Skills, Knowledge, Competence Recognition for TCNs: An Evaluation (Work Package 4)

SWEDISH REPORT

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Wp4 – Skills, Knowledge, Competence Recognition for TCNs: An Evaluation

1) INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the activities and the results of a participatory investigation and evaluation (audit) of the system of skills, knowledge, competence (SKC) assessment and recognition in place in Sweden. Findings suggest areas where the system could be improved. SKC recognition refers to the assessment of both the formal and informal skills of third country nationals (TCNs) residing in Sweden and is applicable across multiple employment sectors.

2) METHODOLOGY

In order to audit the functioning and efficacy of this system this part of the DIVERSE research project undertook ten of key informant interviews (and three workshops with stakeholders involved in the management or implementation of SKC assessment. A stakeholder mapping analysis was conducted (as described in section 3.1).

In addition, ten residents in the Västerbotten region who held third country citizenship and permanent residency status (TCNs) were engaged in this audit of the SKC recognition process. Evaluation involved garnering their feedback and reflections on the SKC recognition process that they had personal experience of. Investigation also took account of their experience of their journey towards employment within Sweden. They provided information on the time taken for SKC recognition, the inputs required from them, their experience of the process and how they were supported, and their analysis on the strengths and weaknesses of the current system. They also indicated where the system might benefit from improvement.

Section 3, below, outlines the findings from this methodology. Section 4 then contains a broader discussion of the SKC system in Sweden and makes some improvement recommendations, based on a cumulative analysis built-up from the findings from work package 3 of this research project, and the views and perceptions of both those doing the validating and those being evaluated (work package 4).

3) FINDINGS

3.1) Current Structure and Relevant Stakeholders

During this evaluation process it became apparent that there was a lack of a clear picture of the system and the stakeholders involved. Not only to our researchers, but also to many of those interviewed who were a part of the system. Many stated that there was an absence of a holistic overview of the entirety of the system and its players. Most people work with, or interact with, a small part of the bigger picture, often split by labour sector. It became no small task to attempt to
map out and clarify how the Swedish system of SKC recognition worked, who was involved, and who had ultimate responsibility.

The research team began to tease out the various threads in the tapestry and created a schematic overview of the organisations and stakeholders within Sweden relevant to SKC recognition and how and where they fit within the system. This was then discussed in workshops with those who conduct validation and those who sub-contract out such assessments, and modified in consultation with these key players. The results of this exercise are depicted visually in Figure 1 in as complete a picture as was possible from the research conducted. Undoubtedly some players and sectors are missing but this diagram nevertheless serves an instructive purpose and helps clarify how the Swedish system operates. It certainly reveals the sheer number of stakeholders and organisations involved at different geographic scales. As the Swedish Government’s job support organisation for all who are unemployed, and for those asylum-derived establishment plans, the Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen, AF) plays a very important role in this web of stakeholders. Their role as a major player in the SKC recognition web has been relatively recent, since 2010. It was at this point that AF was given the mission from the Swedish government to coordinate the country’s SKC assessment and recognition process and guide validation efforts, and to be held accountable for the country’s efforts in this arena (whether it be for Swedes of Swedish heritage or those of immigrant background).

Prior to 2010 SKC recognition was a more decentralised affair with local councils having greater responsibility for the provision and implementation of assessment services. When it concerned immigrants from outside of the EU their line of access to validation went through the Swedish for Immigrant (SFI) languages courses and adult education programmes. The revision of this structure and the allowance of market actors to operate within the assessment process (albeit under commission from the State via AF) was partly a response to difficulties in the old system, a lack of common standards across the nation, and partly a reflection of the Swedish political swing to the right with a more open attitude towards privatisation as a way of providing services. Much of this background and socio-political context was described in the Swedish Country Report for Work Package 3 as part of this DIVERSE research project.

It is also relevant to note here that the structures, stakeholders and models for SKC assessment have been in development for a much longer period of time for the Swedish population. It is a more recent phenomenon that the process has been opened up to immigrants as part of a support strategy trying to improve the likelihood of non-EU residents obtaining employment. The current Swedish SKC system, whilst having a national level coordinator, is implemented locally through AF’s local offices and in contract with multiple local, sectorial players. The guidelines, the models and the judges and evaluators are nationally coordinated but the implementers are local or regional (ie. a centralised design and overview, but a decentralised, market-influenced local implementation).

As a result of assessment services being sub-contracted by AF via the market with various stakeholders the local configuration of stakeholders can change relatively rapidly. This dynamism has implications for local staff capacity and knowledge build-up and loss, and helps to explain why individual employment advisors at AF are not always fully aware of what services and opportunities are available locally or for whom they are applicable. There has been increasing media discussion and political focus at the national level in Sweden on the situation for those highly educated professional
and academic immigrants from outside of the EU who remain stuck in low-skilled employment such as cleaners, bus or taxi drivers or home care. The consequent desire has been expressed to improve and speed up the recognition process for such individuals. In reality for the northern Västerbotten region, which has been the focus of this study at least, there seems to have been more TCN immigrants going through a SKC recognition process who have come through the asylum channel via the Public Employment Service (AF). Possibly in a reflection of the local labour market needs these seem to have been more in the nursing assistant and personal assistance sectors, though there is a local project known as the Short Path (Korta vägen) that focuses on academics.

Figure 1 also highlights diagrammatically where and why people gain entry to an SKC validation. It should be noted that those that enter via the Public Employment Service (which includes sub-contracted projects for academics or teachers) have the cost of validation covered by AF (both fees for SKC assessment and the social support allowance for the unemployed). Those who enter via employers may have their employer help cover costs or they may have to cover the cost themselves. All other entry paths must fund their own access and assessment journey through SKC assessment and any complementary education that is an outcome of the assessment. That there is a need for skilled professionals, especially in the health care sector can also be seen in a growing number of private actors offering recruitment services. According to the coordinator at the county board of health care in Västerbotten, they are contacted several times per month by such private recruitment actors, offering to supply them with foreign competence ready to start working in the health care sector, at a higher cost. Since the validation process and language requirements takes so long for health care professionals (legitimated professions), the higher costs of going through such a private actor can be worthwhile for employers in Sweden.
Figure 1: The Swedish SKC Recognition Stakeholders System

OVERVIEW OF STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SKC RECOGNITION (VALIDERING) SYSTEM IN SWEDEN

KEY

= indicates a government institution
* = also a public institution

National Actors
(Standard setting, validation model design, standard holding, certification)

- Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket)*
- Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolor, MyH)*
- Swedish Council for Higher Education (Uppsala och högskolerädet, UHR)*
- Swedish Higher Education Authority (Uppsala och högskolerädet, UHA)*

- National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (21 medical-related & regulated professions)

- Swedish National Electrical Safety Board (Elektriskhållbarhetsmyndigheten, EHM)*; Central Committee of the Electrical Trade for Vocational Training (Elektrisk hållbarhetsmyndigheten, EHM); Swedish Electrical Contractors' Association (Elektroinstallationorganisationer, EIO); Swedish Electricians' Union (Svenska Elektrikerförbundet, SEF)

- Education Sector:
  - Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket)*
  - Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolor, MyH)*
  - Swedish Council for Higher Education (Universitet och högskolerädet, UHR)*
  - Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitéts- och högskolorädet, UHA)*

- Medical/Health Sector:
  - National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (21 medical-related & regulated professions)

- Electrical Sector:
  - Swedish National Electrical Safety Board (Elektrisk hållbarhetsmyndigheten, EHM)*; Central Committee of the Electrical Trade for Vocational Training (Elektrisk hållbarhetsmyndigheten, EHM); Swedish Electrical Contractors' Association (Elektroinstallationorganisationer, EIO); Swedish Electricians' Union (Svenska Elektrikerförbundet, SEF)

- Other Industry Reps:
  - Construction Industry Training Board (Häggenbyggnadsinstruktörisföreningen); The Paint Industry Training Board (Häggenbyggnadsinstruktörisföreningen, NYF); Professional Launderers Board (Sällskapet för Textikhållande, NYF); Barber Enterprises Organisation (Sällskapet för Korteträffande, NYF); Swedish Wood Working Board (Svenskaallvardssällskapet, NyF); Swedish Metal and Ventilation Training Board (Sveriges Växel och Ventilationsmyndighet, SVV); Swedish Craft and Small Business Association (Håndverksföreningen, NYF); Vocational Training and Working Environment Council (Transport Trades) (TVA); The Service Industry Training Board (Arbetsmarknadsutbildning, NYF); Swedish Vocational Board of Agriculture and Horticulture (Häggenbyggnadsinstruktörisföreningen, NYF); Association of Swedish Bakers and Confectioners (Svenska brödsalliansen); Swedish Handcraft Advisory Bureau (Svenska konsthandikraft, NYF); Competence Centre for Energy Materials (Kompetenscentrum för energimaterial, KEKEM); Swedish National Association for Maintenance Technology Engineering (UTEK); Horticultural Central Professional Committee (TBC); National Association of the Wood and Furniture Industry (TMF); WTV Industry Training Board.

Local Offices of the Public Employment Service [AF]
(commissions validations and project manages the process)

- Education:
  - Secondary: Local councils; local schools; college; Adult education institutes; Universities
  - Vocational: Vocational schools and colleges, folk schools, study associations
  - Tertiary: University Admissions Offices

- Medical:
  - National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen); County Councils

- Health & Care Sector:
  - Medicare; Läkarna (private subcontractors), plus others locally

- Educational Sector:
  - Läkarna (private subcontractors), plus others locally

- Other Sectors:
  - Multiple private, public or semi-state sector-focused subcontractors and/or relevant individual assessors or industry representatives.

  Examples include: MediCare; Läkarna; SiDent; Swedish Pavilion; PVT; Teknikcentrum; Kåren; Swedish Electric Contractors Association (Elektroinstallationorganisationer, EIO); Swedish Energy; Retail Skills Agency (Handels kompetensbyrå); Competence Centre for Energy Materials (Kompetenscentrum för energimaterial, KEKEM); Swedish National Association for Maintenance Technology Engineering (UTEK).

Swedish Language Education
(run by local councils or adult education units)

- Immigrants: Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), Medical Swedish, Legal Swedish

Specific/Local Projects
(sub-contracted by Arbetsförmedlingen)

- Academics: The Short Path (Korta vägen)
- Teachers: Foreign teachers' supplementary education (ULV)

REGIONAL/LOCAL ACTORS
(Implementing validation assessment)

For education continuation or complementation to direct to educational body

Individuals who request evaluation direct

Employers or employees who request evaluation
3.2) Key Aspects of Audit of the SKC Recognition Process

The actual SKC assessment and recognition process in Sweden follows the same 4-steps, regardless of which sector or level of skills are being assessed. This was described in detail in Work Package 3: Swedish Country Report as part of this project but figure 2, below, serves as a reminder of the general procedure. Step 1 essentially involves initial consultation with the person wishing to have their skills and experience evaluated, and a first stage documentation of their skills, qualifications or background. In terms of time this could take anything from half a day to a week. Step 2 entails a more detailed skills mapping and analysis of knowledge held. The time taken and exact methodology involved will vary greatly from sector to sector but range from one week to up to 8 months (when it comes to evaluation of previous medically-related education by the National Board of Health and Welfare). The third step, which involves undertaking any necessary educational complementation to prepare the person for the specific Swedish context and standards required may take anything between one month up to two years (particularly for the medical-related professions that are obligated to take Swedish medical legislative courses and attain a high level of Swedish language competence including specific medical-Swedish terminology). The final stage involves the evaluation and certification of the person’s skills and knowledge by the relevant national assessment body (step 4) and this may take anything from a few weeks to approximately three months (figure 2). All stages are conducted only in the Swedish language, thus requiring a good degree of competence (time estimates vary greatly across sectors).

Figure 2: Steps and Procedures in the SKC Assessment and Recognition Process
One dimension added in the Swedish audit scheme, in comparison to the project’s provisional audit scheme, is the necessity for proficiency of TCN’s in Swedish language. The experiences from using interpreters in the process are not satisfactory. In comparison to the provisional audit scheme suggested by the project management the Swedish steps and procedures include a very clear complementation requirement where TCNs usually need to complement their existing knowledge with further education at a Swedish college or university. The time and resource implications (staff time, staff training and skills requirements) for SKC evaluation in the Swedish process are described in section 3.2 and figure two.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the TCNs that were engaged in the audit. Table 2 describes the stakeholders that were consulted as part of this audit of Sweden’s SKC recognition system.

### Table 1: TCN’S Interviewed or Otherwise Engaged in the Audit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TCN Gender</th>
<th>TCN Region of Origin*</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Role in SKC Process</th>
<th>Profession/Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Male</td>
<td>Croatia (prior to its joining the EU)</td>
<td>Approx. 40</td>
<td>General support and guidance to TCN immigrants</td>
<td>Adult Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Female</td>
<td>TCN (South Asia)</td>
<td>Approx. 25</td>
<td>Swedish language learner and wishes to apply for the biomedical research permit</td>
<td>Biomedical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Male</td>
<td>TCN (West Africa)</td>
<td>Approx. 25</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Biomedicine / Academic but working as a cleaner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Male</td>
<td>TCN (Asia)</td>
<td>Approx. 30</td>
<td>Completed necessary Swedish complementary education and medical Swedish courses (total time: 3 years)</td>
<td>Medical doctor. Has been working within homecare during validation time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Female</td>
<td>TCN (East Africa)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Completed Swedish language course and was assessed for and accepted onto nursing assistant education programme at Medlearn</td>
<td>Nursing Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Female</td>
<td>TCN (East Africa)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Completed Swedish language and assessed for Medlearn nursing assistant education at. Required only to study one course out of 4 to qualify based on assessment of previous experience.</td>
<td>Nursing Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Male</td>
<td>TCN (Asia)</td>
<td>Approx. 30</td>
<td>Graduated from Korta Vägen project and has completed necessary Swedish complementary dental courses and medical Swedish courses (total time: 2 years)</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Male</td>
<td>TCN (East Africa)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Completed Swedish language and certified as personal assistant through 20 week course at Medlearn.</td>
<td>Nursing assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Female</td>
<td>TCN (America)</td>
<td>Approx. 25</td>
<td>Short Path</td>
<td>Conference Manager, Hospitality sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Male</td>
<td>TCN (South America)</td>
<td>Approx. 30</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Academic (Post-doctoral researcher)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Specific country not given to reduce ease of identification of the individual in such a small town*
### Table 2: Stakeholders Engaged in the Audit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation / Person</th>
<th>Role in SKC Process</th>
<th>Representation (Individual, public, private)</th>
<th>Profession/Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Medlearn</td>
<td>Assessor &amp; complementary education provider</td>
<td>Private education facility</td>
<td>Personal assistants and homecare; nursing assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) University Admissions</td>
<td>Assessor of educational qualifications</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) University Admissions</td>
<td>Assessor of educational qualifications</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) The Short Path Project Advisor (Korta Vägen)</td>
<td>Support and guide to validanders</td>
<td>Public (sub-contracted by AF to run this project)</td>
<td>Professionals and Academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Student Support, Umeå University</td>
<td>Support and guide to validanders</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Umeå School of Teaching Education</td>
<td>Assessor and guide and complementary education provider</td>
<td>Public (Project for the Further Education of Foreign Teachers)</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) County Council of Västerbotten</td>
<td>Support and guide to validanders</td>
<td>Public (an employer)</td>
<td>Medical/Healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Medlearn</td>
<td>Assessor &amp; complementary education provider</td>
<td>Private education facility</td>
<td>Personal assistants and homecare; nursing assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Study Guidance, Student Services and The Short Path Project Advisor</td>
<td>Support and guide to validanders</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Tertiary Education and Professionals and Academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-13) Career and Job-seeker advisors</td>
<td>Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen, AF)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Support to job seekers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 3.3) Which TCNs are Accessing SKC recognition and who are Missed?

It is possible that a person wishing to have their skills or qualifications assessed and validated can request this directly themselves with the appropriate assessor organisation and can push themselves directly through the system. To put oneself through the system without the Public Employment Service’s (AF’s) help, however, requires that the individual is aware that such a facility even exists, and of how to access it. This does not appear to happen often from the information found during this research. It is also possible that an employee, either of their own accord, or due to their employer’s encouragement, may seek out branch-specific SKC recognition for a job they are already doing but which would mean they would gain a better status and/or better salary and/or greater responsibility by being assessed and accredited within their field. This may happen somewhat more often, especially for Swedish people of Swedish background who may lack formal qualifications, but data is lacking to be able to say with any certainty, particularly with regards to those of immigrant background.

Findings from this research focussing upon the SKC recognition for non-EU immigrants suggests that it is overwhelmingly through an individual’s advisor within the Public Employment Service (AF) that
people are directed and filtered into the SKC validation system (with the possible exception of foreign application directly to educational institutions). This means the person must be applicable to be registered as unemployed, or be on one of the Government’s establishment plans for immigrants who have come through the asylum channel. According to the interviews held with TCNs, if coming through other channels, such as for study, work or as a tied-mover, they may never even get to hear about a possibility for SKC recognition.

For those medically-related regulated professions (of which there are 21 in Sweden [Socialstyrelsen, 2014]) it may be more common for those qualified abroad that have moved to Sweden to proactively seek out and put themselves through the validation, and consequent complementing education, and medical license exam process on their own. This channel of information is somewhat clearer and more easily accessible as it is more centralised through the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen). Individuals with other professions or sector backgrounds and experience are, however, highly dependent on the Public Employment Service (AF) to inform that an SKC process exists and that it might be an option for them. Moreover an individual’s AF contact person must approve the course of action. This highlights one of the weaknesses in the system: the level of knowledge and understanding of individual contact officers within the Public Employment Service about the existence and validity of SKC assessment is highly variable. Such a highly pressured and resource-limited organisation that wears so many hats within the Swedish labour market constellation struggles at times to keep its own employees fully informed and up-to-date about all the services available. There will also, of course, be geographic variation on what kind of validation is available locally. Strengths and weaknesses of the Swedish SKC system will be returned to in section 3.3.

The SKC process in Sweden is not necessarily valid or applicable to those immigrants who have already gained Swedish qualifications. Yet holding Swedish qualifications does not always adequately prepare or position migrants for the Swedish labour market. They will still have to battle against possible employer discomfort with, or even suspicion of, a non-Swedish education or of the person’s cultural competence or linguistic ability. There may be overt or hidden racism to contend with. Such barriers contribute to the small but present parallel society where migrants end up stuck in low-skilled jobs, even when they are highly skilled or educated people, or whereby migrants start their own businesses and feed work to each other, with limited interaction with the host society.

In summary, it appears to be predominantly immigrants from third countries who have come through the asylum channel, with a lower representation of those who are registered as job seekers on the Public Employment Service’s roster, who may gain access to SKC assessment. Those without permanent residency status, or those who are resident in the country on a study-only visa, or those who are simply not registered as unemployed, are less eligible and find it more difficult to gain access to SKC recognition, if they even hear of it as a possibility.

3.4) Impact: Has SKC assessment helped immigrants into jobs?

Given all the rhetoric and importance allocated to SKC recognition as a support path to immigrant employment in Sweden it is somewhat astounding that so little data is available to answer the simple question of whether or not it works. Are non-EU educated and/or experienced individuals being
better supported into appropriate and relevant employment by SKC recognition? Is the right level of employment being obtained more quickly than it would have been without skills validation? It was almost impossible, during the course of this research, to find data or even individuals and organisations within the system who really had an idea. This lack of monitoring and evaluation of the efforts made within the SKC recognition system is a keen weakness which cripples claims of efficacy. What can be said from the interviews conducted with those six TCNs interviewed who had been through a specific form of SKC assessment and recognition was that they had little criticism of the process itself and they found the experience to be generally a positive experience, shortening the time required for complementary study.

“It worked very well for me but not always so good for others. For me, my experience in my home country as a nursing assistant meant that I could skip 75% of the course material.”

(Interview with TCN from Eritrea)

This need for complementary education was seen by some as slightly overdriven and added a greater time commitment to the process. This is especially the case when Swedish language education much also be undertaken, and for medical professionals requiring legitimation. Nevertheless, the general feeling was that the process was rewarding in recognising skills and was necessary to facilitate adjustment to the Swedish context. Recognition of informal SKCs was experienced to be lagging behind that of formal SKCs, with some exception being for the personal assistance and nursing assistance sectors. Five of the TCN validanders were optimistic about their chances of gaining employment but they were so newly graduated, or still just about to graduate, that none of them had yet obtained relevant employment. Three had been for interviews around the time of meeting with our researchers. Clearly none of these five had succeeded in gained employment during the SKC recognition, assessment and complementation process.

In fact, it was only possible to find one TCN during the course of this research who had gained employment. This person specifically did gain employment through the Short Path validation and support project in operation at the local level in Umeå city. They were able to stay on with a hotel employer whom they had conducted an internship as part of their Short Path course. While this reflects well on the project’s role, it must also be recognised that this TCN was white American, had gained a good competence in Swedish language, was very confident, and was working in a sector that does not differ significantly across countries. In their own words:

“I’ve had an extremely easy transition because I have a local boyfriend and friends and family contacts, I got straight into the Short Path project when I arrived here, and because the hotel industry is very similar here to the USA, its just that it is in Swedish here! I’m outgoing and talkative so I just asked lots of questions.”

(Interview with a now-employed TCN from USA)

It is also the case that all those that were met who had been through an SKC evaluation were required to spend time within the Swedish education system to complement their skills. Research, during this limited survey, was unable to identify a TCN immigrant who went straight into employment after a SKC evaluation, a fact that some stakeholders are critical of.
“He saw most aspects of the process [SKC assessment and consequent complementary education] as positive, both education, certification and internship. But, he had also experienced racism in the work place, mostly from the elderly, less often in open comments questioning him and his work, but often as something he could sense underneath from both patients and employers. He felt he was disadvantaged in the labour market due to this.”

(Interview with a TCN from Africa who had decades of nursing assistance experience and who had not yet been successful in obtaining employment after his recognition process)

The Short Path project based at Umeå University, which focusses on individualised and intensive support to TCN academics and professionals, described how 17 of their 32 participants (53%) from 2013 obtained appropriate employment within 4-months of course completion (Personal Communication, Korta Vägen, 2014). One of the few evaluations that have been made was for the predecessor of the Short Path, that is, a project that focused on foreign academics (Projektet Utländska Akademiker, PUA) where about 33% of participants had found relevant employment after going through the complimentary education and training program (Länsstyrelsen Västra Götalands län, 2012). As an interesting comparative statistic, a recent internal study at Umeå University’s geography department showed that 63% of undergraduate students in the planning programme found relevant employment within 3-months. In conclusion, the indications may be positive that SKC assessment and recognition can help immigrants into jobs, after the seemingly essential complementary education, but without concrete data the jury is still out.

It is important also to not overlook the fact that contacts and social networks still play a very important role, even for Swedish people, when obtaining jobs, regardless of which sector they work in. If an immigrant is not well linked-into a wider Swedish contact network, even if they have the language, their possibility of getting their foot into the Swedish labour market shrinks even further. Interviews conducted during this and the earlier part of the research confirm this finding. Having been through an SKC evaluation and recognition process will not necessarily help an immigrant to gain this important social network.

“In my experience it has been almost impossible to meet and make friends with Swedes. I know of immigrants who have been working in Sweden for 8 years who have no Swedish friends. This is an important key to a wider integration. It’s not like you can just stop a person on the street and say ‘hey I want to be your friend.’ Where do I meet Swedish people? How, when I’m working and trying to support my family and also trying to study to learn the language on the side, as well as still making efforts to apply for more relevant jobs?”

(Interview with Swedish-university educated TCN from Africa who feels somewhat trapped in a cleaning job)
3.5) Strengths and Weaknesses of the System

Based on interviews with those conducting validation and those being assessed (TCNs), both during this part of the research and the preceding work package 3 the following strengths of the Swedish system can be highlighted:

- There are a number of sectorial models (approximately 30) in place designed to assess and validate both educational background and practical skills, but accessibility may differ geographically.
- The services are, in general, free of cost to the individual if they have come through AF. There, in some cases, may even be grounds for economic support (depending on migration status and employment status).
- The process can be a positive personal journey for the person and may raise their own awareness of their skills and may help boost confidence.
- When access and utilised, the framework and the tools currently in use work quite well on the whole, problems are rather wider organisational, personal or systemic (see below).
- SKC assessment can reduce the amount of study courses and thus time an immigrant must commit to gain qualifications if complementation required (not so applicable to the medically-related professions which require at a minimum a two-year study investment, but can be more).
- Ultimately the SKC process can save the State money as it shortens educational time and gets people into jobs more quickly than if they had to start an education from the beginning (at least this is the theory).
- There is a decentralised and privatised array of evaluating organisations (market mechanism) which allows greater service provision, and (at least in theory) pushes up the quality of assessment.

Some of the weaknesses outlined were as follows:

- The SKC assessment system is not always in tune with, or responsive to, the needs of the labour market, OR at times may not be responsive to the immigrant’s own career interests and ambitions. It can be criticised for being more focussed on getting immigrants into the Swedish education system, rather than into employment.
- The most common way of finding out about and/or entering the SKC evaluation process is through the Public Employment Agency (AF) but not all immigrants are registered or valid for this.
- Immigrants are often unaware of the SKC option. It requires a lot of initiative to find out about the option. There is an organisational confusion over who is responsible and whom to contact, even for stakeholders within the system.
- Value of the process is to some degree influenced by the attitude, skills and commitment of the evaluator, and of the AF contact officer who has the power to condone SKC as a course of action.
- There has been a lack of follow-up and evaluation on whether SKC recognition better gets immigrants into appropriate employment, an absence of statistics on success rates etc. This lack
of monitoring and evaluation of the SKC recognition system is a weakness crippling claims of
efficacy.

- The lack of long-term financing for investigative/improvement initiatives occurring in local
  projects.
- SKC evaluation cannot overcome employer suspicion of non-Swedish-gained skills and
  qualifications nor of possible employer discrimination.
- SKC validation cannot help with understanding or overcoming the subtle socio-cultural codes and
  behaviour that contribute to TCNs not being fully integrated into society. Neither does the
  process help an immigrant build up their Swedish contact network, which is acknowledged to be
  of crucial importance (even for Swedes) in gaining access to the labour market.

The long time required for those going through a medically-related form of validation (and the
required complementation of their education, as well as the time and effort required for completion
of the necessary medical and legislative Swedish language training, can be a huge hindrance for
those highly-educated immigrants. This burden is further emphasised when the TCN must support
themselves financially through this one-to-five-year process. This is especially pressing if they also
have family members to support. This time and financial commitment is a deterrent for some. It
can also be hugely demoralising for those who have long work experience in their own country
and/or for those who are already highly-specialised professionals.

In summary, however, it is clear that the SKC models and systems in place in Sweden seem to work
relatively well, when/if they are used. The criticisms and weaknesses identified during this research
refer overwhelmingly to wider systemic, capacity, attitudinal, financial and societal issues that SKC
tools and techniques in themselves can only play a very small role in overcoming.

4) Discussion and Recommendations for Improvements

From the seminars held with relevant stakeholders engaged in the process of validating SKCs, or in
working towards a broader integration of immigrants, and from key informant interviews, the
following aspects and possible improvements came to the fore:

System Perspective

Validating foreign SKC demands knowledge in the sector that is to be validated. To best understand
what a certain profession or education entails in the origin country a degree of cultural
understanding and language proficiency can be valuable. This can make the competence needed to
be most efficient quite specific, and also mean that evaluator skills will be accumulated over time.
This, in turn demands that assessment is undertaken as a continuous activity. Currently, much of the
work with validation is undertaken by individual actors, by market-directed service providers, and
within short-term projects. This presents a danger in losing the possibility to accumulate the specific
validation competence.

To validate foreign SKCs was also found to demand more resources from the actors than to evaluate
similar Swedish-gained competence. The question of who should bear the costs of this additional
requirement is, in some cases, unclear. Suggestions for improvements were therefore seen in more long-term funding and through either concentrating validation towards fewer actors, or creating stronger collaboration across actors to be able to better accumulate the knowledge and resources. More feedback and documentation is essential to better utilise the effectiveness and value of SKC evaluation.

The political ambition to target foreign academics could be misdirected if looking at integration of TCNs at large. Those with tertiary education (approximately 43% of total TCNs in Västerbotten in 2010 (ASTRID, 2010), which is relatively high as a result of the presence of a university and a regional teaching hospital in the area) can be understood to already have the training and motivation required to push themselves through a system, to find their way to employment. Those without formal training and documentation, however, risk being overlooked when political and media dialogue focuses too exclusively on academics and tertiary educated professionals. This is particularly poignant when statistics and experience suggest that approximately 70% of the TCN immigrants coming through the asylum channel (or 53% of all the region’s TCN citizens (ASTRID, 2010)) in Västerbotten consist of lowly educated and/or those lacking formal qualifications but with years of vocational experience; 30% of these have very low literacy levels (Interview discussion with establishment support stakeholder; ASTRID data (2010)).

“We have the wrong focus when we talk about doctors etc. They are not the ones who need help. What I see now is that I have dozens and dozens of women coming to me who are very lowly educated, and many are quite used to not being listened to or not being allowed to voice an opinion. But many of them have years of experience of caring for their children, sick parents, the elderly, in multiple ways. They are familiar with extremely tough living conditions where they have had to cook, clean, care for many people. They are incredibly motivated to work. They are a tremendous resource if we can learn how to better respond and direct this resource. Why send these women constantly on ‘training course’ and try to fit them into education programmes? The system earns money from doing this, that is why. This is also a form of structural racism. We need to change our view, and employers’ views of these people. That’s where we need to be working more, with the employers.”

(Interview with a stakeholder engaged with immigrant establishment plans)

The focus on complementary education and formalising of knowledge within a Swedish educational framework can be misguided for immigrants, but especially so for those with little experience of schooling and studying. Instead of translating informal skills more directly into suitable employment, the systemic emphasis on formal qualifications risks creating a cycle of continuous education and training programmes with no link to the actual labour market of the region.

At the same time, the informal cultural understanding of Sweden and Swedish ways of operating may be working as a covert criteria from the employer’s side whereby an employer feels more secure in hiring those with Swedish credentials and Swedish background. An employer has to also consider his other employees and how they operate in the workplace. If efforts to support immigrants into employment fail to take into account these kind of influences, and fail to advocate and educate at the employer and organisational level, much well-intentioned and well-implemented SKC recognition will fail at the employer’s doorstep.
Individual Perspective

The success of an SKC validation can also be highly dependent on the characteristics and aspirations of the individual being validated. The multitude of actors and the time required to go through the different steps of the process can be challenging for any individual. Educational background, family relationships and individual characteristics are factors that may enable or hinder a person to successfully travel through the validation process.

“If I would use one word a hundred times it would be ‘motivation’. I think the most important thing is your motivation.”

(Interview with a TCN from Pakistan within the medical profession reflecting on what it took to get through the medical validation system)

Immigrants who, whether through their partners or otherwise, have the opportunity to socialise with Swedish people, have a better chance of attaining cultural understanding, and ultimately of integrating, than those who have not found a way to interact with the wider society. A social network hooked into the host society is a great advantage in accessing information about employment opportunities. Efforts that specifically try to encourage interaction and friendship and shared experience with Swedish people are necessary and should be encouraged and financially supported. The validation system, has on occasion, been seen to be more attuned to the needs of the labour market, sometimes pushing people to attain documentation in another field than they desire. Whilst maintaining one eye on where the jobs in society lie it is important that any SKC recognition system or wider labour market integration initiative can be flexible enough to take into account individual needs, circumstances and abilities.

“The system here has helped me a lot. But you have to also push yourself forward, ask lots of questions, show interest, make yourself seen, dare to communicate. A lot of motivation is required from yourself, but there is lots of support available if you ask and if you push. Much depends on the person. Everyone is an individual.”

(Interview with TCN from Somalia)

Wider Societal Perspective

Systems for validation are in place in Sweden and seems to be functioning well, when they are utilised. Some stakeholders expressed the view that validation is rarely used, and especially not for immigrants:

“We have a lot about validation here in paper form. Lot of talk at the political level. But in practice it is not being used.”

(Interview with a stakeholder engaged with immigrant establishment plans)
There is also a gap between the systems in place to validate SKC’s and the skills, knowledge and motivation required to attain relevant employment. Although important, the Swedish documentation or certificate which is the usual end result of a validation process, does not lead to actual employment per se. Attaining relevant employment is dependent on the local supply and demand of labour as well as the general economic situation. It is also highly dependent on an employers’ willingness to understand and accept foreign competence. The labour market and the job seeking process can be understood to be ruled by cultural codes where foreign competence and merits find it more difficult to gain acknowledgment. This can range from structural racism and prejudice (such as seen in how second generation immigrants with Swedish education and proficiency have been found to have more difficulties in finding employment than ethnic swedes), to employers simply being unfamiliar with how foreign competence is documented and presented.

“There is structural racism: we have slow-moving authorities that are not flexible. There is so much bureaucracy, so many rules to be followed. It takes a long time to turn such machinery to a new direction.”

(Interview with a stakeholder engaged with immigrant establishment plans)

It was acknowledged at one of the seminars that employers, especially in the healthcare sector, might be hesitant towards foreign competence as it may be seen as a legal liability. Solutions to such barriers are not clear cut, but the stakeholders engaged with this research seemed to agree that employers need to be better informed and incentivised to employ people who have attained their SKCs outside of Sweden.

5) Conclusion

Undertaking interviews with TCNs with different backgrounds and experiences of the validation processes has shed new light on the Swedish system. Experience from actual validations were, overall, positive in the way it is managed, the support from project managers within AF, how the TCN felt going through the process. Findings also reveal, however, that SKC recognition is not being widely used at this stage, is not accessible to all immigrants, cannot help to overcome all the barriers facing an immigrant seeking employment. The system is however, generally well-designed with high and good ambitions and the individual sectorial models have been well-developed. Great opportunity is apparent. More work on the employer side is needed.

There is a general lack of overview and feedback of the system which makes evaluation and improvement difficult, and limits the ability of stakeholders to claim SKC as a success story. Problems are seen in the lack of consistency in funding and actors involved. Suggestions for improvement target the coordination between actors as well as the desire for more long-term economic support for validation, and better information to, and engagement from, the Public Employment Service’s contact officers.

The findings outlined in this report suggest that difficulties and barriers to the wider integration of TCNs within the host society and the labour market are found largely outwith the specific SKC evaluation procedure. They relate more to the organisational and implementation system, the competence of the evaluator, the national standards to be attained, or to broader societal
circumstances, employer suspicion, and to the personal characteristics of the person being assessed (their linguistic competence, their understanding of the value of the process, their commitment, their attitude).

These are not the kind of factors that specific new evaluatory tools or models for the recognition of TCNs’ SKC would be able to have much influence over. Such an emphasis on methodology alone would miss the bigger picture in the Swedish context. Opportunities to make real improvements to the Swedish system, if the ultimate aim is to better integrate immigrants into employment and the wider Swedish society, do exist, but go beyond skills evaluation tools. There remains some work to do.

REFERENCES

ASTRID (2010) Statistical Database held by the Department of Geography and Economic History, Umeå University.

