

Conclusions and recommendations of the National Audit Office

Work-based immigration – Effectiveness and customer orientation of the immigration administration and recruitment of foreign labour in the health and social services sector

The audit looked into authorities' actions and administrative processes associated with work-based immigration. A particular aim was examining if the processes are efficient and customer oriented and if cooperation between the authorities is effective. This examination focused specifically on the health and social services sector, which is affected by a major labour shortage but in which little or no action has been taken to promote work-based immigration.

Finland's population and the number of employed can only increase through immigration. According to the Ministry of Finance, a permanent increase in work-based immigration by 10,000 people a year would, over the longer term, reduce the sustainability gap by about 0.5 percentage points in relation to the gross domestic product (GDP), or more than one billion euros. Since 2003, Finnish Government Programmes have referred to promoting work-based immigration as a means of improving the demographic dependency ratio, bolstering the economy, and alleviating the situation in sectors suffering from labour shortages.

While measures to promote work-based immigration are heading in the right direction, progress has been slow on many fronts

Numerous strategic development targets at the government level have been set to promote work-based immigration over the last 20 years. While the authorities' actions have been steered consistently to achieve the targets, target achievement has been hampered by slow progress and interruptions. Among other things, problems have been caused by the fragmented administrative structures of official actions and variations in different authorities' commitment to the targets. In addition, grassroots level development measures have largely relied on project funding, which has been an obstacle to long-term development.

In 2020, the administration of work-based immigration was transferred to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. Whereas this has improved the overall steering and promoted target achievement, there is still room for improvement in the effectiveness and customer orientation of immigration administration.

The Government has set the target of doubling work-based immigration from its current level by 2030, making it possible to attain the total increase of at least 50,000 work-based immigrants identified as the requirement in the sustainability roadmap. After this, the target will be to increase the number of immigrants by at least 10,000 a year. The preconditions for achieving the targets set for work-based immigration include more streamlined permit processes for workers and entrepreneurs as well as closer co-operation between the authorities. The central government, local governments and business life should also work together to improve immigrants' language skills and professional competence. Work-based immigration could also be promoted more efficiently if, rather than funding individual projects, fragmented resources were allocated to actions and structures that safeguard permanent preconditions for entry.

Specialists' and growth entrepreneurs' permit processes meet the target time, employees' and entrepreneurs' processes do not

Slow permit processes have been a significant reason for the low number of foreign employees recruited by Finnish companies. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment has made determined efforts to develop the permit processes since the administration of work-based immigration was transferred to the Ministry. Among other things, the permit processes have been speeded up by introducing automation, using risk-based processing of applications and increasing the human resources of the Finnish Immigration Service.

Permits for specialists and growth entrepreneurs are processed within two weeks set as the target. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is striving to accelerate the permit process for specialists even further using a fast track service pledge and the national D visa associated with it, which entered into force in June 2022. The audit found, however, that additional administrative measures and an assessment of the cost-benefit ratio are prerequisites for the full introduction of the D visa. According to Finnish missions abroad, only a fraction of the specialists applied for a D visa in the first months after it became available, and no great increase in this share is expected.

The permit processes for employees and entrepreneurs comprise two steps, which slows them down. A TE Office or a Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment first make a partial decision before the Finnish Immigration Service makes its decision. In July 2022, the average processing time of residence permits for an employed person was 68 days, while this figure for entrepreneurs was 85 days. Employees' permits to enter the country do not apply to their families, which makes family reunification slow, expensive and uncertain for employees. As employers cannot promise potential employees that they can bring their families to Finland, targeting campaigns at employees to attract them is difficult. Specialists' family members usually receive a residence permit decision faster and simultaneously with the sponsor.

There is room for further improvement in the permit and service system's customer orientation

Guidance and advisory services for immigrants who arrive in Finland to work should be improved further. Customers still find it difficult to obtain information on the progress of the residence permit process. The agencies have improved the customer orientation of their approach. In a survey conducted in connection with this audit, however, companies and projects working with work-based immigration highlighted the need for further improvement in the customer orientation of the Finnish Immigration Service and the Digital and Population Data Services Agency, in particular.

Several measures intended to improve the customer orientation and efficiency of the permit system are proposed as part of reforming Chapter 5 of the Aliens Act (301/2004). They include more extensive outsourcing of permit-related tasks, remote hearings of applicants and certification of trusted employers. The audit findings indicate that more extensive guidance and monitoring by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs would be needed to outsource residence permit tasks. While ten missions have already outsourced residence permit tasks, not all of them find the outsourced activities completely satisfactory. Remote hearings may improve customer orientation and efficiency if the Finnish Immigration Service and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs can work together smoothly.

Gaps remain in the knowledge base of work-based immigration

In an audit carried out as far back as 2012, the National Audit Office found that data concerning the grounds for issuing residence permits cannot be combined with other national register data. This prevents the compilation of statistical data on work-based immigration and makes it problematic to produce monitoring, foresight and research data. The audit findings indicate that this key issue associated with the knowledge base of work-based immigration has not been solved over ten years. While efforts are currently being made to solve the knowledge base issues through various development measures, co-operation between different authorities remains a precondition for ensuring that comprehensive statistical data are collected.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has played a minor role in anticipating the need for foreign labour in the health and social services sector, even if the Government has set the ministry several targets associated with foresight activities as part of strategic steering over the past decade. The ministry sharpened its focus in late 2021 as it launched a cross-administrative programme to ensure the adequacy and availability of personnel in the health and social services sector.

Work-based residence permits for a profession requiring legalisation cannot be issued directly to health and social services professionals trained outside the EU and EEA

While work-based immigration has long been considered a partial solution to labour shortages in the health and social services sector, it does not provide a fast remedy for the prevailing situation. Professionals who have completed their health and social services sector training in an EU or EEA country, or non-EU and EEA countries, cannot be issued directly with an employee's residence permit for professions requiring legalisation in this sector, as they must first obtain a right to practise their profession issued by the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira). The audit findings indicate that, in addition to the residence permit process, the processes of granting professional practice rights should also be speeded up.

Valvira may require the applicant to complete compensatory measures or additional studies before they are granted the right to practise their profession. However, there is no path to obtaining the proper qualifications for trained nurses in the health and social services sector. Attempts have been made in recent years to build a qualification path for nurses in several projects. No permanent funding for such qualification training has been found, however, which is why efforts to develop this training are continued with the support of project funding. Another precondition for obtaining the right to practise the profession is submitting a certificate of sufficient language proficiency to Valvira. However, the legislation does not specify what sufficient language proficiency means. A sub-group of the programme for improving the adequacy and availability of health and social services personnel has been tasked with presenting its proposals concerning the funding of training for the legalisation of foreign labour and preparing an action plan for developing and putting on a permanent footing both the legalisation process and the qualification training that supports it. The National Audit Office finds performing this task extremely necessary.

International recruitments are handled by recruitment companies operating in the health and social services sector. There is currently no legislation directing or regulating international recruitment activities in Finland. Consequently, it is the recruitment companies that make the rules for the recruitment market in the health and social services sector. Recruitment companies in this sector bring persons with a background in nursing from countries outside the EU and the EEA to Finland to work as care assistants and practical nurses. Care assistants do not need professional practice rights granted by Valvira, and a person who has not completed practical nursing training can also work in this role if the employer finds that they have sufficient training, experience, professional skills and language proficiency for the task in question. Some of the recruits are trained as practical nurses in Finland through apprenticeship training because it is not possible to be trained as a nurse under an apprenticeship agreement in Finland. While the authorities and experts find this operating method unethical, it is, however, the

only way to recruit international workers directly to the Finnish health and social services sector.

Recruitment companies in the health and social services sector currently bring into the country people whose language proficiency would not meet the requirements set by Valvira for nursing professionals who have completed their training abroad and who have been legalised and issued the right to use a protected occupational title. It is up to the employer to ensure that the employee has sufficient language proficiency required in a healthcare professional's work. However, it is rarely necessary to intervene in the right of persons who have completed healthcare training abroad to practise the profession, and these cases usually involve a lack of clinical competence rather than language skills.

Large cities invest in settling-in services for work-based immigrants but smaller municipalities do not have established services

According to the Parliamentary Audit Committee, integration services for immigrants who come to Finland to work should be improved. The audit found that instead of organising integration measures, large cities have helped work-based immigrants to settle in Finland by providing authority services at guidance and advisory points intended for immigrants following the one-stop shop principle.

The integration of work-based immigrants can be enhanced by defining the parties responsible for settling-in services and their roles more accurately and by improving cooperation between central and local government authorities. In addition, electronic identification should be introduced in all services associated with entry into Finland. Integration and settling-in services offered to work-based immigrants should also be strengthened and put on a permanent footing outside the largest cities. Services that promote integration and settling in Finland are a pull factor for the country and help ensure that work-based immigrants and their families stay in Finland. Studies have found that investing in integrating immigrants is highly profitable for society.

Recommendations of the National Audit Office

Based on the audit, the National Audit Office recommends that

1. the gaps in the knowledge base of work-based immigration be investigated and filled in, ensuring that in the future, data describing the grounds for issuing a residence permit can be combined with other national register data. The authorities responsible for this are the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Finance as well as the Finnish Immigration Service, the Digital and Population Data Services Agency and Statistics Finland as agencies subordinate to them.

2. permanent practices, knowledge bases and organisation be created for anticipating competence and labour needs in the health and social services sector. They should be based on the on-going programme for ensuring the adequacy and availability of health and social services personnel and government policies on developing the national foresight system. The authorities responsible for this are the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment.
3. the authorities responsible for permit processes invest in streamlining the permit processes not only for specialists but also for employees and entrepreneurs as well as their family members and in developing customer orientation further. The authorities responsible for this are the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Finnish Immigration Service.
4. the Finnish Immigration Service develop its customer service regarding guidance and advice provision for employers and applicants for an employee's residence permit, for example by disseminating information about the agency's upgraded telephone service more efficiently and by assigning a contact person for companies that recruit foreign workers to answer enquiries and provide additional information.
5. when the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Education and Culture assess the need to develop legislation on the recruitment of foreign labour, the ministries should also consider more detailed provisions to be included in the section on language proficiency and the level of language proficiency required in today's health and social services sector tasks.