

## Navigating life as an educated but unemployed immigrant in Norway

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Norway is one of the best countries to work and live in, well that is according to several statistical reports on economic and social wellbeing. It features consistently among the top 10 in the World happiness index. Also, the unemployment rate in Norway is relatively low compared to other Western countries. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and Statistics Norway (SSB) reported that the unemployment rate in Norway in 2022 was about 1,8%. This is lower than the pre-pandemic 2019 rate of 2,3% and lower than that of major European economies like Germany, UK, Italy, Spain, UK and the EU itself with about 2.9%, 3.7%, 7.8%, 12.87 and 6.1% unemployment rate respectively. Even during the heat of the corona pandemic, the numbers were comparatively low. According to statistics from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), 30% of the first-time residence permit issued in 2020 were work permits, and over 50% of these number were skilled workers permit - further attesting to Norway's need for skilled workers.

While these reports are true to a large extent, it is not the reality of thousands of educated immigrants who have participated in our events and projects since Inter-Nationals was founded in 2019. Many immigrants, especially newly arrived ones, have reported struggling with loneliness, the feeling of low self-esteem, (undiagnosed) anxiety and depression. Various factors can contribute to these emotional states, but many have attributed it to their difficulty in getting jobs that are commensurate with their education, skills, and prior experiences. Our workshops on "How to get a relevant job in Norway" are usually fully booked. Statistics also attest to this gloomy reality faced by many immigrants. According to SSB and NAV, 9.2% of immigrants were unemployed in Q4 2020 compared to 2.7% unemployed in the general population during that period<sup>1</sup>. There are no clear statistics on the number

of people who are underemployed (which we define as doing just any job to survive).

The high rate of unemployment in the immigrant population is due to a complex cocktail of reasons which can be attributed to immigrants themselves, the policy makers, corporate organisations and the larger society.

Based on our experience talking and working with immigrants with higher education as well as other analysis conducted by the team, the first and most obvious reason why educated immigrants struggle to get relevant jobs in Norway is language. The official language in Norway is Norwegian, a mother tongue spoken barely by 5.3 million people around the world, and not commonly spoken outside the Nordics<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore understandable that immigrants coming from outside the Nordics would have to spend a minimum of 6 months to learn Norwegian up to a level that they can comfortably use it in professional settings. The government understands the role of language in increasing the participation of immigrants in economic and social activities in Norway and dedicates resources towards Norwegian training. These offers have only just improved in recent years after a change in the integration law. In the past, qualifying immigrants were offered free Norwegian tuition up until the B1 level in the common European language framework (CEFR), whereas a minimum of B2 was the requirement to get admission into the university or to get employed in professional jobs where Norwegian was the language of communication.

There are only upsides, both professionally and socially, when immigrants learn Norwegian. We have often heard people say, "why can't they just change their working language to English since Norwegians learn English from primary class 1". Inter-Nationals as an organisation is a big proponent of investing in Norwegian and we think that it is

quite egoistic to expect the host community to totally transform their identity to accommodate English speaking immigrants. We also know from experience that Norwegians are not so comfortable communicating for long in English, in a similar way that many immigrants (who moved to Norway as adults) feel less comfortable speaking in Norwegian than in their main language.

In some professions, especially those that require some form of authorization or licensing, not knowing Norwegian is 99 out of 100 times, shutting oneself out of job opportunities. Learning Norwegian to a professional level widens the job pool from the limited and highly competitive English-speaking jobs to include Norwegian-speaking jobs which usually have lesser applicants. In our more recent CV and career workshops, some of our users have reported receiving more interview invites and are always happy because for them it means “something is right with their CV” and “at least they have something the employers are looking for”. These interviews do not always immediately translate into job offers and it is an emotional roller coaster to go for numerous interviews without landing a concrete job offer. We often encourage immigrants to see these interviews as a feedback mechanism to understand what the local market is looking for and where the individual can make personal adjustments where necessary.

Another major barrier to immigrants' employment in Norway is the lack of local education or work experience which provides skills relevant to the local market. Many immigrants hate to hear this because they often equate prior education and work experiences with relevant skills, however this does not always translate. An accountant educated abroad understands for example assets, liabilities, debit and credit, all of which are universal accounting terminologies, however such a person needs some form of local training to know the accounting and tax rules that are applicable only in Norway. Many of our users have reported their fear and reluctance to start their educational journey all over again. However, there are many paths to “reskilling” that do not necessarily require spending two to three years at the university. It is for this reason we started a project in 2022 highlighting and promoting the different “reskilling”

paths and resources that would accelerate the process of getting a relevant job. A large percentage of our users have reported getting a relevant job within a year of completing some form of Norwegian education/training.

We also strongly encourage our users to engage in strategic internship or volunteering. Although employers exploit the willingness of educated immigrants to acquire relevant local skills, strategic internships or volunteering are career boosters. A strategic internship or volunteering for the purpose of getting a relevant professional job is one which has a direct link and contribution to one's long term career goals. Such strategic internships reduce CV gaps and help resolve the issue of being too qualified or not qualified enough that many immigrants experience when applying for jobs. We often suggest to our users to seek such opportunities in the startup environment because they will have the opportunity to wear many hats and actually contribute while also learning. Startups also offer more flexibility that allows immigrants to combine other personal commitments like learning Norwegian, upskilling, childcare as well as taking up “survival jobs”. Thankfully, the corona pandemic has made many non-startup companies to be more open to flexible working options, and we encourage immigrants to take advantage of this flexibility to simultaneously achieve many goals within a short period.

For those that are willing to take the leap, we also encourage starting a business. There are many studies that suggest that immigrants are likely to go into entrepreneurship (Tella, 2015), the question is often about the motivation, whether it is out of necessity or because an immigrant entrepreneur saw a business opportunity and harnessed it. Whatever the motivation, there are no downsides to starting a business as an immigrant. If the business succeeds, then one has become a successful entrepreneur creating opportunities for others, but if the business fails, one would have learnt many valuable lessons in the process. Our observation of immigrants in Norway who started a business and later crossed into the corporate world has shown that they are less likely to start “at the bottom”, than people who have gaps in their cv.

We acknowledge that this advice might not always be relevant in professions with a high barrier to starting a business.

A third and major reason why immigrants struggle to get jobs in Norway is their limited network in Norway. According to a 2017 NRK article, about 42% of jobs in Norway are never advertised, rather they are gotten through one's personal network. For immigrants who have moved to Norway as adults, this could put them at a disadvantage. They might have to work extra hard to open the doors to social circles and to develop the mutual trust required for anyone to put their reputation at stake to recommend the immigrant for a job.

Despite the difficulty, networking with both Norwegians and other immigrants is beneficial in the long run. In the short term, it can provide a valuable source of support. The mental toll that (long term) unemployment or underemployment has on immigrants with higher education cannot and should not be underestimated. We are not quick to recommend therapy because the public waiting lines are long, and the cost of private therapy might be too expensive for people who are already struggling financially. However, having a good support system is a cheap and effective way to reduce the mental stress related to not having a (desired) job. When we organise networking and CV workshops, our users have often reported feeling better knowing that "they are not alone in the struggle", "that they are not stupid or worthless". In order to enjoy the benefit of support systems, we always recommend networking with and gleaning support from positive minded people - more negativity cannot brighten up dark feelings. One group of people who we highly recommended are people who have recently gotten a job because they are happy (positivity), they still freshly understand the feeling of long term job search (empathy) and they can offer tips on what worked for them (practical insights). From a public policy perspective, the story has always been "many immigrants are unemployed because they cannot speak the language enough, are not educated enough to get a job or do not want to work". This rhetoric is fueled by many factors including the lack of recognition of the changing demographic of people migrating to Norway, blindness to

the strong desire of many immigrants to contribute intellectually and economically to the Norwegian society, limited statistics on the level of unemployment among the immigrant population - disaggregated based on their level of education. Due to limited and non-granular data, the government's labour market initiatives for immigrants are not targeted enough and are just a waste of resources (Iluore, 2019). One of our users once reported being offered a job driver course by NAV despite having an MBA and relevant experience from one of the top 10 IT companies in the world. Such a course, if she went through with it, would have been a waste of resources.

In 2019/2020, the government enacted an immigration law that stipulated that immigrants who had met the language and residency requirement but have not earned up to 3Grunnbeløpet (in 2020, 1 Grunnbeløpet was equivalent to 101 351 Norwegian krone) would not be eligible to apply for a permanent residency (some exemptions apply). The aim of the law was to increase immigrants' participation in the labour market. The unintended effect was that many immigrants, including some of our users, who were working in startup companies resigned from their jobs and moved to survival jobs (despite having some financial safety net from their partner) so that they could enjoy the mental safety that comes with being a permanent resident. It is well known that many startups bootstrap in the earliest stage and that compensation comes in different non-cash forms like shares. The fact that the immigration agency (UDI) and policy makers did not make exemptions for those working in the startup space further underscores the lack of government's appreciation for the talent and skills that immigrants possess (Iluore, 2020).

Unfortunately, many immigrants are consumers of the policies that directly affect their wellbeing in Norway, and hardly contribute to the lawmaking process. Maslow's hierarchy of needs clearly explains this phenomenon – a group of people who are yet to satisfy their physiological needs are less likely to prioritize their esteem and self-actualization needs. In the private sector, there have been noticeable shifts in the past 3 years, especially in the bigger organizations. This has been mostly fueled by conversations on the global stage about diversity, inclusion, struc-

tural racism, discrimination, and related themes. For some of the big organizations, however, diversity and inclusion is just a project for the marketing and PR department. It does not translate into changes in the operational culture of these organizations. For organizations that are walking the talk, Inter-Nationals' users have reported seeing better appreciation for university degrees acquired outside Norway or the Nordics, more invite to interviews, placing greater weight on "non-Norwegian" work experience, more equitable salaries, and access to opportunities.

The unique challenge for the Norwegian private sector is that many companies are considered small by various international metrics. According to Næringslivets Hovedorganisasjon (NHO), 99% of companies in Norway are categorized as SMEs (less than 100 employees), about 26% of these companies have less than 20 employees. These smaller companies do not have the same ESG pressures as the bigger organizations and so diversity and inclusion features less on their operational strategies and training priorities. Recruitment agencies are not of much help outside the construction and service industries. Continuous patronage is dependent on their clients' satisfaction, for this reason recruitment agencies are less likely to "take a chance" on immigrant employees compared to direct recruitment by the company.

The direct and indirect impacts on immigrant unemployment and unemployment are dire. As earlier highlighted, many of our educated immigrants reported the feeling of low self-esteem, loneliness, (undiagnosed) depression, anxiety, and other related mental issues. They also report the feeling of despair, which is easily transmittable to other immigrants. People often question why they should invest in learning Norwegian when others who have learnt have not gotten a relevant job. Experience has shown us how difficult it is to disabuse the mind of those who have already concluded (based on personal experience or hearsay) that their education and skills will never be valued in Norway.

Norway is globally known for its high standard of living. Unfortunately, the financial impact of unemployment is that there is an increasing level of poverty amongst the immigrant population. According to a 2021 Aftenbladet article, 4 in 10 children

with immigrant background live in poverty. Many immigrant families are single-income families and immigrants are overly represented in statistics related to social welfare assistance. Educated but unemployed immigrants are not exempted from this reality, they also feel the pangs of depending on a single stream of income in a country that is ranked as one of the most expensive places to live in the world.

Another financial impact of unemployment is economic dependency which in many homes creates power imbalance, fear of saying no and vulnerability to abuse. While the lack of a job/income is never a justification for abuse, it is an aggravating factor. According to Barne, Ungdom- og Familiedirektoratet (Bufdir) Krisesenter statistics (2022), immigrants constitute less than 20% of the population in Norway yet 65% of the people who used the government's domestic violence shelters in 2021 were people with immigrant backgrounds. Lack of stable income and visa dependency are some of the common reasons why people stay in violent marriages. The Norwegian government has social, economic and immigration support that will make it easier for women (and other victims) to leave violent marriages, but the reality is that educated immigrant women are less likely to ask for help due to the stigma associated with being in a violent relationship or being dependent on social welfare.

The abuse is not limited to the home settings, unemployed and underemployed immigrants are susceptible to exploitation in the workplace. Zero-hour contracts, limited contracts beyond the legally allowed timeframe, unpaid internships, unpaid overtime work, and lower salaries are some of the negative experiences immigrants suffer when they manage to get jobs. According to a 2019 Statistics Norway report, immigrants with a higher education from abroad earn on average 12% less than someone in the general population with a similar background, while those educated in Norway earn on average 6% less. The Norwegian Labour Law has several protections for employees, but many immigrants are not willing or able to assert their rights either because they are not aware of it in the first place, or they do not want to "spoil their Norwegian references". For grievous cases that need to be tried in court, many

are not financially viable enough to engage the services of a lawyer.

The adverse impact of unemployment amongst educated immigrants is not limited to the parents alone. Children with immigrant backgrounds are highly represented on both ends of the spectrum that measures completion of high school education in Norway (Midtbøen, 2019). One of our users complained about how she was struggling to keep her 16-year-old daughter motivated with her education. Her daughter reportedly could not see the value of education if she was going to end up jobless like her mother. For youngsters who manage to stay motivated, many have reported being pressured by their parents or guardians to follow certain career paths where immigrants are more likely to get a job. Immigrants are highly represented in certain sectors like the health sector, but a career in journalism and other related media is out of the equation for many. Feedbacks such as this formed the inspiration for the Inter-Nationals "Passion in Action" photo exhibition project in 2021. Through this project, we highlighted immigrants working across different professions in Norway. The aim of the project was to inspire immigrant youths to learn from others and to follow their true passion - however daunting it might seem.

The general Norwegian society also suffers the consequences of immigrant unemployment. Some of these consequences include but are not limited to society missing out on the intellectual and economic contributions that immigrants have to offer, high government tax spending in providing social benefits. In addition to that, immigrants are highly represented in crime statistics further increasing the dichotomy and mistrust between the immigrant and general population.

As highlighted above, the causes and impacts of immigrant unemployment are complex and multifaceted. It is in the interest of everyone that immigrants who are willing and able to work are provided with the opportunity to do so. As an organisation, Inter-Nationals will continue to engage the different stakeholders to play their part in contributing to a Norway where everyone, irrespective of their background, has an opportunity for self-actualization.

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## The First International Conference on Psychiatric Rehabilitation Policy in Israel.

Prof. Max Lachman ([lachman55@gmail.com](mailto:lachman55@gmail.com)) and Mrs. Taisia Leikin, ISPRA



representatives of the inpatient system, the Community Mental Health Care system, and the rehabilitation system, as well as representatives of the consumer movement, family organizations, and ISPRA (The Israeli Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association).

Dr. Gabriel Rocca has also taken part in the conference while visiting Israel. During his visit, Dr. Rocca became familiar with the local mental health rehabilitation system.

The conference opened with a presentation of the current picture of the psychiatric rehabilitation system in Israel by Ms. Batia Leidner, head of the rehabilitation system at the Ministry of Health.

On November 23, 2022, after more than 20 years of implementing the "Israeli Law for the Rehabilitation in the Community of Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities (2000), the first international conference on psychiatric rehabilitation policy in Israel was held in Tel Aviv.

The conference was organized by the National Council for Psychiatric Community Rehabilitation (part of the law) and the Israel Ministry of Health.

Most of the stakeholders in the mental health field in Israel were invited to the conference - rep-

resentation of Health.

The central theme of the first session was "20 Years of the Law on the Community Rehabilitation of the People with Mental Health Disabilities," with Prof. Max Lachman's lecture based on the research of Prof. Lachman, Prof. Uri Aviram, and Anat Ifergan on the achievements and challenges of the law after 20 years.

In the second session, Dr. Gabriel Rocca presented the constitutional change in Italy, which took place 45 years ago and led to reorganizing the