

DIVERSE

Diversity Improvement as a Viable Enrichment Resource for Society and Economy



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PART 1: SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, COMPETENCE RECOGNITION

It is of relevance to note that the topic of skills, knowledge competence (SKC) assessment and recognition (*validering* in Swedish) has been raised at the highest and most visible levels of Swedish political discourse recently in the run-up to the September 2014 national elections. The leader of the main opposition party, when questioned about immigrant integration to the labour market on a national television discussion, stated that *validering* was a very important process to improve employment engagement of immigrants and that Sweden must improve its procedures related to this. While this is of course true, there is a danger that a sole focus on tools and methods, will lead to disappointment if the linguistic and the more subtle socio-cultural barriers to integration are not recognised and also given prominence.

Discussion in the popular press within recent months has also been indignant about the extreme length of time (5-10 years) it takes for highly educated immigrants to establish themselves within the Swedish labour market (Almerud and Krantz, 2014). Increasing attention is being given to the need to better speed-up and effectivise the system, particular for sectors where Sweden has a shortage of labour such as nursing, midwifery, and medical doctors. The host country language attainment is an important ingredient influencing this time duration but it is not the whole story. A

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suspicion of foreign education, and a bias within the SKC system to push immigrants into Swedish education rather than into Swedish jobs also play their part. Policy could target these blockages.

- 1) The competence in the Swedish language of the person that is having their skills assessed is key to the value and effectiveness of the SKC assessment process. Sweden already puts resources and effort into supporting immigrants to learn Swedish through its Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) programme. Discussion of the successes and difficulties with this programme is not part of this research. What is important to highlight here is that it would be wise for authorities not to push immigrants to conduct an SKC evaluation before they have gained sufficient competence in Swedish (this has been occurring more recently as part of the new establishment plans for immigrants). Going through the evaluation and assessment process too early is simply a waste of time and resources and will not allow best benefit from the service. Alternatively, if speed is important then the SKC system should be overhauled to allow evaluation in the English language as well (with associated resource and training implications). However this strategy would probably not be in the long-term best interests of the immigrant either since mastery of Swedish is important in accessing and maintaining employment.
- 2) For employment sectors (such as medical, legal or electrical) with a clear requirement of competence in Swedish legal and/or technical standards, SKC evaluation cannot help much. A person must go through the Swedish training (or at least part of it) to gain such knowledge and legal standards. If such a sector is a known goal of a person at the outset of SKC evaluation it is perhaps better to not undergo a full assessment.

However, it is recognised that the assessment process may help a person with relevant foreign competence in the sector figure out where their experience and qualifications translate to in the Swedish system and thus where they need to pick up training. Thus it may, overall, save those people with relevant experience time, and thus also save the authorities money in supporting educational costs, to conduct the SKC.

- 3) Policymakers could consider whether some sectors could be modified to allow immigrants with a competence in the English language to work already prior to gaining fluency in the Swedish language since English is fairly widely used and known among much of the Swedish population. The population could then be given an open choice when they call for a medical appointment for example, whether they would like a Swedish-speaking person or would they consider seeing an English-speaking professional. Trialling such initiatives may prove fruitful but monitoring and evaluation is required.
- 4) Evaluating informal and non-formal skills: this is difficult but not impossible. Its value is very sector-specific. This area requires more research and testing.
- 5) The lack of cohesion, and the number of different stakeholders involved, and models used, causes some confusion and creates a lack of clear oversight—this could be better streamlined with political intervention.
- 6) The lack of statistics and reports evaluating the value and success of the SKC process is undermining claims of its impact on labour market access and societal integration. For example: does SKC validation get immigrants into permanent jobs, and faster? The answer to this is not yet clear. Comprehensive and strategic research must be supported to provide answers to this question and guide future SKC effectivity.
- 7) Systemic problems within the wider Swedish context, such as hidden discrimination, and a suspicion of competence and qualifications gained outside Sweden, is a broader issue that requires action and is not something that a SKC process alone can tackle. Awareness-raising that such barriers to integration exist, and to encourage combative strategies are essential.
- 8) A final important aspect of recent labour market dynamics and co-dependencies within Sweden has been the growing but largely unknown importance of temporary seasonal labour (berry

pickers and forest workers, but even construction site workers) that falls outside of official statistics and monitoring. The liberalisation of the Swedish labour regulations in 2008 which opened up the possibility to import foreign labour to these sectors has fuelled this new type of utilisation of seasonal foreign labour. A key implication for policy is to improve the assessment and evaluation of patterns and behaviours within this sector, which has as yet unknown implications for wider labour market and societal integration of TNC immigrants.

PART 2: DIVERSITY WITHIN SWEDISH ORGANISATIONS

- 1) The definition of a Third Country National (TCN), and this focus on the citizenship held, creates difficulties in the Swedish context when it is relatively quick and painless to gain Swedish citizenship (4-5 years). If this remains the focus, research and action will omit a whole group of people who are officially Swedish citizens yet who still face many of the same problems as TCNs. Missing this wider group also risks missing some of the more subtle and persistent structural factors that contribute to people of immigrant background or heritage generally having greater difficulty with labour market and/or societal integration, and/or having lower average salaries. A shift in, or at least a more nuanced and open, definition of who is affected by difficulties gaining Swedish jobs and difficulties integrating into society, is recommended.
- 2) Information and materials should be overhauled to move away from the general subtle assumption that TCNs work in low-skilled jobs. While this view has some relevance, the research conducted here in Northern Sweden suggests that many TCNs working in the region are very highly educated doctors, academics and specialists. They offer a net gain to Sweden, which has not funded their upbringing and education, yet benefits from their input to Swedish healthcare provision, Swedish education and international research, and Swedish technological advancements.
- 3) The research undertaken as part of this project in Västerbotten region suggests that TCNs often find employment (both highly skilled, and less skilled) in sectors that struggle to attract sufficient numbers of Swedes due to both a lack of willingness to move to the region, and (in some sectors) a dearth of trainees compared to jobs required. A policy recommendation related to this point could be to better inform the wider public about this situation which would raise awareness of labour market dynamics in the region, and would also help to combat claims or fears from those concerned about Swedish jobs.
- 4) Organisations could be encouraged to reflect more strategically upon other countries' methods of working within specific sectors by engaging with their staff that have been trained outside of Sweden—this diversity of views could be beneficial for all.
- 5) Likewise, organisations would benefit from recognising that those not brought up in Sweden (even other Europeans) do not necessarily have an instinctive grasp of the subtle Swedish codes of behaviour, flat hierarchy etc. Helping a non-Swede to understand these norms and expectations with a 'cultural induction phase' or a 'befriender'-type system, may serve to alleviate possible misunderstandings and teething problems that diversity may occasionally bring.
- 6) Personal contacts, networks and references are crucial, even for Swedes in many cases, when searching for employment, particularly with that first job. Efforts supporting contact of immigrants with Swedes could be a productive way of supporting labour market integration efforts, and may even be more beneficial than learning Swedish.

- 7) There appears to be evidence of a hidden discrimination in Sweden which was highlighted in the research. Improved awareness raising of the more subtle and structural barriers that can further complicate an immigrant's efforts to find employment could be instrumental in limiting such impediments.

PART 3: PARTICIPATION IN VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

- 1) More active engagement and outreach to third country nationals (TCNs) and those of immigrant background, at the local council level, to explain what volunteer and charitable organisations exist, how they operate, and how a person could get involved would be beneficial.
- 2) Ethnic associations have a very important role to play but they can, at times, hinder integration by setting up parallel support structures. Local policies and strategies could encourage greater collaboration and engagement between ethnic and the indigenous Swedish non-profit groups.
- 3) Policies/financial incentives that encourage associations themselves (especially traditional Swedish religious, social and environmental groups) to i) recognise the untapped potential of TCNs, ii) value TCNs and diversity, and iii) proactively reach out to TCNs via information or introduction days, other language events or literature, or specific activities.
- 4) Council-led initiatives, such as the "In Umeå" project can play a key role. Policy could encourage and fund such programmes for the long-term rather than in short-lived successful interventions with no follow-up.
- 5) Finally, the interviews conducted in the region, and other research findings, have acknowledged the importance of the volunteer sporting sector in engaging in young immigrants. Sports associations within Sweden have, in recent years, worked rather actively to recruit new members within immigration dense and/or deprived neighbourhoods. Such efforts should continue to receive local and national political and financial, and models of successful should be scaled up.

Main Authors: Heather Mackay, with Ida-Maja Lindström, Department of Geography and Economic History, Umeå University

Project Leader: Olof Sternström, Department of Geography and Economic History, Umeå University