FINLAND: INCREASED IMMIGRATION PUTS ADDED PRESSURE ON INTEGRATION POLICY

ABSTRACT

Increasing immigration to Finland is putting pressure on the integration policies. This article examines the legislative basis for integration in Finland, the correlation between education and employment, the provision of services and its three-tiered system, the respective roles of the Ministry of Labour and NGOs. The author cautions that avoiding ethnic unrest and immigrant ghettos in the future depends on three factors: Can interministerial attitude divisions be settled? Will the individual integration plans become more than formalities? Will language education better consider immigrant needs?

Finland is increasingly becoming a country of immigration. Finland is the only EU country in which asylum seeking has increased in recent years. Moreover, there has been a considerable increase in all forms of immigration, as illustrated by three statistics. First, the number of foreigners legally living in Finland without citizenship increased four-fold between 1990 and 2003, from 26,300 to 107,100. Second, the number of foreign-born Finnish citizens and residents doubled between 1991 and 2003, from 77,000 to 159,000, which is 3% of the total Finnish population. Third, the number of residents whose first language is not Finnish has trippled between 1992 and 2004, from 43,000 to 128,000.[1]

According to a survey by Finnish geographers Elli Heikkilä and Maria Pikkarainen, immigrants often come from neighbouring countries, typically settle in southern parts of Finland, have primary education, and those with a higher education tend to get permanent work less often than those with less education.[2]

For example, in 2002 a total of 12,487 persons of working age (ages 15-74) immigrated to Finland. The largest group by country of birth were native Finns returning to their homeland (39%), followed by immigrants born in the former USSR (15%), Estonia (6%), and Sweden (4%). Other large groups included Chinese-born, British, German, Iraqi, Turkish and Thai.

According to Heikkilä and Pikkarainen (2006) migrants born in the former USSR have settled in counties of the province of Uusimaa (in southern Finland), where the capital city of Helsinki is located, and Varsinais-Suomi (in southwestern Finland), as well as in the counties of southeastern Finland, where they may make up as much as half of all the migrants who have moved from abroad. Migrants born in Sweden have mainly moved to the Aland Islands, Uusimaa and to the coastal counties of southwestern Finland. The immigration target of Estonians was Uusimaa, Varsinais-Suomi, as well as Southern Ostrobothnia (in western Finland) and Pirkanmaa. In absolute terms, Uusimaa province received the largest number of immigrants from the border countries.[3]

Although all destinations seem concentrated in the southern part of the country, there are major variations between the immigrant groups – even among the immigrant groups from "the near abroad" – as concerns education and working prospects. Regarding the educational levels of immigrants from the major countries of origin (Sweden, Estonia and Russia), over 60% have only primary education, and about half of the immigrants from Estonia and Sweden have been employed in the preceding year, compared to only 20-30% employment of those from Russia.

Figure 1 indicates the correlation between education and employment of the immigrant groups and the diversity between them: the highest employment is among persons from Sweden with high education and among people from Estonia with low education, whereas for Russians, the least and most educated are well employed, whereas the ones with average education are worse off in terms of finding work.

The legislative basis for integration in Finland

Finland is thereby increasingly becoming a country of immigrants, where groups of diverse educational backgrounds have sharply contrasting chances of finding work. The increasing volume and complexity of the groups underline the importance for Finland of constantly developing its integration policies.

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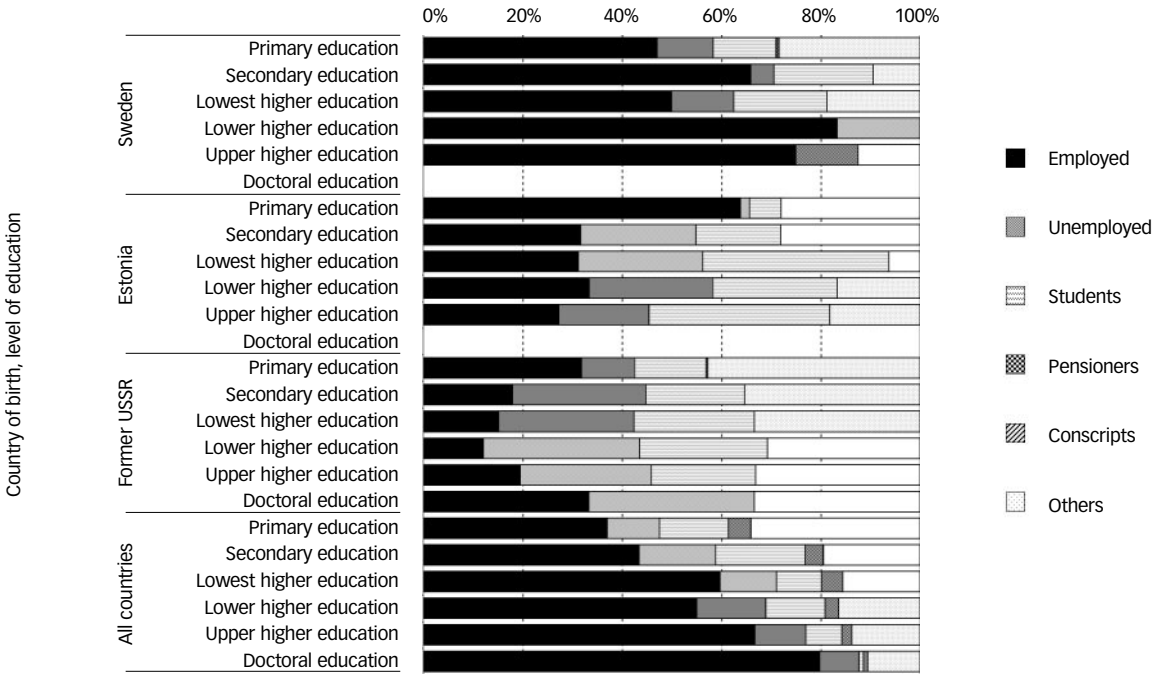
Figure 1
Main activity of immigrants in Finland one year after immigration (2003), according to level of education and country of birth (Data: Statistics Finland)



The guiding principle of the Finnish legislation is to treat non-nationals and nationals equally, if exceptions concerning non-nationals have not been explicitly made. One of the foremost goals is efficient integration, or "learning the language and the rules of society quickly," which is "a precondition of successful living in Finland."[4]

Conversely, with any particular integration plan, immigrants are entitled to specific rights concerning health services, education, citizenship, voting rights, housing employment, etc.

To give legal basis for and to further advance these aims, there are provisions on integration in the *Integration Act*, the Constitution, the *Aliens Act* as well as the *Equality Act*. The *Integration Act*, which entered into force on January 1, 2006, was established to promote the integration, equality and freedom of choice of immigrants through measures that help them acquire the essential knowledge and skills they need to function in society, and to ensure the essential livelihood and welfare of asylum seekers by arranging for their reception.[5]

The *Integration Act* determines integration measures to persons who have moved to Finland and have a home municipality in Finland, as specified in the *Municipality of Residence Act*. The *Integration Act* applies to labour migrants as well as to asylum seekers (until such time as they have been granted a residence permit or until a legally valid decision on their deportation has been made and enforced), persons who have been granted a residence permit under the *Aliens' Act* on the basis of need for protection or on strong humanitarian grounds, and persons who are family members of a refugee or are otherwise related to such a person, provided that they have been members of the family of the refugee or person granted a residence permit before the said person entered Finland.

The most recent amendments to the law in 2006 endeavour to further facilitate integration. They clarify authority mandates (Ministry of Labour, Ministry of the Interior and other ministries) and uphold the existing rights of immigrants to individual integration plans. The respective mandates of the Ministry of Labour and the municipalities is clearer. The municipality has the final responsibility for coordinating individual integration.[6]

Regarding other relevant legislation, the Constitution includes such basic rights as: equality before the law; the right to life, personal liberty and integrity; privacy; freedom of religion and conscience; free basic education; and the right to one's language and culture. These rights are guaranteed for all the people within the national borders, and not specifically reserved to the citizens of Finland. According to Section 19, "those who cannot obtain the means necessary for a life of dignity have the right to receive indispensable subsistence and care."[7]

The core objective of the third law, the *Aliens' Act*, is to implement and promote good governance and legal protection in matters concerning aliens. In addition, the purpose of the Act is to promote managed immigration and the provision of international protection with respect to human rights, basic rights, and the international agreements that are binding on Finland.[8]

Finally, the *Equality Act* came into force at the beginning of February 2004. The purpose of this Act is to foster equality and enhance the protection provided by law to those who have experienced discrimination. The *Equality Act* prohibits discrimination based on age, racial or ethnic origin, citizenship, language, religion or

belief, conviction, opinion, state of health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics (such as financial position, pregnancy, and family situation). The term "ethnic origin" refers both to immigrants and Finland's "old" ethnic minorities, such as the Roma, Sami, Tatars, Jews and representatives of the old Russian community.[9]

A three-tiered provision of services

The services are divided into the national, the local (or municipal) and individual levels. At the national level, the Ministry of Labour is responsible for the overall drafting of integration policy and providing information and guidance to the local authorities on matters concerning the integration of immigrants.[10]

On the local level there is the so-called "integration program," which is a document drawn up by the local authorities in collabora-tion with employment and other authorities and the Social Insurance Institution. The program contains a plan for objectives, measures, resources and collaboration in the municipal integration of immigrants. When programs are drawn up and implemented, immigrants, NGOs, employee and employer organizations and, when possible, other relevant local parties have a chance to provide feedback. Attributing the responsibility for drafting the integration programs to the local level has caused diversification both of the programs and of the way they are accomplished in the different municipalities. The actual realization of integration rests on the pro-activity of the municipal officials, due to a lack of clear-cut regulations concerning the responsibilities of officials.[11]

Those immigrants who register as unemployed job seekers or apply for social assistance as referred to in the *Act on Social Assistanc*e are entitled to an "integration plan" drawn up in cooperation with the local authority and the Employment and Economic Development Center.[12] The duration of and amendment(s) to a plan as well as the extension of a suspended plan are subject to agreement between the local authority, the employment office and the immigrant. An integration plan must be drawn up before a five-month period of unemployment or receipt of social assistance by the immigrant have elapsed. Immigrants are entitled to an integration plan for a maximum period of three years after being first entered into the population data system of their home municipality. The employment office will decide whether a plan should be considered suspended. A plan may be considered suspended one month after the immigrant has become permanently employed in a full-time job or as an entrepreneur, or after the immigrant begins full-time studies leading to a vocational qualification or degree. The employment office must give a hearing to the immigrant before it makes the suspension decision.[13]

Regarding the educational levels of immigrants from the major countries of origin (Sweden, Estonia and Russia), over 60% have only primary education, and about half of the immigrants from Estonia and Sweden have been employed in the preceding year, compared to only 20-30% employment of those from Russia.

The integration plan may be an agreement on providing support for studies of Finnish or Swedish, labour market training, self-motivated education or training, vocational counselling and rehabilitation, practical training, preparatory education for the integration of children and young adults, and other reasonable measures to support integration. The immigrant entitled to an integration plan is required to participate in the compilation of the plan and in any services and measures agreed upon therein. If, without justified cause, the immigrant has refused to participate in the compilation of the integration plan, or has refused to participate in a reasonable measure without a valid reason, the basic amount of social assistance previously provided is lowered.[14]

On the individual level the immigrant is granted an integration allowance when an integration plan is agreed upon. The integration allowance can be granted for a maximum period of one year, and is renewable. The integration allowance is re-assessed if there are changes to the circumstances of the person receiving support, or of that person's family, or if a change occurs in the need for support. In order to protect their right to integration allowance, immigrants must report on the progress of their integration plan and report if changes are required, otherwise the plan is suspended, as stipulated in the plan. When needed, immigrants must provide the local authority and the Social Insurance Institution office with information on any income affecting the amount of the allowance, and any other information needed to grant and pay for the allowance.[15]

The integration plan has faced some criticism. According to Peltosaari, integration plans are considered mere formalities by the immigrants, and the substance and potential of the plan do not quite open to the immigrant in the process. Peltosaari sees the main reasons for this to be language problems, the resources of the authority to concentrate on individual cases, and the perception of the authority that he or she is mainly assisting in the job search. Furthermore, cultural problems have not been tackled. Due to the traditional passive authority-client mentality of many immigrants stemming from the country of origin, a fertile dialogue has not emerged.[16]

The Ministry of Labour leads the public services

Public service providers have an organic or very close connection to the Ministry of Labour, which is primarily responsible for integration matters in cases where the immigrant is already residing in Finland. Service providers can be categorized as those who function at the national level, working closely with the Ministry of Labour, and those who work at the municipal level, either under the Ministry of Labour or the Ministry of the Interior.

At the national, Ministry of Labour level, the responsibilities of the Ombudsman for Minorities include promoting solid ethnic relations, monitoring and improving the status and rights of ethnic minorities, reporting, putting forth initiatives and providing information. In addition, the Ombudsman for Mino-rities, together with other officials, ensures that everyone is treated equally regardless of their ethnic background. The Ombudsman for Minorities mainly gives recommendations, instructions and advice. The Ombudsman may also launch initiatives concerning social inequities or the status of foreigners or different ethnic minority groups. In certain cases the Ombudsman or his or her office may help persons who have faced discrimination.[17]

Also on the national level, the Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO) functions as a broad-based consultative expert organization releasing statements on matters relating to refugees and migration and on racism and ethnic relations. Several linguistic and cultural minorities are represented on the Advisory Board. Half of the Board's members represent traditional and new ethnic minorities, and the political division of the Ministry of Labour coordinates its activities.[18]

At the local level, Employment and Economic Development Centres – under the Ministry of Labour – plan, steer and follow up on the reception of asylum seekers and the integration of immigrants into society and working life. The Centres also perform other separately assigned functions.[19] In cooperation with the local and municipal authorities led by the Ministry of the Interior, the Centres have a general responsibility concerning the integration of immigrants and a responsibility for related coordination measures.[20] Employment offices, in collaboration with employment and economic development centers, implement labour-market policy measures and provide employment services.[21]

In policy making, the constant, passively negative public opinion and the wrangling on immigration matters between the heads of two ministries – the Ministry of Interior (which generally handles permits) and the Ministry of Labour (integration) – have slowed the progress of immigration and integration legislation and policy.

NGOs typically specialize in assisting refugees

There is less non-governmental activity in support of immigrants in Finland than in North America, due to the traditionally larger role of government in the former. However, NGOs do play a large role, both in individual assistance and in participating in the public discussion about immigration policy and governmental activity. Most of the major NGOs particularly concentrate on assisting refugees and the asylum seekers.

The Refugee Advice Centre (RAC) provides legal aid and advice to asylum seekers, refugees and other foreigners in Finland. Both public and private funding has been given for this purpose, and the RAC has the main responsibility for organizing legal aid to asylum seekers in Finland. It also works to promote the legal rights of asylum seekers, refugees and other foreigners. The organization is recognized as expert in refugee and alien affairs in Finland. It is therefore heard from by officials and Parliament when new laws concerning foreigners are drafted and passed. The RAC works in close co-operation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as well as European refugee organizations. The RAC is a member of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), which represents 78 refugee organizations throughout Europe.[22]

The Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) is a politically and religiously independent non-governmental organization founded in 1965. Its main tasks include information and education, fundraising as well as work with refugees in Finland and abroad. It works in co-operation with various international organizations, the most important ones being the UNHCR as well as refugee organizations in the Nordic countries.[23]

The refugee activities of the Finnish Red Cross (SPR in Finnish) focus on supporting the integration of immigrants and promoting tolerance. The SPR maintains two reception centers and is also prepared to organize emergency reception of large groups of unexpectedly arriving asylum seekers. SPR's responsibilities also include making practical arrangements for family reunification, receiving quota refugees at the airport and monitoring employment histories.[24]

Conclusion

Finnish immigration and integration matters are undergoing a major transition. Until the 1990s, Finland remained a "rich periphery," but EU membership in 1995 and a successful recovery from the depression of the early 1990s have made Finland into an attractive alternative for immigration. Although immigration to Finland has increased in recent years, the volume of immigration has been comparatively small so that Finland has avoided the problem of chaotic immigrant ghettos or systemic ethnic conflict. This fortuitous outcome has therefore been partly independent of the development of Finland's integration policies.

In policy making, the constant, passively negative public opinion and the wrangling on immigration matters between the heads of two ministries – the Ministry of Interior (which generally handles permits) and the Ministry of Labour (integration) – have slowed the progress of immigration and integration legislation and policy. Many politicians have avoided speaking out for fear of losing support, hence improvements have been slow.

In general, immigrant's basic rights in Finland are, on a European scale, relatively well protected. In forthcoming years, however, the Ministry of Labour needs to better materialize the integration policy and keep up with the increase

in immigration in order to maintain stability and further develop the sustainably stable settlement of immigrants.

For this, treating immigrants as an active, individual party, better matching language training and the genuine desire of all parties to get immigrants proper work will advance the foremost goal of Finland's integration policy, i.e. "learning the language and the rules of society quickly," which is "a precondition of successful living in Finland." This activity needs to be based on a properly bilateral and earnest integration plan, where immigrants turn from passive subject of "another bureaucratic formality" to an active, eager counterpart in the integration process. Another essential precondition for transforming these policy goals into reality will be increasing the supply of new homes for immigrants.

Notes

[1] Tanner (2004).

[2] Heikkilä and Pikkarainen (2006).

[3] Heikkilä and Pikkarainen (2006).

[4] Haapalehto, Teemu, Valtioneuvosto 1997, Annex 1, Page 3.

[5] Haapalehto, *Act on Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers*, section 6.

[6] Ministry of Labour, www.mol.fi/mol/fi/04_maahanmuutto/index.jsp.

[7] The Constitution of Finland.

[8] *Aliens Act*.

[9] *Equality Act*.

[10] *Act on Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers*, sections 7-16.

[11] Söderling (2003, 915).

[12] According to Söderling, integration plans were written for 29, 912 immigrants between 1999 and 2001 (Söderling 2003, 914).

[13] *Act on Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers*, sections 7-16.

[14] *Act on Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers*, sections 7-16.

[15] *Act on Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers*, sections 7-16.

[16] Peltosaari (2004).

[17] The Ombudsman for Minorities.

[18] The Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations.

[19] Employment and Economic Development Centres.

[20] Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities.

[21] Employment Service.

[22] The Refugee Advice Centre.

[23] The Finnish Refugee Council.

[24] The Finnish Red Cross.

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