



Towards Activation or Inactivation? Migrants' Experiences of Encounters with the Swedish Public Employment Service

MAJA LILJA

HANNA LI KUSTERER

SVEN TRYGGED

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

Sweden has long pursued activation policies, particularly towards vulnerable groups in the labour market, with the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) being the main agent of these policies. Recent cutbacks and organisational changes within the PES have significantly altered the support offered, particularly affecting migrants with low education and little work experience. This study investigates how these migrants experience encounters with the PES after the initial establishment period. A total of 23 refugees, mostly women, participated in semi-structured interviews that were analysed thematically. The interviewees struggled with job applications and requested personal encounters with the PES's caseworkers, which was often denied. Classification played a role in relation to support from the PES; for example, it seemed that activities offered were based on gendered classifications, limiting some of the women. Furthermore, despite the activation policies, we discerned a risk of becoming inactive, especially because some interviewees believed that they should wait to be contacted by the PES to be offered a job or job-related activity. This calls for a different approach by the PES with more flexibility, practical support and opportunities for in-person meetings.

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR:

Maja Lilja

Department of Social Work,
Criminology, and Public
Health Sciences, University
of Gävle, Sweden

maja.lilja@hig.se

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The work strategy is a longstanding principle in the Swedish labour market and social policy, emphasise that individuals should rely on income from employment rather than depending on welfare benefits for their livelihood (e.g. Junestav 2007; Lindqvist & Marklund 1995; Trygged 1996, 1998). The upside of the work strategy and its activation policies is the public responsibility to support people in finding work, the provision of education and training leading to employment and the intent to activate, motivate and empower people (Ennerberg 2019; Minas 2009). The downside is a strict workfare policy, which includes cutting benefits for individuals not displaying enough job-seeking activity, running the risk of repression via control and disciplinary consequences (Minas 2014; Walter 2011).

Activation policies primarily target weaker groups with major difficulties in entering the labour market, such as many migrants (de la Porte & Jacobsson 2012; Ennerberg 2019). In the past decades, labour market measures for migrants and refugees have changed, partly due to activation policies (Larsson 2019; Wikström & Ahlund 2018). More responsibility is placed on individual migrants to make themselves employable (Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024; Fernandes 2015; cf. Fejes 2010). The activation policies include the assumption that migrants should fulfil their obligations, meaning being active, willing to take any job that comes their way, working hard and not being a burden on society (Bengtsson & Berglund 2012; Junestav 2007; Larsson 2019; Lindvert 2011). However, some of the activities arranged for migrants focus on making them 'activated' by offering them 'empty activities' to fill the job seeker's activation plan (Larsson 2019; Wikström & Ahlund 2018). These activities can be seen as a kind of 'custody' or disciplinary actions in which people are 'detained' pending work rather than participating in activities that lead to employment (Dahlstedt 2009; Ennerberg 2019; Wikström & Ahlund 2018). Moreover, there is often a focus on the monetary support: not attending programmes or planned activities could lead to the withdrawal of allowances, which is a form of subtle control over the participating migrants (Fernandes 2015; Larsson 2015; Wikström & Ahlund 2018).

Job-seeking authorities such as the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) are key players in translating labour market policies into practice. The PES plays a prominent role in labour market integration, being responsible for the Establishment Programme, which entails enhanced support and job-related activities for newly arrived refugees in their first 3 years in Sweden (e.g. Alsén, Mångs & Vinell 2021). After the establishment period, the PES continues to be the most important authority for migrant job seekers.

During recent years, the PES has undergone several changes affecting the support for newly arrived refugees, mainly due to organisational changes and increased digitalisation. Whilst numerous studies have explored the development within the PES and the consequences of activation policies (Andersson Joona 2020; Ennerberg 2019; Hertzberg 2003; Larsson 2015; Larsson 2019; Walter 2011; Wickström Östervall 2017), there are few studies on how these changes are experienced by the migrants themselves (see Spehar 2021). Exploring migrants' views can illuminate their understanding of the support offered as well as the potential impact this may have on their chances of employment. In particular, studies about migrants with low education are lacking, as existing studies on migrants' own experiences target so-called skilled workers (e.g. Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018; Larsen Rogne & Birkelund 2018; van Riemsdijk, Basford & Burnham 2016). Migrants with low education face

many difficulties when trying to enter the Swedish labour market (Calmfors & Sánchez Gassen 2019). They rely more heavily on job-seeking authorities for assistance than other job seekers and have therefore been particularly affected by organisational changes within the PES, including the widespread use of digital tools and lack of face-to-face meetings (Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024; Besic, Diedrich & Aigner 2021; IAF 2018).

This study focusses on a group of refugees with low education in the Gävleborg region after the establishment period has ended and the amount of support from the PES is reduced. The region consists of 10 municipalities of various sizes (altogether about 285,000 inhabitants, Statistics Sweden 2024). Gävleborg has comparatively high unemployment rates and low educational attainment, and received many migrants in recent years, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis. Many of the migrants have less than 9 years of schooling, and a sizeable proportion have not been to school at all. The aim of this study is to investigate how a group of migrants of low educational background and no regular employment in Sweden experienced their encounters with the Swedish Public Employment Service after the establishment period had ended. The research questions are:

- How have the migrants experienced the contact with and support from the PES after the establishment period?
- How can the migrants' experiences be understood in accordance with Swedish activation policies?

In the following, we will provide background and present previous research related to the PES. Thereafter, our theoretical framework will be presented. This is followed by the methodology section, presentation of results and finally, the discussion where we sum up the study and discuss the results in a broader context. Throughout this article, we argue that rather than activating and empowering the studied group of migrants, the stringent activation policies run a high risk of inactivating individuals and widening the distance to the labour market.

BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH RELATED TO THE PES

The PES is the main authority for the integration of newly arrived refugees through its Establishment Programme. During the 3-year establishment period, newly arrived refugees are eligible for support and activities to accelerate their integration into Swedish society and working life (e.g. Alsén, Mångs & Vinell 2021). These activities include language training provided by Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), civic orientation courses, work experience placements and job searching support. An individually tailored establishment plan is supposed to be set up and used as a guide for the individual migrant. Even though the PES does not directly implement many of the activities included in the establishment plan, it is responsible for realising the various activities. After these 3 years, many participants – particularly those with low educational background – are still linked to the PES, which continues to play a crucial role in mediating jobs and job-related activities for migrant job seekers (Alsén, Mångs & Vinell 2021).

In recent years, the PES's support for job seekers has changed significantly due to a stricter work strategy, increased digitalisation (IAF, 2018) and organisational changes within the PES. Since 2008, the PES has become more market oriented, and the operation of activities arranged for job seekers can be assigned to complementary,

often private, actors that have partly taken over the process of matching job seekers with employers (Lindvert 2011). Furthermore, because of the financial cutbacks within the PES in recent decades, migrants are not offered as much specialised support as they previously were. Besic, Diedrich and Aigner (2021) have argued that whilst the PES used to offer more support for refugees, during recent years the measures have aimed at a broad group of job seekers without considering their particular needs (see also Besic, Foti & Vasileva 2022).

There is also more emphasis on digital job-seeking. This development was put in place for the PES to quickly steer individuals who are self-sufficient with digital tools into using their services autonomously, so that more resources can be allocated to individuals who need hands-on support (Abdi, Harvard & Pärlemo 2019). However, the digital transition and redistribution of resources have hampered migrants and other groups with weak positions in the labour market (Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024; Besic, Diedrich & Aigner 2021; IAF 2018). There are difficulties both for the job seekers in finding appropriate channels of support and for the PES's employees to guide job seekers towards suitable channels (Abdi, Harvard & Pärlemo 2019). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accelerated the process of digitalisation in the labour market generally and within the PES specifically (Andersson et al. 2021), making it even more difficult for migrants to get face-to-face meetings with their caseworkers (Besic, Diedrich & Aigner 2021). This has especially affected older migrants with low education who find it difficult to handle digital job-seeking tools (Besic, Diedrich & Aigner 2021; see also Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024).

Regarding the efficiency of labour market policies, a systematic microeconomic review showed that search assistance programmes were relatively efficient, whilst public sector employment programmes were not (Card, Kluve & Weber 2010). Besides the state authored programs, there have been many local (municipal) attempts to combat unemployment amongst vulnerable groups (Thorén 2012). The target groups for municipal activities were further from the labour market, needed more financial assistance and were less engaged in job searching and matching activities compared with participants in PES activities (Card, Kluve & Weber 2010; Forslund et al. 2019; Helgesson et al. 2022). This raises concerns, given that individualised support is most effective in facilitating employment (Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024; Ortlieb et al. 2021; Sarvimäki & Hämäläinen 2016; Spehar 2021).

The present study concerns how broad policy changes impact migrants' labour market opportunities. Previous research has predominantly analysed policy documents and the PES's caseworkers (e.g. Andersson Joona 2020; Larsson 2019; Walter 2011). Although we focus on migrants' experiences with the PES, such studies are highly relevant for our study. The PES's caseworkers, also described as street-level bureaucrats, have a special role, as they implement the integration policy in face-to-face encounters with migrants (Spehar 2021; cf. Lipsky 1983). These encounters open up opportunities such as employment or work-related activities, but they can also be negative, as not getting sufficient support distances the migrants from the labour market. Caseworkers' prejudices and stereotypes can influence the support (Arai et al. 2016; Hertzberg 2003). Migrant women are not offered as many work-related activities as migrant men, and migrant women are more often offered activities to achieve activity requirements or language activities rather than activities leading to work (Andersson Joona 2020; Larsson 2015; Wickström Östervall 2017). Such differences are linked to stereotypical ideas and discriminatory processes – albeit often indirectly (e.g. Arai et al. 2016; Wickström Östervall 2017) – which in turn are

based on classifications. Because classifications play a major role in who is eligible for a particular intervention or support offered by the PES, we develop this perspective in the following section.

CLASSIFICATIONS, SYMBOLIC POWER, AND THE SELF-IMAGES OF THOSE CLASSIFIED

Garsten and Jacobsson (2013) have claimed that classifications are necessary for organisations such as the PES as part of the bureaucratic assessment practices needed to find correct measures or activities for a certain group of job seekers (see also Walter 2011; cf. Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003b). For instance, being coded as disabled can unlock opportunities for activities to improve employability (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013). Thus, classifications can be empowering by offering opportunities to individuals in certain groups, but simultaneously disempowering by constructing certain features as acceptable and desirable and others as not (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013). Similarly, Järvinen and Mik-Meyer have claimed that in welfare institutions, particular constructions of the client or the help seeker are always produced in the meeting between the help seeker and the welfare institution (Järvinen 2002; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003a; Mik-Meyer 2006). Borrowing Bourdieu's term *doxa*, Järvinen (2002) considers the clients and their perceived problems as constructed by the particular welfare institution. Here, *doxa* signifies what is taken for granted, including assumptions regarding a help seeker in that institution. This means that instead of being guided by the clients' individual needs, support is given according to the rules and constructions that dominate the welfare institution. Correspondingly, the PES produces a particular construction of the job seeker (e.g. migrants with low education), connected to ideas of appropriate individual support (cf. Garsten & Jacobsen 2013).

PES's classifications and constructions of job seekers are strongly linked to power structures (Walter 2011; cf. Järvinen 2002; cf. Lipsky 1983) perpetuated in the interactions between job seekers and caseworkers, as well as through the norms, values and expectations that are transferred to job seekers within the institution (Garsten & Jacobsen 2013). The power performed by the PES can be considered symbolic, that is, embedded within the assistance and goodwill provided by the organisation (Järvinen 2002). This implies that the power is not explicitly acknowledged as such, but rather perceived as an inherent aspect of the act of helping. It is achieved through the process of defining the recipient of support, consequently placing them in a subordinate position. In addition, the PES's power is manifested as their support carries expectations on migrant job seekers (Garsten & Jacobsen 2013). Job seekers must conform to the institution's demands, primarily driven by activation policies that require active job-seeking. Deviating from these expectations is difficult, as job seekers rely on the PES's support to maintain their allowances (cf. Salonen 1998).

Consequently, the classification processes within institutions such as the PES also influence the self-image of those being classified, which can be handled in various ways (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003a; Mik-Meyer, 2003, 2006; cf. Hacking 1986). Whilst a classified individual can adapt to and embrace these constructions to get support, people can also try to resist their given roles. Institutions often separate willing from unwilling help seekers, preferring to help those considered collaborative (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003b; Mik-Meyer 2006). In line with Järvinen (2002), these constructions can be interpreted in agreement with the *doxa* of the institution, and the goal of adaptive help seekers becoming suitable for support.

This study is based on 23 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020. The sample comprised 17 women and 6 men from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Türkiye. Foreign-born women have greater difficulties entering the labour market (Bevelander 2005; Wickström Östervall 2017), which justified more female than male interviewees. Most interviewees had been in the country for 4–6 years. None had completed more than 9 years of education. Whilst some had received no formal education, only a few had more than 6 years (for more information, see appendix 1).

The interviewees were recruited from Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) in three towns in the Gävleborg region. We contacted the principals, who, via teachers, invited students in the target group to participate. Except for one person, who had completed the SFI courses, all interviewees were SFI students.

Our sampling strategy was to identify interviewees who could be regarded as having a weak connection to the labour market. Some principals specifically approached teachers in classes with a high number of students with slow progress in learning Swedish. However, there may be bias in our sample selection, such that individuals who showed interest in participating also had a greater interest in finding a job.

The interviews were arranged by the SFI teachers and conducted in a classroom at the SFI premises by M.L. or H.L.K. We initially conducted 2 pilot interviews, which are included in the total of 23 interviews. The average interview took 45–60 minutes. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, four interviews were conducted online. All interviews except one were recorded with the interviewee's approval and transcribed verbatim.

We asked the interviewees about their reception in Sweden, their time at SFI, support from the PES and other authorities, experiences of the job application process and thoughts on future employment (see appendix 2 for interview guide). As much as possible, we tried to let the interviewee express their thoughts and experiences in their own way.

The interviews presented various challenges, such as language barriers, interpreter-related issues and the fact that some interviews were conducted online. In some cases, several factors intersected, making it difficult to precisely assess their impact on the interviews. Most interviews were conducted with an interpreter or language aide. Conducting interviews with the assistance of an interpreter has certain challenges and limitations (Williamson et al. 2011). It may affect the study's validity, as interpreter accuracy is uncertain (Kapborga & Berterö 2002), and using interpreters can impact the ambience and limit narrative access. We engaged multiple interpreters and observed that interviewees appeared more comfortable with the interview situation when the interpreter took an active role as a third party, as opposed to trying to remain inconspicuous (cf. Temple & Edwards 2002). Some interviewees did not use an interpreter and had to rely on their ability to express themselves in Swedish, which was a challenge. Therefore, we believe that utilising interpreters improved interview quality and effectively conveyed the migrants' voices.

We carefully followed the ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017), strictly ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary, including the right to pass over questions in the interview. The participants were informed of their rights as research subjects and signed a consent form before the interview commenced. This study has been ethically approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (DNR 2020/03125).

The analysis started with the three authors reading and discussing the transcribed interviews to get a common understanding of the empirical data. The transcribed interviews were uploaded to Atlas.ti software and coded by one of the authors into main themes and sub-themes. The main themes were constructed by the objectives we had in the main study,¹ and the sub-themes were constructed inductively from the empirical findings (cf. Schreier 2012). In developing the present article, which centres on encounters with the PES, we primarily used the main themes *support from authorities* and *structural barriers*, and sub-themes related to the PES such as *support from the PES* or *structural barriers related to the PES* (for details, see appendix 3). Using an abductive approach, which involves an interaction of empirical data and theory/previous research (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2009), the focus on activation and categorisation emerged.

In the results section, we have selected a few illustrative quotations from the interviews. These quotations have been translated from Swedish to English. Some of the interview content has been anonymised, and we have edited the quotations slightly for ease of understanding. However, we have avoided rewriting them too much, as it is important that the quotations retain the same character as the spoken interviews.

RESULTS

THE WAY FORWARD AFTER THE ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: ACCEPTANCE, RESISTANCE AND ADAPTATION

The interviewees had various approaches to the prescribed route to labour market integration. They spoke very little of their establishment period and activities or plans made during that time. Generally, the expected route is to study SFI for several years before more job-related activities are considered, and some interviewees agreed on this approach. Others, particularly some men, questioned why they had to study for so long before getting a job. They preferred to work rather than study, and were eager to get into the labour market as soon as possible, as this man (104) expressed:

INTERVIEWEE: I think I need money and need to work. I like to work and money. When come to Sweden, they say 'must study, study, study'. I like to work. Not much study. It first ... to me problems. This also, Public Employment Service, they not help much. They write my name and caseworker and all that, but nothing for work.

Rather than acceptance of the prescribed route to integration, this is an example of resistance. For others, the way to navigate the expected establishment was instead to adapt to the system. A woman (108) who had lived in Sweden for about 15 years (longer than the others) explained the turmoil she experienced in her first years in Sweden, as her adult children could not join the rest of the family. After eventually completing the basic levels of SFI, she was told that she could not enter the more advanced level because too much time had elapsed and that her obtained level was sufficient for her. However, she could not secure a job because she needed a higher

¹ This article builds upon the results of a larger study about migrants with low education and their opportunities and barriers to finding employment in Gävleborg region.

level of SFI to obtain the relevant education. She and her husband opened a small convenience store, which they ran for several years. This appeared to be a successful way forward, illustrating the adjustments made to accommodate a rather rigid system. However, that was not how the interviewee perceived it:

INTERVIEWEE: I came to Sweden in 2005, studied here at SFI, start work experience placements, many placements. It was wrong in my life – the convenience store, many years. Stayed convenience store many years. It doesn't help. I wish I didn't go to the convenience store. Work with my husband. I wish I went to the other side. Study. Education.

Her husband sold the convenience store to start a restaurant, but it failed financially and had to be closed. The woman had now, several years later, started the advanced SFI level and was aspiring to further education: 'I cannot sit at home my whole life.' Her self-perception of idleness could seem somewhat surprising, considering the various job-related activities and jobs she had taken on in Sweden. This woman was one of very few interviewees who had held a regular job in Sweden, albeit mainly in self-employment. Nevertheless, she considered herself to have failed in her attempts at labour market integration, because she had made the 'wrong' choices. The correct choice, according to her, would have been to learn Swedish first, and be able to get an education in her chosen line of work. Ironically, this was exactly what she said she had been denied in her earlier years in Sweden, despite being put forward as the prescribed way forward by the PES.

The process of accepting, resisting or adjusting to the prescribed strategy of integration, that is, to study SFI before taking on work-related activities, could be understood as different reactions to a classification process (cf. Garsten & Jacobsson 2013). Being classified as a migrant job seeker is an institutional identity that comes with a support package and a prescribed and standardised understanding of how to secure a job. One can argue that the PES is producing a particular construction of a job seeker (e.g. migrants with low education), closely connected to ideas of what support this group is entitled to, and the correct way forward. The individual migrant can either accept or resist the given role. Adaptations, such as those made by this woman (108), are not always considered successful if they deviate from the prescribed role, changing the classification and thus support entitlements.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FROM THE PES: POWER, CONTROL AND GENDERED CLASSIFICATIONS

The PES offers a range of activities and services to reduce unemployment. Work-related activities relevant to the migrants we interviewed were mainly subsidised temporary employment or work experience placements. Only about half of the interviewees had been offered work-related activities or courses by the PES, even though nearly all of them would be considered targets of such measures. To be offered a certain type of temporary position arranged by the PES,² it was necessary to have an especially weak connection to the labour market. Many interviewees wanted such a position, but the conditions for it were not always clear to them. In addition, restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that such activities were halted in some municipalities.

² The interviewees talked about a so-called *extra position*, which was arranged by the PES. It provided an employer a grant to cover the employee's salary, and was intended for individuals who had been unemployed for a long time or who had recently come to Sweden.

One man said he was told he could not get such a position since he previously had a job and therefore did not meet the requirements. This shows the importance of being classified as needy enough – here, distant enough from the labour market – to be offered activities to shorten this distance and strengthen one's connection to the labour market (cf. Garsten & Jacobsson 2013).

Some of the male interviewees had attended mechanics and technical courses, potentially increasing their chances of employment. Although the course offered good opportunities to practise Swedish and obtain useful skills and knowledge, the interviewees said that the courses were poor in quality and did not ease the way to employment. One man (107) said he started a mechanics course, as initiated by his PES's caseworker. Eventually, he became dissatisfied with the quality of the course and also felt that it was too difficult. He therefore wanted to quit, but his caseworker opposed:

INTERPRETER: 'I don't want to do this course, I want to stop it.' Three times he [i.e. the interviewee] has tried to reach the caseworker and say 'I don't want to do this.' Because, he says, the caseworker could stop the course, because he did not want to. And this course, there were four teachers, but 60 students. And how could they teach 60 students like this? But they have a contract with the PES that they receive money from the PES. That's why they could not stop any student, because they will ... you know ...

After completing the course, this man was still unemployed and disappointed that it did not improve his chances on the labour market. In relation to Swedish activation policies, his experience demonstrates the emphasis on making job seekers 'activated', even though the activities involved are unlikely to lead to suitable employment (c.f., Dahlstedt 2009; Ennerberg 2019; Larsson 2019; Wikström & Ahlund 2018).

The above quotation also highlights the importance of being heard. Another man (304) had a similar experience. He started a mechanics course but soon realised that the language was too difficult for him, and wanted to quit. His caseworker then said it was not up to him to decide:

INTERVIEWER: And was that ok for the caseworker?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't know. I think that she is a bit angry with me. She writes to me: 'Why you don't make it at SFI? You cannot skip this course. Your teacher decides, not you.'

These two men's experiences pinpoint how the job seeker-caseworker relationship is permeated with symbolic power that puts the men in a subordinated position, giving the caseworker power to decide what the job seeker should do (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013; Järvinen 2002; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003a). Establishment plans and action plans after the establishment period that devise job-seeking activities should be made in collaboration with the job seeker, but are often decided by the caseworker with little or no input from the job seeker (Walter 2011). The accounts of what happened when the men wanted to quit a planned activity expose the control that the PES caseworkers had over their activities. Despite the men's reluctance, one felt obliged to complete the course, seemingly to no benefit for him, whilst the other voiced concerns over forthcoming repercussions from his caseworker because he left a course he could not understand. The caseworkers' perceived control was amplified by the men's dependence on financial support provided by the PES (cf. Salonen 1998).

The activities offered to the female interviewees stand in stark contrast to those offered to these men. Instead of work-related activities or vocational courses, the women had participated in craft courses and additional language courses. Whilst some interviewees said that the craft courses offered a good opportunity to practise Swedish, others objected to an activity that would not lead to employment. The skills they learned, crafting and sewing, are not valued by Swedish employers, they said. Moreover, this activity did not suit everyone. A young woman (201) felt she had nothing in common with the other women in the course who were all much older than her: 'I was almost depressed as soon as I arrived. I turned into this little baby when I got there. Nobody to talk, nothing to... Yes, there's nothing in common with people who are there.' The other participants were not as motivated to learn Swedish and find employment. Even the teachers in the course thought she should be assigned a more job-related activity:

INTERVIEWEE: No, but anyway, the staff, they are nice. Well, they are good people, they have good hearts. But they ask me, 'How come you ended up here?' They think I don't fit in there at all. You are studying B but you speak Swedish well. 'What are you doing here?', sort of. Away, kind of, then back to school.

This young woman's experience – especially in contrast to the men's experiences – illustrates gendered ideas of suitable activities for female job seekers of low educational background, regardless of individual characteristics such as age, vocational experience or individual motivation or desires. Whilst some migrants benefit from the opportunity to practice Swedish in such courses, for a young woman who is motivated to improve her chances on the labour market, such a course is not ideal. It shows that the classifications used to assign individuals to activities are based on stereotypical ideas. These classifications can be very limiting for the individuals being classified, as there is little room for individual adaptations.

THE JOB-SEEKING PROCESS WITH THE PES: TOWARDS ACTIVATION OR INACTIVATION?

Many interviewees expressed a strong willingness to work and longed to be employed. Having a job was seen as having a meaningful occupation, generating much sought-after earnings, and as a way to achieve independence from demanding authorities. The constant pressure of reporting activities to the PES was a burden that several of our interviewees desired relief from. To get a job, the interviewees considered it necessary to go through the PES. One interviewee (206) explained: 'They are the ones who should tell us, they should... Yes, we go through them. It's not easy to find yourself. You must go through the PES.' Some interviewees said that the PES had encouraged them to apply for jobs by themselves, but that it was too difficult as they did not understand the job-seeking process, such as how to use digital tools or to write a CV.

Although the PES's support was considered crucial for finding a job, many stressed that they lacked institutional support from the PES to find a job or work-related activities. The lack of tangible support, coupled with the perceived lack of power and control, made many of the migrants frustrated and disillusioned. The woman (108) with longer residence in Sweden, whose situation was described in a previous theme, expressed this via the interpreter:

INTERPRETER: She said that when they contact, for example, PES, they just talk. They do nothing for her to get a job. For example, if she applies for a job, they must help her find that job. She doesn't have education, she has long experience. Didn't get help from PES. Only they talk on the phone with her: 'You have to do this and you have to collect this form', without doing anything real.

Like this woman, many interviewees only had a remote bureaucratic connection with the PES, and frequently the activity report served as their only form of communication with the authority. Instead of the bureaucratic and controlling task of recording the number of jobs applied for, the migrants required steadfast assistance from the PES in the job-seeking process, as they had received during the establishment period. However, the PES largely denied them such support, and making contact was very difficult, as one older woman (206) described:

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it was during that time that all my classmates got a job, then I'm mad. Then I went to PES to ask, but there I met someone who works there who can speak Arabic, and I can speak Arabic. So I asked her why couldn't I meet my caseworker, I said to her. She said 'Do you have an education? Do you have a driving license?', she said to me. I said no. So... 'Yes, if you are going to get a job then you need an education and driving license.' Then I'm mad. And I explained them... my classmates had nothing of what you ask. Instead, they got a message from their caseworker and then they got a job. I'm mad and they won't let me see my caseworker. I would... I wanted to know why I couldn't. But I can't see my caseworker.

The difficulties in reaching the caseworker seemed to escalate during the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face meetings with caseworkers were suspended altogether. Some interviewees were active and tried to contact the PES, whilst others waited for the PES to contact them and offer them a job or a job-related activity. They believed that they had to wait for their turn and that the PES eventually would offer them something. This was often expressed by female interviewees, as in the following excerpt (205):

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything that could help you to get a job, that you didn't mention before?

INTERVIEWEE: No, no. Really. There is nothing else to give. There is no short cut to work that I get. There's just one authority, the PES, that helps and there is nobody else who can influence. It doesn't matter if we contact these or try... You are in line, you have to wait your turn, and it is that simple. So I can't think that if I... There is nobody else that could, I would say... yes. You just have to wait.

Some years after the establishment period, our interviewees still demanded support from the PES to find a job. In line with the Swedish activation policies, they were encouraged to apply for jobs themselves without further assistance. From the point of view of the PES, this can be understood as a way to activate the migrants and emphasise individual responsibility for the job-seeking process. However, because the interviewees lacked the necessary resources and knowledge (e.g. digital skills, CV writing and understanding the job-seeking process), the attempts at activation failed. Furthermore, instead of being pushed towards activation, some interviewees were

waiting – perhaps in vain – for the PES to contact them. Here, we see an imminent risk of further inactivation. Rather than trying to search for jobs, find suitable activities or repeat their call for support in these matters, the migrants became more passive and remained in a state of limbo.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how a group of migrants of low educational background experienced their contact with and support from the PES after the establishment period. The interviewees felt that they lacked sufficient support from the PES to be able to find and apply for jobs (cf. [Senthana et al. 2020](#); [Spehar 2021](#)), particularly face-to-face contact with caseworkers at the PES, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results highlight that migrants of low educational background struggle the most with digital tools and the increased digitalisation within the PES (cf. [Besic, Diedrich & Aigner 2021](#)).

The findings suggest that classification played a role, both in the interviewees' contact with the PES and how they understood the job-seeking process. Classification can identify individuals' needs and right to support, but it can be limiting for those being classified ([Garsten & Jacobsson 2013](#)). Our study reveals how gendered classifications seemed to determine what activities individuals were offered. More male than female respondents had been offered job-related activities, whilst the female interviewees more often attended language or craft courses, as consistent with previous research ([Larsson 2015](#); [Senthana et al. 2020](#)). We also show how limiting such activities can be, especially for young women.

It became clear that activation policies regulated the contact and support from the PES. Some interviewees had attended courses that did not lead to employment but rather were experienced as control and discipline (cf. [Dahlstedt 2009](#); [Ennerberg 2019](#); [Larsson 2019](#); [Wikström & Ahlund 2018](#)). Furthermore, the responsibility for the job-seeking process was placed with the individual job-seeking migrant, but it can be questioned how effective this 'responsibilisation' strategy was in activating them (cf. [Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024](#); [Fejes 2010](#); [Fernandes 2015](#)). Similar to Bengtsson, Jacobsson and Wallinder (2024), our interviews drew attention to the inadequacy of the PES's new approach, which is supposed to empower job-seeking individuals to take responsibility for their own actions. However, imposed individual responsibility, coupled with a lack of diversified support, instead risks deactivating job seekers, such as our interviewees, for example, waiting for the PES to contact them. Nevertheless, it can be interpreted as a consequence of the responsibilisation of job seekers generated by the PES's latest organisational reforms (cf. [Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024](#)). There was a clear gender dimension in that those who were waiting for support from the PES often were women. They remained passive and thus risked increasing their distance to the Swedish labour market and being regarded as uninterested in work by their caseworkers. Larsson (2015) has shown that caseworkers at the PES tend to pay more attention to individuals, often men, who actively make contact with them, and are less willing to help individuals who are not as active in their pursuits (see also [Thorén 2009](#)). Consequently, our respondents might receive even less support, which in turn would make their quest for employment even more difficult, as frequent contact with a caseworker increases the chances of job success (cf. [Cederlöf, Söderström & Vikström 2021](#)).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focusses on migrants' experiences and does not include the perspectives from the PES caseworkers and other authorities. Whilst this allows us to thoroughly investigate migrants' experiences with the PES, it overlooks the insights from case workers. However, other studies focussing on caseworkers support our findings (e.g. Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024). Furthermore, the context of a region with comparatively high unemployment rates, low educational attainment and many migrants may steer the focus towards negative aspects. In many other parts of Sweden, the chances of securing employment, even for individuals of low educational background, are higher.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Sweden has taken a similar approach to migrants' labour market integration as several other European countries, streamlining support and implementing activation policies that encourage migrants to make themselves 'employable' (Besic, Foti & Vasileva 2022; de la Porte & Jacobsson 2012). This article contributes to existing research by revealing how migrants perceive the PES's support within these policies. It highlights that, contrary to policymakers' expectations of fostering self-reliance, these policies often result in increased passivity as migrants await support and guidance, a point not adequately addressed in previous studies.

We believe that several efforts can be made to improve the chances of employment for migrants with low education. Our study supports a wide range of studies illustrating that migrants benefit from an individual approach to finding employment (e.g. Bengtsson, Jacobsson & Wallinder 2024; Ortlieb et al. 2021; Sarvimäki & Hämäläinen 2016; Spehar 2021), which is particularly important for migrants with low education (Dahlberg et al. 2020). For example, Finland provides more personalised support and it appears to enhance chances of employment (Sarvimäki & Hämäläinen 2016). Recent projects in Sweden that offer migrants more individual and face-to-face contact with the PES have also been successful, for example, the project *Equal Establishment*. This project showed that active matching efforts, in which the caseworker matches the job seeker with a suitable employer, led to more chances of employment without being more costly (Helgesson et al. 2022). Drawing on the present findings in corroboration with previous studies, it is thus important that the PES and other authorities break the vicious cycle of misinterpretation that could jeopardise the labour market integration of a group of migrants with few formal qualifications but a very strong will to work. On the basis of these studies, and in line with the voices from the migrants in this study, we believe that face-to-face individual and flexible support is the key to increasing the chances of employment for this group of migrants.

ADDITIONAL FILES

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix 1.** Table. Interviewees' backgrounds and previous experiences. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.735.s1>
- **Appendix 2.** Interview guide. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.735.s2>
- **Appendix 3.** Table over themes, theoretical/analytical concepts and codes. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.735.s3>

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Maja Lilja and Hanna Li Kusterer conducted the empirical data collection and co-authored the article, with valuable input from Sven Trygged, who played a significant role in crafting the introduction. Maja Lilja initiated the idea behind the article, performed the initial analysis and led the writing process. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Maja Lilja  orcid.org/0000-0001-8797-0533

Department of Social Work, Criminology, and Public Health Sciences, University of Gävle, Sweden

Hanna Li Kusterer  orcid.org/0000-0001-8537-667X

Department of Social Work, Criminology, and Public Health Sciences, University of Gävle, Sweden;
Department of Education, Stockholm University, Sweden

Sven Trygged  orcid.org/0000-0001-7028-8247

Department of Social Work, Criminology, and Public Health Sciences, University of Gävle, Sweden

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