

## Migrants at the university doorstep: How we unfairly deny access and what we could (should) do now

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*The Finnish Government recently launched policies to meet labor shortage challenges, recruit highly skilled international workers. However, they overlook a skilled population already living in Finland, namely highly educated migrants. The problem is that migrants tend to be treated similarly, whether they are well-educated or not. This means that migrants are typically directed into low paying jobs. How is it possible to better develop this group with more effective career guidance? We believe an important answer lies in improved university education for migrants. This investigation is based on responses from surveys, interviews, and project evaluations. An analysis is made of three successful university-based short-term integration programs. The emerging questions include, to what extent are obstacles for migrants appropriately deliberated in universities? What can we learn from the three model programs? Should language learning be incorporated into advanced academic programs? The analysis includes how current practices constrain migrants' access to university education. Even with positive intentions, the prevailing understanding of equality involves equal treatment for all, despite educational or other differences. In addition, simplistic understanding of language skills and learning appears to predominate how migrants are treated. Highly educated migrants face serious challenges when there is a disconnect between language training and one's disciplinary studies. We surmise there are critical differences between general population language training programs and those situated within disciplinary departments. Analysis of the model programs reveals that a systematic and holistic approach for overcoming current challenges is possible but with an emphasis on sustainability.*

**Keywords:** higher education, second language learning, academic literacy, highly educated migrants, equality, access

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## 1 Introduction

The Finnish Government, meaning the cabinet of ministers led by the Prime Minister, launched a program to attract international talent, especially internationally recruited students, or skilled workers, in response to the labor shortage (Finnish Government, 2021; Jokila et al., 2019). At the same time, however, there is a rather sizable number of talented international people in Finland that are ignored, namely well-educated migrants. Many seek professional positions or official validation of prior qualifications and experiences. Others look to complete university-based degree programs started elsewhere. Some hope to update and expand their skill set to meet entry requirements to regulated professions, such as medicine or education. Paradoxically, people who are already at the doorstep of universities, within reach of the professional level labor market, are seldom considered to be the kind of international talent Finland requires. That is, the highly charged political nature of immigration in Finland, Europe and elsewhere obscures the point that Finland possesses a valuable resource within its own borders.

The gap between the images behind the workforce policy and the actual situations of highly educated migrants is also apparent in Finnish integration policies and practices. Integration programs mainly focus on providing newly arrived migrants with basic literacy and Finnish language skills alongside cultural knowledge (Finnish National Agency of Education [FNAE], 2012). The programs are not designed to address the needs of highly educated migrants; they fail to recognize previous qualifications and degrees, they do not promote career advancement and they do not provide guidance for academic goals. The most confounding part is that educated migrants are typically misdirected into low-paying entry-level jobs that are less challenging than their education or skill indicates (Shemeikka et al., 2021). Ordinarily, once one settles into an entry-level job it is difficult to scale up to high-skilled jobs (Strömmer, 2017). Even when well-educated migrants are chosen to work in their chosen field, they are typically employed in positions at a lower level in the hierarchy commensurate to their skill set (Kyhä, 2011; Larja & Luukko, 2018). The situation epitomizes a loss of human resources at both individual and societal levels, leading to a lower quality of life and work satisfaction (Rask et al., 2018).

Migrants are an underrepresented group in higher education in Finland (Airas et al., 2019; Larja, Sutela & Witting, 2015), so there is a need to find better solutions to enrich their opportunities. The Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014, § 6) obliges universities and other education providers to work on “realisation of equality in their activities and take the necessary measures to promote the realization.” Improving migrants’ access to higher education is, therefore, an important area of equal access within educational policy (Kosunen, 2021).

In Finland language classes available to migrants are ordinarily geared at lower level, early-stage development. However, academic language proficiency required at the university lies at a much higher level. Socialization into academic literacy practices is a dynamic and socially situated process involving negotiation on local discursive practices as well as positionings and ideologies in speech communities (Duff, 2010, 2019). Successful socialization requires access to participate in academic communities from the beginning. Therefore, there are several steps required of migrants to pass the threshold of admissions. Whether it be the preliminary complementary studies for a Finland-based qualification, or directly

into degree programs, the university structures and strategies simply do not support highly educated migrants. As it now stands, each individual is left to gain sufficient skills and knowledge of the admissions process on their own because there is no official place where they might receive support services.

In this study, we focus on how to promote equal access to university education. We turn a critical eye toward the structures and practices, as well as the underlying normativities and ideologies, that result in obstacles to equal access. Our focus is on migrants who have moved to Finland in adulthood, and who possess a higher education degree, or part of a degree, from a country other than Finland. The case is made for complementary studies or to finalize the degree started elsewhere.

Our research questions are cumulative:

- 1) What obstacles do migrants face when accessing Finnish universities and how are these obstacles identified and responded to in Finnish universities?
- 2) What can we learn from an analysis of three notable project-based programs specifically focusing on migrants and higher education? How have such programs responded to the prevailing challenges?
- 3) How can we foster socialization into academic literacy practices by combining the spaces and processes of learning a language and learning disciplinary content?

Next, we describe the three illustrative integration education and language education programs that focus on migrants' access to universities. Then we introduce various interpretations of equality gleaned from literature on inclusive education, and reveal how such interpretations frame the obstacles, especially access, that migrants and other underrepresented groups regularly encounter. Second, we discuss the concept and interpretations of "language skills" and the processes of language learning. By bringing together these two theoretical approaches, we challenge the common reasoning that language would be a legitimate reason for exclusion from university education. Next, in Section 3, we explain the data and methods in detail, uniquely tailored toward critical policy analysis. In Section 4, we elaborate our results. Specifically, we first answer research question 1 by discussing how migrants' challenges concerning access, and the concept of equal opportunity, are a direct result of definitions and policies within universities. Next, we answer our research question 2 and 3 and focus on best practices and scrutinize how socialization into academic literacy is enhanced by simultaneous learning within a subject area, as opposed to learning a language separately or prior to enrolling into the content area. In the conclusions, we discuss what structures could best support equal access to university education, and what changes are needed in ideologies, structures, and practices to make university education for migrants more accessible. Our aim is to provide a novel and systemic understanding of migrants in higher education and what type of practices are likely to be sustainable for individuals and for society.

### *1.1 Integration education and language education programs in focus*

The main objective that the three education programs discussed in this manuscript share is to combine language learning and academic skills into field-specific subject studies, with participants attending the training programs on university campuses. This enables socialization into academic communities and

literacies already at the early stages of language learning (Duff, 2010). There are no expectations that participants would achieve “complete and established” language proficiency. Programs are introduced in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Education programs.

Program	Target group	Content of the program	Coordinator	Funded by
Academic Skills AKVA, 1st round	Migrants who have studied at a university or college outside of Finland or who have completed upper secondary school.	Finnish language, 15 ECTS credits Finnish society, 5 ECTS credits Academic study skills, 5 ECTS credits  English language, 5 ECTS credits  A course in their own field of interest, 5 ECTS credits  Study guidance and career counseling, 5 ECTS credits.	University of Helsinki Centre of Continuing Education  Carried out by personnel from the University of Helsinki	Ministry of Education (2019–2021)
University studies as part of the integration path (JYU.INTEGRA)	Migrants who have completed or are qualified for higher education and aim to complete interrupted degree studies, or complement a prior degree, in compliance with Finnish qualification requirements.	Finnish language, 24 ECTS credits,  English language, 6 ECTS credits  Studies in the students’ own discipline, 5 to 10 ECTS credits  Study guidance and career counseling, 5 ECTS credits	University of Jyväskylä, Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication	The Ministry of Education and Culture (2017–2021)  University of Jyväskylä (2021–)
The program Belonging (Kuulumisia)	Migrants who completed teacher training abroad or who are already working or would like to work as teachers in Finland but who are lacking official teacher qualification.	Three study paths: 1) pedagogical course to gain pedagogical qualification, 60 ECTS credits  2) multidisciplinary course for a classroom teacher subject qualification, 60 ECTS credits  3) complementary courses, 15–30 ECTS credits.	Tampere University, Faculty of Education and Culture	Finnish National Agency of Education  The Ministry of Education (2009–2022)

Academic Skills (AKVA), is a project-based academic pathway program for migrants aspiring to pursue a higher education degree. University studies as part of the integration path (JYU.INTEGRA), is a training program that integrates university language and content studies. The program Kuulumisia (meaning belonging) is a teacher training project. Since 2017 the training has been inclusive, meaning it is targeted to both L2 and L1 Finnish speakers, and open to teachers who have completed studies in Finland but lack some qualifications or who work with linguistically and culturally diverse education, such as L2 teachers, and teachers of preparatory classes, minority religions, migrant students' mother tongue or basic education for adults. The program is one of the few where inclusiveness has been central to all activities

In Academic Skills (AKVA) and University studies as part of the integration path (JYU.INTEGRA), one may complete studies as voluntary integration training. The projects have connected to integration training in higher education. Both projects provide an opportunity to engage in integration training in an environment suitable to one's own student record and future aspirations. Both in AKVA and JYU.INTEGRA, participants' disciplines may vary, whereas in program Kuulumisia the participants' backgrounds are in educational sciences.

## **2 A thematic literature review: Elaborating the whole problem**

### *2.1 The prevailing understanding of equality obscures the structural obstacles of access in Finnish higher education*

How equality and inequality are defined is the basis for what equal access means. However, academic and policy-oriented discussions contain only vague definitions of equality and equity. Those terms are often used as if they mean the same thing and are interchangeable (Espinoza, 2007). The confusion makes it difficult to review the intentions and outcomes of different policies and to argue for more just educational policies and practices.

To clarify the difference between equality and equity, we draw from ideas developed in inclusive education (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2022; Slee, 2011), socially just education (Ayers et al., 2010), and culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Accordingly, equality refers to sameness, meaning similar treatment of everyone without considering their starting points or needs (also Espinoza, 2007). No changes are made in the existing structure. This system benefits only those who fit the procedure, resulting in systematic exclusionary practices. In this system, the onus of responsibility is on the individual, a position that transforms structural problems that impair individuals into individual issues. The increasing societal tendency to view social issues as individual problems, individualization, reifies this practice (Brunila, 2021).

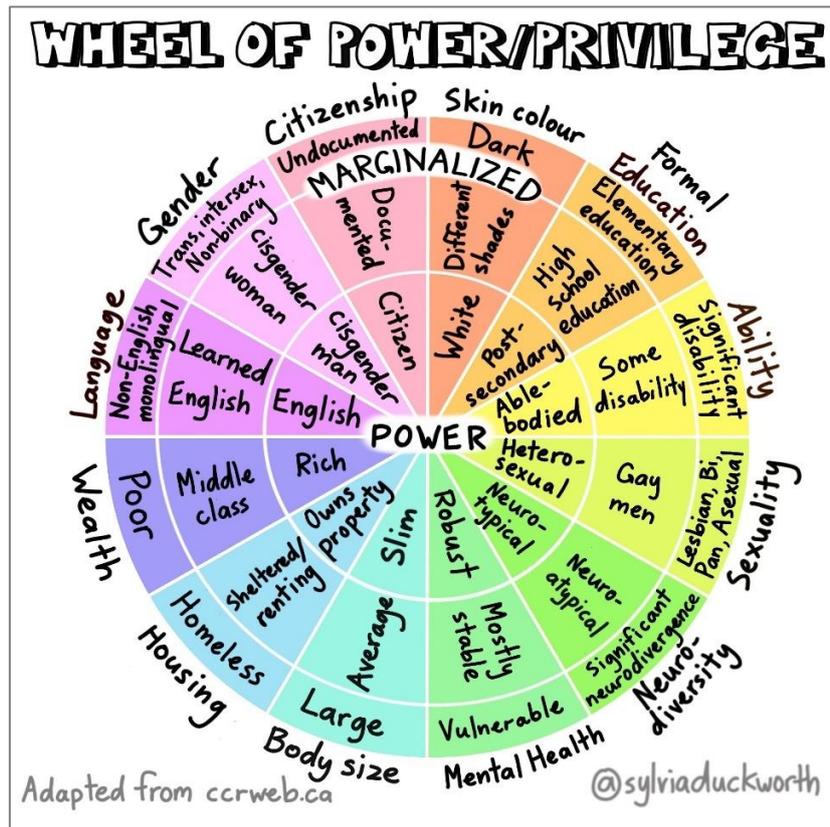
The idea of equity, however, focuses on changing the values, norms, institutional structures, and practices to achieve inclusion and social justice in education. This means challenging the norm of sameness as the measure of fairness and offering everyone what they need to get on the same line. In this case, the responsibility for ensuring access through an inclusive environment, therefore for success or failure, lies with society and its institutions.

Between the policy of sameness and inclusive practices is the policy of integration, which we consider important to discuss in the context of immigrant

integration education. Along the lines of this policy, migrants are provided additional education and support to help them to gain admission into the education system, and to find success in the labor market. However, while integration education programs provide valuable information—such as the entrance routes and formats of degree programs—when lessons are similarly structured for all, they often miss the mark for well-educated migrants. Despite official and well-intentioned aims of directing migrants to be gainfully employed and active members of Finnish society, integration measures that are insensitive to structural discrimination reinforce marginalization and exclusion (Kurki, 2019; Masoud et al., 2021; Pötzsch, 2020).

Historical and societal contexts, where policies and attitudes toward migrants' access to education are interpreted, hamper understanding of equity. In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, unfair treatment of specific populations based on ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, and other minorities have long been overlooked (Kantola et al., 2012; Keskinen et al., 2019). The success of the welfare state project has contributed to an unfounded idealism that equality has been achieved (Kantola et al., 2012). As a result, society and the educational system are considered equal because the policies proclaim it, and vice versa. In educational contexts, equality as sameness has been, and still is, the default position (Riitaoja, 2013). Svensson et al. (2019) argue that Nordic equality has been based on sameness to such a degree that it leaves little room for politicians and lawyers to recognize and appreciate the difference. In such a situation, routinized equality statements and policies can actually be counterproductive if they lead to the denial of structural inequalities and silencing discriminative conditions, making it difficult to address the inherent systemic discrepancies (Ahmed, 2012).

Another problem with routinized equality policies emerges when issues and solutions are elaborated merely as ideals and principles, without a relevant connection to people's real-life situations and to the societal, historical and institutional contexts that frame those situations. We cannot extract inequalities from each other and discuss them in a separate manner, but we need to think what kinds of positions and issues they result in together (Crenshaw 1991). Intersecting and cumulative privilege and subordination result in different starting points for people. We illustrate this with the Wheel of Power, Privilege and Marginalization (Figure 1). The wheel should be understood as a pedagogical tool of understanding interconnected inequalities than a universal model.



**Figure 1.** Wheel of Power, Privilege, and Marginalization, by Sylvia Duckworth. Used by permission. To our knowledge, the original version comes from the Canadian Council of Refugees (CCR): <https://ccrweb.ca/en/anti-oppression>. Several versions of the wheel have been developed for various contexts. For a Finnish version (published in Finnish by Michaela Moua) in Helsingin Sanomat 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2021.

The closer to the center, the easier it is to navigate the unpredictable ocean currents of society (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Privilege is usually invisible to those who benefit from it. The easier one accesses and benefits from the system the more one can maneuver around the rules, whether for oneself or for the greater good.

At Finnish universities, acting with confidence as an academic requires cultural and social capital: privileges, class, and whiteness as well as being, speaking, and acting like an academic who is fluent in Global Nordic English. Many successful academicians experienced backgrounds that provided head starts to plot a course through the system. They possess tools, such as cultural, social, and economic capital, that facilitate access to the inner workings of the system (Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2018; Kosunen et al., 2018; Reay et al., 2011). Such capital includes birthrights from educated Finnish- or Swedish-speaking families, including appropriate cultural advantages, and parents who understand middle-class academic and literacy practices. Moreover, universities are traditionally based on the normativity of whiteness (Alemanji & Seikkula, 2018) often negatively impacting access and the prosperity of students of color (see Kisnanen, 2021).

While higher education gained in another country provides tools for integration into a new context, cultural and social capital do not fully transfer from one context to another. Even more challenging is the situation for those migrants who have no academic and highly educated family background

(Makrooni, 2019). Thus, gaining capital that makes one successful in the academic world as a student and a scholar requires time and effort. Unlike students who can use their primary languages, migrants in Finland face a situation where they must concurrently learn a new language and new subjects. They must study such content using a language that is foreign to them.

If education is the tool to eliminate social exclusion from attitudes toward race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or migrant status (Harju-Autti et al., 2022) the existing structures and practices need critical review. Linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lucas & Villegas, 2013) are key features of inclusive learning cultures. Culturally and linguistically aware educators have a focal meaning in supporting students' learning (Makrooni, 2019). Building an inclusive university that is also responsive to adult migrants requires that the "default settings" concerning literacy practices and cultural knowledge of the context are realized and resolved.

## 2.2. *Language as a threshold*

Different interpretations of equality are intertwined with language and access; who do we assume university studies are for and what sort of students are considered ideal? Moreover, which language skills are favored and whose Finnish counts as most skilled?

Migrants from outside "Western" countries face negative expectations and discrimination both in education and in the labor market (Ahmad, 2020; Non-discrimination ombudsman, 2020). Racialization influences which education and working life pathways migrants are expected and encouraged to take (Kurki, 2019). Racialized ideologies are also present in language ideologies, where languages and language speakers are ranked in terms of inferiority and superiority (Kroskrity, 2020). Fluency in a Western European language presumes language skill—even when skills in English are not included in one's language repertoire—whereas fluency in Somali or Arabic are often ignored. Thus, language often works as a formal reason for exclusion on the basis of race or nationality (Piller, 2021).

A widely used but unproblematized argument in public discourse and policymaking on migrant education and employment is that migrants' language skills in Finnish or Swedish are not sufficient for higher education and employment in professional careers (Airas et al., 2019; Nieminen, 2015). In many cases, English-based bachelor's and master's programs are offered as a solution to the challenges that migrants face within the Finnish education system. While more inclusive, such a solution obscures the actual problems of the education system, and results in exclusionary programming while creating a delimiting bottleneck of access from university education to working life (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019; Schumilova et al., 2012). Not all highly educated applicants have sufficient English proficiency. English can thus be as exclusive a language as Finnish or Swedish. At the same time, advanced or academic language courses organized by universities are usually available for degree students only.

Inequality is apparent upon an applicant's admission process. Language requirements in Finnish or Swedish are often high (CEFR levels B2–C1). For applicants who have not graduated from Finnish or Swedish-language general upper secondary education, nor taken a Finnish language test in secondary

education, the only way to demonstrate language skills in Finnish is to pass the national language test. National Certificate of Language Proficiency [YKI] is used as the criteria of eligibility in Finnish universities. The test is expensive, and an applicant may need to take the test several times to achieve the level required. In addition, the YKI test is intended to measure the functional language proficiency of adults in everyday situations (Finnish National Board of Education, 2011) while the language skills needed in higher education are academic and field specific. This may lead to a situation where an applicant may have taken field-specific studies in Finnish or Swedish at, for example, an open university and has good academic language skills in their own area, but insufficient for the YKI test. The question then arises as to who is eligible to apply for higher education. There are few options for language proficiency verification.

Language admission requirements seem to rely on the idea that proficiency should be “complete and established” at the time of application, as if language skills did not develop during the studies. What might happen if language learning is seen as a dynamic and socially situated process that takes place through socialization and everyday experiences? Can emersion be programmed?

### 3 Data and methods

The data for this investigation were assembled from several sources. First, survey and interview data were collected from teaching staffs and administrators in Finnish universities. Second, students from integration education programs provided individual and group interviews and reflective materials concerning their learning processes and experiences. Third, survey data focusing on the development of migrants’ Finnish language skills were collected and analyzed. This empirical data is described in Table 2. Finally, document analysis of reports, evaluations and policy recommendations relevant to migrant access to universities, provided context and depth.

**Table 2.** Empirical data.

	Type of data	N	Year	RQs and results sections the data responds to
University studies as part of the integration path (JYU.INTEGRA)	Survey: multiple choice and open-ended questions	35 university administrators 44 university teaching and guidance staff	2020	RQ 1, Section 4.1
	Thematic group discussions via Zoom	14 group discussions	2020	RQ 1, Section 4.1
	Individual and group interviews with the students Vlog blog postings	28 students	2019 & 2020	RQ 2 & 3, Section 4.2
Academic skills (AKVA)	Student’s essays	26 students 48 essays	2019 & 2020	RQ 2 & 3, Section 4.2
Belonging (Kuulumisia)	Survey: likert-scale and open questions	51 former students	2020	RQ 2 & 3, Section 4.2

The survey and group interview data come from a nationwide study conducted as part of the University studies as part of the integration path (JYU.INTEGRA program) at the University of Jyväskylä. The study (JYU.INTEGRA, 2021) examines how committed universities are to provide education for people who have moved to Finland in their adulthood, and who have completed their degree prior to arrival, or are qualified for higher education. We used the data to analyze how Finnish universities interpret equality in general and migrants' equal access to university studies in particular.

To describe the two extensive surveys, one was targeted to university administrators and another for university teaching and guidance staff. Thematic group discussions with the administrators, teaching staff, and support staff via Zoom were conducted and analyzed as complementary to the survey data. Here we link and focus on qualitative data from the surveys and from the group discussions. The data were thematically coded in ATLAS.ti 8 and subsequently analyzed by applying thematic analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009).

We also used student interviews and materials produced by the students during their integration education program. The data from the University studies as part of the integration path (JYU.INTEGRA) include individual and group interviews, and video blog postings, in which students reflected on their own learning processes and the integration education program. The thematic interviews were conducted in groups of four and video blog postings were collected individually during the program course. All interviews were transcribed and coded and then analyzed and grouped thematically by using qualitative content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). Student essays collected as part of the program called Academic skills (Akateemiset valmiudet, AKVA) centered on students' learning during the program. The essays were analyzed using thematic analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009).

Regarding the third type of data, a survey was conducted to investigate the impact of the Kuulumisia program referred to above. The survey was targeted to all students who had enrolled in the program between 2014 and 2020 ( $N = 156$ ). The data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to gain a comprehensive understanding of former students' experiences of the program, especially concerning the development of their Finnish language skills, professional networking and the program's influence on their professional development and status in working life (Kallonen et al., 2020).

Most of the material was collected in Finnish, with some responses and interviews in Swedish or in English. The data were analyzed in original language, and key excerpts were selected and translated into English. The system emphasizes translation of informal speech into informal written text in order to preserve the original meaning as much as possible. The translations were all double or triple checked. To be sure, the original Finnish is provided as well.

To round out the investigation of the three model programs, much material was collected and analyzed in the form of project reports, dissertations, program evaluations, and policy recommendations. The authors have personal involvement with the projects and their reflections and insights have been systematically considered (e.g., JYU.INTEGRA, 2019, 2021; Kallonen et al., 2020; Niemelä et al., 2020; Vuorio, 2015; Yli-Jokipii & Vuorio, 2020). While such material does not qualify in every instance as full research reports, it is an important knowledge source. The fact of the matter is that most migrant education, and perhaps most equality work, is housed in grant funded short-term projects (Brunila, 2009),

which leaves little room for extensive research initiatives, or for dissemination and further development of the good practices created in the projects. Thus, a key question is, what types of programs are considered worthy enough to be regularized in the university curriculum?

To expound on our positions in the study, in addition to being researchers, we have also worked as teachers and coordinators, and also as counselors, in migrant education programs. In our work we have achieved goals but have also found several areas of development in the levels of programs, institutions, and policies. Such an experiential base enables us to elaborate upon institutional structures, policies and practices from students, teacher and administrative perspectives, and to enumerate the challenges that migrants face when entering and navigating the Finnish system. We have first-hand experience and autoethnographic insights as our own cumulative experiences crystalized over time. As a research team, we have constantly compared our knowledge, ideas, and experiences to unearth similarities and differences, and to examine various interpretations of the cases. Such collective reflections and theoretically informed discussions around the data have allowed us to build a holistic understanding of the issues surrounding migrants' access to higher education.

The diversity of this research team has been of significant multi-disciplinary value when analyzing phenomena related to migrant education. The disciplines represented include sociolinguistics, sociology of education, and social sciences. The multidisciplinary collaboration has permitted us to assemble research knowledge and perspectives from various disciplines, and to collectively construct more expansive knowledge than we could have on our own (Kress & Kimmerle, 2018). We have been inspired to carefully investigate and extract discourses that are circulating in practice and in research, and to critically examine taken-for-granted assumptions.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Interpretations of equality in Finnish universities

#### 4.1.1 Equality as sameness results in restricted access

Here we report the results from the JYU.INTEGRA survey and interview investigations. Accordingly, equality is interpreted in various ways but, surprisingly, not specific to roles such as teacher, administrator, or guidance counselor. The variance of interpretations influences how policies and practices ensuring "equal access" are justified and enacted. In what follows, we analyze the interpretations.

One of the open-ended questions in the survey focused on practices universities employ to legally promote equality (*Non-Discrimination Act, 2014*). Many respondents who interpreted equality as sameness argued that everyone is treated equally, therefore, equality obligations have been met and no structural changes are needed. Excerpts 1 and 2 illustrate such thinking:

**Excerpt 1.** University administrators, survey (original in English).

At the moment our university doesn't have a special or specific process or strategy to recruit immigrants in particular. Anyone applying to higher education is treated in the same manner and everyone who qualifies for higher education is welcome.

**Excerpt 2.** Teaching staff, and study guidance and counselling staff, survey.

Nyt oikeasti: Ne jotka on koulutuskelpoisia voivat hakea ihan normaaliin tapaan. Kyllä ne osaavat löytää meidät. Älkää olko lapsellisia tässä asiassa.

Come on: Those who are eligible may apply in a normal way. They do know how to find us. Don't be childish.

The reasoning in Excerpts 1 and 2 is that everyone who qualifies is equally welcome to apply, thus the obligation of equal treatment has been met. The resulting situation is that everyone is formally welcome, but access is prohibited anyway for those who cannot meet the demands. The respondent in Excerpt 2 argues that eligible people are equally capable of “finding us,” in other words accessing the university. It is assumed that everyone has the same starting point and opportunities. The point of view neglects consideration of key structural points that favor students who apply from inside, and who possess the cultural capital needed to navigate and succeed in the system. As a result, responsibility for success and failure is placed upon the individuals. The logic resembles traditional thinking about disabilities as an individual problem and not a societal issue requiring structural change, as is shown in Excerpt 3:

**Excerpt 3.** The Teaching, study guidance, and counselling staff survey.

Se mikä vaikuttaa pääsyyn EI ole meidän käsissämme. Se on heidän HEIKKO osaaminen. Hakijoita on valtavasti ja ihan vääristä syistä (muu kuin halu kouluttaa itsensä asiantuntijaksi jollain alalla), mutta HYVIÄ todella vähän, ja ne todella hyvät löydetään jo.

What affects access is NOT in our hands. It is about their LACK OF skills. There are plenty of applicants who apply, but many for the wrong reasons (apart from the will to educate oneself as an expert in some field of the study). There are only a few GOOD ONES, and these really good ones are already identified.

The respondent in Excerpt 3 opts out of all responsibility by claiming that the issues with access do not concern the university but remain the problems of applicants. In such reasoning, migrants are looked down upon as a group inferior to other applicants. The same admission criteria and entrance exams serve as gatekeepers for sorting out a few really good applicants from the rest.

The previous excerpt is openly prejudiced, but the discourse about migrants lacking the necessary skills is echoed elsewhere in the study. The assumption is that migrants primarily require study and language skills. As seen in Excerpt 4, the resulting pedagogical stance would be that applicants are required to master the needed literacies before admission (see Appendix 1 for transcription symbols):

**Excerpt 4.** University L, group discussion.

Participant 1: meilläkin niinkun perusoletuksena tai itsellä on perusoletuksena se että kun opiskelija tulee, niin että silloin tavallaan tämmöinen suomi, suomalainen tapa tehdä, tehdä tätä tai olla oppia. ja tota niinku sanoit sehän ei todellakaan. ympäri maailman. niinku. niinku sitä mitä me oletetaan sen olevan

Participant 2: opiskelukulttuurit on vaan niin eri

Participant 1: we also hold basic assumptions, or I have basic assumptions, that when a student arrives, they face a Finnish way of being a student, of learning, and as you said, it is not the same here as it is elsewhere around the world, as we assume.

Participant 2: the study cultures are just so different.

The basic assumption is that one already knows the Finnish way of being a student. To the contrary, even those who have gone through the Finnish schooling system cannot be totally familiar with academic literacy practices prior to university studies. In the degree programs students are offered courses for improving and strengthening their literacies. Against the discourse of migrants' deficiencies, the ideal applicant is one that does not differ from the normative student group in terms of official qualifications and language certificates, and who needs no special procedures or support systems. Those who do not fit this ideal are seen in terms of skill deficiency or what they do not know. As a consequence, previously obtained academic literacies and degrees from abroad often remain invisible and unrecognized in the Finnish university system.

#### 4.1.2 Towards equity and socially just education

Instead of sameness, some respondents and small group participants turned their attention from individuals to the structural problems that reinforce unequal access for migrants. Excerpt 5 illustrates the point:

**Excerpt 5.** Teaching staff, and study guidance and counselling staff, survey.

Yhdenvertaisuus ei lähtökohtaisesti toteudu niin kauan kuin korkeakouluun haku- ja pääsyprosessit perustuvat virheelliseen tulkintaan yhdenvertaisuudesta (samanlainen kohtelu).

There is no equity as long as the application and admission processes are based on false interpretations of equity (sameness).

In this excerpt, the respondent directly states that the politics of sameness is based on a false interpretation which precludes realization of true equity in the application and admission processes. The respondents who shared such an interpretation of equality, considered that inclusive and socially just education cannot be achieved by adhering to current practices. Regarding admission processes, entrance exams form a central barrier for access. This is pointed out by a participant in Excerpt 6:

**Excerpt 6.** University D, group discussion.

jotta yliopistossa voi niinku suomenkielisiä opintoja niinkun suorittaa ja niissä menestyä ja pärjätä niin tota täytyy olla riittävä suomen kielen taito mutta, mutta ettei se niinku sit se pääsykoe oo siinä, siinä tavallaan ikään kun kompastu- kompastuskivi sitte siinä että, et muuten kyllä vois olla edellytykset, mutta ei sitte pääse vaan sen kielitaidon takia

to compete and succeed in and manage studies in a university in Finnish one must have sufficient Finnish language skills but, so that an entrance exam should not become a stumbling block, apart from it one could have prerequisites but one won't get in only because of language skills

One reason why entrance exams are considered unfair for migrants is that everyone has the same instructions, and the same amount of time, for completion, whether they be native first or second language applicants or speakers of other languages. Since they all must abide by the same instructions the process favors L1 Finnish speakers. To succeed, one must be really quick in reading and writing

Finnish (participant) (*pitää olla todella niinku nopea lukemaan suomen kieltä ja nopeasti kirjottaa suomen kieltä*). According to participants, modifying the entrance exams would promote equity. Changing admission criteria and processes, however, is necessary but insufficient to ensure inclusion. Rather, inclusion must be systematic in the admissions phase and during studies. What is required is structured support for socializing in academic communities and literacies in the degree programs and to minimize obstacles for students after admission. In Excerpt 7, a participant suggests a model that would allow access to the university but also provide sufficient language support during the studies:

**Excerpt 7.** University H, group discussion.

helpoin tie ois se että, pääsis edes sisään [ - -] ja sitten ois mahdollisuus niinku kandiointojen aikana parantaa sitä suomen kieltä kohdennetusti nimenomaan siihen oma- alakohtaisiin opintoihin, jollon sitte sinne maisteriopintoihin niin si- siellä sitten voiski olla se, se kieli- kielitesti joka ois nimenomaan alakohtaisesti vielä suunniteltu

the easiest way would be to just get in, and one could have an opportunity during the bachelor studies first of all, to offer language- modified language courses alongside so that it is possible to complete them, and then during the bachelor program to improve Finnish language skills specifically in their own field, and then in the master program- then there could be a language- language test that would be specifically designed as field specific.

Instead of demanding high-level language skills prior to a bachelor's program, one would gain support and skill during one's studies. The level of sufficient language skills could be tested with a field-specific language test at a later phase of studies, as the participant suggests. Socialization into the academics of Finnish universities takes time. Close collaboration between language educators and educators working in the departments enhances the process. However, to elaborate an argument mentioned above, why is such collaboration so difficult in hard-funded university programming?

In section 4.2 we describe how three project-based programs responded to the prevailing challenges in order to create more equal access to higher education.

## 4.2 *Three programs that promote equity for Migrants*

### 4.2.1 **Overcoming obstacles to achieve equity**

In this section, the focus is on how the projects respond to the challenge of equity and of providing successful programs of study for migrants. The main question is, how could training foster socialization into academic literacy practices and communities? Investigation of the practices developed in the programs are based on interviews with JYU.INTEGRA (University studies as part of the integration path) students, reflective essays written by the students in AKVA (Academic Skills program), and an impact survey conducted in the project Kuulumisia (Belonging).

The socialization process into academic communities includes recognition of prior knowledge and skills. For example, documentation of expertise in other languages, specific content knowledge and even meta-cognitive knowledge are critical for this purpose. In all three programs, this approach has been highly regarded from the very beginning through assessment of prior knowledge and

with the creation of personal study plans. Significantly, the differences between academic and work-life cultures have been openly discussed to support students who are concurrently learning and working (see Yli-Jokipii & Vuorio, 2020). In Excerpt 8, a student was asked if the training improved her academic skills. She finds that her skills in Finnish have increased, but she has also benefited from her prior knowledge of literacies in her own mother tongue:

**Excerpt 8.** JYU.INTEGRA student, personal interview.

venäjän kielellä esimerkiksi mä oon myöskin kirjoittanut referaatteja esseitä ja sellaisia juttuja mutta se oli vähän eri tavalla mutta nyt ne opettajat selitti mulle että kannat- miten Suomessa se tehdään

For example, I've also written summaries, essays and things like that in Russian but now, as the teachers explained it to me, it is done a bit different (in Russia) than how it is done in Finland.

Integrating content studies and academic language means the language “is present in the organization of classroom spaces and activities, mediating the relationships of learning communities, and providing a tool for thinking and learning” (Moate & Szabó, 2018). This element is shown in Excerpt 9, in which a student describes language as a tool for learning various aspects of academic literacies in one task. She learned content and language and, at the same time, also “new ways of learning”:

**Excerpt 9.** JYU.INTEGRA student, vlog entry.

Integrassa tutustuin uusiin oppimistapoihin kuten oppimispäiväkirjaan, mikä on erittäin hyödyllistä opiskelussa jos opiskelen yliopistossa. minun mielestäni oman alan opiskelu oli tärkeää. tässä opin paljon oman alan sanastoa ja termejä. [- -] viidennessä jaksossa teimme projektityön, jossa yhdistimme kaiken mitä olimme oppineet kielessä.

In Integra I became acquainted with new ways of learning, like using a learning diary, which is very useful for studying, if I study at the university. I think studying our own field was important. Here I learned lots of vocabulary and terms from my own field. [- -] In the fifth period we had a project where we combined everything we'd learned in the language.

Focusing on learning-to-learn skills is relevant because many students in training programs experienced, for instance, challenges with learning diaries and with pair and group work. Students found it challenging because they were used to more structured and grammar-oriented learning. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss, compare, and even experiment with different ways of learning (see Müller-Karabil & Harsch, 2019). In the next section we take a closer look at peer learning as one of these ways.

#### 4.2.2 Peer support and learning

The benefits of peer learning may not be familiar to all students. After accruing opportunities to socialize into these practices, one often realizes they can learn from peers. In Excerpt 10, a student establishes the importance of peer support and learning while tackling field-specific contents of university level courses and practicing new ways of processing knowledge:

**Excerpt 10.** AKVA student, essay.

Pienryhmätyöskentelyn aikana minä pystyin puhumaan opiskelijoiden kanssa, jotka ovat samassa tilanteessa, mitä oli todella hyödyllistä ja helpotti minua. [--] Luin pienryhmän jäsenten oppimispäiväkirjoja ja niiden lukeminen auttoi minua kirjoittamaan oppimispäiväkirjaani, koska ennen sitä minä ajattelin kirjoitustehtävien olevan todella vaikeita.

During the small group work, I was able to talk to students who are in the same situation, which was very helpful and made it easier for me. [--] I read the learning diaries of the group members, and reading them helped me with my own learning diary because before that I thought writing assignments were very difficult.

The guided small group work helped the students in the group to master content, allowed them to practice group work as an academic study method, and provided them an empowering experience when utilizing the shared knowledge.

In the project *Kuulumisia*, one of the fundamental elements is peer learning between L1 and L2 speakers. Courses have had a maximum of 25 percent of L1 Finnish speakers who complete their studies to qualify for work in linguistically and culturally diverse educational contexts. This offers an intriguing setting to explore informal and non-formal learning. According to the *Kuulumisia* survey, the L2 speakers found that the inclusive education model had an impact on their language learning. They pointed out that support from L1 speakers helped them to improve their academic Finnish language skills. Additionally, all respondents, both L1 and L2 speakers, felt heterogeneous groups were beneficial because they enabled them to gain explicit and implicit skills to work with linguistically and culturally diverse learners and settings. L2 teacher students' prior skills and knowledge were acknowledged and L1 student teachers had the opportunity to reflect on traditional Finnish teacher training, as the following excerpt illustrates:

**Excerpt 11.** *Kuulumisia* alumni, survey.

Maahanmuuttajataustaisten opiskelijoiden aikaisempi varsin laaja kokemus opettajan työstä sekä heidän näkökulmansa suomalaiseen kulttuuriin ja yhteiskuntaan rikastivat luokanopettajan opintoja, joissa on kuitenkin pohjalla tuhti suomalais-kansallinen ja perinteinen paatos. Olen todella iloinen, että sain opiskella niin monenlaista nähneiden ja räiskyvien ihmisten kanssa.

The broad teaching experiences and perspectives of the students with a migrant background enriched the studies in the multidisciplinary course, in which there is strong traditional Finnish emphasis. I am extremely pleased that I had the opportunity to study with people with so many kinds of life experiences and vivid personalities.

In addition to this, the L1 speakers mentioned that they learned to reflect on and reconcile their own linguistic practices when working with linguistically diverse settings. This inclusive implementation provides new opportunities for peer learning which benefits everyone in the group. Both L1 and L2 speakers can learn academic literacies in situations where it is a priority as well as in situations in which it is not necessarily the focus. Once this dynamic is noticed, it becomes possible to support language learning in non-formal situations and make it visible to learners.

Learning from a peer can take place in many ways: for example, the opportunity to meet other migrants studying at Finnish universities, or working as professionals, was meaningful for AKVA and JYU.INTEGRA students:

**Excerpt 12.** AKVA student, essay.

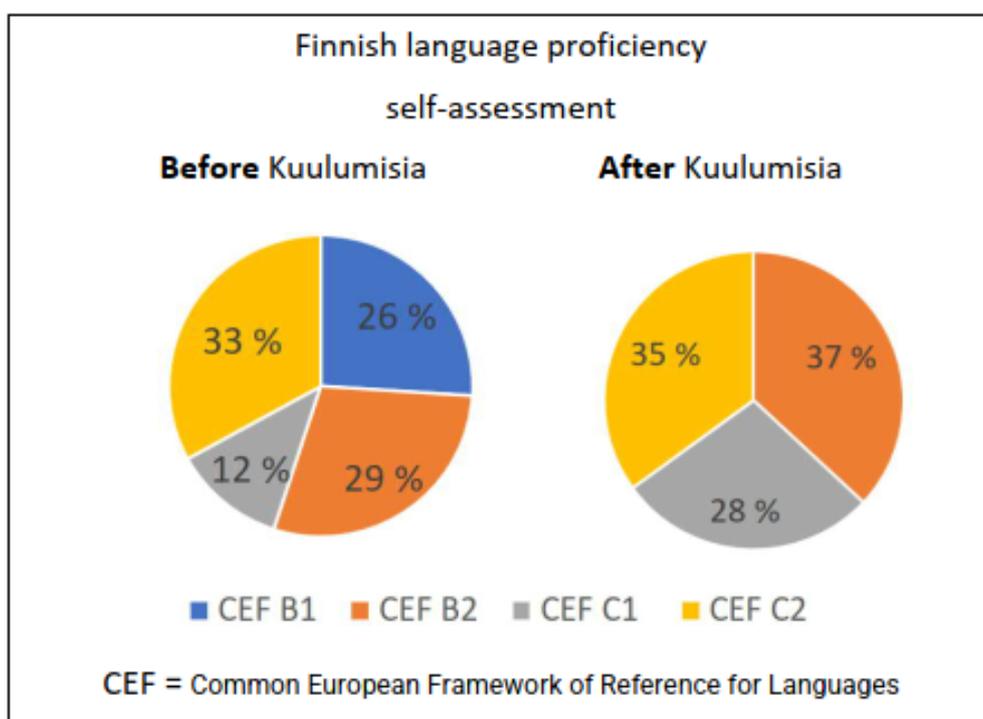
Vierailijoiden käynnit olivat minulle erittäin hyödyllisiä, koska minulla oli paljon tietoa kuulemalla muiden kokemuksia heidän opintojensa ja työnsä aikana Suomessa, mikä antoi minulle kannustimen edetä.

Having guest visitors was very useful for me because I got a lot of information listening to their experiences during their studies and work in Finland, and gave me the inspiration to go on.

Since university students represent a privileged group of people, those who come from outside may not view their path to university studies and academic communities possible. These encounters were meaningful and empowering for students, helping them to see themselves as prospective professionals (Yli-Jokipii & Vuorio, 2020).

**4.2.3 Academic literacies develop during the studies**

The inspection of both formal and informal language learning in the project Kuulumisia survey also clearly shows that when exposed to the language in a linguistically responsive working environment, academic literacies develop during the studies. When students assessed their own skills in the Finnish language before the course, as well as after one year of it, most of the students reported that their skills had improved (see Figure 2). The most notable development was seen in the cohort that assessed their skills to be at the lowest level (B1) at the beginning. Every participant reached at least the B2 level by the end of the training.



**Figure 2.** Self-assessment of Finnish skills before and after the Kuulumisia teacher training cycle.

Language studies in integration training usually include only Finnish or Swedish depending on the place of residence in Finland. In both AKVA program and JYU.INTEGRA program, however, English is included in the programs. In Finland, English is widely used in academic contexts and expert work. The aim is to support the students' university studies and employment in their field of expertise. Similarly, this demonstrates multilingual practices: how languages are used in parallel both in teaching and learning. Students acknowledged the value of English also for their future studies. However, sometimes studying various subjects in two languages concurrently was difficult. Excerpt 11 illustrates not only this challenge but also how simultaneously learning various skills in different language can prepare oneself for the next phase:

**Excerpt 13.** JYU.INTEGRA student, vlog entry.

ensiksi Integra on opettanut minut tunnistamaan vahvuuteni ja heikkouteni akateemisessa tilanteessa. olen oppinut monia asioita, kuten oppimispäiväkirjan kirjoittaminen tai referaatin kirjoittaminen ja myös englannin kielen oppitunnit, olen oppinut miten lukea ja ajatella kriittisesti [- -] vaikka minulla on ollut vaikeaa ja joskus vaikeaa ja, haastavaa. mielestäni se oli ja on hyödyllistä ja valmisti minua seuraavaan vaiheeseen.

firstly, Integra has taught me to recognize my strengths and weaknesses in academic situations, I've learned many things, like writing a learning diary or summary and also English lessons, I've learned how to read and think critically [- -] although it has been hard for me and sometimes hard and challenging. I think it was and is useful and prepared me for the next phase.

In addition to Finnish and English, students are encouraged to use their entire language repertoire in learning. Utilizing all languages in the classroom, and during the learning process, at once enhances learning literacies and field-specific content. Furthermore, such fluid language practices, translanguaging, support mutual understanding and promote adult learners' expert roles in multilingual classrooms (Garcia & Lin, 2017). Students also realize the importance of recognizing strengths and weaknesses regarding academic literacies. This shows development as a learner, summoning a readiness to continue her beyond the program. Positive experiences of academic studies in Finnish create a sense of accomplishment and of self-efficacy.

The data from these three programs support the previously mentioned assumption that when the learning environment is linguistically and culturally responsive, it offers excellent opportunities to learn both language and content simultaneously. To advance the assumption further, learning effectiveness was enhanced through the principles of language awareness and through socialization into academic literacies. This leads to rethinking language requirements for application to universities.

## 5 Conclusions and discussion

We have investigated the challenges confronting well-educated adult migrants' who seek access to higher education in Finland. With three data sets we inspected how universities consider migrants' access challenges, and the actions they perform to remedy the situation. By analyzing three integration education programs, we have identified practices that improve accessibility, but we have

also found areas requiring further development. To be sure, as insufficient language skills are often seen as a minimum threshold for access, we have scrutinized practices that focus on supporting socialization into academic literacy practices from an early phase.

In light of our results, Finnish universities and their key actors that implement policies concerning access of adult migrants rely strongly on interpretation of equality as similar treatment of everyone. The interpretation is widely echoed in problematic discourse about migrants' inadequate language skills as the main obstacle to access. The emphasis on sameness obscures structural obstacles that hinder adult migrants' opportunities to apply to, access and successfully complete a higher education programme and then to achieve positions as gainfully educated professionals in the Finnish labor market.

The results also show that there are actors that recognize the structural inequalities and work for systemic changes for better inclusion of migrant students. Those are people who actively work with migrant students and participate in developing practices and entire programs for this group. However, such development work runs the risk of remaining marginal because it is mainly done in short-term projects, with little connection to the faculties and disciplinary programs (see also Airas et al., 2019; Yli-Jokipii & Vuorio, 2020). The short time frame of the project-based programs also narrows migrants' opportunities and time window for language learning. To make development work more influential and sustainable requires involving all actors within all facets of the higher education process, with much collaboration.

Based on our study, we suggest changes in the ideological, structural, and practical levels to support migrants' equal access to higher education. First, we need an updated understanding about equity and equal access, one which allows us to better identify practices that systematically discriminate adult migrants. As well, stronger implementation of legislation related to equality and non-discrimination laws that obligate universities to provide equal access is called for.

Second, we need a more dynamic understanding of language skills and language learning that is alert to the development of academic literacies. Our results show that academic literacies can be enhanced in linguistically and culturally responsive environments where integrated language and subject studies, language-aware pedagogy, and translanguaging promote socialization into academic literacy practices. Accordingly, it is necessary to re-evaluate formal language requirements for accessing degree programs. Universities should cease using inadequate language skills as a pretext to exclude migrants when they are ill-prepared to change the structures (see also Piller, 2021). Entrance exams are also an example of restraining structures and they need to be modified to be more accessible for all. However, lowering language requirements and modifying entrance exams requires systematic support for socializing into academic literacy practices and communities during the studies, to avoid the accumulation of challenges during degree studies. This approach demands cooperation among departments and language educators. Better support would benefit everyone, not only migrant students. Institutions of higher education could re-evaluate their working practices and learn how to be more responsive and more sustainable in the global era.

Third, as the national recommendations for integration education, developed in university studies as part of the integration path program (JYU.INTEGRA 2019, 2021) argue, it is crucial that highly educated migrants gain access to academic

communities and literacy practices in the early phases of formal integration time and Finnish language learning. Participation in academic literacy practices (oral, written, and multimodal) is a prerequisite for learning (see Duff, 2010, 2019). Focusing on Finnish language skills, however, is not enough because access to and succeeding in higher education program requires academic literacy skills in English as well. Considering the availability of academic-level language studies, universities must take better responsibility for organizing advanced-level language education for migrants. Improved cooperation among universities would enable closer integration of content and language learning and more courses for the advanced students. It is also necessary for universities to assume more responsibility in organizing integration training for adult migrants who have completed or are eligible for higher education. Expanding universities' role for integration education requires changes in the level of education policy and budgeting, because traditional universities are not responsible for preparatory education in the same way universities of applied sciences are.

Fourth, inclusive practices, such as enhancing accessibility and providing sufficient support for academic literacy learning during the program, are beneficial not only for adult migrants but for students and learners of all kinds, including young migrants, who have completed part of their primary and secondary education in Finland. Similarly, working in mixed student groups in culturally and linguistically responsive learning environments contributes to the skills and knowledge of both L1 and L2 speakers. By creating models of inclusive higher education, institutions can support all learners to gain the competence to live and prosper in a global world with increasing diversity and develop abilities that are prerequisite for sustainable societies (Kallonen et al., 2020; Yli-Jokipii & Vuorio, 2020).

An observable risk in inclusive education is that policy jargon and superficial solutions overrule deeper structural changes. To make inclusion a true priority requires a systematic approach on how the processes of integration education, employment services, higher education, and the labor market together shape opportunities for adult migrants. Moreover, it is necessary that the solutions are informed by a holistic lens that recognizes adult migrants' life situations, needs and aspirations and also their prior skills and qualifications. While adult migrants must obtain new contextual skills to survive in the Finnish context, they can also provide fresh knowledge and skills (Yli-Jokipii & Vuorio, 2020). Moreover, it is crucial that the solutions in each phase of the integration process are sustainable for the individual migrants as well as for society.

Our focus has been on language and access to higher education. It would be important, however, to also investigate guidance and counselling services to better understand their role in the process. In addition, the experiences of employed migrant alumni who have made it through the system as well as those of migrant scholars and staff members in universities are potent situations worthy of further investigation. Such lines of investigation could expand the systematic and holistic understanding of the nature of inclusion and exclusion in Finnish higher education.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1. Transcription symbols.*

- . pause
- cut-off of the preceding word
- [- -] cut-off the preceding sentences
- , continuing (rising/level) intonation
- () transcriber's comment

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