



FACULTY  
OF SOCIAL  
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# Highly-Skilled Migrants in Sweden

A qualitative study of the experiences of non-EU high skilled  
migrants in the Swedish labour market

by

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## **Abstract**

The study of the migratory trajectories of high skilled migrants has been a topic of enquiry for decades; nevertheless, in practice, these have not been studied in-depth. Therefore, acknowledging this research gap, this thesis aims to explore the experiences of non-EU high skilled migrants when integrating into the labour market in the context of Sweden. This is of particular relevance given that Sweden has for a long time been a country of migration and it is a major recipient of migrants. Specifically, to identify what are the main challenges that they are encountered with, focusing on challenges during job search and workplace integration.. Through the lens of human capital, social capital and cultural capital theory; various aspects were analysed to comprehend this. Among the key challenges identified in participants' narratives were language proficiency, cultural differences, access to social capital, and even bureaucratic processes. These factors are not in isolation, but are strongly interconnected. For instance, language proficiency is crucial for migrants as it not only determines their ability to communicate effectively but also affects their chances of finding employment, building social connections, and understanding workplace dynamics. Furthermore, The challenges identified, including language proficiency, cultural differences, access to social capital, and bureaucratic processes, can have a significant impact on the socio-economic well-being of migrants. Insufficient language skills may limit their access to higher-paying jobs or opportunities for career advancement. Additionally, cultural differences may hinder their ability to navigate workplace dynamics and professional networks with ease. Accessing support services for migrants, such as community organisations and mentorship programs, can help individuals navigate bureaucratic processes, receive job search assistance, and obtain guidance on integration issues. Participants mentioned that It is important to demonstrate resilience and adaptability when faced with challenges. This includes persevering through setbacks and actively seeking alternative pathways to achieve career and socio-economic goals.

**Keywords:** *High skilled migrants, labour market integration, experiences, Sweden*

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## **List of Abbreviations**

OECD      Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

EU          European Union

EEA        European Economic Area

ID          Identity document

SFI         Swedish for Immigrants ('Svenska för invandrare')

IT          Information Technology

ISM        International Student Mobility

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## **1. Introduction**

Throughout history, human mobility has been a constant phenomenon. In contemporary times, international migration arises as a significant driver of global transformation. The arrival and subsequent settlement of migrants brings about inevitable cultural, social and economic changes, for both sending and receiving societies. In particular, as education levels and specialisation rise coupled with the growing complexity of labour markets there will persistently be a demand for a wide range of migrant labour, spanning from lower to higher skill levels, making immigrants a more diversified group (de Haas et al., 2020, p.3) Particularly, the migration of international high skilled individuals is not a new phenomenon, and it has been increasingly placed within the framework of ‘race for talent’, which depicts how OECD countries are competing to attract high skilled workers (Bailey & Mulder, 2017). The migration of highly skilled individuals has become a significant driver of global migration streams, with a notable 76% increase observed between 2000 and 2010 in OECD countries alone, driven by the globalisation of labour markets and the expansion of knowledge-driven economies (ibid.).

As the subject of migration takes centre stage in European policy discussions of public authorities at all levels of government, Sweden stands out as a significant case study, witnessing a substantial influx of both professional and nonprofessional immigrants in the last decades. Sweden has been a country of immigration since the end of World War II and labour immigration then constituted the highest proportion of immigration. In the wake of this wave of migration, the question of new arrivals' path into the labour market has become relevant (Emilsson, 2015). In Sweden, unemployment amongst the foreign-born is 3.5 times higher than amongst the native-born (de Haas et al., 2020, p.283). Participation in the labour market is thus an essential socioeconomic issue as it constitutes a significantly important part of

immigrants' integration process. Furthermore, over the last years, Swedish migration policy has undergone notable changes in its legislation, moving from a relatively liberal approach to a more restrictive one, which can be seen as a new 'paradigm shift' (Suter & Ekstedt, 2023). This recognition stems from factors such as skill shortages, demographic changes, and the acknowledgment that high-skilled migration is essential for fostering innovation and competition. Furthermore, Sweden has emerged as an attractive destination for international talents due to its system in place, among them, the country's welfare state, grounded on gender equality, and its work-life balance.

Given the intensified global competition for highly skilled migrants, especially within specific industries, it is crucial to thoroughly understand the factors that attract and retain them in specific regions. However, high-skilled migration has received limited attention in terms of academic study and theoretical exploration (Povrzanovic et al., 2016). As previously stated, the successful integration of immigrants into the labour market is a crucial factor in their overall societal incorporation. High skilled labour migrants are perceived as individuals who, due to their status, more easily integrate and therefore do not necessarily need extended assistance and integration efforts (Emilsson et al., 2014). However, all labour migrants are bound to face challenges pending the social position of the country and their experiences vary. Nevertheless, similarly to other OECD nations, immigrants in Sweden continue to face persistent challenges when entering the job market. There exists a significant disparity in employment rates between native-born individuals and migrants within the Swedish population (Irastorza & Bevelander, 2021).

In light of these considerations, this thesis seeks to explore the experiences of high-skilled migrants in Sweden who transitioned from an international student status to a work-status in the Swedish labour market. By examining their migration



trajectories, integration processes, and lived experiences, this research aims to shed light on the opportunities and challenges encountered by this demographic group.

## **2. Aim and Research Questions**

The overall objective of this thesis is to contribute to the ongoing research in migration studies by critically examining the experiences of non-EU high skilled migrants in Sweden.

Using a qualitative approach, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are some of the key challenges encountered by highly skilled migrants from non-EU countries during their integration into the Swedish labour market, as perceived by the migrants themselves?
- How do these integration challenges affect the socio-economic well-being of non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden, and what coping strategies do they employ?

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to explore the experiences of highly skilled migrants from non-EU countries as they integrate into the Swedish labour market. By focusing on the perceptions and lived experiences of these migrants, the study aims to identify the key challenges they face during their integration journey. Specifically, the research seeks to investigate the main obstacles encountered by highly skilled migrants in their job search and integration into the Swedish labour market. By highlighting these challenges from the migrants' perspectives, the study aims to provide insights into the complex dynamics of their integration process. Furthermore, the study aims to examine the impact of these integration challenges on the socio-economic well-being of non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden. It

seeks to understand how these challenges may hinder or facilitate their access to employment opportunities, career advancement, and overall economic stability. Additionally, the research aims to uncover any potential disparities or barriers that exist in the Swedish labour market, particularly for non-EU highly skilled migrants. Ultimately, the overarching goal of this study is to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by highly skilled migrants from non-EU countries as they integrate into the Swedish labour market. The study aims to gain valuable insights into the complexities of highly skilled migrants' integration into the Swedish labour market by examining their challenges and coping strategies. It also seeks to uncover any disparities or barriers within the labour market and contribute to efforts to improve the integration and socio-economic well-being of non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden.

### **2.1. Delimitations**

This thesis focuses exclusively on the experiences of non-EU highly skilled professional immigrants who have migrated to Sweden. Migration is inherently a political phenomenon. The exclusive focus on non-EU highly skilled professional immigrants in this thesis is underpinned by the notable regulatory distinctions governing migration between individuals originating from non-EU countries and those from EU/EEA nations within the Swedish context. Non-EU immigrants are subjected to a distinct set of legal and procedural requirements, including stringent visa application processes, residency permit stipulations, and work authorization criteria, which often entail rigorous scrutiny and prolonged processing times. In contrast, EU/EEA migrants benefit from the provisions of the European Union's membership distinguishing three levels of mobility freedoms - free entry, right of residence and right to establishment - including the right to work and do business (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 238). These regulatory disparities engender multifaceted socio-economic ramifications, potentially exacerbating inequalities in employment prospects, social welfare entitlements, and integration support between the two

migrant cohorts. Consequently, the deliberate focus on non-EU immigrants in this study serves to elucidate the nuanced challenges and dynamics intrinsic to their migration trajectory within Sweden's regulatory framework, thereby enriching scholarly discourse on contemporary migration phenomena.

## **2.2. Relevance of study to Development Studies**

The nexus between migration and development has been increasingly debated across the field of international development and migration studies. There are diverse views on the repercussions that skilled migration represents for both receiving and sending countries. Globalisation in companies and higher education is driving professions to expand globally. Many skilled migration schemes are designed to recruit talented workers from the Global South. For example, many skilled migration schemes in the EU are aimed towards third-country nationals, while EU residents have no movement or residency constraints inside the EU (Bailey & Mulder, 2017).

Notably, concepts such as "brain drain," "brain gain," and more recently, "brain circulation," have surfaced as pertinent for understanding the driving forces and outcomes associated with migration. The discourse on high-skilled migration has shifted over time. Early discussions on skilled emigration highlighted concerns about the negative impact on countries of origin, especially regarding welfare levels and economic loss. On the other hand, literature has also suggested that brain drain may incentivise education and lead to positive feedback effects, such as knowledge transfer and return migration. The impact of high skilled migration on development is influenced by various factors, including the host country environment and structural settings of migrants' home countries.

Aligned with the field of Development Studies, this study tackles issues of inequality and social inclusion by investigating the experiences of non-EU skilled professional immigrants in gaining entry to a foreign labour market, in this case the Swedish

labour market. Development studies frequently focus on minimising gaps and fostering equitable opportunities for all members of society, regardless of their background or origin. Analysing the difficulties that immigrants encounter in obtaining work opportunities leads to a more comprehensive understanding of social exclusion and the issues connected with economic inclusion. Previous research indicates that highly skilled immigrants often encounter challenges when attempting to re-enter their field of expertise, stemming partly from the lack of recognition of their educational credentials and skill sets in the host country. Consequently, migrants frequently find themselves in occupations that do not align with their level of education and expertise due to barriers such as difficulties in obtaining diploma equivalency, recognition of skills, language barriers, and discriminatory practices (Haas et al, 2020, p.31).

### **3. Contextual Background**

#### **3.1. Swedish Contemporary Labour Immigration Policy**

For many years, international migration has been a contentiously debated issue in Swedish politics. Migration policy concerning labour in Sweden has generally evolved from a restrictive approach towards a more 'flexible' one; and in recent years there has been a growing discourse on the desire to maintain Sweden competitive as a research nation and promote the international recruitment of highly qualified workers.

In 2008, the nation's labour immigration policy underwent a radical liberalisation process, as a response to the demographic challenges of an ageing population. This policy change was primarily intended to address labour shortages in specific occupations and sectors within the country. The aim was to facilitate the recruitment of labour from non-EU countries (Emilsson, 2014; Emilsson, 2015). Elwert et al.

(2023) highlight that the adoption of this laissez-faire model for labour migration in Sweden was guided by principles of equality and openness, with the goal of welcoming labour migrants without restrictions on their skills and educational backgrounds. Additionally, labour-market tests were abolished, and individual employers now hold the authority to determine whether there is a demand for labour, rather than state agencies and unions. Thus, the main focus on the reform is that the power over migrant labour selection and recruitment lies on the employer.

The effects of this policy reform resulted in an increased inflow of labour migrants, as expected. However, the majority of these newly-arrived workers ended up in lower skilled jobs, demonstrating a direct effect on work conditions of labour migrants. Following the reform, labour migrants with lower educational backgrounds were more likely to find employment in lower-level occupations, where there was an oversupply of workers. Furthermore, for labour migrants who arrived after the reform, there was a significant decrease in average income compared to those who arrived before the reform (Elwer et al, 2023). This demonstrates the unintended consequences, for both the composition of the Swedish labour markets and migrants themselves, influencing labour conditions and outcomes in the country.

### **3.2. Integration policy in Sweden**

In later years, the Swedish government has focused on leaning integration policy towards a more general multicultural ambition. There has been a notable emphasis on promoting labour market participation among immigrants as a means of fostering economic self-sufficiency and social integration (Wiesbrock, 2011; Cetrez et al, 2020). The evolution of integration policy in Sweden has witnessed a transition towards greater centralization, particularly evident in the administration of introduction programs for migrant newcomers. Initially decentralised, with

municipalities overseeing such initiatives, perceived inefficiencies prompted central government intervention. Reforms in 2010 transferred responsibility and administration from municipalities to the state, accompanied by increased state funding and legal regulation of program content (Emilsson, 2015, p.9). Emphasising labour market activities, these reforms aimed to standardise program implementation across regions. This centralization trend extends to other facets of integration policy, with the state introducing subsidised employment schemes targeting migrant newcomers, resulting in a significant rise in allocated state budgets for local integration programs. Legislative expansions have broadened eligibility criteria, including family members of humanitarian migrants. Such measures signify a broader shift towards centralised integration policies in Sweden, with the state assuming a more assertive role in coordinating and financing initiatives at the local level (Emilsson, 2015).

Language proficiency has been an important component of Sweden's integration strategy, recognized as essential for navigating various facets of society, particularly the labour market. Since 1994, adult immigrants have been given the opportunity to acquire proficiency in Swedish through a structured program known as SFI (Swedish for Immigrants). This initiative is accessible to all foreign individuals aged 16 and above. SFI courses involve assessing participants' educational backgrounds, in terms of their years of schooling (Öbrink Hobzová, 2021). Civil society actors have also played a crucial role in the integration process of immigrants. Organisations such as the Red Cross and Svenska Kyrkan provide reception services, including early language instruction, sharing of relevant information and the provision of legal and psychological assistance to new-comers (Cetrez et al, 2020, p. 25).

Overall, despite the presence of a well-established and comprehensive programme of integration policy, the socioeconomic gap between immigrants and natives remains a challenge in the country.

### **3.3. The Tidö Agreement (*Tidöavtalet*): a ‘newer’ paradigm shift?**

The Swedish government recently announced that national policy pertaining to migration is undergoing a new ‘paradigm shift’, involving significant changes in its legislations. A new government came into power in October 2022; the current Swedish parliament (Riksdag) is composed of the Moderate Party, the Liberal Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats, the latter as a support party. The new national legislation changes are outlined in the Tidö Agreement, presented by the new cabinet. The Tidö Agreement is a set of instructions negotiated by the participating parties. The agreement covers the mandate period of 2022 to 2026 and includes seven directions that the parties will work together to achieve. The agreement places strong emphasis on migration and integration, areas which are the government’s priority (Tidöavtalet, 2022).

Following the 2022 Swedish general election, the newly elected government prioritised migration issues, delineating a paradigm shift in migration policy through the Tidö agreement. The government aims to reduce irregular migration, combat labour immigration fraud, and maintain dignified reception standards while expelling those without legal grounds for stay. Simultaneously, they express a desire to facilitate the entry of highly skilled foreign workers, researchers, and doctoral students, emphasising their value in contributing to Swedish society. Migration Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard asserts that the government seeks to address integration issues by limiting asylum immigration and increasing highly qualified workforce migration. However, this discourse places the burden of integration on migrants, assuming that highly skilled migrants can effortlessly navigate economic, social, and cultural integration. Critically, this perspective overlooks structural barriers such as language proficiency and geographic constraints. Swedish integration politics since 2010 has focused on employment and individual responsibility for integration, often criticised for neglecting structural barriers. The

government emphasises integration based on responsibilities and rights, aiming to improve conditions for newly arrived migrants to enter the labour market and social life. This discourse posits migrants as individual actors making choices leading to their societal position. Highly skilled migrants are perceived as valuable because their education and employability facilitate integration. Thus, the government views them as the most desirable migrants, inherently capable of integration due to their qualifications.

All in all, the enactment of this agreement, involving novel and controversial measures for migration and integration, signify a considerable shift towards a restrictive approach regarding migration issues in the country, contrary to what has occurred in the past years.

### **3.4. International student mobility (ISM) in Sweden**

Sweden has become an increasingly popular destination for international students seeking high-quality education and unique cultural experiences. The country's higher education system is renowned for its excellence, innovative teaching methods, and research opportunities, making it an attractive choice for students from around the world. Over the past decades, Sweden has seen a steady growth in the number of international students enrolling in its universities and colleges. According to the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ), the number of international students has more than doubled since the early 2000s, with a significant portion coming from countries outside the European Union (EU). In 2021, Sweden hosted around 39,806 international students (Erudera, 2024). The Swedish government and educational institutions have actively promoted internationalisation and mobility, offering a wide range of English-taught programs, scholarships, and exchange opportunities to attract talented students from abroad. Initiatives such as the Swedish Institute Study Scholarships and Erasmus+ exchange programs have further facilitated international



student mobility and cross-cultural interactions. Despite the increasing number of international students in Sweden, there are challenges associated with their transition from students to high-skilled migrants. Many face uncertainties regarding visa regulations, work opportunities, and integration into Swedish society post-graduation. While the Swedish government has implemented policies to encourage international students to stay and work in Sweden after completing their studies, the transition process can still be complex and daunting.

Moreover, the experiences of non-EU international students in Sweden differ from their EU counterparts due to stricter visa regulations and work permit requirements. Non-EU students often face additional hurdles in navigating the Swedish labour market and securing employment opportunities that match their qualifications and skills. Understanding the dynamics of international student mobility in Sweden is crucial for contextualising the experiences of non-EU high-skilled migrants who have transitioned from international students to high-skilled migrants. It provides insights into the pathways, challenges, and opportunities that these individuals encounter during their educational journey in Sweden and their subsequent transition to the labour market.

### **3.5. Who qualifies as a 'highly skilled immigrant'?**

Nation-states exercise control over their borders, determining who can enter and under what circumstances, thus shaping the concept of migration (de Haas et al., 2020; Weiner & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). By establishing visa categories and eligibility criteria, states influence the collection of data, which in turn affects how skills, education, and migration are represented in research datasets (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020, pp. 9-10). Though international legal frameworks may exert some influence on state decisions, ultimately, states are only bound by these frameworks as long as they choose to be. As the primary authority, states define highly skilled migrants, using phrases such as "the best and the brightest" and

"chosen immigration" in policy discussions to shape migration flows through specific economic programs and streams (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020).

Consequently, the definition and interpretation of highly skilled immigrants vary across different countries. While some nations prioritise skills obtained through work experience along with formal educational qualifications, others may solely emphasise educational attainment.

Parsons et al. (2014) highlight the challenge of defining highly skilled migrants, noting inconsistencies in national immigration statistics, occupational classifications, and immigration policies. They identify three areas of inconsistency: definitional, occupational, and policy discrepancies, which result in variations in how individuals are categorised. For instance, the same individual may be classified differently based on educational factors, occupational classifications, or immigration policy streams. These inconsistencies in data, methodologies, and policy choices lead to a failure to recognize or include many individuals as highly skilled migrant workers (Parsons et al., 2014). This has led to criticism of the economic conceptualization of skilled migrants, which has been described as a "homogenising and simplistic understanding of mobile talents as rational, profit-optimising brains on the move" (Mosneaga & Winther, 2013, p. 182).

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to adopt Iredale's (2001) well-established definition, which characterises highly skilled migrants as individuals who have completed higher education, at least at the bachelor's level, and have relocated from one country to another. This definition aligns closely with the framework established by the Swedish Migration Agency, which defines a highly qualified workforce based on the Swedish occupational classification standard, including managerial occupations and those requiring extensive university competence or equivalent education. In Sweden, highly skilled immigrants are

individuals with a higher education, individuals with highly skilled occupations and former students (Emilsson, 2014).

By adopting Iredale's definition, which closely aligns with the criteria outlined by the Swedish Migration Agency, this thesis focuses on individuals who came to Sweden as international students and subsequently entered the labour market. This targeted approach allows for a comprehensive examination of their integration, employment prospects, and societal perceptions within Sweden, providing insights into the effectiveness of educational systems, the recognition of domestic qualifications, and the challenges faced by international students transitioning into the Swedish labour market. Consequently, this project aims to conduct interviews with individuals falling within this category, offering valuable insights into their unique experiences and contributing to the broader discourse on highly skilled migration and labour market integration.

#### **4. Academic Relevance and Contribution**

##### **4.1. International literature on high-skilled migration**

From an international perspective, previous literature pertaining to high-skilled migration can be divided into two prominent research themes. Firstly, at the macro level, there is an analysis of the diverse national and/or regional policy frameworks related to high-skilled migration. Secondly, at the micro-level, there is a focus on the subjective experiences of high-skilled migrants when integrating into the host society, specifically their decision-making process and integration into the host society.

The first stream of research is related to the national policy frameworks that regulate and impact the skill composition of migration flows (Cerna, 2009; Cerna & Czaika, 2016). Institutions and policies play a crucial role in shaping the migration decisions of highly skilled migrants, particularly in the areas of labour market policies,

immigration regulations, and the responsibilities of employers. Therefore, attention has been directed towards the institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks facilitating the integration of highly skilled migrants into receiving societies, with a specific focus on issues such as credential recognition and access to professional networks. As a result, a considerable body of literature has been devoted to the study of high-skilled migration policy, both cross-nationally and over time. For instance, Kolbe (2021) examined the influence of government partisanship on labour migration policy liberalisation across 19 European states, finding that it affects both skilled immigration and labour market dynamics. The study also explains why right-wing parties may advocate for liberalisation in certain instances, contrary to their usual support for restrictive immigration policies. Furthermore, other studies have explored policy initiatives specifically targeted at high-skilled third-country nationals, such as the EU Blue Card initiative (Cerna, 2013).

A further central theme within the literature pertains to understanding the decision-making processes of highly skilled migrants. In this sense, scholars have mostly focused on the analysis of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of highly skilled migrants. It is important to note that research on non-EU highly skilled migration focuses primarily on migrants belonging to a certain nationality, race, or occupation. For instance, the authors Kōu and Bailey (2014) explored the experiences of highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands and Germany. They used a life course approach to understand the migratory experiences of highly skilled migrants. Among their findings, they discovered that international mobility has become integral to the professional trajectories of highly skilled individuals from India, serving as a strategic means to enhance competitiveness in both domestic and international labour markets. Similarly, Becker & Teney (2018) explored intra-EU high skilled migration through the case of European physicians in Germany. The authors emphasise the significance of the role of educational opportunities, career

prospects, and quality of life considerations in shaping migrants' decisions, reflecting the multifaceted nature of migration decision-making.

The literature has further explored highly skilled migration and its intersectionality with other aspects of identity and social differentiation. Spadavecchia (2013) examined the increase of highly skilled women migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in labour migration among tertiary students, physicians, and nurses. This study provides insights into contemporary migration patterns. Colakoglu et al. (2018) focused on the experiences of highly skilled women migrants, including the career challenges they face and the strategies they use to re-establish their careers after migration. These challenges are often motivated by factors such as accompanying a spouse, pursuing further education, or engaging in self-initiated expatriation.

As evidenced, scholars have examined the experiences of migrants from diverse demographic backgrounds, shedding light on the intersecting dynamics embedded in high skilled migration.

#### **4.2. Literature on international student mobility (ISM)**

Although they have received significantly less attention, international students have also emerged as a relevant target group in studies on skilled migration. They have been regarded as a subgroup of skilled migration, and limited studies have explored their educational and working experience (Eskelä, 2013). The increasing nexus between education and immigration policy has led to the reconceptualization of international student mobility (ISM) within broader policy frameworks (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Whereas ISM was once viewed largely as a means of enhancing the state's soft power and providing development assistance to newly decolonized nations, recent shifts in policy paradigms have fundamentally altered its purpose and function in the public policy landscape (Ibid.). Literature on high-skilled migration underscores this transformation, emphasising governments' strategic management of

ISM as part of broader efforts to attract talent and bolster national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy (Gopal, 2016; Elken et al., 2022). ISM is increasingly framed within the discourse of the 'race for talent' or the quest for the 'ideal immigrant,' reflecting the growing recognition of international students as valuable human capital assets rather than just recipients of educational services (Gopal, 2016).

Moreover, alongside the macro-level policy shifts shaping ISM, there is a growing recognition of the need to understand the micro-level dynamics influencing individual student decisions. Studies exploring the decision-making processes of international students shed light on the multifaceted factors driving their migratory trajectories. Career prospects and the perceived quality of education emerge as primary motivators, as highlighted by Baláž and Williams (2004), Hazen and Alberts (2006), and Findlay et al. (2012). However, it is equally crucial to acknowledge the role of social networks in shaping migration choices. Musterd & Gritsai (2010) underscore the influence of close family members and friends in guiding individuals towards specific destinations. This micro-level perspective complements broader policy analyses by providing insights into the personal, social, and economic dimensions that drive individual migration decisions within the larger framework of ISM policy.

### **4.3. Skilled Migration Studies in the Swedish context**

In recent years, skilled migration research within the Swedish context has focused on several key themes and trends, including labour market integration, educational investments, immigration policies, and the experiences of skilled migrants in different geographical regions. Scholars have explored the challenges and opportunities faced by skilled migrants in navigating the Swedish labour market, the impact of immigration policies on their integration process, and the role of education and language acquisition in facilitating their socio-economic mobility.

Various scholars have examined the economic integration of immigrants in Sweden, shedding light on the challenges and trends shaping their labour market participation. Bevelander (2013) highlights the historical context, noting that while immigrants experienced high employment rates in the 1950s and 1960s, economic crises in the 1970s and 1990s led to significant increases in unemployment rates, particularly among foreign citizens. He further emphasises the relevance of human capital theory, which posits education as an investment leading to increased productivity and improved employment outcomes for immigrants. Disparities in education levels are cited as potential explanations for variations in immigrant labour market integration. Another early study by Rydgren (2004), suggested the prominent presence of ethnic discrimination in the labour market, as organisations engage in discriminatory practices when it comes to recruitment. in a two fold-way: First, they make decisions based on stereotypical and often biassed beliefs about specific groups, rather than considering individual skills. Second, they tend to choose candidates who are known to them or have been recommended by someone they know (referred to as network recruitment) for vacant positions. Furthermore, research on high-skilled migration has delved deeper into the labour market outcomes and integration experiences of highly skilled migrants. Irastorza & Bevelander (2021) specifically explore labour market integration from an economic standpoint, analysing employment rates, income, and occupational mobility in comparison to the native population. Their findings reveal that immigrants with academic degrees have lower employment rates than natives with comparable education, indicating challenges in translating educational credentials into employment opportunities for skilled migrants in Sweden.

Recent studies have shifted focus from purely economic aspects to the lived experiences of high-skilled migrants in Sweden. Studies on the socio-economic impacts of skilled migration in Sweden offer valuable insights into various facets of migrants' experiences and contributions to the labour market. Carlbaun (2021) sheds

light on the challenges and opportunities encountered by high-skilled migrants in rural areas of northern Sweden, with a particular focus on re-entering their professions. Povrzanovic et al. (2019) examines the work/non-work experiences of skilled migrants, emphasising the social domain's significance for social integration. Limited studies have demonstrated the importance of social capital in the labour market outcome of skilled migrants in the labour market.

Behtoui (2022) underscores the nuanced and context-specific nature of social capital, particularly in the context of immigrant communities in Sweden. It highlights that social capital can be generated both by civil society organisations and institutional agents, and it operates in accordance with the contra-stratification effect, which suggests that social capital can mitigate social stratification and promote social mobility.

Lazarczyk (2020) delves into the entrepreneurial intentions of high-skilled women, providing valuable insights into their experiences within the Swedish labour market. Meanwhile, Axelsson (2017) investigates the unique challenges faced by IT professionals, including issues of labour market mobility and uncertainty. Among these studies, factors such as language proficiency, cultural differences and social and ethnic exclusion were some of the main challenges faced by high skilled migrants.

Hence, the labour market integration of skilled migrants in Sweden is a multifaceted process influenced by various factors, including labour market dynamics, educational investments, and structural changes in the economy. Scholars have considerably examined these dimensions, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities faced by immigrants in integrating into the Swedish labour market. Despite the focus on skilled migrants, there's a notable gap in research regarding the migratory trajectories of international students transitioning into the Swedish labour market upon completing their studies. Exploring their integration process would contribute to



understanding the subjective experiences of high-skilled migration in Sweden. This discussion could significantly elucidate on the decision-making process of these types of high-skilled migrants, providing valuable insights into their pathways and challenges. Furthermore, by examining their integration process into the labour market, this will contribute to the research on the subjective experiences of high-skilled migration in the Swedish context. Skilled migrants are often linked with economic competitiveness, whereas international students are discussed in the context of the educational system (Eskelä, 2013). Integrating studies on international student perspectives into the broader discourse on skilled migration in Sweden will provide a more comprehensive understanding of labour market integration dynamics and the diverse pathways of skilled migrants' transitions into the Swedish workforce.

#### **4.4. Thesis Contribution**

This thesis aims to make an academic contribution by conducting a qualitative exploration of the experiences of non-EU high-skilled professional immigrants in Sweden. I am specifically focusing on individuals who initially migrated to Sweden as international students and then integrated into the Swedish labour market. At this point, it is relevant to clarify that the study does not concern the 'study' period of interviewees, but is purely concerned on their experiences throughout establishing themselves and integrating into the Swedish labour market.

In Sweden, international students make up a significant portion of skilled migration due to the country's reputable universities. This research employs an interpretative approach to uncover the subjective experiences of migrants and the factors that influence their integration into the Swedish labour market. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by this group and their implications for socio-economic well-being. Additionally, this thesis addresses the gap in academic literature regarding the impact of high-skilled migration on host societies, thus contributing to theoretical discussions in migration studies. By examining the lived

experiences of non-EU high-skilled professionals in Sweden, this research enhances our understanding of the complex integration process and sheds light on the broader socio-economic dynamics at play. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders involved in shaping migration policies and support systems that aim to facilitate the successful integration of high-skilled immigrants into Swedish society. The qualitative approach and focus on subjective experiences in this thesis enrich the scholarly discourse on migration by providing a nuanced analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by this specific group of migrants.

## **5. Theory**

Migration is seldom a straightforward individual decision, where one simply seeks improved life opportunities, uproots from their place of origin, and swiftly assimilates into a new country. The statement that most people migrate in the generally realistic expectation to improve their long-term wellbeing is undoubtedly a simplistic view that does not reflect the daunting complex and diverse nature of real-life migration (de Haas, 2010, p.42). More commonly, migration and settlement are protracted processes that unfold over the course of a migrant's life, even extending to subsequent generations. Scholars have highlighted the need to explore migrants' agency in labour market integration. Capital is viewed as an essential instrument for highly skilled migrants to gain employment in a host country, and more broadly, their labour market integration (Yamazaki, 2022). Therefore, this study is guided by several theories, including Human Capital Theory, Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital. The integration of these theories allows for a holistic examination of the various stages and transitions in the migration journey, including the transition from being an international student to entering the labour market. This perspective can help contextualise the experiences of the participants within the broader trajectory of their lives, with the objective of analysing how

non-EU migrants leverage their human, cultural, and social capital to enhance their capabilities and overall integration into Swedish society.

### **5.1. Human Capital Theory**

Earlier efforts to comprehend migratory patterns of labour migrants were attributed to economic gain, such as higher wage opportunities and skill return investment. A popular analytical framework across disciplines are *push-pull models*. These identify various factors of economic, political and demographic nature that presumably ‘push’ people outside of their places of origin and ‘pull’ them into destination countries. In this sense, people are attracted to these places due to factors such as demand for labour, economic opportunities, political freedom, and so forth (de Haas et al., 2010, p.45). The push-pull theory was highly criticised for its simplistic and deterministic nature, as it is merely based on the identification of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors in an arbitrary manner, not accounting for the interaction among these factors. (ibids.). In micro-level analysis, it is important to recognize that individuals have different perceptions, preferences, and ambitions, and they may respond differently to similar circumstances.

A further framework developed to explain the migration process is neoclassical migration theory, pioneered by Todaro (1969) and Harris and Todaro (1970), initially developed to comprehend rural-urban migration in developing countries but that was later applied in international migration. Therefore, it offered a nuanced perspective on migration dynamics, approaching it as a function of geographical differences in the supply and demand for labour. This signifies that it approaches migration as a rational response to geographical disparities in labour and capital, resulting in wage differentials that drive individuals from low-wage, labour-surplus regions to high-wage, labour-scarce regions. At the micro-level, neo-classical theory views migrants as individual, rational actors that decide to move “on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation, maximising their income” (de Haas et al., 2020, p.46).

As a complementary and more refined approach, Human Capital Theory emerged as a foundational and widely cited in the literature on migration and labour market integration, and became the starting point of the traditional economic migration research (Liebig et al., 2003). Specifically, the theory of human capital, introduced by Becker (1975), provides a theoretical framework that elucidates the economic benefits derived from an individual's human capital. In Becker's perspective, education, productivity, employment, and earnings are intricately connected along a linear trajectory. When applied to the migration process, human capital theory views migration as an investment in human capital, where individuals weigh the present discounted value of lifetime earnings in different geographic locations to make migration decisions. Scholars like Sjaastad (1962) have contributed to this perspective, emphasising the role of migration in maximising potential lifetime earnings. Thus, the transition from neoclassical migration theory to human Capital theory represents a deeper understanding of migration as an economic decision-making process, rooted in rational calculations of individual benefit and investment in skills and abilities. The heterogeneity of migrant groups, in terms of; for instance, skills, knowledge, physical abilities, age, gender; signifies that there will be differences in the extent to which they can expect to gain from migrating. This also partly explains why it is the more young and highly skilled who migrate. This model can be particularly useful when applied to student migration as an investment in human capital (de Haas, 2010, p.47). Migration itself can be a strategic decision to enhance skills and qualifications that are more valued internationally. Young, educated individuals often use international exposure as a way to gain competitive advantages in their home countries or globally.

While formal education potentially has a positive impact on migrants' employment, earnings, and job matching, particularly when obtained in Sweden, disparities in formal education alone cannot fully account for the differences in employment, earnings, and job matching between native and foreign-born workers. Bevelander

(2013) argues that the "type of migration" within the overall immigrant population serves as a significant factor in explaining the employment gap between natives and immigrants in Sweden. However, as evidenced, high skilled migrants often encounter significant barriers when transitioning into the labour market in Sweden (see section 4.3). Furthermore, despite possessing valuable human capital acquired through their education, international students are frequently at a disadvantage compared to local applicants due to biases in hiring practices. Employer attitudes such as ethnocentrism and anti-immigrant biases can hinder the recognition and utilisation of the human capital brought by international students. These biases may lead employers to prefer hiring from the local applicant pool, overlooking the skills and qualifications of international students. Furthermore, systemic barriers such as the lack of recognition of foreign experience and credentials further exacerbate the challenges faced by international students in the labour market. Studies have documented the prevalence of such biases in the employment transitions of the general immigrant population, indicating that these challenges are systemic and pervasive (Rydgren, 2004; Irastorza & Belevander, 2021; Carlbaun, 2021). These biases could not only undermine the potential contributions of international students to the Swedish labour market but also perpetuate inequalities in access to employment opportunities. In light of these challenges, it is essential to critically examine the role of human capital in the integration of international students into the Swedish labour market. While education and skills acquisition are valuable assets, the recognition and utilisation of these assets are contingent upon addressing systemic biases and barriers in the labour market.

Furthermore, the concept of human capital theory offers a valuable framework for highly educated non-EU immigrants. It helps them understand how their accumulated knowledge and skills can effectively lower transaction costs. Throughout their academic experience, for instance, immigrants gain industry-specific knowledge and practical experience, thereby enhancing their

human capital and making them more attractive to potential employers. As a result, job hunting becomes less burdensome, reducing the need for extensive networking efforts. The term "human capital" encompasses the information, skills, education, and experiences that individuals possess, which ultimately impact their ability to perform tasks and contribute to economic advancement. Through the lens of human capital theory, I aim to specifically investigate how the education and skills acquired by migrants in Swedish universities have potentially contributed to their employability in the Swedish labour market. This is not merely concerned with formal education, but can be extended to include language skills and even cultural familiarity gained during their studies. Therefore, Human Capital Theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the economic motivations behind migration and the role of education and skills in facilitating labour market integration. By examining how migrants' human capital assets acquired during their studies contribute to their employability in the Swedish labour market, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping migrant integration processes.

## **5.2. Cultural and Social Capital Theory**

While human capital theory focuses on economic returns through skills and education, cultural and social capital theories add layers of societal integration and networking benefits, crucial for understanding the full spectrum of challenges and opportunities migrants face. In a similar vein, critique of classical migration theory has outlined the need to embed more elaborate notions of structure and agency in migration theory. Moving away from the dominant explanation of the migration process of skilled migrants based on human capital, an alternative approach emerged to broaden our understanding of 'capital' beyond being only the 'economic' (Yamazaki, 2022). Migrants' process of assimilating into the labour market of their host nation is impacted by a wide range of personal elements, such as their cultural

background, human and social capital, and different behavioural, emotional, and cognitive characteristics. (de Haas, 2010) Additionally, because of contextual issues including adjusting to a new language, work environment, culture, and communication norms, workplaces can be complicated and stressful situations for migrants. They could potentially have to deal with host country immigration rules, prejudice from locals, and sociopolitical factors in the job market.

Bourdieu's concept of capital resembles a "treasure chest," containing three types of cultural capital: incorporated (mental schemes, language, values), institutional (formal qualifications), and symbolic (cultural objects). When immigrants arrive in a new country, they bring these "treasures" with them, which are then assessed and valued by the host labour market. This process involves the negotiation of the value of the cultural capital they possess (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Furthermore, the human capital theory elucidates an individual's labour market prospects by analysing their inherent attributes, disregarding the comprehensive consideration of structural barriers, such as discrimination. As evidenced by multiple studies, individuals, particularly migrants, are occasionally assessed on the basis of institutional factors that are unrelated to productivity, but rather influenced by stereotypical beliefs and discriminatory practices (Rydgren, 2004; Erlandsson, 2022). Bourdieu argued that human, cultural, and social capital have inherent value and can be translated into economic capital. These forms of capital are essential for highly skilled worker programs, yet they can be undervalued or misinterpreted, particularly concerning assumptions about a migrant's country of origin. "Soft barriers" are crucial for maintaining the quality of human capital brought to the labour market, and they often protect the domestic workforce (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Soft barriers, such as a lack of language skills or non-recognition of foreign credentials, impede highly skilled workers from achieving their full potential. These barriers are not always fully removed, leading to phenomena like brain waste and underemployment. Soft barriers can limit migrant workers' access to

social and labour rights, hindering their ability to change jobs or advance in their careers. Both hard and soft barriers are present in a migrant's integration process, with soft barriers often determining the success of their migration project.

At the macro-level, migrants must address challenges related to formal requirements and regulatory frameworks, while at the meso-level, they face challenges related to perceptions about their cultural capital. These perceptions, or "country labels," can result in subconscious biases or attitudes that influence migrants' ability to progress in the labour market. When entering the labour market, highly skilled migrants potentially face what authors Weiner & Klekowski von Koppenfels (2020) coined as both 'hard' and 'soft' barriers. Labour market outcomes for migrants are influenced by both "hard" and "soft barriers" to integration. "Hard barriers" encompass policies governing entry processes, such as visa regulations, work permit systems, and labour migration quotas. For highly skilled migrants who qualify for dedicated entry channels, these hard barriers are often reduced or eliminated, facilitating their entry. However, the absence of hard barriers alone does not ensure positive labour market outcomes. The critical determinant of a 'successful integration' lies in navigating the "soft barriers" to labour market integration, which encompass various socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors influencing migrants' ability to effectively integrate into the labour market.

## **6. Research Methodology**

### **6.1. Philosophical assumptions**

Philosophy is an important aspect of research; indeed, it plays a crucial role in any research study, guiding things such as the direction of the research, why we decide to explore a particular research phenomena and what methodology we use for answering these questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.15-16). Particularly, delving into qualitative research methodology offers a profound opportunity to explore the



multifaceted complexities of social phenomena. At the heart of any research endeavour lies philosophical assumptions that serve as guiding principles shaping the trajectory of inquiry. Thus, philosophical assumptions and certain beliefs, whether we are consciously or unconsciously aware of them, are present at every stage of research, driving the selection of research topics, the adoption of specific methodologies, and the interpretation of findings.. Therefore, I have devoted this particular section to acknowledging them.

From an epistemological point of view, the constructivist perspective aligns with the principles of my research project, emphasising that knowledge is socially constructed and contextually dependent. This viewpoint acknowledges the interactive relationship between the researcher and the research subjects, understanding that meaning arises through their interactions within specific socio-cultural contexts. Migrants' experiences and perceptions of integration challenges are shaped by their socio-cultural contexts and interactions. I aimed to engage deeply with participants' narratives, prioritising their lived experiences and subjective interpretations.

From an ontological point of view, a critical realist standpoint provides a comprehensive framework for comprehending the nature of reality by acknowledging both its objective existence and the subjective interpretations through which it is understood. This perspective recognizes the complex nature of social phenomena and acknowledges the existence of multiple realities shaped by diverse perspectives and experiences. As a researcher, embracing a critical realist ontology involves navigating the tension between acknowledging the presence of an objective reality and recognizing the limitations of human perception and interpretation. It also entails appreciating the diverse ways in which individuals construct and comprehend their social environments, thus enhancing our understanding of intricate social dynamics.

Central to the interpretive nature of qualitative research is the recognition that data collection and analysis are inherently subjective processes mediated by the researcher's interpretations. While this subjectivity enriches the depth and richness of qualitative inquiry, it also underscores the importance of critically reflecting on the researcher's positionality and its implications for knowledge production. Engaging in qualitative research entails embracing philosophical assumptions and committing to transparency, reflexivity, and ethical integrity.

## **6.2. Research Design**

The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach is based on its interpretive nature. Qualitative research aims to understand the meaning that individuals attribute to social phenomena, and to gain insights into their social and material circumstances, experiences, perspectives, and histories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Moreover, qualitative inquiry provides a valuable avenue for in-depth exploration of subjects, allowing for an examination of the underlying drivers, justifications, and factors influencing decisions, attitudes, behaviours, or related phenomena (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 28). Therefore, a qualitative approach is deemed suitable for the objectives of this study. Creswell & Poth (2018) distinguish among five different approaches to qualitative research: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Given that this research study aims to explore the individual experiences of highly skilled migrants in their integration into the Swedish labour market, a narrative qualitative approach was employed. This approach focuses on "the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 67).

## **6.3. Sampling Strategy**

I explored the experiences of non-EU high-skilled migrants who were initially international students and are now working in Sweden, using qualitative data

collected through semi-structured interviews. A key challenge relating to data collection was finding the targeted group of respondents, who match the set of criteria for the relevance to the research. In order to gain access to potential participants for my study, I employed various strategies. The main sampling strategy that I applied was purposive sampling, which involved the non-random selection of participants based on the following inclusion criteria: being a foreign national with tertiary education from a Swedish University, from a non-European country, currently living and working in Sweden. These selection criteria were chosen as they align with the working definition of high-skilled migrants in this research, with the additional requirement that the latest degree was obtained from a Swedish university. Initially, I reached out to my personal connections, including professors, classmates, and other professionals who might have connections or be able to provide insights into suitable participants. I also heavily relied on online advertising to recruit participants for my study. Notably, the internet also facilitated sample recruitment through online communication platforms, enabling interviews with participants who were geographically dispersed while mitigating logistical constraints and expenses (Robinson, 2013). I primarily used the platform LinkedIn, which is widely used by professionals worldwide. I wrote a post titled 'Invitation to participate in my research study' (see Appendix 1).

To a lesser extent, the second sampling strategy that I applied, which emerged during the interviewing process, is snowball sampling. This involved asking participants for references to other potential participants among their acquaintances (Zapat-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). Therefore, after the interview process, I asked respondents for additional contacts who could potentially participate in my study as well. This allowed me to gradually expand my participant pool, leveraging existing relationships to access a broader range of perspectives and experiences. Additionally, I utilised online platforms and forums dedicated to international workers in Sweden to reach out to potential participants who might be interested in contributing to my

research. By employing these diverse strategies, I aimed to ensure a comprehensive and varied sample. Initially, I intended to focus solely on non-EU high-skilled migrants from a particular region or city in Sweden. However, I ended up interviewing people living in different parts of the country. This turned out to be highly positive as it allowed me to explore patterns and potential differences among the interviewees' narratives. Furthermore, by speaking with professionals residing in different geographical areas, I was able to uncover a broader spectrum of integration experiences and perspectives. Along the same lines, conducting the interviews online, primarily via Zoom, enabled me to interview individuals working and living in different parts of the country. It is also worth noting that I did not limit the sample to a specific profession or background. This decision was made to adopt an inclusive approach, allowing for a more holistic exploration of integration challenges and capturing a range of perspectives and experiences across various occupational sectors and social contexts. This also enabled the recognition of potential differences in labour market integration according to different industries, a factor that was noticeable during the analysis stage.

#### **6.4. Data Collection**

The data collection phase was a critical phase of this research and a lot of time was consumed before the required and relevant set of data was collected. In total, I conducted a total of ten interviews and one pilot interview. The majority of the interviews were conducted over the phone due to the remoteness of the interviewees who lived in different cities across Sweden and took place upon agreement with the interviewees on timings convenient to them. Merely two interviews were face-to-face. As shown in the '*Invitation to participate in my research study*' (see Appendix 1), participants were always given the option to do the interview online or in person, according to their preference and time-schedule. A short overview was provided to familiarise the interviewees with the primary topics to be covered before commencing the interview, as the specific questions were not disclosed in advance.

The interviews lasted between 20 to 40 minutes. Despite the advantages that online interviewing presents, particularly in terms of accessibility and flexibility, there are methodological limitations that are inherently present. Notably, online interviewing has difficulties in establishing rapport and the inability to take into account interviewee's body language. After being in contact with a potential participant and after agreement on doing the interview, the interviewee was provided with the consent form, which had to be signed either electronically or physically (if face-to-face interview). In total, two interviews were performed online and five interviews were done online, using the Zoom platform. The selection of semi-structured interviews stems from their inherent flexibility, allowing for the spontaneous incorporation of additional inquiries during the interview process, thereby enabling a more comprehensive exploration of pertinent aspects germane to the study. Conversely, predetermined questions outlined in an interview guide serve as a foundational framework to guide the interview process, ensuring a systematic approach to data collection and facilitating focused examination of key themes (Bryman, 2016). The interview guide developed (see Appendix 2) was divided into various key themes which are depicted in Table 1. With the consent of interviewees, all the interviews were recorded and later transcribed for the analysis phase. In order to execute interviews successfully and establish a rapport with participants, it is beneficial to maintain eye contact and actively engage with individuals, and note-taking can interfere in this process (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 92). Therefore, I took brief notes to keep track of items to follow up on or new questions to pose. Additionally, documenting notes after each interview helps in recording specific details about the participant's presentation and environment, reflecting on personal reactions, evaluating the interview process, and generating ideas for data analysis and further questioning (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 93). Doing this was particularly helpful for the analysis stage.

Table 1. Key Themes for Interview Guide

| Theme                                      | Description  |
|--|--|
| Introduction and Background                | Gathering information about the participant's personal background, age, origin, profession, and motivation for moving to Sweden.                             |
| Integration into the Swedish labour Market | Exploring expectations, experiences, challenges, and barriers faced during the integration into the Swedish labour market, including job search experiences. |
| Socio-Economic Well-being                  | Understanding the impact of employment situations on the participant's socio-economic status and their future plans.   |
| Upward Mobility                            | Investigating opportunities for career advancement and factors influencing upward mobility for immigrants in Sweden.   |
| Support Systems and Resources              | Identifying the types of support, resources, or services that aided the participant in their integration process and employment navigation.                  |
| Coping Strategies and Resilience           | Exploring the coping mechanisms, strategies, or resources that helped the participant maintain resilience amidst challenges.                                 |

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Reflections and Recommendations | Reflecting on experiences to provide advice for potential immigrants and suggesting improvements for immigrant integration in Sweden. |
|---------------------------------|---|

### 6.5. Data Analysis

Analysing qualitative data from interviews can be challenging, primarily because it is a time-consuming and disordered process; likewise, the collected data is subject to the researchers' interpretation (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Instead of adhering to a strict and procedure-based approach, I intended to be alert, flexible and positively interact with the data collected (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). The initial step involved the manual transcription of all the interview data. Throughout this process I also intended to familiarise myself with the data. I read and re-read the transcripts to immerse in the data and gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives. The qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, a flexible and systematic method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and/or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The software NVivo was used to assist in organising and managing the data during the analysis process, to sort and synthesise the obtained material through qualitative coding (Hilal & Alabri, 2013).

Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. These codes are typically attached to data "chunks" of different sizes and can be either straightforward and descriptive, or more evocative and complex (Miles et al., 2014, p.71-72). Coding can be divided into two major phases: first cycle and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013 cited in Miles et al.; 2014). The former is a way to initially summarise the data, while the later involves arranging the summaries into fewer categories or themes, in order to

develop the most salient categories. I began the analysis process by attaching initial codes, in order to represent what these segments are about and make sense of the obtained data. Hence, I majoritarily employed both descriptive and 'in vivo' codes. Descriptive codes merely identify a topic of a particular passage, and not go in-depth into the meaning behind it. For this reason, the use of 'in vivo' codes is particularly beneficial. 'In vivo' codes, which are derived directly from the language and terms used by the participants themselves, allow for a richer, more authentic representation of their perspectives and experiences (Miles et al., 2014, p.73).

After finalising the first cycle coding stage, I proceeded to employ focus coding to discern overarching patterns and themes across the various transcripts. During this phase, I identified recurring codes or "patterns" among the data, which provided insight into common experiences, challenges, and perspectives shared by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These similar codes were then grouped together to create a smaller number of categories or pattern codes, facilitating a more concise and organised representation of the data. By clustering related codes into broader categories, I aimed to capture the most of participants' experiences and generate higher-level analytic meanings. Drawing on the methodological framework outlined by Miles et al. (2014, p.80), this process allowed for the exploration of interrelationships among the identified categories, thereby facilitating the development of nuanced interpretations and insights. Through systematic analysis and synthesis of the data, I sought to uncover deeper layers of meaning and understanding, ultimately contributing to the formulation of robust assertions and conclusions regarding the integration challenges and socio-economic well-being of non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden.



## **6.6. Final Methodological reflections**

To evaluate the quality and reliability of the provided study, the subsequent paragraphs critically analyse the credibility, dependability, and transferability of its design and findings.

### **6.6.1. Ethical considerations**

Adhering to ethical guidelines throughout the research process is crucial, from the initial stage of planning and designing the study to the final stage of the presentation of findings. Particularly in qualitative research, when dealing with individuals' private experiences and feelings, it is crucial to consider all the potential ethical issues that could arise throughout the realisation of the research study. As Creswell & Poth (2018) highlight, it is important to examine ethical issues as they apply to different phases of the research process (p.54).

In the process of beginning to conduct the study, all participants, possible as well as actual participants, were thoroughly informed with the purpose of the research, and what their participation in it would entail. Therefore, in order to achieve this, I developed a consent form (see Appendix 3). The consent form presented all the necessary information regarding the nature and purpose of the study, a detailed description of the interview process, a statement that participation in research is voluntary, a statement ensuring the anonymity of participants' identity and the confidentiality of all provided information throughout the whole research process. The form also included a statement offering the participant the opportunity to withdraw at any time from the research without consequences. Participants were ensured that there are no risks associated with participating in the study. The consent form was sent to every participant prior to starting the interview, and was signed by both the participant and the researcher.

Throughout the stage of data collection, I ensured that the data was recorded, stored, used and reported in a way that nobody can have access to the original sources.

Furthermore, to ensure anonymity and respect the privacy of participants, I assigned fictitious names or ‘pseudonyms’, and omitted information that could potentially disclose their identity. Relevant to mention, prior to recording the interview audio, participants were asked for their verbal consent. Overall, these ethical considerations underscore a dedication to safeguarding participant privacy and maintaining the integrity of the research endeavour.

### **6.6.2. Reflexivity**

Reflexivity in research can be understood as ‘a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes.’ (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p.241). Many of my research ideas stemmed from my own personal experiences and observations. Therefore, being reflexive of my own positionality and biases as a researcher was essential to acknowledge the way in which these influence each step of this research. It is beneficial to distinguish between two types of reflexivity - personal and functional (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.37). Personal reflexivity in research involves incorporating the researcher into the research process, making them visible as active participants. A researcher is categorised as an ‘insider’ when they possess specific attributes that align with those of the study participants. Conversely, a researcher is classified as an ‘outsider’ when they do not share the same group affiliation as the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Being also a non-EU migrant myself, I shared commonalities with the research participants. Particularly, in regards to the recruitment process, I had an advantageous access to networks and communities of non-EU high-skilled migrants. However, this does not signify that I faced challenges in this respect; specially considering that I aimed to have a heterogeneous sample, with individuals with diverse backgrounds. I am aware, nevertheless, that there were certain difficulties associated with my shared identity with the participants, especially when it comes to upholding neutrality and mitigating potential biases. Therefore, during the interviews

themselves, I hence made an effort to establish and maintain neutral yet friendly rapport during interviews to ensure that my own verbal and nonverbal reactions do not influence participants' answers, as well as a respectful relationship with the respondents.

### **6.6.3. Credibility, reliability and transferability**

On grounds of credibility and trustworthiness, I ensured to be completely transparent by providing a thorough account of all stages of the research process. This includes discussing the applicability and consistency of methodological tools, as well as highlighting any difficulties, personal reflections, and critical points I encountered during the research process.

In addition, the transparent presentation of all research steps serves as evidence for the validity of the study's conclusions and enhances its credibility. To further enhance credibility, I also ensured to verify my understanding of the interviewees' communication, provide detailed descriptions of findings, and closely align my interpretations with the original narratives provided by the interviewees. A pilot interview was conducted with one participant as a way to test the validity and reliability of the data collection procedure. Indeed, this was an excellent way to test the interview guide, and ensure that there is a clarity in the wording and ordering of questions. Moreover, to identify any redundant or unnecessary questions.

To assess a study's transferability, i.e. the generalizability of the inferences about non-EU high skilled migrants in Sweden, it is essential to provide a detailed account of the particular contexts, participants, settings, and conditions involved. This allows the reader to assess the likelihood of extending the findings to different contexts or participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.282). It is important to mention in this regard that the overarching purpose of this research was not to transfer the findings to other cases. Instead, this thesis produces an in-depth understanding of the studied group. The results highlight the commonalities of general challenges that may be relevant to

the broader population of non-EU skilled professional immigrants in accessing professional employment in Sweden, despite the fact that the circumstances of skilled professional immigrants in Sweden may differ from those of professionals in other settings in the job market.

Hence, while this study's findings may not be generalizable to all non-EU high-skilled migrants in Sweden due to the purposive sampling method, a detailed description of the research context, participants, and methodology is provided to enable readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

### **6.7. Limitations of the study**

All research endeavours involve inherent limitations, as various factors may have influenced or compromised the data in different ways. Therefore, this section will outline some of these limitations. From a methodological standpoint, the qualitative nature of the research posed significant challenges, particularly in terms of time consumption and participant recruitment. Although the intention was to conduct ten interviews, only eight were possible due to time constraints and scheduling difficulties, made worse by participants' struggles to balance work commitments with interview availability. Furthermore, the disproportionate representation of female respondents (five) compared to male respondents (three) introduces potential biases into the study's participant demographics, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives captured. Additionally, the small sample size raises concerns about the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific study context. Nevertheless, the transcripts obtained from the conducted interviews are expected to provide ample material for analysis and effectively address the research questions. Despite these acknowledged limitations, this study offers valuable insights to the existing literature, shedding light on crucial aspects of the research topic. However, it is important to interpret the findings within the context of these limitations, recognizing

their potential impact on the study's outcomes and the broader applicability of its conclusions.

## **7. Findings**

This section will describe the findings of the eight semi-structured interviews conducted with non EU high skilled migrants. The findings presented answers the two research questions: firstly, *what are some of the key challenges encountered by highly skilled migrants from non-EU countries during their integration into the Swedish labour market, as perceived by the migrants themselves?* and How do these integration challenges affect the socio-economic well-being of non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden, and what coping strategies do they employ?

### **7.1. Background information of participants**

Prior to presenting the findings, this section will introduce the interviewees (refer to Table 2 in Section 6.4.1). Here, a brief overview of the interviewees' basic characteristics will be provided without delving into specific details, such as their process of relocating to Sweden or the specifics of their integration in the labour market. These aspects will be discussed in greater depth in the subsequent sections. To safeguard the participants' confidentiality, all identifying information has been altered. Table 2 outlines the basic characteristics of the research participants and will be presented to offer a snapshot of the demographic and professional diversity of the sample. The participants were selected based on specific criteria to ensure a varied representation that captures the breadth of experiences of non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden. As evidenced, women are overrepresented in the sample (5), in comparison to male participants (3). Three interviewees are from the Latin American region, two from Africa, two from OECD countries, and one from the Middle East region. It is important to note that most of the participants have been in Sweden for more than two years, which is rational given that a Master's degree program lasts around 1 to 2 years. The rest of the time represents participants' time in the labour

market. The interviewees' backgrounds are varied, ranging from Social Science, IT, Marketing, Microbiology, and Machine Learning. It is important to acknowledge that the participants' varied educational backgrounds and professional experiences bring a wide range of viewpoints regarding the challenges and opportunities of integration in the Swedish labour market. Moreover, the interviewees are located in different cities in Sweden. Three of the interviewees are working in companies located in the Skåne region, while one interviewee lives in Östergötland region, two interviewees are living in Västra Götaland and two interviewees in the Stockholm region.

Table 2. Characteristics of Research Participants

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Qualification in Sweden</b>                         | <b>Country of Origin</b> | <b>Time in Sweden (In Years)</b> |
|--------------------|---------------|--|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| R1                 | F             | Guest Researcher (PhD in Microbiology)                 | Egypt                    | Around seven years               |
| R2                 | F             | Master in Ethnic and Migration Studies                 | Australia                | Three years and a half           |
| R3                 | M             | Master in Information Systems                          | Peru                     | More than two years              |
| R4                 | F             | Master in Accounting and Finance                       | Uganda                   | More than four years             |
| R5                 | M             | Master in Development Studies                          | Zambia                   | Five years and a half            |
| R6                 | F             | Master in Global Studies, BSc. in Development Studies  | United States            | Six and a half years             |
| R7                 | F             | Master in International Marketing and Brand Management | Ecuador                  | One year and a half              |

|    |   |  |         |                        |
|----|---|--|---------|------------------------|
| R8 | M | Master in Machine Learning Systems and Control | Ecuador | Three years and a half |
|----|---|--|---------|------------------------|

**Source:** Interviews conducted between March 8th and April 16th

### 7.1. Underlying motivations for moving to Sweden

One factor that was examined among participants was their underlying motivations for choosing Sweden as their destination country. This aspect holds great significance within the research literature on the migratory experiences of highly skilled migrants, as evidenced in the review of previous studies, and has the potential to provide intriguing insights. The participants' answers were aligned with their decision to select Sweden as their destination country for the purpose of conducting their studies. It is important to note that all the participants initially relocated to Sweden as international students with the goal of completing a Master's degree, with the exception of one participant (R1), who came to Sweden as a guest researcher as part of a doctoral program. Thus, the most common reason cited by participants was the opportunities for career advancement that studying and working abroad provide, as well as the higher quality of life that Sweden offers compared to their home countries. This includes factors such as safety, quality of education, and opportunities for initiation and research. The interviewees used words such as “work-life balance”, “a place where you can feel very safe” and “job security” when describing the life Sweden offers compared to that in their countries of origin. Additionally, some participants expressed that the specific industry they are involved in is not as strongly present in their home countries, and therefore the programs offered by Swedish universities were not available to them. All of these factors contribute to Sweden being an attractive destination for the interviewees. For example, participant R7 stated the following:



*'Well, at the start, my dream was, my forever dream, was always trying to see different options and different ways in order to make a life in Europe. At the start, I didn't know what was going to be my destiny, but I started applying to different countries. (...) When I saw this opportunity in Sweden, I started researching more about the country, the life quality, also the education, the way the different problems were adapted to my expectations of what I wanted to have as a professional experience.'* (Participant R7)

Furthermore, some participants also referenced personal or family connections to Sweden, such as having relatives already residing in the country, which strongly influenced their decision. For instance one of the participants was an accompanying spouse, and another one came due to having a Swedish partner. These personal and familial connections highlight the multifaceted nature of migration decisions, where factors beyond career opportunities and quality of life play a crucial role in shaping individuals' choices, and the diversifying nature of their migratory trajectories.

## **7.2 Challenges of labour market integration**

The first research question guiding this study aims to capture some of the key challenges encountered by highly skilled migrants from non-EU countries during their integration into the Swedish labour market, as perceived by the migrants themselves. Hence, this particular section I will delve into detail on what these challenges have participants identified among their narratives.

### **7.2.1. Language Proficiency**

The interconnectedness of various factors has shown to influence the labour market integration of migrants in host societies (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). When asked about their experience of seeking employment in Sweden, one of the greatest challenges identified by all interviewees was the language. This is strongly aligned with previous studies, reaffirming the crucial role of local language

proficiency in shaping individuals' career trajectories, and their experiences of integration into the Swedish labour market. To exemplify this, participant R4, who further her education with a one-year Master's degree at a Swedish University, particularly highlighted the significant obstacle posed by the language requirement for job opportunities in Sweden, not only for high skilled positions but also for low skilled jobs.

*'Yeah, I think the biggest challenge, of course, was the language. Many jobs required for me to know Swedish, which I didn't really, wasn't, I wasn't, I couldn't speak at that time. So even applying for the positions was really difficult, even when you try to apply for a low level, like a low level job.'* (Participant R4)

In a similar vein, participant R7, who also expressed the significance of knowing the local language for career advancement, further acknowledged the challenge of competing with native Swedes for job opportunities, and a potential bias by recruiters for hiring native speakers, by stating that employers potentially make their recruitment choices based on preferences on one's nationality background. Most employers would prefer not to hire individuals who cannot speak Swedish. Instead, they would prefer to recruit individuals who can understand instructions, communicate workplace safety concerns with employers, colleagues, and clients. Another relevant point brought up among interviewees was the difficulty of attaining a job aligned with their competences and previous skills. Throughout the process of looking for a job within their field of expertise, the fact that job advertisements were written in Swedish presented a strong limitation. Also potentially discouraging participants' willingness to apply for a position. In this matter, for instance, participant R1 stated as follows:

*'Of course, I don't speak Swedish. So it's very hard to get employed. Yeah, I think this is the main reason, like, because I tried to apply for everything, like lab technician, for example, in my field, but like all job descriptions, like fluent in Swedish.'*

*(Participant R1)*

Moreover, participants discussed the psychological impact of language barriers, sharing experiences of feeling excluded or unable to fully participate in professional settings because of language limitations. The lack of Swedish skills had influenced the interviewees' career prospects, not only in the process of seeking for a job, but also at the workplace. The inability to understand conversations or effectively express oneself during meetings was identified as a significant source of stress and insecurity. This highlights the profound emotional impact that linguistic barriers have on individuals' overall psychological well-being and self-confidence. For example, participant R6 describes his experience working for an organisation where the working language was Swedish:

*'I joined it because I thought I could manage or pick up some of the language quite quickly, but it was challenging. Like, you can't imagine sitting in a meeting and not understanding anything. So then it plays on your mind and you can't fully express yourself.'* (Participant R6)

This aspect is of particular importance, and is also linked to potential ethnic discrimination in the labour market, which has been shown among the literature as well (Rydgren, 2004; Erlandsson, 2022). The analysis of the empirical data has demonstrated the importance of the language barrier as a common challenge faced by non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden. All interviewees who had reported that not knowing Swedish is a disadvantage when applying for work in Sweden. It highlights the practical necessity of learning the host country's language for both daily living and professional advancement in Swedish society. Language proficiency goes beyond basic communication skills and encompasses cultural understanding and integration. As evidenced, language proficiency has a significant impact not only on the job-seeking process and working lives of highly skilled migrants, but also

affects them emotionally and psychologically. These language limitations have an influence on their sense of belonging and overall well-being.

### **7.2.2. Difficulties in the recognition of qualifications**

*'No, I don't see it is recognized at all. Not recognized. I feel like it's not considered even, like, to think about recognition.'* (Participant R1)

According to Iredale (2001), highly skilled migrants consider career prospects to be a crucial factor in deciding whether to prolong their stay in the host country. However, previous literature on labour market integration has shown that the non-recognition of foreign credentials and work experience can pose a challenge, which has been referred to as the 'transferability of human capital' in previous studies (de Haas et al., 2020). This challenge is particularly evident for participants R1 and R2, who are struggling to find employment in their field. Participant R1, as indicated in the quote provided at the beginning of this subsection, expresses frustration that her qualifications are not being recognized. Despite having extensive and remarkable experience in the field of Microbiology, both from her home country and in Sweden, she reports that employers do not value it. Highly skilled migrants commonly face this issue, as their credentials and professional experience from their home country may not be acknowledged or valued (Yamazaki, 2022). The lack of recognition presents them with a challenge in finding suitable employment that matches their skills and experience. Consequently, they feel undervalued and frustrated. When asked about whether she had any preconceived ideas of the Swedish labour market, participant R4 stated that her initial thoughts were that it would not be so challenging given that she had various years of previous experience in a well-known multinational company in her home country. However, she encountered unexpected obstacles and faced rejections while trying to find employment in their field. Despite feeling well-qualified for the positions she applied for, she was initially unable to

secure a job. She thus highlights the disparity between their previous professional position in Uganda and the opportunities available to them in Sweden. Being given lower-level roles can be frustrating and have an impact on their self-esteem and professional identity. This passage emphasises the importance of career growth and achieving professional goals for highly skilled immigrants, which can influence their decision to stay in or leave the host country.

*'Because back in Uganda, (...) but it was almost like a manager role. So when you come here, and then they tell you, maybe you can apply for an internship, it feels like a downgrade. So I think it was a shock.'* (Participant R4)

A relevant factor that was mentioned by certain participants was trust. Participant R5 particularly delved into the significance of trust in workplace relationships and the challenges of establishing trust as a newcomer in Sweden. When looking for work experience while conducting his studies, he referred to the presence of a 'trust culture' in Sweden which ultimately influences the recognition of his previous qualifications, attained in his country of origin.

*'So, I mean, to be very frank with you, I'm very candid, it's like in Sweden, it's about trust, right? In whatever form of relations you're going to be in, even in the workplace, it's about trust. So the first challenge you experience is, or I experienced was, like I wasn't sure if people trusted me and my abilities, like it takes time for people to trust.'* (Participant R5)

This aspect is indeed very interesting as it could potentially unveil how also the cultural values present in Swedish society are also intertwining with the lives of migrants. Trust plays a crucial role in fostering effective collaboration and integration in the workplace, while its absence can create obstacles to meaningful engagement and career advancement. This excerpt provides insight into the interpersonal barriers that migrants face when attempting to gain credibility and

build rapport in Swedish workplaces, ultimately impacting their professional development and sense of belonging. All interviewees acknowledged the perceived advantage of having a degree from a Swedish university or work experience in Sweden as highly skilled migrants in navigating the Swedish labour market.

*'I think having a degree from a Swedish university now probably helps a lot. Because I feel like when I first arrived, I had no experience of working or studying in Sweden. And I think that probably made it a lot harder.'* (Participant R2)

Country-specific education, particularly the Swedish education system, has been identified as a considerable requirement for the successful integration of immigrants into the Swedish labour market. This could be due to the fact that employers place a higher level of trust in individuals with a familiar academic background, while unfamiliar with international credentials and experiences, as well foreign education systems due to limited knowledge and understanding of their standards and quality. In other words, when considering immigrants as potential employees in the Swedish labour market, it is crucial to take into account country-specific skills such as Swedish education, work experience in Sweden, and proficiency in the Swedish language.

### **7.2.3. Importance of networking**

In addition to language proficiency and cultural adaptation, the significance of social networks emerged as a prominent theme in the narratives of participants. Several participants across various interviews emphasised the importance of building social connections and leveraging personal networks to secure employment opportunities in Sweden. For example, Participant R6 acknowledged that knowing the right people and having established connections were crucial for her in navigating the Swedish job market. Reflecting on this, she acknowledged how in the job seeking process, to

a certain extent, she relied on the people that she knew when contacting organisations she was interested in working with.

*'I knew that in Sweden, it's a little more difficult to find jobs here for non-Swedes. There's the kind of network value is very high here. So knowing people, having connections is very important.'* (Participant R6)

The recognition of the heightened significance of social networks in Sweden implies that individuals from outside of Sweden may encounter additional obstacles when they are in search of employment in a new country. Unlike in their countries of origin, where familiarity with local customs and networks might be considered to be a given, some interviewees discovered that they were at a disadvantage due to their limited social connections and lack of knowledge regarding the intricacies of the local job market. In this particular context, the emphasis on networking highlights the necessity for active efforts to expand one's social circle and establish meaningful connections within professional circles. To provide further evidence of the role that social networks play in the job-seeking process, interviewee R2 elaborated on the importance of references when applying for jobs within her field. She also mentioned that doing internships and becoming involved in voluntary organisations are effective ways to obtain contacts and potential and more current references for future applications.

*'(...) And I think maybe one of the other challenges is being able to have strong references. Because most of my work experience is from back home in Australia. In situations where jobs might want references, I cannot really contact those people from years ago. So, at the moment, I am trying to focus on doing internships and stuff like that. Just to try and get some stronger references for when I go through the application process.'* (Participant R2)

Overall, the emphasis on social networks as a considerable factor in the job search process highlights the nuanced nature of employment dynamics in Sweden. By acknowledging the importance of personal connections and networking, participants shed light on the multifaceted nature of labour market integration and the diverse strategies employed by individuals to navigate the complexities of seeking employment in a new country; highlighting the importance of personal connections and networking in the local job market.

#### **7.2.4. Cultural differences**

Alongside language skills, the lack of recognition for foreign qualifications and the significance of social networks, cultural adaptation was revealed by some participants as a crucial factor influencing their individuals' experiences in their job search. The study participants emphasised that cultural differences further complicate the integration of migrants into the Swedish labour market. When questioned about whether he had experienced cultural differences between the Swedish labour market and his country of origin, Peru, participant R3 highlights the significance of exhibiting cross-cultural competence when searching for employment in Sweden, particularly since his work experience was acquired in his home country. He emphasised that his adeptness in effectively collaborating with individuals from various cultural backgrounds, having taken part in international projects and his proficient English communication skills were an advantage. This recognition emphasises the high value placed on intercultural skills and adaptability in the Swedish job market, where regular interactions with colleagues and clients from diverse cultural backgrounds might be common.

*'(...) I wanted to demonstrate in my profile that I was able to work with people from different cultures in English and not only with Peruvians because I think that was going to be a key factor to people in Sweden to trust me and to see me as a good profile.'* (Participant R3)



He emphasised that although it is crucial to showcase the skill of collaborating with individuals from various cultural backgrounds, there can be substantial obstacles due to the practical realities of diverse workplace norms and expectations. For example, practices that are considered normal and accepted in Peruvian work settings may not be relevant or may even be misconstrued in Swedish workplaces. As a result, there is a need for a period of adaptation and learning, where migrants must not only adjust to new work methods but also discard previous habits that may not be effective in the new environment.

*'Yeah it's true and I think I can relate to my experience but anybody who wants to work in a different country or a different continent region that the one you come from or where you have worked before you will face cultural challenges because in Sweden the practices at work are different to Peru.'* (Participant R3)

Furthermore, Participant R7 provides more details about the difficulties migrants in Sweden encounter when it comes to cultural integration. They explain how recruitment processes can favour candidates who share similar cultural backgrounds with the current team, which is often made up mostly of Europeans. This observation sheds light on the potential obstacles that individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds may face when trying to find employment and integrate into Swedish workplaces.

*'So for example, as we come from a different culture and all that, I've noticed that the recruiters, they look like someone that matches their teams. So usually they are made up with Europeans themselves. So try to insert yourself in a culture that you are experiencing and also you are trying to adapt, but it will always have this, like what do you call it, like 'brecha', like between being a Latino and European.'* (Participant R7)

Furthermore, participant R8's experience highlights the extensive amount of time and effort necessary for successful cultural adaptation in the workplace. Moving from a Latin American work setting to Sweden requires substantial adjustments, which can have an impact on productivity and professional performance. This underscores the importance of providing support systems and resources to help migrants navigate cultural differences and effectively integrate into Swedish workplaces. In conclusion, acknowledging cultural diversity and promoting intercultural understanding are crucial for creating inclusive and prosperous labour markets in Sweden.

*'But of course, I learned that in Ecuador and everything when I was working there. But trying to switch from a work environment from Latin America to here, it was completely different. So it took me, I would say, two months in order to actually be productive.'* (Participant R8)

This suggests that the beliefs about migrants' "cultural distance" from native Swedes, held by important individuals in gatekeeper roles, may be more influential in exclusionary practices than the general cultural differences themselves. Such perceptions of cultural distance can greatly affect migrants' integration and success in the Swedish labour market. By addressing these beliefs and fostering a more inclusive and culturally sensitive environment, we can help overcome these challenges and promote a workplace that is more fair and diverse.

#### **7.2.5. Bureaucratic processes**

From the discussion with participants, another theme that emerged was the burden of dealing with bureaucratic processes. These processes can create obstacles that complicate the job-seeking experience and impact the overall ability of migrants to adapt to their new environment.

For instance, participant R4, who initially moved to Sweden to conduct a one-year Master programme, mentioned the issue of obtaining a personal number, which is crucial for accessing various services in Sweden, including healthcare, banking, and

employment. She pointed out that this represents a difficulty faced by students in one-year master's programs who are ineligible for a personal number. This lack of a personal number severely limited her ability to integrate fully into Swedish society and the labour market.

*'You know, when I came, I don't know how long your master's programme was, was it two years or one year? Yes, it's two years. When I came, mine was one year. And because of that, I don't know if you have friends who are taking one year classes, but one of the biggest challenges is you don't get a personal number.'* (Participant R4)

At the same time, participant R6 highlights the benefits of having a Swedish partner, which enables him to obtain a Sambo visa. Unlike work permits, this visa does not require company sponsorship, offering him more freedom and security in the job market. Being able to stay in the country without relying on an employer provides a significant advantage and lessens the stress of searching for a job.

*'An advantage I think that I have in the labour market here is because I have a Swedish partner, I have a Sambo visa. So I didn't, I wasn't reliant on a company sponsoring me for a work visa. And so that's a huge privilege and advantage for a lot of people that are looking for work fresh out of university in Sweden. So yeah, it just popped into my head. So I wanted to say that.'* (Participant R6)

Regarding this challenge, one of the interviewees highlighted the issue of needing sponsorship for a work permit, which can affect the job search process. Some recruiters, especially those in small companies, may not be familiar with the process of obtaining a work permit. As a result, they may be more inclined to hire individuals who do not require a work permit. Participant R7 specifically discussed the complexities and perceptions surrounding work permits. She mentioned that some recruiters may be hesitant to hire international candidates due to the perceived difficulties in obtaining work permits. This hesitation can pose a significant barrier to

employment for migrants, as companies may prefer to avoid the additional administrative burden. However, she also noted that multinational companies are generally more open and experienced in navigating these processes, making them more likely to hire international talent.

*'That would be the second. And the work permit. That would be also like a major, let's say, thing when it comes to landing a job, because some people don't know, like at least some recruiters don't know the process. Their first thought is that it's probably hard to get a work permit. So they don't like to do that. At least I've noticed in some companies, but in others, for example, multinationals, I've seen that they are more open in bringing more international workforce to their companies.'*  
(Participant R7)

The bureaucratic processes that high-skilled migrants outside the EU need to face add an additional layer to the already described challenges faced by high-skilled migrants in order to integrate into the labour market.

### **7.3. Socio-economic wellbeing**

A further topic explored throughout the interviews was the socio-economic wellbeing of participants. Socio-economic well-being is a complex concept that includes different aspects of an individual's financial security and overall satisfaction with their economic situation. During the interviews conducted with highly skilled migrants in Sweden, participants shared their experiences with socio-economic well-being, thereby revealing factors like financial independence, satisfaction with salary, and challenges associated with meeting living expenses.

For many participants, achieving financial independence was a significant milestone in their integration process into Swedish society. This transition symbolises a crucial aspect of socio-economic well-being – the ability to sustain oneself financially and achieve a level of autonomy in managing one's finances. In the excerpt below,

interviewee R8 highlights that attaining a job in Sweden allowed him to become financially independent, and not having the need to rely on other people to support himself.

*'Actually, I felt quite happy because when I was studying, I needed to spend my money from my savings. And also my parents were helping me. But now I had the chance to earn my money to support myself' (Participant R8)*

However, having financial security does not come without challenges, as pointed out by some participants who faced challenges due to the high cost of living in Sweden. Participant R5, who managed to attain a job in his field, but had to relocate as the company's headquarter is in the capital city of Stockholm, expanded on this. Although he recognized that his salary was adequate based on Swedish standards, he also highlighted that the cost of living, coupled with inflation, resulted in continuous financial strains. Even though he earned what could be considered a reasonable salary, he perceived the long-term sustainability of his financial circumstances in light of rising living expenses.

*In terms of salary and all those things, I think generally the cost of living in Sweden is extremely high and the salaries are just okay. (...) So it's, it's okay. I mean, because of Swedish standards, but now with inflation and all these things, it's a bit, just on the okay point of view, but otherwise, like well being-wise, I think I'm in a better place. (Participant R5)*

Furthermore, the experiences shared by participants emphasised the temporary nature of socio-economic well-being, which is subject to changes and uncertainties. For example, one participant discussed the difficulties they encountered as a freelancer, unable to cover their living expenses despite depleting their savings. This story highlights the vulnerability that individuals may face when their sources of income are unstable or insufficient to meet their financial needs.

*'Yeah. I would say the hardest time I have this challenge is now, currently. Yeah, because I spent all my savings, and I still can't make it work as a freelancer, so to have my living expenses covered for each month.'* (Participant R1)

These experiences demonstrate the intricate interaction between personal circumstances, employment conditions, and broader economic factors in shaping individuals' socio-economic well-being. However, despite these challenges, participants also expressed a sense of resilience and adaptability in navigating their socio-economic situations. Despite facing financial setbacks, many spoke of their determination to overcome these obstacles and improve their overall well-being. This resilience not only reflects individuals' coping strategies but also the presence of support systems and resources that enable them to weather economic hardships and strive for a better quality of life. In conclusion, the interviews conducted with highly skilled migrants in Sweden provide valuable insights into the complexities of socio-economic well-being. These interviews shed light on both the achievements and challenges faced by individuals in their quest for financial security and satisfaction. Through an examination of their lived experiences and perspectives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the various factors that influence socio-economic well-being, as well as the strategies employed to navigate economic uncertainties.

#### **7.4. Access to Resources**

The last theme that was touched upon among interviewees' narratives was whether they turned to any particular kind of resources, benign public or private, during their job seeking process. Out of all the participants, most of them recurred to university career resources, which makes sense given that these are available for them throughout their studies. To exemplify this, I present this excerpt from participant R4, who mentioned that university resources were highly useful when she was concluding her studies.

*'So one, I used the university resources. Surprisingly, the university has career offices. And I didn't know until the end that actually I could have shared with them my CV. (...) So I found that very helpful. And I would always recommend for students to do that before they enter the market. (Participant R4)*

Participant R8's experience highlights the range of resources available to highly skilled migrants during their job-seeking journey. In addition to university career services, the participant sought assistance from external organisations such as Arbetsförmedlingen and Akademikernas a-kassa (the unemployment insurance fund for academics), which play distinct yet complementary roles in support through various stages of employment transition.

*'So, that's one organisation that I recurred to, which is Arbetsförmedlingen, and then there is also this one called Akademiförmlingsakassa or something like that, and actually, it's the unemployment membership, well, I forgot the complete name, but they help you out if you, for instance, lose your job, they will pay you like four months or six months, they will give you like a fraction of your salary, you know, for you to find another job in that time lapse.'* (Participant R8)

Arbetsförmedlingen, commonly known as the Swedish Public Employment Service, serves as a central hub for job seekers, offering a wide range of services to facilitate employment opportunities. From job listings to career counselling, Arbetsförmedlingen provides tailored support to individuals navigating the job market. Participant R8's engagement with Arbetsförmedlingen reflects a proactive approach to tapping into public resources for job search assistance. By leveraging the services offered by Arbetsförmedlingen, the participant accessed valuable tools and guidance to enhance job prospects and navigate potential employment challenges. Furthermore, participant R8 also mentions Akademikernas a-kassa, an unemployment insurance fund tailored for academics and professionals. This

resource provides financial protection for individuals facing unemployment, offering income replacement during periods of job loss. The participant highlights the role of Akademikernas a-kassa in providing a safety net for individuals transitioning between jobs, alleviating financial concerns and facilitating a smoother reintegration into the labour market. The provision of financial support during unemployment underscores the importance of social welfare systems in promoting economic stability and mitigating the adverse effects of job insecurity.

## **8. Analysis**

The presented findings have examined the various challenges that the study's participants have faced both in their job seeking process, and at their workplace. I will now move on to provide an in-depth analysis of the findings in connection to the guiding theory: human capital and social and cultural capital. First of all, the prominent role of language proficiency was identified. In this regard, the importance of the acquisition of human capital that is relevant for 'successful' integration in the host country's labour market was deemed as crucial. Lack of language proficiency in Swedish was identified by all participants as a major barrier to their integration into the Swedish labour market. Human capital theory suggests that investing in education, skills, and knowledge can greatly improve a person's ability to find employment and be productive (Liebig et al., 2003). In the case of highly skilled migrants in Sweden, learning the Swedish language directly contributes to their human capital, increasing their appeal to employers who value fluency in Swedish for operational and communication purposes. Proficiency in the language also enables better comprehension of workplace norms, expectations, and cultural subtleties, which are crucial for successful integration and performance in the job market. In the Swedish context, language skills have proven to be a critical component of the human capital of migrants, especially in a country where the local language plays a central role in professional settings and social integration. This lack



of proficiency can hinder not only the ability to secure employment but also potentially affect workplace communication, professional networking, and long-term career development. Furthermore, while most participants were able to secure jobs within their field of expertise; one interviewee in particular stressed that effective communication and fluency in Swedish is crucial for career advancement, and even upward mobility. Specifically, proficiency in the local language was viewed as a prerequisite for obtaining better job opportunities and achieving upward mobility in the workplace. This highlights the significant role that language plays in career progression. In this regard, a further theme that was identified amongst the interviewees' narratives was the difficulties in 'transferring their skills from back home'; the recognition of their foreign qualifications. Relevant to highlight, some participants also mentioned the high value attributed to having an experience working in a multicultural environment. However, it is important to note that those who successfully navigate this process often find that their international experience and more importantly, practical experience obtained in Sweden, is highly valued in the Swedish job market. This juxtaposition underscores a critical barrier, yet also a potential advantage for immigrants. For this reason, all participants acknowledge that they were in an advantageous position as they had 'local education'. This may be because employers tend to have more trust in individuals with a familiar academic background, while being less familiar with international credentials, experiences, and foreign education systems. This lack of knowledge and understanding can limit their ability to evaluate the standards and quality of these qualifications.

The role of the migrants' social contacts and network in regards to their labour market establishment can be examined through the lens of the theory of social capital. Participants often found that despite having substantial formal qualifications and professional experience (components of human capital), their lack of social and cultural capital in Sweden was also worth considering. Nevertheless, social capital, instead of being directly referred to as literally acquaintances or individuals, were

framed in the form of references. Important to point out, contrary to the increased importance placed on social capital - social network and/or acquaintances- of migrants across the literature (Behtoui, 2022; Cedeberg, 2012); the interviewees in this study did not explicitly say that their current positions were a result of their social capital. This indicates a nuanced understanding of how social networks play a role in helping migrants establish themselves in the labour market in Sweden. While participants recognized that having social connections and references is important for job search strategies, they did not necessarily believe that their job placement was solely due to their social capital.

As previously presented, cultural differences were also a predominant theme identified by interviewees. For instance, understanding local work culture, norms, and expectations—elements of cultural capital—are vital for navigating the workplace effectively and fitting into the broader social environment (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). This sheds light on the importance of resources such as Arbetsförmedlingen and university career centres, which are instrumental in building both social and cultural capital by connecting migrants with local professionals, providing cultural orientation, and enhancing understanding of the Swedish labour market. However, bias in the labour market can hinder migrants' access to social networks and the benefits they offer. For instance, discriminatory hiring practices or cultural stereotypes may restrict migrants' opportunities to connect with influential individuals or organisations within their industry. This exclusion from key networks can reduce migrants' access to job opportunities, mentorship, and other forms of social support that are crucial for career advancement. In light of this challenge, participants highlighted the importance of taking proactive steps to broaden one's social network and establish meaningful connections within professional circles. Some participants emphasised the significance of creating strong references through internships and involvement in voluntary organisations,

acknowledging their value in the job application process. Furthermore, bias in the labour market can undermine the trust and reciprocal relationships that form the foundation of social capital. Migrants who perceive or experience discrimination may become hesitant to seek help from others or engage in networking activities, fearing further marginalisation or rejection. This hesitation can further isolate migrants from valuable social resources and perpetuate their disadvantage in the labour market.

The integration process of migrants in the labour market is a complex interplay of various factors, as observed in the findings. The analysis emphasises the importance of language proficiency, cultural adaptation, human capital, and social capital in migrants' establishment in the labour market in Sweden.

## 9. Final Discussion

*Sweden prides itself as having these core values of inclusion, diversity, equality, and all these things. But in actual sense, when you get into the work market, some of these values are questioned, right? (Participant R5)*

The study has provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by highly skilled migrants in accessing job opportunities that match their qualifications in Sweden. It sheds light on the importance of host country-specific skills and the role they play in immigrants' labour market integration. The findings indicate that immigrants who lack all the qualities of the host country's specific capital may encounter difficulties in accessing professional jobs in Sweden. The final discussion of this research reflects on the experiences of migrants in the Swedish labour market from a neutral standpoint, acknowledging both the successes and challenges encountered. While many participants were able to integrate successfully into the labour market, it is important to consider the broader context of Sweden's values of inclusion, diversity, and equality.

Human capital, social capital and cultural capital theories offer valuable insights into the mechanisms and dynamics that contribute to successful integration into the labour market. Human capital theory highlights the importance of knowledge and skills as essential factors for employment. The analysis conducted in this research has highlighted various challenges faced by migrants, including language barriers, difficulties in credential recognition, and bias in the labour market. These challenges underscore the complexity of labour market integration and the need for ongoing efforts to support migrants in their journey. For instance, the emphasis on language proficiency as a crucial component of labour market integration suggests the importance of language learning initiatives and support services. By investing in

language education and providing resources for language acquisition, Sweden can facilitate the integration process for migrants and promote greater equality of opportunity in the labour market. Similarly, the analysis of social capital underscores the significance of social networks and references in labour market establishment. While bias in the labour market may hinder migrants' access to these networks, measures can be taken to address bias and promote inclusivity. Initiatives aimed at reducing unconscious bias and fostering diversity and inclusion can help create a more equitable labour market environment. In conclusion, while Sweden strives to uphold values of inclusion and equality, the experiences of migrants in the labour market reflect both successes and challenges. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, Sweden can continue to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable labour market for all individuals, regardless of their background or origin.

## **10. Further Research**

In terms of further research, it would be advantageous to delve deeper into specific aspects identified in this study to inform targeted interventions and policy reforms. Firstly, exploring the efficacy of existing language learning initiatives and support services for migrants could provide valuable insights into areas for improvement. By assessing the accessibility, quality, and impact of language education programs, policymakers can better tailor interventions to meet the diverse needs of migrants and enhance their integration prospects.

Secondly, investigating the mechanisms underlying bias in the labour market and its impact on migrants' access to social networks and opportunities for advancement would be crucial. Understanding the root causes of bias, whether they originate from institutional practices, cultural attitudes, or individual prejudices, can inform

strategies to mitigate its effects and promote a more inclusive and equitable labour market. Moreover, exploring the role of mentorship programs and peer support networks in facilitating migrants' labour market integration could offer promising avenues for further research. By examining the experiences of migrants who have benefited from mentorship and support initiatives, researchers can identify best practices and strategies for promoting social capital and career advancement among migrants. Overall, future research informed by the findings of this study can contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions and policy reforms aimed at fostering greater inclusion and equality in the Swedish labour market. By addressing the identified gaps and challenges, Sweden can continue to uphold its values of inclusion and diversity while ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals in the workforce.

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## 12. APPENDICES

### 12.1. APPENDIX 1: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY



FACULTY  
OF SOCIAL  
SCIENCES

#### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

I am conducting research for my Master's thesis, focusing on the experiences of foreign professionals with tertiary education who have moved to live and work in Sweden from non-EU countries. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how your migration journey intersects with your life course dynamics and your integration into the Swedish labor market. Your participation in this study would involve sharing your experiences and insights, which will greatly contribute to our understanding of the multifaceted experiences of highly skilled migrants in Sweden.

#### ARE YOU INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN MY STUDY?

Your insights would be invaluable to my study, and I would be honoured if you would consider participating. The participation would involve a single interview session lasting approximately one hour. The interview would be conducted in English and can take place at a time and location convenient for you, always including the option for a virtual interview. Please be assured that all information shared during the interview will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please feel free to reach out to me via email at xxxxxxxx@gmail.com or by phone at +46xxxx. Additionally, if you know of any colleagues who might be interested in participating, please do not hesitate to forward this message to them.

Thank you very much for considering my invitation, and I look forward to potentially hearing from you soon!

Warm regards,

Xiomara Seminario, Student at Lund University

## 12.2. APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Research Interview Guide

Title of Study: Examining the Experiences of Non-EU Highly Skilled Immigrants in Sweden

#### Introduction:

Welcome to the interview for my Master's thesis project on the experiences of non-EU highly skilled migrants in Sweden. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and all information you provide will be kept confidential. Before we start, I just want to make it clear that your participation is completely voluntary and it is okay to cancel the interview at any time and you do not have to explain why. You should never feel that I intrude on your personal opinions or thoughts in a way that does not feel right to you - please let me know if that is the case. The purpose of this interview is to gather insights into your experiences as a non-EU highly skilled immigrant in Sweden and to explore the challenges you have encountered during your integration into the Swedish labour market. The interview will be audio-recorded for analysis purposes, but your identity will remain anonymous throughout the whole research process.. I intend to focus only on the time you have been in Sweden, from the beginning to today, and want to hear about your thoughts and actions in relation to the Swedish labour market integration.

#### 1. Introduction and Background:

- a. Can you please tell me a bit about yourself, your age, where you come from, including your background and profession?
- b. What motivated you to move to Sweden?

#### 2. Integration into the Swedish labour Market:

What kind of expectations or thoughts did you have about the labour market and your work situation when you first arrived in Sweden? With relation to your education?

What do you think are the most important aspects of your labour market integration process? Was it challenging, if so how? What was positive and what was negative? Is there anything you wished was different or that you would have done differently? What is your situation now and what do you feel about it?

What were the main challenges you faced during your job search and integration into the Swedish labour market?

Did you encounter any specific barriers related to language, qualifications recognition, or cultural differences?

3. Socio-Economic Well-being:

- a. How has your employment situation impacted your socio-economic well-being?
- C. How do you perceive your future? If/what do you plan to do next and why?

4. Upward Mobility:

Have you experienced any opportunities for career advancement or professional development since moving to Sweden?

What factors do you believe facilitate or hinder upward mobility for immigrants in Sweden?

5. Support Systems and Resources:

- a. What kind of support did you receive, if any, during your integration process in Sweden?
- b. Are there any resources or services that you found particularly helpful in navigating the challenges of integration and employment in Sweden?

6. Coping Strategies and Resilience:

- a. How have you coped with the challenges you have faced as a non-EU highly skilled immigrant in Sweden?
- b. Can you share any strategies or resources that have helped you maintain resilience and perseverance?

7. Reflections and Recommendations:

- a. Looking back, what advice would you give to other non-EU highly skilled immigrants considering moving to Sweden or Sweden?
- b. Are there any changes or improvements you would suggest to support the integration and well-being of immigrants in Sweden?

Closing:

Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us today. Is there anything else you would like to add before we conclude the interview?

End of Interview

## 12.3. APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM



# Research Study Consent Form

Title of Study: Examining the Experiences of Non-EU Highly Skilled Immigrants in Sweden

Researcher: Xiomara Seminario

Institution: Lund University

Contact Information: xxxxxx

### Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by me, Xiomara Seminario, a Master's student at Lund University. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of non-EU highly skilled immigrants in Sweden. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and this form is designed to provide you with information about the study to help you make an informed decision about your involvement.

### Study Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-hour interview. The interview will focus on your experiences as a non-EU highly skilled professional immigrant in Sweden, including the challenges you have encountered during your integration into the Swedish labour market

. The interview can be conducted in person at a location convenient for you or via Skype, according to your preference.

### Confidentiality:

All information collected during the interview will be kept strictly confidential. Your name and any identifying information will not be disclosed in this study. Audio recordings of the interviews will be stored securely and will only be accessible to the researcher.



Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw, any data collected up to that point will be discarded, and your decision will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the institution.

Benefits and Risks:

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, your insights and experiences may contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by non-EU highly skilled immigrants in Sweden. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study.

Questions and Contact Information:

If you have any questions about the study or your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me at xxxx.

Consent:

By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided in this consent form. You voluntarily agree to participate in the study and consent to the collection and use of data as described above.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

[If the participant agrees to participate electronically, provide space for electronic signature and date.]

[Electronic Signature] \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 08-03-2024 \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your participation. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.**