



Skilled migrants re-entering their careers in Sweden and support they received

Ali Osman, Marianne Teräs & Eva Eliasson

Stockholm University, Sweden

(ali.osman@edu.su.se)

Abstract

This article examines the support migrants receive to access and re-enter their previous vocational areas successfully. The analytical framework builds on studies based on Coleman's and Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and develops the concepts of ideational support, material support, and bridging support. In the analysis of the empirical data, 20 interviews with skilled migrants, we found that although the kinds of support received by the migrants differed, there were also similarities. Their access was shaped not only by being categorised as (economic) immigrants or as refugees but also by when they came to Sweden and their vocations before arriving. Ideational support from people around them was critical, particularly from the institutional actors such as teachers they encountered in the different structures of opportunities that target migrants. In addition, serendipity – a chance meeting with someone – seemed to be a key for some individuals to successfully re-enter their vocations.

Keywords: skilled migrants, re-enter, career, vocation, access, support



Introduction

Labour market integration of refugees and migrants in Sweden constitutes a recurring and often polarising theme in academic and political discourse, mirroring challenges observed across global North contexts. This article adopts a broad conceptualisation of ‘migrant’ to include all individuals granted residence in Sweden, such as economic migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Almohamed & Vyas, 2019). By economic migrants we mean migrants primarily changing home country for economic reasons such as better living conditions, higher wages, or better job opportunities. Common policy and academic explanations for the difficulties migrants encounter when entering the Swedish labour market often stress limitations in language proficiency, mismatches in educational credentials, and insufficient access to professional networks.

This study aims to move beyond these predominant deficit narratives by examining how some skilled migrants have successfully re-entered their professions in Sweden at different times. Particular attention is paid to the differential impacts of institutional support – such as language training or targeted labour market programmes – and the informal support provided through individual social networks. By doing so, the study shifts the analytical focus away from explanations rooted solely in cultural difference or systemic discrimination and toward a more nuanced understanding of the enablers of professional reintegration, as narrated by migrants themselves.

This investigation seeks to address the following key questions:

- What specific kinds of support did skilled migrants receive to re-enter their vocations in Sweden?
- Through what mechanisms and sources did they receive this support?
- What are the lived experiences and perceptions of this support among skilled migrants?

Structure of opportunities for migrants

There is substantial research in Sweden and internationally that examines obstacles migrants face in accessing their vocations. However, there are also migrants from different nationalities and ethnicities who have succeeded in establishing themselves in the Swedish labour market in their past vocation that came to Sweden at different times. Thus it is important to point out that these migrants accessed different types of structure of opportunity to facilitate their integration in the Swedish labour market. We follow Phillimore’s (2021) concept of opportunity structures by examining dimensions such as discourses, institutional support and measures targeting migrants. For instance, in the 1960s there were no labour market interventions targeting migrants that were organised by

the state or the municipalities like today. Language courses during this period were either organised by the companies or study associations (Drange et al., 2025). Within this context, it is critical to recognise that the structures of opportunity introduced across different periods were underpinned by a dominant discourse – shaped by both political consensus and academic inquiry – about the factors seen as inhibiting immigrants' access to the Swedish labour market. Language proficiency, in particular, was constructed as a central obstacle, and this discourse informed the implementation of Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) in the 1980s as a key integration measure (Drange et al., 2025). Similarly, the validation of prior learning emerged in the same period as a policy tool intended to facilitate the transition of migrants into the Swedish labour market by recognising their previous educational and professional experiences. The process of validation is crucial and it has changed over time.

However, research on validation in general points out that the process of validation leads to two primary outcomes: a) an individual's competence is misrecognised, meaning they must re-train from scratch, or b) the institution that conducted the validation recommends compensatory training based on the evaluation they conduct (Andersson & Osman, 2008). The evaluation has two focuses: assessing the practical and theoretical competence of migrants. These initiatives were developed in the mid 1990s as a structure of opportunities designed to facilitate the inclusion of refugees in Sweden, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness over time, as suggested by critiques of SFI language programme quality (Rodin et al., 2017).

Research in Sweden has, however, identified several challenges associated with this process, such as how to assess training acquired (Andersson & Osman, 2008) outside the EU/European Economic area (ESS) countries. The common practice is to examine the vocational education acquired elsewhere (outside the EU and ESS countries) in relation to the Swedish system. This approach, however, fails to acknowledge the value of heterogeneity and the contextuality of a vocation (Diedrich, 2014). Research also shows that validation functions as a divisive practice, where migrants are either placed in subordinate positions or excluded altogether from their vocations (Andersson & Osman, 2008).

Sociologically grounded research has long pointed to the lack of relevant professional networks as a key barrier preventing migrants from entering their former vocations in countries like Sweden (Vesterberg, 2015). This challenge is often understood in terms of social capital – resources embedded in social networks – which migrants may lack in the host country. Both Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1977) offer foundational insights into the concept. Coleman frames social capital as a kind of public good, something individuals invest in to benefit their families and communities. His perspective emphasises the instrumental value of these ties. Bourdieu, on the other hand, sees social capital

as both a result of and a means to accumulate other forms of capital. In his view, it plays a double role: it both shapes and is shaped by the social position of the individual.

At the same time, social capital, we would like to emphasise, should not be regarded as a uniform or universally advantageous resource. Gericke et al. (2018), for example, demonstrate how different types of social ties can lead to very different labour market outcomes. In their study of Syrian refugees in Germany, ties within the same ethnic or national group often provided emotional or practical support but mostly resulted in low-skilled jobs. Conversely, connections to individuals outside their immediate community, such as social workers, supervisors, or volunteers, were more likely to offer access to employment that better matched their qualifications. In other words, the significance of a migrant's network depends on how closely it aligns with their professional objectives.

Some migrant groups, such as Iranians in Sweden, have been relatively successful, in part because they arrived with cultural and social capital that could be more easily recognised and converted into opportunities (Behtoui, 2022). But this is not the case for all. Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. (2018) describe how many skilled refugees struggle to make their cultural capital count in the Swedish labour market. A consistent theme in this body of research is that the experience, knowledge, and networks that migrants bring with them are often undervalued or misrecognised (Andersson & Osman, 2008). This is echoed in the findings of Behtoui and Leivestad (2019) and Povrzanović Frykman and Mozetič (2019), who show that many skilled migrants end up working below their qualifications and earn less than their Swedish-born peers. As a result, they are often forced to reconfigure or renegotiate their career paths (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018).

Other studies have drawn attention to additional hurdles. As Dehghanpour Farashah and Blomqvist (2020) point out, having one's credentials formally recognised is not enough. Migrants also need to learn how to navigate the often implicit norms and institutional cultures of the Swedish labour market. On top of that, broader structures – such as migration and asylum policies – can create further obstacles (Ganassin & Johnstone Young, 2020; Rodin et al., 2017). In some cases, legal and bureaucratic rules tied to non-EU citizenship, for instance, limit access to stable employment. Van Riemsdijk and Basford (2022) describe how in Norway, the requirement for non-EU migrants to secure a full-time job with a comparable salary just to maintain their residence permit is a stark example of how policy can act as a gatekeeper.

The relationship between state institutions and organisations supporting refugees is therefore complex. As shown in Werwiebe et al.'s (2019) study in Austria, these actors can both enable and restrict migrants' access to the labour market. Understanding this tension is essential, especially when considering how

administrative systems sometimes create more barriers than opportunities. Still, research also points to factors that can help – language skills, personal drive, support from others, and a more inclusive social context all seem to make a difference in how migrants manage to re-enter their professions (Economou & Hajer, 2019; Eliasson et al., 2022; Ganassin & Johnstone Young, 2020).

Societal structure of support for migrants to access their vocations in Sweden

Since the mid 1980s, Swedish policies have sought to minimise the time required for migrants to re-establish themselves in their professions. In the 1950s and 1960s, migration to Sweden predominantly comprised labour migrants from Nordic countries, the former Yugoslavia, Greece, Italy, and Turkey. Since the 1970s, Sweden has seen a major demographic shift among migrants, with asylum seekers increasingly coming from Iran, Latin America, Somalia, Iraq, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, the former Yugoslavia, and, most recently, Ukraine. To provide context, Sweden's number of foreign citizens has steadily increased from 2010 to 2024. In 2024, more than 2 million people were born abroad, corresponding to 20 percent of the population (SCB, 2025).

Prior to the 1970s, Sweden lacked a comprehensive integration policy beyond naturalisation processes and adherence to international conventions regarding asylum. However, this changed with the adoption of a multicultural policy in the 1970s, designed to support migrants' ethno-cultural identities (Borevi, 2014). A shift away from this multicultural approach occurred in the early 1990s, leading to substantial modifications in integration strategies. While this period saw a change in focus, the foundational elements of the 1970's policy, such as mother tongue instruction, support for ethnic associations, and SFI, were retained, despite critiques regarding their potential to reinforce cultural divisions.

These policy shifts redefined integration practices, prioritising the swift re-establishment of migrants' pre-immigration careers. Here, 'access their vocation' refers to having vocational qualifications recognised, obtaining necessary certifications, and securing employment within their respective professional fields, aligning with the concept of 're-entering their previous vocations'. The government introduced validation programmes and the establishment programme to achieve these objectives. These programmes are mandatory since 2018, provides a two-year, individually tailored plan through the Public Employment Service. Its core aims are to expedite newcomers' entry into the Swedish labour market, foster their self-sufficiency, and enhance their engagement in work and society. It is designed for adults aged 20 to 65 (Arbetsförmedlingen, n.d.a).

In 2015, the Swedish government launched two integration programmes: the Short Way (Korta vägen) and the Fast Track (Snabbspår). The Short Way programme targets job seekers registered with the Public Employment Service (PES) who possess at least two years of academic education from abroad, primarily newly arrived academics granted residency within the past 36 months. It assists participants by assessing their skills, securing internships, providing specialised Swedish language courses, and offering vocational coaching and job training. The Academic Fast Track programme focuses on newcomers with in-demand skills and aims to quickly place them in appropriate jobs through the PES. Both programmes vary in duration, typically from six months to one year. Specific Fast Track pathways illustrate this variation. For instance, the medical and dental track includes 200 hours of Swedish language and cultural education, plus 60 hours of medical Swedish. The social sciences, economics, and law track, on the other hand, consists of a commissioned education equivalent to 30 higher education credits, comprising six months of study and a six-month internship, resulting in a one-year programme (Arbetsförmedlingen, n.d.b).

Theoretical framework

The analytical framework of this study builds on studies by Lin (2001), Prado (2009), and Osman and Månsson (2015), which are based on Coleman's and Bourdieu's concept of social capital. While these two thinkers conceptualise social capital differently, there are similarities. For example, Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1977) regard social capital as a collective resource, a product of the social structure in which individuals are embedded. Coleman constructs the concept as a public good (Coleman, 1988) and an investment by agents to benefit the family and the community. He takes an instrumental view while Bourdieu perceives the concept as cause and effect. In other words, the concept concomitantly acts in two ways, producing and converting the different forms of capital that individuals use to entrench their positions.

Empirically, the notion of trust and normative control (community control) in Coleman's understanding of social capital is supported by many empirical studies (as stated above, but also Tornatzky et al., 2002). The analytical focus of these studies was shared expectations, trust, and normative control. However, what is ignored in this conceptualisation of social capital and analysis in these studies is the unequal social and economic resources in which individuals are embedded and how these impact the competition for limited resources in different social fields (Bourdieu, 1986). Some individuals are socially amenable to benefit from trust to facilitate their social mobility and integration, while other groups and individuals cannot do that; this is at the core of Bourdieu's analysis of different fields.

Hence, to analyse the mechanism and factors which allowed the individuals in our study to re-enter their vocations in Sweden, it is essential to identify the social and material resources these individuals received or mobilised. To achieve this objective, the following concepts will be used to analyse the data collected: ideational support, material support, and bridging support (Osman & Månsson, 2015; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Prado, 2009). *Ideational support* refers to the ability of a person to mobilise the support of the social network they are embedded in (Coleman, 1988; Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009). This concept, hence, allows us to shed light on the support these migrants received, for instance, advice and information about educational opportunities. This can include individuals in their network or institutional actors such as teachers.

Material support refers to the impact of unequal material resources and how underprivileged individuals compensate for their lack of material resources. This support is tangible through finances, board, and lodging (Osman et al., 2020; Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009;). Bridging support denotes the linkage between ideational and material support. Both Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) stress the significance of others in social networks and how networks are vital in the competition for limited and coveted institutional resources. Hence, bridging support refers, for instance, to individuals who link migrants to those who can provide ideational and material support – relatives, friends or others who may link to a third person with institutional expertise or knowledge about accessing their vocations. Bridging support is the linkage between two or more parties and serves as a conduit for material and ideational support (Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009). In Osman's (2012) analysis of the transitional education career of a Somali Swede, it is shown that the decision to study in the UK and to seek labour market integration was enabled through access to material resources (e.g., free board and lodging) and ideational resources provided by family members. But this support has a downside, sometimes referred to in the literature as the dark side, of community normative control, whereby individuals are expected to adhere to the norms of the community or relatives. The combination of these three analytical concepts allows us to capture how these immigrants compensated for their lack of individual, social capital to access their vocations.

Methodology

Between 2020 and 2021 we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with skilled and highly skilled migrants who were or had been working in Sweden in their previous vocations. We used purposeful sampling to locate the participants, all of whom were informed about the study before giving their informed consent. Ethical review was granted by the Swedish Ethical Authority (2020-01139). Six

men and 14 women from 17 countries participated, representing Africa, Asia, and Europe. Their arrival times in Sweden varied from the 1980s to the 2010s and they gave various reasons for migrating such as family reunion, economics, career, and humanitarian. Participants' ages ranged between 25 and 61 and their vocational areas included the financial and food sectors, industry, healthcare, and childcare (see Table 1). The recorded interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes, and while some were conducted face-to-face, most took place via video conferencing or telephone due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify various themes. NVivo software was used to aid the analysis. All names in the result section are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participants' sex, pseudonym, country of origin, year of arrival to Sweden, and vocational area.

Sex/pseudonym	Country of origin/ year of arrival	Vocational area
F/ Leila	Iran/2002	Physiotherapist
F/ Asha	Thad/2009	Nurse
F/ Maria	Syria/1996	Health care secretary
F	Poland/1995	Nurse
F	Uganda/1991	Nurse
F/ Catherine	Uganda/1982	Financial worker
M	Iran/2015	Welder
M	Gambia/2016	Upper secondary industrial education
F/ Mila	Thailand/2000	Chef
F/ Caroline	Armenia/2012	Preschool teacher education
M	Croatia/2016	Financial worker, teacher education
F	Germany/2002	Preschool teacher
M/ David	Nigeria/2004	Industrial worker
F	Lithuania/2000	Teacher education
M	France/2015	Chef
M	Lebanon, Syria/2003	Chef
F	Russia/2016	Financial worker
F/ Grace	Iran/2011	Nurse
F/ Aisha	Eritrea/2017	Nurse
F/ Amina	Eritrea/2015	Nurse

In the first phase, all researchers thoroughly read all interviews. In the second phase, we independently used an inductive approach to identify preliminary codes and develop themes. In the third phase, we discussed and checked our coding and themes to ensure accuracy. In the fourth phase, we focused on the theme named *support*, which was closely examined through the lenses of our research questions and theoretical concepts – ideational, material and bridging support. It was remarkable that even though the data were very diverse in terms of the participants' backgrounds – for example, when they had entered Sweden and from which country, their vocational areas or reasons for migration – they all talked about social support and its significance for their re-entering their previous vocations. The quotations in the results section were chosen to highlight various types of support they received along the way.

Results

The results of this study address the three research questions by analysing the types of support skilled migrants received, how they accessed this support, and their experiences with it. First, the findings reveal that material and bridging support can be crucial for migrants re-entering their professions, with ideational support being particularly significant. This addresses the first research question by identifying specific types of support migrants received, such as advice from institutional actors, family members, chance encounters, and material resources like financial aid or housing. Second, the analysis emphasises how migrants accessed support, which often depended on their migration category such as refugee or economic migrant, social networks, and institutional structures like the PES or validation programmes.

For instance, refugees often relied on institutional support, while economic migrants faced more obstacles due to ineligibility for state-funded resources. This directly answers the second research question by illustrating the pathways through which support was accessed. Lastly, the support experiences varied considerably, with some migrants benefiting from serendipitous encounters or active institutional actors, while others encountered discouragement or misrecognition of their qualifications. This addresses the third research question by showing how migrants perceived the effectiveness and challenges of the support they received. Motivation, individual efforts, and even serendipity were identified as vital factors in navigating these processes, further linking the findings to the research questions. Overall, the analysis demonstrates how the interaction of institutional structures, social networks, and individual efforts shaped migrants' experiences and outcomes in reclaiming their previous vocations in Sweden.

The structure of opportunity as a type of institutional support

The Swedish system of support intended to aid migrant professionals in re-establishing their careers reveals a landscape marked by significant disparities. While migration status, distinguishing between economic immigrants and refugees, carries some weight, the timing of an individual's arrival and the specific conditions attached to their residence permits emerge as far more critical determinants of their access to institutional assistance. This creates a situation where the ability to leverage available support is heavily contingent on factors beyond one's initial reason for migration. A particularly stark contrast exists in access to social assistance: refugees are automatically entitled to this crucial safety net, whereas economic migrants and their spouses face considerably stricter eligibility criteria. This differential access profoundly shapes their vocational paths, particularly for those with prior professional training. The experiences of individuals like Grace, a qualified nurse who joined her refugee husband through family reunification, illustrate this complexity. Grace benefited from programmes like the establishment programme and Fast Track initiatives. Her initial employment often involved roles below her skill level, such as assistant nurse or personal assistant. This pattern of downward occupational mobility, echoed in the experiences of other professionals like the Eritrean nurse who simultaneously worked as an assistant nurse while studying Swedish, underscores the challenges and inconsistencies within the system, highlighting a gap between qualifications and initial opportunities despite the presence of institutional support.

So, while I was studying the language, I also chose to work as a substitute in three different places as an assistant nurse. (Grace)

Some entered the Swedish labour market in sectors like cleaning services, hospitality, or retail. Then, I worked as a cleaner full-time. In addition, I worked as a cashier in the evenings. At that time, it was called [name of the company], but now it is called [name of the company]. I worked every day, 12 hours, full time. (Maria)

While Grace's experience suggests a different dynamic, the cases of Amina and Aisha underscore how the very time of arrival in Sweden initiates a period of uncertainty. As asylum seekers and migrants await their residence permits – often a protracted process – their ability to engage with the labour market and welfare system, and crucially, to transfer and apply their existing knowledge and skills, remains conditional and increasingly time-sensitive within the Swedish context. This was especially true for Aisha, whose integration was likely further complicated by arriving during a period when the landscape of opportunity in Sweden was less expansive compared to the times of Amina and Grace's arrival.

Amina said: 'After getting married, after two years, we came here to Sweden. And then everything stopped there. Aa. So yes, I could not work. I was waiting for my residence permit.'

Grace, unlike Amina, already had her residence permit when she came to Sweden to join her husband.

I came to Sweden in 2017 because I married a man who was here. However, via the Public Employment Service I got to know about 'The Fast Track'. In Fast Track you study the language at the same time you learn about Swedish working life. (Grace)

According to Grace, after successfully completing the Fast Track programme, participants were expected either to take a compensatory programme or take a Swedish nursing examination (*kunskapsprov*) to get a licence to work as a nurse. A physiotherapist from Iran described her examination as follows:

I was preparing for another test that you have to do to get your degree recognised in Sweden. It was about legal issues and laws. At the same time, I was preparing for the written test, which was a comprehensive test. You could say that it was validation of my theoretical knowledge. [...] There were then three steps to it: master the language Swedish B-level, pass the theoretical test, and then pass a practical test as well, to get your degree recognised. (Leila)

The support landscape for skilled immigrants and refugees seeking vocational re-entry in Sweden evolved over time. Consequently, Leila did not receive the same assistance as Grace because, at the time of Leila's arrival, key initiatives such as the Short Way and Fast Track programmes, which later facilitated Grace's integration, were not yet in place. Asha's family comes from Chad, but she was trained as a nurse in Kuwait for six months before coming to Sweden, applying for and being granted asylum. When she arrived, she attended SFI and other complementary language courses through a municipal adult education programme where she also trained as an assistant nurse, even though she had a nursing degree from Kuwait. After her assistant nurse training, she contacted the human resources office in the county council (which was responsible for Health) to apply for the Swedish Nursing licence, and they arranged for her to practise in a hospital for six months.

She [the human resources officer] arranged for me to practise at the hospital. I studied the assistant nurse programme, but I have done an internship since then, as a nurse at the hospital for at least six months. The validation went well at Karolinska. The National Board of Health and Welfare arranged it, and it went very well. A challenge there was my cultural difference, that I come from another culture, that affected the result. I passed everything but failed on the drug bill part of validation. I was very sad, but I redid the test three months later and passed. (Asha)

Catherine, originally from Uganda, came to Sweden in the 1980s, after completing a degree in economics in India.

When I completed my education, Idi Amin was the president of Uganda. Uganda was unstable, I could not go back, and my student visa in India was expiring. I had a friend who lived in Sweden, and she said, 'come to Sweden'. (Catherine)

The process of accessing her vocation, like for all the informants, began with a language training programme.

Catherine: The first time in Sweden was very difficult. Everything is so new. In addition, you started with Swedish at once. I think the first week it was quick to get into the Swedish course, and you could choose to go for six hours [a day]. Then after '82, I started at an AMU centre [a labour market programme]. During this time, if you were registered at an AMU centre you automatically got compensation from the Swedish Public Employment Service on the days you went to school.

Interviewer: How long was that training at the AMU centre?

Catherine: It was only six months. If you passed the exam, then you could choose a vocation. Mechanics or office administrator or chef. There were different career choices. I already had an education; I did not want to do anything else. Therefore, I left AMU, and went back to the Public Employment Service, where they kept referring me to cleaning jobs, but I refused. During this time, you could refuse a job you were offered.

During this period in the early 1980s, there were no programmes such as The Short Way or validation for refugees to help highly educated individuals like her to access their vocation. However, because she was a refugee, she had the support of PES, although, as evident below, she realised that they would not help her to access her vocation since they kept referring her to cleaning positions. She agreed to take a cleaning job but not in a hotel or a hospital. Her strategy pivoted on the reasoning that every office has a finance department, so she accepted office-cleaning assignments as a way to make contact with the vocation.

I said, 'I'm not cleaning hospitals. I am not interested. Not hotels. But offices I can clean'. So, he sent me to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency head office. [One day she met the director, who said:] 'come and tell me about yourself', and then I explained that I came from Uganda, studied in India, and had a degree in Economics. She was very surprised, 'but why are you cleaning?' [Catherine replied]: 'I don't know. They referred me here'. She said, 'no, no, no, no, no, that was not good'. After a couple of months, the director called me and explained that they would be announcing a position in the finance department and if I wanted, I could apply for it. I applied for the job; 90 people applied, but the head of the department said, 'I know you have never worked in Sweden, but I want to give you a chance. And I will give you the job for six months and test you. If you can do it, then you get a permanent job'. I struggled for six months and then I got a permanent job as an administrative assistant in planning and budgeting. (Catherine)

This type of access was rare, but it could even happen today. All participants emphasised the role their motivation and individual efforts played in accessing their vocations. As Asha said, 'you never give up!'

I think I had a very strong inner motivation. I was also very young at that time. I had the strength and energy, I just knew now I have to have a Swedish nursing licence, I have to work as a nurse. Then everything will be easy for me. If I failed, I always saw why I failed. What can I do differently? Who can help in this situation? Which people know best? So, I called the National Board of Health and Welfare, I googled

their phone number, I called the county council, I called the school. All the time I was trying to find paths even if some were controversial, how can you say, not ordinary. (Asha)

David came from Nigeria to Sweden as a student. He similarly stressed strong inner motivation when he was struggling with the new language and education.

Yes God, several times you were about to give up. And several times I asked myself, 'but why do I have to fight like this to get into society?' And then, remember that it is difficult. It is difficult. But one thing I have known all along is: 'God, Sweden has given me a chance', because this is what many people forget, they say; 'oh, it's hard, why did I not get in?' No, they still gave you a chance to do your best. (David)

Caroline, unlike Asha, Amina, or Grace did not come to Sweden as a refugee, but as a migrant from a non-EU Eastern European country to join her husband. Both had to find work to get a residence permit. She studied SFI part-time and once she got her permanent residence permit, she took advanced courses at an adult education centre, contacted the study counsellor, and explained her plans. Instead of informing her and suggesting ways she could pursue her goals, the counsellor instead discouraged her from pursuing her vocation in Sweden:

I met a career counsellor, study counsellor, in an adult education school. I said, 'I'm trying to find a job as a dental nurse'. I told her that I am a dental nurse and that I had a little preschool teacher education. I want to work as dental nurse. She said, 'yes, but you know it's very common nowadays for people to buy their qualifications and then come to Sweden and pass them off as their own'. I got very angry at that woman. I insisted and said to her, 'okay', and she said, 'but even if you are a dental nurse and choose to work as a childcare worker you have to take some courses here in Sweden. You need vocational language'. I said, 'but of course you can learn it during the internship when you work or you can do an internship, maybe one-two months and learn'. 'No no no, it is a very demanding course' [the counsellor said]. I felt like I would get nowhere with her. I took a child and recreation programme and did my practical, I got work, and I am still working as a childcare worker. (Caroline)

Caroline's case shows how the path to accessing one's prior vocation for an economic migrant is different from that of a refugee. [Economic] migrants cannot access the resources and the support of the various welfare systems to facilitate their inclusion into Swedish society or to access their vocations. Earning a salary comparable to Swedish workers is essential for securing a residency permit and qualifying for Swedish institutional welfare, which includes skills validation, vocational course funding, and retraining. The priority for economic migrants is finding work, which then gives them access to the institutional resources which facilitate entry into their vocation.

To summarise, factors that shape migrants' paths to their vocations in Sweden include their country of origin, whether they are refugees or an economic or EU migrant, and time spent in the host country getting a residence permit and gaining recognition of their prior qualifications. Unlike economic migrants from outside the EES, Nordic, or EU regions, those within these regions face neither

barriers to obtaining work permits nor challenges to their occupational training or qualifications. Economic migrants from countries outside the ESS-area also face similar hurdles to refugees when accessing their vocations in Sweden. Still, unlike the refugees, they are not eligible for state institutional, financial, material, or ideational support.

Support: The door openers

Informants in this study noted that their most significant support was not sought but rather delivered or received – ideational and bridging institutional aid arriving through chance or the initiative of institutional actors. While generally available, certain institutional actors truly stepped up, transcending their roles. For Asha, it was a county council human resources officer, and her Swedish teacher actively championed her progress, which illuminates the transformative power of this unexpected support.

A person who arranged the internships for me, I think about her a lot. I have never forgotten her. She opened doors for me. She helped fix internships for me and advised me to learn and improve my Swedish if I wanted to get my nursing license. I think she has opened a bigger door for me, the most enormous door. She helped me to get a practicum. (Asha)

Thus, the institutional actors can and often do function as door openers and may even be able to offer a job, thereby providing ideational, but most importantly, institutional bridging support. Some of the migrants received ideational and bridging support from family members. For instance, Mila, a chef from Thailand, got advice from her friend and her sister:

I thought, 'What am I going to do when I have sold my restaurant?' I didn't want to work anymore at a restaurant because I wanted to do something new. I got many hints from different people – my friend, my sister. My sister is an assistant nurse, so she said, 'Care work'. Just as we helped our mother and father, it is part of the culture in our country. (Mila)

Mila was embedded in a network that could advise her about work opportunities. Similarly, for Asha it was critical to meet other migrants: 'I knew some who went the same way a little earlier. So, I think the role model of people who have gone all the way is great. There are actually people who have done it.' Asha's role models represent a form of aspirational bridging, where seeing others succeed provides not just guidance but also motivation and self-belief. Mila's case provides a good example of how bridging from close family members or a social network facilitates labour market access. However, not all our informants were embedded in a social network that could help them access their vocations in Sweden. For Catherine, the financial worker, the chance meeting with the organisation's director and their conversation about her background changed the

course of her life. In other words, a single, serendipitous connection with the organisation's director led to a career breakthrough.

To summarise, while there were similarities there were also differences in how the various categories of migrants experienced the support which helped them access their vocations. For refugees, the kind of support they got from institutional actors, particularly from Public Employment Officers, was critical. For some, these actors were door openers, while for others they were hurdles, or for lack of a better word, door closers, as in Caroline's case. Another important aspect is the recognition of prior learning. As noted above, the recognition was contingent on where they came from, and where they received their training or education. In other words, vocational education is privileged differently in the host society; in our case, in Swedish institutions and the labour market.

Similarly, the obligation to attend language classes is contingent on whether one came as a refugee, or an economic migrant. However, irrespective of how an individual comes to Sweden, language courses are obligatory for accessing complementary vocational courses or programmes which require a specific Swedish language ability. Time of arrival in the host country was similarly a critical factor for refugees. For instance, there were fewer support structures in the mid 1970s, compared to today, where there is a battery of structures of opportunity targeting different categories of immigrants. Finally, individual efforts and drive were critical factors, mainly for economic immigrants and refugees who lacked the social capital to link them to the ideational support needed for accessing their vocations in Sweden; they had to rely on institutions to provide that support.

Concluding discussion

This article explored the support skilled migrants received to re-enter their prior vocations in Sweden successfully. The findings identified structural and individual factors, differences, and commonalities in their experiences entering their profession or vocation in Sweden.

A significant difference emerged between refugees and economic migrants to accessing institutional support. Refugees had automatic access to structured programmes such as the Fast Track and the Short Way, which provided language training, validation of prior learning, and financial assistance. These structured programmes are key instruments in Swedish integration policies and practices. The policy aims to facilitate rapid labour market entry of refugees in Sweden.

In contrast, economic migrants, particularly those from the EU and non-EU countries, did not automatically qualify for these institutional structures of opportunity or the different welfare regimes. They had to navigate the system

independently. Their ability to re-enter their vocation depended largely on self-initiative and personal networks.

Despite these differences, a common theme identified by the informants in this article was the importance of ideational support – access to information, advice, and encouragement. Many migrants, regardless of status, relied on bridging actors, such as engaged institutional actors, and serendipitous encounters to re-enter their vocation in Sweden. This aligns with prior research on the role of social capital in labour market integration, suggesting that formal support mechanisms alone are insufficient without access to relevant social networks. Another significant institutional support structure is the validation of prior competence. It emerged as another critical factor but with varied outcomes. Some migrants had their qualifications recognised and could enrol in compensatory programmes tailored to their vocation. Others faced significant barriers due to normative validation procedures, rules and regulations of different institutions that organise compensatory programmes, and biases regarding credentials obtained outside the EU.

The validation process, thus, can be both a structural barrier and an opportunity for a migrant to access their prior vocation in the Swedish labour market, where foreign qualifications are often degraded, and some migrants are subordinately included in their previous vocation in Sweden. Furthermore, the role of institutional support and motivation was evident across cases. However, it is vital to point out that migrants who actively sought information, engaged with institutions, and persisted despite bureaucratic hurdles were more likely to succeed in re-entering their vocations. But those who encountered institutional actors willing to provide additional support often had more successful outcomes. This highlights serendipity in labour market integration, where chance encounters with supportive individuals can significantly alter career trajectories. Institutional support structures can provide essential scaffolding for migrants, but such resources remain unevenly distributed. The interaction between migration category, prior education, and access to bridging support networks plays a decisive role in vocational re-entry. Future policy efforts should focus on improving access to social capital, streamlining validation processes, and ensuring that institutional actors can provide tailored support that considers the diverse backgrounds and needs of skilled migrants.

Acknowledgments

This paper is part of a larger research project called ‘Integration and Inclusion of Migrants in and Through Vocation and Work’ and funded by The Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE) (Grant 2019-00832).

Authors' contributions

Authors have contributed equally to the article.

Notes on contributors

Ali Osman is Professor of Education at the Department of Education, Stockholm University. His research focuses on migration, recognition of prior learning, and transition between different educational systems and working life.

Marianne Teräs is Professor of Education at the Department of Education, Stockholm University. Her research mainly focuses on vocational and professional learning, immigration, and interculturality.

Eva Eliasson is Associate Professor of Education at the Department of Education, Stockholm University. Her research interests mainly concern vocational and teacher knowledge, especially in health care education, and the interplay between power relations and vocational knowledge.

References

- Andersson, P., & Osman, A. (2008). Recognition of prior learning as a practice for differential inclusion and exclusion of immigrants in Sweden. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59(1), 42–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713608325173>
- Almohamed, A., & Vyas, D. (2019). Rebuilding social capital in refugees and asylum seekers. *ACM Transaction on Computer-Human Interaction*, 26(6), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3364996>
- Arbetsförmedlingen. (n.d.a). *The introduction programme*. Retrieved February 2nd, 2025, from <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/other-languages/english-engelska/extra-stod/stod-a-o/etableringsprogrammet>
- Arbetsförmedlingen. (n.d.b). *The academic fast track*. Retrieved February 2nd, 2025, from <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/other-languages/english-engelska/additional-support/support-a-z/akademikertjanst-korta-vagen>
- Behtoui, A. (2022). Upward mobility, despite a stigmatised identity: Immigrants of Iranian origin in Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 12(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.419>
- Behtoui, A., & Leivestad, H. (2019). The “stranger” among Swedish “homo academicus”. *Higher Education*, 77(2), 213–228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0266-x>
- Borevi, K. (2014). Multiculturalism and welfare state integration: Swedish model path dependency. *Identities*, 21(6), 708–723. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2013.868351>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel, & A. K. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487–510). Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(1), 95–120.
- Dehghanpour Farashah, A., & Blomquist, T. (2020). Exploring employer attitude towards migrant workers: Evidence from managers across Europe. *Evidence-based HRM: A Global Forum for Empirical Scholarship*, 8(1), 18–37. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBHRM-04-2019-0040>
- Diedrich, A. (2014). Classifying difference in organizing, or how to create monsters. *Equality, Diversity & Inclusion*, 33(7), 614–632. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-02-2012-0007>

- Drange, I., Gillespie, A., Nortvedt, L., Osman, A., & Teräs, M. (2025). Pathways to occupational inclusion in host societies [Manuscript submitted for publication].
- Economou, C., & Hajer, M. (2019). Integrating Syrian refugee teachers into Swedish educational labour market: Reflections on a fast track design. *Education Inquiry*, 10(4), 385–403.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2019.1579625>
- Eggenhofer-Rehart, P., Latzke, M., Pernkopf, K., Zellhofer, D., Mayrhofer, W., & Steyrer, J. (2018). Refugees' career capital welcome? Afghan and Syrian refugee job seekers in Austria. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 105, 31–45.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.01.004>
- Eliasson, E., Teräs, M., & Osman, A. (2022). 'Back to work': Dactors facilitating migrants' re-entry into their previous vocations. *Journal of Education and Work*, 35(8), 828–842. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2022.2144168>
- Ganassin, S., & Johnstone Young, T. (2020). From surviving to thriving: 'Success stories' of highly skilled refugees in the UK. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 20(2), 125–140.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1731520>
- Gericke, D., Burmeister, A., Löwe, J., Deller, J., & Pundt, L. (2018). How do refugees use their social capital for successful labor market integration? An exploratory analysis in Germany. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 105, 46–61.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.12.002>
- Lin, N. (2001). *Social capital: A theory of social structure and action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Osman, A. (2012). In search of green pastures: The onward immigration of Somali-Swedes to Britain. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 2(2), 133–140.
<https://doi.org/10.2478/v10202-011-0035-8>
- Osman, A., Carlhed Ydhag, C., & Månsson, N. (2020). Recipe for educational success: A study of successful school performance of students from low social cultural background. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 30(4), 422–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1764379>
- Osman, A., & Månsson, N. (2015). "I go to teachers conferences, but I do not understand what the teacher is saying": Somali parent's perception of the Swedish School. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(2), 36–52.
<https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v17i2.1022>
- Phillimore, J. (2021). Refugee-integration-opportunity structures: Shifting the focus from refugees to context. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(2), 1946–1966.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa012>
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. University of California Press.

- Povrzanović Frykman, M., & Mozetič, K. (2020). The importance of friends: Social life challenges for foreign physicians in Southern Sweden. *Community, Work & Family*, 23(4), 385–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2019.1599323>
- Prado, J. M. (2009). Comparing educational trajectories of two Chinese students and one Latina student, a social capital approach. *The High School Journal*, 92(2), 14–27. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.0.0015>
- van Riemsdijk, M., & Basford, S. (2022). Integration of highly skilled migrants in the workplace: A multi-level framework. *International Migration & Integration*, 23, 633–654. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-021-00845-x>
- Rodin, L., Rodin, A., & Brunke, S. (2017). Language training and well-being for qualified migrants in Sweden. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 13(2), 220–233. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHSC-11-2014-0043>
- SCB, Statistics Sweden. (2025). *Utrikes födda i Sverige [Foreign born in Sweden] (Dataset)*. <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/manniskorna-i-sverige/utrikes-fodda-i-sverige/>
- Tornatzky, L. G., Cutler, R., & Lee, J. (2002). *College knowledge: What Latino parents need to know and why they don't know it*. Tomas Rivera Policy Institute.
- Vesterberg, V. (2015). Learning to be Swedish: Governing migrants in labour-market projects. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 37(3), 302–316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2015.1043987>
- Verwiebe, R., Kittel, B., Dellinger, F., Liebhart, C., Schiestl, D., Haindorfer, R., & Liedl, B. (2019). Finding your way into employment against all odds? Successful job search of refugees in Austria. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(9), 1401–1418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1552826>