

Trapped in the Wrong Job: How Migration Policies Push Highly Educated Migrants into Low-Wage Work

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Despite Sweden's reputation for fairness and opportunity, current migration and labour policies actively contribute to the systematic underutilization of highly-skilled migrants. Restrictive migration rules and labour market barriers often force them into jobs far below their qualifications. A 2023 report by the Swedish National Audit Office revealed that 63% of non-EU graduates work below their skill level, particularly concentrated in low-wage sectors such as cleaning, transport/logistics, hospitality, and delivery services (Swedish National Audit Office, 2023). These findings are consistent with studies showing that highly educated migrants in Sweden face greater education-to-occupation mismatch than highly educated natives (Irastorza & Bevelander, 2021; Risberg & Romani, 2022). Such patterns demonstrate the urgency of reforming migration policies to reduce underutilization of migrants' skills and human capital and to better align migrants' own aspirations with Sweden's long-term labour market needs.

Skilled Migration, Unskilled Employment

The Swedish migration framework requires migrants to meet specific conditions to extend temporary work or residence permits. For international graduates, a one-year post-study job-search period is granted. To renew, they must secure full-time employment that meets minimum wage thresholds and is consistent with collective agreements (Swedish Migration Agency, 2023). For work permit holders, the first two years bind them to a specific employer and occupation. Changing jobs during this period requires a new permit application, creating dependency on employers. After four years of continuous qualifying employment, migrants become

eligible to apply for permanent residency. These requirements are not only bureaucratically complex but put migrants in a precarious position on the labour market. Migrants often accept jobs they would not otherwise take to maintain their legal status, even when underpaid, underemployed, or facing other unfair treatment.

The Lived Reality: Evidence from Migrants' Experiences

To understand how these policies affect migrants' everyday lives, this brief is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with highly-skilled migrants in Sweden, aged 27–57, who are currently employed in low-paid, low-skilled jobs. Participants include both international graduates and skilled workers who entered under different visa categories. The interviews explore how migrants navigate existing migration rules and how they perceive employers' influence on residency outcomes.

The brief highlights two interconnected dynamics—hope labour and overperformance in underemployment—to show how strategies of survival both enable and constrain migrants' contributions to Swedish society. By foregrounding migrants' own voices, we illustrate how endurance, hope, and structural barriers intersect in everyday practice.

Hope and Overperformance as Necessary Strategies – But at What Cost?

"You cannot risk losing your job, because then you lose everything."

This fear shapes many migrants' strategies in a regulated labour market. In our interviews, respondents often described their current jobs as temporary sacrifices: roles that kept them legally secure but delayed their true professional aspirations. For example, a former border police officer in her home country took employment as a cleaner at an airport to position herself strategically for a security job. Previous research has referred to the acceptance of underqualified or precarious jobs in anticipation of better futures as hope labour (Diedrich & Risberg, 2023), which reflects both resilience and fragility: migrants produce essential labour in Sweden's economy, but under conditions of insecurity and deferred aspirations. For international graduates and work permit holders, this concept also takes on a distinct shape where hope is oriented less toward career advancement and more toward securing residency rights.

Apart from being prepared to work in precarious, and often underpaid employment positions in the hope that this will lead to more stable and long-term employment in the future, our interviews also showed that highly-skilled migrants often overperform in their roles (low-skilled and high-skilled) to remain employed (see also Santangelo et al., 2024). In some cases, employers seemed to exploit this by hiring overqualified workers to access advanced skills at lower costs. For instance, one respondent in our study who was a trained medical doctor was employed as an assistant nurse (underemployed) but frequently had to perform tasks typical of doctors, while being remunerated at the assistant level. In other words, migrants end up in positions where their underemployment is characterized by overperformance.

And as they fear jeopardizing their residence, they tolerate potentially exploitative practices. This dynamic creates a fragile but productive class of workers: highly visible and essential, yet structurally insecure.

Employer Dependency and Silent Exploitation

Employers play a decisive role in migrants' residency processes, acting as gatekeepers. Several respondents felt compelled to tolerate workplace exploitation or unfair conditions due to the employer's role in validating their residency status. A newspaper distributor explained how he worked long overtime hours without pay but "kept quiet to survive." Migrants reported that unionized workplaces provided stronger protections, particularly ensuring employers met wage and contract standards. In contrast, in smaller firms with weak oversight, migrants often felt abandoned and unprotected, facing unequal treatment and power asymmetries. This uneven landscape reinforces both dependency and vulnerability.

Integration Policies Should Give Skilled Migrants a Meaningful Start, Not Confine Them to Exploitation

Sweden's image as a fair society contrasts with the lived realities of many of its skilled migrants. The migration framework, as currently designed, risks turning migration into cycles of endurance and compromise rather than of opportunity and contribution. Proactive reforms are needed to enable highly-skilled migrants to contribute fully to Sweden's economy and society.

Policy Recommendations

- **Increase flexibility in work permits:** Reform or remove the two-year restriction binding migrants to one employer and occupation, reducing dependency and the risk of exploitation.
- **Extend post-study and job search periods:** Increase the 12-month post-study job-search window to 24 months, aligning with realistic labour market integration timelines.
- **Clarify migration rules:** Provide transparent, accessible information on residency requirements, including wage thresholds and contractual obligations—through universities, Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) programmes, and public information campaigns.
- **Strengthen monitoring and protection:** Enhance state oversight in sectors prone to exploitation, empower unions, and enforce employer compliance with collective agreements.
- **Promote skill-matching initiatives:** Expand mentorship, bridging programmes, and credential recognition systems to reduce the structural gap between migrants' qualifications and available jobs.

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