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Globalisation in Swedish rural areas: organisation of adult education and transitions to work for immigrants in times of depopulation

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on how local institutions in three rural areas in Sweden organised education and work to assist adult immigrants' integration. We particularly analyse how local officials in educational institutions, employment offices and local governments attempted to support adult immigrants' education-to-work transitions, using a theoretical framework rooted in the ecology of equity concepts. The results show that national policy is oriented towards areas that have larger populations than most rural areas. However, flexible solutions such as finding suitable workplace placements to assist specific immigrants' transitions and integration are sometimes easier in rural areas with closer interactions.

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Rural education; immigrants; social justice; educational administration

Rural areas in Sweden received quite small numbers of foreign immigrants until the immigrant wave in 2015/2016, when refugee centres opened in all rural municipalities, in addition to those previously opened in urban municipalities, sometimes with only a few weeks' notice. Inflows significantly fell when an agreement between the European Union and Turkey came into force on 20 March 2016 and Sweden introduced stricter immigration policies including temporary residencies and stricter rules for family reunification (Prop. 2015/16:174 2016). However, the yearly quota for resettlement refugees set by the government increased and is now 5000 per year (Migrationsverket 2020). These EU and national immigration policies have had both encouraging and discouraging effects on rural areas. For example, global migration arguably offers solutions to the depopulation of rural areas in western societies (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014).

In this context, the integration of immigrants is often regarded as one of the great contemporary societal challenges in Sweden. As the country’s 290 largely independent municipalities are responsible for many aspects of immigrants’ reception, the municipalities’ integration processes and factors that promote or hinder success clearly warrant careful attention. Nevertheless, few studies on migration and place have addressed how organisation of adult education for immigrants intersects with place, and little is known about local official authorities’ efforts to arrange educational and work opportunities for adult immigrants in rural areas (Brännström et al. 2018). Although local officials’ activities are subject to national regulations, it is important to examine local organisation and agency as they are key factors in integration processes. Despite numerous investigations of immigrants’ social involvement and marginalisation in education and wider society, research on
immigrants in rural areas is scarce and tends to be rooted in rather urban-centred perspectives and theories (Beach et al. 2019).

Previous studies with broader foci indicate that there are substantial place-related imbalances in power, manifested (inter alia) in metrocentricity (Farrugia 2014; Gulczyńska 2019), variations in resources linked to migration flows (Haque 2017; Dvir, Morris, and Yemini 2019), rural idyll representations (Halfacree 1995) and poverty of access (Gray, Shaw, and Farrington 2006). While ‘rural adult learners look like, act like, and learn like urban adult learners’, institutional barriers for learning and education are greater in rural than in urban areas (McCannon cited in Easton 1991, 63). However, barriers to education and work are not only institutional but also individual and situational. Moreover, rural areas have some advantages for integration through education and work associated with their small population centres, including fewer stigmatised areas, more spontaneous interaction and closer networks and contacts (Rosvall 2017; Vogiazides and Mondani 2020).

Our aim in the study presented here is to analyse organisation and practices of efforts to provide opportunities for adult education and transitions to work that support or hinder immigrants’ integration in three rural areas in Sweden.

**Theoretical underpinnings**

To investigate power relations associated with place and adult immigrants’ education-to-work transitions we apply the ‘ecology of equity’ concept (Ainscow et al. 2012), recognising the importance of interactions within, between and beyond organisational units. Although such separation is only possible analytically, it allows us to deepen understandings of different levels of policy and practice through analysis of the three researched rural areas. Several actors are involved in newly arrived immigrants’ integration, such as the local municipal administration, the Swedish Public Employment Services (SPES), Municipal Adult Education (MAE) providers and local employers. Thus, our unit of analysis is not a single school (as in Ainscow et al.’s original conception) but a municipality as a rural place. The within element here refers to ways in which immigrants are taught and engaged with learning and work, ways in which participating ‘groups are organised and the different kinds of opportunities that result from this organisation’ and the characteristic ‘kinds of social relations and personal support’ (Ainscow et al. 2012, 2). The between element refers to collaboration and competition between different actors within their rural municipal place as well as collaborations and competition between actors in different rural areas. The beyond element encompasses their wider policy context, interests and understandings of the professionals working in them, together with demographic, economic, cultural and historical aspects of the areas they serve. It also includes underlying national and (in many respects) global level socio-economic processes (Ainscow et al. 2012, 3). Collaboration and competition are especially interesting in this case since the three rural areas interact through several cooperative educational initiatives established to support rural areas.

**Methodology**

Findings reported here are from a broader ethnographic project focused on three rural municipalities located (like most rural Swedish areas) in northern Sweden. These were selected from municipalities defined as rural in the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions list. In other words, three of the 55 municipalities defined as rural, i.e. municipalities with a centre smaller than 15,000 inhabitants and few workers commuting. To increase variation we considered demographic factors: population density, size, geographical position (inter alia, distance from large towns), possibilities for higher education and historical base of production. The largest municipality in population terms we call Larch and the two smaller municipalities Spruce and Elm.

Ethnography involves the generation and analysis of diverse forms of data on cultural formation and maintenance in particular places through multiple methods, but particularly direct and long-
term engagement of the researcher(s) (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The general intention of the project was to provide accounts of how everyday practices of those engaged in educational processes are involved in broader social relations and cultural production, and to highlight the agency of educational subjects in these processes. Continuous fieldwork was planned that resulted in field notes from site visits and classroom observations. Data were also obtained through interviews with officials in various local institutions involved in the reception, administration and education of immigrants. These included three principals, six teachers, and four study and career counsellors at local learning centres. We also interviewed two local SPES staff members and six local officials involved as members or leaders of relevant projects at municipality and regional levels, 12 local employers (public and private), and 36 immigrants. This information was produced through what Jeffrey and Troman (2004) call an intermittent time mode, with flexible frequencies of site visits and progressive focusing on the participant observation and general data production. This involved development and continual evaluation of a characteristic ethnographic spiral of research planning and reflection, data production and analysis, new planning, and further data production and analysis. All the collected material provided important background information, but as the study presented here focused on organisation most attention was paid to the interviews with officials. The presented analyses have also been facilitated by studies of the same empirical material with other foci, particularly education projects targeting newly arrived migrants (Benerdal 2021) and highly skilled migrants’ views of their routes from education to work (Carlbaum 2021).

Although we stress the importance of recognising rural areas’ heterogeneity, with (inter alia) specific histories, material bases and geographical positions, our analysis indicated that their distinction from urban areas was more relevant to the focal issues than differences between the three research sites. Thus, the presentation focuses on the urban–rural distinction rather than differences between the research sites.

**The Swedish context**

Rural areas in Sweden have paradoxical features. Most, like most rural areas elsewhere, have been adversely affected by depopulation due to a general shift from a natural resource/industry-based economy to a service-based economy (Hedlund and Lundholm 2015). They have also been affected by decentralisation and the introduction of new forms of governance in the late 1980s and 1990s that were heavily inspired by New Public Management ideas, involving privatisation, marketisation and management by objectives and results in sectors such as education, infrastructure and healthcare (Almqvist 2006). Market-oriented governance does not tend to favour rural areas with small markets that attract few investors (Beach et al. 2019). Overall, this has contributed to fewer educational and employment opportunities and depopulation of rural areas. Nevertheless, most rural areas have shortages of both non-skilled and highly skilled labour since they have difficulties in attracting various kinds of personnel, for example assistant elderly care nurses, pre-school teachers, teachers and social workers. A possible solution to such gaps in the labour force, recognised by both officials of local authorities and researchers (Livi Bacci 2017; Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014), is to exploit global immigrant flows.

In line with the new governing forms described above, measures intended to facilitate the integration of refugee immigrants have also shifted from provision of support and benefits with the promotion of social responsibility to workfare schemes, activation and promotion of individual responsibility (Wikström and Ahnlund 2018; Fernandes 2015). Since 2010 the SPES, rather than municipalities, has been responsible for refugee immigrants’ integration, with intentions to reduce risks of ‘welfare dependency’ and promote self-sufficiency through paid labour. A two-year establishment programme is offered to newly arrived refugee immigrants. However, despite formulation as a right of the individual, not an obligation, the programme only provides financial benefits if participants engage in qualifying types of full-time activity, which include Swedish language courses, on-the-job training and labour market orientation courses (Wikström and Ahnlund 2018). Thus,
several kinds of institutions are involved in the formal organisation of education and work intended to facilitate adult immigrants’ integration in Sweden: the municipalities, SPES, County Administrative Boards, and providers of Municipal adult education (MAE) including Swedish For Immigrants (SFI).

Findings

The findings are structured according to two themes: one related to the key concept beyond and the other related to the key concepts between and within of the theoretical framework (Ainscow et al. 2012). Adopting a common approach in ethnographic studies (cf. Coles and Thomson 2016) results and analysis are not reported separately here, but in an intertwined fashion. Thus, we call this section Findings. We also adopt a common writing style in ethnographic reports, with substantial numbers of references signalling contextual similarity and recognition of patterns (Larsson 2009). We use this style since it is argued to increase transferability and/or generalisations in small-scale studies, as in multi-sited ethnographic studies in rural areas, in which numbers of participants are limited.

**Beyond: issues related to the organisation beyond control**

This section presents findings regarding effects of national policies, regulations and norms on the organisation of education and work intended to facilitate adult immigrants’ integration.

**National immigration and integration policies**

As described in the introduction, legislation and policy regarding immigration changed rapidly in Europe, including Sweden, in 2016. Then the immigrant wave fell to a ripple almost overnight, and the situation in the three considered municipalities sharply changed:

We’ve seen a dramatic shift in recent years [after 2016]. Soon there’ll be no new immigrants. You can see it in the numbers from the Swedish Migration Office. They assign quota to all municipalities. Besides the quota some could voluntarily move here, theoretically, but no-one really comes here, thinking ’I’ll move to that remote place up north that no one’s ever heard of’. The new quota for our municipality is 16 individuals, two and a half families, more or less. (SPES official, Elm)

Due to their remoteness and low populations the reduction in immigration was more prominent in Spruce and Elm than in Larch since quotas are based, *inter alia*, on municipalities’ size. Difficulties in adapting to the fluctuations in numbers of immigrants have been reported across Sweden in various sectors, including education (see next section). However, the situation has been described as most problematic in rural areas where refugee centres first opened in 2015/2016 then closed within a few years. The municipalities have been reportedly left in a problematic economic situation with difficulties in providing ‘normal’ levels of social services for their inhabitants (for other examples see also Brännström et al. 2018). All the informants described their municipalities’ situations as difficult, though not among the worst reported in Swedish media. They also described the situation as being not solely due to the migration wave of 2015/2016, but also (or mainly) due to decades-long combinations of declining economic resources and changes in legislation and policies that hinder rural municipalities’ attempts to maintain acceptable levels of social services. Thus, the economic difficulties were not only associated with the immigrant wave, and can be understood in terms of a general ‘poverty of access’ to education and social services for citizens in rural areas (for international comparable examples see Gray, Shaw, and Farrington 2006).

Several informants also claimed that rural municipalities’ problems associated with the fluctuation in numbers were exacerbated by the Migration Agency’s settlement policies, which resulted in rural areas receiving larger shares of refugees with limited educational backgrounds or illiterate
migrants, and fewer with tertiary education. The principal of the learning centre providing MAE and SFI in Elm attributed this at least partly to inherently metrocentric national policies and administration; a pattern also found in international contexts (cf. Farrugia 2014; Gulczyńska 2019).

In the eyes of the state there are only academic jobs in cities and only non-skilled jobs in the countryside. The few that we get move to the coastal municipalities in search of fast tracks and additional tertiary education. Their time in our municipality is too short to create a social network and sense of belonging that could draw them back here, and the more that move the more will follow since they then have family, relatives and friends in the cities. (Principal, Elm)

The highly skilled immigrants who local officials said were needed to fill shortages in academic positions in rural areas are lacking and the large investments, support and education required for illiterate immigrants to fill gaps in less-skilled labour strain the already scarce resources in rural municipalities.

Like the informant quoted above, others also highlighted the importance of timing since immigrants, especially immigrants with tertiary education, usually move if they do not get education or a job quickly enough or do not see sufficient job prospects in their locality. We have identified at least three important, intertwined reasons why time is apparently regarded as important in relation to geographical positioning and local resources versus national policy and media. First, most immigrants expressed desires to be integrated with their new society and make a living as soon as possible. They also often portrayed larger cities as providing more opportunities for education and work. Some mentioned that opportunities in cities accelerate prospects of acquiring the education needed for a job, and for many interviewed migrants decisions about staying or leaving rural municipalities were tied to job opportunities. Second, the desire to move is fuelled by the shift in policies towards granting asylum seekers and other immigrants only temporary residencies and the requirements for them to become financially self-sufficient to stay. Subsidies decline with time in Sweden from the time they enter the country, the subsidies are related to getting education and work, and immigrants must show progress to get financial support. Thus, there is strong economic pressure to move on (see also Wikström and Ahnlund 2018). Third, policy and media signal that refugees should integrate rapidly, because (unlike labour immigrants) they are demanding and economic burdens. ‘Fast track’, ‘Short path to employment’ and similar programmes for immigrants show the importance attached to fast integration, activation, responsibilisation and workfare (cf. Wikström and Ahnlund 2018; Fernandes 2015). For these three reasons, the interviewed public officials and educational staff found it difficult to counter immigrants’ desires to move, especially within a tight timeframe that largely depended on national economic pressures and regulations beyond their control.

National policies regarding education for immigrants
The dramatic shift from substantial influxes of immigrants to small numbers also reportedly created educational problems. One principal said that following the immigration wave of 2015/2016 they organised SFI courses for 100 students per year, but last year the number of students they received dropped from 65 to 40, and at the time of the interview they only had a handful of students on one of the courses (cf. Table 1). As noted by an SPES official at Elm, if there are ‘About five adults, and you’re supposed to arrange SFI courses. What can I say … there’s no way to do this properly.’

There are clearly difficulties. The global flux of immigrants could improve situations for both individuals fleeing from hardship and small communities that need more inhabitants, but the national authorities seem to regard the rural areas as too small to receive more immigrants. This may become a self-fulfilling prediction, because the areas then receive too few immigrants to provide appropriate education for them. This also raises problematic administrative financial burdens. As noted by an official in Larch, the largest of the three investigated areas, costs of some administrative tasks are the same for handling a few or many participants. For example, for the SPES to
procure labour market training and courses, ‘Twenty is the lowest [viable] number. If there are ten or a hundred the work is the same, but there must be at least twenty’ (SPES official, Larch). Thus, if there are too few there will be poverty of access (cf. Gray, Shaw, and Farrington 2006). Strong restrictions on immigration and the low allocation of immigrants from the Migration Agency leave rural areas in a ‘Catch 22’ situation: they are obliged to provide education for immigrants that meets quality standards set by the Swedish School Inspectorate, but have too few immigrants to do so. This is partly due to the municipalities being largely responsible for financing education for immigrants, despite having too small tax bases to readily provide education of required standards for small numbers of participants. There are some national grants for the municipalities, but they do not fully cover costs and are based on numbers of immigrants attending courses not the standard of education.

Some informants also said that possibilities to overcome issues associated with small numbers of students were constrained by Sweden’s strong market-oriented steering of education and barriers between educational institutions. Some linked this problem to public procurement rules. For example, an SPES official in Elm said that few enterprises saw benefits of establishing in rural areas because, as already mentioned, the customer base was too low. Moreover, on the few occasions when private enterprises had offered courses they had sometimes pulled out as student numbers and viability declined. For example, one of our interviewed immigrants participated in an SPES-procured course provided by a private company for immigrants to gain credentials for work as an assistant nurse, but with just three months remaining to complete the course it was cancelled because only 13 immigrants were still participating. The immigrants were left in limbo, with unfinished training that could not be easily completed by MAE at the local learning centres. One informant also referred to strong barriers between educational institutions, when asked about aspects of current rules and regulations s/he would like to change, as follows:

More possibilities for cooperation with the municipality regarding education … the ability to buy directly from the municipality. Maybe buy places on vocational courses for assistant nurses. For some of our immigrants. Or on the Vehicle engineering programme, Industrial programme [upper secondary school], everything. But we can’t. Because they’re really strict, these procurement rules. (SPES official, Larch)

For example, SPES was not allowed to procure places on ongoing courses at upper secondary schools, due both to public procurement rules and because there is a 20-years age limit for upper secondary education students in Sweden.

Table 1. Demographic and geographic classification of the municipalities, with corresponding reference statistics for the average Swedish municipality and Stockholm. All statistics from 2019 if not stated otherwise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>More or less than 7000 municipality inhabitants</th>
<th>Square kilometres (rounding to closest 100)</th>
<th>Population density per km²</th>
<th>Demographic dependency ratio (2019)</th>
<th>Foreign born aged 18–64 share (%) 2019</th>
<th>Refugees with resident permit, number of 1000 inhabitants</th>
<th>Distance to closest university, more or less than 200 km</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Larch</td>
<td>More</td>
<td>6000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>2017:8.8 2019:2.7</td>
<td>Less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elm</td>
<td>Less</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>2017:13.2 2019:3.9</td>
<td>More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spruce</td>
<td>Less</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>2019:6.3</td>
<td>More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden, average municipality</td>
<td>More</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>2017:8.6 2019:2.9</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockholm</td>
<td>980,000</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>5211 (2020)</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>2017:5.8 2019:2.1</td>
<td>Less</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Swedish official statistics available from Swedish Statistics (SCB) and Kolada: https://kolada.se/verktyg/jamforaren/?_p=jamforelse&focus=16802&tab_id=84105 https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/manniskorna-i-sverige/befolkningstathet-i-sverige/
**Short-term interventions**

When discussing immigrant education, on-the-job training or subsidised employment, all interviewed local officials referred to economic issues beyond their control due to state regulation. They argued that many of the activities were supported by subsidies that were usually short-term and highly targeted, rather than general and long-lasting. For example, during the immigration wave of 2015/2016 and shortly thereafter the state provided higher subsidies for receiving immigrants to assist their housing, education and other activities. When the situation changed there was strong political pressure to reduce costs of immigration, which led to a reduction of subsidies for receiving refugees.

Compensation for SFI has been reduced, rules for subsidies have been sharpened, and possibilities for temporary jobs have been taken away, all of which makes it difficult to make long-term plans, for example to establish collaborations with other municipalities. (Principal, Spruce)

According to interviewed officials and educational staff, economic resources set important constraints for support, such as the ability to hire someone to synchronise activities or keep up to date with policy changes or funding opportunities. State support for short-term activities was sporadically available, according to the informants, but it could be difficult for small municipalities to compete for it:

Larger municipalities have other opportunities since they have possibilities of ‘job carving’. With larger groups of employees they can systematically search for support even for projects smaller than a full time-position. […] We can’t compete on the same basis since a small drop in support for small projects has a bigger budgetary impact when there are smaller groups of employees. Thus, we have difficulties to build on knowledge and experiences, and short-term projects have more transient effects because we can’t retain the experience within the group. (SPES official, Elm)

Collaborations in MAE education between the municipalities’ learning centres have been established, including short-term projects intended to provide foundations for more prolonged collaboration to promote and facilitate cooperation between partners, thereby enhancing the local impact of labour market policies (cf. Benerdal 2021). However, as also noted by Easton (1991), short-term projects to enhance collaboration are seldom successful as material and social foundations enabling further subsequent cooperation are the key outcomes. When such a project ends the material and social base usually disappear with it (see also Mc Glinn 2018). An implication of the quoted informant’s comment that ‘we can’t retain the experience within the group’ is that short-term projects may have limited spillover effects on new short-term projects and lack potential to build robust foundations for long-term collaborations between municipalities. Accordingly, project members reported that collaboration between municipalities is good during a project, when economic and social base resources associated with a larger pool of immigrants allow them to provide more activities, courses and job training. However, they worry that all the accumulated knowledge and resources gained will ‘go down the drain’ once the project ends (Project member, Spruce). Nevertheless, as described in the next section, there was well-established collaboration between the three municipalities’ MAE education activities and local learning centres.

**Within and between the rural idylls – collaboration and competition for work and education**

This section presents how respondents referred to ways in which teaching was organised (within elements), possibilities and hindrances of collaboration (between elements) and the resulting kinds of opportunities for learning and work for adult immigrants.

**Collaborations between municipalities and learning within**

The three rural municipalities participate in several established collaborative initiatives to promote, sustain and provide education within them and enhance their development. One is the Northern
Academy (which supports adult education in northern parts of Sweden). Others include extensive efforts to provide Swedish language courses at compulsory and upper secondary levels, and various kinds of adult education at the municipalities’ learning centres. For many years, courses and lessons, mainly in theoretical subjects, have been held in one municipality and attended through live feeds by students at learning centres in other municipalities. ‘The way we are located, we have no choice: we’ve been forced to develop technical solutions and collaborations. This is dictated, we’re good at it, unlike larger cities where there has been no need for it’ (Principal, Elm). However, there were few references to collaborations and distance education between the municipalities concerning SFI at the time of our study. During our first visits to the three municipalities the learning centres all separately provided SFI courses A-D (for students with education ranging from minimal to college level). However, following the implementation of stricter immigration policies, numbers of new immigrants are becoming too small to arrange courses separately and at the time of our last visit courses were provided by single A-D classes in one municipality, and another municipality planned to follow suit.

Our informants also articulated needs for more, and better, vocational distance education. Efforts have been made to arrange more ‘real’ distance education in vocational education, including practical and manual activities, but they tend to meet resistance from teachers and immigrants. A study and career counsellor said that substantial shares of immigrants who had started distance vocational education courses had moved since some of them included practical and manual activities that required attendance at the educational site. Thus, although it was referred to as distance education the students actually had to be at the educational site quite often. Labour market vocational training and education is often provided outside the rural areas in more densely populated areas, and it often also requires a certain basic level in the Swedish language, such as at least completion of an SFI course.

Often, it [vocational training and labour market education] is not available here, they [the immigrants] need to leave and have a hard time finding housing in the regional metropolitan area for like six months. There’s no chance. And they have no interest in leaving their family for half a year either. (Project member, Elm)

Other informants, such as the principals in Spruce and Larch, said that providers of distance courses in the coastal cities often had a metrocentric view (cf. Farrugia 2014; Gulczyńska 2019), for example lectures and meetings are seldom arranged off-campus and their schedules are often inconvenient for long-distance commuters. If a rural municipality or collaborating group of rural municipalities plan(s) to organise education it is also difficult to find experienced lecturers when a course might only be given once, and not on a regular basis.

Both teachers and immigrants also mentioned problems of distance education that hindered immigrants’ learning. Examples included difficulties in understanding programme instructions, developing their Swedish oral and hearing skills, and lack of face-to-face instruction and a teacher to ask questions until they felt secure enough in the Swedish language. One interviewed immigrant, a young student whose ambitions included university studies, moved to a metropolitan area solely for face-to-face classroom teaching. Students engaged in distance education must be highly motivated, and there are substantial drop-out risks. Perceived problems with distance learning correlated to some extent with the immigrants’ academic background. It was not suitable for those who were illiterate and had little prior computer experience, but for immigrants with longer academic backgrounds it could provide a faster track to diplomas in, for example, Swedish proficiency and eligibility for other education. Immigrants preferred the form of distance learning provided through the municipalities’ collaborations, involving scheduled live teaching by video conferences at the learning centres, to the solely e-learning with little teacher–student interaction that commissioned private companies more commonly provided. For example, a study and career counsellor in Larch said that distance education was not the best choice since it demands much more from the students than classroom teaching and provides much less support for immigrants’ learning. Moreover, the
teachers can only assess students’ development through essays rather than through classroom interactions.

We have a contract with Hermods [a private company providing distance adult education procured by the municipality] and you’ll never meet any teacher there. You get your assignments on a timeline, then you deliver them and do your tests and assignments online, and at the end there’s an oral examination. You might not have opened your mouth for five weeks and spoken a single Swedish word, then you have an oral examination in Swedish. That’s pretty tough. (...) If the student’s motivated and has good study technique and computer knowledge, it can work. (Study and career counsellor, Larch)

Thus, although new technologies can facilitate (and are crucial for many forms of) distance education (cf. Alexander 2018), our informants recognised problems associated with technology in distance learning for language development and the inclusion of on-site elements in the ‘distance education’ for immigrants. Informants often noted the difficulties of commuting for women, especially single mothers, including travel, childcare and financial problems. Thus, we identified difficulties in collaborations between different institutions, but also in provision of education at physically convenient sites and establishing viable groups. Moreover, different aspects of those problems seem to both increase and decline as courses become more advanced. For example, distance learning gets easier with the proficiency in Swedish, but the specialisation of advanced courses hinders the recruitment of groups with corresponding interests, especially when total pools of students are small.

Collaborations between SPES and local employers in provision of workplace practice and step-in jobs

The current integration policy’s focus on workfare, full-time activity and quick labour market incorporation demands extensive knowledge and collaboration between SPES and local employers to find and organise workplace practice and step-in jobs. From an SPES perspective, arranging workplace practice and step-in jobs is seen as easy, but time-consuming.

It’s easy to find places for workplace practice or step-in jobs when we have a relationship with the employer. But we seldom have the resources needed ... It takes time to establish a relationship, discuss suitable times in the year and reach agreement about supervision, and who will be responsible if additional training is needed. But there is no lack of social engagement by the local private employers. Definitely not! (SPES official, Elm)

In contrast to this view of the SPES official, some local employers claimed that immigrants are being ‘dumped’ in local workplaces without sufficient language preparation. According to these informants, their staff were expected to find suitable work tasks, supervise, and teach immigrants Swedish and local workplace culture, thereby solving the integration problem. Thus, although the smallness of the rural areas increases opportunities for establishing close relations with employers, limitations of resources in terms of time to discuss expectations, work tasks and supervision seem to hinder collaboration and immigrants’ learning. Employers in the public sector further said that they are tired of taking all the responsibility for contributing to and supporting immigrants’ introduction to the national and local labour market. They claimed that too few private actors are stepping up, in contrast to the SPES officials’ experience.

As noted by Brännström et al. (2018), integration and labour market measures in northern Sweden include government-subsidised step-in jobs in the welfare, public, cultural and non-profit sector called ‘extratjänster’ (extra positions). Several of our interviewed migrants were either currently in or had been in these types of subsidised employment created by the municipal administration, which all our informants regarded as valuable. From a SPES perspective, these ‘extra positions’ are especially valuable since the local municipal management is regarded as better equipped for workplace introductions due to previous experience and coverage of diverse vocations: ‘everything from swimming pools, park maintenance, you name it, to financial and administrative work, everything’ (SPES official Elm).
A similar government-subsidised employment scheme targeting work in government agencies and management of natural resources was seen as especially important for training immigrants with tertiary education and retaining them in the local rural area. Informants also mentioned some successful transitions from education to work, through workplace practice, in which the local SPES office had actively arranged temporary employment.

**Local solutions and prospects in the rural idylls**

Common features of Swedish rural areas are shortages in the workforce, despite the economic situation, due to depopulation – especially in certain sectors. All interviewed officials in all three municipalities, as well as managers of pre-schools and elderly care facilities, described such shortages.

Supplies of competence [after the heavy reduction in inflow of immigrants] will be the next problem because most of those employed in the healthcare service, personal assistants and as support in the preschools are newly arrived immigrants. (SPES official, Elm)

The local official workers and managers worried about the situation after the reduction of refugees coming to their areas, especially in combination with the historical difficulty of retaining immigrants (cf. SCB 2016). Thus, one of the two smaller municipalities particularly searched for local possibilities to offer support to immigrants so they would stay. For example, its officials strove to enable immigrants to meet requirements more flexibly, and at short notice develop courses to facilitate their career development by accelerating the attainment of educational qualifications for employment, broaden competence, and support acquisition of professional vocabularies (such as Swedish terms used in accountancy or childcare). The municipality also provided and financed step-in jobs previously funded by the national government to improve employability, show immigrants potential work options in the local area and reduce welfare dependency. Government-subsidised jobs or workplace practice placements are regarded as means to improve immigrants’ integration by enhancing their language skills, familiarity with local workplace culture and employability.

When describing collaborations both within and between the rural areas, informants (both officials and some immigrants) often mentioned concepts associated with ‘rural idylls’ (cf. Halfacree 1995), such as ‘It’s easy to find a suitable place for step-in jobs since everyone knows everyone’. Although such phrases sometimes seem to be expressed by rote, as lazy clichés, the idea seemed to be empirically supported in our material. For example, officials in Spruce and Elm municipalities referred to social interactions helping them to support immigrants’ progress with education or employment opportunities (step-in jobs or workplace practice placements) more often than their counterparts in the larger municipality Larch.

**Concluding discussion**

Processes of immigrants’ integration in any areas are inevitably influenced by complex interactions of demographic, economic, cultural and historical factors, including their national and international and socio-economic contexts. Many of these factors, such as the global changes in migration patterns that resulted in the immigration wave of 2015/2016 and national responses to them, are far beyond the control of rural Swedish municipalities like the three we considered. The rural areas, which had previously received only a few immigrants, have had serious difficulties, as shown by the presented results, in maintaining acceptable levels of social services and meeting the needs of each individual. Problems have been associated not only with the immigration wave and stricter immigration policies that followed, but also ongoing, decadal declines in economic resources together with shifts in legislation and marketisation policies. The metrocentricity (cf. Farrugia 2014; Gulczyńska 2019) of the policies is manifested in lack of educational opportunities (cf. Gray, Shaw, and Farrington 2006), and targeted subsidies for short-term interventions that do not favour rural areas, addressed by Mc Glinn (2018), and Easton (1991) in other contexts,
procurement rules that hinder local cooperation and educational opportunities, and settlement policies that financially hinder provision of education and work opportunities.

Our analysis, based on the conceptual framework inspired by Ainscow et al. (2012), showed that the three focal rural areas shared many problems and possibilities related to urban–rural distinctions and metrocentricity. However, it also revealed some differences among them. Within the two smaller municipalities Spruce and Elm, officials seemed to offer more flexible help in transitions, workplace practice opportunities and (for example) development of courses at short notice to support immigrant students. Organisation of teaching for immigrants in rural areas inevitably results in small groups and providing suitable opportunities in convenient locations for each student is difficult, if not impossible. Collaboration and distance education offer solutions, but problems arise when educational programmes include some on-site elements and they may be far from ideal for language development, especially for immigrants with poor educational backgrounds. Collaboration and competition between the rural areas and institutions within them tend to both support and restrict immigrants’ learning and work opportunities. The smaller communities seem to strive to be more collaborative with communities of similar size due to their more pressing needs for collaboration to provide services and educational opportunities.

The most important conclusion from our analysis is that the local officials implicitly and explicitly refer to the analytical level of beyond and advocate better consideration of rural areas in policies regarding integration and education. Although we have seen various examples of officials and students working in flexible and inventive ways, there seem to be need for longer-term policies and economic subsidies for rural areas to compensate for the metrocentricity of recent and current policies. In a related vein, Shucksmith et al. (2009) argue that there is a conceptual dichotomy in rural research, between what they term pastoralism (representing rural idylls to be cherished and protected from outside influences) and pre-modernism (emphasising the backwardness of rural life, its constraints and resistance to change). Our findings certainly do not support the latter, but neither do they indicate that rural life should be cherished and protected from outside influences. Policies and regulations clearly tend to emanate from and favour urban/central areas, so their local officials, teachers and other relevant agents can more easily initiate flows and movement. In contrast, those in rural municipalities such as those we examined are more on the receiving-end and some are effectively restricted by national policies, beyond their control (cf. Massey 1994). Even though local officials and staff are working hard to create social spaces and relations to overlay physical space, the physical distance to regional institutions and authorities is difficult to overcome. The rural idyll (within) does not compensate for objective and material disadvantages in social services or lessen the need for attention to rural areas when formulating and implementing national policies and regulations (beyond) (cf. Shucksmith et al. 2009).

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