Crossing the boundary to Europe

Finns on transnational careers in the European Union

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Introduction

During the peak of the "European refugee crisis" (2015–2016), over one million asylum seekers crossed the Mediterranean to Italy and Greece or arrived to a European Union (EU) territory via Turkey and the Balkan states (Triandafyllidou 2017; UNHCR 2015). While people fleeing war, desperation and lack of opportunities in their home countries continues to be the most visible migration phenomena of today, there are also other forms of migration that shape our societies and have an impact on the European labour markets. Namely, Europe is home to a globally unique area, where sovereign states have given parts of their legislative power to supranational institutions and have given up one of the fundamental rights that define a nation state—that of deciding who can cross its borders (e.g. Koikkalainen 2011; Recchi 2015). Different groups of migrants are on the move within the European free movement area: posted workers, skilled professionals,

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students and retirees move as European citizens who have the right to reside and settle anywhere within the countries belonging to the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA).[1] This article examines one important form of contemporary migration that has increased in volume and importance in Europe in recent years, namely highly-skilled migration (e.g. Koikkalainen 2013a). The reasons for the increased interest are both economic and political: immigrants who arrive with higher education degrees and valuable professional skills are "not only economically advantageous but also politically acceptable" (Boeri 2012, 1). Based on the experiences of Finnish graduates, this study asks, why do young highly-skilled individuals choose to look for work abroad? Do they end up in precarious, temporary jobs below their skill level, or does their cultural capital transfer easily across borders?

This chapter is based on research on the labour market experiences of 24–45-year-old university educated Finns who lived abroad in 12 other EU member states.[2] Finns follow the lure of London, go to study in Berlin, seize a job opportunity at the Euro-city Brussels or start their career as a trainee in Paris. They move also to many other cities in Europe, depending on their motivations, family situations and sometimes even pure coincidence of being offered a job abroad. Such

[1] Once the United Kingdom leaves the EU in 2020 and after the transitionary period is over, the landscape of intra-European migration will be significantly altered. It is, however, beyond the scope of this article to discuss the possible implications of Brexit for highly-skilled migration in Europe.

[2] The study focused on those living abroad in the so-called EU15 countries that formed the EU when Finland joined in 1995. In my study, there were participants from 12 countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. There were no respondents from Greece, and the handful of respondents from Sweden were omitted from analysis because Sweden is historically the most important migration destination for Finns. This is especially true of Swedish-speaking Finns, and therefore, a somewhat different case than the mobility towards farther away Europe that characterised migration from Finland since the mid-1990s (see e.g. Korkiasaari & Tarkiainen 2000).

small and scattered migrant groups are a challenging population to study with survey methodology. Creating a random and statistically representative sample of the target population is not possible because there are no updated address registers. Hence, the participants were contacted via the Internet through expatriate networks. I administered two consecutive *Working in Europe* online surveys: the first in 2008 (n=364) and the second in 2010 (n=194). Because the original survey data was collected before the global economic downturn, I decided to conduct a follow-up survey in 2010 to see whether the recession had a serious negative impact on the labour market situation of the respondents (for an assessment of the impact of the recession, see Koikkalainen 2017). The second survey was sent to those respondents who had volunteered their e-mail addresses in the first survey. In addition, I conducted 18 migrant interviews in 2011 via Skype among selected participants of the two surveys.

The Finns who took part in the study included tertiary-educated consultants, finance managers, ICT-workers, post-doctoral scholars, freelance journalists, and self-employed language specialists, for example. Their intended stay abroad varied from that of a settler to that of a sojourner; from permanent emigration to short-time mobility. Also, the participants' desire to integrate varied, as some were strongly rooted to the current home country, while others contemplated either returning to Finland or moving on to a new destination. Over two-thirds of all respondents in the 2008 survey were female: there were 280 female (77%) and 84 male (23%) respondents. Respondents who were single made up 27 percent, 45 percent were cohabiting, and 28 percent were married. Most respondents (76%) did not have any children. The respondent average age was 32 years and they were fairly recent movers as 78 percent had moved abroad after the year 2000. The educational background of the respondents was varied: 48 percent had obtained their degree in Finland, 20 percent from abroad, and 25 percent had a degree from two countries. Seven percent of

them were still studying. A clear majority of the respondents (87%) were from five countries: United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, France and Spain.

Finns living in other European countries are a small group in terms of their numbers, but in many other respects, they are similar to the "pioneers of European integration" (Recchi & Favell 2009) originating from the larger EU member states. All intra-EU movers are not highly-skilled, nor do they all come from elite backgrounds. Groups facing discrimination, such as the Roma from Eastern Europe, are on the move along with the well-earning retirees, posted workers, university students and young professionals (e.g. Barslund & Busse 2016; Favell, Recchi, Kuhn, Jensen, & Klein 2011). Yet all European citizens are privileged when compared with migrants and refugees originating from outside Europe: they are entitled to equal treatment regardless of where they live, and at least in principle, they should face no discrimination. The legal rights and sense of belonging provided by European citizenship also makes them stakeholders in their respective countries of residence without the necessity of applying for national citizenship or aiming for full integration (Koikkalainen 2019). An analysis of how highly-skilled migrants, such as the Finns in this study, manage to build their lives and careers abroad can shed light to how the EU works as a transnational space and how mobility features in the working life today. Why did these migrants cross the boundary from a national labour market to Europe, and how did their careers progress as a result?

Leaving Finland

Mobility from Finland to other European countries increased significantly after Finland joined the EEA in 1994 and the EU in 1995. During the past 10 years, the favourite destinations of Finns have been Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, Germany and

Spain. During this time, an average of 9,400 Finnish citizens moved abroad each year, and more than 6,500 of them (69%) chose one of the EU member states as their destination (years 2007–2016) (Statistics Finland 2018). While at the *micro* level, the motivations and paths of these migrants are highly diverse and individual, various historical processes, cultural phenomena and economic developments influence the reasons *why* particular individuals decided to move, *where* they moved to and *when* they moved. At the background influencing such mobility lie different macro and meso-level processes and factors (Castles, de Haas, & Miller 2014). Most importantly, these include processes related to economic and cultural globalisation and to Europeanisation.

Globalisation played a role in how highly-skilled Finns in the 1990s, along with their peers in many other Western countries, began to imagine their personal futures and working careers spanning outside of their country of birth. The concentration of professional jobs in key nodes of the global economy, and the new career opportunities in multinational companies, offered the promise of a prosperous and exciting life abroad. At the same time, technical advances, such as the Internet with its numerous ways to connect and engage in real time across great distances, have also made the world feel "smaller". The ease of communication, affordable travel and increased global inter-connectedness significantly influenced the kinds of career choices that were available for Finnish university graduates. The unique European area of free movement was already fully in place when Finland joined the EEA and the EU in the mid-1990s, and the Finnish telecommunication company Nokia was becoming a global player in the mobile phone business. As European citizens, the young graduates were able to look for their fortunes abroad and the numbers of those who did so rose after Finland recovered from the economic recession of the early 1990s (Koikkalainen 2013a).

Many moved abroad for the first time with the help of the European Socrates-Erasmus (currently known as Erasmus+) exchange programme, which has facilitated the mobility of more than 5 million students, apprentices and volunteers since its inception in 1987 (European Commission 2017). Finland typically ranks among the top five sending countries in Europe, when the numbers of outgoing students is compared with the overall student population (European Commission 2016). Starting from the internationalisation boom of the 1990s in Finnish higher education (Garam 2003), the importance of gaining international experience has been frequently repeated in the media. The students and young graduates have the knowledge of possibilities for internationalisation and transnational mobility and an awareness of how to grasp the opportunity when it presents itself. In addition, the numbers of those completing degrees abroad have been rising. In 2006–2007, approximately 4,000 Finnish students were enrolled in degree studies abroad. During the academic year 2015–2016, their numbers doubled and reached nearly 8,000 students, equal to the average student enrolment of a small Finnish university (CIMO 2017).[3]

While the increased mobility from Finland takes place within the larger context of globalisation and Europeanisation combined with the country's unique migration history, there is still room for considerable individual agency. Often the motivation to move because of studies or career progress were combined with love and personal relationships or simply the desire to see the world. Many participants of the study explained that they wanted to move abroad to encounter new things, get a better quality of life or live in the home country of their spouse. Some explained that they ended up abroad as if by

[3] The Finnish Social Insurance Institution Kela gives financial aid to students who complete degrees in either Finnish or foreign higher education institutions. The figures refer to the numbers of students who have received student aid abroad. There are no other official statistics on degree students abroad.

accident when they took on a job opportunity that suddenly presented itself, while others said they had always known that they would one day move abroad. All participants of the study had lived, worked, studied, or at least travelled abroad before moving to the country where they lived during the first survey. They thus had "mobility capital" (e.g. Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices 2006; Murphy-Lejeune 2003), which has been shown to increase the likelihood of further transnational mobility. The migration experience itself can also be an important element in enhancing one's "career capital" (Habti 2012, 31, 92; Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari 2008).

Economic theories of migration stress the importance of wage differentials and standards of living as the causes of human mobility. However, even though a majority of the respondents estimated their wages in the destination country to be higher than in Finland, a closer look at their motivations reveals that money was not the main or only incentive for migration. For these educated Finns, moving abroad is a possibility, not a matter of survival, or of maximising the family's income, as it may be for many of those who cross national borders to work in the Global North to send remittances back home to the Global South. Based on his study on mobility within Europe, Hubert Krieger (2004, 36) argues that "increasing national wealth goes hand in hand with an increase in personal and family motives for migration". This conclusion resonates also with Finnish migration history: while in the 1960s and 1970s, those who moved to Sweden were perhaps mostly attracted by higher salaries and standard of living (e.g. Korkiasaari & Tarkiainen 2000), the Finns who move today may do so more for adventure or lifestyle reasons.

Finding work abroad

Previous research into the labour market integration of highly-skilled migrants has identified several barriers to finding employment in the

country of destination. These include lack of language skills, non-recognition of foreign educational titles and lack of country-specific knowledge and experience (Schittenhelm & Schmidtke 2011), lack of specific local capital and resources, the difficulty of navigating in a new structural and institutional context (Zikic, Bonache, & Cerdin 2010, 670), unfamiliarity with local labour market rules, and having a foreign habitus (Bauder 2005). Education from abroad has been found to correlate with the difficulties of labour market entry, as it tends to be less valued than local degrees (e.g. Friedberg 2000; Saarikallio, Hellsten, & Juutilainen 2008). Nohl, Ofner and Thomsen (2010) use the concept of "status passage" to describe the transitional period between exiting the labour market of the country of origin, or graduating from an institution of higher education, and integrating into the labour market of the country of destination.

For the participants of this study, however, these factors had not been major obstacles to labour market entry in the country of destination. While the transition through the status passage had been slow for some, a clear majority of the respondents had found a satisfactory job rather quickly. At the time of the first survey in 2008 (n=364), nearly 80 percent of the respondents were in full-time employment, and only three percent were currently unemployed or looking for work. During the two years separating the two surveys, the situation had changed for some of the respondents: they had returned to Finland, moved on, started a family or changed jobs. Despite the global economic downturn, which began in the autumn of 2008, the change was not generally for the worse. Only 17 percent of the respondents explained that their labour market situation had worsened from the spring of 2008, while 25 percent said it had improved and 58 percent reported no remarkable change due to the recession. During the second survey in 2010 (n=194), therefore, over 60 percent of the respondents were in full-time employment, while only

four percent were looking for work. At both times, a sizeable number[4] of respondents were also working as freelancers, self-employed, or in part-time jobs alternating between family duties, studying, and work.

The transition to the destination country labour market had, therefore, mostly been smooth. Those who had encountered problems were a small minority: in the 2008 survey, only four percent stated that they had not found employment in the new country that *matched their degree*, while another four percent said that they had been unemployed and had looked for work for longer than six months. Nearly eighty percent had found work within weeks: either before or immediately after moving or after graduating from a local institution. The respondents were also asked to compare their current country with Finland on a number of claims related to their labour market position. The respondents were rather content with their situation in the new country: 70 percent completely or somewhat agree that their salary is better than it would have been in Finland, 79 percent state that their job fits their qualifications and 77 percent that their degree and previous job experience is recognised. Being foreign had not been a major obstacle in finding work: only 11 percent report having faced discrimination.

The respondents were also asked to evaluate the impact of the move abroad on their career. The responses can be classified into three categories. First, those who thought the move had clearly been beneficial, second, those for whom the move had caused a downturn in their career and third, those who were ambivalent about the effects of the move. About 70 percent of the participants belonged to the first category. New experiences, increased language and intercultural communication skills, interesting job assignments, and the sheer amount of different employment opportunities available were noted as signs of labour market success. Those who stated that

[4] 10 percent in selected one of these options in the 2008 survey, and 19 percent in the 2010 survey.

the move had negative consequences for their career shared some common characteristics. Stepping off the beaten track that heads for London, Brussels, or the other large European cities that host many international job opportunities had been somewhat risky. Looking for work in the smaller cities of France, Italy, Spain or Austria, for example, makes you compete in a more restricted and national labour market with the local graduates who have the benefit of having an easily recognised degree, perfect language skills, and local networks and social capital that are highly beneficial for finding employment.

Most of the survey respondents were content with the life choices that they had made, and in that respect, they do not differ from the results gained in other studies: all groups of intra-EU movers express a higher level of life satisfaction than comparable samples of nationals of their country of origin (Recchi 2008, 218). The Finns of this study had found several ways in which to communicate their skills and knowledge in the destination country labour market and were thus satisfied with their situation, even if considerable adaptation was often required when they first moved to the new country. There are numerous ways in which to "make it abroad", to find a good life and a new home for oneself in Europe, where national borders no longer restrict one's choice of place of residence.

Conclusions

Recent research has stressed the diversity of motivations for intra-European mobility (Favell 2008; King & Okólski 2019; Recchi 2015; Santacreu, Baldoni, & Albert 2009; Strey, Fajt, Mortimer Dubow, & Siegel 2018; Verwiebe 2014). For internationally minded, relatively young and well-educated European citizens, mobility in the EU/EEA area is one possible labour market path among many and experimenting with living abroad is a choice that may or may not lead to a longer-term settlement. While the European citizens who live and

work abroad in other EU member states are still the exception, living a transnational life in Europe and engaging in various cross-border practices is becoming an accepted way of building one's career and planning one's future because maintaining contact across borders is increasingly easy (see e.g. Favell et al. 2011).

Europe as an area where "international migration" resembles "internal mobility" (e.g. Favell 2008; Recchi & Triandafyllidou 2010) does, therefore, seem to exist for at least some Europeans. The idea is echoed also with the participants of my study: moving abroad was not understood as a *final* decision because a return to Finland was always a possibility if things did not work out in the destination country. Up to a third of the *Working in Europe* survey respondents had already previously lived in three or more countries outside of Finland. Some of the respondents had taken every possible opportunity at internationalisation: going on student exchange while still at school, studying abroad with the Erasmus programme while at university and working at Disneyland Paris or as an au pair in London during the holidays. Such mobile Europeans can at least superficially blend in the new country of residence and take their mobility rights for granted.

International migration often signifies a transitional phase in the work career of the migrant. The mobile individual may have to make a fresh start in her career, and the situation can be perceived either as a crisis or as an opportunity. Especially those who have to make the migration decision without any prior knowledge of a job in the destination country have to take the risk of a possible downturn in their career if they are unsuccessful in finding work that would match their degree and work experience. All types of knowledge are not equally valued: some are more mobile and easier to transfer and translate than others, and the valorisation of different types of knowledge and skills is often linked to occupations, status positions and gender (Kofman 2013; Ryan, Erel, & D'Angelo 2015).

The participants of the study share the experience of looking for work or working in a situation where they belong to a minority and must operate by the rules of a labour market that is largely unknown. To avoid losing out on their career they have had to try to negotiate the best possible value for their credentials and previous work experience. Many chose to highlight the fact that they are different from the local job applicants so that their foreign background could be seen as an asset, and not an obstacle to finding employment. Working in a foreign language in a multicultural context has demanded adaptation and flexibility from all the participants regardless of their educational background or profession (Koikkalainen 2013b).

Despite the fact that most countries are ready to welcome highly-skilled migrants as the only truly accepted migrants of today (Raghuram 2004), tertiary education is no guarantee for a trouble-free entry to the destination country labour market even for the European citizens exercising their right to free movement. As the results of this study demonstrate, highly-skilled Finns do not face insurmountable barriers when they enter the labour market of another EU country, but they are also not welcomed with open arms as *brains gained*: finding a highly-skilled job in the country of destination demands adaptation, perseverance and sometimes even a total re-orientation of one's career.

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