

# Essential? COVID-19 and highly educated Africans in Finland's segmented labour market

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to characterise the position of highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market and to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on that position.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on the biographical work stories of 17 highly educated African migrant workers in four occupation areas in Finland: healthcare, cleaning, restaurant and transport. The sample was partly purposively and partly theoretically determined. The authors used content driven thematic analysis technique, combined with by the biographical narrative concept of turning points.

**Findings** – Using the case of highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market, the authors show how student migration policies reinforce a pattern of division of labour and occupations that allocate migrant workers to typical low skilled low status occupations in the secondary sector regardless of level of education, qualification and work experience. They also show how the unique labour and skill demands of the COVID-19 pandemic incidentally made these typical migrant occupations essential, resulting in increased employment and work security for this group of migrant workers.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research and the authors' findings are limited in scope owing to sample size and methodology. To improve applicability of findings, future studies could expand the scope of enquiry using e.g. quantitative surveys and include other stakeholders in the study group.

**Originality/value** – The paper adds to the knowledge on how migration policies contribute to labour market dualisation and occupational segmentation in Finland, illustrated by the case of highly educated African migrant workers.

**Keywords** African migrants, Finland, COVID-19, Labour market segmentation, Migration policy

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 affected the world of work and labour markets in unprecedented ways. However, societies had to find ways to keep workers working to mitigate its anticipated adverse socio-economic impacts (see Guadagno, 2020; International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2020). To curb the spread of the disease, most governments issued nationwide or regional lockdown orders that restricted free movement within and across national borders, resulting in the closure of workplaces for several hundreds of millions if not billions of workers worldwide. Immediate effects included mass unemployment, cuts in working hours and incomes, and sweeping negative impacts on trade, businesses of all sizes, and on the informal economy (Chakraborty and Maity, 2020; Guadagno, 2020; see also ILO, 2020; McKibbin and Fernando, 2020;

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OECD, 2020; Xiong *et al.*, 2020). However, a complete and nuanced understanding of the pandemic's impact on the world of work and labour markets at a global, national, local or sectoral level was not possible in 2020. Such an understanding is needed to effectively manage the short- and long-term social, economic and industrial impacts of the pandemic. This paper seeks to answer a two-throged research question: What is the position of highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market and impact of the pandemic on that position?

The paper is based on an empirical study conducted in Finland between September 2020 and June 2022. It draws on Piore's (1979) and Reich *et al.*'s (1973) labour market segmentation theories to investigate how labour market structure, migration rules and the pandemic intersect and impact migrant workers' position in the host country labour market. Specifically, this study aims to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and Finland's corresponding public health management measures affected the labour market position of 17 highly educated African migrant workers in sectors classified as essential during the pandemic. This is done by analysing research participants' work stories, collected via biographical interviews to determine and characterise their labour market position and identify how that position was/ is affected by the labour market conditions precipitated by the pandemic.

Empirical data consist of biographical work stories of 17 African migrants living in Finland and active in the labour market as employees, jobseekers and/or entrepreneurs before, and during the pandemic. Our data-driven thematic analysis focussed on turning point experiences as signposts for key themes (see method discussion in the study by Ellis and Bochner, 1992 and Denzin, 1989, 2014). The paper focusses on African migrants, a growing migrant group in Finland who are nonetheless the least favourably situated in Finland's labour market, and whose terms of employment, occupational growth opportunities, social protection and security amongst others require consideration (see e.g. discussions in the study by Ahmad, 2020; Ndomo and Lillie, 2020).

On the position of highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market, our data reflect labour market segmentation with characteristics of dualisation into secondary and primary sectors and further segmentation within the sectors. Our participants are concentrated in the secondary sector in typical low skill and low status migrant occupations irrespective of their education, qualification and work experience. Using care workers as an example, we show how African migrants' skilled labour is subordinated and "forced" out of the mainstream primary sector to maintain an apparent division of labour based on ethnicity, nationality, linguistic and legal status differences amongst others. However, these migrant occupations were incidentally designated essential by the pandemic, resulting in a paradoxical employment and work security for our research participants. Our wide-ranging analysis allows us to contribute new insights into how student migration policy and labour market integration practices in Finland reinforce existing labour market segmentation patterns and create structures for new segmentations.

Section 2 unpacks the theoretical framing of the paper and introduces key contextual details about the Finnish labour market and African migrants in Finland. This is followed by a presentation of the research methodology in Section 3 and the analytical discussion and concluding remarks in Section 4.

## 2. Labour market segmentation and African migrants in Finland

Migrant labour market scholarship identifies typical migrant jobs as dull, dirty and dangerous jobs that locals discriminate (see e.g. Anderson, 2013; Bade, 2008). This now banal characterisation, in fact, epitomises labour market segmentation, and when critically engaged, it draws attention to the proliferation of segmentation in modern labour markets including Finland's. Labour market segmentation draws on and perpetuates inequality making analysis of its occurrences in varied contexts imperative.

In a segmented labour market, jobs have different positions on a stability continuum and confer different social, economic and political outcomes to otherwise comparable people (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Piore, 1979; Ryan, 1981, p.4) in a process that draws on stereotypes amongst other sources and perpetuates social inequality and exclusion (see discussion in the study by Rubery and Piasna, 2017). On segmentation and migration, Piore (1979) argues that modern labour market structures, characterised by an orientation towards flexibility and cost saving business models (Atkinson, 1984), develop a permanent reliance on migrant labour. This means that segmentation thrives where there is a ready and seemingly endless supply of new (migrant) labour (McCollum and Findlay, 2015; Anderson, 2010) and is thus essentially perpetuated by many forms of migration.

Existing scholarship covers several varieties of labour market segmentation theories. Segmentation as used in this paper refers to two of these varieties: dual segmentation and occupational segmentation within the dual sectors. Piore's (1979) theory of dual segmentation focusses on a division of jobs and labour into two sectors – primary (stable) and secondary (unstable) sectors. The “stable” end of the continuum features standard employment, extensive mobility ladders, on-job training and internal firm rules that keep out outsiders. The “unstable” side of the continuum is characterised by atypical precarious employment, high labour turnover, short mobility ladders and minimal investment in training and recruitment. Another element of duality raised in labour market segmentation scholarship is the insider–outsider positionality of labour versus stable employment and job opportunities (see e.g. Häusermann and Schwander, 2010). Occupational segmentation scholarship focusses on the finer fragmentation within the secondary and primary sectors that can be based on any number of logics (see Leontaridi, 1998; Reich *et al.*, 1973). Both dual and occupational segmentation are visible in the Finnish labour market.

To allow differential treatment of comparable workers, labour market segmentation uses and reinforces flexibility labour management schemes such as easy hiring and dismissal, occupational clustering and labour rotation (see McCollum and Findlay, 2015; Lallement, 2011; Anderson, 2010; Atkinson, 1984). Flexibility labour management schemes in turn reinforce segmentation. Flexibility schemes are also a typical adjustment strategy in times of economic crises such as the 2008 recession (Lallement, 2011), and now COVID-19. We not only look at how pandemic induced changes affected migrant workers' employment, but also probe how pre-pandemic labour market structures shape the pandemic time responses. The intersection of labour market segmentation, migrant policies and flexible labour market structures is central in our analysis.

Segmentation in the Finnish labour market, however, runs counter to strong egalitarian norms and institutional structures. Finnish society and politics are highly unified and consensus based, around the idea of a universalist welfare state that is often at tension with the also influential notion of Finland as a competition state, in which social institutions support competitiveness in world markets (Kettunen, 1998). Likewise, union membership is very high, and extended collective agreements cover most of the workforce, setting a floor for pay and conditions in most jobs. Precarious work as a growing force for deep poverty, in the sense evident in many other countries, is not widespread in Finland (Pyörriä and Ojala, 2016).

While the growing importance of precarity is recognised in Finnish research (Jakonen, 2015), effective universalist institutions in industrial relations and the welfare state have protected Finnish workers from the worst effects of precarity and labour market segmentation (Mustosmäki, 2017). Finnish employers have instead turned to migrants as a way of getting around this because for a variety of reasons it is easier to exclude migrants from protections. Not all precarious workers are migrants, and not all migrants are precarious, but the advent of migration to Finland since the 1990s provides Finnish employers with an exploitable group that often ends up in the secondary labour market.

As a result, nationality and ethnicity-based hierarchies are evident in recruitment (Ahmad, 2020) and in career progression (Ndomo and Lillie, 2022).

Of all migrant groups in Finland, African migrants (first- and second-generation migrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa) have the worst labour market integration outcomes according to employment, income, occupational distribution and growth, and social protection and security indicators amongst others (Integration Database, 2022; Ahmad, 2020; Ndomo and Lillie, 2020; Maury, 2020). In 2018, their unemployment rate stood at stark 28.8%; three times the population average of 9.7% (Integration Indicators Database, 2022). In addition to high unemployment rates, the employed are often underemployed and tend to be concentrated in ethnicised occupations typically found in the secondary sector of the Finnish labour market (Ahmad, 2015; Näre, 2013; Heikkilä, 2005; Jaakkola, 2000). Other studies of discrimination in recruitment have also shown that African migrants would receive the least amount of call backs compared to other ethnic groups despite having equivalent qualifications for the advertised jobs (Ahmad, 2020; Koskela, 2019).

Past studies also evidence an unequal distribution of third country nationals (TCNs), including highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market. TCNs are overrepresented in occupations in the social and healthcare sector, and in the low skill end of the services sector irrespective of their education, qualification and work experience (Ahmad, 2020; Maury, 2020; Koskela, 2019; Vartiainen *et al.*, 2016; Heikkilä, 2005; Forsander, 2003; Valtonen, 2001). Except in healthcare, these occupations are structurally characterised by little or rudimentary skill demands, low pay and precarious atypical forms of employment like shift based or 0-h contracts (Ndomo and Lillie, 2020). Participants of this study are individuals who moved from a sub-Saharan African country to Finland to study in at least two-year-long degree programmes and continue to habitually reside in Finland on a variety of legal statuses including naturalised citizens.

### 3. Methodology and scope of study

This study is based on qualitative biographical interview data of 17 sub-Saharan African migrants living and actively engaged in the Finnish labour market as employed workers, self-employed entrepreneurs or unemployed jobseekers (see Table 1). Our biographical interview approach drew on the study by Mrozowicki (2011), while data analysis drew on the study by Denzin (1989) as well as Creswell (2007). Interviews were conducted between September 2020 and October 2021. Interviews were done in English and each lasted 60 min. The biographical narrative approach was favoured as it allowed us to collect data with a longitudinal outlook, capable of capturing a holistic picture of participants' labour market position and its evolution over time. Data cover the pre-migration, migration and pandemic periods of participants' lives.

In data collection, we used an interview protocol structured after Adam Mrozowicki's three-phase biographical interview approach (Mrozowicki, 2011, pp. 265–267). In Phase 1, “spontaneous narration”, we asked a single open-ended question inviting the participant to talk about themselves and their migration to Finland in detail. In Phase 2, “supplementary narrative questions”, we narrowed the focus to work life history from the first job ever held in Finland to the current job or work situation. Phase 3, “theoretical question”, was the most structured as it was used to fill in missing information crucial for our research focus – labour market integration experiences in Finland, and other life stories relevant for interpretation. Our analytical approach combined the general qualitative technique of data-driven thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007) with Denzin's (1989) interpretive biographic tool of turning points as signposts of key themes. In analysis, first, we read the transcribed interviews through and secondly located each research participant in a social group – employed, unemployed and self-employed. Next, we identified key turning point events

Participant	Gender	Employment status/ occupation	Contract type	Education/ qualification from Finland	Country of origin	Residence in Finland (years)
1	M	Nurse assistant	Shift based and open- ended 0-h contract	M.A., Sport Science and Bachelor of Healthcare	Nigeria	6
2	F	Nurse assistant	Shift based and open- ended 0-h contract	B.A., Business Administration and Bachelor of Healthcare	Kenya	7
3	F	COVID nurse	Fixed term and temporary	CHEF/Culinary school and Bachelor of Healthcare	Kenya	9
4	F	Practical nurse	Fixed term temporary	Degree in restaurant and catering, Bachelor of Healthcare and M.A. in Healthcare and Social Services	Gambia	24
5	F	Acute/ Registered nurse	Permanent	M.A., Intercultural Communication, Bachelor of Healthcare and M.A. in healthcare and social services	Cameroon	15
6	F	Practical nurse	Shift based and open- ended 0- h contract	B.A. in marketing and Bachelor of Healthcare	Ghana	8
7	F	Practical nurse	Fixed term and temporary	Bachelor of Healthcare	Kenya	6
8	F	Practical nurse	Permanent	Mid-study switch to Bachelor of Healthcare	Kenya	13
9	F	Practical nurse	Permanent	Mid-study switch to Bachelor of Healthcare	Ghana	16
10	M	Cleaner and food courier	Permanent (cleaning) and independent contractor (food courier)	MSC, Biological and Environmental Science	Ghana	4
11	M	Cleaning	Permanent	MSC, Information Systems	Ghana	5
12	M	Food preparation assistant	Permanent	BSC, Software Engineering	Kenya	12
13	M	Food preparation assistant	Permanent	BSC, Information systems	Kenya	14
14	M	Food courier	Independent contractor (food courier)	M.Sc. Social and Public Policy	Ghana	5

**Table 1.**  
Research participants'  
biography  
(continued)

Participant	Gender	Employment status/ occupation	Contract type	Education/ qualification from Finland	Country of origin	Residence in Finland (years)
15	M	Unemployed job seeker	–	MSC, Computer Engineering	Nigeria	13
16	M	Unemployed job seeker	–	MSC, Environmental health and Technology and Ph.D. in environmental science and technology	Nigeria	11
17	F	Cleaning and housekeeping	Fixed term and temporary	BBA, International Business and MSC, Corporate Environmental Management	Cameroon	7

Table 1.

(codes) that we categorised into themes that are explored individually in the analysis section of the paper.

We chose research participants according to a preselected list of occupations, and selection of later interviewees considered the content of prior interviews. We focussed on healthcare, restaurant, cleaning and transportation – food courier and taxi – sectors. Both sectors were classified essential for sustenance of life during the pandemic meaning they kept operating through the two “lockdowns” in Finland (Moisio, 2020). Additionally, a disproportionately large number of TCN migrants work in these sectors in Finland as employees or independent service providers (Ahmad, 2015; Forsander, 2003; OECD, 2020). Ten participants are women, seven are men, consistent with the dynamics of employment in these sectors in Finland; women are overrepresented in care work, and men in transport and logistics. Data collection, storage and analysis adhered to University of Jyväskylä data security protocols.

4. Analysis

In this section, we first situate our participants in the Finnish labour market by analysing their stories of labour market integration and their experiences with student migration policies. The second part examines the effect of the pandemic on participants’ labour market position.

4.1 Student-migrant-workers: locating highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market before COVID-19

All legal working age migrants with continuous residence permits in Categories A, B and P and asylum applicants who satisfy set legal requirements can work legally in Finland (Bontenbal et al., 2019). Although all participants of this study migrated to Finland specifically for studies, all transitioned into the labour market during their studies and continued after graduation. This is consistent with the finding of a nationwide longitudinal quantitative survey that, on average, more than 65% of international student migrants remained in Finland three years after completing their studies for work and family reasons (Mathies and Karhunen, 2021).

Finland's residence permit rules, especially the economic conditions for permit renewal for non-EU/European Economic Area (EEU) students like our research participants have a direct impact on their labour market entry and labour market integration in proceeding years. All 17 participants took up their first jobs in Finland to cover upkeep costs and, most importantly, to raise the annual 6,720-Euro savings requirement for residence permit renewal. Before April 2022, all non-EU/EEA students entered Finland on a temporary fixed term renewable one-year class-“B” residence permit. Every year they had to meet three conditions to renew the permit: provide proof of progress in studies, private health insurance and 6,720 Euros in their own bank account (or an employment contract). The latter two demonstrate the students' ability to live in Finland independently of Finnish social welfare. Both bachelor's and master's degree students underwent the renewal process several times. The student permit also allowed holders to work up to 25 h weekly during the semester, and unlimited hours during holiday breaks. Our analysis explores the impact of these two features of the Finnish student migration regime on our participants' labour market position in Finland, drawing on common experience amongst participants that Participant 15 captures well in the following reflection.

... I realized that my quest for the IT job was not forthcoming and of course, you have to get your papers in Finland to continue staying. And how do you do that? You do that by getting work. So, I ventured into the non-skilled work just to sustain myself. But while doing that, I was also doing some educational development, I wrote my first Java certification in 2013, and second in 2016, because I'm actually a software engineer. All this while I was still doing these menial jobs, just to survive to get the four years [4-year residence permit]. After the four years of course, you have to wait to get the permanent. ... All this while I was trying hard to apply for these jobs, but one thing I've come to realize in Finland is that for a foreigner, even after you have been trained, the system doesn't absorb you. It is set up for you to fail. And you have this feeling that you'll be reduced to the bare minimum, you understand that it doesn't matter how good you are.

Earlier research underscores the complex interconnection between the “student” and “worker” statuses of TCN students in Finland, categorising them instead in the multidimensional subject position “student-migrant-worker” (see Maury, 2017, 2020). Maury (2017, 2020) argues that the student migrant legal status in Finland, by design, creates vulnerable, precarious, flexible, cheap and exploitable labour for Finnish employers. Our data reflect the same, showing how the Finnish student migration regime skewed participants' labour market entry, career potential and overall labour market position (see Figure 1).

Entry level jobs (1st -3rd year in Finland)	Participants' jobs in Pre-pandemic era	Participants' jobs during the pandemic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⑩ Cleaning<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schools</li><li>• Offices</li><li>• Supermarket</li><li>• Restaurant</li><li>• Factory</li></ul></li><li>⑩ (Hotel) Housekeeping</li><li>⑩ Newspaper delivery</li><li>⑩ Personal assistant</li><li>⑩ Food preparation assistant</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⑩ Cleaning<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schools</li><li>• Offices</li><li>• Supermarket</li><li>• Restaurant</li><li>• Factory</li></ul></li><li>⑩ (Hotel) Housekeeping</li><li>⑩ Nursing<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Practical nurse</li><li>• Nurse assistant</li></ul></li><li>⑩ Personal assistant</li><li>⑩ Food preparation assistant</li><li>⑩ Platform work<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taxi</li><li>• Food courier</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⑩ Cleaning<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Factory</li><li>• Supermarket</li></ul></li><li>⑩ Nursing<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Practical nurse</li><li>• Nurse assistant</li><li>• “COVID nurse”</li></ul></li><li>⑩ Food preparation assistant</li><li>⑩ Courier</li></ul>

**Figure 1.**  
Participants' job  
mobility before the  
pandemic



Like Participant 15, all the other 16 participants entered the Finnish labour market through secondary sector elementary low skill low status occupations such as cleaning and newspaper delivery. These were not their first-choice jobs, and neither did the jobs match their educational qualifications and skills, including educational training undertaken in Finland. Participants saw these jobs as bad, but inevitable – the “bad first job” (see [Ndomo and Lillie, 2022](#)). We argue that the inevitable bad first job is a product of pre-existing labour market segmentation structures activated and sustained by the continuous and growing flow of student migrants, who are turned into workers by the economic and legal constraints of the Finnish student migration regime. This is further underscored by Finland’s immigration policy objective of tripling international student intake by 2030.

The experiences of all 17 participants show that the economic conditions for renewing the student residence permit annually “forced” students into the labour market within the first months of migration to raise 6,720 Euros before the first permit expires. The dual pressure, to get a job and to do it fast and other intervening factors “forced” participants into low-hanging-fruit elementary secondary sector jobs only. Further, in the first years of migration, participants did not have Finland based informal networks or membership in relevant migrant communities and were unaware of relevant Finnish national and local institutions such as the employment office that are all crucial in job search and recruitment (see [Alho, 2020](#)). This is exacerbated further by the fact that international students are not eligible for official state sponsored integration services, including labour market integration programmes. Finally, lack of context specific skills such as Finnish language, poor comprehension of the Finnish labour market, statistical discrimination by Finnish employers and a 25-h weekly work-time limit further excluded participants from skilled jobs and other stable primary sector jobs.

In the resulting conundrum, on one hand, a group of student migrants with varied foreign higher education qualifications and work skills found themselves in an urgent and inescapable need of employment and on the other, primary sector employers with stable lucrative jobs had sufficient legal, social and economic reasons to not hire them. In the middle were secondary sector employers who had a steady supply of low skill and low capital – and from a dual frame of reference perspective – very well-paying jobs in cleaning, newspaper delivery, etc. and were willing to hire student migrants. In fact, student migrants are their target workforce for reasons such as flexibility and willingness to take up such jobs on much precarious terms. Courier work done within the framework of nominal independent contractual partnership with platform service providers Wolt, Foodora and Uber, in food delivery and taxi were another category of work open to all migrants. However, these were entrepreneurship-based and were more insecure than standard and even atypical employment.

Labour market segmentation theories can explain why our participants could easily access some jobs and not others. Firstly, dual labour markets segment into two sectors that are similar to the characteristics of the Finnish labour market our participants encountered. The first is an insider-only primary sector that is inaccessible to migrants and low working-class groups like women and youth. Here, high-skill high-pay jobs such as the IT job Participant 15 was seeking are protected by internal rules. In Finland, an example of such rules that our participants and past research identify is the requirement of fluent Finnish language skills for jobs that do not require Finnish language skills to implement. Rules like these predetermine labour-work allocation and segment the available pool of labour into insiders and outsiders.

All our research participants could find their first job only in the secondary sector, confirming the openness of the secondary sector to migrants, including students, consistent with dual segmentation theory arguments. It was especially easy to find cleaning and newspaper delivery jobs because first, some employers or subcontractors tailored their terms of employment to student migrants’ legal status needs. Posti, the main Finnish mail delivery



group, and its subcontractors typically gave its migrant employees (mainly night newspaper couriers) a permanent employment contract that could be used as financial security during residence permit renewal. A permanent employment contract also allowed a transition from the more precarious temporary B residence status to A status that includes entitlement to state social welfare. Also, cleaning service companies naturally favoured flexible working hours like morning or evening shifts that allow students to juggle school and work during weekdays. Secondly, these are the jobs that other students were already doing, and therefore recommended.

Viewed through a segmentation lens, congruence between migrant student circumstances and service sector employer strategies such as permanent contracts are not accidental. The flexibility on both sides is a characteristic of segmented labour markets, in this case one valued by both employers and workers. However, what we underscore in this analysis is the role of Finland's student migration policy in creating secondary sector workers out of international student migrants such as our research participants. Another critical point we raise is the secondary sector's permanent grip on workers that is further guaranteed by the incompatibility of jobs in the two sectors. The career advancement paths into the primary sector sought by our interviewees are disconnected from possible upward mobility paths in or out of the secondary sector.

For our participants, "the bad first job" was seen as a temporary detour in professional development to be endured until a better skill and qualification-matching job is found. However dual and occupational segmentation theories have shown that this is unlikely. Cross sector mobility, from the secondary sector to the primary sector is either extremely difficult or impossible. As explained earlier, internal institutional rules of the primary sector protect it from the external market and its "natural" labour demand and supply dynamics. After several years in Finland, including after completing their degrees, our research participants faced the same barriers to primary sector occupations as they did at the beginning of their labour market integration, implying sectoral immobility. Participants employed different strategies to improve their labour market integration potential, especially their ability to secure employment in desired high-skill high wage occupations in the primary labour market with varying results.

Participants relied on their agentic capacities such as resilience (surviving without attempting to change the source of strain), reworking and (occasional) resistance differentially (see [Ndomo and Lillie, 2022](#); [Berntsen, 2016](#); [Katz, 2004](#)). Notably, to rework barriers to skilled occupations, some participants requalified and/or reskilled by undertaking full training in high demand skills in Finland such as nursing and computer programming. In fact, eight of nine nurses we interviewed had retrained into the occupation, after failing to secure desired jobs matching their qualifications. Participant 5 who is a nurse today recounts her experience as follows

... I moved to Finland in 2006 to do a master's degree at X. And then after studying for about a year, I discovered that there would be no jobs linked to my program and that I wouldn't be able to get a job in the future. So, I decided to switch careers, and then I applied to a nursing programme.

Requalification and reskilling into high demand occupations such as nursing improved the labour market position of some participants, but only partially. Our participant's mobility into skilled occupations, and by effect the primary labour sector, was undermined by Finland's labour market structures of segmentation, ethnic hierarchisation and discrimination, and individual worker's own flexibility. For instance, attempts to enter skilled core market occupations e.g. in healthcare triggered a new division of labour that allowed employers to use participant's skilled labour without admitting them into primary the core care sector as should have been. Participant 7, a female nurse explains the phenomenon this way

... even though I graduated as a [registered] nurse, I'm not completely doing nursing work at my workplace because I didn't speak enough Finnish. Like, that's what they say. And you know, when it comes to my salary, I'm not even being paid the full amount of a nurse ... I can understand the language demand when it comes to nursing ... But then sometimes I feel like it's just an excuse as well. When some places don't want to hire us ... Sometimes I just feel like I'm being bullied because of this language thing. And not just me, but my friends as well.

In her reflection, Participant 7 hints at a well-documented but unproblematised challenge to the labour market integration of migrant care workers, especially doctors and nurses in Finland. Näre (2013) shows that an apparent migrant division of labour positions migrant workers unfavourably in Finnish healthcare. She shows that despite fast growing numbers of migrant doctors and nurses in Finnish healthcare since the 2000s, their acceptance and inclusion as professionals of an equal standing with their Finnish counterparts is very slow. Migrant doctors are overrepresented in public health centres where working conditions are eroded by New Public Management reforms, resulting in for example, lower wages. Subject to a similar migrant and ethnically driven division of labour, migrant nurses are systematically directed to the lower echelons of the profession such as elderly care, practical nurse and assistant nurse positions (Vartiainen *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, deregulation allows proliferation of subcontractors and intermediaries and non-standard employment arrangements featuring precarity, social insecurity, declining working conditions, stunted professional growth and short occupational mobility ladders thus effectively materialising secondary sector-like conditions for skilled, ideally primary sector workers.

This analysis has traced the position of our research participants in the Finnish labour market before the COVID-19 pandemic in the secondary labour market, on the unstable side of the stability continuum. We have shown how the student migrant visa regime “forces” migrant students prematurely into the labour market, where an insider–outsider job market segmentation skews their entry to few secondary sector jobs. Their place in the secondary sector is sustained by segmented labour market dynamics that hinder cross sectoral mobility that we illustrated using the case of African migrant nurses trained as registered nurses in Finland but employed in subordinate roles with secondary-sector-like conditions, thus “forcing” them out of the primary labour market.

#### *4.2 Effect of the pandemic on the labour market position of African migrants in Finland*

*4.2.1 Job gain, loss and rotation: impacts of COVID-19 on a segmented labour market.* Two nationwide “lockdowns”, a national telecommuting recommendation, international and national travel restrictions, and individual workers’ perceptions of COVID-19 altered the world of work for most workers in Finland since 16 March 2020. In the interviews we conducted, research participants unpacked the effect of the pandemic on their work life in terms of loss or gain of work, employment or source of income. We analysed those accounts and identified workers’ own practices of adaptation, mainly, rotation between occupations during the pandemic as a third theme. We discuss these while drawing links to labour market segmentation and other structural features of the Finnish labour market that shape these practices.

*4.2.2 Job gain (or retention).* In segmented labour markets, secondary sector and periphery labour market workers are typically the first to become redundant in times of economic downturns or crisis. Our data show that COVID-19 had the opposite effect, at least for our participants. The very nature of the health crisis and the social and economic crises it triggered, determined the occupations, which are essential to its effective management free of the hand of the market or internal firm rules of core labour market segments. In Finland these included several low skilled occupations in the service sector (cleaning, food preparation and courier) and periphery health sector occupations (gerontology nurses, nurse assistants

and personal assistants). Therefore, workers in these sectors, though usually in a less protected and highly deregulated position compared to primary sector high skill and high capital occupations, found their employment and work protected by the pandemic itself. This is one part of the reason why out of 17 participants, only two lost their source of income because of the pandemic. Labour market segmentation is the other part. We go a step further and argue that labour market segmentation preceded and influenced the apparent work and income security our research participants enjoyed during the pandemic.

At the first peak of the pandemic, the Finnish healthcare sector anticipated the highest care labour demand prompting the sector to expand worker recruitment. This created opportunities for all healthcare practitioners in Finland, including migrant nurses. However, the experiences of seven out of nine nurses we interviewed show that the new hiring/employment terms largely adhered to pre-existing segmented labour market structures, thereby reinforcing their pre-pandemic labour position. Therefore, in terms of employment, African migrant nurses had a positive gain from the pandemic in purely quantitative terms. However, nothing changed in qualitative terms such as the contract type, social security and occupational equality. One participant explained that more of “them” were hired as assistant nurses and practical nurses in elderly care homes to free “others” (Finnish nurses) for emergency, acute or other nursing work in the hospitals rather than giving them those opportunities. This division we argue was only possible because it was already structurally entrenched. In Finland, migrant nurses generally as illustrated in past research (Vartiainen *et al.*, 2016; Näre, 2013) and the experiences of our research participants are absorbed into the labour market from the very bottom regardless of qualification. Therefore, their subordination during the pandemic was merely business as usual.

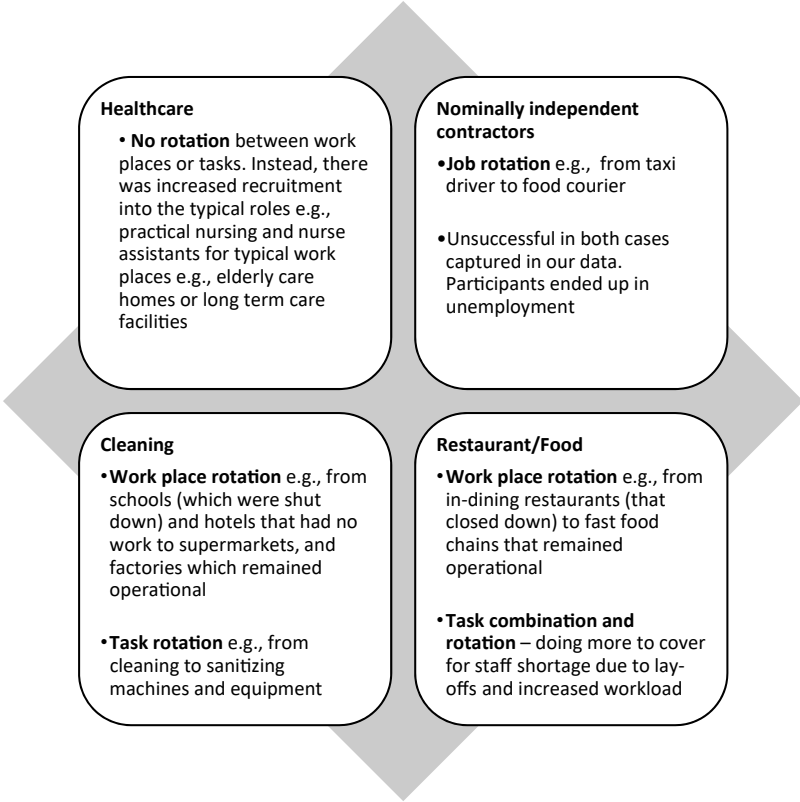
However, the pandemic also created a new acute care nurse category for specific COVID-19 care needs such as tracking and monitoring patients and infections, vaccination and testing. “COVID nurses” worked from varied workstations ranging from school ground pop-up stations, to designated spaces within hospitals and clinics, meaning that “COVID nurse’s” job distribution cut across segmentation boundaries. Unlike other nursing jobs that are location specific like gerontology and medical surgical nursing situated in old people homes and hospital wards, respectively, COVID care work is done in multiple places and across demographics, and that alone can empower it to challenge the existing division of labour in care to some degree. Participant 3 and 6, both working as “COVID nurses” thought that being placed in the same workplace, as a Finnish nurse, to do the same work, under similar conditions could demonstrate the capacity of migrant nurse workers to mainstream employers and challenge their stereotypes about such workers. However, the lifespan of “COVID nurse” category is contingent on the pandemic that gives it a limited time frame to have an impact.

*4.2.3 Job rotation.* Intra-sectoral labour mobility, especially in low skill occupations in the secondary sector of the labour market happens especially where flexible labour market structures and flexibility schemes are widespread. Employers, typically subcontractors who provide a variety of services that differ only slightly in skill or labour requirements rotate workers across roles e.g. from school cleaning to hotel housekeeping in response to business cycles and market fluctuations. Occupational clustering is a business model by firms and subcontractors that groups jobs with similar skill or labour demands and increases firm’s service/product market as well as adaptability in crisis. Occupational clustering is easy to implement in the low skill, low capital and the low specialisation secondary labour market.

During (economic) crisis that affect labour markets like COVID-19, employers use flexibility schemes such as labour rotation within an occupational cluster to adapt by reducing costs and maximising functionality (Lallement, 2011). During crises, states may themselves recommend and implement market deregulation including flexible labour

management schemes. In Finland, one of the amendments to the Employment Contracts Act called specifically for worker rotation ([Työsuojelu, 2022](#)). Employers were not allowed to dismiss a worker who could be reassigned into another role in the employers' organisation. Our analysis illuminates the use of labour rotation across the essential occupations covered in this study, as well as the difference between employer and worker-initiated rotation. The analysis also explores the labour market segmentation and labour rotation intersection.

As already discussed in 4.1, the COVID-19 pandemic did not render our participants in secondary and periphery sector jobs redundant as expected of a segmented labour market in crisis. Instead, it made them essential and indispensable workers (see [Figure 2](#)). However, there were slight variations between occupations and occupational clusters in line with the nature of the health pandemic and management steps adopted by national and local governments. In our data we see a sharp rise in demand for food couriers (Finland typically works in partnership with platform companies) following a national telecommuting recommendation. Alongside this was a sharp decline in demand for (platform) taxi drivers due to the same recommendation. This prompted a worker-initiated rotation from taxi to food courier by e.g. Participant 15 and 16. Platform work, which was already growing steadily as a livelihood source for migrants prior to the pandemic was bolstered by the pandemic (see [Van Doorn et al., 2020](#)) and this is captured in some of our interviews. Work from home, remote learning and social gathering bans bolstered demand for safe digitally mediated services such as no contact food ordering and delivery.



**Figure 2.**  
Job mobility due to and  
during the pandemic

The cleaning sector also faced some disruptions linked to pandemic regulation such as remote learning, resulting in labour rotation. Participants with cleaning jobs like Participants 11 and 17 were rotated by their employers from redundant cleaning roles such as school facility cleaning and housekeeping to cleaning and sanitising supermarkets and similar essential public facilities. Similarly, food preparation assistants like Participants 12 and 13, were rotated by their employer to different roles to accommodate the shift in restaurant operations from indoor dining to complete take-away and food delivery service modes. Food couriers, who in Finland work as independent contractors providing services in nominal non-binding, non-employment partnership with platform companies like Wolt and Foodora experienced the least displacement from the effects of the pandemic. On the contrary, they experienced a demand boom which however Participant 14 who works as a courier for Wolt explains became levelled out by incoming migrant workers laid off from the restaurant sector, cleaning and other negatively hit migrant occupations.

A lot of people lost their jobs, like people who were in cleaning or dishwashing even those who were driving taxis . . . So, a lot of people migrated to food delivery. You saw people who were using their taxi cabs to do delivery, or people who were cleaners getting a car to do delivery . . . So, there were a lot of people who were doing delivery, on one side, and then on the other side, orders increased because people were not supposed to come to the restaurant and eat. So, sometimes the order increase but the number of people who were doing delivery also increased.

We argue, however, that the labour rotation adaptation deployed successfully by employers and workers across occupations was only possible because of a pre-pandemic labour division and segmentation structure in the Finnish labour market that created and sustained the occupational distribution and matching of our research participants to a specific set of low skill (clustered) occupations. Participant narratives also illuminate a “reworking” and “resilience” perspective to labour and task rotation towards the objective of “surviving” the pandemic period.

*4.2.4 Job loss.* Many participants would fall in this category; however, because of the mitigating effect of labour rotation, only two individuals, Participant 15 and 16 lost work or their active source of income because of the pandemic. However, we note that the two were already in the most precarious and vulnerable labour market position as they did not have a standard employment relationship with an employer that usually comes with social security provisions for mitigating socio-economic risks resulting from e.g. unemployment. They worked as independent service contractors for a taxi platform company without a legal or binding employer–employee relationship. The spread of platform work amongst migrant workers and the social insecurity inherent in it as an atypical work arrangement effectively situate it at the bottom of the secondary labour market sector. However, as permanent residents in Finland (a quasi-citizenship status), they were also amongst the most socially secure as they were entitled to state unemployment benefits that are not contingent upon prior earnings-based contributions. We argue that “citizenship” assured security undermined their adaptation efforts as compared to other participants in other or similar precarious labour market positions. Personal characteristics, including individual agentic assertion also intervened as in the case of Participant 16. With a permanent residence permit, a Ph.D. and two master’s degrees in a marketable science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) field and 11 years of unsuccessful labour market integration attempt in Finland; he shifted from a strategy of resilience to a strategy he regards as a form of resistance. In December 2021, he relocated out of Finland.

## 5. Conclusions: theoretical contribution and recommendations for future studies

The objective of the research behind this article was to determine and characterise the labour market position of highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market and to

investigate the impacts, if any, of the COVID-19 pandemic on that position. Through our one-on-one biographical narrative interviews with 17 participants, we find that the job security of our research participants was largely not negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the nature of their work. However, they remained, as before, during, and after the pandemic, in relatively poorly paid and precarious unemployment, for which many were overqualified as a result of labour market segmentation through discrimination.

Our data analysis locates our research participants in low skilled, low wage and socio-economically risky secondary sector occupations with limited opportunities to transition into high skilled high wage primary sector occupations despite all of them being highly educated including having qualifications obtained in Finland. Additionally, the absorption of qualified registered nurse participants trained in Finland, in predominantly subordinate roles at the bottom of the Finnish care occupation tier, with low wages and weak social insurance show labour market segmentation based on migration status, and this continued despite high demand for healthcare workers during the pandemic. We also show these workers were in a situation of relative economic security in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic, owing to the unique pandemic management procedures that classified the services of several secondary sector occupations where our participants were concentrated as essential. Most importantly (theoretically), our analysis identifies a link between the observed segmentation trend and Finland's international student migration policies which as our data shows, "pushes" participants into the secondary sector and periphery labour markets. Therefore, the paper contributes to the body of knowledge on how migration and labour market integration policies in Finland reinforce existing labour market segmentation and create new segments as illustrated by the case of healthcare workers in our sample.

Towards developing migration and labour market segmentation theories and policy interventions, our findings engage the question of sources of segmentation in varied contexts and the impact of that of the scope of interventions applicable in case of adverse effects. Migration and labour market segmentation research has typically attributed segmentation to employers' cheap labour and cost saving business models and migrants' labour standard and other behavioural compromises. We identify additional sources such as state competition policies e.g. Finland's student migration regime that we suspect affects international students from other regional blocs and continents as well, likely with variations. We therefore suggest that more empirical studies are carried out at varied contextual levels to comprehensively map the basis of segmentation, only after which policy interventions can be appropriately targeted.

This research and our findings are limited in scope by sample size and methodology. To improve applicability of findings, future studies could expand the scope of enquiry using e.g. quantitative surveys and include other stakeholders in the study group.

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