland and of Finns abroad, with an emphasis on the importance of factors ranging from the transferability of education and different forms of capital (cultural, social, intellectual, symbolic), as well as career progress, and questions related to family and the quality of life. Each of the featured articles makes a unique



contribution to migration research and to understanding Finland's position in the global migration networks.

The articles share certain interesting themes. The articles by Nicol Foulkes and Liisa Mäkelä, Vesa Suutari, and Chris Brewster focus on highly skilled professionals on expatriate assignments and company secondments abroad, noting how such career-motivated mobility has its impact on the highly skilled employees themselves, but also on their spouses and children. The articles by Kris Clarke, Driss Habti, and Aija Lulle and Marta Balode highlight an important feature of highly skilled migration, namely the role of female migrants. Not all highly skilled migrants are men on company secondments, as this migrant category also includes highly educated women who have migrated for marriage or love (see also Leinonen 2012). Saara Koikkalainen and Lulle and Balode discuss the process of transferring cultural capital, that is, education and previous expertise, across national borders. All the articles focusing on the experiences of highly skilled migrants in Finland (Koskela, Clarke, Lulle and Balode, Korhonen, Habti) note the difficulties these professionals face in finding highly skilled employment and integrating into the Finnish labor market. The articles by Koikkalainen and Carol Kiriakos, on the other hand, examine the kinds of lives Finns working abroad have had and note the importance of migrant's active labor market agency (Koikkalainen) and the challenges of distance when one is expected to work with colleagues in Finland while living in Silicon Valley, California (Kiriakos). In terms of geography there are links between the articles as well: Clarke examines the experiences of Americans in Finland, and Kiriakos of Finns in America. The article by Koikkalainen looks at Finns living in other European Union countries, while Lulle and Balode focus on intra-European migrants who move from Latvia to Finland. Foulkes on the other hand examines Finns and Danes who move outside the European Union borders to India, and Habti investigates the Arab women arriving from outside the EU, namely from Middle East and North Africa, to Finland.

The first five articles of this special issue examine incoming highly skilled migration to Finland. In the first article Kaisu Koskela introduces a concept of a "migrant hierarchy," a framework based on Finnish society's views on different types of immigrants. The hierarchy divides migrants living in Finland into differently valued categories that affect also the everyday lives and self-defined group identities of highly skilled migrants. Her analysis reveals boundaries that imply underlying problems in regard to the social integration and feelings of belonging by highly skilled migrants in Finland. In the next article Kris Clarke discusses how American women narrate their cultural adjustment to Finnish society as long-term residents, with an emphasis on how they construct their changing personal and social identities in relation to their perceptions of the cultural and structural differences between Finnish and American societies. Clarke notes that even though these American women have

higher education degrees, most of them are not employed and do not feel that they have a place in Finnish society except via their Finnish husbands.

The third article by Aija Lulle and Marta Balode also examines female migrants living in Finland, namely highly skilled Latvians married to Finnish men. The article concludes that highly skilled migration is complexly embedded in multiple decision-making processes and in individual and national/regional biographies and histories. The friction and problems in finding employment and integrating into the Finnish society is made visible, for example, in these women's views in the importance of learning the Finnish language and in selecting which surname to adopt after marriage. The article by Driss Habti on the other hand focuses on female migrants originating from Middle Eastern and North African countries. The article touches upon their highly skilled migration experiences from Arab countries to Finland in the context of dual career and highlights their constructed spatialities of family and home, labor market, and paid work in Finland. The last of the articles on Finland by Vesa Korhonen tackles an important part of highly skilled migration: the experiences of integration of international degree students. According to the students who took part in Korhonen's study, there is a general satisfaction with Finnish Higher Education and its quality, but, on the other hand, the reserved social culture, as well as the lack of language skills and social networks were considered as obstacles for cultural or social integration.

The first of the articles examining highly skilled Finnish migrants is by Saara Koikkalainen. Koikkalainen looks at Finns who have moved abroad to work within the European Union area. She addresses the issue of how highly skilled migrants manage to renegotiate the value of their cultural capital in their destination country's labor market. The article identifies three strategies through which highly skilled migrants can minimize the loss of cultural capital: distinction, adaptation, and re-orientation. Also the article by Carol Kiriakos examines Finns working abroad, but her focus is on Silicon Valley. In this age of globalization it has been suggested that the meaning of distance has been erased, especially for elite migrants, because of their freedom to move geographically and access the latest information and communication technologies. Yet despite the ease of virtual communication, these Finns still experience distance in their work and everyday life that spans across borders.

The third article, examining outgoing migration by Nicol Foulkes, focuses on India, where the IT-boom has generated job opportunities for seconded employees from Nordic countries, as well as from other countries. Her article compares the situation of Finns seconded to India to that of Danes—both Nordic welfare states, which when seen from the outside may appear rather similar. The article considers how Finland and Denmark protect the social rights of these rather privileged migrants when they are working abroad. Foulkes concludes that these temporary migrants incur new social risks, such as losing the right to social security benefits, depending on

the country of origin, their labor market activity, and the conditions of the contract of employment with the sending company. The last article of the special issue by Liisa Mäkelä, Vesa Suutari, and Chris Brewster investigates the issues involved in balancing work with other aspects of life while on the expatriate assignment. The authors note that, besides facing conflicts, global careerists also experience enrichment of their work and non-work life interface. Several work-domain, non-work domain, and individual antecedents for the balance are also identified, and the writers argue that more emphasis needs to be placed on the enrichment perspective.

We hope this thematic issue will be of interest to all those engaged in contemporary Finnish Studies, as well as to a range of researchers, academics, and students in a wide variety of disciplines, and to policy-makers and agencies whose focus is laid on global highly skilled mobility and migration.

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