

# Unpacking “the system”: Multi-level governance gaps in the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees

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## Abstract

A plethora of government- and non-government actors are involved in the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees, forming a complex “system” that is difficult to navigate for integration actors and refugees. Based on interviews with 32 labour market integration actors in Sweden, this article examines multi-level governance gaps in the wake of the simultaneous centralization and decentralization of labour market preparation services. It examines various “steps” in the labour market integration process to gain a more holistic perspective of “the system”, and identifies governance gaps in each step. The article finds that the devolution of services has opened up participatory spaces for non-government actors, but narrowly defined mandates and short-term funding mechanisms hamper cooperation within and between territorial levels of policy implementation.

## INTRODUCTION

The labour market integration of immigrants has a high priority in immigrant-receiving states as their governments regard employment as a means for newcomers to be economically self-sufficient and to participate in the receiving society (Ferris, 2020). Government actors and non-government actors have developed various initiatives to help immigrants find gainful employment. Some of these efforts specifically target persons

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with refugee background, who tend to have the lowest employment rates compared to family reunification migrants, labour migrants, and the native-born population (see Martín et al., 2016; OECD, 2016 for refugee employment rates in Europe).

This article focuses on the labour market integration of *highly skilled* refugees, defined as persons whose asylum claims have been approved and who have completed a tertiary education. They are more often employed below their level of expertise and in precarious employment compared to voluntary migrants and native-born workers (Damas De Matos & Liebig, 2014; Desiderio, 2016). This issue deserves more attention as a sizeable number of refugees are highly educated. In the European Union, one in five working-age refugees has completed a tertiary education (OECD, 2016). In Sweden, the case study for this article, over 30 per cent of refugees had pursued at least some post-secondary education in 2019 (Statistics Sweden, 2021). Unfortunately, no recent data are available for completed tertiary education.

Scholars have attributed the unemployment and underemployment of highly skilled refugees to health issues, a lack of recognition of professional qualifications and skills, language and cultural barriers, limited professional networks and work experience in the receiving country, and discrimination by employers (Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, & Spehar, 2019; Wehrle et al., 2018). This article argues that a governance perspective should be added to better understand the institutional obstacles that slow down or impede refugees' re-entry into their professions.

This study focuses on highly skilled refugees in Sweden, a country that took in the most asylum seekers per capita of any OECD country between 2012 and 2015 (OECD, 2016). While the Swedish government funds fast-tracks and supplementary programmes for professions that are experiencing labour shortages (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2022; Swedish Public Employment Service, 2019), it takes considerable time for highly skilled refugees to re-enter their professions—if at all.

This article seeks to unpack the labour market integration “system”, a term used by informants to refer to the complex institutional architecture of labour market integration initiatives. Analytically “the system” refers to the institutional setting and organizational design within which policy implementation takes place. These implementation structures allocate decision-making power and responsibility and shape actors' roles in the implementation process (Sager & Gofen, 2022). In an implementation structure, collaboration between actors is affected by the vertical steering capacity of governmental units and their willingness to collaborate with local public and private actors (ibid.). This article uses multi-level governance as its analytical framework to (1) identify actors and organizations that are involved in the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees, and their territorial involvement; (2) analyse “vertical” and “horizontal” modes of cooperation in “the system”; and (3) identify governance gaps.

This article also uses Charbit's (2011, 2020) multi-level governance gaps framework. These gaps are the result of coordination challenges between levels of government, caused by the decentralization (and sometimes also recentralization) of public services and the mutual dependency of levels of government (Charbit, 2020). This article takes a broader perspective on multi-level governance, focusing on coordination challenges between public, private, and voluntary actors, both “vertically” (between different territorial levels) and “horizontally” (at the same territorial level). Cooperation along both axes is necessary to manage complexity effectively.

Theoretically, the article contributes to structure-agency debates in the refugee integration literature. While other studies have examined the agency of particular actors at a single territorial level, such as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010), voluntary actors or NGOs (Fehsenfeld & Levinsen, 2019; Garkisch et al., 2017), this article investigates integration actors at multiple territorial levels as well as their (lack of) cooperation.

Empirically, the article focuses on highly skilled refugees, who face a unique set of institutional obstacles to employment that require specialized initiatives (Blasko, 2023; Mozetič, 2022b; van Riemsdijk, 2023a; Van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2022). The article aims to provide a holistic understanding of the labour market integration process, exploring the governance challenges during the asylum-seeking period, labour market preparation initiatives, and bridging programmes and fast-tracks. Using a Swedish case study, the article analyses multi-level governance gaps that shape the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees.

The case study of Sweden speaks to broader issues raised in the migration literature, namely the (re)centralization of migration governance and the devolution of service provision to lower levels of decision-making. Integration efforts have oscillated between centralized decision-making at the national level and more flexible, local solutions. The existing literature has shown that these governance models have specific strengths and weaknesses. With its focus on vertical and horizontal modes of governance, this article aims to provide a better understanding of the institutional factors that may hamper the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees.

The article is organized as follows. It first presents a multi-level governance perspective on labour market integration in general, and Sweden in particular. Thereafter, the methods are introduced, followed by an analysis of the labour market integration “system” in Sweden. In conclusion, the article discusses its contributions to existing literatures on labour market integration and highly skilled refugees.

## A MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE ON REFUGEE LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION

Migration- and immigrant integration policies were traditionally the responsibility of the central state, informed by concerns about national identity and an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983). The governance and delivery of labour market integration services, however, takes place at several territorial levels. Labour market integration has now become a multi-level policy issue that can involve the EU, national governments, and regional and local government- and non-government actors (Scholten & Penninx, 2016). National integration policies tend to have a symbolic function (i.e. politicizing of national identity and belonging), while local policies are more aimed at pragmatic problem-solving (Scholten & Penninx, 2016).

Research on labour market integration used to be informed by methodological nationalism, focusing on national-level policies and institutions that govern international migration and integration (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Recent scholarship has critiqued this research for failing to take subnational differences in integration practices into account. In response, a “local turn” now examines cities' integration policies and practices (see for example Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Penninx, 2009; Scholten, 2013; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017).

Researchers have also called for migration scholars to examine relations between different levels of governance, rather than studying either the EU, national, or local level (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018). A multi-level governance perspective enables researchers to take multiple levels of policymaking into account, exploring actions “from above” (the state, the EU, and supranational institutions), “from below” (subnational governments and non-government actors), as well as “sideways” (public-private networks) (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018).

Multi-level governance refers to the dispersion of authority away from the central state upward to supranational institutions, downward to subnational institutions, and sideways to public-private networks (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). In order for an issue to be considered multi-level, at least three levels of government need to be involved (Piattoni, 2015), in this case the national, regional, and local level. In addition, actors involved in multi-level governance are mutually dependent (Charbit, 2020).

In the shift from *government* to *governance* that has taken place since the late 1980s, the central state has shared its decision-making power with non-government actors at various territorial levels. This results in “complex, heterogeneous and non-hierarchical networks among autonomous and yet interdependent actors” (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018: 1998), requiring a high level of horizontal and vertical coordination (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). This is also the case in the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees, as will be discussed in more detail in the analysis section.

Scholarship of immigration governance has focused predominantly on the vertical aspects of multi-level governance (the intergovernmental dimension), paying less attention to horizontal cooperation and relations between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of governance (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020: 2). The authors argue that a

study of both axes provides a more comprehensive understanding of the governance of immigration issues, which this article aims to do.

The professional life of highly skilled refugees is governed by national asylum regulations, language requirements, recognition guidelines for prior learning, authorization requirements in the case of registered professions, and labour market regimes. Each of these regimes has its own laws and regulations, which may duplicate, overlap, or contradict each other, resulting in a complex labour market integration “system” that is difficult to navigate for integration actors and highly skilled refugees.

Multi-level governance “gaps” occur as the result of a lack of vertical (and sometimes also horizontal) cooperation between actors involved in a particular policy issue. Charbit (2011, 2020) has identified seven types of multi-level governance gaps: an information gap (which results from information asymmetry between levels of government); a capacity gap (a lack of knowledge or infrastructure to complete tasks); a funding gap (caused by unstable or insufficient revenues); a policy gap (due to policy silos); an administrative gap (caused by a mismatch between functional areas and administrative scales for policymaking); an objective gap (when national and local actors' opposing objectives impede cooperation); and an accountability gap (when practices are not transparent). The first step in remedying these gaps is to gain a better understanding of “the system” (in terms of “who does what”) (Charbit, 2020) and the causes of these “gaps” – both of which this article aims to do.

## LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN SWEDEN: A MULTI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

The Swedish government funds a 2-year introduction programme for refugees that aims to provide an introduction to Swedish society and help prepare refugees for the labour market. The introduction programme has been studied in terms of policy development and implementation (Andersson Joona et al., 2017; Emilsson, 2014; Valenta & Bunar, 2010), its economic outcomes (Andersson Joona, 2019; Irastorza & Bevelander, 2017; Qi et al., 2021; Swedish National Audit Office, 2015), and refugees' experiences with the programme (Bucken-Knapp, Fakh, & Spehar, 2019; Mozetič, 2022a; Spehar, 2021). The literature is, however, inconclusive regarding highly skilled refugees' experiences in the introduction programme and other labour market integration initiatives.

Blasko (2023) finds that the multiple offerings of labour market training programmes can make it difficult for refugees to choose the “right” programme. While they are supposed to select programmes on their own, they may lack information about the content and benefit of the available offerings. This may result in taking unnecessary courses.

Employment officers and job coaches can be crucial actors in helping refugees navigate “the system”, as Mozetič (2022b) shows in a study of refugee healthcare professionals in Malmö. While informants in Mozetič's study reported that PES employment officers provided the information they needed to pursue their professional goals, some refugees in other studies (Blasko, 2023; Bucken-Knapp, Fakh, & Spehar, 2019; Spehar, 2021) felt that their PES employment officers did not meet their support needs. When guides are absent or unhelpful, other actors can become important sources of information. This article will highlight the roles of County Administrative Boards, professional organizations, trade unions, and voluntary actors in helping highly skilled refugees understand and navigate “the system”.

The organization of Sweden's labour market integration initiatives is the result of major rescaling efforts. Like other states, Sweden has experienced a shift from central command-and-control authority (government) to the diffusion of political power to vertical and horizontal territorial levels of decision-making (governance) since the 1980s. Influenced by new public management (NPM) ideas, public administrators adopted tools from private industry to make service delivery more efficient and effective. These tools included privatization, deregulation (in f.ex. health care, education, finance, and housing markets), customer choice, contracting-out of welfare services,

privatization, and performance management (Montin, 2016; Sundström, 2016). These NPM strategies have been applied to labour market integration initiatives as well.

The governance of labour market integration of refugees has oscillated between centralized and local control. In 1968, Sweden implemented its first immigrant integration policy, aiming for immigrants to have the same living standards as native-born. The first policy for language training and civics courses for refugees was implemented in the 1970s, coordinated by the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES). In 1985, the PES implemented an introduction programme for refugees that provided language training, civics courses, and labour market preparation initiatives. The responsibility for the introduction programme was devolved to the municipalities, guided by the assumption that they were knowledgeable about local labour market needs and could provide flexible services (Emilsson, 2015). The lack of central coordination, however, resulted in regional differences in access to and quality of services. In addition, critics argued that the municipalities prioritized social assistance over labour market activities, resulting in low employment rates (*ibid.*).

In response to these critiques, the centre-right government implemented an Establishment Reform (*etableringslagen*) on December 1, 2010 (Bill 2010:197). The reform transferred the responsibility for the introduction programme back to the PES, aiming to speed up refugees' entry into the labour market with a more centralized and efficient system (Gebhardt, 2016). The (re-)centralization also signalled that the state took control during the perceived "crisis" of integration (*ibid.*). Since 2010, the PES has coordinated the introduction programme and contracted-out labour market preparation services to private actors, while the municipalities are responsible for the provision of language training and civics courses.

Swedish municipalities are responsible for a range of social services for refugees, including housing and the administration of language training and civics courses. Municipalities in Sweden have a high level of autonomy but the central state retains decision-making power in integration policymaking (Lidén & Nyhlén, 2022). Regional councils are responsible for health care, transportation, and regional development, as well as skill supply in these arenas.

County Administrative Boards assist municipalities with immigrant integration, and establish and maintain networks between integration actors (Regulation 2016:1363). These networking activities include information sharing, cooperation, and agenda-setting. County Administrative Boards represent the national government at the regional level, set objectives for sustainable development, and inform the government about the counties' needs (County Administrative Board Uppsala, 2021; Government of Sweden, 2021).

Qvist (2016) has identified a market- and collaborative mode of governance in the 2010 establishment reform. He argues that this mixed mode of governance can result in institutional tensions, and ultimately in failure, owing to a lack of coordination and cooperation between public and private actors. The market logic, influenced by NPM ideology, consists of the contracting-out of public services to private actors by the PES and municipalities. This mode of governance can fail due to inadequacies in the market and inefficiencies. A collaborative mode of governance encompasses ideas exchange and mutual learning but can result in talk rather than tangible results.

In a study of the role of cities in civic integration programmes, Gebhardt (2016) finds that cities in Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands have a limited role in immigrant integration. The centralized governance of the programmes reduces actors' ability to flexibly respond to local integration needs and migration trends, requires considerable coordination, and involves a large bureaucracy and high cost (Gebhardt, 2016). He concludes that the centralization of integration policy has increased financial resources for integration programmes, but also resulted in more bureaucracy and less focus on solving practical problems or meeting specific needs (*ibid.*).

The labour market integration of highly skilled refugees in Sweden encompasses both the governance strengths and weaknesses identified in the research above. The administrative responsibility for the introduction programme rests with the PES, which administers the programme at the national level. Municipalities are responsible for the provision of Swedish language training and civics courses, which are contracted-out to local private actors. While this seems to be a clear-cut division of responsibilities, the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees involves a large number of actors who operate at various territorial levels, steered by different mandates and funding sources, resulting in a complex and fragmented governance structure.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was designed as a case study to examine the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees and its multi-level governance gaps. I followed the research methodology for governance gaps as developed by the OECD's Regional Development Policy Committee (Charbit, 2011, 2020). The first step consisted of “institutional mapping”, which identifies the actors involved in the policy issue, and their roles and relations with other actors. In the second step, I diagnosed governance gaps.

For the institutional mapping, I identified actors and institutions involved in the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees, using journal articles, policy documents, and Internet searches. I then interviewed the identified actors about their integration activities and cooperation with other integration actors. We discussed perceived governance gaps – what they consisted of, why they may have emerged, and successful vertical and horizontal cooperation.

I asked each informant to provide contact information for other integration actors. This snowball sampling method, combined with Internet searches, provided a sample of actors and institutions at the national, regional, and local scale. For each identified actor/ institution, I interviewed one or more persons who worked with integration initiatives for highly skilled refugees. The main criterion for inclusion was that informants were knowledgeable about these initiatives. Some of the interviews can be considered expert interviews, while others predominantly aimed to obtain information about the organization's integration efforts and (lack of) cooperation with other actors.

The methodology has two possible shortcomings. First, integration initiatives in Sweden's largest cities are overrepresented in the sample. However, these cities have the largest number of refugees (Statistics Sweden, 2020) and offer specialized integration initiatives. Second, it could be argued that integration actors' perceptions of governance gaps do not reflect the perspectives of the organizations that they represent. To address this issue, I removed personal opinions from the dataset. In addition, I validated the research findings in a meeting with the research project's advisory board, which consisted of highly skilled refugees and integration actors (see <https://www.kultgeog.uu.se/research-en/researchprojects/integration/samverkan/>).

I conducted interviews with 32 labour market integration actors, including eight coordinators for fast-tracks and bridging programmes, three public servants in municipalities, a representative for the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, four representatives for County Administrative Boards, six representatives for the PES, two coordinators for profession-specific language courses, two private companies that provide labour market preparation services, a representative for an employer organization, and five individuals who were engaged in volunteer-provided labour market preparation initiatives.

The interviews were conducted between October 2019 and April 2021, meeting in-person until March 2020 and thereafter on Zoom as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted in Swedish and lasted approximately 1 h each. I also interviewed highly skilled refugees about their experiences with re-entering their professions in Sweden (Van Riemsdijk, 2023b), but this article focuses on the involvement of state, private, and voluntary actors in the labour market integration process.

I conducted two rounds of analysis. In the first round, I mapped integration actors, their level(s) of authority, (lack of) cooperation with other actors, and multi-level governance gaps, according to the methodology described above. In the second round of coding, I identified governance gaps using Charbit's (2020) seven types of governance gaps (discussed in Section “A Multi-level governance perspective on refugee labour market integration”).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: UNPACKING “THE SYSTEM”

In interviews conducted for this research project, informants often mentioned the complexities of “the system” when discussing the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees. Several informants commented that they, as well as the highly skilled refugees that they work with, experienced difficulties with navigating “the system”.

They also found it challenging to gain an overview of all available labour market integration efforts. A representative for an employer organization explains:

You have your little piece of the puzzle, every actor, every authority has a piece of the puzzle but does not see the full picture how this trajectory could work for an individual, so that is well the conclusion, for it to work we really have to work together.

(representative for an employer organization, June 3, 2020)

The quote illustrates the fragmentation of “the system” and the importance of cooperation to make it work. One of the key issues in the governance system, however, is a lack of vertical and horizontal cooperation between integration actors, as the analysis below will show. It is not necessarily a lack of actors' willingness to cooperate, but rather an issue of narrowly defined mandates, short funding cycles, and a system that is both centralized and decentralized at the same time.

The next sections analyse the governance of labour market integration for highly skilled refugees during five “steps” in the professional re-entry trajectory: the asylum-seeking period, the introduction programme (personal introduction plan, language training, and labour market preparation initiatives and mentoring programmes), and continuing education. These “steps”, however, are rarely linear and chronological (Cangià et al., 2021). Each section shortly explains the organization of a labour market integration effort, followed by an analysis of existing governance gaps. The sections also identify “successful” cooperation in labour market integration when actors fill vertical and/ or horizontal governance gaps.

## The asylum-seeking period

In Sweden, services for asylum seekers are provided by national actors (who make decisions on asylum claims and fund integration initiatives), regional stakeholders (County Administrative Boards that facilitate cooperation between national, regional and local actors), and local actors (municipalities, voluntary, and private actors that provide local services). The vertical and horizontal cooperation between these actors requires a large bureaucracy.

During the asylum-seeking period, service providers predominantly aim to meet asylum seekers' immediate needs such as housing, psychosocial support, and healthcare. Few initiatives specifically target highly skilled asylum seekers, as it is uncertain whether they will be granted the right to stay. These persons can benefit from labour market preparation initiatives while they are waiting for a decision on their asylum claim, enabling them to turn “professional dead-time” (Mozetič, 2022b: 425) into “productive” time.

Some non-government actors provide labour market preparation activities that specifically target highly skilled asylum seekers. A key funding source for these initiatives are Early initiatives for asylum seekers (TIA) grants, awarded by County Administrative Boards. TIA grants fund initiatives that provide Swedish language training, knowledge about Swedish society and the labour market, or health information. TIA funding priorities are determined annually by the national government in a regulation letter (interview with a representative for a County Administrative Board, April 14, 2021), and funding is awarded for 1 year. These short-term funding cycles make it difficult to develop long-term, sustainable solutions (for challenges with short-term funding, see Fehsenfeld & Levinsen, 2019).

This was the case for a four-month programme to prepare asylum seekers with a medical degree for the professional aptitude test for doctors. The four-month programme provided intensive Swedish professional language training, lectures, an internship, and advising. In order to offer the programme, the Swedish Medical Association established vertical funding relations with regional (TIA) and national (the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs) funding sources (Swedish Medical Association, n.d.). A funding gap emerged when the short-term funding ran out, resulting in a capacity gap.



Engineer to Engineer (E2E), a project initiated by Engineers Without Borders, was also funded by a TIA grant. The project staff organizes workshops to prepare asylum seekers with an engineering background for the Swedish labour market (interview with a coordinator for Engineer to Engineer, October 7, 2020). After the TIA funding ended, the E2E programme staff secured other funding and the programme now supports asylum seekers, refugees and voluntary migrants and has scaled up its efforts in several Swedish cities (interview with a representative for E2E, October 7, 2020).

## Vertical cooperation between integration actors

Websites can bridge vertical policy implementation gaps by connecting national integration actors with local users. One such example is the website [informationsverige.se](http://informationsverige.se) (Information Sweden), which provides information about government authorities, offers basic Swedish language training and information about Swedish society, and informs about procedures for the translation of diplomas and recognition of prior learning. The website is available in Swedish, English, Somali, Spanish, French, Arabic, Dari, Persian, Russian, and Tigrinya.

The Information Sweden website is the result of horizontal and vertical cooperation between integration actors. The creation and maintenance of the website is funded by the Ministry of Employment, and Västra Götaland County is responsible for coordinating the initiative together with other County Administrative Boards. In the creation and updating of the website, the County Administrative Boards vertically collaborate with national actors, including the Swedish Migration Agency and the PES. They also horizontally connect municipalities, asylum seekers, and refugees, thus operating at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of multi-level governance (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018). Its long-term success, however, depends on continuous funding commitments.

## The personal introduction plan

A person who has been granted refugee status can enrol in a 2-year introduction programme to learn about Swedish society and prepare for the labour market. The person meets with a PES employment officer to create a personal introduction plan for maximum 24 months, usually consisting of language training, civics courses, and labour market preparation activities (Wikström & Ahnlund, 2018). The employment officer can arrange for diplomas and transcripts to be translated into Swedish, inform about the recognition process for foreign qualifications, and explain the application process for recognition of specialist qualifications. The information that the job seeker receives, however, depends on the employment officer's engagement and knowledge of available initiatives (Mozetič, 2022a).

In the creation of the introduction plan, the local PES horizontally coordinates with municipalities for language training and civics courses, and with private service providers for labour market preparation activities. These coordinating roles are, however, negatively affected by current restructuring efforts in the PES after the agency failed to meet the performance targets set by the central government (Lindahl, 2019, Government decision 2019-05-09).

The budget cuts and restructuring efforts in the PES have resulted in capacity gaps as the organization struggles to fulfil its mandate. A public servant in a municipality explains:

Now we're getting again into whose responsibility it is. In some way if not the PES [takes responsibility for the integration of highly skilled refugees], um, the municipality steps in and does the job of the PES than maybe the shortcomings in the PES are not visible and then they do not get funding to improve their services [in our municipality] and that is a balancing act. ... The municipality has a



responsibility but it is also wrong to step in and take over when a state agency is unable to carry out its mission.

(interview with a public servant in a municipality, June 10, 2020)

This case illustrates a lack of vertical cooperation between a centrally-governed state agency and local service delivery, as well as a failure in the collaborative mode of governance (Qvist, 2017). As discussed in more detail below, local stakeholders are negatively affected by the weakened position of the PES but they are generally unable, or unwilling, to take over the agency's responsibility.

## Language training

All foreign-born residence permit holders in Sweden are eligible for courses in Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), offered free of charge. These courses are funded by the national government and administered by municipalities. Some larger municipalities also offer profession-specific language programmes for highly skilled migrants. An example is the Swedish for Professionals (SFX) programme in Stockholm County. Programme participants learn how the profession works in Sweden, attend lectures related to their profession, and participate in site visits (interview with a SFX coordinator, January 24, 2020).

The Swedish for Professionals (SFX) programme in Stockholm County is funded and administered by vertical and horizontal collaborations between public actors. All municipalities in Stockholm County (*Stockholms län*) have signed a cooperation agreement, obliging each member to pay tuition for their residents who participate in SFX programmes (SFX, 2020). The County Administrative Board and Stockholm Regional Council vertically connect central state authorities (the creators of the curriculum for SFI, which SFX follows while using profession-specific texts) with regional and municipal authorities in the delivery of language courses.

Despite these vertical and horizontal coordinating efforts, SFX encounters several challenges: A lack of formal responsibility and ownership for SFX; competing logics between actors; competition between programmes offered by the municipalities and the PES; and dual steering (Gougoulakis & Lagercrantz All, 2020). These factors highlight the challenges in multi-level governance "without clear dominance of one level" (Scholten & Penninx, 2016: 94).

## Labour market preparation initiatives and mentoring programmes

Several programmes have been specifically designed for migrants with an academic degree, including a language training and internship programme for academics (*korta vägen*; the short route), offered by a private company; and an internship programme for foreign-born persons with a degree in engineering, architecture, business, or science (*jobbsprånget*; the job leap), offered by the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences and funded by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation. Immigrant job seekers can participate in these programmes free of charge if a PES officer approves their participation.

However, the PES's responsibility to allocate participants to labour market preparation initiatives has resulted in policy gaps in some instances. For example, a private company that offers a labour market preparation programme depends on the PES to allocate eligible participants to the programme, but the company has been informed late about enrolment numbers. This uncertainty makes it difficult to plan for staffing, classroom reservations, and computers (interview with a private company, August 17, 2020). These issues illuminate the challenges of a centrally-steered and -financed introduction programme and the powerlessness of local actors in the decision-making process (Emilsson, 2015; Qvist, 2017). The gap in vertical cooperation results in this case in a policy gap.

## Vertical and horizontal cooperation

In the case of vertical and/or horizontal policy implementation gaps, voluntary organizations and individuals can fill some of these. For example, mentoring programmes provide a vertical linkage between national professional organizations and local professionals. It can, however, be challenging to maintain these voluntary efforts over time.

This was the case for the mentoring programme *Farmaceutkompis* (Pharmacist Buddy), which was founded by Pharmacists Without Borders in 2015. Over time, interest from volunteers waned, and the programme was ended in 2019 (interview with former programme coordinator, February 1, 2021). The Swedish Medical Association has been more successful in maintaining its mentoring programme for foreign-born doctors (Swedish Medical Association, 2020). In 2019, the first year when the programme was offered, the Swedish Medical Association received development funds from the PES to design the initiative. The Swedish Medical Association has since then funded the programme by itself (interview with an employee of the Association, March 29, 2021).

Another example is Project SENNA, an initiative that aims to speed up foreign-born pharmacists' accreditation and employment. Project SENNA is a cooperation between the trade union Swedish Pharmacists, two employer associations, and two trade associations. Project SENNA provides information about accreditation requirements and supplementary training, it has developed online study tools for the aptitude test, and offers advising, study visits, communication training, and seminars about the pharmacist profession (interview with a programme coordinator, March 15, 2021). The project is funded by the PES's promotional funds for social partners but a funding gap may emerge as the programme manager has to apply for new funding each year.

## Continuing education

After the completion of the introduction programme, the next step is to seek employment or enrol in continuing education. Like Swedish-born students, refugees are eligible for grants and loans from the Swedish Board of Student Finance (CSN). They may, however, encounter difficulties finding information about the next “steps” required for re-entering their professions (Blasko, 2023).

When refugees have completed the introduction programme and are considering the next step, a governance gap emerges when no actor is responsible for career guidance. Refugees no longer qualify for assistance from a PES employment officer, a policy gap also noted by Spehar (2021). An informant explains what happens after participants finish the municipality-funded profession-specific language programme:

There is a small gap, one can say, in the system that these persons are left a little alone to manage by themselves. No one takes over... Then the question is how much we should do. It is always a balancing act as we offer language training, that is our [mandate], we have a responsibility until then, to Swedish 3. But it is clear that we see a huge need for something afterwards but we have also understood that it is not us who should be there because our mission has ended. But it would be nice for us to be able to refer students to something or to be able to show what is there. So we try to identify [opportunities].

(interview with a coordinator for a profession-specific language programme, March 16, 2020)

In this case, the programme coordinator's ability to provide career guidance is restricted by the municipality's narrowly defined mandate.

## Vertical and horizontal cooperation between integration actors

One tool that could bridge the identified policy gap is the PES-funded website [vagentilljobben.se](http://vagentilljobben.se) (the path to employment). The website shows professional pathways for teachers and medical professionals. It lists requirements for education, language proficiency, and licensing. The website was developed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) in collaboration with trade unions in the respective fields. The success of the website, however, depends on migrants' access to the site. As the information is provided in Swedish, an information seeker needs to know Swedish to find it. In addition, long-term financing from the Swedish PES is required to keep the information up to date.

Another example of vertical cooperation are fast-tracks (*snabbspår*) that aim to speed up highly skilled refugees' re-entry into their professions. These initiatives, started in 2015 and now numbering over 30 tracks, provide profession-specific courses and on-the-job training, and result in a professional licence upon completion of the programme (Swedish Public Employment Service, 2023).

The Ministry of Employment has developed the fast-tracks in collaboration with employer organizations and trade unions. The PES contracts with institutions of higher education to develop the curriculum and offer the fast-tracks. The PES also assigns participants to programmes. The latter responsibility has created problems for some fast-tracks when available seats remained vacant. The lack of programme participants contributed to the closure of teacher programmes in Gothenburg and Stockholm (interview with a coordinator for a fast-track, January 28, 2020).

Institutions of higher education also offer complementary programmes (*kompletteringsprogram*, also known as bridging programmes) for registered professions. These programmes are allocated by competitive tender and funded by Ministries. The coordinators of these programmes are responsible for the selection of participants, bypassing the involvement of the PES. They do, however, have to balance the competing logics of the educational requirements set by the Ministry of Education, professional requirements established by the national authorities, as well as their department's academic requirements (interview with a coordinator for a complementary programme, January 10, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

In some ways, the governance gaps identified in this article are specific to the Nordic countries, where labour market integration programmes are largely funded by the public sector (Norbäck & Zapata Campos, 2022). The majority of initiatives discussed are funded by government agencies and County Administrative Boards, who shape labour market integration processes through funding streams and cooperation agreements.

At the same time, Sweden shares a commonality with other countries in its dependency on private actors, voluntary actors, and public institutions in the delivery of integration services. Vertical coordination between public and private actors, and horizontal coordination between public-, private- and voluntary actors, is crucial for the functioning of "the system" (Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

The article has shown the utility of a multi-level governance perspective to gain a better overview of the actors involved, their cooperation, and governance gaps. In addition, it has shown the utility of a *process* perspective. A focus on the "stages" of refugees' labour market re-entry, and the actors involved in each of these, provides a more holistic understanding of the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees. Such a process perspective can be beneficial for studies conducted elsewhere – and for policymakers as well.

While other studies of the integration of refugees in Sweden have also found governance gaps as a result of a lack of cooperation (Emilsson, 2015; Lidén & Nyhlén, 2022; Qvist, 2017), these gaps can have particularly negative outcomes for highly skilled refugees. They depend on specialized integration initiatives to be able to re-enter their

professions, particularly in the case of registered professions. When refugees are unaware of these initiatives, or when specialized assistance is lacking, the re-entry process can be drawn out over time.

The governance implementation gaps identified in this article are likely to be present in other countries as well. The gaps can be attributed to the fragmentation of the integration “system”, as services are funded, administered, and delivered by different actors at different territorial levels. While fragmentation is not necessarily negative – as it may open up spaces for voluntary and private actors to offer specialized services – it becomes a pressing issue when it results in governance gaps that negatively affect refugees and integration actors.

This article has shown that some governance gaps are the result of institutions' narrowly defined mandates—an issue that is little discussed in the existing (multi-level) governance literature. While integration actors are aware of missing links in the labour market trajectories of highly skilled refugees, they may be unable, or unwilling, to address these issues when they fall outside their institutions' defined tasks. In some cases, voluntary actors step in, but they may lose momentum over time. The short-term funding horizon for integration initiatives also poses a limit to horizontal cooperation.

Lastly, it is important to note that there is not one integration “system”, as it was often referred to by informants. In fact, highly skilled refugees and service providers have to navigate a multitude of, and sometimes disconnected or overlapping, systems including the migration regime, the education system, and labour market policies. Each of these “systems” is governed by a different set of actors with different goals, mandates, and funding sources. There is a role for future research to identify these policy silos, to examine how they affect labour market integration, and how refugees negotiate these institutional barriers.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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