



‘You Need to Know Someone Who Knows Someone’: International Students’ Job Search Experiences¹

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes how 31 international students (IS) entered the Finnish labor market as they graduated from Finnish universities. Despite a growing interest in international student migration (ISM), there are few studies that analyze the firsthand experiences of IS as they seek to enter the receiving-country labor markets as they graduate. This article contributes to the topic by showing how the interviewees of this study managed to enter the receiving-country labor markets, which are embedded in national, cultural, and institutional contexts that require context-bound knowledge of particular recruitment patterns. The contribution of the article lies in (1) providing new insights on an understudied topic: IS’ experiences of finding jobs in the country of graduation, and, in (2) constructing a theoretical framework for analyzing IS’ job search in the countries of graduation. More broadly, the article contributes to the studies on highly educated migrants’ labor market integration by shedding light on the experiences in a Nordic setting.

KEYWORDS

International student migration / job search strategies / weak ties / bridging social capital / bonding social capital

Introduction

International student migration (ISM) to the Nordic countries has increased during the last two decades (Eurostat 2019; Nordic Council of Ministers 2013). In this article, ISM is analyzed from a labor market perspective. More precisely, the article examines graduating international students’ (IS) job search experiences in Finland. In doing so, the article contributes to the scholarship on highly educated migrants’ labor market integration in a Nordic setting.

The path of an increasing number of IS lead to Finland (62% increase in the number of IS between the years 2008 and 2017) and there are currently approximately 20,000 IS [i.e., 7% of the total population of degree-seeking students in higher education (HE)] studying in Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017). This is a considerable number, as the total number of foreign nationals was 249,000 (i.e., 5% of the total population of 5.5 million) in 2017 (Statistics Finland 2018).

Finland’s reputation of providing high-quality education and tuition-free HE for all nationalities have attracted IS to the country (Eskelä 2013) (tuition fees were, however, introduced for non-EU/EEA students in 2017). The increase is also related to Finland being the non-English speaking country in Europe with the highest share of HE

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institutions that offer degree-programs taught in English (for the shares see Wächter & Maiworm 2014, p. 40). The graduating IS contribute to the Finnish labor force: approximately half of those IS who graduated in 2011 were employed in Finland one year after graduation (CIMO 2014, p. 1). In an international comparison, the stay rate is high (see Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2015); however, there are no data as regards to what extent the IS who stay in the country find jobs that match their education.

IS are considered 'ideal' immigrants of prime age, who can bring valued skills to the receiving countries upon graduation (Koikkalainen 2013; Mosneaga & Winther 2013). Therefore, many governments seek to attract IS and retain them after they graduate (e.g., Facchini & Lodigiani 2014). In Finland, the perceived post-graduation labor market potential of IS' is visible, for example, in the 'Future of Migration Strategy 2020' (Ministry of the Interior 2013, p. 14).

Because Finland is a member of the EU, students who are citizens of the EU/EEA countries do not need residence/work permits before/after graduation, whereas the non-EU/EEA students are constrained by a variety of judicial restrictions. However, in 2015, the Finnish government took measures to ease the IS' labor market integration of non-EU/EEA students' by extending the time-period to secure employment after graduation from six months to 12. The Government Programme for the years 2019–2023 (p. 147) states that the IS' post-graduation residence permit for seeking work will be prolonged to two years. The strive to facilitate the labor market integration is also visible in the fact that non-EU/EEA students are allowed to work 25 hours per week during semester and full-time during holiday breaks alongside their studies (EU/EEA students have no limits as regards working time).

The job search experiences of the interviewees of this research took place mainly in the early 2010s and the mid-2010s. The Finnish labor market was affected by the 2008 economic recession, which was related to the increase in unemployment. There has, however, been a decrease in unemployment in the end of the 2010s. Even if it is not justifiable to define the 2010s in Finland as time of 'economic crisis', it can be argued that the time period in which the job searches of the interviewees took place was not necessarily favorable for new job seekers trying to enter the labor market. In this type of a situation, job seekers are confronted with more limited opportunities than in a more robust labor market. Earlier studies (e.g., Brown & Konrad 2001) have shown that the importance of effective job search strategies is accentuated in times of economic downturn.

This article analyzes the job search experiences of 31 IS who had graduated or were about to graduate from Finnish universities. Out of the 31 interviewees, 22 had graduated. Those who had graduated were no longer students at the time of the interview. Nevertheless, all had recent experience of job searches/studying. For the sake of clarity, we call all of them international students.

The main research question is: Why did the interviewed IS find some job search strategies more effective than others? The main theoretical concepts through which the IS' experiences are analyzed are weak ties, bridging social capital, bonding social capital, the meaning of which is explained later.

The following interrelated questions are answered: how did the IS become aware of the job opportunities? How did they make use of social ties (and what types of social ties) as job search strategies? How did they try to overcome the challenges (e.g., discrimination and lack of different types of social ties that are beneficial for job search) they faced

in their job search? What was their experience of institutional support given by the universities and state authorities?

A 'job search strategy' is understood as the methods utilized by a job seeker in order to find employment. 'Employment' refers to both wage-work and self-employment. 'International students' are defined as non-native degree-seeking students who have moved to Finland as adults and have enrolled at a Finnish university (the study excludes exchange students). Obviously, a Finnish student/graduate can be as 'international' as a person belonging to the focus group. However, the term 'international student' is applied in the aforementioned way because of its established position in the research literature.

The contribution of this article lies (1) in providing new insights on an understudied topic: *international students' experiences of finding jobs in the country of destination* and (2) in providing a theoretical framework for analyzing IS' job search in the countries of graduation.

The article draws on the theorization of job search by applying Granovetter's (1995; 1973) concept of 'weak ties', which provide important social capital used in securing employment. In addition, the article analyzes the experienced effects of making use of weak ties based on 'bridging social capital' (e.g., Lancee 2010), which here refers to IS' ties with the majority population and 'bonding social capital' that here refers to social ties within one's own ethnic/national networks (ibid.)

The next section traces how ISM has been studied and articulates the article's contribution to this thriving field of study. The subsequent section presents the theoretical framework, which is followed by a presentation of the research material. The following section presents the results of the study and the final section summarizes and discusses the findings.

Positioning the current study

Research with a migration approach examines the IS' migration decisions, experiences, and outcomes (see, e.g., Eskelä 2013; Koikkalainen 2013; Lulle & Buzinska 2017; Wang et al. 2015). Another strand of research concentrates on IS' academic experiences on campus and in the classroom (see, e.g., Finn & Darmody 2017; Li 2017). Many studies discuss ISM from the perspective of globalization of HE (e.g., Kauppinen et al. 2014; Mathies & Karhunen 2018; Shumilova & Cai 2016). Other studies focus on policies related to ISM (e.g., Riaño et al. 2018) and immigration policies that concern IS (e.g., Maury 2017).

However, few studies have approached IS as actors in the receiving-country labor markets. The existing studies within this strand of scholarship show that IS, as a category, face many of the same obstacles migrants in general encounter when trying to enter the local labor markets. These include lack of social networks (Arthur & Popadiuk 2013); ethnic discrimination (Liu-Ferrer 2011); insufficient local language skills; uncertainty about receiving-country cultural norms (Sangganjanavanich et al. 2011); 'hesitant employers' (Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2015); receiving-country bureaucracy (ibid.); lack of institutional support related to job search and residence permit questions (ibid.); and dependency on the fluctuating demand of labor in different working life sectors (Hawthorne 2018).

The number of studies focusing on IS' experiences in the labor markets in these countries is very limited. Wilken and Dahlberg (2017), however, show that in Denmark many IS experience difficulties in landing jobs and some of them become 'trapped in semi-legal employment or in low-status, low-paid jobs'. Brekke (2006) showed that IS in Norway were motivated to stay in the country after graduation. They, however, saw it as unrealistic due to—inter alia—their lack of knowledge about 'rules and regulations' and lack of contacts to the Norwegian labor market. Their desire to stay in Norway was also held back by 'endless stories of applicants with foreign names not getting jobs' (ibid, p. 84). In the Finnish context, the lack of local language skills, networks, and work experience has been identified as the key impediments to IS finding jobs (Korhonen 2014; Laine 2017; Shumilova et al. 2012). Maury (2017) focused on the hardships of students from sub-Saharan Africa in the low-paid and precarious segments of the Finnish labor market, exacerbated by temporary visas. Mosneaga and Winther (2013) show that the IS' decisions to stay in or leave Denmark after graduation depend on opportunities that rise—or do not rise—out of personal connections in Denmark. Maury (2017) and Mosneaga and Winther (2013) show how residence permit regulations put the IS in an unequal position in the Nordic countries: those with an EU/EEA passport have a clear advantage. The following section presents the article's theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework: a closer look at job search

The logic of the theoretical framework is following: the IS need some sort of job search strategies to enter the labor market. Job search strategies can be either formal or informal (or have characteristics of both). The job searches are normally enhanced by possessing different types of social ties, which provide valuable connections and information. Applying Granovetter (1973): the IS' ties can be either 'weak' or 'strong' (the meaning of which will be explained later) and be based on contacts to the majority population and/or individuals from their own national/ethnic group (or both).

Further, the job search strategies occur in a societal setting with its constraints and opportunities that need to be taken into consideration. Who gets a job (and what type of a job) is not merely explained by an individual's human capital (i.e., skills, education, and credentials) but also by the job seeker's societal embeddedness. Bearing in mind that the focus group's situation differs from that of the graduating native student's—as will be illustrated later—we need to theorize job search with a particular attention devoted to research on immigrants' job search.

Let us next look at the formal/informal dimension of job search, then at the role of different types of social ties that can be embedded in job searches. After that, we analyze the ethnic dimensions of job search.

Formal and informal job search strategies

The job search strategies are divided into the following two analytical categories:

- 1) Formal ways of acquiring a job, that is, via applying to an open call, which is advertised publicly. A formal way of acquiring a job can also be a consequence of

visiting or obtaining information via a state/private employment agency/university career service.

- 2) Informal ways of acquiring a job, that is, relying on one's social ties by, for example, asking or obtaining information on potential jobs from acquaintances. Inquiring directly from employers who do not explicitly advertise their need for labor is another informal way of searching for a job.

The division into these categories is informed by the earlier research on job search (Granovetter 1995). The division formal/informal is not always clear-cut, as one single job search can include both dimensions. In addition, one can enter the labor market by becoming self-employed. Consequently, self-employed were not excluded from the study. In the following, we will look at the role of social ties that are/can be embedded in the aforementioned formal/informal job search strategies.

The role of social ties in job search

The role of social ties as transmitters of knowledge about job opportunities has been documented in a multitude of studies (e.g., Ahmad 2005; Holzer 1987). The most famous ones are probably Granovetter's (1995; 1973) studies that theorize job search. According to Granovetter, weak ties—unlike strong ties (ties to family members or close friends) do not require significant time commitment, emotional intensity, or a history of mutual favours. 'Strong ties', no matter how socially important otherwise, do not generally provide novel information that is of value in the labour markets, whereas weak ties are essential in the transmission of novel information (Granovetter 1995, pp. 51–72).

Even though Finland has a well-established network of public and private employment agencies, the report of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2017, p. 15) shows that employers most often apply informal ways of recruiting. According to a survey representative of the Finnish population, in 2017, only 27% of the respondents stated that they had found their current job by applying to an open call (SITRA 2017). The same phenomenon has been reported in other national contexts. In Sweden, for example, most job recruitments occur via informal channels (Ekström 2001). Despite modernization, this type of informality—usually associated with pre-industrial societies—has persisted in recruitment (Granovetter 1995, p. 126). Employers favor this type of 'word-of-mouth' recruitment because it saves time and because they believe informal networks provide them with employees with the right kinds of qualifications (Carroll et al. 1999; Granovetter 1995, pp. 162–168).

Obtaining information about job opportunities in the 'hidden' job market increases the amount of potential jobs available to a job seeker. The hidden job market is understood here as a market of jobs that are not advertised publicly (not to be confused with undocumented work). In addition to transmitting information about 'hidden' job opportunities, weak ties can be important in the spreading of information about publicly announced jobs—typically a job seeker does not have full information about all openly advertised jobs that s/he might possibly fill (Granovetter 1995).

Social ties—whether 'weak' or 'strong'—entail 'social capital', a term, which holds many meanings (see, e.g., Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1990; Putnam 2000). What, however,

is common in different understandings of social capital is the idea that it is embedded in social networks that give benefits for those involved.

Building on these insights, individual's embeddedness in such beneficial networks is a form of social capital. The question of social capital's role in job search is approached from an ethnic perspective with a focus on the scholarship on immigrant job seekers. This is justified because IS often face the same types of challenges as 'migrants in general' in the receiving-country labor markets. We could assume that being able to use all types of viable jobs search strategies (including making use of weak ties) is important especially for a group such as the IS who by default are in a disadvantaged position in comparison to the native job seekers.

The ethnic dimension: the role of bonding and bridging capital for international students' job acquisition

Social ties entail social capital, which in this article is analytically divided into (1) 'bonding social capital', which means social capital that an immigrant's co-national/co-ethnic contacts provide, and (2) 'bridging social capital' that refers to immigrants' contacts to the majority population.

Bonding social capital has in many contexts facilitated immigrants' integration into the labor markets (Light & Gold 2000; Portes & Jensen 1989; Wilson & Portes 1980). Some studies, however, point to this type of social capital as contributing to channelling immigrants into low-pay and low-status jobs that locals avoid (Ahmad 2005; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006).

Other studies highlight the positive outcomes of bridging social capital for immigrants' labor-market integration (Lancee 2010). After all, most employers are natives. From this perspective, it is useful for immigrants to have contacts with them.

The theoretical lens through which we analyze the job searches consists of the distinction between formal and informal strategies, which may (or may not) contain a utilization of social ties. The social ties, in their turn, can consist of ties to the majority population, or to IS' own national/ethnic minority groups. Before the presentation and analysis of the empirical material, let us take a look at the research design.

Research design

This study builds on 31 qualitative, semi-structured research interviews with non-Finnish university students/graduates from 17 Finnish universities who are employed in Finland. The face-to-face interviews (n26) were conducted between August 2016 and November 2017. Five interviews were conducted via Skype.

Interviews were conducted until it became evident that they could not provide new insights into the studied phenomenon. The requirements for the interviewees were (1) to have a degree (BSc/MSc) from a Finnish university (or be close to graduation, that is, less than approximately one year away from expected graduation); (2) be of non-Finnish origin and have moved to Finland as adults; and (3) be employed. The first people who were reached and met the criteria were interviewed. As there was no goal of making comparisons between IS' from different universities, no strategic sampling of having a certain amount of IS' from certain universities was made.

Twenty-four interviewees were reached by posting requests for interviews on Facebook pages in English where the discussions involved work-related issues, including job searches in Finland. Seven interviewees were reached by contacting university staff working with tasks related to IS. The interviewees were asked whether the interviews could be recorded, and all of them agreed. The mean length of an interview was 51 minutes. Some of the interviewees emailed additional comments related to the discussed topics after the interviews, which were also used as research material. All interviews were conducted in English except for one interview in Finnish, as preferred by the interviewee. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and their names are pseudonyms.

The interviews probed the IS' experiences of living in and motives of moving to Finland; social networks; work history in Finland and elsewhere; studies, experiences of the Finnish society; future plans; and, above all, experiences of successful (and unsuccessful) job searches.

The interviewees had migrated on average six years earlier to Finland and had extensive experience of successful and unsuccessful job searches.

IS' motives to study abroad are influenced by a multitude of factors (Eskelä 2013). This was also the case of the participants of this study. Their reasons for moving to Finland included in addition to study reasons: postgraduation employment opportunities, social relationships, the desire for new experiences, the good reputation of Finnish education, and tuition fee free university studies (all interviewees had started their studies prior to the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU/EEA-students in 2017). One interviewee was an exception, as he had moved to Finland as a quota refugee.

The reason to include both graduates and students who were close to graduation is justified, as the norm in Finland is that HE students participate in work life already during their studies. Hence, the transition from university to work is a fluid process that usually starts prior to graduation. In 2005, as many as 74% of HE students worked, as they were close to graduation (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2012). The IS also actively participate in the labor markets: approximately half of IS work during their studies in 'non-internship' work (Shumilova et al. 2012, p. 56).

All interviewees had graduated/were about to graduate from bachelor/master-level programs offered in English at universities, including universities of applied sciences. Studying in programs offered in English was, however, not a prerequisite for participating in the study (the vast majority of IS in Finland study in the English language (Garam 2018)). Table 1 presents the characteristics of the interviewees.

Table 1 Characteristics of the interviewees

Category	Number of interviewees: 31
Country of origin	Bangladesh 2, Brazil 1, Burma 1, China 1, Colombia 1, France 1, Ghana 1, Germany 4, Hungary 1, Israel 1, Nepal 1, Pakistan 2, Philippines 1, Russia 7, UK 1, US 4, Vietnam 1
Sex	Female 19, Male 12
Age	20–30 years (20), 30–40 years (9), 40–43 years (2), mean age 29 years
Higher Education degree in Finland	Only Bachelor level (10), about to finish Bachelor level (3) Only Master level (11), about to finish Master level (5), Bachelor and Master level (2) PhD degree (0)

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Time of immigration to Finland	1–4 years ago (12), 5–8 years ago (9), 9–12 years ago (10). The interviewees had migrated to Finland on average six years ago.
Study discipline	Social Sciences and Humanities (17), Business (9), Engineering/IT (2), Nursing (2), Classical Music (1)
Current sector of work	Business/logistics/consultancy (13), multicultural NGOs offering cultural/social services (4), education/teaching (4), nursing (2), classical music (1), engineering (1), multinational media (1), tourism (1), translation (1), research (1), software design (1), food delivery (1)

The reason for not limiting the participants to a certain study discipline/occupation/country of origin was that the diversity of the interviewees allowed—despite the small sample—some contrasting of the role of these variables in relation to the job search experiences.

Some reflections regarding the chosen research method

This study applied a theory-driven qualitative content analysis (see MacFarlane & O'Reilly-de Brún 2012). This means that the interview questions and the analysis of the interview transcripts were guided by the theoretical framework that was presented earlier. The theoretical framework was used to identify patterns and themes related to the participants' job search. At the end of the interview, the interviewees could come up with topics that had not been discussed during the interview. Few of the interviewees, however, raised any new topics, which would imply that the set of interview questions covered rather well the interviewees' experiences. The interview quotes used in this article are selected based on their capacity to illuminate typical job search experiences. Grammatical errors that are typical for spoken language have been corrected in the interview quotes. The interviews were transcribed by the author of this article and two research assistants who had signed a confidentiality agreement in terms of the content of the interviews.

There were no possibilities to directly observe the job searches in this research project: the study was dependent on the interviewees' accounts of their experiences. There is no good reason to believe that interviewees purposefully gave information that was inaccurate (the interviewees were anonymized and the interviews were conducted in settings where other people could not hear what was said). On the other hand, as the interviewees' job searches included many cases—sometimes over a number of years—it is possible that their memories were not always entirely accurate. It is, however, unlikely that the accounts would to a significant degree deviate from the 'real life' events due to false memories. After all, we are focusing on what a group of relatively young people had experienced during a couple of previous years. On the other hand, some of the information the interviewees had gained of job search via different channels may not always be accurate, which is discussed in the concluding chapter.

The researcher also needs to reflect on factors that might affect the results of the study due to the social interaction during the interviews (see, Baser & Toivanen 2018). The interviews were conducted by the author of this article, who belongs to the majority

population in Finland and is a ‘non-migrant’ in the Finnish context. This raises the question of whether the interviewees perceived that it might not be socially appropriate for them to voice critical views about their time spent in Finland. However, this did not seem to be a problem, as the interviewees also raised critical issues. The following sections present the results of the study.

Making use of formal and informal job search strategies

For most of the interviewees, the process of securing a job had entailed a considerable effort. Some had experienced spells of unemployment, although a few had experienced smooth transitions to work. The interviewees knew of numerous cases where IS had to leave Finland after graduation because they could not find employment. The interviewees also pointed out that non-EU/EEA students, in particular, were in a stressful situation, as their legal right to reside in Finland was based on finding employment in due time.

The interviewees had in most cases extensive experience of both formal and informal job search strategies. It was the informal strategies that the IS had experienced being of great importance. Even though we know that the informal dimension in recruitment is high in Finland (SITRA 2017), it might be somewhat surprising to learn that only six out of the 31 interviewees had found their current job by making use of a formal job search strategy. Even in some of these six cases, the informal aspects of job search had merged into the formal ones; for example, one of the interviewees had completed an internship for the same employer that later employed her. The ties forged during the internship had paved the way for her recruitment—even if the job was announced formally as an open call.

A pivotal point for many of the interviewees was when they started to informally contact employers who were not explicitly looking for employees. Making use of such a strategy was often enhanced by information transmitted via weak ties. Maria, who originates from Brazil, and works in international sales, stated that ‘It was very, very surprising that the Finnish job market can be so dependent on the social relationships’. Several other interviewees were also surprised by the experienced effectiveness of the informal strategies compared to the formal ones.

For many, learning the effective job search strategies were a result of trial-and-error experiences. Binh, a business controller originating from Vietnam, commented on the ineffectiveness of formal strategies given the large number of applicants open calls attract, and brought up the importance of references.

Andrei, who originates from Russia, and works in an international logistics company, had replied to ‘500–600’ open calls within a period of nine months without getting one single invitation to a job interview. Later, Andrei changed his job search strategy and contacted an employer informally, which resulted in a work contract. Earlier studies (e.g., Ekström’s 2001) have shown that employers at times avoid open calls due to the (too) large amount of applications they get that way. In a similar vein, according to the information Andrei had received from companies in his field, the employers try to avoid open calls because ‘they get too many applications and it’s too time consuming to go through them’.

Building on these types of experiences, the interviewees stressed the importance of contacting employers informally. Possessing weak ties enhanced the interviewees’



possibilities to make use of such informal strategies because they provided valuable information about potential jobs.

It is impossible to know why Binh, Andrei, and many other interviewees had mainly poor results from open calls. Most likely, as the interviewees suggested, one reason is the large amounts of job applications employers get via open calls. As Hawthorne's (2018) study on the Australian situation shows, the fluctuating demand of labor in the receiving country affects the IS' post-graduation labor market outcomes in a way that is out of their control. Regarding the context of our study: the interviewees' job searches had taken place in the beginning of, and in the mid, 2010s, in the wake of the post-2008 economic crisis, which was a time of an unemployment rate of around 10% in Finland (which was approximately twice as high for foreign nationals), however, with decreasing unemployment towards the end of the decade.

Although being categorized as 'desired' immigrants by the policy-makers, IS are not free from the same discrimination and prejudices that the broader category of 'immigrants' experiences (Liu-Ferrer 2011; Lulle & Buzinska 2017). Along these lines, we cannot rule out the role of discrimination based on the interviewees' national background (as suggested by many interviewees). A study carried out in Finland in 2002 revealed that half of the Somali immigrants and every fourth Russian, Estonian, and Vietnamese immigrant had encountered discrimination while applying for a job (Pohjanpää et al. 2003). Many interviewees claimed that 'western' and 'white' job seekers would not be victims of discrimination, which points to a similar ethnified/racialized hierarchy, which Pohjanpää et al. (2003) study also points to.

Sarah, who originates from Ghana and works as a kindergarten teacher, expressed that she had been the victim of racism in the recruitment processes in the private child-care sector due to her skin color. Mary, who originates from the Philippines, had strong suspicions of racism, as 'less competent' native job seekers had been recruited for jobs she had applied for, despite her fluent Finnish. Noam, who originates from Israel and works as a human resources consultant, expressed that in his experience, employers use IS' lack of Finnish skills and lack of knowledge of Finnish culture as an excuse for not hiring them due to their foreign background. The other 28 interviewees did not point to any personal experiences of discrimination in job search, but many suspected that discrimination might be a reason for the mostly poor results of answering to open calls.

Pager (2007, p. 118) has shown that discrimination is likely to be most prevalent at the early stages of the recruitment process (when there has been no contact between the job seeker and the employer), because the information about the applicant is at a minimum. In a similar vein, many interviewees suggested informal ways of contacting employers as a strategy to build trust and to overcome discrimination and/or employer hesitance. Hanna, a marketing professional originating from Hungary, for example, stated that:

'[instead of responding to open calls] I think it's just easier if you go and try to meet people [potential employers] personally so that they see that you are not some weirdo [sarcastically] who is coming from Eastern Europe ... and I know a lot of people who found jobs through this [method] ...'

Like Hanna, Noam explained that according to his experience this type of strategy helped to overcome employers' reluctance to employ non-natives.

Hanna's and Noam's interviews point to a way of overcoming employer hesitance by informal contacts to employers. We could assume that this strategy could be effective in overcoming 'lenient' forms of employers' hesitance and prejudices towards IS, although it would most likely be less effective in overcoming stronger prejudices and/or racism.

Earnshaw et al. (1998, p. 237) raise the drawback of recruitment through informal networks; it has the potential to reinforce 'existing race, gender or disability imbalances within the workforce'. Similarly, Roth and Xing's study (1994, p. 997) shows that the actual selection of who gets a job has at times already been made—on informal grounds—prior to the formal recruitment process. Many of the interviewees likewise raised their negative experiences of such a recruitment culture. The two following interview quotes illustrate the experienced exclusionary dimension of such informal recruiting. Sofia, who originates from the US and works as a software engineer, somewhat critically stated that:

'... in the US it [recruitment] is really about skills and not necessarily who you know [in contrast to Finland]. In fact, it's actually discouraged to hire someone you know, because you might be showing favoritism ... in the US it's strictly like, what are your skills, what is your experience, "okay, you have the most, so we'll take you".'

Similarly, Diana, who originates from Germany, and works with international sales, explained that:

'In Finland connections are the most important thing. You need to know someone who knows someone because most jobs I feel are not even [advertised] somewhere. They are just given to people before they ever get printed anywhere ... in my company there are a couple persons who know each other from previous workplaces. They know people who know people who know the same people and it feels like it's a really small circle. And I think that if you're not in that circle then you really have a disadvantage'.

In contrast to informal job search, formal, institutional support in job search offered by the state employment services and the universities had been of modest benefit at best (for similar findings in the Norwegian context, see Brekke 2006). On the other hand, we should not make too strong conclusions as regards the functioning of state employment agencies, as many of the IS had never visited one. Shumilova et al. (2012, p. 66) have reported that IS in Finland often find the universities career services insufficient. In the context of this study, there seemed to be differences in the universities' motivation to provide useful career-services to IS. Some had, however, experienced universities' career fairs moderately useful, but on a general level, the career services had not been of significant benefit in job search (cf. Shumilova et al. 2012, p. 66).

The interviewees had used private employment agencies' websites and the state employment agency's website to find information about jobs, which were of varying use as providing information about potential jobs. The job search relevant courses provided by the state employment services had not recognized the specific needs of the focus group. Their courses were of little use at most (for those who had made use of them): they were of too general a nature. When the courses were directed at immigrants, they included people from too diverse educational backgrounds (e.g., people with little formal education and people with much formal education) to be beneficial for



those interviewees who had made use of them. Some interviewees, however, valued the affordable Finnish language courses available via the employment services.

Regardless of having experienced exclusion from the right kinds of networks, the interviewees had been gradually able to build weak ties that had benefited their job search as will be explained later. The next section analyzes these social ties and job search from an ethnicity standpoint.

The role of bonding and bridging capital

Bonding social capital

Earlier studies (Light & Gold 2000; Portes & Jensen 1989) have pointed to the important role of bonding social capital (i.e., social ties to co-nationals) for immigrants' in their job search. The interviewees, however, claimed that in Finland, weak and/or strong ties to their own ethnic/national group had been of no value in terms of finding employment that corresponded to their professional aspirations.

The only exception among the 31 interviewees was a German interviewee who had landed a job that she considered career-enhancing via making use of her German networks. One of the Russian interviewees was employed in her partner's parents' company. In her case, bonding social capital, based on a strong tie (a relationship to a partner), had paved the way for her employment. This was an opportunity that arose from the situation and not a job search strategy as such, which of course does not exclude the importance of a strong tie in this case.

When bonding social capital had been of relevance, it was in the case of jobs that the IS personally considered menial, but which could help them financially during their studies. Binh, a business controller, originating from Vietnam, explained:

'I got that job [packing job in meat production] from a friend of mine who is a Vietnamese student aswell ... [the job provided] pocket money, just enough for living ... I didn't put that in my CV'.

'I didn't put that in my CV' means that type of jobs that could be acquired with the help of bonding social capital were not career-enhancing.

A number of earlier studies (Ahmad 2005; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006; Toma 2016) point that making use of bonding capital often channel migrants to the low-status segments of the labor market. Similarly, many interviewees from the Asian and Latin American countries claimed that networks of co-nationals (i.e., bonding social capital) would only channel them to 'less-attractive' jobs that did not correspond to their professional ambitions. Maria, originating from Brazil, stated that the Brazilian community could only help to provide that were not attractive to highly educated people. Likewise, Binh explained that the Vietnamese community could be of help in finding jobs in Vietnamese restaurants. He also stressed the socioeconomic differences between the 'older' Vietnamese community and the community of the more recently arrived Vietnamese students.

Even if many interviewees cherished bonding social capital in the form of the social and cultural aspects that networks of co-nationals provided, they deemed them irrelevant

for finding jobs that matched their professional ambitions. The irrelevance of bonding social capital is best explained by the characteristics of the interviewees of this study. They were all highly educated and therefore not attracted to the low-status jobs that in their experience some of the ‘older’ established immigrant communities could provide.

Another plausible explanation for the experienced irrelevance of bonding social capital is that Finland is a relatively new country of immigration. The studies that highlight the importance of bonding social capital have often been conducted in the U.S.—a country with large and established immigrant communities (e.g., Light & Gold 2000). In the Finnish context, the immigrant communities are small and often fragmented due to factors such as their immigration history (as Binh’s description on the Vietnamese community illustrates). Hence, the ‘ethnic economies’ are of very limited scale and concentrated mainly on a few nationalities (Wahlbeck 2007). It is likely that also for these reasons, the interviewees’ co-nationals were for practical purposes of little relevance in finding jobs that attracted them.

Instead of bonding social capital, the participants’ experiences point to the importance of ‘bridging social capital’, that is, ties with the majority population (see, e.g., Lancee 2010). These experiences are analyzed in the following section.

Bridging social capital

A key advantage of bridging social capital expressed by the interviewees was that it made it possible to forge connections to potential workplaces. Linda, who originates from the US and works as head of sales and marketing, had landed one of her previous jobs via information she received from her Finnish roommates. Linda’s example is a case in point where a contact to people from the majority population provided information that led to a work contract.

Liebkind et al. (2016) have shown that job applicants with Russian names need to send more applications than (equally qualified) applicants with Finnish names in order to get an invitation to a job interview. Despite the egalitarian ethos of the Nordics, similar findings have been reported in the other Nordic countries (e.g., Birkelund et al. 2017 on the Norwegian case). These studies point to discrimination/lack of trust among the majority population towards ethnic/racialized minorities. The reluctance of employers to recognize work experience acquired abroad is also a factor raised by the Expert Council of German Foundation on Integration and Migration (2015) as one reason for local employers’ hesitance to hire IS as they graduate. Along these lines, Hamid, who originates from Pakistan, and works as a manager in the IT sector, underlined the importance of getting references from ‘Finnish people’ from traineeships and other job-related contexts. They had, according to his experience, the potential to build trust in the eyes of employers; as Hamid stated: ‘usually Finnish persons trust that recommendation’.

Such references would express an attachment and adaptation to Finland in the eyes of potential employers. Adele, who originates from Germany and works in communications, along the same lines, expressed that ideally, it would be ‘a Finnish person’ who gave the reference, as this would create more trust among employers than a reference from ‘a foreign person’.

Similarly, the interviewees (e.g., Hamid and Adele) mentioned that lack of trust impedes employers from hiring IS. They meant that employers might question whether



a non-Finnish person could adapt to local work culture and/or that employers would discount their previous work experience abroad. Alexandra, a marketing specialist who originates from Russia, likewise explained that:

'I understand that they might have a little less, you know, enthusiasm about hiring me. But when you are talking to a person face-to-face on a business event it's kind of easier to explain who you are and why you are good for this job'.

Interestingly, Alexandra's comment points to the possibility of overcoming the lack of trust by building bridging social capital by getting to know people at business events.

An, who originates from China and works in marketing, explained that she had spoken with a recruiter from company in a business event who had told her that 'the moment our recruiters see your [Chinese name] ... your name is not familiar to us, we can't pronounce that, we won't even ask you to an interview'. As a consequence, she had started to use her informal Finnish first name and her husband's (Finnish) last name. Her experience was that this helped her in navigating the job market because a Finnish name created more trust among employers than her Chinese name.

In addition to building bridging social capital in informal social settings, several IS had built bridging social capital by volunteering for NGOs and other associations, attending networking events, making use of ties forged at traineeships/apprenticeships, and in hobbies. The interviewees had not been socially active merely to improve their chances of landing jobs: participating in such activities had served other social purposes. Making use of such ties, which many reportedly had done, however, points to a deliberate job search strategy that builds on bridging social capital. In some cases, however, these job-relevant ties were built in multiethnic contexts, that is, they were not always strictly based on ties with the majority population.

Sectoral variances

Granovetter's (1995, pp. 160–162) study showed that there are some sectoral differences in recruitment cultures on the formality/informality scale across industries and countries. Likewise, in the case of the interviewees' experiences, some sectoral variances could be identified; small startup companies seemed to rely mostly on informal recruiting. In contrast, in larger companies and in the public sector, the recruitment culture tended to be more systematic and formal (which is probably correlated to larger organizations' larger resources). The interviewees' Finnish language skills varied from very elementary to fluent. Those with better Finnish skills were in a more favorable situation. Some had, however, with – varying levels of Finnish skills – found jobs in workplaces where Finnish was the spoken language. Others had found jobs where Finnish skills were not required, or, where elementary/intermediate Finnish skills were sufficient. Interestingly, many participants claimed that jobs where Finnish is not needed (or where limited Finnish skills are sufficient) are increasingly available in Finland. They explained this with increased immigration and 'internationalization'. They had found such jobs in internationally oriented companies, the music sector, IT, software design, and organizations/companies that provided services to immigrants. In addition to the Finnish language aspect, these sectors seemed to be more open to the IS because in these types

of jobs, the employers sometimes valued the IS' foreign language-skills and their knowledge of markets abroad that could provide new opportunities for them.

Summary and discussion

The article has contributed to the studies on highly educated migrants' labor market integration by shedding light on the experiences in a Nordic setting by focusing on international students experiences of applying for jobs. This is a topic that has received only very limited attention in previous studies. In addition, it has provided a theoretical framework for analyzing IS' job search in the countries of graduation.

Applying the right types of strategies was important in securing jobs that matched the IS' professional ambitions. The important role of weak ties based on bridging social capital in job search raises the question of whether the finding might be influenced by the composition of the participants of the study. It is possible that people who are prone to making use of social networks are more eager than those less socially disposed to participate in a study of this kind. However, there is no good reason to believe that the group of interviewees would differ much from their peers in terms of personality traits.

The interviewees were people with bachelor's and master's degrees – including people who had some unfinished coursework at the time of the interview – from universities and universities of applied sciences. It was, however, not possible to find differences among their experiences based on these variables. The participants' transitions to work seemed, however, to be smoother in sectors where there was a shortage of labor (as Hawthorne 2018 has shown, IS' transitions to work are affected by the sectoral differences in the demand of labor). As a case in point, the two participants, who were trained as nurses, had relatively easily found jobs in hospitals due to the good employment situation in the healthcare sector. Those interviewees (n17) who had studied humanities and social sciences seemed to have experienced somewhat more challenging paths to employment than those who had studied disciplines that prepared more directly to specific professions: business (n9), engineering/IT (n2), nursing (n2), classical Music (n1). Three of the interviewees were self-employed. Their paths to employment had also benefitted from informal ties, which helped them in their business environment. One might have assumed that relying on informal job search strategies would have mainly led to fixed-term work contracts (instead of open-ended contracts). This was not the case: only four interviewees' had currently fixed-term contracts.

Interestingly, those interviewees who worked in the public sector (three at the time of the interviews)–or had knowledge of the recruitment practices in the public sector–expressed that informal networks also played a role in the public sector recruitment. They explained that short-term jobs were not always opened to public competition–and hence 'who you know' mattered also in the public sector.

The drawbacks of the informal recruitment culture have been documented by, for example, Earnshaw et al. (1998, p. 237) and Roth and Xing (1994): it has the tendency to exclude the 'outsiders'. In a similar vein, some interviewees expressed that even if employers advertised jobs publicly, pre-existing informal relations between employers and job seekers played a role in the filling of a job, which has the tendency to exclude the IS. Despite the gains, we should bear in mind that reverting to informally gathered information could create also other types of problems: although the interviewees did



not express having experienced this, the informal information might be misleading, incomplete or simply incorrect. From this perspective, the role of public authorities in providing accurate information is of importance.

IS can be subjected to discrimination and prejudices by employers (see Arthur & Popadiuk 2013; Liu-Ferrer 2011; in Denmark, Wilken & Dahlberg 2017), which also became evident in the participants' accounts. These types of factors limit their agency and results in some of their post-graduation potential being lost. However, the study revealed certain strategies to overcome at least some of the lenient prejudices employers have towards IS. Obviously, this does not mean that the burden of fighting discrimination and prejudices should be put on the shoulders of the individual job seekers –but at the society at large.

The familiarity with strategies that lead to best outcomes in a certain context seems particularly important for the IS who wish to work in the receiving country after graduation because they experience specific challenges due to factors analysed in this article. In addition, in a Nordic context, the graduating IS typically has weaker knowledge of the local language(s) than graduating IS in, say, an English-speaking country (cf. Brekke 2006). Despite these challenges, the interviewees described successful strategies in securing employment. In fact, 29 out of the 31 interviewees expressed that they were fairly or very content with their current jobs.

As this is a qualitative study, it is not possible to claim that the results would directly apply to other contexts, or to all IS who have found jobs in Finland. However, as previous studies (e.g., Granovetter 1995; Lancee 2010) have also demonstrated, networks are across contexts important in job search. Therefore, it is likely that somewhat similar results on IS' job search could be found in the larger Finnish context and in other national contexts. In countries with larger migrant/ethnic minority populations than in the Finnish case, however, the role of bonding ties (ties to co-nationals) might be more important for the IS. These are questions, which could be investigated by future studies.

The focus of the article has been on the experiences of applying job search strategies. This does of course not mean that there would not be other factors than the strategies that would play a role in explaining the relative success of the participants of this study. Many of them referred to the importance of a 'right set of mind' and 'not giving up' despite encountering obstacles. These psychological traits surely play a role too in explaining the outcomes. In order to not 'over-strategize' job search, it needs to be added that some interviewees explained part of their success as 'luck' or by being 'in the right place at the right time'.

If we were to conduct a similar study among native students and graduates in Finland, the important role of informal aspects in entering the labor market would probably also emerge (because we know from previous studies, e.g., SITRA 2017, that the role of informal aspects of recruitment are important in Finland). However, the difference between native and non-native graduates would—in addition to the residence permit questions—probably be that the natives would (1) be culturally, linguistically, and have stronger social ties that are of use in job search, (2) have better knowledge of how to navigate their entry in the labour market, and (3) encounter discrimination to a lesser degree. In addition, even if there is no good reason to doubt the truthfulness of the interviewees' accounts, some of the information and conceptions related to job search might be based on misconceptions and inaccurate information. Therefore, as the focus has

been on experiences, we cannot make strong claims that ‘objectively’ most viable job search strategies would in all cases be identical to those experienced by the interviewees.

More broadly, what can we learn from the experiences of the IS? This study has illuminated how IS, despite often—such as other ‘highly skilled migrants’—being cherished by governments and policy-makers, experience some particular challenges in entering the receiving-country labor markets. This study has also illuminated how recruitment patterns are embedded in national, cultural, and institutional settings that require context-bound knowledge and embeddedness from the job seeker.

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Note

- ¹ As the space is not available here and as this is not a statistical study aiming to make generalizations regarding the whole population of IS employed in Finland, the reader interested in more detailed numerical data on IS in Finland as regards study disciplines/gender/areas of residence, is advised to refer to the work of Garam and Korkala (2013).