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SIMHE GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING SUPPORTING DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER PATHS

The SIMHE guidance and counselling services, offered by several higher education institutions in close co-operation, support the integration into Finnish society of highly educated immigrants and immigrants who are eligible for higher education through studies and employment. The SIMHE guidance and counselling is provided nationwide; in other words, guidance and counselling is made available to immigrants living in different parts of Finland regardless of which higher education institution they are applying for (Ministry of Education and Culture 2016, 25). The higher education institutions' own expertise in the relevant fields of study and in guidance and counselling is applied in guidance and counselling, but the networks also cover various higher education institutions and authorities, such as the Finnish National Agency for Education and the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health. In addition, the operations include advocacy and increasing the awareness of the services on the national level. At the same time, best practices accumulated in the operations and the competence accrued by the guidance counsellors are made available to parties working with immigrants.

Each SIMHE higher education institution provides the services primarily based on the needs of the immigrant clients while also taking their own region and partner networks into consideration. For example, in Northern and Eastern Finland, the long geographical distances create challenges in the operations, whereas the high number of clients seeking guidance and counselling services can be challenging in the Helsinki metropolitan area. This has, for its part, resulted in the establishment of different kinds of networks and forms of co-operation between various actors in the regions. (Autero 2018, 9–10.)

¹The higher education institutions that have provided SIMHE services in 2016–2020: University of Helsinki, University of Jyväskylä, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Oulu University of Applied Sciences, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Tampere university community and University of Turku.

The current focus on continuous learning adds weight to SIMHE guidance and counselling, the central goals of which are to develop and update the competence of people who pursue higher education or have a higher education degree and have moved to Finland as an adult, as well as to support their employability. The services have reached guidance and counselling clients well in recent years, and the awareness of SIMHE has increased through the establishment and expansion of the operations (see Finnish National Agency for Education n.d.a). According to statistical data collected by the SIMHE higher education institutions, more than 4,300 clients used the services in 2016–2019. New higher education institutions have also joined in to provide and develop the services and to strengthen highly educated immigrants' integration into society regionally.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SIMHE GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

The SIMHE guidance and counselling services are run based on the strategic funding provided by the higher education institutions and based on each institution's defined emphases and resources as well as the pedagogical and substance expertise of the personnel in charge of implementing the services. For example, the guidance and counselling services are implemented by the admission services or by a separate SIMHE unit. Although the organisation of the guidance and counselling services varies, personal guidance is the most central and most common guidance and counselling method in all of the SIMHE higher education institutions.

Key competence areas in the SIMHE guidance and counselling operations include interaction skills and operating environment competence. As is the case in guidance and counselling work in general, a personalised approach that focuses on the client's situation is an important element of guidance and counselling provided to immigrants and supporting the client's active agency is key. (Autero 2018, 22–26.) Interaction is a particularly important part of the guidance and counselling discussion. Vehviläinen (2015), for example, discusses three orientations of guidance: supportive, explorative, and problem-solving. The key aspects of supportive orientation include the counsellor's presence and listening skills as well as their ability to be compassionate and receptive to emotions that may sometimes be difficult to deal with. This creates a foundation for trust-based interaction, which helps the participants progress towards the exploratory and solution-oriented orientations that

will provide the guidance and counselling client with tools and methods to plan their life.

A figure presented by Häkkinen (2019) depicts the SIMHE guidance and counselling discussion as an entity consisting of the dimensions of orientation, encountering, asking questions, and developing. The interactive guidance and counselling make it possible to encounter the client and their questions in the very situation in which the person finds themselves in the new society and environment. The questions asked in the guidance and counselling discussion often stem from one's own competence, educational and work background, and objectives. The interaction offers a way to explore and expand the available options and map tangible steps forward to support the client. Allowing space and time for questions and discussion helps share understanding and knowledge. Thus, interaction functions as a tool to develop not only guidance and counselling but also administrative practices, such as selection criteria and application guidelines.

Most of the guidance and counselling clients already have a higher education degree or degrees earned abroad, and usually they are not degree students in Finnish higher education institutions. In addition, the SIMHE guidance and counselling is characterised by issues related to language skills and the guidelines and requirements concerning applying for studies in Finland.

The key objective of guidance and counselling is to help the client find alternatives and solutions in terms of studies that support employability and in terms of their career. For some, it is a balancing act between the occupation they have earned previously and a new career. This may be due to the mismatch between the previously earned degree and competence and working life in Finland, a highly regulated sector (such as education and social welfare and health care), language proficiency requirements, or the goal of finding a new direction for one's life. The counsellor's expertise and networks are an asset in the discussions concerning the client's goals and plans.

SIMHE operations have disseminated information and shared best practices in guidance and counselling networks in Finland and internationally right from the beginning. This topic has also been examined in the Maamot project, which created a website to collect information and concrete examples to support the guidance and counselling of immigrants (Haapakorpi 2018; HY+ 2019)

CONTENT OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IMPACTED BY THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

The discussion on guidance and counselling includes a review of the client's personal background, wishes and goals in terms of education and employability as well as studies that supplement their competence. The aim is to help the client understand and verbalise their competence and together examine how their previously accumulated competence aligns with the education and working life requirements in Finland. Some of the clients seeking guidance and counselling services are already aware of jobs in their own field and the requirements concerning employability. They also know what elements of their competence need to be developed to find a job. With some clients, guidance and counselling needs to begin from the very basics. This may include looking at an overview of the Finnish educational system or language proficiency requirements. The framework and competence requirements set for guidance and counselling by different occupations and fields of education are also different. The following covers factors that impact guidance and counselling in several different fields of education where the requirements of professional qualification differ in terms of the higher education degree, language proficiency and supplementing one's studies, for example.

Technology

Many individuals seeking SIMHE guidance and counselling have a higher education degree in technology. This is most often a bachelor's degree. The career progress of those who have completed a technology degree varies based on their educational background and competence. The technology sector is not regulated, except for the qualifications required in the electrical engineering sector (Finnish Safety and Chemicals Agency n.d). Key factors emphasised in the job search include the job-seeker's own competence in relation to the competence required for the job, their need to supplement one's competence, and language proficiency. Knowledge of Finnish is highlighted in sectors where Finnish is a requirement for understanding the regulations and laws governing the sector. Alongside professional competence, Finnish language skills may play a key role in employability in the electrical engineering and construction sectors, for example. (Autero 2018; Metropolia 2019) Depending on the duties and the organisation, the importance of Finnish language may be lower in the ICT sector, for example, where good command of English combined with substance competence may be sufficient to qualify someone for a job.

However, a guidance and counselling client often lacks information about where they could complete supplementary higher education studies in their field of technology or what other opportunities there may be for continuing education. If that is the case, the objective of guidance and counselling is to support the client in applying for suitable studies, and guidance and counselling can focus on preparing the documents needed in the job search and finding jobs through networks. Occasionally the client's technology competence and the language skills required in the field are not at all aligned with the Finnish requirement level and bringing them up to date would require considerable investments in terms of both time and money. A career change and finding ways to apply one's previous education and employment experience in the new profession may then become relevant.

Psychologists and teachers

In Finland, some professions are regulated and require a licensing decision by the relevant authority. According to law or decrees, specific education or a certain degree is required in these professions. If a person has completed a degree in social welfare or health care, they should apply for licensing with the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health Valvira (National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health n.d.). The decision concerning the suitability of a foreign teacher's degree is made by the Finnish National Agency for Education (Finnish National Agency for Education n.d.b).

Official processes are in place for the regulated professions regarding the submission, processing, and decision-making processes of applications. However, the decisions often raise questions concerning where and how the required supplementary studies can be taken and what the decision qualifies the person to do once they have completed the required studies. When a regulated profession and the recognition of foreign qualifications come up in guidance and counselling, the client's goals and prior studies should be discussed with them and matters concerning the preconditions for the recognition of a prior degree should also be covered. The counsellor should also ensure that the client understands which authorities they should contact at any given time.

Being qualified as a psychologist in Finland does not follow a similarly clear-cut process as does the qualification of a physician or a dentist, for example. They proceed along a distinct path of study, placement, and examination (Tampere University 2020). The following is an example of the challenges encountered in becoming qualified as a psychologist:

NN graduated from a foreign psychologist education programme. They have a decision by the Finnish National Agency for Education, in which their degree is equated to a master's degree. A statement issued by the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health requires that the person supplements their studies as follows: an extended (5 months) supervised placement period and studies on the ethical foundation of and legislation concerning practicing a psychologist profession. NN has been living in Finland for approximately five years, their language proficiency level is Good, and they have also obtained additional training while investigating their opportunities to qualify as a psychologist – among other things, they have completed a Finnish-language upper secondary vocational qualification. They are currently employed as a youth worker. However, they are highly motivated to receive a psychologist's qualification even though their current duties already enable them to apply their psychology competence. They also have secured a work placement spot that would enable them to complete the placement requirement. However, according to the current practice, the work placement requires one to be a university student.

A person with a foreign educational background cannot complete the qualification training without applying in the joint application procedure of the higher education institutions and become a degree student in psychology through an entrance examination. Even though they may have competence in psychology, their Finnish language skills may not be strong enough for the demanding entrance examination. Thus, becoming a degree student may not happen. A question often heard in guidance and counselling discussions concerns potential routes or more open ways to apply for a right to study that would enable people to complete the qualification studies. This question is justified and valid, considering how low the credit requirement is in relation to the scope of the degree and considering that there may be a shortage of competent psychologists in the region.

Apart from psychologists, another key group that uses SIMHE guidance and counselling is teachers who have earned their degree abroad. Unlike with psychologists, supplementary studies in teacher training are mostly possible through a non-degree right to study and, sometimes, also through open university studies. For subject teachers, the possibility to complete supplementary studies in their specific subject is fairly good, especially if their language skills allow them to study in Finnish at a university. The studies required for qualification as a

class teacher often include multidisciplinary education and school subject studies (so called 'POM' studies), which generally are not available through the non-degree right to study or open university studies.

Many academic universities and universities of applied sciences offer pedagogical studies for teachers. The pedagogical studies aimed at immigrants are provided in project form, which is why the continuity of the studies is difficult to forecast. This makes it difficult to prepare a curriculum over a longer time span. In addition, the language proficiency requirements in teacher education are high, which makes it more difficult to qualify as a teacher.

IMPORTANCE OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN CONTINUOUS LEARNING

The SIMHE guidance and counselling is linked to the topical reform of continuous learning. The experience gained in guidance and counselling work over a longer period indicates that there are more and more people in Finland and arriving from abroad to Finland who have completed a higher education degree in their home country and who are also motivated to update their education and competence to meet the needs and requirements of Finnish society. Thus, guidance and counselling provided for and the studying and learning by highly educated immigrants and immigrants eligible for higher education should be part of continuous education and a right to obtain such education.

The SIMHE guidance and counselling has demonstrated that identifying prior learning in a higher education institution streamlines the access to the path to higher education and qualifying for a profession in Finland. From an individual's perspective, this will help them find their own place as an adult member of society and make it possible for a person who often possesses diverse international and cultural competence to contribute to the institutions and functions of society.

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