

Academic Paper

Cultural aspects in multicultural mentoring-to-work relationships

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Abstract

This survey analyses mentors' and migrant mentees' perceptions of the role that cultural factors have in labour market integration and in the mentoring relationship. The data consists of Webropol surveys and interviews. The findings revealed that cultural similarity, local language proficiency and the ability to build up trust were experienced as supportive. Mentoring can promote cultural competences. We recommend using local languages, recruiting mentors from the same professional field and including the subject 'culture' in the mentoring trainings.

Keywords

mentoring, mentoring-to-work, migrant, culture, integration

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Introduction

Migration is considered an integral part of European economies and society, more specifically when we talk about filling gaps in the labour market. Consequently, effective methods for promoting employment and facilitating integration and labour market entry are important. For a good understanding, we take a brief look at the concepts of integration and mentoring. Integration is described as a social, cultural, political and economic process that takes place when migrants arrive in a new society (Martiniello, 2006). Bidirectional integration (OECD, 2018; Ala-Kauhaluoma et al., 2018) refers not only to accommodating migrants but understanding that changes are happening also at the societal level (Kärkkäinen, 2011; Csillag & Scharle, 2017). Regarding mentoring, we use the definition of De Cuyper and others (2019):

A person with more localised experience (mentor) provides guidance to a person with less experience (mentee), the objective of which is to support the mentee in making sustainable progress in his or her journey into the labour market. Both mentor and mentee voluntarily commit to this and establish contact on a regular basis. The relationship is initiated, facilitated and supported by a third actor (organisation). While asymmetrical, the mentoring relationship is of a reciprocal nature.

Mentoring in general is fundamentally relational and developmental, has career and psychosocial functions, requires both professional and personal investment and includes phases and transitions (Benishek et al., 2004; Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). It is an intense, goal-oriented process through which guidance is sought or extended for varying purposes. Mentoring has been highlighted as beneficial for both social and labour market integration (OECD, 2014; Konle-Seidl & Bolits, 2016). It provides an opportunity to broadly address labour market-related issues that migrants face, especially the cultural aspects of integration (De Cuyper et al., 2019; Vandermeerschen & De Cuyper, 2019).

Of the many forms that mentoring can take, the focus of this article is on mentoring-to-work. The goal of this mentoring process is to develop the mentee's work-life skills, expand their professional network and assist them in job-seeking. A mentor is a professional in their own field who already has experience and networks that can benefit the mentee. While this type of mentoring can be used for various target groups, in this context the focus is on increasing the likelihood of the mentee with a migrant background to access the labour market.

To better understand the possible advantages of mentoring-to-work, it is necessary to understand the impact of migration on employability. Migration implies a loss of so-called economic, social, cultural and information capital, as these types of capital are not easily transferable across geographic and cultural borders (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Many current programmes to decrease the employment gap between natives and migrants have failed to comprehensively address the various difficulties faced by migrants, partly because they tend to focus on the economic capital, while leaving the socio-cultural and information aspects largely untouched. Mentoring-to-work has been introduced as a way to address this problem, as it allows sharing of valuable and various types of information that is hard to access in the more formal ways of training (De Cuyper et al., 2019). Mentoring has been found to increase the employability of migrants by mitigating some of the hindering effects and making the mentee more desirable in employers' eyes (Weiss & Tulin, 2021). Haggard et al. (2011) as well as Eby et al. (2008) also highlight developmental benefits of mentoring, as the relationship is characterised by the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences.

Looking at the added value mentoring-to-work can create, culture-specific advice is highlighted as the most important element (Vandermeerschen & De Cuyper, 2019). Culture is widely discussed as central to mentoring, and sensitivity to multicultural issues is often emphasized for producing mentoring experiences that better respond to the needs of mentees and mentors (Benishek et al., 2004; Kent et al., 2013; Chan, 2018). Research on the cultural aspects of mentoring has largely focused on mentoring relationships (Schlosser et al., 2011; Reddick & Young, 2012; Kent et al., 2013), how societal cultures can impact how mentoring is conceived and valued (Megginson & Garvey, 2004) and the manner, in which ethnicity and societal beliefs relate to the structures and aims of mentoring (Kent et al., 2013). Our study brings into discussion the mentors' and mentees' own perceptions of the role of cultural factors in labour market integration and the mentoring relationship. We also address how mentoring can enhance cultural competences.

This paper is part of the development project "MESH – Employing immigrants via networks and mentoring" (2019–2021). In the project, a Finnish and Belgian consortium developed and experimented with models and practices of mentoring, in addition to identifying and systematising criteria for effective mentoring. The project was funded by the European Social Fund and coordinated by Turku University of Applied Sciences.

Attributes and components of culture

There are several definitions of culture, which vary depending on the lens of the discipline and researcher, and these have evolved over time. For the purposes of this paper, a workable description is found in Kent et al. (2013: 204) who state:

Culture represents the set of distinctive attributes that differentiate one group from another. It includes the beliefs, values, norms, customs, traditions and assumptions that determine the ways in which people conceptualise reality and live their lives.

Biricou et al. (2009: 3) add an important fact, when they conclude that “*definitions [on culture] agree on the fact that culture consists of something that is shared and/or learned by a group of people, but the content of the culture varies in different definitions.*” In addition to this general definition, a number of other aspects of culture merit consideration in the context of mentoring-to-work. It is important to be aware that culture is much more than what we objectively perceive, and that language appears to be an important component of integration. Moreover, it is often forgotten that in integration to work, the work context is also important, and for this reason we also briefly discuss how a group/organization culture is formed.

Cultures manifest in visible and invisible ways

According to Schein (2010), cultures manifest in visible and invisible ways. Visible elements include things such as artefacts, clothing, food, and art. The invisible aspects of culture consist of knowledge that is deeply embedded within it such as beliefs, norms, values, and basic assumptions (Schein, 2010). These latter elements are unconsciously understood by those within the culture but may be difficult for those outside it to grasp (Kochan, 2013; Kent et al., 2013). Edgar Schein (2010) further divides the invisible aspects into (i) norms and values and (ii) basic underlying assumptions. Norms and values are not as visible as artefacts, and it takes some time and communication to discover them. This is the level of shared goals and ideals, of ideologies, and of what we call ‘common sense’. Contrary to the deep basic assumptions, which are implicit, norms and values remain conscious and occasionally explicitly articulated (Schein, 2010).

Language and culture

Scientists in many disciplines have researched what the relationship between a particular language and culture is (Hoijer, 1954). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) states that man is an animal supported by a web of meanings created by himself. For Geertz, culture is that web. An essential part of culture is language. It comprises different systems of meanings that are structured in language and discourses, for example ethics and group identities, as well as conceptions of social relationships (Geertz, 1973). Language reflects the individual and community’s perception of reality (Saarikivi & Virtanen, 2020). Linguistic categories influence the worldview and thought (Boroditsky & Liberman, 2010). Learning a language is learning the culture (Scarino, 2010).

Culture as a shared learning process on common challenges

As we are studying mentoring to work, it is interesting to have a look at workplace culture. Schein (2010) describes culture as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid

and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

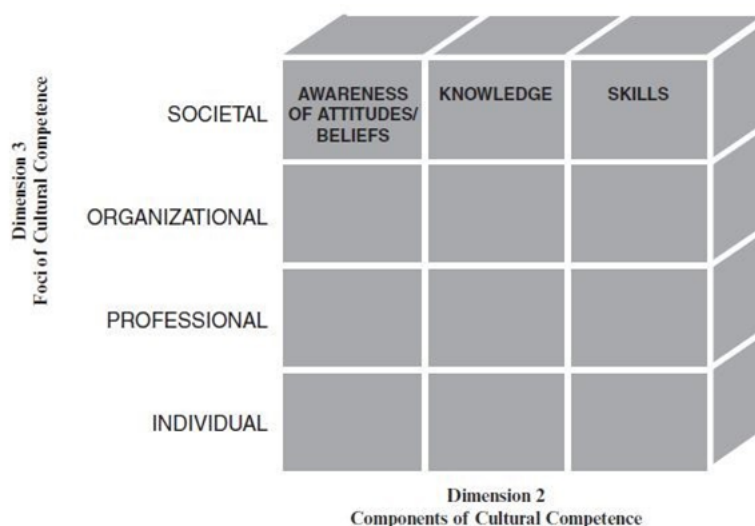
It gives an insight into how culture is created: a group of people facing common challenges and together searching for how best to deal with it. This view of culture is confirmed by Kent et al., (2013; see also Kochan & Pascarelli, 2012) who declare that several definitions refer to culture as a learned outcome of experiences within a definable group. Trompenaars even argues that culture is the way in which a group of people solve problems (Nunez et al., 2017).

Mentoring-to-work and cultural competences

Culture in a mentoring-to-work context works through different relationships and contexts: (i) individual cultural differences as e.g., between mentor and mentee, (ii) the cultural task of societal integration and cultural challenges in the workplace which can be divided in (iii) professional differences and (iv) being able to understand the culture of the organization one works for (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero 2002). Following Kent et al. (2013), research indicates that to be successful, any person involved in a mentoring relationship must seek to be both culturally aware and sensitive. Kochan (2013) even takes it a step further. For a mentor to not just transfer their own cultural traditions and mores, but act as a part of a cultural transition and build bridges between cultures, some cultural competences are necessary. To carry out this type of transitional mentoring work, the mentor and the mentee must both have a well-developed awareness and understanding of their own cultural biases and the cultural mores of the context.

Several researchers (Hofstede 2006; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) have tried to grasp basic cultural differences, and have identified several 'key differences' between cultures, such as an individualistic versus collective orientation and power distance. Their models are a good tool for reflecting and engaging in dialogue about culture. However, they do not provide an overview of the cultural challenges and competences required to integrate into the labour market and society. This systemic overview can be found in Sue's multidimensional model of cultural competence (Sue, 2006 and 2017), which divides cultural competence into awareness, knowledge, and skills on the one hand, and refers to the four different layers on which culture occurs on the other hand.

Figure 1: Multidimensional model of cultural competence (adapted; Sue, 2006 and 2017)



The model shown in Figure 1 suggests that culture exists on different levels and relieves the one-sided focus on individual relations and societal cultural difference. When entering the local labour market as a migrant, it is necessary to be aware that the rules and customs in the professional field probably differ from previous experiences in the home country. For example, some cultures have a more authoritarian relationship between teacher and student while others operate more equally (Harber & Mncube, 2011). Additionally, the organisational culture inside the same professional field may differ between organisations (Szydlo & Grzes-Buklaho, 2020).

Another interesting perspective of this model is the split of cultural competence between the characteristics of awareness, knowledge, and skills. According to Sue (2006), awareness is the consciousness of one's own worldview and understanding the worldview of culturally diverse groups. It is more than an intellectual exercise, namely a personal and lived experience, which results in seeing the people behind diverse cultures, and in striving to ensure that people are treated equally (Sue, 2006). Sue et al. (2013) define cultural knowledge as understanding and sharing the world view of the other person through cognitive empathy. At the skills level, a culturally competent person must be able to send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages accurately and appropriately, between cultures (Sue et al., 2013). We believe that Sue's systemic overview allows the mentor and the mentee to have a faster and better cultural understanding, as sensed differences and frictions are framed in a more complete picture. It allows them to respond to the challenges better.

Methodology

Based on empirical data, we seek answers to the following questions:

- In the mentoring programme, the mentor and mentee came from different cultures. What are the mentors' and mentees' own perceptions of the role that cultural factors have in labour market integration and in their relationship? Which cultural aspects hinder and stimulate integration into work-life?
- How does mentoring enhance the cultural competences of mentors and mentees?

We answer the question on the grounds of mentors' and mentees' own perceptions and opinions, based on their reported experiences in mentoring programmes of 3–6 months, organised by the MESH project in Finland. In the development project "MESH – Employing immigrants via networks and mentoring" in Finland, we simultaneously experimented with different models, contents, and practices of mentoring in Turku and Lahti. Turku organised multisectoral mentoring programmes, whereas Lahti concentrated on one professional field. Accordingly, the data consists of two, separate parts.

First, in the MESH mentoring programme organised by Turku University of Applied Sciences, a total of 60 mentees and mentors participated in four mentoring programmes in 2019 and 2020. The programmes lasted 3–6 months, including 2–3 group trainings and several meetings in pairs. Most programmes and meetings were organised online, in English. In the first group training, the pairs were encouraged to set their goals for the process. The subsequent group trainings concentrated on follow-up, support, and evaluation. The mentees were well-educated migrants from a variety of professional fields (the most common being business, natural sciences, engineering sciences and information technology), in search for employment in Finland.

Most of them had migrated for family reasons or studies. They had lived in Finland 1–15 years. Approximately 70% originated from outside Europe, mostly from Asia. The majority of both mentees and mentors were female. The mentors were mostly native Finns, recruited on a voluntary basis. However, there were also international mentors, who live in Finland and have local working experience. In the matching process, we could assign a mentor from the same professional field to a half of the mentees. At the end of each mentoring programme, a Webropol survey was

conducted, with the sum of 34 participants providing feedback about their experiences. Some people left the survey unanswered because they were busy with their work or studies. Some had moved out of the country.

In the survey the following open-ended questions were posed: "In this mentoring programme, the mentor and mentee come from different cultures. Did this play any role in your cooperation?" "If so, how?" "What are the benefits/disadvantage of your different linguistic and cultural background concerning employment?"

To get a deeper understanding of their mentoring experiences, as well as how cultural aspects affect the relationship between the pair, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. Altogether 11 (out of previously described 60) volunteered; 7 mentees and 4 mentors. In the interviews, the participants were asked about their set goals, collaboration expectations and experiences in the mentoring programme. They were also asked to describe their experiences of integration and socialising processes in Finland both from professional and societal perspectives. Additionally, the participants reflected on how their own cultural backgrounds and other cultural aspects facilitated/hindered their successful integration into the social life and labour market. Due to the physical location of some participants, as well as Covid-19 restrictions, some of the interviews were conducted online, whereas others were in person. With the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded for further thematic analysis.

Second, in 2020, 13 mentoring pairs participated in a mentoring programme for health care students and professionals in the city of Lahti, organised by LAB University of Applied Sciences. The mentees were students from LAB University of Applied Sciences' Bachelor's Degree Programme to become a registered nurse. They all were at the end of their studies. Initially, they were from different countries outside Europe, but they all had lived in Finland for a few years before starting their studies. Although the study programme was in English, their working language is going to be Finnish. Therefore, the mentoring programme was in Finnish: one of the goals was to provide an opportunity to strengthen language skills. All but one of the mentors were native Finns. Everybody had local working experience and were registered nurses. They acted as mentors on a voluntary basis. One of the mentees and one of the mentors were male, and they formed a pair. All the others were female.

The programme lasted 4 months and consisted of a joint introduction meeting, pair meetings and a feedback session at the end. The pairs met each other an average of 5 times both face to face and online during the programme. As a part of the programme, the mentors also received training in language-conscious encounters. A language-conscious instructor is aware of the importance of language as part of vocational learning and recognises the special features of communication in the professional field (Arola & Seppä, 2019).

At the end of the mentoring programme, a questionnaire was provided, including the same open-ended questions, and the abovementioned questions about cultural differences, benefits and disadvantages as in the survey of Turku University of Applied Sciences. The questionnaire was filled in at the final meeting of all the mentors and mentees. In total, 13 mentees and 12 mentors completed the questionnaire. All mentors and some of the mentees answered the questionnaire in Finnish. The answers were translated into English by the authors during the analysing process.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to the data. Qualitative content analysis is a research method, which represents a systematic means of describing, categorising, typifying and conceptualising phenomena (Schreier, 2012). It is commonly used for analysing qualitative data. In the analysis process, the data is reduced to concepts that describe the research phenomenon by creating categories and concepts (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Elo et al., 2014). The research questions direct the analysis (Schreier, 2012). A qualitative content analysis can be applied in either an inductive or deductive way. Both the inductive and deductive content analysis process involve three main phases: preparation, organisation, and reporting of results. The preparation phase includes

collecting suitable data for analysis, making sense of the data, and selecting the unit of analysis. In the inductive approach, the organisation phase consists of coding, creating categories, and abstraction (Elo et al., 2014; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

In the analysis, an inductive approach was implemented. The unit of analysis was a statement, which may consist of several sentences expressed by a respondent. Once all the data was collected and prepared, the researchers coded it further, created categories and a wider thematic structure which was extracted from the data. The results following this structure will be presented in the next chapter.

Findings

In the surveys, the minority of mentees (with exception of nurse student mentees) and most of the mentors reported that cultural differences played a role in the cooperation. During in-depth interviews, cultural considerations arose in each. After thorough, repeated reading and coding of the data, three categories emerged. Each category was related to one or several cultural levels/layers (individual, professional, organisational or societal) and/or components (awareness, knowledge and skills). The first category was “Similarity or otherness”, alternatively “Finnishness vs non-Finnishness”. This included sub-categories “Surname” and “Educational background”. The second category was named “Language”, with sub-categories of “Language as a means for communication”, “Language proficiency”, “Working language” and “Language and building an identity”. The third category was “Cultural competencies”, or alternatively “Cultural learning”, with the sub-category “Working culture”. The last category calls “Trust”.

Cultural similarity or otherness

Koskela (2014) brings up the idea of migrant hierarchy in Finland, based on such factors as ethnic background, socio-economic position, as well as cultural, historical and political aspects. Based on these aspects, there is a segmentation with a top section formed by the highly skilled migrants, preferably Western with a familiar cultural background. The bottom part is filled with humanitarian migrants from less familiar cultures. In line with this, respondents with a Western appearance will be more easily accepted in Finland. This was recognized in our study by one of the respondents who noted: “*Luckily, I look Finnish, so I think it has been my advantage (in how easily they are accepted)*”, (Mentor 2b). Additionally, some respondents mentioned that the specific culture and linguistic abilities of the migrant may play an important role in how much the mentees can benefit from it in Finland. One respondent noted: “*The benefits totally depend on the language(s) you speak as a mother tongue and where you are from,*” (Mentee 2c). References were made to the similarity of cultures such as “European culture” and “Western culture”, without further specifying them: “*We were from different cultures, but still Western. There may not have been so many differences*”, (Mentor 3c).

Many respondents, especially mentees, noted that cultural differences no longer mattered when a person had lived for a long time in Finland. On the other hand, many mentees had lived in several countries and considered themselves more international than representatives of any culture. In general, the respondents recognised the existence of different cultures. They named for instance “*Asian work culture*”, “*Finnish work culture*”, “*Finnish care culture*” and “*Islamic culture*”. A couple of respondents raised the point that a different cultural background could be a detrimental factor on an organisational level but also mentioned that potential problems can be alleviated from the organisation side:

Of course, working life skills need to be strengthened, but it is also the responsibility of the employer. When you familiarize your employee well, you are sure to get a committed and willing employee. (Mentor 6a)

However, many respondents highlighted the benefits, especially diversity, that a company can derive from hiring an employee who has moved to Finland. This came up several times in the health care field, where the patients as well as employees are increasingly multicultural:

An understanding of different languages and cultural background is a plus for employment because the individual with such an understanding of different languages and background will be the most suitable candidate to work in a multicultural setting or with clients from different backgrounds as (s)he will understand the different clients better. (Mentee 7a)

One aspect of similarity in general that seems to facilitate migrant acceptance and integration with the local society and job market is the surname (Ahmad, 2019). Based on the data, if the individual has a familiar Western-sounding surname, they might not necessarily be singled out. However, unfamiliar sounding surnames might scare away the employer. Subsequently, both international mentors and mentees mentioned having adopted a Finnish/Swedish surname, while others have at some point considered changing their surname. For instance, one respondent noted:

I also have a Swedish last name, which is an advantage. I definitely think it has helped me. People do not know where I am from, they don't know if I am Finnish or Swedish (I am actually from --), and I think that is the point. (Mentor 2b)

Many of the mentees and foreign mentors agreed that the education in their home country was not readily accepted in Finland. In fact, several of them had to redo whole degrees (whether undergraduate or graduate) to get a better chance of employment. This is in line with what many researchers have highlighted about the fact that in Finland the most appreciated educational backgrounds are from Finnish universities, followed by other Nordic countries or Western nations (Jaakkola, 2000; Forsander, 2001; Saukkonen & Peltonen, 2018; Sutela, 2015). On the individual level, for many, having to go back to study is a struggle and a challenge. One respondent expressed this by saying: *"I had to work with my ego, as you have so many years of study, and suddenly you come here (Finland), and you are zero,"* (Mentee 5b).

Language in mentoring and the workplace

As Scarino (2010) states *"Learning a language is learning the culture"*. Therefore, we're not surprised to learn that the respondents linked the issue of culture to languages and language skills. However, the data show that for newcomers, language is primarily considered as a means of communication with the environment, as a necessary condition for social and professional integration. The cultural aspects encapsulated in the language appear not to be consciously explored in this phase of integration.

A few mentees felt that they had benefited from the mentoring programme in terms of practicing Finnish. In general, the respondents viewed knowing the official language(s) as a big contributor in facilitating or hindering the successful integration into Finnish society, as well as the labour market. According to the respondents, in some professions the acquisition and proficiency of Finnish language is more highly demanded than in others. Poor mastery of professional Finnish language makes it difficult to find employment (Arola & Seppä, 2019). One of the respondents explained this by saying: *"I work with people; I speak for living. If I want to work with locals, I have to speak their language"*, (Mentor 1b).

For instance, in the fields of social and healthcare services, education and customer support, sufficient command of Finnish is a must. Particularly, the mentors stressed the need for language and cultural skills of nursing staff. The mentoring programme in Finnish was seen as a good option to gain more skills. Several studies have confirmed the need for additional training for healthcare workers to deal with cultural diversity (Sainola-Rodriguez, 2013).

The topic of language is intertwined with working life in many ways. In many professions, such as IT, technical design, and biochemical research industry, and in work with EU and international organisations, it might seem that the knowledge of Finnish is not absolutely necessary for successful task management. The working language inside many national and international companies and organisations may as well be English. Yet the unofficial communication language inside the company may be Finnish. However, the organisational culture does not necessarily support migrants to practice and improve their Finnish skills:

There are also people, who refuse to talk to me in Finnish, they say 'I am here to work, you are here to work, let's work in the best way without the language barrier'. No problem! (Mentee 3b)

Language was also reported to affect migrants' social contacts and identity. Moreover, building a professional identity, in addition to professional language skills, requires socialisation with the linguistic and communicative customs and practices of the profession. Each professional field has its own concepts and terms which one learns through contact and communication. In addition to basic communication, it is important to be able to speak about professional issues. (Arola & Seppä, 2019.)

Finally, there might not be as many opportunities for mentees to practise Finnish or continue learning. In line with Heikkilä and Peltonen (2002), most of the mentees reported experiencing some difficulties with learning the language, like inefficiently organised course instructions.

Learning cultural competences

In the mentoring process, cultural learning happens on several levels: individual, professional, organisational and societal. In their one-to-one discussions, the mentoring participants improved their cultural competencies, and their worldview developed. In the mentoring programme, native Finnish mentors got a chance to learn about cultures other than Finnish: "*To understand the mentee's perspective, it was important to learn more about the way she experiences the world culturally, assumptions and expectations*", (Mentor 5a). But they learned also about their own culture, when they got a small glimpse of it through the eyes of an outsider. The employment challenges of those moving to Finland from elsewhere became clear to them. It shows that cultural learning took place on both sides, related to culture in general and working culture in particular. The answers of many, both native Finns and those who moved to Finland, described Finnish culture as rather closed and anti-social. The cultural understanding of many mentors and mentees increased, and certain stereotypes about different nationalities were even overcome:

Finns are lovely people, once you get to know them, you may make a friend for life. But to make that friend for life, you need to get through that protective layer. We have to understand that migration is quite a fresh phenomenon in Finland. We should understand that person does not mean anything bad when they look at a foreigner with a sceptical look. (Mentor 1b)

Additionally, respondents mentioned that migrants should also actively try to learn about the hosting culture and be aware about the communication styles in the given culture, to allow further contact.

Finnish working culture was defined as document-centred and requiring certifications of professional competencies. Additionally, being open to volunteering and productising one's own know-how was highly regarded. The mentees considered the opportunity to learn Finnish work culture to be the most important cultural gift of mentoring. This was reflected in views such as the following:

Getting experience from Finns for employment in Finland is very beneficial, unless your aim is to work only with foreigners. It helps understanding how people think and what they may look for in employees. (Mentee 2c)

My Asian mentee also asked what it was like in the Finnish working life. Good questions, whether co-workers are competitors. She was shocked by the thought of joking together with the CEO. In Finland, leisure time, the balance of work and leisure is valued, not the expectation that work will be done in the evenings. (Mentor 15b)

Furthermore, it is deemed important to have networks and recommendations. The need for developing cultural knowledge was based on the communication differences between the migrants' home culture and Finnish culture (for instance the balance of formal and informal communication or what are appropriate communication channels). Additionally, differences in gender roles were observed:

When it comes to gender, I think it is because it is not common for a female to ask a man to go out for a drink or a coffee and have it be about work only, it is viewed with suspicion ... (Mentor 2b).

Especially from the point of view of understanding the Finnish working culture, a native Finnish mentor was considered valuable. On the other hand, individual respondents also benefitted from international mentors or at least the involvement of international experts in the mentoring training, as they understand the foreigner's perspective and difficulties.

Trust in mentoring and in society

The theme of trust was mentioned in different ways. On a more individual level, the mentors and mentees mentioned the importance of building trust in the mentoring relationship, like being able to share dreams, goals, as well as networks from the perspective of the mentors. As Crutcher (2014) and Evans (2018) emphasise, mutual trust and understanding are crucial elements of any and especially cross-cultural mentoring relationship. The following quotations from the respondents reflect this aspect: *"-- a person that you can trust, to discuss what your fears are, what your weaknesses are, what your dreams are. This is what I actually expect from my mentor", (Mentee 4b). And: "The best part is that I found someone who is inspiring, willing to share their experience and knowledge, an open person. I think I found a friend", (Mentee 5a).*

The other point was more at the organisational and societal level. Many mentees felt that one reason they found it challenging to become employed was because their cultural background did not inspire trust in the eyes of the employers. Additionally, the mentees were looking forward to getting recommendations from a native Finnish mentor, as they felt this was more trusted in the labour market: *"I think Finnish people very much trust Finns, not foreign people. They think what you say is true, you do not have to prove anything when it is a question of Finnish people", (Mentee 3b).* In fact, trust was seen as one of the fundamental attributes of Finnish society:

Finland is a very small country, and it feels more safe to talk to strangers, even if people do not do it very often. If in my own country a stranger comes up to talk, you think are they going to scam me, are they a criminal, what's their motive? The society is trustful here. (Mentor 2b)

In social policy research, trust is defined as an essential part of the Nordic welfare model. It creates the basis of society and characterises relations in the labour market (Dolvik et al., 2015).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to draw on lessons learned about which cultural aspects hinder and stimulate integration into work-life and how mentoring develops the cultural competences of both mentor and mentee. This knowledge and insights might inspire to design future mentoring programmes to be more impactful.

Concerning the research question about hindering and supporting cultural aspects, several aspects were experienced as supportive such as cultural similarity (e.g., Western cultures, surname), local language proficiency and the ability to build up trust. The latter was enhanced by cultural knowledge and awareness and seems to correlate with similarity to Finns in name, appearance, and customs. On the other hand, having a foreign-sounding surname might be a hindrance when entering the Finnish labour market, as well as insufficient knowledge of the local official languages and professional customs. An educational background from the migrant's home country is usually not directly validated in Finland.

Cultural integration is a complex concept and we noticed that most mentors nor mentees have a full overview of its meaning and scope. All four areas of cultural competences (individual, professional, organisational, and societal) were seldom acknowledged and covered. Often there was a focus on one or two domains while they are all important and, when entering the labour market, especially the professional and organizational should be given adequate attention. As also Evans (2018) recommends (cf. Neuwirth and Wahl, 2017), it is an advantage if the mentor is working in the same professional field the mentee is aiming to enter. This will give an opportunity for the mentee to receive practical information about the professional culture and customs and enable learning of professional language.

According to Månsson and Delander (2017), there is no difference in goal attainment arising from the national origin of the mentor. However, in terms of cultural learning, it could be recommended that the mentor belongs to the local population and therefore knows the local culture. When, on the other hand, we also consider van Zyl's research results (2022), according to which a shared identity is important in terms of psychosocial support, a mentor with a migrant background who has lived in the country for a long time and is well integrated could be a good option.

Language is closely related to cultural skills, in the sense that a culturally competent person must be able to send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages accurately and appropriately, between cultures (Sue, 2006 and 2017). Language was considered one of the most significant cultural aspects in the integration process, and the level of knowing the official language(s) appeared to be a great contributor to either facilitating or hindering successful integration into society and the labour market. Moreover, mentoring was seen by the mentees as a chance to practice Finnish and learn more about the local working culture. For this reason, mentors and mentees can be advised to use the local languages during their meeting as these are unique opportunities to learn and practice the language.

Mentoring proves to be an important tool for enhancing the cultural competences of mentors and mentees as it provides a framework in which both mentor and mentee are introduced to another culture. For cultural issues to be sufficiently considered in mentoring programmes, cultural issues should be included in the themes addressed in the mentoring training. Cultural issues, such as values, attitudes, or differences in organizational cultures, can be discussed, for example, in a joint training for mentor pairs. Consciously looking at the deeper layers of culture during the mentoring process could help to touch the similarities between the different cultures. After all, cultures have many similar and overlapping values and beliefs, but the way in which they are expressed can be very different (Hanel et al., 2018). Mentors and mentees must be aware that diving into the deeper levels of culture requires trust, so attention need to be paid to building up trust first. As Neuwirth and Wahl (2017) state, the formation of a relationship and the emergence of trust require time. The mentoring programme must be long and dense enough to enable this. For highly educated migrants, networking is especially important in terms of employment (Bagnoli et al., 2022), and it also takes time. In our study, the half-year program proved to be quite sufficient, as also reported in Bagnoli et al.'s study (2022).

Regarding the validity of findings, there are some limitations. In evaluation of validity in qualitative research, Whittemore et al. (2001) emphasize credibility and authenticity. Rather intensive engagement in multicultural mentoring-to-work, several researchers and more than one data

source make us believe that the results are an accurate interpretation of the participants' meaning. However, a significant number of mentors and mentees left the follow-up questionnaire unanswered. Many voices were not heard, which questions the authenticity of the findings. As our study indicates some special challenges in the health care sector, studies addressing multicultural mentoring in different professional fields would be of particular interest and need, as well as studies on practical mechanisms of bi-directional learning of cultural competences in mentoring relationships.

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