Tailored workplace education for immigrants in Rural Sweden: working with resources and deficits

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ABSTRACT
Incorporation into the labour market is a key endeavour, of heightened importance in recent years due to high migration flows, for both immigrants and their recipient countries. Hence, activation and employability are major themes in both transnational and national policy discussions, which have generated various programmes and policy measures. This article focuses on one type of such initiatives: collaborative agreements intended to increase the effective establishment of newly arrived migrants through work-related educational tracks in Sweden. Drawing on post-structural policy analysis techniques and theorisation of place, the author analyses documents regarding associated policies, and views expressed by interviewed actors, in three rural municipalities. In efforts to identify hindrances and possibilities for immigrants' incorporation in rural settings, potential employers' perspectives are included. The analysis shows that a 'resource discourse' and a 'deficit discourse' are prevalent in the construction of the agreements and the employers' perspectives regarding immigrants in the municipalities, place and tracks. It also shows that the municipal strategies differ in terms of organisation and local goals of the tracks. The indications of how place is constructed in local rural settings highlight the importance of such a perspective in efforts to enhance immigrants' incorporation into the labour market, address deficits and harness resources.

Introduction
In many refugee-receiving countries, important issues have been raised by policies and programmes to promote humanitarian migrants' incorporation into the labour market. This is a highly prioritised goal in Sweden, which is traditionally known for adopting a multicultural approach towards integration, and granting relatively strong cultural and political rights to immigrants (Schierup and Ålund 2011; Vesterberg 2015). Sweden is also renowned for the scope of its welfare system, and reportedly has the most optimally integrated labour market of the 38 countries covered by the Migrant Integration Policy Index (Huddelston et al. 2015). However, while provision of immigrants' political rights is high on the policy-level agenda, their integration and establishment in Swedish society can be quite difficult. As in many other European countries, refugees are more likely to be unemployed or have temporary jobs and have generally lower incomes than native peers (Åslund, Hensvik, and Skans 2014; Bevelander 2011). Moreover, their prospects for employment are poorer in Sweden than in other refugee-receiving countries (Irastorza and Bevelander 2017) and the employment gap between immigrants and natives has recently been among the highest in OECD countries, e.g.
14.8% in 2018, according to the OECD (2018). This has often been attributed to differences that disfavour immigrants such as lack of language skills, formal education and access to networks. Diverse forms of education and training such as second-chance education has long been important tools to increase the labour market participation and productivity of poorly educated, unemployed or other people at risk of marginalisation and social exclusion (Ball 2009; Fejes 2019; Morrice, Shan, and Sprung 2017; Sprung 2013). However, several studies have shown that individuals’ attributes and competencies can only account for some of the inequalities between natives and immigrants in the labour market, indicating that structural discrimination and other factors related to ‘Sweden-specific’ knowledge, such as ‘country-specific social competence’ and years spent in Sweden, are also relevant (Nordlund, Bonfanti, and Strandh 2015; Rydgren 2004; see also Dobbins and Plows 2017). This highlights the need to consider not only immigrants’ attributes, but also the specificity of local labour markets and their actors, in analyses of immigrants’ prospects of incorporation into the labour market and efforts to improve them. Managers are key players in this regard, as their decisions strongly influence not only functions of the business and labour market as a whole, but also immigrants’ prospects for employment. Nevertheless, employers’ role in the recruitment of immigrants has largely been ignored (Almeida, Fernando, and Sheridan 2012), although some previous studies have shown that managers’ attitudes towards hiring refugees varies, depending on factors such as their own background and previous experiences of hiring immigrants (Åslund, Hensvik, and Skans 2014; Friberg and Midtøien 2018; Lundborg and Skedinger 2016). There are also regional differences in immigrants’ employment in Sweden, including higher than average rates of unemployment of immigrants in rural areas. However, Vogiazides and Mondani (2020) recently showed that the most advantageous regions for immigrants to find a first employment are at the extremes of the population density distribution: the Stockholm region and small town/rural regions (see also Rosvall 2017). For rural communities, immigration offers a possible solution for problems of population decline and maintaining economic and social sustainability (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014). Thus, it is highly important to enhance our knowledge of immigrants’ incorporation in the labour market, particularly in rural settings, which are often neglected (Beach et al. 2019).

This article focuses on local labour markets and a specific kind of tailored education targeting newly arrived migrants in the rural north of Sweden, to explore associated possibilities and hindrances for immigrants, thereby assisting efforts to acquire the required understanding. The tailored education activities are constructed through so-called DUNA (Delegationen för unga och nyånlanda till arbete; The Delegation for the Employment of Young People and Newly Arrived Migrants) agreements between municipalities and the governmental Swedish Public Employment Service (SPES). The primary intention of these agreements, which are described in more detail later, is to increase the effective incorporation of newly arrived migrants (and youths of all origins) into the labour market. The following questions have guided the research:

1. How are the agreements constructed, and what do they entail in terms of activities, education and positioning of immigrants?
2. How do actors in the local labour markets perceive possibilities and hindrances for immigrants’ incorporation into the labour market?

The agreements are context-specific, created in a local setting, based on local perspectives and intended to address local needs. These are important factors to consider when addressing any political aspects of place, such as the issues related to immigrants and their establishment explored here (cf. Massey 2005). Although the agreements are context-specific, features they share with other Swedish and EU policies and instruments implemented to increase employment among immigrants include targeting the most vulnerable and focusing on individual immigrants and their activation and employability (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2019; Qvist 2016). Thus, this case analysis of phenomena linked to places in rural northern Sweden may also contribute to an understanding of broader issues related to education, labour market integration and positioning of immigrants.
The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next sections briefly introduce the policy context and research on immigration and labour market policy in Sweden, and outline the framework and background of the DUNA agreements. Then, the theoretical framework and data collection procedures are described, and the results and analysis are thematically presented, focusing on the construction of agreements followed by the labour market actors’ perspectives. Finally, the issues, findings and their implications are addressed in a concluding discussion.

**Immigrants and policy in Sweden**

Historically, Swedish integration policy has been characterised by adherence to principles of diversity and multiculturalism (Vesterberg 2015; Wiesbrock 2011), resulting in relatively strong provision and protection of cultural and political rights for immigrants compared to those in most other refugee-receiving countries (Huddelston et al. 2015; Vesterberg 2015). However, changes have occurred in the welfare systems and related policies in Sweden, in line with recent European trends. These include transformation from welfare systems based on state interventions delivered through social policy measures to ‘workfare’ systems rooted in competitive economic policies, marking a shift in responsibility for employment/unemployment from the state to the worker. In this context, employment and social policies prioritising ‘activation’ have emerged, emphasising individuals’ obligations and duties to become ‘employable’ (Qvist 2016; Sultana 2012). Newly arrived immigrants’ (‘nychlanda’ in Swedish terminology) are of special concern. These are humanitarian migrants, or refugees, who are incorporated (after receiving a residence permit) in an ‘establishment programme’ that normally lasts two years. Each individual’s ‘establishment plan’ includes full-time participation in Swedish language classes, provision of basic information about Swedish society, and activities to facilitate labour market integration. To enhance social benefits, newly arrived migrants are expected to participate in the activities prescribed by an official of the Public Employment Service for the entire period.

**The DUA committee**

The Delegation for the Employment of Young People and Newly arrived migrants (DUA) was established in 2014 to enhance the impact of labour market policies to reduce youth unemployment at the local level by promoting and facilitating cooperation between relevant actors (Committee Directive 2014, 157). In 2017, their role was extended to include the promotion of collaborative ‘DUNA’ agreements intended to ease establishment of newly arrived migrants in the labour market. The committee allocates government grants to promote agreements of municipalities and the SPES to collaborate more deeply in efforts to achieve this goal (Committee Directive 2017, 20). Municipalities and the SPES are encouraged to enter collaborative agreements with the aim to enable newly arrived migrants to become more effectively established in work (DUA 2018). The agreements are intended to create work-related tracks that immigrants can take as part of their establishment plan, thus enhancing their preparation for work. Each track explicitly targets a prospective employer or employment sector, and each agreement generally covers multiple tracks (DUA 2019).

**Theoretical points of departure – the construction of agreements and positioning of immigrants**

The study draws on an understanding of policies as social constructs, so the local-level workplace education, content, practices and activities included in the DUNA agreements are bearers of ideas, norms and values (Bacchi 2009; Colebatch 2006; Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf 2010). Their construction can be seen as local policy work (Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf 2010; Colebatch 2006) that occurs in different settings with their own histories and conditionalities that shape the
possibilities of what can and should be done (cf. Massey 2005). Viewing policies as social constructs that reflect subjects’ ideas, norms and values about the nature of problems and ways to solve them, or rather about what is being ‘problematised’ (Bacchi 1999), in these settings is an important element of the theoretical approach applied here, as it focuses attention on the problematisation of issues associated with immigrants and their employment. Treating the DUNA agreements as policy also facilitates the deconstruction and analysis of how they are made, what they entail and how local actors in the labour market position newly arrived migrants in terms of the possibilities and hindrances for their establishment in the market. Other key elements of the theoretical approach are viewing place as political (Massey 2005), and scrutinising how the problematisations through which governing occurs constitute ‘subjects’, ‘objects’, and ‘places’ (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 69). In this manner, key aims of the paper are to uncover and analyse the governance and politics of integration as manifested in the DUNA agreements, which position immigrants in different ways, and are key outputs of the municipalities’ policy work. Data drawn from both policy documents associated with the agreements and interviews are used for these purposes. Interviews are important resources for considering how we are continually produced as particular kinds of provisional subjects. According to Foucault (1986, p. 10, cited in Bacchi and Goodwin 2016), in a theoretical exploration of the production of human ‘subjects’, the key issue in the whole history of thought is to define ‘the conditions in which human beings “problematize” what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live’. Accordingly, this study focuses not on the immigrants’ own perceptions of the world, but those of local actors who shape the activities and programmes for immigrants together with employers’ perspectives on aspects such as ‘the immigrants’, ‘the place’ and the local solutions presented through the agreements and associated activities (‘the tracks’). Thus, the analysis departs from questions regarding what kind of problems the activities are solutions for and how the immigrants are positioned in rural settings (see Bacchi 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016).

Method and material

The study focuses on three Swedish rural municipalities (SKL 2016) that differ in population, number of immigrants, educational organisation and labour market opportunities. However, all three participate in a collaborative initiative called Akademi Norr (Northern Academy) established to support adult education in the rural north of Sweden. The municipalities are called here Larch, Elm and Spruce. Their populations range from 5000 to 12,000, and are substantially smaller in Elm and Spruce than in Larch. Between 8 and 10% of the inhabitants were born outside Sweden (a smaller proportion than the national average, of about 20%). They have received varying numbers of refugees, but in 2017 each of the municipalities had 60–100 immigrants enrolled in the establishment programme, and more than 50% of them only had pre-secondary education (Kolada 2019).

As shown in Table 1, much of the empirical material considered in this article consists of municipal policy documents, including DUNA agreements, project descriptions and material from websites. Further important information was obtained from interviews with 18 actors (16 interviewed individually, and two jointly) engaged in activities related to the tracks at various levels (five in each of the three municipalities, and three with regional-level responsibilities). They included project workers in Elm and Spruce, the head of municipal adult education in Larch, both public and private sector managers and CEOs of organisations operating in sectors targeted in the agreements. The interviews with unit managers or CEOs focused on their needs for staff, experiences of recruitment and employing immigrants (especially newly arrived immigrants), collaborations and educational requirements for staff, as well as their experiences and thoughts about ‘the place’ (the location, municipality etc.) and future prospects. The interviews with project leaders and managers responsible for the agreements and tracks focused on questions regarding the tracks and organisation, the place as well as motives and challenges. The interviews were semi-structured to enable the informants to freely express ideas they felt were important (Bryman 2018), they were conducted face-to-face or by phone, and lasted between 35 and 70 minutes.
Table 1. Data sources. The gender of the interviewees is indicated in parentheses. ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care.

| Data/Municipality       | Elm Municipality | Spruce Municipality | Larch Municipality | Regional            |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Policy documents        | Project agreement with four appendixes concerning: needs for skills, newly arrived migrants in the municipalities, organisation for collaboration, the local tracks. | Project worker (f) | Head of municipal adult education (m) | Website |
| Interviews with actors responsible for tracks | Project worker (f) | Project worker (f) | Head of municipal adult education (m) | Project leader targeting municipalities (f, m) |
| Interviews with public sector managers | Manager, elder care unit (f) | Manager, elder care unit (f) | Manager, elder care unit (f) | Project leader targeting industry (f) |
| Interviews with private sector CEOs | CEO, service and tourism firm (m) | CEO, engineering firm (m) | CEO, manufacturing firm (m) | CEO, engineering firm (m) |

Construction of agreements and creation of tracks in the three municipalities

In all municipalities, perceived needs were identified to meet challenges associated with difficulties in recruiting staff, future retirements, and (as stated in the scrutinised documents) ‘the composition of the target groups’. We will return to this, but first, the agreements and tracks created (three in each municipality; Table 2) are briefly described.

Track 1 is intended to prepare poorly educated immigrants for a subsequent work-related track (in Larch) or subsidised employment in a municipality (in Elm and Spruce). In Larch municipality, two work-related tracks were created, one covering industry and the other health & social care and service. The education in the ‘Health & social care and service track’ is incorporated into the Child care upper secondary education programme in the municipality, and thus focuses mainly on child care. The healthcare element of the track has not been created yet, at the time of writing, almost two years after the agreement was adopted. In Larch municipality, they have also had some difficulties regarding the industry track, which was created in collaboration with industrial partners. Despite having an industry programme in the municipality’s upper secondary education, the theoretical part of this track is provided by an external actor (education company). Larch municipality’s agreements also have quite strongly stated local actor, including goals to ‘break the gender-segregated labour

Table 2. Summary of the tracks created by the three municipalities.

| Municipality/Track | Track 1                                      | Track 2                                      | Track 3                                      |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Larch              | Basic education leading towards participation in a work-related track | ‘Health & social care and service’ leading towards municipal ECEC employment | ‘Industry’ leading employment in private industrial businesses |
| Elm & Spruce       | Basic education leading towards subsidised municipal employment in the public sector | ‘Health & Social care’ leading towards municipal or regional employment | ‘Service & cleaning’ leading towards employment in private firms or the municipality |
market’ and thus nearly equal numbers of male and female participants in both of the work-related educational tracks (Larch agreement 2018).

In Elm and Spruce, a project was established in 2017, through the agreements, in collaboration with three other municipalities and local branches of the SPES, funded by the EU European Social Fund (ESF) with a regional actor as project owner and leader. The expressed motivation for the joint collaboration was that it would have been ‘very challenging’ for the small municipalities to establish the tracks individually since they were mainly ‘sparsely populated with large areas, long distances and low population densities’ (Project agreement, Appendix 3, p. 1). Together they created two work-related tracks: one targeting cleaning & service, and the other health & social care. The education is provided by one or two of the municipalities, and participants from other municipalities can join it. Different actors provide theoretical elements of the tracks, and the content varies, but it is constructed in collaboration with the providers of adult education in the municipalities. None of the work-related tracks result in formal qualifications; they are intended more to provide opportunities to ‘try out’ different work paths, and some also prepare for employment.

The analysis of the motivation and argumentation in the agreements and creation of the tracks shows that they are intended to solve perceived problems posed by the presence of low-skilled immigrants and paucity of skill supplies in the rural municipalities. The problem of low-skilled immigrants is represented in statements about their lack of upper secondary level education and ‘ability to socialise at work’ (Larch agreement p. 5), indicating a perceived lack not only of formal education but also other aspects such as workplace ethics. Such statements corroborate previous findings that the immigrants are constructed as problematic learners (Brine 2006), and that ‘adding’ education is seen as a key solution (e.g. Fejes 2019; Morrice, Shan, and Sprung 2017). Thus, the representation of the low-skilled immigrants problem is related not only to the positioning of immigrants and their capacity for action, but also to the geographical position of the municipalities, since (as stated in the scrutinised agreements and by interviewees) immigrants placed in their municipalities are generally less educated than the average adult immigrant.

The other problem representation is connected to the labour market and the difficulty of providing skilled staff. Unsatisfactory provision of skills, connected to demographic and geographic factors, is highlighted as a longstanding problem in the municipalities’ region (Larch agreement, 2018; Project agreement, 2017), with negative implications for the future and both their provision and management of welfare services. In this problem representation, immigrants are positioned as ‘resources’ that can potentially fill the gaps in the public and (partly) private sectors, for example by covering future retirements.

These discourses were also manifested in comments by the interviewed managers and CEOs regarding their perspectives on the hindrances and possibilities for immigrants. The results of analyses of the interview material regarding these discourses are described in the following sections, focusing on three main themes: ‘the immigrants’, ‘the place’ and ‘the tracks’.

**Local employers’ perspectives: possibilities raised in a resource discourse**

Most of the interviewed potential employers employed newly arrived migrants. All of the interviewed managers involved in the focal public sector (ECEC and elderly care) mostly as temporary ‘extratjänster’ (government-subsidised ‘extra workers’ or ‘extra services’). The experience of interviewees from the private sector varied strongly, as immigrants accounted for 0 to 50% of their companies’ labour force.

**Immigrants as resources**

The interviewees talked about immigrants filling a huge gap in their organisations and as a ‘resource bank’. One of the unit managers in the eldercare sector described the immigrants as such important elements of the workforce in their municipality that they would ‘not have survived if it weren’t for the
newly arrived’ (Elm, Manager, elder care unit). The interviewees spoke about the immigrants not only filling a staffing hole, but also as having better work ethics or morals than the Swedish staff (‘Generally they’re better than the Swedes’; Larch, CEO, manufacturing firm), and being ‘absolutely priceless’ because they were prepared to work whenever needed, including antisocial hours (Elm, CEO, service firm). The immigrants were also positioned as bearers of important qualities and cultures in their organisations. For example, ECEC units (e.g. preschools) often need personnel who can fluently speak the same language as children whose mother tongue is not Swedish:

We need staff with different languages because we have children with different languages, and it’s a big advantage when someone at the preschool can talk with children and parents without an interpreter and really make themselves understood/ … /it makes it much safer (Spruce, manager, ECEC unit).

The immigrants are also described as bearers of another culture, which is often presented positively. In Spruce and Elm municipalities, the ECEC unit managers described the immigrant staff’s heritage as a valuable resource for disseminating knowledge of, and teaching about different cultures. Immigrants are also seen as bearers of other cultures in care of the elderly:

Many newly arrived … have a different/ … /cultural approach to older people. Or care of the elderly. You see it in reverence and desire to help the elderly … I don’t really know how to put it into words. You feel a more natural way of caring for the elderly (Spruce, manager, elder care unit).

This perspective also highlights the trend of immigrants being employed in low-waged care-jobs in Sweden and other European settings, and illustrates how ethnicity can come to be seen as a skill (see e.g. Friberg and Midtoøen 2018; Ruist 2018; Sparreboom and Tarvin 2017). In the ECEC and elderly care sector, the male immigrants are also positioned as contributing through their gender, by joining a predominantly female workforce and thus helpfully countering a gender imbalance. In some settings, this has reportedly even led to ‘overcompensation’, and a preponderance of men with foreign names in female-dominated occupations (Bursell 2014). No indication of this was found in the studied contexts, but the finding that this gender element was positively regarded is highly relevant, particularly as one of the specific aims of the DUNA agreement in Larch municipality was to break the gendered labour market.

The place as a resource

When talking about ‘the place’, their municipalities, and running a business or being a unit manager in them, many interviewees mentioned several advantages of a small municipality for both them as actors and immigrants. These included short decision paths, and relative ease of finding the right person to talk to. Moreover, while recognising that the smallness could be a limitation, rural municipalities were seen as having ‘another tradition’ (compared to the big cities) ‘where people stay’, and less mobility in the labour market, which was seen as advantageous for businesses. This reportedly helped to keep their businesses and products or services more coherent and consistent, and enhanced the value of training people: ‘there is less mobility than in other places, which is valuable because you get something back from the time and energy you invest in training people to do different tasks’ (Spruce, CEO, engineering firm). This was less frequently raised by the interviewees from the public sector, who mentioned three favourable factors associated with the smallness of the place: ‘you get seen’ (Spruce, manager, elderly care unit), the short decision paths, and knowing who to talk to (Elm, Larch and Spruce, public officials).

The tracks as a resource

Only one of the interviewees was a representative of a private business with experience of tracks of the agreements. This was also the most enthusiastic interviewee about such programmes, the CEO in the service sector in Elm municipality, who described the corresponding track as highly valuable and
providing a good education to meet expectations in working life and as an employee. However, the service track was highly targeted towards cleaning, and this respondent’s business also required personnel who could handle service-oriented assignments that were not covered by the track, and thus expressed hope that another track would be started to enable the recently employed to enhance their skills further. The managers of public sector units expressed optimism that the tracks would let the immigrants ‘try out and feel’ if they wanted to work in the targeted profession. Most of the interviewees had no experience of the tracks or any knowledge of the agreements, and most of the private CEOs did not have a positive attitude towards it. However, even if the potential employers did not see many benefits of the tracks, they could still increase immigrants’ agency as previous studies have shown that participation in education and training services in Sweden considerably improves work matching for immigrants (see e.g. Bussi and Pareliussen 2017). Moreover, work experience is one of the most important factors for incorporation of newly arrived immigrants in a European context, together with extensive language courses and vocational training (see e.g. Martin et al. 2016).

Local employers’ perspectives: hindrances raised in a deficit discourse

Perceived hindrances for the immigrants can be linked to a discourse of deficits expressed in terms of the positioning of immigrants, the place and the tracks developed through the agreements and associated project.

Deficits regarding the immigrants

In this manifestation of the deficit discourse, all but one of the interviewees expressed immigrants’ lack of fluent Swedish as the main hindrance for employment in their organisation. The exception was the CEO of an organisation with almost 200 staff, about half of whom were not from Sweden. Many of the CEOs talked about knowledge of Swedish as a safety concern, because staff who lack fluent Swedish may pose risks for themselves and their colleagues. Interestingly, knowledge of Swedish was not related to safety by participants from the public sector, that is representatives of organisations engaged in care for other people. This could potentially be linked to the statuses of the sectors and gender. Pickiness’ about safety concerns may be possible in the relatively high-status male-dominated industrial sector, while organisations in the relatively low-status female-dominated sector of health and social care may have to ‘make do’ with anyone they can get simply to provide their services.

Another kind of deficit was represented in statements about immigrants lacking cultural knowledge. Although many of their attributes were regarded as beneficial elements of cultural capital by managers in the elderly care and ECEC sectors (see above), being a bearer of a different culture was also seen as a deficiency, and possible cause of culture clashes: ‘They think it’s very strange [to take care of the elderly in a care home]. Why not take care of them at [the family] home? A culture clash occurs right there, about how to care’ (Elm, manager, elder care unit). Moreover, although most of the interviewed managers of ECEC units mentioned positive aspects of the immigrants bearing a different culture, it was also seen as problematic:

Then there are also aspects related to tradition, attitudes towards children. Because they’re very different in other countries, compared to how we are in Sweden. Yes, for example, we want the children to do a lot themselves, so they learn to become independent, and we listen to them and so on. We’ve seen that many of them [immigrants] do a lot for the children. So we say “No, we want them to try it themselves”, a bit like that (Larch, manager, ECEC unit).

One of the CEOs from the private sector also expressed a fear of being labelled as a heavily subsidised business: ‘You don’t want to get a reputation of being full of immigrants/…/with people coming in and saying “Yeah, there were just immigrants, what are they really doing in this place?”’ (Elm, CEO, service firm), indicating that employing many immigrants has substantial drawbacks. This
statement indicates that managers may be wary of public perceptions, and that large numbers of immigrant employees could signal ‘fake jobs’ or subsidised employment. It could also be interpreted as an example of recognition of an attitude among the public that immigrants have low status, and cannot get a ‘real job’, indicating that not only immigrants but also their employers may have smaller capacity to act.

**Deficits in relation to the place**

Previously, child care training equivalent to upper secondary education was sufficient to get a permanent position in the municipalities’ ECEC sector, but now university-level preschool teacher training is required. As they are in remote areas with no easy access to a university, this creates difficulties for managers in the sector to meet their staffing needs. All those interviewed expressed desires for the universities to offer distance or remote education, because it is difficult for people with children or without a driving licence to travel far away for university studies. Some also complained of shortages of students who could do temporary, part-time or seasonal staff work, due to the absence of a university nearby. The CEOs of private firms also expressed difficulties in operating a business in rural Sweden, arguing that ‘The Government doesn’t think properly about sparsely populated areas. We give and give, and receive nothing’. (Spruce, CEO, mechanical firm). This statement can also be understood as an expression of a north-south colonisation discourse, claiming that the Swedish south plunders natural resources of the north, which is often expressed in debates regarding dissatisfaction with national politics of redistribution and equalisation (utjämningspolitiken). Many of the CEOs of the bigger industrial firms also expressed concerns regarding expansion, which they said was difficult to in northern Sweden due to a lack of governmental support. They also viewed location in rural Sweden as disadvantageous. For example, one of them stated:

In fact, the biggest problem we have in the rural areas for doing business is that you can’t get a mortgage on real estate. If you run a business in a bigger city then you can mortgage the property and expand it, but if you’re located inland, then the property’s worth nothing. It’s a damn problem (CEO, Larch, manufacturing firm).

Many of them also expressed opinions that it was much easier to start a business in other countries, such as Poland, than in Sweden. Some of the unit managers also expressed concerns about the location and place, as being ‘too small’ and ‘lacking attractions’ for the immigrants, as some of them are used to living in bigger cities (Elm, manager, elder care unit; Spruce, CEO, mechanical firm). They said that they put time and effort into teaching the immigrants the occupation or work, but after a while some of them moved away (due to the limitations of the municipality), leaving the managers and co-workers with a feeling of desertion and that teaching them had been a waste of time and energy (Elm, CEO, service firm; Elm, manager, elder care unit). Some also talked disparagingly about the place in terms of the human resources available, and lack of local potential employees with required skills (Larch, CEO, engineering firm; Spruce, CEO, engineering firm; Elm, CEO, manufacturing firm; Elm, CEO, service firm). These problems were clearly attributed to the rurality and long distances from universities, particularly by participants from the ECEC sector, although they were also raised by the industrial CEOs.

**Deficits of the tracks**

Most of the interviewees stated that they had no experience of the agreements specifically, and did not even know what they were about, although the agreements specifically targeted their sectors and the project managers directed us specifically towards those businesses to find relevant interviewees. However, there were some critical voices. One of the managers was very sceptical about the tracks, arguing that ‘We must stop obsessing about fast tracks/ . . . /fast tracks don’t work. It takes time. But if you let [the process] take time it could be great!’ (Elm, manager, elder care unit). Scepticism was also prevalent in relation to the broader scope of offered education. Many of the CEOs blamed Swedish For Immigrants (SFI; a free national Swedish language course
offered to most immigrants) and other education providers for not ‘doing their job’ (Spruce, CEO, engineering firm) and not giving the immigrants opportunities to learn Swedish as they should. Some of the managers from the public sector recounted immigrants’ stories of learning better at work than at school where they ‘sit by the computer’. These statements express criticism of the kind of education offered and its organisation, shifting some of the responsibility for learning Swedish away from the immigrants to the SFI and other providers. This is consistent with some previous indications that SFI does not always provide high-quality training (Karlsdottir et al. 2018).

Most of the private sector CEOs expressed sceptical views of ‘projects’ and ‘public investments’ regarding integration matters through statements such as ‘the companies should be able to solve this themselves’. For example, one said, ‘We take in more immigrants that anyone else in the inland [rural areas of North of Sweden] if I would say, and I can’t understand why they would need to help with that’ (Larch, CEO, manufacturing firm). Another CEO also expressed scepticism about the project form, saying that projects are useless because they only provide employment for leaders of the projects, who essentially do nothing (Elm, CEO, manufacturing firm). This may be particularly relevant in small, rural municipalities that lack resources to create activities without external funding.

Concluding discussion

This article explores efforts to promote immigrant incorporation into the labour market through local work, manifested in collaborative agreements creating targeted workplace education, and local actors’ perspectives of the possibilities and hindrances for immigrants’ incorporation. The analysis of the collaborative agreements illustrates how political intentions to accelerate immigrants’ incorporation into the labour market for immigrants are constructed and formed, and the way that local contexts and their histories and conditionalities shape the possibilities of what can and should be done (Massey 2005). The framings of the problems were clearly influenced by the rurality of the municipalities in terms of both geographic location and in relation to the low level of formal education of most immigrants that settled in them. Analysis of the problem representations enabled not only discernment of the solutions, but also their relations to the places and contexts, in conjunction with associated rationales. For example, the biggest municipality Larch attempted to tackle the problem of its gender-segregated labour market through the examined agreement, while the smaller municipalities Elm and Spruce joined forces with three other small municipalities in the region through a project set up simply to enable the creation of tracks. The agreements studied here could be understood as examples of the deployment of education to facilitate transitions into employment, which has been embraced by Swedish society and long been a major element of Swedish labour policy, as in many European countries. In such cases, immigrants are positioned as needing help to ‘fit’ into the society, and education (both general, formal education and more cultural knowledge) to do so. Broader increases in emphasis on activation and employability (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Qvist 2016) are highly visible in the examined documents and interview material, as well as a deficit discourse that interventions are needed for immigrants to be included or integrated (Morrice, Shan, and Sprung 2017; Qvist 2016; Waldinger, Waldinger, and Lichter 2003). For small, rural municipalities there is much at stake as international immigration may be a possible solution for reversing problems of population decline and maintenance of economic and social sustainability (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014). However, there are several major complications, including national policies that promote self-activation and individual responsibility, together with the rural areas’ reception of less-educated immigrants whose integration may require much longer than the timeframe envisaged in the establishment programme, especially in smaller, rural communities.

The article does not address the tracks’ outcomes in terms of numbers employed after completion of the education. However, it does provide indications about the focus of the agreements in relation to the labour market and the positioning of immigrants. All three municipalities chose to create
a track towards some kind of care (health & social care or child care & education), in accordance with
a national tendency for high shares of newly-arrived refugees to be employed in this sector, e.g., 60%
of the women and 30% of the men in 2015 (Ruist 2018). Our results suggest that this pattern is
promoted in the municipalities, understandably as many rural municipalities struggle to cover their
welfare service obligations (Swedish Government 2020). However, in relation to the terms of
employment, it is also important to question the choice of tracks as this will affect the newly arrived
immigrants and their capacity to act and find employment. All interviewed managers of ECEC units
indicated that a lack of formal education was the main hindrance for immigrants’ employment, and
the education through the track does not result in formal qualifications that are even equivalent to
upper secondary child care education. Thus, the track could be regarded as a ‘trap’ that limits
immigrants’ prospects to temporary, low-skilled work, and the chances of it meeting expressed
ambitions to strengthen immigrants’ positions and prepare them for employment are questionable.
The tracks targeting ECEC may in some instances even disempower immigrants through the
associated limitation of the integration ambitions (Fernandes 2015).

The industrial sector was a target for Larch municipality, and planned future tracks in Elm and
Spruce. This used to be one of the main employment sectors for newly arrived refugees. In 1990, 30%
of the newly arrived male refugees worked in the manufacturing sector, but in 2015 this had declined
to just 5%. Something has changed in this sector, since the decrease is much stronger than in the
total male workforce during the same period (Ruist 2018). A contributory factor may be the
perceived risk associated with lack of knowledge of the Swedish language expressed by some of
the CEOs and project managers, indicating that a safety discourse linked to fluency in Swedish may
have permeated parts of the sector. If so, however, it has clearly not fully permeated all businesses,
since one of the largest employers covered in this article is an industrial company with almost 200
employees, more than 50% of whom are not from Sweden.

The analysis also revealed that two of the municipalities (Elm and Spruce) joined forces with three
others to enable the creation of a collaborative agreement. They rely on ESF funding to cover salaries
of project members in all five municipalities, and project leaders at regional level. While this follows
a growing trend of the so-called projectification of the public sector (Fred 2018; Jensen, Johansson, and
Löfström 2018) in both rural and urban areas, it may affect rural areas most strongly since they are
economically more vulnerable due to their small populations and correspondingly small tax bases.
For these municipalities, financial support from external sources enables some kinds of integration efforts.
However, the project form also has negative side-effects, which raised concerns for some of the
interviewees. Examples include risks of attempts to fix long-term problems by ‘quick-fixes’ that drain
resources from potentially more effective measures to meet persistent needs (Abrahamsson & Agevall,
2009). Another concern (raised by some of the COEs) is that initial legitimacy created through targeted
investments in the form of projects may rapidly fade because of their limitations, resulting in discontent
and distrust of public authorities, politicians and society at large (Abrahamsson & Agevall, 2009). The
project form was also criticised, in accordance with recent findings that EU projects targeting social
exclusion and unemployment often only lead to employment for project managers and consultants (cf.
McGlinn 2018). Similarly, in the studied municipalities the project funding provided a way to retain staff
with knowledge of the target group, i.e. newly arrived migrants. However, it is an understandable
solution as influxes of immigrants to the municipalities are relatively low, so there is relatively little
governmental funding for them to address associated issues.

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