Temporality and space in highly skilled migrants’ experiences of education and work in the rural north of Sweden

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to critically explore and analyse opportunities and obstacles faced by highly skilled migrants in rural areas seeking to re-enter their profession, focusing on the lived experiences of migrants residing in northern Sweden. Analysis of their stories focusing on intersections of temporal and spatial positionings reveal different lived experiences and opportunities depending on migration regime and policy, gender, age and family situation, profession and labour market needs. However, similar challenges also emerged related to rurality such as rural dismantling and poverty of access to (and support for) both adult education generally and specific fast tracks for highly skilled migrants, with accompanying risks of deskilling and marginalisation. The stories also indicate that the rural idyll tends to provide closer social networks than those in cities, thereby increasing opportunities for re-entry to former professions. However, workfare policies and devaluation of foreign credentials lead to requirements for re-education to re-enter former professions or undertake other work (high- or low-level) that are particularly difficult to meet in rural settings.

KEYWORDS
Cultural brokers; intersectionality; migration; refugees; rural adult education

Introduction
This article focuses on highly skilled migrants’ experiences of adult and complementary education and work to regain high-level positions in their new national context. These immigrants are sought by many countries for their skills and competences. Often, they are seen as a privileged group in relation to other migrants in terms of finding work and employment, as education generally has positive effects on employment rates and labour market integration (Anthias et al., 2013; Povranovic Frykman & Öhlander, 2018). Moreover, most studies on highly skilled migrants have largely addressed voluntary economic immigrants seeking better life opportunities in other countries, while most studies of refugees and forced migration tend to neglect issues and experiences of those who are highly skilled. Thus, challenges faced by highly skilled refugees or involuntary migrants have received little attention, although a few studies have illuminated their experiences in the UK (Smyth & Kum, 2010; Willott & Stevenson, 2013) and Nordic contexts (Bygnes, 2021; Liversage, 2009a, 2009b; Mozetič, 2018).

Research shows that deskilling is widespread, i.e. there are generally higher proportions of overeducated individuals in immigrant populations than in the native populations of recipient countries (Ayres et al., 2013; Dahlstedt, 2017). In Sweden, for example, 30% of immigrants with a tertiary education have jobs for which they are overqualified (OECD, 2017). Deskilling is commonly explained by lack of formal recognition of the migrants’ qualifications and work
experiences attained abroad, devaluation of foreign qualifications by employers, non-transferable skills, restrictions on eligibility for professional jobs, as well as language barriers, and both gender and racial discrimination (Ayres et al., 2013; Midtbøen, 2015). These are challenges that are also faced, to varying degrees, by migrants with lower educational backgrounds. Various complex and interrelated factors affect all migrants’ opportunities, such as their reasons for migration, country of origin, gender, age, family situation, national rules and regulations, educational structures, as well as both local and national government routines (Povranovic Frykman & Öhlander, 2018). As Dahlstedt and Fejes (2019: 76) show, educational structures are important as ‘engagement in adult education as a means of finding a job appear as the main orientation guiding the futures of the adult students’, and ‘their claims for belonging’.

How place matters for highly skilled migrants has received little attention, especially for those in depopulating rural areas (Frykman et al., 2020; Han & Humphreys, 2006; Verdich, 2010). Thus, better understanding is needed of obstacles and opportunities for professional groups of highly skilled migrants in relation to their local places of residence (Frykman et al., 2020). This article critically explores highly skilled migrants’ opportunities for, and obstacles hindering access to, adult education, training, workplace practice and validation to re-enter their profession and stay in rural areas. I do this by analysing the lived experiences of highly skilled migrants who migrated for reasons other than work, residing in three rural municipalities in northern Sweden. Thus, the paper seeks to increase understanding of how rurality matters to highly skilled migrants who did not migrate for economic reasons, and factors that may contribute to their retention in rural areas.

**The Swedish context**

Immigration to the rural north of Sweden has fluctuated over the years and since the 1990s, less densely populated municipalities have received more refugees per capita than regions of the large cities, due to changes in immigration and immigration policies (Dahlstedt, 2017). The Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for settlement of refugees and asylum seekers based on yearly quotas. Migrants can move elsewhere if they are prepared to find and pay for housing themselves, and large proportions of migrants assigned to sparsely populated municipalities do so (Hedlund et al., 2017). Only one in eight immigrants who were assigned to rural regions in the period 2006–2010 were still in the respective regions five years later, compared to three out of four assigned to the larger city regions (Statistics Sweden, 2016). While employment and educational opportunities may be reasons for leaving rural areas, research has identified other reasons, such as lack of social integration, being the ‘other’ in a small community, and a desire to live in multicultural environments, close to friends, relatives and ethnic communities (Valenta & Bunar, 2010). However, there are also potential benefits of remaining, such as better prospects of being offered high level work as rural areas are often desperate for skilled workers. Hence, for example, in the rural north of Sweden migrants are often seen as potentially important resources in times of depopulation (Hedlund et al., 2017).

Following the immigration of 2015–2016, in which Sweden received higher shares of migrants than most European countries, several restrictions in immigration policies were introduced. These included most migrants being granted temporary rather than permanent residencies and requirements for economic self-sufficiency for permanent residency and family reunification (Prop. 2015/16:174). These restrictions followed a previous shift in integration policies in 2010 that increasingly emphasised ‘activation’ and ‘workfare’, with welfare benefits tied to work-oriented integration activities and assignment of responsibility for refugees’ integration to the Swedish Public Employment Services (PES) state agency (Lidén et al., 2015; Wikström & Ahnlund, 2018). However, many actors are still involved, including several authorities and publicly financed private actors. Municipalities still have responsibility for providing access (either directly, or via procurement and delivery by private actors) to Swedish language education through Swedish for
immigrants (SFI), introductory courses to Swedish society and municipal adult education (MAE) programmes. The municipalities also have responsibilities for social services, support and social benefits when initial responsibilities of the PES are fulfilled (Lidén et al., 2015).

Since 2000, more than half of the immigrants received by Sweden have been refugees and asylum seekers born outside Europe, with variations in educational level linked (inter alia) to country of origin and reason for migration (Dahlstedt, 2017). Highly skilled migrants ("högutbildade invandrarer") are defined in Sweden as those with at least three years of tertiary education (Statistics Sweden, ). In terms of proportions of meeting this criterion, there is no significant difference between the native-born and foreign-born populations of working age (25–64 years, specified for convenient comparison), but a larger share of the foreign-born population has no education above compulsory level (Dahlstedt, 2017; Statistics Sweden, ). There are also regional and local variations in Sweden, and shares of migrants with tertiary education are lower in sparsely populated areas than in more densely populated areas (Kolada, 2019; Statistics Sweden, 2019). As Sweden has labour market needs for teachers, engineers and healthcare professionals, highly skilled migrants are seen as potentially important resources (Povrzanovic Frykman & Öhlander, 2018). Thus, several programmes have been initiated to provide ‘fast tracks’ and ‘short cuts’, for example, in teacher education, for such migrants and their labour market incorporation in Sweden.

**Theoretical perspectives**

Theoretically the paper draws on intersectional spatial geographic theory (Valentine, 2007), focusing on how power and inequalities work through spatial and temporal contexts. The concept of intersectionality is used to theorise the interconnections and interdependence of different social positions such as race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1995). Intersectionality has spatial connotations, as subjects can occupy positions of the norm and centre as well as marginalised and outside positions in different spatial and temporal contexts, positions that are imbued with infinite features and constantly changing. Valentine (2007) argues that the spatial connotation of intersectionality should be further developed through the experiences of subjects in specific spatial and temporal moments. With the focus on the significance of space, interlocking processes of marginalisation and oppression can be better understood. Where someone is located in time and space is constitutive of that person’s identity and opportunities. Valentine emphasises that while we can focus on multiple identities and their fluidity, these ‘operate in and through the spaces within which we live and move in systematic ways to generate hegemonic cultures that can exclude particular social groups’ (Valentine, 2007: 19). Lived experiences are important for understanding the systematic production of power and structural inequalities (Valentine, 2007).

Liversage (2009a) highlights the significance of both temporal and spatial contextual elements for highly skilled migrants’ opportunities in new national contexts. She shows that contextual factors influence labour market incorporation patterns, and portrays ‘variations in the intersections of individual and historical temporalities’ (Liversage, 2009a: 203), in which world events, labour market needs, rules and policies construct either openings for or restrictions to high-level work. More specifically, she identifies five ideal-typical paths in a study of highly skilled immigrants from eastern Europe and their trajectories into the Danish labour market. Three of them (the re-entry, ascent and re-education paths) lead to high-level work, while the other two (the re-migration and marginalisation paths) lead to subjects remaining outside high-level work. In this paper, drawing on notions of intersecting spatial and temporal positionings presented by Valentine (2007) and Liversage (2009a), I focus specifically on labour market needs, rules and policies, rural place, gender, class and age that is constitutive of the migrants’ space for action and opportunities.
**Method and material**

The reported study is part of a project on integration of adult migrants in rural areas, focusing on adult education in three municipalities in the rural north of Sweden. Each of these municipalities has a centre with a population between 4000 and 10,000, but there are differences in numbers of migrants, educational opportunities and labour market opportunities. Although it is important to avoid treating rural areas as homogenous, I focus here on rural places as such, as commonalities in relation to urban areas were more evident than differences between the research sites. Empirically, a flexible approach has been applied in the project, heavily rooted in ethnographic and progressive focusing techniques (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This has involved continuous rounds of planning, site visits, data collection and analysis to pursue issues raised during fieldwork and iterative consideration of acquired information. In total, the material consists of field notes from site visits and classroom observations, and records of interviews with principals, study and career counsellors, teachers, students, local employers, and officials of the local office of the PES, municipalities and regional administration. The site visits enabled my colleagues and I to contact migrants who were participating (or had participated) in adult education (either the SFI course or MAE) in these rural communities. The research project initially focused on highly skilled migrants, but as there were only a few, we chose a convenience sample (i.e. migrants willing to participate). In total, 36 migrants were interviewed, either individually or in pairs. Of these, nine migrants had tertiary education, and their stories provide the basis for this paper. Table 1 presents contextual data for the nine, pseudonymised, interviewees 1 (a number considered sufficient for explorative analysis of highly skilled migrants’ experiences of establishments in rural areas of northern Sweden). The interviews, conducted in Swedish except for a few English questions, words and phrases during 2018 and 2019, were recorded and fully transcribed. They were loosely structured around the following themes: the migrants’ experience of immigration and living in the rural north of Sweden; educational opportunities and obstacles in learning Swedish, validation of education and further education; ambitions and career development; and future living and family life. This allowed the interviewees to talk in their own ways, following their own paths and lines of reasoning, while

| Name          | Home region  | Home country education | Work before migration | Age | Settlement in Sweden | Migration type and residence status                                      |
|---------------|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Karen         | Africa       | Medicine               | Medical doctor        | <35 | 2017                  | Resettlement refugee, permanent residency                                |
| Kathy         | Africa       | Medicine, (interrupted)| None                  | <35 | 2017                  | Resettlement refugee, permanent residency                                |
| Olivia Spouse | Middle East work | Business studies        | Economy               | 35– | 50                    | 2018                                                                      |
| Maria          | South America | Marriage                | Medicine              | Medical doctor | <35                  |                                                                 |
| John Asylum   | Middle East  | Business studies        | Business              | 35– | 50                    | 2014                                                                      |
| William       | Middle East  | Physical Chemistry      | University & high school teacher | >50 | 2013                  | Asylum seeker, permanent residency                                      |
| Emma          | Middle East  | Business studies        | Economy               | <35 | 2016                  | Asylum seeker, temporary residency                                       |
| Sophia        | Africa       | Teacher education       | Primary and secondary teacher | <35 | 2016                  | Asylum seeker, temporary residency                                       |
| Leah          | Africa       | Business studies        | None                  | <35 | 2015                  | Asylum seeker, permanent residency                                       |
ensuring that the themes were covered. To encourage storytelling and accounts of lived experiences, which may reveal otherwise overlooked associations, questions were used such as ‘Can you tell me . . . ?’. Since migrants might feel the need to emphasise what is good and express gratitude to the receiving country, and me as a representative of this country, efforts were made to ensure that the interviewees knew I had no relation to the local learning centre, employers or government agencies.

Due to differences in the migrants’ reasons for migration they were subjected to different migration regimes, including differences in support systems and demands from government agencies in terms of integration and social benefits. Migrants entering the country as resettlement refugees or asylum seekers granted a residence permit are enrolled in what is known as an establishment programme organised by the PES. This is a two-year programme intended to shorten labour market integration, involving various activities such as Swedish language studies and individually planned activities amounting to full-time occupation. A migrant who is participating and following an agreed plan of activities can receive ‘introduction benefit’ from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Swedish Public Employment Service, 2020). In contrast, granting of a residency as a spouse is not accompanied by any specific government support as spouses are then responsible for the new resident’s economic, social and cultural support.

The participants’ comments in the interviews have been subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on what their stories tell about the lived experience of highly skilled migrants, their career development, opportunities and obstacles in rural areas. The analysis was data-driven, and reported themes were inductively identified and addressed in relation to spatial and temporal moments and the intersecting social positions and power relations entailed.

Stories of intersecting spatial and temporal context in highly skilled migrants work opportunities

The migrants settled in Sweden under somewhat varying conditions. Although they all came with tertiary education, some had been forced to interrupt their education, some had several years of work experience, others only a few years, and some had no work experience at all within their field of education. They had varying ages (Table 1), and some came to Sweden alone while others came with families and children. Their reasons for migration also differed, some came as asylum seekers spending months in other European countries before arriving in Sweden and going through long asylum processes without access to education, work or settlement programmes before being granted residencies. Others entered Sweden as resettlement refugees with a direct permanent residency and placement, gaining direct access to education and settlement programmes, while others entered as spouses with no specific public support. Other important differences in the temporal context for the interviewees who entered as asylum seekers, relative to earlier migrants, are the stricter immigration laws and policies they faced, including grants of temporary rather than permanent residencies. Variations in the migrants’ intersecting spatial and temporal positions, in terms of migration regime and previous career development, were clearly reflected in differences in lived experiences and perceived opportunities. While all interviewees expressed hopes of obtaining work that enables them to use their high-level skills, asylum seekers and resettlement refugees seemed more inclined to take any job as illustrated by Karen, a medical doctor:

I have no expectations, but I know I have to have language, so I’m focusing on that. I can’t say I have expectations, I’m happy to be here, so I’ll just accept it. I don’t want to go back so I just accept and try to find a way that’s better.

The quotation from Karen can be seen as expressing a coping strategy of deskilling and downward mobility being ‘natural’ and normal for forced migrants (Anthias et al., 2013). According to associated discourses, they should accept that they have to make sacrifices, with no expectations that it will be easy to retain their qualifications and social status. Those who were family migrants,
entering as spouses, had more optimistic expectations when first arriving (cf. Liversage, 2009b). For example, another medical doctor (Maria) was determined to regain her medical licence and not willing to work in a lower status position, such as an assistant nurse in elderly care.

The interviews revealed four interconnected themes related to the migrants’ shared spatial position in the rural north, which I present in the following sections using the stories of Emma, John, William and Karen where the themes were most prominent.

**Rural dismantling and workfare – Emma’s de-professionalisation and deskillling**

Emma, a young woman with a degree in business studies and experience of professional work obtained in the Middle East arrived in Sweden with her husband and one-year-old child seeking asylum in 2016. Entering and seeking asylum during the immigration wave and after the implementation of stricter immigration laws, she and her family were moved between immigration centres in different places several times before being granted temporary residency and settling in the rural north. The temporary residency allows her and her family to stay for three years, after which their need for asylum will be reviewed (Swedish Migration Agency, 2021). Fearing deportation, Emma is doing everything she can think of to find secure employment with sufficient salary to provide for her and her family so she can apply for an extension as an employed person and obtain permanent residency. As Emma says: ‘All I want is a job and to be able to stay’.

As she is young and with skills and competences that provide important potential resources, Emma has a more privileged position than other migrants. However, her story reveals the importance of specific spatial and temporal contexts of rural dismantling, devaluation of foreign credentials, migration regimes, workfare, and motherhood, resulting in interlocking processes of deskillling and marginalisation (Valentine, 2007). She does not see her degree in business studies as a fruitful stepping stone to employment before her need for asylum will be reviewed. This is mainly because she has been told there are few openings in economic professions in the local rural labour market and devaluation of her foreign education (cf. Bauder, 2003). Emma’s strategy and experience can be interpreted as a path of ‘re-education’ and reskilling (Liversage, 2009a), but for low-medium level work without thoughts of ascending to more high-level work. Thus, she first enrolled in a one-year training programme for migrants to become assistant nurses for work in elderly care, a profession with labour shortages in the local rural labour market she was told. She was successfully participating and passing courses while continuing Swedish language studies. However, the private education company that provided the training programme, with PES funding, decided to end the programme because few students were passing the courses. Emma was left with an unfinished education programme that she could not easily complete by enrolling in the MAE programme at the local learning centre, for which she required formal certification of proficiency in Swedish. After meeting this requirement by taking extended flexible online Swedish language courses she found that she could not take the additional assistant nurse courses she needed before her temporary residency was reviewed. To avoid losing time while waiting, and improve her work opportunities, she enrolled in another vocational programme with on-the-job training as a cook provided by the learning centre. Leah, a young migrant with interrupted education in business economics, had similar experiences. She also did not see finishing her university studies as a fruitful option, and had set her hopes on work within child or elderly care, or restaurants. This shows awareness that migrants are largely seen as resources in certain sectors with labour market shortages, regardless of their former education and level of work, which strongly contributes (inter alia) to an ethnicisation of care (Grigoleit-Richter, 2017).

Rural dismantling, procurement legislation, and stricter immigration laws prevented completion of Emma’s training as an assistant nurse, not because of failure to pass courses but because there were too few participants and economic rationalities. Her investment in a profession outside her tertiary education field and work experience was not paying off, especially since the municipality, the local employer of assistant nurses, froze recruitment due to budgetary constraints. So, even if
she could finish her education and become an assistant nurse she could only hope for insecure, temporary employment or casual, hourly work rather than the stable employment and income she needed to provide for her and her family according to current migration rules and legislation (Swedish Migration Agency, 2021). Emma is caught between desires to remain in the rural place and move to settle somewhere else, uprooting her youngest child to (hopefully) obtain better prospects of education and work in more urban areas. Emma’s experiences clearly highlight the significance of her intersecting spatial and temporal positioning (Valentine, 2007) as a young woman, with family, children, and temporary residency, living in the rural north, which hinders pursuit of her previous career, with attendant risks of ‘marginalisation’ (Liversage, 2009a).

**Social networks in the rural idyll – John’s professional re-entry**

John, with business studies from the Middle East, entered Sweden alone in 2013 seeking asylum, and was settled by the Migration Agency in the rural north. As he sought asylum before the stricter immigration laws were implemented he was granted permanent residency. His story can be described as one of ‘re-entering’ his former profession in terms of Liversage’s (2009a) ideal-typical paths that shows how specific interconnected spatial and temporal contexts (Valentine, 2007) of being a young, highly skilled male with no family ties and obligations, a permanent residency and social networks in the rural idyll can lead to ‘successful integration’ in terms of Swedish policy. Like the other forced migrants, John had no expectations of working as an accountant, all he wanted was a job. Like many migrants with either tertiary or non-tertiary education interviewed, John was offered, and enrolled in, training as an assistant in elderly care and worked for a while in an elderly care centre through a subsidised step-in job. He also worked for a while as a language assistant at a local school supporting migrant children’s studies. In times of large international migration, these types of work as ‘cultural brokers’ are common forms of first employment for migrants (Liversage, 2009a, 2009b).

Now John is established in the local rural labour market and has managed to re-enter his profession and regain highly skilled status through employment in a firm of accountants. He attributes this to the ease of forming social networks in his small rural community. When a position opened up at the firm, a friend of his – a native local entrepreneur and customer of the firm – recommended him for the position, highlighting the importance of social networks for local employers to value foreign credentials (particularly in contrast to the lack of such experience in Emma’s case). John describes knowledge of business economics and accountancy as universal and context-independent, but describes his MAE courses in accounting at the local learning centre as essential for his professional language and knowledge of Swedish legislation.

John’s story shows how spatial and temporal moments intersect (Valentine, 2007). Settlement in a rural area with permanent residency before the immigration wave allowed him to use his language and cultural resources as a cultural broker for other migrants. In his 30s with no family to care for and not fearing deportation, time was not an issue in gaining employment or re-education. John’s story can be interpreted as a story of successful integration and re-entry in a ‘rural idyll’ (Halfacree, 1995) that provides close contacts with the local natives, familiar settings in the local learning centre where he is seen as a person rather than a number, and potential to create crucial social networks for gaining employment without formal Swedish credentials.

**The immigrant identity as a resource in the rural north – William’s work as a cultural broker**

William, a physical chemist and university and high school teacher from the Middle East migrated to Sweden in 2013 with some of his family. Entering Sweden as asylum seekers they passed through several Swedish municipalities before gaining permanent residencies (as they arrived and applied for residency before implementation of the stricter immigration laws) and were settled in the rural north. William already spoke several languages, including English, quickly learned Swedish and finished his
SFI courses within a few months. However, only two weeks into his SFI courses he was told to take a Swedish language proficiency test in the urban regional centre that, if passed, would provide him access to supplementary university education and fast tracks for highly skilled migrants that are only available in urban areas. Although he took the test he thought it was too advanced for his current level and did not feel ready for it. Failing the test, he returned to his SFI studies in his rural municipality and has not tried again or enrolled in any fast tracks for highly skilled migrants. This can be understood through William’s temporal and spatial positioning (Valentine, 2007) as a breadwinning father in his late 50s, with valued cultural competence, language skills and knowledge in the local labour market.

Like John, William found work through social networks. Staff at the local learning centre recommended him to the municipality, which offered him work as a bilingual assistant to help pupils with migration backgrounds at one of the local schools. Today, William works full time helping pupils with their studies in all subjects, teaches pupils in their native language, and sometimes provides temporary cover when teachers are absent. Thus, like John and Sophia (a highly skilled migrant with a teacher education degree) international migration opened up opportunities for him to work in integration activities as a ‘cultural broker’ (Diken, 1998; Liversage, 2009b). Unlike John, however, William has not been able to fully re-enter his profession and regain highly skilled status. His situation can rather be interpreted as one of ‘marginalisation’ (Liversage, 2009a) as he describes himself as not being ‘one of the real teachers at school’. His knowledge and skills are not valued as highly because he is not a native Swedish speaker and lacks formal certification of sufficient Swedish proficiency and a teacher degree. He recognises that a teaching degree are required for teaching positions, but wonders why the municipality and school can hire native Swedish speaking persons who lack formal teaching degrees for teacher positions, but he himself is left in an assistant’s position. Working full time, needing the money to provide for his family in Sweden, he feels that taking Swedish language courses to gain formal qualifications would be unfeasible (and supplementary university studies to obtain a teaching degree completely impossible due to the time off work and moving or long-distance commuting required).

For William (and other highly skilled migrants interviewed) the requirements for high Swedish proficiency to practice as certain professionals, such as teachers (as in William’s case) or MDs, are particularly problematic. There are no available fast and flexible tracks in rural municipalities. The local learning centres might not even offer the required courses at all through classroom teaching, but solely through distance learning collaboratively with municipalities in the region or online courses, provided by private actors with funding by the municipalities. While the online courses can be flexible and fast (as illustrated by Emma’s experience described above) other interviewed migrants criticise the online courses as they believe they do not improve their communication skills in Swedish. Rural areas are more dependent on distance education, especially for adult learners (c.f. Iloh, 2018), and William’s position as a migrant intersects with power relations of structural inequalities between rural and urban places, which hinders migrant adult learners’ efforts to acquire the required proficiency in Swedish.

William’s temporal position of migrating before the large immigration wave opened up opportunities for work as a cultural broker. However, his story illustrates how processes of marginalisation occur through interlocking spatial and temporal positionings (Valentine, 2007). William’s temporal position of being older and spatial position of living in the rural north and caring for his family hinders his re-investment in supplementary university education, and attempts to find work that matches his skills and knowledge in the local labour market. Due to his positioning, William’s experiences can be described as what Bygnes (2021) calls ‘mobility dissonance’: a form of post-migration stress that leads to feelings of stagnation and failure to progress in life, profession and status.
Closed professions and poverty of access and support – Karen’s coping strategies of re-education

Karen, a young medical doctor from an African country came to Sweden in 2017 as a resettlement refugee. Consequently, she was directly granted permanent residency, and settled in the rural north, with access to the establishment programme. Her temporal position (Valentine, 2007) of migration to Sweden at a time when there were (and still are) high shortages of medical doctors in Sweden (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017), enhances her opportunities to re-enter her profession. To help efforts to address labour shortages in professions such as medicine and education, specific complementary university education programmes have been developed to facilitate transitions of appropriately skilled migrants. There is also a more general fast track, the ‘Short Route’, specifically aimed at shortening the integration of highly skilled migrants. This is a six-month language and career development course, commissioned, funded and overseen by the PES, but provided by various private actors, often in collaboration with universities or adult education organisations. In this manner, the PES controls who is offered the opportunity to participate in the course, which is only available in more populated municipalities.

The spatial positioning (Valentine, 2007) of Karen and the other highly skilled migrants settled in the rural north restricts their opportunities to participate in these forms of fast tracks for highly skilled migrants. This is due not only to structural inequalities and poverty of access (Gray et al., 2006) in the rural north but also limitations in the knowledge about such opportunities and services provided by government agencies responsible for migrants’ establishment and introduction into the labour market. The lack of knowledge of fast tracks can be partly attributed to staff encountering few migrants with higher educational backgrounds (Kolada, 2019) and having relatively little experience of supporting them in rural areas. Karen learnt about the Short Route through friends and online, then approached her local employment services office herself, wanting to be enrolled on the Short Route, a similar experience to that of Maria and Kathy. Other interviewed migrants had not heard of these specific tracks for highly skilled migrants. While Karen’s spatial location in the rural area raised structural obstacles for professional re-entry, her ambition and activity can be interpreted as classed resources of agency related to her position as highly skilled. Finding information on her own, enlightening, arguing and demanding access to specific training for highly skilled migrants resulted in a form of continuity of retention of her social status as highly skilled (cf. Bygnes, 2021). After enrolling in the Short Route course, Karen felt she obtained fast tracks to formal credentials of Swedish proficiency and access to internships in the strictly regulated healthcare sector. It also provided access to career counsellors with knowledge of available paths and expertise in navigation through the regulatory channels to a licence to practice medicine in Sweden.

Despite a favourable labour market, the medical profession in Sweden is regarded as relatively ‘closed’ for migrants educated outside the EU/EEA due to stricter licencing regulations (by the National Board of Health and Welfare, NBHW) than those in other Nordic countries (Alecu & Drange, 2019; Mozetič, 2018). In addition to Swedish language proficiency, a migrant from a non-EU/EEA country must pass an MD proficiency test and may also require six months of clinical training (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2019). The test has been criticised and many foreign doctors fail, resulting in marginalisation and re-migration (Läkartidningen, 2019). The difficulties caused one of the other doctors, Maria, to consider re-migration to another EU-country where her education had already been validated and she had a job offer. Three years practice would allow her to apply for a Swedish MD licence as if her education had been completed in an EU or EEA country (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2019). This clearly illustrates how global intersections of space and time, colonial ties, national and international policy and rules create contextually different spaces for actions for highly skilled migrants in specific spatial and temporal moments that allow transnational mobilities for some, but not others (Guo & Maitra, 2019).
Like many other forced migrants (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019), Karen is missing some documentation of her university studies and is not very optimistic about the NBHW’s assessment and validation. She might also need to pass several upper secondary courses to gain access to university studies to complete her MD education, leaving her in a similar situation to that of Cathy with unfinished medical training. Karen is thinking she might have to start all over again (cf. Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019), but as stated in her quotation above, she has ‘no expectations’. Even if the NBHW ‘only’ requires her to do the proficiency test and clinical training, Karen believes that acquiring authorisation to practice medicine again will be a long process. For now, she is taking one step at a time, focusing on becoming proficient in Swedish, preferring not to think about the long and unclear road ahead through the Swedish education system and bureaucratic thicket of validation and licences. Migrants often find encounters with such bureaucracy frustrating due to the bewildering regulations, and regard the multiple agencies and long waits involved as wasting their time and slowing their integration (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Bygnes, 2021; Korzeniewska & Erdal, 2019). Such experiences of migrants are not restricted to rural areas, but there is more knowledge and experience of supporting highly skilled migrants elsewhere (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Bygnes, 2021).

In terms of Liversage’s (2009a) ideal-typical paths for highly skilled migrants entry into the labour market, Karen’s experience can be described as a path of re-education that in the future might lead to her re-entering her profession as a medical doctor or other high level work. Karen’s intersecting temporal and spatial positioning (Valentine, 2007) of her young age, without family and children meant increased possibilities of commuting and re-investing in re-education embodying the ‘ideal woman immigrant’, as a young, highly educated, ambitious, active, energetic and enterprising self who want to work and integrate (Larsson, 2015).

**Concluding discussion**

The highly skilled migrants’ efforts to re-enter their professions in Sweden vividly illuminate how their location in time and space is constitutive of their opportunities as non-EU/EEA migrants coming as refugees or family migrants to rural areas. Highly educated migrants living in rural Swedish areas who want a fast track to the Swedish language proficiency required for access to former professions and short routes or complementary university education to continue practicing their profession need to move, commute or (if lucky) participate in online courses and distance learning. Variations in the migrants’ intersecting spatial and temporal positions of family situation, gender, age and financial resources, reveal different lived experiences of the ‘poverty of access’ (Gray et al., 2006) to specific routes for highly skilled migrants in rural areas. Moving for some is not an option for various reasons, such as not wanting to uproot children and family again, financial issues, lack of family support, and difficulties finding housing for the whole family and/or work opportunities for spouses. Commuting also takes time away from family and has financial costs, for example, in terms of loss of income from work. As a young woman without a family, recently settled in Sweden but with permanent residency, the costs are lower for Karen to commute and participate in fast tracks, while for William (an older single breadwinner) the costs are much higher (cf. Liversage, 2009a).

The migrants’ stories can also be interpreted as rural stories of the needs for individual agency and strong motivation, and for migrants to push, demand, and find required information themselves, related to their classed position as highly skilled. These factors are particularly essential in encounters with Swedish bureaucracy, for negotiating with individual gatekeepers and navigating the complex educational structures and regulations for access to certain licenced professions, such as teaching and medical practice in Sweden. While these are not specific experiences of migrants in rural areas (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Bygnes, 2021), the use of classed resources and individual agency may be particularly essential in such areas. Reasons for this include lack of knowledge and experience regarding key aspects of professional career development in the rural learning centres,
career counselling services, and PES offices (probably associated with the small numbers of highly skilled migrants placed or settled in rural areas). Such contextual factors raise several risks. One is that they may substantially contribute to migrants’ deskilling and cooling of their efforts to re-enter their professions (cf. Anthias et al., 2013). Another is that they may substantially reduce the likelihood of these professional workers establishing and remaining in depopulating areas.

The social structures and migrants’ different positions in spatial and temporal moments (Valentine, 2007) present and allow different opportunities for re-entering their professions due to differences in professional barriers and current labour market shortages. For example, professional barriers for non-EU/EEA medical doctors are substantial and the paths around them so long and tortuous that many migrants question even the feasibility of acquiring a licence to practice medicine, despite a favourable labour market. For one of the migrants, the doubts were so strong that she was considering re-migration to another EU-country where her education has already been validated and she has a job offer.

The costs of reclaiming qualifications vary, depending on the migrants’ age and professional stage when they migrate as well as the migration regime, highlighting the importance of spatial and temporal locations for opportunities and hindrances (Valentine, 2007). These dictate access to settlement programmes, language studies, security of possibilities to stay, re-education and validation requirements, as well as expectations of the time and effort needed to regain former qualifications. Some of the migrants’ stories illustrate coping strategies of deskilling and future hopes for re-education, accepting to some degrees that life has been interrupted, previous career plans changed and hindered, and the need to start all over again (Anthias et al., 2013). Others can be said to experience a form of ‘mobility dissonance’ (Bygnes, 2021) having different expectations of quickly regaining their professional status and a feeling of moving backwards/downwards, or standing still and not advancing in life. Long times are required for some professionals such as teachers and healthcare staff to navigate through complex licencing processes, validate qualifications, gain language proficiency and complementary education. This leave migrants like Maria and William anxious about forgetting professional knowledge and skills, experiencing deskilling and downward mobility in terms of their professional identity, and losing claims to being highly skilled like many other highly skilled migrants (Korzeniewska & Erdal, 2019; Livesage, 2009b; Smyth & Kum, 2010).

Not all interviewed migrants experienced deskilling and, as other studies show, temporality in terms of time in the new country seems to be important (Bygnes, 2021) and in the future some of the interviewed migrants might be able to re-enter their profession or other high-level work. However, due to differences in opportunities and requirements related to differences in professional barriers, re-entry is much more feasible for some than others. Unlike professionals who require licences to practice, such as teachers and medical doctors, those with business degrees encounter less formal hindrances but may experience informal devaluation of foreign credentials (Bauder, 2003) that results in reskilling and downward mobility strategies. The story of Emma specifically highlights how policies of temporary residencies that put time pressure on migrants’ labour market incorporation and self-sufficiency result in strategies of re-education for low-level work. Almost all interviewed highly skilled migrants have been active, to some degree, in different types of work as cultural brokers and providers of language support, or in child and elder care, from which it is not easy to ‘ascend’ (Livesage, 2009b). While previous skills and education are devalued, their immigrant identity (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018) has value in the local labour market, intersecting with immigration flows and labour market shortages in ways that contribute (inter alia) to ethnicisation of care, deskilling and downward mobility. However, John’s story shows that spatial positioning in a rural idyll (Halfacree, 1995) with close contacts, where everyone knows everyone, can overcome devaluation of foreign credentials and employers’ unfavourable attitudes.
By focusing on the spatial connotations of intersectionality, otherwise neglected power dimensions of space and temporality in terms of age, world events, labour market needs, rules and policies (Liversage, 2009a; Valentine, 2007), the intersectional analysis contributes to a better understanding of how power operates. The lived experiences of highly skilled migrants’ intersecting spatial and temporal positions highlight variations in interconnections of space, time, gender, age, family situation, profession, immigrant status and policy (local, national and international) that create contextually different spaces for action in which re-education is essential for re-entering former professions. The interviewed migrants’ experiences have similarities with those of highly skilled migrants’ experiences in more urban areas (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Bygnes, 2021; Liversage, 2009a). However, their spatial location in rural areas seems to reinforce risks of deskilling and being pushed out to more urban areas associated with the structural dismantling of rural areas in terms of lack of personnel, closure of government agencies, and scarcity of educational opportunities, economic rationalities and procurement rules adapted to urban areas (Beach et al., 2018). Furthermore, gendered discourses of highly skilled migrants as young, childless and independent labour migrants tend to restrict their spaces for action in rural areas.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms and the participants’ places of residence in the three rural municipalities are omitted for the sake of anonymity. As the commonalities of living in rural areas were more evident than differences between the research sites the migrants’ anonymity was considered more important than the contextual information.

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