

“They have their rules” - Digital stories offer guidance for employment services

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Abstract

This study analyses the stories of the experiences of 18 highly educated migrants with public employment services in Finland. This article contributes to the discussion about the value of these services by exploring 1) how they respond to the needs of educated migrants, 2) how educated migrants experience encounters with employment officers, and 3) what kind of services educated migrants themselves think would help them. The results reveal a lack of encounters and regard for personal situations, and also deficiencies in professionalism and customer service orientation. The stories in this article portray the employment office mainly as a bureaucratic and faceless apparatus, controlling and sanctioning its subjects. The contribution of this article lies in (1) providing insights into the understudied topic of educated migrants' experiences of the employment office, (2) offering an example of a user experience analysis, and (3) helping develop employment services in collaboration with the foreign-born population.

Keywords: value co-creation, value co-destruction, employment services, immigration, service development

Introduction

The highly educated foreign-born population is a current topic in Finland, as it is in many other Western countries. Enticing skilled foreigners to come and stay in Finland is important because they offer innovation potential and internationalization opportunities and can counter the aging demographic. Nevertheless, skilled foreigners already in the country do not receive similar attention even though many struggle with employment. The obstacles facing highly educated migrants are complicated and intertwined, including discrimination and racism, language barrier, lack of social networks, unrecognized qualifications, limited work experience, and restricted working rights (Lehtovaara & Jyrkinen, 2021; Steel & Jyrkinen, 2017). Racism as a concept encompasses “racist ideologies, prejudiced attitudes, discriminatory behavior, structural arrangements, and institutionalized practices resulting in racial inequality.” (United Nations, 1978). Its effects are especially prevalent in Finland, which is perceived as one of the most racist countries in the EU (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, the unemployment rates of migrants born outside the EU are

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especially high compared to those of the native-born population (Karlsdóttir et al., 2018). Higher education seems to facilitate entry into the labor market (Karlsdóttir et al., 2018), but foreign-born people must often accept unskilled work (OECD, 2018). Non-Western migrant workers, in particular, often become stuck in these jobs (Holm Slettebak & Rye, 2022), which relates to an international phenomenon whereby expatriates from the global north are considered ‘international talents’ whom society does not pressure to integrate, whereas highly educated migrants from the global south report more homogenous experiences with the low-skilled (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020).

The integration programs and comparatively high labor-market spending in Finland (OECD, 2023) do not seem to correspond with the results. Although approximately 40 % of people of foreign origin have a university degree (Baumgartner, 2023), the employment rate among that cohort is considerably lower than that among native Finns, although it has increased since the 2000s (Toikka et al., 2023). Employment offices should provide individual integration plans for migrants, but in practice, people with different backgrounds and needs are often placed together on similar courses and activity programs (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2022, p. 868). The issue touches on *value* in public services; that is, the true value of a service is created in the interaction between a public service officer and a client and is defined by the latter, depending on how well they can match the provided resources to their needs (Osborne et al., 2021).

Frontline officials interact directly with citizens and can thus create or destroy the value of the service they administer (e.g., Gyllenhammar et al., 2023; Engen et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is a lack of knowledge on how value creation occurs in service interaction situations (Becker et al., 2015). This research aims to enhance our understanding of the value of Finnish public employment services to highly educated migrant clients, taking into account the actual services provided and the value created in the interaction with employment officers. We also explore the opportunity for collected experiences and needs to kindle public service development and co-creation. There is a shortage of research focused on migrant clients’ experiences of or need for employment services (Oosi, 2016), although some recent research on the experiences of highly educated immigrant women (Lehtovaara & Jyrkinen, 2021; Steel & Jyrkinen, 2017) and international students (Alho, 2020) is to be found. We use the term highly educated migrant as it is generally used in earlier research (see, e.g., Alho, 2020). Higher education refers to a university-level degree, whether at the bachelor’s, master’s, or doctorate level

We seek to know:

How do highly educated migrants consider the existing public employment services to respond to their needs? (Research question 1)

How do highly educated migrants experience interaction with employment officers? What kind of identities are constructed for them in this interaction? (Research question 2)

What services do highly educated migrants think could help them find employment? (Research question 3)

We collected digital stories from highly educated migrants living in Finland and applied discourse and content analysis to isolate patterns or common themes relating to the experiences with the services and service professionals. This study provides an example of digitally gathered *user experience* analysis. User experience is defined as a subjective and context-specific, user-defined outcome of the service value creation process (Jaakkola et al., 2015), which provides the first step to understanding the value co-creation process in public services (Trischler & Trischler, 2022). Our article contributes to current discussions on public service value creation and destruction, employment services, and public service development. It does so by analyzing how collected digital stories reveal the adequacy of public employment services to meet the needs of highly educated migrants and what kind of information clients could provide for public service development.

NPM and Value Creation or Destruction

New public management (NPM) is a managerial approach that has dominated the public service reform agenda since the late 1970s. It has brought private-sector principles to the nexus of public governance (Hood, 1995), becoming the primary management model in the public sector. The NPM approach is now applied worldwide, although the extent and influence vary (van Gestel et al., 2023). Hood (1995) noted seven inter-related characteristics within this approach: A shift to the disaggregation of services into manageable units; competition between public organizations and the private sector; management practices copied from the private sector; an emphasis on the parsimonious use of resources; hands-on management; measurable standards and strict control of outputs.

It is important to emphasize that NPM has by no means disappeared and is institutionalized in contemporary public organizations, creating a context in which public services operate (Eriksson & Andersson, 2023). For professionals, applying NPM principles has meant increased bureaucracy, administration, and workloads (Jacobsson et al., 2020), scrupulous control, standardized processes, and client assessments (e.g., Brodtkin, 2011). Consequently, there is arguably little left of the idea of a *street-level bureaucrat* introduced by Michael Lipsky (1980). Lipsky considered frontline workers to be policy implementors on a practical level, stressing the importance of their discretionary power and autonomy from their employers. However, their direct interaction with clients and influence when enacting measures ensure frontline workers, such as employment officers, retain an important role in their clients' lives (e.g., Eriksson & Andersson, 2023).

It has been argued that NPM is an outdated approach to the complex problems in current society (Eriksson & Andersson, 2023) and has failed to deliver its promise (Osborne, 2018). Instead of focusing on internal processes with NPM, there is a growing consensus among scholars emphasizing the need to reach out to other organizations and citizens (Eriksson et al., 2022). Public service logic is based on this paradigm. It argues for a service-dominant approach and a focus on value creation to benefit the users of public services and encourage their involvement (Eriksson & Andersson, 2023; Osborne, 2018).

Advocates of public service logic see citizens as active co-producers of service value, which emerges from their interaction with frontline workers (Eriksson & Andersson, 2023). *Value co-destruction*, a term introduced by Plé and Cáceres (2010), refers to a situation in which the interaction between a client and a public service official results in the well-being of an individual or an organization declining. Interest in value co-destruction has been increasing (e.g., Cui & Osborne, 2023; Eriksson & Andersson, 2023), as the understanding of how value is co-created does not necessarily equate to understanding how it can be destroyed. In practice, actions intended to foster value creation could eventually have the opposite effect (Becker et al., 2015). Contemporary public management research recognizes the role of frontline workers as key actors in creating or destroying value in public services (e.g., Becker et al., 2015; Engen et al., 2021; Gyllenhammar et al., 2023). Engen et al. (2021) list four factors leading to value co-destruction: lack of transparency, mistakes, a lack of bureaucratic competence, and inability to serve. Cui and Osborne (2023) mentioned three stages in which value can be destroyed: the design or preparation phase if citizens are unwilling to participate or are excluded from the process, during service encounters, and owing to users' choices through intentional or unintentional misuse of resources.

Employment Services in Finland

Finnish employment services have traditionally been administered regionally, but this responsibility is to be transferred to municipalities with the aim of enhancing efficiency. This arrangement will be tested in local government pilots 2021–2024, and the permanent transfer will occur on 1 January 2025 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, n.d.a). In addition, Finland also implemented the Nordic labor service model in 2022, intending to achieve the higher employment rates enjoyed by other Nordic countries. According to the model, job seekers must apply for a certain number of jobs. They should also

receive more individual support, with early support being particularly emphasized (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, n.d.b).

Finnish employment services seem to be moving relentlessly toward privatization, performance management, and quality control, indicating the influence of NPM principles (see, e.g., Hood, 1995). Moreover, those services have been reformed to enhance efficiency and client satisfaction while simultaneously cutting resources and the number of employment offices and investing in digitalization (National Audit Office of Finland, 2020). Employment offices should offer advice, job placement services, and help for job seekers to accumulate human capital or become entrepreneurs (Act on Public Employment and Business Services, 2012). In line with the market focus of NPM (Eriksson & Andersson, 2023), the role of the professional has changed and is now closer to that of a *manager of networks*. In contrast, services promoting real employment are largely obtained from third-party providers. There is a growing emphasis on self-administered services, most being digital. Professionals monitor the job search process, implementing sanctions if the client does not act according to the plan and complete the tasks assigned to them (JobMarket Finland, 2022).

For newcomers, employment offices provide initial assessments, integration plans, and state-funded integration courses in Finnish or Swedish, reflecting Finland's bilingual status. Besides initial services, migrants can access employment services, such as vocational guidance and career planning, expert assessments of various types, coaching, trial work placements, training trials, and labor-market training (Centre of Expertise in Immigrant Integration, n.d.). Bontenbal and Lillie (2022) list three major shortcomings affecting migrants' integration and employment services: limited availability, insufficient flexibility to serve individual needs, and a lack of direct labor-market contacts. Steel and Jyrkinen (2017) have recognized similar problems, such as busy timetables and excessive workloads among service officers, an absence of personal advice, and a lack of common language and understanding, all apparently symptomatic of a lack of interest in the voice of this group.

Many of the clients struggling to find employment assessed the employment services to be deficient (Terävä et al., 2021; National Audit Office of Finland, 2020), and the situation was worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic, which created an influx of new clients due to layoffs and dismissals. Services are not arranged on a payment-by-results basis, as in several other countries, but employment offices' performances affect their budgets, and they are evaluated by their job performance (National Audit Office of Finland, 2008; National Audit Office of Finland, 2020).

Research Design

The data comprise 18 digital stories conveyed in between 10 and 62 minutes. Appendix 1 offers details of the informants. Among those, 13 were women, five were men, and all were of working age. They had been in Finland for between 3 and 10 years and were unfamiliar with the Finnish employment service system when they arrived. Most of the informants (13) came from Europe or other Western countries, and some from Asia or Africa. All but one had a university degree, for example, in business or education, and some had studied and graduated from English-speaking degree programs at Finnish universities. Eleven of the informants were employed at the time of the interviews, seven of them at a level corresponding to their education. Two informants were studying and five were unemployed.

The majority (14) of the interviewees were found among the participants of the MESH project (<https://mesh.turkuamk.fi>), which aimed to enhance the employability of highly educated migrants through mentoring and networking and was funded by the European Social Fund. The mentees represented the target group, and many of them were socially active and considered it important to influence the quality of employment services. Altogether, 77 mentees from MESH mentoring programs were approached by email and asked if they wanted to participate and share their experiences about Finnish employment services. Four of the interviewees were found through a post by an NGO called International Working Women in

Finland (<https://iwwof.com>) to its Facebook group with approximately 2,800 followers. Informants were told that participation was voluntary, and each consented in writing to their data being used. The files containing sessions were stored safely on researchers' computers.

The data were gathered in 2021 and 2022 by students at the Turku University of Applied Sciences (13 sessions) and the main author (5 sessions). The majority of them were conducted in English and one in Finnish, according to informants' preferences. The informants had strong English language skills, although it was not the first language of the majority of them. The sessions were conducted between the interviewer and the informant using *Zoom* or *Teams* applications, which also facilitated recording the stories.

The main author focused on informants' satisfaction with employment services, as well as on employment-related service development ideas. In contrast, the second author concentrated on employment officers' interaction with highly educated migrants and the types of identities that were constructed for the migrants in this interaction. Both researchers listened to the collected stories twice and compared their impressions.

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling is an emerging research method that has proved useful in the needs assessment phase when developing public services, enabling people to tell authentic stories about their lives and experiences and offering insight into their worlds (Trowbridge & Willoughby, 2020). This method combines narratives with digital media elements, such as audio, images, and videos, aiming to contribute deeper and more accurate information about people's lives in a simple and accessible way (Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021). The narratives usually focus on an experience or event and how the storyteller interprets it (Jamissen, 2008). Digital storytelling is especially useful in giving voice to individuals who are often ignored in society for reasons relating to race, age, class, and language skills, for example. The method offers them a safe space to share and reflect on their experiences (Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021). Digital storytelling methods have gained popularity alongside the spread of digital technologies, for example, in social work (Chan & Sage, 2019).

The use of digital media to acquire research data brings some advantages in its ability to cross geographical boundaries (Driscoll, 2011, p. 165), which enabled us to find participants in our research from all over Finland. Digital storytelling is often used when delving into delicate issues, and some studies indicate that the social distance that digital media brings to communication could facilitate the sharing of emotional and delicate experiences (Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021). This phenomenon was also noticeable in our data, as many informants openly shared their distressing experiences.

The digital storytelling method utilized in this research is *community reporting*, which aims to challenge the status quo and enable public administration to realistically engage with citizens. Storytelling has similarities with in-depth interviewing and informal conversational interviewing. An informal, conversational interview is based on questions arising spontaneously during an interview guided by research questions (Gray, 2009). These methods are particularly useful for exploring new topics, and researchers use these methods to acquire a holistic understanding of interviewees' points of view by letting them express themselves in their own way and at their own pace, with minimal control over the responses (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

The data-gathering phase began with a three-part training for the students implementing the process, given by two teacher-researchers. The training covered the ideology and use of these methods, as well as ethical points and data protection. The interviewer started with an opening question (conversation starter), which was "Would you like to describe in your own words your experience of finding a job here in Finland?" or "How do you feel the existing employment services in Finland respond to your needs." The informants were given space to share their narratives and reflect on their experiences in their own words. The interviewers focused on listening and letting the story proceed freely, asking questions that naturally occurred to them while remaining conscious of the research questions. The interviewers were primed to

pose those research questions if the anticipated topics did not emerge unprompted.

Discourse analysis and content analysis

While discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis stem from different philosophical bases, they can be complementary in terms of what they can reveal (Hardy et al., 2004). This advantage was exploited in this article, resulting in a multifaceted view of employment services' value to highly educated migrants. The discourse analysis revealed the interpretative repertoires of identities constructed in interactions (Davies & Harré, 1990) between employment officers and their clients (research question 2). In contrast, content analysis explored the informants' opinions on current services (research question 1) and the reforms they considered would help, or would have helped, them find employment (research question 3).

Discourse analysis recognizes the importance of language and does not perceive it as neutral but as constructing our reality. Discourse has been defined in many ways, such as "representational practices through which meanings are generated," a meaning system as a unit of analysis (Dunn & Neumann, 2016, p. 2). Interaction between professionals and clients can be viewed from the perspective of identities, as there are identity-related consequences arising from interaction, and identities are communicatively produced in it (Kroskrity, 1999).

Individuals can possess several context-bound and changing identities (Davies & Harré, 1990), which Kroskrity (1999) calls the *repertoires of identity*. However, people strive to preserve a coherent narrative of self-identity, as identity is an instrument of agency and an important source of meaning (Castells, 2001). Migration is a major life change and can challenge people's identity definition in terms of self-efficacy, continuity, and self-esteem (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000). Unemployment is linked not only to a weaker economic situation but also to latent consequences, such as undermining people's identity and status (Jahoda, 1981).

In this analysis, we did not study actual communicative events between the clients and the officers but the interpretations that clients made of those events. The clients' stories signalled their impressions of the interactions with the employment service professionals, what conclusions and what kind of value they drew from those encounters—especially concerning their identity.

There are no strict rules or methodology for the practical application of discourse analysis. The data should be listened to or read with an open mind several times. Explanations are not unambiguously right or wrong but always depend on the interpreter (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). Interpreting can change and deepen with multiple sessions. In this analysis, the most obvious and repetitive interpretations and identities ("an outsider," "a false client") emerged after the first hearing. After further listening, other interpretations and identities arose, such as "an inferior outsider."

The content analysis describes, categorizes, and typifies qualitative data inductively or deductively, directed by research questions (Schreier, 2012). Utilizing the four stages ideated by Bengtsson (2016), this study's content analysis consists of decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation phases. Because service satisfaction and service wishes were so heavily intertwined, the researcher decided to address them jointly: wishes came up directly when asked and indirectly when the informants were relating their experiences of the employment services (see Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of direct and indirect service wishes.

	Direct service wish	Indirect service wish
More personal services	<i>I'm thinking about more practical, more involved, more personalized services.</i>	<i>I'm also thinking about when I first arrived here, and I found it was very important for me to see the same person -- every time you go to see someone, and it's a new person, and that's really uncomfortable, because you never...you always feel as though that person has no idea of what went on before to lead you up to that point.</i>

Results

Employment services' overall adequacy to highly educated migrants' needs.

Our results consolidate earlier research findings (e.g., Alho, 2020; Steel & Jyrkinen, 2017) on Finnish public employment services not catering to the needs of highly educated migrants. The informants had too few opportunities to meet officers, and they felt that their competencies and goals were rarely considered. Overall, most of the informants found employment services difficult to approach or the service to be completely lacking, as employment officers were not accessible directly and did not necessarily respond to inquiries. The digitalization of services was a strong presence in the stories: the diffusion of ICT into employment offices has caused even *digital discretion*, in which human judgment is influenced or replaced by computerized routines and analysis, enhancing efficiency at the expense of service quality (Busch & Henriksen, 2018). Many informants had resorted to seemingly random contacts to get help: professionals from other services, temporary development projects, and unofficial networks.

The employment office seemed to have a notorious reputation and was described as a place where one gets unemployment statements and not much else: “*Nobody gets a job through the TE [employment services] Office*” (Informant 3). Many mentioned their disappointment with employment officers' passive attitudes, “*Never found those kinds of office services to be proactive. They seem to expect you to come in and have a plan, and for immigrants, that is a really silly thing, to think that we are going to know what the situation is in this country*” (Informant 14). Tummers et al. (2015) explored frontline workers' coping mechanisms under current pressures, categorizing them as 1. moving toward clients by bending the rules in their favor, 2. moving against clients by sticking to the rules on every occasion, and 3. moving away from clients by minimizing contact with them. It seems that the coping strategies Finnish employment officers deploy are moving against and especially moving away from the clients instead of bending the rules to meet their needs.

Many informants felt that employment services and the whole system were designed for migrants with low educational backgrounds and that officers gave the same advice to everyone, regardless of skills and education. These findings corroborate earlier research illustrating the inadequacy of the employment services in terms of recognizing highly educated migrants' needs (Alho, 2020) and the contribution to gendered and racialized deskilling practices (Steel & Jyrkinen, 2017). The tenets of NPM have led to the standardization of client assessments (Jacobsson et al., 2020), and routinizing (i.e., providing a standardized service at the cost of quality) is a common coping strategy among frontline workers, reflecting high workload pressures (Tummers et al., 2015). However, some of the informants felt they were treated differ-

ently by the natives, as they deemed it improbable that employment officers would suggest berry picking or cleaning to a highly educated person with a Finnish background, as was the case with some of them. These kinds of attitudes could refer to structural racism, and society systematically pushing migrants into low-wage sectors is a phenomenon also recognized in earlier research (Ndomo, 2021).

The bureaucracy related to employment services and the system, in general, was considered burdensome and sometimes haphazard, as different professionals could give opposing instructions. The complexity and inflexibility of the system were common topics, as a part-time or deskilled workplace had prevented many informants from accessing employment services, adding to feelings of exclusion. Moreover, the absence of English on many employment office websites and deficiencies in officers' language skills caused some informants to feel that services were not meant for them. Some informants praised the state-provided, full-time integration courses, although the quality of these courses seems to vary considerably (see also Sheimeikka et al., 2021). These courses are conducted by private firms selected by tender, which hinders long-term development (Shemeikka et al., 2021). Earlier research reveals that the target grade for language skills is not achieved often enough (Shemeikka et al., 2021; OECD, 2018), which significantly affects participants' employment and education opportunities.

Identities constructed in the interaction

At best, the informants' encounters with employment officers were friendly or, at least, appropriate and professional. However, most informants reported encounters being indifferent, impersonal, even unskilled, and unprofessional. A variety of interpretative repertoires were manifested in interaction with employment officers, and a diverse set of identities was assigned to the informants. The "*false client*" identity manifested in situations where the informants tried to find information and support, but the employment office refused for bureaucratic reasons. For example, the three-year integration period might have expired, sometimes without the person being told of it or its significance. Or the money for language courses had run out (however, there always seemed to be enough money for unemployment benefits, as one informant commented). Or they did not serve students in their search for work.

(The) TE [employment services] office contacted me about the application (probationary work shift). Unfortunately, it was declined because I had a job even though it was not in my domain [kitchen worker, eight hours/week]. They cannot help me because I am still hired somewhere.... If I had quit the job, of course, you cannot get financial support for three months. That is how they have their rules. (Informant 12)

The identity of "*an outsider*" stems from most of the information on the employment office's web pages being in Finnish and Swedish; thus, their audience is restricted to Finns and other speakers of Finnish and Swedish. The same message was conveyed even more strongly when some informants never received any response from the employment officers to their inquiries or messages. This failure provoked feelings of humiliation, discrimination, and worthlessness; people felt like "*an inferior outsider*."

Complete lack of respect. I don't think they would talk like that to a Finnish person...and then she said, 'If I really have to say something about why you cannot find a job, maybe you look too Italian...We [Finnish] are boring people, and we are too humble sometimes'. (Informant 18)

Those feelings, added to helplessness and confusion, were evoked when facing strict but unclear rules behind which officers seemed to hide. An identity of "*a subject of bureaucracy*" was manifested in some interviews.

She was horrible...No matter how many times I called, she never picked up ...she did not respond to any messages. But when she discovered, as I wrote her, that I was in Hungary, she immediately cut my support.

She did not tell me anything; I just noticed that I was not receiving any money anymore. (Informant 15)

The officers anticipated encountering the “independent, self-motivated client” identity but did not expressly say so. For many informants, it took years to understand how the employment services work in practice. Very few received any individual counseling from the employment office; an online platform for independent job searching was offered instead. Personal support for employment seemed difficult to obtain within the employment system.

The interpretative repertoire, the *European–non-European distinction*, was experienced not only in encounters with employment officers but widely in the labor market and society (see also Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020).

A manager said we only hire non-Europeans at the point when we see that they have double the expertise of other European people. (Informant 10)

There were also accounts of the worst of discriminative repertoires, a racist position of “*an inferior (colored) refugee.*”

In fact, I have even heard some so-called professionals...asking refugees questions like Do you think this country is a country for you? I don't think that this might be the right place for you. I think you should think again and consider other places. (Informant 2)

Experiences of discrimination and patronizing behavior were quite common. This finding might relate to that of Tummers et al. (2015), indicating that frontline workers' aggression is perhaps symptomatic of their frustration. Some informants felt their dignity was questioned. Koskela (2020) reported that some highly educated migrants feel that they are perceived through a negative image of *the migrant*, referring to a non-western, non-skilled refugee. At the same time, they identify first and foremost as skilled migrants, and their own identity is based on shared high-class status, as well as a positive perception of internationality and foreignness. This conflict leads to boundary-setting strategies concerning other migrant groups and creates *otherness* toward them (Koskela, 2020). Foreign nationality as grounds of discrimination could occur simultaneously with other grounds such as age and sex. Comments like “*You look too Italian*” (Informant 18) and “*You are too old to work*” (Informant 14) reveal multifaceted and intersecting discrimination. As studies of intersectionality show, in addition to nationality or ethnic origin, a person's position in society is influenced by many other differences, such as social class, age, and gender (Steel & Jyrkinen, 2017). In essence, intersectionality views identities as being constructed in the interrelationship of these categories (Christensen, 2009).

Some informants who had studied in Finland felt somewhat misled. In education marketing and during their studies, they received the impression that they would be a welcome addition to the workforce. However, they were not informed about the challenges of job hunting, the importance of learning Finnish, and networking. The English-speaking labor market in Finland is small and clusters in certain areas (Baumgartner, 2023). Some accounts manifest the “*misled victim of the international education market*” identity:

I went to the TE [employment services] office last year, and they said to me: Why is this degree available in Tampere, especially Tampere, because there are no jobs here for foreigners, especially in this field. And especially for internationals studying in English, what are they going to do for work afterward? (Informant 9)

Service wishes

The content analysis revealed that almost all informants stated some desires relating to the array of

employment services. Some 15 informants ideated services they thought would help them into employment, which indicates a willingness and capability to engage with the service development process. Besides those wishes and innovations that were directly stated, there were also deficiencies many informants mentioned, although they did not express them in the form of service development ideas.

The service informants thought would most benefit them, or highly educated migrants in general, was enabling direct contact with companies (nine mentions). The informants suggested different forms in which such contact might occur, including on a one-to-one basis, through employment offices connecting companies with highly educated migrants (or at least bridging the gap between them), and also via networking events and job fairs. The informants considered their lack of networks hindered obtaining a job, and some complained that the competition with locals seemed unfair. Maintaining informal contact with employers is crucial in Finland (Alho, 2020), and research indicates that approximately 70% of people found jobs in ways other than by responding to job applications (Jämsén, 2016). Informants generally thought Finnish working life was not very open to diversity ideals, and the discrimination exhibited toward migrants is also confirmed by earlier research (Ahmad, 2020; Steel & Jyrkinen, 2017). Many expressed exasperation with the language barrier, as the Finnish language was a requirement for the majority of jobs.

More personal services were mentioned eight times, although the disappointment and frustration about impersonal employment officers were palpable in almost every story.

“I didn’t know the person; we never met, and if I called, she never picked up the phone, very seldom answered my emails, or I had to send two or three emails asking, please call me, please call me please, I have this and that kind of question or problem or whatever, so it was very... sometimes a bit humiliating I have to say, and difficult, and it was just a bad feeling” (Informant 15).

The above experience might relate to a frontline worker coping strategy called rationing, where access to public services is made difficult for clients (Tummers et al., 2015). In addition to the demand for more personalized service, informants wished that their individual situation, background, and skills were taken into account and the job search plan based on them. The current changes in the Finnish employment services aim to identify and address clients’ personal needs more efficiently than previously (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, n.d.a) and provide more intensive and individual support during the job search process (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, n.d.b).

Mentoring received four mentions as a wished-for service, and some informants reported positive mentoring experiences, which may be related to the fact that the majority of the informants had recently participated in a mentoring program. The mentors were recruited through the MESH project or an NGO. The personal approach helped them understand job-seeking in Finland and provided access to networks. It was also a source of motivation, helping to counter the low self-esteem that tends to accompany unemployment, which was worsened by the effects of the pandemic. Higher-level Finnish courses received two mentions, and two informants wanted more information about services and events and reminders of these events.

Discussion

This paper contributes to the discussion on public service provision. It does so primarily by identifying three points undermining the value of public employment services for highly educated migrants, namely 1) deficiencies at the organizational level, 2) unpleasant interactions with employment officers, and 3) an insufficient array of services.

The stories portray the employment office service as inflexible, bureaucratic, faceless, and uncaring. The migrants’ experiences were mainly negative or non-existent; these coveted ‘international talents’ were often left to their own devices. Several points of value co-destruction, as described by Engen et al. (2021),

are evident at the organizational level, the most crucial of which is perhaps the *inability to serve*, meaning the users could not contact officers. The *lack of transparency* manifested in Informant 15's story, for example, when an officer cut a person's employment support without replying to their messages. Deciphering the employment systems' complicated rules was not helped by the employment office's web pages, where the information was provided mainly in Finnish and Swedish. That oversight led to a *lack of bureaucratic competence*, as many informants were unfamiliar with the Finnish regulatory framework and unable to master the service system. The point made by Gyllenhammer et al. (2023) that the needs of public service users are often more complex than the structure of the system allows for was also supported by the stories gathered for this research. Employment officers cannot always support their clients' best interests. For example, one cannot access the employment office's services if they are already employed, even if that employment consists of just a few hours a week in a position that does not reflect their skills and qualifications. Similarly, if the integration period (generally three years) has expired, applications for integration courses after that period will be refused. The situation might also be due to NPM features limiting the discretion of frontline officers to forge closer relationships with clients (see also Brodtkin, 2011; Eriksson & Andersson, 2023).

The informants' interactions with employment officers were rarely described as pleasant and were instead described as impersonal, indifferent, and even unprofessional. Clients' needs and wishes were often ignored, and many encounters were likely to create and strengthen negative and subdued identities, likely to hinder their integration, employment, and well-being. Employment officers can face a dilemma: The NPM context, their workload, lack of understanding of foreign-born jobseekers' service needs, and the priority given to digitalized services make it difficult to serve clients properly. That is not inevitable: a recent example from Sweden (Jacobsson et al., 2020) portrayed local employment officers as highly flexible and focused on client-related outcomes.

In addition, the array of services was not sufficient. Many informants mentioned that the system was created for those with no or limited qualifications, and people who did not fit with the system received little benefit. In this research, informants stated the importance of personal services. Employment services could target those in need and willing to access them. There are encouraging research findings on this kind of intensive support from Sweden, especially among refugees (Åslund & Johansson, 2011). The importance of employer contacts was also heavily emphasized. Employment officers could facilitate closer ties to employers, which is crucial, as Finnish employers have been reported to be highly prejudiced (Ahmad, 2020; Lehtovaara & Jyrkinen, 2021). Prejudices especially concern jobseekers from the global south facing more racism when trying to seek employment and in general (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Moreover, employers most often utilize informal recruitment methods (Alho, 2020), which necessitate direct interaction to ensure employees and employers can become familiar with each other.

Public service organizations do not create value for their clients but can only provide it. The key point then becomes the extent to which citizens can utilize the service offering (Eriksson et al., 2022). Finland's public employment services seem to offer limited value for highly educated migrants, mainly owing to excessive bureaucracy, lack of suitable services, and absence of guidance or any guidance being inadequate. A public-sector organization that prioritizes issuing sanctions and formal decisions over helping its clients risks losing its relevance. As the National Audit Office stated in 2008, "job-finding services have been overlooked by other activities in the Labor Office, at both the strategic and practical level" (National Audit Office of Finland, 2008, p. 34).

The digital storytelling method made it possible to connect directly with highly educated migrants and better understand their worlds. Information on the needs of highly educated migrants remains worthless unless it translates into a new practice. Highly educated migrants are an innovative group with the best knowledge of their challenges and preferences. Therefore, it would be beneficial to include them in developing and creating employment services alongside service professionals. Some of the informants themselves proposed that solution.

The informants consisted of volunteers. They were informed about confidentiality, methods, and the

publication of the research, and written consent was obtained. However, some ethical challenges must be addressed. Firstly, although the informants were highly educated and competent, many were in a vulnerable position in Finnish society. Without work, obtaining a permanent residence permit and creating a future adequate living is difficult. Secondly, although some ethical challenges were anticipated, it was difficult to know how to act when faced with the injustice and racism that some informants experienced. Ethics in migration research emphasizes that the rights and interests of subjects must be primary, and the old principle of *do no harm* is insufficient (Hugman et al., 2011). We need to ask ourselves how our research helps to enforce the rights of migrants in the same position. Several informants mentioned the topic's utmost importance and wanted to participate. By publishing this study, we want to raise critical awareness of how inadequate employment services are for highly educated migrants' needs and how employment officers view those migrants. We want to give them a voice to express their needs and ideas on how to improve employment services. Future research could investigate employment officers' perspectives and development ideas.

Our research has limitations. The sample size precludes generalizing on the experiences of highly skilled migrants. Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, to illuminate and understand, rather than to generalize or extrapolate. Validity in qualitative research is related to the trustworthiness, relevance, and credibility of the results (Winter, 2000). Therefore, we do not claim that our results reflect the overall state of employment services and the experience of everyone. Our informants were not randomly selected. It is possible that the most dissatisfied clients needed to be heard. Our informants sought out the MESH mentoring program and the International Working Women group, which suggests they are determined individuals who might not be representative of their peer group as a whole. Most of the informants were female since International Working Women caters to that demographic. Most of the mentees of the MESH mentoring program happened to be women, too, which might relate to the fact that migrant women's employment situation is more difficult than men's, although it has improved recently (Baumgartner & Raijas, 2023). The data were gathered when COVID-19 restrictions were in place, which may have amplified the feelings of isolation and identifying as an outsider. However, read in parallel with the earlier research, our results provide a glimpse of the hardships highly educated migrants face when trying to settle into a new country, as well as an example of the potential with which the employment services could be developed into a more client-oriented, modern organization.

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