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SUMMARY

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IMMIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES OF LIVING AND WORKING IN FINLAND FINLAND'S TALENTS OF THE FUTURE RESEARCH PROJECT, E2 RESEARCH

The results of the report *Immigrants' Experiences of Working and Living in Finland (Maahanmuuttajien kokemuksia työskentelystä ja asumisesta Suomessa)* are based on 25 immigrants' experiences of living and working in Finland. The interviewees work in the service sector, social and health care, construction, and agriculture.

According to the interviewees, there are plenty of advantages to living in Finland. They are satisfied with their lives and, based on their stories, seem to have integrated well and succeeded in their lives in Finland in many ways. Many of them were proud of this, as taking up residence in the country had not always been easy, and they had also met obstacles during the years of living in Finland.

The problems they had faced were primarily related to the first few months or years of living in Finland. During that time many of them did not yet feel they were a part of Finnish society due to, among other issues, their poor knowledge of Finnish or Swedish and lack of social networks. When considering solutions for immigrants' integration, employment, career advancement, and problems related to terms of employment, it is worth paying special attention to this stage. The solutions should also address the fact that racism and prejudice make life difficult for many immigrants living in Finland.

Despite the aforementioned problems, the interviewees see Finland as a stable, safe, and democratic welfare society. In their experience, life and work quality are high. As regards work, the interviewees particularly appreciate having working days of reasonable length, work-life balance, low hierarchies, occupational safety, leadership that involves respecting the employee, as well as the right to occupational health care, and a relatively good level of pay.

The interviewees are also by large satisfied with the quality and coverage of public services. However, some had found the services of public health care and the Finnish Immigration Service to be congested. The free, high-quality education attracted especially those with families to Finland. The support and security offered by the welfare state has not reduced the motivation of the interviewees to contribute to the labour market.

NGOs and trade unions have played an important role in the integration of some of the interviewees, providing them with a channel for social participation. For many, immigrants' associations and communities have also been important in enabling their participation and supplying them with information that has supported their integration.

Finland's excellent reputation in the world had influenced many of the interviewees' decision to move to the country. Information about Finland has been readily available on the Internet to support the interviewees' decision to move, regardless of their geographical location.



TUTKIMUS

The importance of learning Finnish was a recurring theme, which the interviewees brought up as a factor that helps them feel at home. Knowledge of English also improved their chances of a good life, as it opened up access to the labour market and gave them opportunities to make friends.

Integration into Finland can also take place by learning Swedish, although no such experiences emerged in this research. Many interviewees stressed the importance of immigrants' own initiative when it comes to integration. In their everyday lives, almost all of the interviewees kept in touch with their acquaintances, relatives and friends abroad, which contributed to them feeling at home in Finland.

The rather positive image of life in Finland that emerged in the study may have been somewhat influenced by the method by which the interviewees were reached. Interviewees were sought through the networks of the project's researchers and the project's monitoring group, as well as Facebook groups for immigrants.

As a result, the most vulnerable immigrants were not reached, as they are seldom found in such networks. However, one of the interviewees had endured a very difficult situation. He had previously lived and worked undocumented in Finland; that is, without a necessary residence permit, which, he said, had resulted in a great deal of stress and worry about the future. However, he had later managed to establish himself in the labour market and been granted a residence permit.

In addition, the interviewees' relatively positive experiences were probably influenced by the fact that they all had a job and were living permanently in Finland. Thus, unemployed persons and foreigners who had moved out of Finland were excluded from the study. Those who had worked in Finland for less than a year were also excluded. Had the interviews focused on people who have lived in Finland for only a very short time, the resulting image of Finland might not have been as positive, as previous research shows that immigrants' position in the labour market improves the longer they live in the country.ⁱ

In this study, however, the interviewees' positive experiences of Finland were clearly influenced by the fact that they had previously lived in countries where the level of pay is, as a rule, lower than in Finland. Many of the interviewees also found the quality of working life higher in Finland than in their previous countries of residence.

The interviewees had lived in Finland for a relatively long time – eight years on average. This provided a good starting point for studying their experiences, as they had accumulated a wealth of experiences and perspectives on settling in Finland.

The flip side of the positive experiences was the racism that some of the interviewees had faced. Some victims of racist treatment stressed that these had been 'only' isolated cases over the years and expressed that racism exists in 'all countries' and in some 'more than in Finland'. However, the experiences of racism mentioned were by no means unimportant, as shown by the fact that they had stuck in the interviewees' mind.



TUTKIMUS

More typical experiences were ‘more minor’ prejudices against immigrants in the context of job-hunting and in the workplace. Some reported that immigrants have to prove their competence more than the native population. The same phenomenon has been identified in previous studies.ⁱⁱ

Recruitment processes and their unofficial social networks also seem to favour native Finns at the expense of immigrants, according to some interviewees. There are also indications of this in previous studies.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some had also had problems with residence permits. With the exception of nurses, the interviewees’ work experience in Finland consists of worker occupations. Low income levels and uncertainty about the continuity of their employment relationship make it difficult for those in low-paid jobs to obtain extended residence permits, and hinder the possibility of family reunification. Uncertainty may have a negative impact on an immigrant feeling at home and make it difficult to plan for the future, as was revealed in some of the interviews.

According to the interviewees, the income limits for family reunification sometimes have a negative impact on their working life. To meet the income level required for family reunification, immigrants who depend on residence permits sometimes have to work very long hours in low-paid jobs in the service sector, for example. In other words, even if the pay and other terms of employment are in order as such, the legislation related to residence permits affects the everyday life of an immigrant who is dependent on a residence permit.

In this sense, immigration policy is always also labour market policy, as the requirements and rights associated with different types of residence permits are reflected in different ways in the daily lives of various immigrant groups in the labour market^{iv}: those in low-paid jobs are at a clear disadvantage. For nurses recruited from the Philippines, residence permits did not pose a problem. Their difficulty was the fact that the nursing degree they had completed in their country of origin is not recognised in Finland. For this reason, some of them were working as practical nurses at the time of the interview. This is a typical example of a situation where vocational competence is underutilised.

Although the interviewees perceived Finland as a country that respects the rights of employees, some of them had had problems related to violations of their terms of employment in the early stages of their careers. Of particular concern is what is known as key money, which dishonest agents collect illegally from immigrants from outside the EU for job brokerage. Two interviewees working in the agricultural sector had paid such key money, but the promises made to them by the agents about the work on offer had not been true.

Despite the problems, the interviewees, as a whole, gave a fairly positive picture of living and working in Finland. This may seem surprising, because we regularly read news about how immigrants’ rights and terms of employment are trampled on. Is it the case that unproblematic and positive aspects do not cross the news threshold in the same way?

On the other hand, it is also the case that, according to studies, the majority of immigrants in Finland are doing relatively well. Around 80 per cent of the immigrants who answered the survey of the International Talent Finland Research Project had settled well in Finland.^v According to a survey that explored the views of linguistic minorities in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, nine out of ten people



TUTKIMUS

feel at home in Finland, regardless of their linguistic background.^{vi} According to a survey conducted by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions SAK for its shop stewards, Finnish employees and employees with a foreign background get along well with each other at workplaces, and only 10 per cent of the shop stewards believe that foreign employees struggle to adapt to Finnish working culture.^{vii}

The positive findings of this report are in line with these results. However, they do not eliminate the fact that prejudice, racism and especially the exploitation of vulnerable immigrants are all too common phenomena in Finland. Due to this, it is important that these problems are highlighted and discussed, so that preventive actions and solutions can be found.

ⁱ Kaihovaara, A., & Larja, L. (2019). Parantaako maahanmuutto taloudellista huoltosuhdetta? *Työpoliittinen aikakauskirja*, 62(4), 37–49. [IP1708223 TEM page 10.pdf \(utupub.fi\)](https://www.utupub.fi/tem/1708223)

ⁱⁱ Alho, R. (2020). ‘You Need to Know Someone Who Knows Someone’: International Students’ Job Search Experiences. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 10(2).

ⁱⁱⁱ Alho, R. (2020). ‘You Need to Know Someone Who Knows Someone’: International Students’ Job Search Experiences. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 10(2).; Välimäki, M., Pitkänen, V., Niemi, M.K., Veijola, R. (2023). Kansainväliset osaajat ja Suomi: mielikuvat, kotiutuminen, työelämä ja tuentarpeet. Kansainvälisten osaajien Suomi -tutkimushankkeen loppuraportti. E2 Tutkimus: Helsinki.

^{iv} Könönen, J., & Himanen, M. (2019). *Maahanmuuton sääntelyn ja etnisen syrjinnän yhteydet maahanmuuttajien työmarkkina-asemaan*. Teoksessa V. Kazi, A. Alitolppa-Niitamo & A. Kaihovaara (toim.) *Kotoutumisen kokonaiskatsaus*, 54–65.

^v Välimäki, M., Pitkänen, V., Niemi, M.K., Veijola, R. (2023). Kansainväliset osaajat ja Suomi: mielikuvat, kotiutuminen, työelämä ja tuentarpeet. Kansainvälisten osaajien Suomi -tutkimushankkeen loppuraportti. E2 Tutkimus: Helsinki.

^{vi} Pitkänen, Ville; Westinen, Jussi & Saukkonen, Pasi (2019): Ollako vai eikä olla? Tutkimus viiden kieliryhmän kiinnittymisestä Suomeen. Raportti 5. Suomen kulttuurirahasto.

^{vii} *Ulkomaalaistaustaiset työntekijät työpaikoilla*. SAK:n luottamushenkilöpaneeli, marraskuu 2022.

<https://www.sak.fi/serve/ulkomaalaistaustaisten-tyontekijoiden-tilanne-tyopaikalla>