

“I NEVER CHOSE FINLAND” - THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL TALENT IN THE FINNISH ICT SECTOR

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Abstract

Due to rising dependency ratios, Western economies are focusing on attracting and retaining international employees, not just for low-skilled jobs but increasingly for high-skilled roles, especially in ICT and technology sectors. Despite labour needs and policy efforts, skilled immigrants often face difficulties in job matching and experience bias in recruitment, leading to higher unemployment rates among them (Shirmohammadi et al., 2019).

Research on migrant integration has focused on coping strategies and acculturation. Coping studies explore survival in new environments, while acculturation research examines attitude, behavior, and identity changes. The literature review of acculturation, coping, and integration success of international skilled migrants by Hajro et al. (2019) suggests that integration success is multifaceted and factors leading towards successful integration – both in the domains of personal and work life – work together, not in isolation, and that future research should investigate the critical combinations of these factors.

Responding to this call and relying on 14 life-story interviews with high-skilled immigrants in the Finnish ICT sector, we ask “*how do high-skilled internationals make sense of and negotiate their lives in a new country?*”. As these individuals are making sense of and expressing their reasons for this move, their living in the new country, and their future goals, they share a range of experiences. Their experiences are both emotional and rational and both positive and negative reflecting high-skilled internationals’ diverse journeys in the new country.

Our analysis suggests that acculturation is more an outcome of the individual’s journey and experiences in the country, rather than a conscious and strategic choice. We also suggest that acculturation is a multimodal process, in which modes can vary across three life domains of high-skilled internationals, including work, social relations and societal aspects. Seeing voluntary retention in the host country as a proxy of sufficient integration success, the success is shaped by at least one positive anchoring experience in any of the three domains, with emphasis varying over time and across individuals.

Keywords: *highly skilled internationals, migration, retention, acculturation*

1. Introduction

With a low birth rate and an ageing population, employers and policymakers in many Western economies consider it imperative to attract and retain employees from abroad. While traditionally the need for foreign workforce has been prevalent in low-skilled jobs, the need is currently emphasized also for high-skilled jobs, especially in the ICT and technology sectors. At the same time many governments have adopted policies to actively support free markets (Cahill & Konings, 2017), and labour mobility thereafter.

However, despite the identified labour need and the policy focus, there is evidence that immigrating and integrating into the foreign labour market and society may not be an easy task (Larja & Peltonen, 2023). Skilled immigrants and internationals have shown to experience challenges in finding employment especially those matching with their qualifications. For example, a recent literature review found that educational credentials, work experience and networks contributed to successful employment only when those were acquired in the host country. Further, the employers were found to have biases and negative perceptions that led them to discriminate against migrants in their recruitment processes. (Shirmohammadi et al., 2019.) Consequently, unemployment rate is often considerably higher among foreign individuals than the average unemployment rate for all (e.g., 24% vs. 10% in Finland in April 2024 Statistics Finland 2024).

Previous research on integration success of migrants has focused on two lines of investigation, coping and acculturation strategies. Studies of coping try to understand how individuals survive in a new, often stressful, environment such as new workplace in a foreign culture, by engaging in different strategies, e.g., problem-focused or emotion-focus behaviors (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005) or by undergoing proactive or reactive forms of identity work (Zikic & Richardson, 2016). Studies have also shown that difficulties in the labor market push some immigrants towards self-employment (Abada et al., 2014). In addition to the actual self-employment (by establishing their own job through setting up a firm), a certain kind of entrepreneurial self (Peters, 2001; Bröckling, 2015; Sugarman, 2015) or neoliberal self (Savickas, 2013; Shan, 2015; Vassallo, 2020) might be required from the “ideal immigrant”. Research on acculturation modes, in turn, has focused on examining changes in individuals’ attitudes, behavior and identity in a new culture (e.g., Abd Hamid et al., 2019; Guo et al. 2021). In his influential work

Berry (1980, 1997, 2005) has identified four such strategies, including assimilation, separation, marginalization and integration.

Recently, in their literature review of integration success of international skilled migrants, Hajro et al. (2019) develop a framework, in which they suggest that various individual, organizational and societal factors together with acculturation modes and coping mechanisms are relevant for the integration success. In their model the factors leading towards successful integration work in concert rather than in isolation and thus, they suggest that future research should investigate the critical combinations (Hajro et al., 2019). In response to this call, we ask “*how do high-skilled internationals make sense of and negotiate their lives in a new country?*”.

Our data consists of 14 interviews of high-skilled internationals who have migrated to Finland and are working in the ICT field. Our definition of international talent, or high-skilled internationals, includes immigrants and cosmopolitans with tertiary degree education or equivalent competences (Nummela et al., 2021).

In our preliminary analysis we identified two storylines (adventure and escape) for moving abroad in the first place, and three storylines (love for the country, career opportunities and social relations) for choosing Finland as a country for migration. We recognized three levels of high-skilled internationals’ experiences in Finland including micro level (self), meso level (work, education, social relations) and macro level (standard of living, societal values, language and nature). Furthermore, we identified three outcomes of their journey so far (becoming settled, loving the country and mixed feelings) concerning their desired to stay in or leave the country.

Our paper contributes to two domains. First, to the critical studies in labor market integration and work experiences of high-skilled immigrants by arguing that acculturation may be less of a conscious strategic choice of the individual but more of an outcome of the individual journey into the country and their experiences of living in the country. Second, we hope that the results also shed light to the critical entrepreneurship research by demonstrating how the entrepreneurial self can become a strategy for immigrants to live their lives in the new home country and labor markets.

2. Literature review

Previous research on acculturation of immigrants and immigrant entrepreneurs has centered on how immigrants navigate between their home and host country identities (e.g. Abd Hamid et al., 2019; Guo et al. 2021). These studies lean heavily on the pioneering studies of Berry, who (2005, p. 698) defines acculturation as “*dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members*”. Berry (1980, 2005) identified four acculturation strategies used by migrants entering a new culture: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. The strategies are distinctive in their approach to maintenance of one’s own culture and heritage and in the ways how individuals seek to build intercultural relationships.

Deriving from these theories, recent studies (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018) have highlighted the interactionist nature of acculturation. The cultures and subcultures evolve over time; in workplaces, in neighborhoods and in recreational organizations, where high-skilled internationals work and live, because not only migrants acculturate to (imaginary, monolithic) host-country culture but also the pre-existing majority and minority groups in the host country change their behavior and cultural patterns as a reaction to the cultures of the newcomers. Hence, acculturation strategies of migrants are not stable constructs across contexts (van der Zee and van Oudenhoven, 2022). Instead, behaviors and associated cognitions and emotions vary across situations, and are also dependent of intercultural competencies, which evolve over time. Through the discussion on super-diversity more attention has been drawn also to new social complexities stemming from increased ethnic diversity (Vertovec, 2019). Consequently, there seems to be an increasing consensus about the complexity and fluctuating nature of cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses to host country cultures. However, empirical attempts to bring together different levels and aspects of those experiences and responses have been scarce.

In their literature review of acculturation, coping, and integration success of international skilled migrants, Hajro et al. (2019) come up with a multilevel framework, which highlights how individual, organizational and societal factors have all been found important for the integration success of high-skilled internationals. In their model, the success of integration can be evaluated objectively and subjectively in two domains of life: personal and work life. Importantly, their analysis identifies that the factors leading towards successful integration

work in concert rather than in isolation and thus future research should investigate the critical combinations.

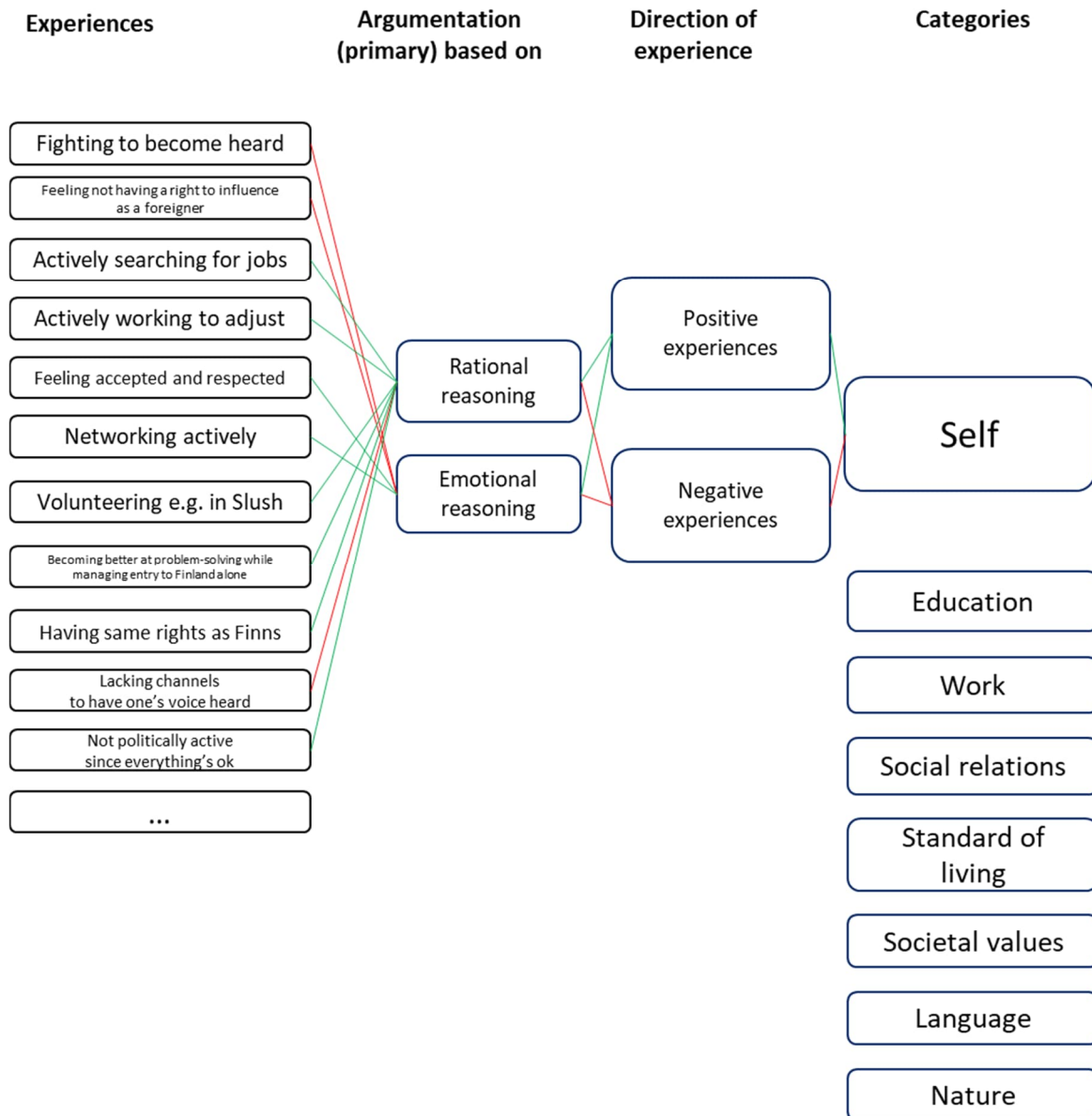
3. Data and methods

To answer the research question, “*how do high-skilled internationals make sense of and negotiate their lives in a new country?*”, we draw from life-story interviews with 14 individuals. To recruit participants to represent these diverse paths into Finland, we used multiple routes including snowballing and using referrals. The participants include both women and men and are from different age groups. They come from different parts of the world (EU and non-EU). The thematic interviews followed a narrative life story approach to allow the participants to talk about the events and experiences that they found meaningful. In the analysis we first familiarized with the overall story lines, including the challenges and experiences these individuals had faced when aiming to find work and integrate into the Finnish labor markets and society.

In the analysis we have iterated between their narration of their overall life story and the coding of the rational and the emotional reasons for first moving to Finland, experiences of living and working in Finland, and then their reasoning of their future. Coding procedure started by three researchers reading closely the 14 interviews multiple times. The coding logics were discussed in four meetings during the process. In addition, each researcher coded the same interview and cross-checked their interpretations and outcomes to get a shared understanding of the categories and codes used. The analysis followed abductive logic (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) whereby the preliminary understanding of the literature provided some cues regarding the experiences relevant for high-skilled internationals when making sense of their lives in a new country.

Figure 1 gives an example of the coding procedure of the experiences of living and working in Finland. An outcome of the coding consists of nine categories of experiences, which were labelled as agency, education, work, social relations, standard of living, societal values, nature and language. In each category we also coded the basis (rational or emotional) and direction (positive or negative) of argumentation.

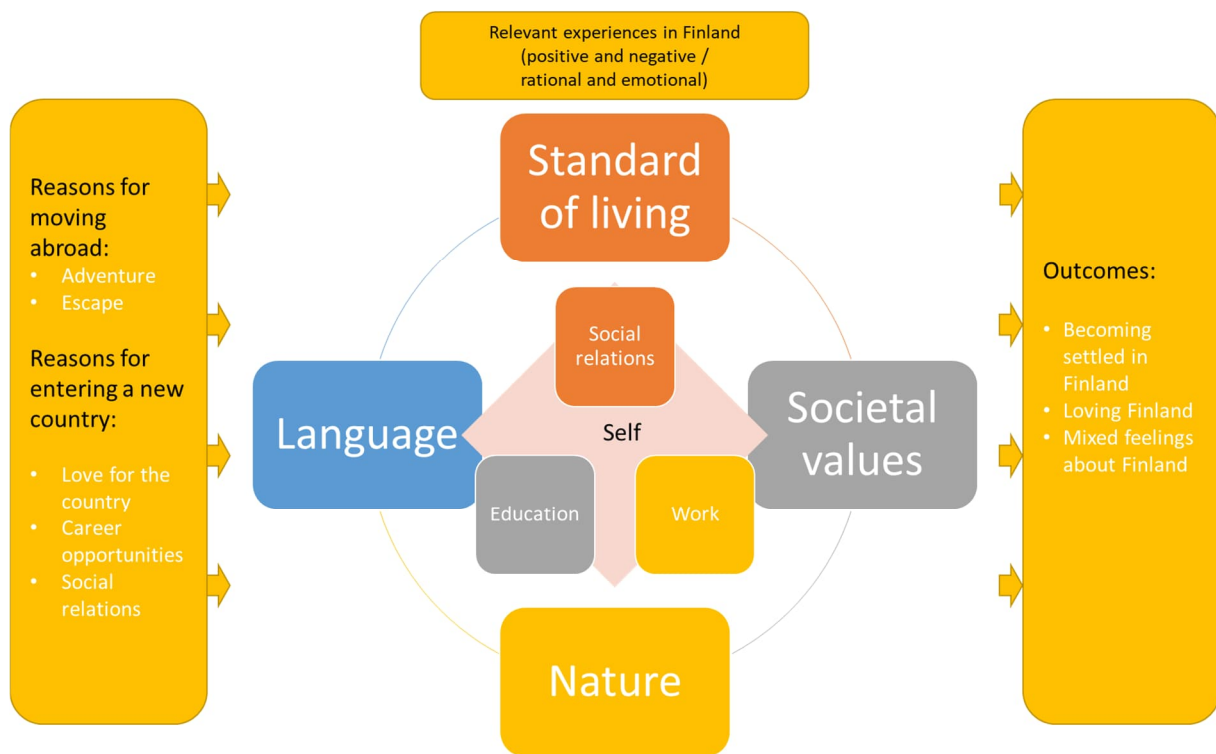
Figure 1. An example of the coding framework of experiences



4. Findings

The interviews can be depicted into storylines including key elements describing first the entry into Finland, second the experiences in Finland, and third the outcomes of being in Finland. Figure 2 summarizes the key elements of participants' sense-making in all of these storylines.

Figure 2. Summary of the core elements of sense making



4.1 Entry reasons

A decision to enter Finland has two layers, why to move to a new country in the first place and why eventually to choose this country (see Figure 2). Interviews showcase that their decision to leave their home country and **move abroad** is motivated by adventure or escape. Adventure has a positive connotation, suggesting that the unknown world draws a person into exploring something new. Adventure can be related to emotional reasons as in Sara's story: *"I said yeah, why not to go somewhere far? I was enjoying my job back then, but it was kind of stuck. I felt that I was not learning anything new and when I don't learn I get very bored. Very easy."*. Likewise, there can be more rational reasons for going on an adventure, such as to progress one's career.

Escape, in turn, has a more negative undertone, meaning that there is something in external conditions that is pushing the person away from the country of origin. For example, the national economy may provide weak career prospects, and hence, a rational grounding for leaving the country: *"But if we speak generally in [country of origin], this is now a very common trend that*

people would like to pursue higher education or opportunities abroad. Because the condition itself in [country of origin] is not so promising.” (Kiran). The escape may also be backed with emotional reasoning, such as a willingness to get distance to the native family as explained by Bob: *“And I personally wanted to stay apart from my family.”* Moving can also be motivated by the societal values that are pushing the person away from their home country. Bob, an atheist, feels that his freedom of expression is at risk in the home country where religion is strongly influencing the social structures: *I was not promoting that I was atheist constantly or consciously, but if it came up in a social environment, it became a problem. I felt that way. (Bob).* Alternatively, if a person’s home country is at war—a war they don’t support but could force them to fight—they might decide to move due to the emotional stress of the situation.

A decision to **move to Finland**, then, is a combination of multiple rational and emotional elements, which can be summarized as three archetypes of reasons: *love for the* (image of the) *country*, *career opportunities* and *social relations*. While love for the country is emotionally charged, career reasons for entering are rational and social reasons mixed. Love for the country involves such elements as societal values related to democracy and freedom, peaceful rhythm of life, exotic or familiar culture and closeness of nature. The love for the country can be related only to Finland (exotic, familiar, nature) or Finland as one of the Nordic or European countries (democracy, freedom). This initial love is based on personal experiences during short holiday or work trips over the years or on information and stories from different sources, such as reading (about Finns’ love for metal music), discussing with family or friends, or having at a time successful Finnish global company’s (Nokia’s) factory with a Finnish flag on the yard close by and contributing to the idea of Finland as a ‘Dreamland’. Career opportunities entail such elements as free education and open positions in the job market, from which the migrating person has learned from the internet, family or friends. Social relations are about following a spouse, siblings, relatives or friends who are already living in Finland or are moving together with the interviewee.

Although there is a primary reason for coming to Finland, it is often backed with secondary, supportive arguments. The entry into Finland is, for some, primarily motivated by career opportunities and the core elements of work and education. However, these core elements seldom work in isolation but often in concert with other, personally relevant and more emotional factors. For example, while pursuing career opportunities through free, high-quality education is a clear rational reason for seeking to relocate into Finland (at least for the duration

of studies), the idea of going to Finland represents an adventure that the participant is seeking to embark on. Louise selected her options for study exchange and decides on the Nordic countries due to wanting to experience something else – *“I knew nothing about Nordic countries. So, I saw it as a chance to just, you know, go and explore for half a year. -- And that's exactly why I wanted to come. I really wanted an adventure and something surprising.”*.

Linking to the idea of adventure is that fact that the decision to move to Finland is not necessarily contemplated for a long time, but as an interesting company is found on social media and makes a job offer, the decision to move and pursue this job opportunity is taken. However, this rational decision may be then supported by the love for Finland through a fond touristic memory of the ice-covered Baltic Sea and the Northern lights based on an earlier short visit to Lapland. Moving into Finland can also be motivated primarily by the love for the country and, for example, its' societal values, which the person feels easy to connect with and who eventually applied for and was accepted to study in a master's degree program Finland.

Social relations can be an important factor in entering the country. Finding a Finnish spouse and/or moving to Finland due work or studies of one's spouse in Finland is one of the reasons to move to Finland. Sometimes, following the spouse is the rational reason, while the more profound motivation lies in the love for the country, for example its' nature, as was the situation in Julie's journey to Finland: *“It sounds like a country where I would be happy to live because of this nature and quiet and all things. [...] Some years later, actually, maybe 3, 4, 5 years after that, my husband got opportunity to come here as a researcher in Finland.,”* (Julie). For some, the decision to move with the spouse can be the decisive factor and even cause feelings of resentment – in particular if the life in Finland turns out complicated, e.g. for difficulties in finding meaningful work *“I never chose Finland. I chose my husband.”*(Sita).

The process of moving to another country is not linear. Many participants had some kind of early exposure to Finland either via short trips during holidays or for visiting family or friends living in Finland, or the moving decision is motivated by visiting here for a longer time e.g. in a student exchange. The journey may also involve moving temporarily to a third country like Louise: *“it was this kind of year-and-a-half-long test. And the conclusion of this test was that Finland is still number one in my heart”*. Or some participants return to home country after their studies to reconnect with the family or go back to finalise their studies or do another degree before moving back to Finland. Reasons for moving or their order of priority may change

between entries as for Maria, when she first followed her spouse for a couple of years, then moved away with him and eventually decided to return to work in the country they fell in love with.

4.2 Experiences in Finland

Life experiences in Finland are bundled around the core elements of education, work and social relations, which will be discussed next. In addition, many relevant experiences of our participants are related to macro level institutions and values, such as standard of living, societal values, nature, and language. Those experiences are also introduced in the following. But let us start by discussing individuals as doers, experiencers and objects of actions, hence, how they make sense of themselves.

Self

Agency taken or given (or a lack of it) was an overarching element in different situations and in different spheres of life when participants described their experiences in Finland. The view expressed by many was that the newcomer is responsible for being active. Agency was mainly emphasized via the active search for jobs, active networking and participating events, and in participants' willingness to adjust to society and the labour market. Agency was also discussed in relation to public participation. The level of agency could be related to their country of origin - whether in the EU or outside the EU. There are some participants (from outside the EU) who felt deprived of rights to influence and of having a voice or being heard as a foreigner, while another participant from a non-EU country on the other hand felt that there is no need to be politically active in Finland, everything is even too well here.

Living in Finland has changed some interviewees in quite a fundamental way. They perceive themselves behaving like a Finn, with some 'sisu' (endurance) as well as increased feeling of empathy towards others. For some, being in a Finnish culture has made them more 'emancipated', more critical towards societal problems. For instance, they have become more aware of feminism and sustainability issues. In a rational way, people's aspirations from education and career have also changed while living in Finland. On the other hand, these changes in the worldview have caused them some isolation from their friends and relatives in the home country who do not share these new values. Or they may find it personally challenging to accept the 'new self'.

Education

Many international talents spend their first few years studying in a new country. Finland is praised for free, highly quality education with interesting study programmes and peer support. Experiences of higher education in Finland are mostly positive and argumentation is foremost rational. They are related to price, quality, social relations and work-life skills. For some, the work-life skills offered through, for example, a mentoring programme to help in job search have been important. Experiences that are emotionally rewarding are related to social relations, such as having a supportive teacher or events organised by the university to make, what has turned out to be, lifelong friendships with other students, mostly foreign but for some also Finns.

Educational route is mostly depicted as a soft-landing spot - the fellow students (Finnish and international students) in their formative years are available to establish connections and develop relations that become the strong networks facilitating living and learning in Finland. Yet, these social relations do not always last if one is moving to another region; or most student friends move to the capital region for work.

Work life experiences

Work-life experiences are an important constituent of the experience of living in Finland for high-skilled internationals. In the analysis we divided between the experiences of finding a (new) job and other experiences at work.

Finding a job in Finland has turned out to be a challenge for international talents and may require daunting effort, relentless job hunt – in some cases extending beyond Finland - and moving into the capital region to be closer to the most promising prospects. The perception is that the labour market in Finland is discriminating, meaning that the recruitment is not primarily based on objective evaluation of the skills but rather on the applicant knowing the right people, having prior work experience in Finland, being able to speak Finnish or being a native Finn. As the recruitment criteria are not considered to be rational, people become emotional about them. To start with, many reach out to public employment services but are disappointed with the service (e.g. perceived lack of expertise). Important means for eventually landing a first job has been a willingness to make compromises by accepting entry level positions despite having worked in the field for many years abroad. Alternatively, finding a job requires other tactics such as volunteering, utilizing a spouse's contacts and actively searching for help to learn about

the ways of the market. For those experimenting with or considering entrepreneurship it is not the market that they worry about but the bureaucracy: does the residence permit allow part-time entrepreneurship and how to disclose a business to not be permanently identified as an entrepreneur by the (un)employment services.

Once a person has managed to start building a track record in Finnish labour market, switching to a new job is considered much easier, but even this is not easy, particularly outside the capital region. People worry about the small size of the job market and fear that they might eventually be running out of options in Finland. For some, work constitutes a positive and smooth experience already from the very beginning, for example it is possible to start working part-time during studies then leading to a permanent position after the studies. When moving to Finland with a work contract, a major influence enabling a successful transition to work is the help from the employer.

For many, current work is depicted as rewarding, challenging enough and a source of enjoyment. Especially, autonomy, freedom and independence offered by Finnish employers, is valued. Participants frequently emphasize the importance of good work-life balance in the Finnish working life culture. They often compare the Finnish experience against their experiences from their native countries or other countries where they worked. They also appreciate the good relations at work, in some cases fostered by the international team.

However, there are also negative work life experiences, and they represent the most challenging experiences for the participants in their journey in Finland. These experiences include also direct abuse, like Bob explains when asked to complete a job that was not part of his work and where he did not have any competences. The participants have also experienced or witnessed other forms of discrimination. While formally the company language may be English, Finnish skills may be required or important things in the company are operated informally in Finnish. Some perceive that there is a glass ceiling for foreigners/foreign women as career advancement and permanent positions are reserved for Finns/white men.

Social relations

Family-ties are often strong, which can make staying in Finland easier or harder. International talents may have family members in Finland welcoming a newcomer. A spouse, siblings or cousins who have already been living in Finland for many years are of great help in everyday

practicalities at the beginning, for example, in arranging housing, advising on matters related to studies, providing translation help and utilizing their networks to ease the initial job search. A spouse plays an important role in many profound decisions, such as a choice of a place of residence and a type of housing. This may result into emotionally difficult situations when the spouse wants to stay put while the international talent would prefer moving, for example, closer to friends to a bigger city in Finland or back to the country of origin. Dependency on the spouse either financially or with the language can also be a challenge – of becoming like a child. Parents oftentimes encourage international talents to move abroad, but it is emotionally difficult to leave them behind, especially when the cultural tradition is that children, sons in particular, should take care of their aging parents. Similarly, the wellbeing of one's own children, such as good education and safety, are important reasons not to move away even when living in Finland is not personally meaningful.

Experiences of social relations outside their family were important for the interviewees and it is here the participants had polarized experiences. For many the social relations are the most challenging issue with living in Finland. For some, this was related to experiences of racism limiting their lives, but a claim shared by many was that although Finns go the extra mile to be helpful, it is their reservedness that makes it hard to get through to form true friendships with them. Consequently, many express feelings of social isolation and being left to either socialise only with their spouse or needing to find other immigrants from their home country or other foreigners to be able to form relationships and friendships. Then there are those who feel that it is easy to make friends with Finns, and that Finns are friendly and supportive. Some have gained so strong connections with locals that they call them 'Finnish grandparents' or 'foster parents'. For many, the strong difference between a colleague and a friend seems odd. They have accustomed to socialising with work colleagues also in free time in their home country, which is not always the case in Finland. Outside work, religious communities, sports, studies or international networks have helped in finding new contacts.

Standard of living

A common experience of many international talents is that Finnish society has contributed positively to their quality of life. They value the public services of the welfare state: education, social security, healthcare and transportation are perceived to be affordable and high quality in comparison to those in their country of origin. Some also appreciate the services targeted for their spouses to help them integrate to the society. The services are significant as they are hoped

to be supportive in the pursuit of one's professional ambitions. Experiences of unemployment showcase this. Benefits for the unemployed are appreciated in bringing security to the everyday life but employment services are criticised of not being supportive in the actual job search. Furthermore, the public services are not always easily accessible, because they require Finnish skills.

Experiences of immigration services are significant to many as they ultimately determine who can come and stay in a country. Residence permits for non-EU citizens are of many types, and experiences vary accordingly: some application processes have been perceived as slow or illogical and others smooth. The level of bureaucracy and administrative processes in one's own home country is influencing the perception of bureaucracy in Finland. Long-stay residence permits are complemented for allowing flexible movement across the borders; and lacking a permit implies not being able to travel or visit outside Finland.

Administration and permits related experiences are often emotional. A key element is not the complicated processes but the uncertainty. Temporary residence permits cause stress because the future in the country remains uncertain. Similarly, obtaining family permits can be a stressful process because they decide if family members can live together. The family breadwinner might even have to take up unskilled jobs to fulfil certain conditions for the permit. The importance of a residence permit also makes people wonder whether everyone is treated equally and with respect, some feeling valued others mistreated due to their background.

A downside to the comprehensive welfare services is high taxation: Finland is considered as an expensive country to live in. For a foreign student the welfare society can then appear contradictory in that they can afford the studies but need to work hard during free time to cope with the high living costs resulting into missing many opportunities to integrate to the society through networking and making friendships with fellow students.

An emotionally significant aspect of the standard of living is feeling safe in Finland, and that the country is calm, quiet, easy-going and stress-free. Cities in Finland are of 'human' size, not too small, not too big. Yet, for others this peacefulness manifests itself as too a slow rhythm of life in the society. The one thing that many international talents miss in the country is their native cuisine.

Societal values

Finland as a society and the social values are important – and mostly a positive constituent – of living and working in Finland. It is important that Finland is politically stable (more so than many other countries), a civilized democracy standing for freedom of speech and of religion, equal opportunities, gender equality, respect for government and each other enabling everybody to be oneself. Safety and low crime rate among other things contribute to the fact the Finland is perceived to be a good place to raise children. For some these values mean that Finland feels like being at home and leaving from Finland is a great sacrifice. Others feel that the society has become better for foreigners, especially with the diversity in the capital region, and they feel accepted – yet, they do not emotionally feel to belong.

Nature

Finnish nature is a source of many positive emotions. It is mostly a source of pleasure and relaxation and for many Finland equals nature. During their stay in Finland, the interviewees have learned that Finns love nature, its quietness and being quiet themselves. This is perceived to be characteristic to Finns. It is an important element for many to stay in Finland.

Yet for some, the cold and dark winter feels too long, depressing and boring. Especially if coming from a country with hot temperatures the shock can be real. On the other hand, it is possible to grow to like Carlos *“So, I've grown to really like the Finnish winter”* and at best summer days are wonderful.

Language

Finnish language is an important mediator/moderator of the experiences in Finland and the becoming settled or even loving Finland. For some the Finnish language presents an emotional challenge. Some of the interviewees were experiencing feelings of uneasiness when they did not understand the language spoken to them. Sometimes locals assumed (based on the looks) that a person speaks Finnish, which caused complicated situations. Some felt invisible when having no common language with others. The emotional aspect of knowing local language is often linked to a process of becoming part of the community (to fit in). Not knowing the language creates a barrier for trying to interact with Finns in social situations.

Language (or lack of proficiency) may be also a source discrimination in the labour market. Also rationally lacking Finnish skills makes it difficult to access networks, to fit in and find

jobs and hobbies, but one may also become less interested to learn the language, if he/she has no Finnish friends – hence, no one to talk to. Language is viewed as a gate to understanding the culture, but it is often stated that learning Finnish is difficult. However, this is tied to how international talents perceive Finland in contributing to their life; if it has something unique and valuable to offer (such as a citizenship), then learning the language becomes a strategic commitment and worthy of the effort.

4.3 Outcomes

Based on our analysis, we identify three storylines regarding the outcomes of their journeys in Finland and their decisions to stay or leave - *Becoming settled in Finland*, *Loving Finland* and *Mixed feelings about Finland*.

Becoming settled in Finland: Despite their struggles of establishing meaningful social relations – with Finns in particular – and struggling with learning the language creating further experiences of exclusion – many participants express having become and wanting to settle – set their roots - in Finland. They appreciate societal values (such as democracy, freedom, gender equality), standards of living, nature (or the calmness and quietness of Finland more broadly). The role of the family (spouse) is an important anchor to Finland. While their journey into Finland may have started with an emotional attachment into the idea or image of Finland, their relationship to Finland has grown to be much more rational and realistic – valuing the good parts and ability to tolerate the bad parts. Working in Finland represents good work-life balance and autonomous, independent work even if career advancement opportunities are limited.

Loving Finland: For some Finland represents the dreamland (their new real home) which they have fallen in love with. They feel to have experienced a personal transformation of changing as a person. They appreciate the societal values, standard of living and work-life balance but importantly they have been able to establish meaningful social relations, even with Finns, here. This results from their ability to speak the language or having been able to develop long-lasting relations during their studies.

Mixed feelings about Finland: Finally, there are those with mixed feelings about Finland and whether to stay in Finland. They may be career minded struggling with the closed/small job markets in Finland, with the horrible weather or with the administration about the permits or

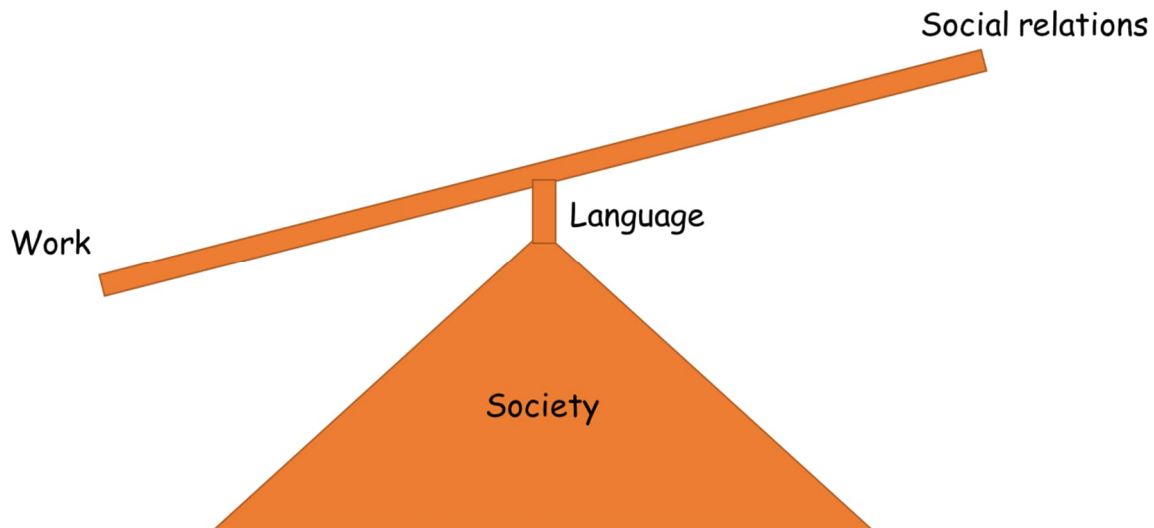
find that the promises of societal trust have been crushed. For them it is often their spouse (and their willingness to stay in Finland) that is an important factor keeping them in Finland but the dream of returning to home country or elsewhere is kept alive. Alternatively, it is the current (permanent) position and good work-life balance keeping them in Finland – at least for the moment – until something better turns out.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Integration success is a complex phenomenon. Hajro and others (2019) identified two possible domains (personal life and career) in which outcomes can be classified to be either subjective or objective. They further put forward that this success is influenced by individual, organization and society level factors (Hajro et al. 2019). We add to this by suggesting that one straightforward way to examine success is whether a migrating person is willing to stay in the host country. In our data, all the participants would like to live in Finland, at least for now, although the degree of commitment to staying varies between individuals from high ('loving') to moderate ('settling') to somewhat low ('mixed'). It is also notable that high-skilled internationals are in a privileged position in that they are free to make their own decisions. Their original choice of coming to Finland was voluntary rather than forced, and similarly their reasoning about the future in the country was not necessity-based but reflected a possibility to choose among different options, out of which Finland was perceived to be at least 'good enough', for the time being.

We further suggest that voluntary stay in a country is based on at least one core experience, which works as an 'anchor', providing a primary reason, or motivation, for the decision. In our analysis, every international talent has such an anchoring factor among the eight types of experiences we identified. These factors, or elements, can be regrouped into three decisive categories including domains of work, social relations and society (see Figure 3 and Appendix). Furthermore, language is an important factor as it is related to all three. Each domain contains multiple subdomains of experiences. Work consists of experiences related to, for example, finding a job, work tasks, HR-practices and organizational culture. Social relations are related to family (e.g., a spouse's job), ethnic community and making friends with Finns. Society concerns societal values (such as freedom and democracy), standard of living (e.g., support systems of the welfare state) and experiences of nature (e.g., weather or green spaces as part of the urban environment).

Figure 3. Domains of anchoring experiences



What also distinguishes the three domains is how much an international talent can influence them, at least in the short run. In the arena of social relations, one has an active role, and experiences are co-created with others, together with a family or in networking with new people, for example. In the work arena, a person can influence the circumstances to some extent through their own actions, such as language-related practices in the office, but the possibilities to influence the recruitment culture in the labour market are more limited. At the society domain, the possibility to contribute is the most minimal, meaning that the surroundings are given, and experiences are a result of how willingly an individual adopts them. The presence of an anchoring experience means that Finland is perceived to have something valuable, possibly even unique, to offer to the international talent themselves or to their family (e.g., work for the spouse). It is important to notice here that although the choice of the country is voluntary, decisions are often made as a 'family unit' where the wellbeing of adults and children are taken into consideration.

In addition, we suggest that integration success (a reasoning about whether to stay or leave the country), is a combination of positive and negative experiences both within and across the three core factors, and that individuals may emphasize experiences differently, also across time. In the work domain, a positive experience of a good work-life balance was so highly valued that it outweighed some negative experiences about a difficulty of finding a job or challenges with

understanding and using Finnish at the workplace, for instance. In the social domain difficulties in making friends with Finns were compensated by, for example, having a loving family close or by forming strong ties with a local ethnic community. Similarly, at the societal level, experiences of free, democratic society or support of the welfare state outclassed negative experiences about administrative procedures with immigration authorities or difficulties in getting used to the local weather or food culture. What can be also learned from our findings, is that individuals emphasize core factors differently so that some prioritize society level (e.g., democracy) experiences, while for others it is the work domain (e.g., work-life balance) or social relations (e.g., spouse's career) that matters the most. Also, the same person can prioritize different core factors over the course of time in the country, for example, emphasize initially social relations (e.g., spouse's work) but later the society domain (e.g., nature).

Moreover, our findings highlight that both rational and emotional aspects are relevant for how international talents articulate their experiences. At the society level, the rational experience, for example, is that Finland is an expensive country or that healthcare is of high quality, whereas positive experience of free society or bad experiences with authorities can be deeply emotional. At the work level, the experience of generous fringe benefits or work-life balance can be quite rational while challenges with finding a job are emotionally draining. In the domain of social relations, following a spouse's career to and in Finland can be rational, while challenges in making friends with Finns is foremost an emotional experience.

In addition, we suggest that the core experiences and integration success (staying or leaving the country) are linked to strategic and emergent behaviours. For example, in the society domain getting citizenship (of an EU country) can be a highly pursued, strategic decision and some negative experiences are tolerated to achieve this. At work level, in turn, job search can be a proactive move for a person to fulfil their career ambitions or it may be a reactive, emergent response to an experience of discrimination at the workplace. Similarly, leaving the country temporarily can be a strategic move to test or reassure one's commitment to the country or an emergent response to challenges in getting employed.

All the above leads us to suggest that viewing acculturation of international talents through a single, chosen, mode, whether assimilation, separation, marginalization or integration (Berry, 1997, 2005) is too a simplistic approach. Instead, acculturation takes places in all the three domains (social relations, work, society) and the modes can vary across them. Our findings

show how one can experience social marginalization (few friends) or isolation (engaging with local ethnic community but failed in making friends with Finns), but at the same time assimilate with the work arena (work-life balance) or society domain (democratic values). Moreover, this multi-mode approach extends to subdomains under each three of the core domains. For instance, in the society domain, a person may at the same time assimilate (regarding the strong support systems of the welfare state), isolate (avoid local food culture) and integrate (enjoys the local weather although different from native country). Acculturation is a process (Berry, 2005), and in the light of our findings this means that a mode of acculturation can change during the stay in the country within any of the three domains. For example, at the social relations domain a person may initially feel isolated from the reserved Finns but over time prefers this more introvert way of socializing. Additionally, our results indicate that viewing acculturation modes as a strategy (Berry, 2005; Hajro et al. 2019) is one-sided. Instead, our findings inform that although a mode of acculturation can be a planned choice (e.g., to adopt integration and learn the national language to receive a citizenship), the many simultaneous modes of integration are emergent, a result of the lived experiences across multiple domains.

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Appendix: Exemplary quotes

Entry reasons

Wanting to move from the home country

Adventure	<i>I said yeah, why not to go somewhere far? I was enjoying my job back then, but it was kind of stuck. I felt that I was not learning anything new and when I don't learn I get very bored. Very easy. (Sara)</i>
Escape	<i>Then I really didn't like the political situation in [home country], especially after 2014, since I was quite, well, sort of politically involved since 2011, as soon as I turned 17, I followed this whole situation and I somehow I didn't really like what was going on back then. Well, in general, in my environment, going abroad has always been like this ... Let's just say, the path that many of my friends chose. (Kirill).</i>

Wanting to move to Finland

Love for the image of Finland (Nordics)	<i>I knew nothing about Nordic countries. So, I saw it as a chance to just, you know, go and explore for half a year. -- And that's exactly why I wanted to come. I really wanted an adventure and something surprising. (Louise)</i>
Career opportunities	<i>After doing my postdoctoral in US, I was actually looking for jobs in many places. But the company I'm in now, they were just a new company start-up set up in Turku and they started a company in 2017. And I accidentally saw the company on LinkedIn, actually. Back then, they only had three-four people, they just started the company. So I found it really interesting with the kind of work they were doing. It's in my field work, research-based work. So, then I just wrote a high email to my boss, my CTO of the company, asking that what kind of job we're doing and is there some conditions... So, he saw my profile and said "Your profile looks good. It will be interesting if you join us". Then I think the conversation went for a few months before I decided and they also decided "Okay, he can come." And then I came. (Sajan)</i>
Supportive factors (personally relevant and more emotional factors)	<i>I can remember there are two scenes. When I first time came to Finland. Those two things I really liked actually. And those two things were really making me think that someday I might come back to this part of the world. (Sajan)</i> <i>First of all, during those times, heavy music was much more related to rebellious thoughts. And this was a cliché interpretation of it. And those thoughts are not very welcomed in Turkey. They still are not. Being able to see that this is not only produced in these countries, but it's something these [Nordic] countries are proud of, at least was for me the first selling point. That kind of led me into like... there wasn't much of an internet back then, but reading about Finland from encyclopedias for example. And trying to read interviews of those artists and try to understand how they live their lives. It was kind of different from that dream land States always promoting. But still, it felt more close, the way the society seemed to work. (Bob)</i>
Social relations	<i>I say well, It sounds like a country where I would be happy to live because of this nature and quiet and all things. So I say, well keeping in one corner of my head that if one day I have the opportunity to come here I would. Some years later, actually, maybe 3, 4, 5 years after that, my husband got opportunity to come here as a researcher in Finland, and I say, well, yes, let's go, let's do it and come here so. (Julie)</i> <i>And I said, I never chose Finland. I chose my husband so basically; I chose the person with whom I wanted to settle down. And he was here. And that was the reason I was here. Finland was never my choice. (Sita)</i>

Multiple entries into Finland	<i>it was this kind of year-and-a-half-long test. And the conclusion of this test was that Finland is still number one in my heart (moving to a third country, Louise)</i>
	<i>During the season he was playing here, so I came to visit for two weeks. [...] When the season ended, they offered a new contract for two more years and he accepted ... That's how, uh, we ended up here. [...] But then 2013 we decided, well we were going back home for visit 2 months, but then [...] then we stayed almost eight years there. And we only came back to Finland last August 2021. --- Yeah we wanted to go back to Finland and started to look for options to do that. (Maria)</i>

Experiences in Finland

Agency	<i>.. I was in Finland, and I thought of trying everywhere. So, I even at that point of time, I started shooting out my application to Germany, other parts of Europe, and also Finland in health, everywhere because I wanted to work, I didn't want it to sit back. I actually had done a lot of effort on my career, so I didn't want it to go that in vain. (Sita)</i>
	<i>But if you ask me that do you have any cause right now, [inaudible] would be heard, then I don't know. I can't tell you that there is any cause for which I am standing and my voice should be heard. No, not by that sense. What kind of voice? -- I don't have any means or ways to make my voice heard, but definitely if some policy maker comes to me for any advice for making any policy, if I can contribute something, yeah I definitely contribute. (Sajan)</i>
	<i>So, I gained a certain level of fighting my life, to make my voice heard, to influence change, certain things. And I'm tired of it right now. So, I don't know if it's rightful to say that or if I get to be tired, but I don't have energy or motivation for it anymore. Easier ways to just like let it be and try to find something that's working. (Bob)</i>
	<i>And I was like, oh. No, I hate this Sara. You know like this is not. You know, like this is not me, but but somehow the the places where you live, the the cultures shape you as well. (Sara)</i>
Education	<i>... education is free here and it's known for its very good educational system. So [a friend] decided to go there [Finland]. And since then he started like spamming us with all this information and at some point I decided that I it was time for me to start looking for new education like because I have always liked to study always. But education in [home country] is not so good. And then I just started to see all this, you know, browse through the information that my friend sent us, and I found this very nice [MSc] program. (Sara)</i>

Work experiences

Finding a job	<i>we moved to [the capital region]. And for five to six months, I was job hunter full time. I was waking up everyday at 8 A.M, sitting down the desk, pointing companies to send applications and writing applications. I'm not sure if I'm still but the number of applications I sent was around 200 by the time that I actually found something. I've experienced many weird stuff. (Bob)</i>
Entry level positions	<i>I didn't start from the level that left in [home country]. I had to start at a level that was just an entry level, but I was glad at least somebody gave me an opportunity to start at least to prove myself to at least upskill myself or maybe a part of this industry. So, I'm really thankful that to somebody actually thought out of the box. (Sita)</i>

Employer support	<i>and the very first day when I came here my two three colleagues, they were really helpful. They helped me... my boss picked me up from the airport, my boss took me, got my rental home, my boss took me to IKEA buying stuff, so yeah. So they really helped me in the very beginning. First few weeks, settling me down. (Sajan)</i>
Rewarding work	<i>The work is going smoothly at the moment. I find it quite interesting. And the project I'm working on is quite interesting as well and challenging on another hand. (Rama)</i>
Good work-life balance	<i>I know that the work culture here is much better, I would say, because one of the things is because you are not really expected to do extra. You know? You're not really expected to do extra work, and really, really finish everything you have to do before you go home. [...] You don't need to, you don't need to sacrifice your private life and your, I would say even mental health for the company. (Carlos)</i>
Good team relations	<i>My teammates are nice. They are Finnish as well and some internationals. It's like multicultural environment. I'm quite happy with what I'm doing. (Rama)</i>
Discrimination	<i>I felt like I didn't have any option to reject what I was asked to do. Because I was in survival mentality. I finally found a job. When I found the job, I only had 24 euros in my bank account. That was all my wealth in the whole world. I was either going to return back to [home country] and crash at my parents' place, or find something. (Bob).</i>
Language	<i>And a lot of the times, they [colleagues] have their own little groups where they speak Finnish. So, maybe it gets better when I finally learn the language, but it's going to be a cold day in hell when I'll be able to speak Finnish in a fluent manner. (Carlos)</i>
Glass ceiling	<i>...you can be in the middle layer, you can be the right hand, but then if you want to cascade yourself to the top it's almost impossible. That is how it has been milled up. And sometimes you'll be surprised and astonished to see these companies do not function on competences and skillset. It's on the mindset. (Sita)</i>
Limited career opportunities	<i>The only fear inside Finland is there is very handful companies and very handful jobs. So, the only scare that you have in your mind is if you apply those to these 20 companies and you don't get selected to either of them, then what happens next? Because you don't have any other option (Fabio)</i>

Social relations

Family ties	<i>Her (grandmother in Finland) role is that I was here as a child, went to her on vacation. And I liked how, in principle, everything is arranged here at least from the outside. (Kirill)</i>
Family ties	<i>Your family doesn't want you to go, they want you close. Especially because it's a really society thing that it's expected that the children take care of their parents when they are old. So, it was difficult, for me and for them, even though that was something I wanted, but when it came to time, really was very hard. (Carlos)</i>
Lacking social relations	<i>If you think from the Finnish social network, and this is the greatest challenge I would say." Consequently, many express feelings of social isolation "honestly, social life, I don't know. Social life, I have very few friends actually. (Sajan),</i>
Ethnic communities	<i>[My ethnic] community, it's easy to integrate because you'll meet them and it's easy to spot them. They will stand out as I would stand out in a crowd. And we</i>

	<i>play common sports. Cricket has been a good way to find likeminded people. So, we play together during summer. We stay in contact. And then also food. We go to the same shops, for instance for spices and so on, rice and so on. In that respect, to meet an international is a lot easier than to meet a Finn and make friends with them. (Kiran)</i>
Language	<i>I use Finnish every day, as most of my friends are Finnish. I used to be married to a Finnish citizen." (Louise)</i>
Finnish habits	<i>But I didn't have any connection I built during the party because I feel like everybody's drunk. It's hard to make connection during party." (Meilin)</i>
Social relations at work	<i>We were working basically between friends [in home country] and I'm still friends with them and every time that I go back to [home country] I meet with them. And that's something that I haven't found here. I don't know if it's because of the difference in culture or because there's too many cultures. So, it's hard to find a bonding.. (Fabio)</i>
Social relations	<i>I joke that I have my foster parents here in Finland. I have these friends of mine who who are kind of foster parents. They have helped me a lot. I stay the weekends with them sometimes. -- And now we are very, very close friends. Actually they are going to my wedding. Yeah, and I told them that they will sit in my parents table so as family because they are they are actually my family. They are like my parents here. (Sara)</i>

Standard of living

Security	<i>Finland provides a lot of social security systems and support for your family and unemployments and this and that, but at the end of the day, those are just supports. (Sita)</i>
Public services	<i>But the work of Migri in the sense that it is at the same time an organization that should stop the illegal presence of immigrants in Finland and at the same time should help immigrants receive all these cards is a bit contradictory. It seems to me that it prevents them from working properly. (Kirill)</i>
Societal values	<i>And I like the democracy here and the gender equality. For example, my new company, half of the employees are woman, so I think it's really hard to find a company like this in [home country]. So, I think I will be more comfortable staying in Finland for my career, especially if I work in IT field and also just a general vibe. Everybody here are so friendly, and I really like it and the life here is so peaceful. (Meilin)</i>
Language	<i>I guess there is a bit of a language barrier for some [recreational] activities. But that's also what motivated me to learn Finnish quite fast. I didn't want to stay out of this. I really wanted to know just what was going on around me at any time, not always be identified as the foreigner for whom we have to switch language. I wanted to blend. (Louise)</i>
Nature	<i>Well from the start we had this hobby to go to nature that was one of the big things why we came or maybe why we stayed here to say. That was all those parks and forest and everything. So this we have enjoyed from the start. (Julie)</i>