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Facilitators and barriers for creating a sustainable working life for first-generation immigrants – perceptions of multiple stakeholders in Sweden

Underlättande och hindrande faktorer för att skapa ett hållbart arbetsliv för första generationens invandrare - uppfattningar från olika aktörer i Sverige

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ABSTRACT

Employment is of high priority in the Swedish integration policy, but immigrants are disadvantaged when it comes to pathways into the labour market, and also to stay in the labour market. This study aimed to explore various stakeholders' perceptions of facilitators and barriers for a sustainable working life among first-generation immigrants and to understand their reasoning regarding how a sustainable working life might be achieved from their perspectives. It is a qualitative study based on seven focus group interviews with participants representing various stakeholders in society. The data were analysed using thematic analysis with an inductive approach. The main theme identified that creating a sustainable working life is a matter that concerns several stakeholders. Aspects related to both society, workplace and the individual have been highlighted in order to promote a sustainable work participation. By increasing collaboration between different stakeholders and providing support to both individuals and workplaces, a sustainable work participation can be facilitated. This study highlights the workplace as an important arena for preparing first-generation immigrants for a sustainable work participation. There is a need to develop supportive solutions to be used at workplaces, formalise long-term support to first-generation immigrants and strengthen the collaboration among involved stakeholders.

SAMMANFATTNING

Att ha en anställning och vara delaktig i arbetslivet är högt prioriterat i den svenska integrationspolitiken, men invandrare missgynnas när det gäller att komma in och långvarigt stanna kvar i arbetslivet. Syftet är att utforska olika intressenters uppfattningar om möjliggörare och hinder för ett hållbart arbetsliv bland första generationens invandrare och att förstå deras resonemang om hur ett hållbart arbetsliv kan främjas. Det är en kvalitativ

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studie baserad på sju fokusgruppsintervjuer med deltagare som representerar olika intressenter i samhället. Data analyserades med hjälp av tematisk analys med en induktiv ansats. Huvudtemat identifierade att skapa ett hållbart arbetsliv kräver samverkan mellan olika aktörer. Aspekter relaterade till både samhället, arbetsplatsen och individen har lyfts fram för att främja ett hållbart arbetsdeltagande. Genom att öka samverkan mellan olika aktörer och ge stöd till både individer och arbetsplatser kan ett hållbart arbetsdeltagande underlättas. Denna studie lyfter fram arbetsplatsen som en viktig arena för att förbereda första generationens invandrare för ett hållbart arbetsdeltagande. Det finns behov av att utveckla stödjande lösningar som ska användas på arbetsplatser, formalisera långsiktigt stöd till första generationens invandrare och att stärka samarbetet mellan involverade intressenter.

Introduction

Migration is a growing phenomenon. In 2020, the number of international immigrants reached 281 million globally (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021); specifically, in Sweden, immigrants made up about 20% of the working-age population (Statistics Sweden, 2021). The immigrants average age is below that of the Swedish-born. This implies that they have a long working life ahead and will constitute an increasing share of the Swedish workforce (Statistics Sweden, 2018). Incorporating first-generation immigrants in the workforce is important, not only for society but also from an individual perspective. It is, however, important to consider that the group of first-generation immigrants is heterogeneous and their labour market entry may differ, for example, due to age, gender, educational background and reason for immigration. Still, having a job is important to all, to earn your own living, but also to have social contacts with others, develop a personal identity, and enable shared experiences and goals (Jahoda, 1981; Paul & Batinic, 2010).

Employment is of high priority in the Swedish integration policy. In 2010, a major reform took place within the Swedish system in terms of receiving and assisting newly arrived immigrants, and the Swedish Public Employment Service (SPES) was given the responsibility of coordinating establishment activities in order to enhance a focus on labour market participation (Law on establishment activities for certain newly arrived immigrants, 2010, p. 197). In 2019, another reform was undertaken to enhance the effectiveness of the SPES. This reform gave SPES the responsibility for the skills and needs assessment of all unemployed people, and to administer their benefits. Due to this reform, focus on preparation and matchmaking became important. There are several initiatives ongoing in Sweden (Diedrich & Hellgren, 2018) and some of them are scientifically evaluated (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). Still, these initiatives are much about getting a (subsidised) job and not that much of being established in the labour market. Previous research identified that initiatives performed by municipal organisations focus on paid work or financial independence as the most important goal for those participating in the initiatives (Starke & Hollertz, 2023). In this study, we focus on how to create a sustainable working life. This includes being able to work to retirement with good health, as well as to adapt to structural changes in the labour market over a life course (European Foundation, 2023). A sustainable working life relates to a sustainable career which also emphasises health, happiness and productivity as key indicators. A sustainable career derives from an individual perspective but is also influenced by contexts and other stakeholders (De Vos et al., 2020). In order to enable a sustainable working life among first-generation immigrants, it is therefore important to identify how various stakeholders collaborate and to consider how integration and inclusion might be promoted in society and in the workplace context (Diedrich et al., 2020; van Riemsdijk et al., 2016; van Tonder & Soontiens, 2014).

Reaching a sustainable work participation is a challenge. One study on immigrants arriving in Sweden found that, despite many immigrants having some kind of positive earnings from employment relatively soon after immigration, it took more than five years to get a 'real job'. To get a stable

position took even longer (Åslund et al., 2017). In addition, another study involving immigrants to Norway found encouraging signs of early labour market integration; however, after just 5–10 years, employment decreased among non-European immigrants and rates of social insurance dependency increased (Bratsberg et al., 2017). Studies have shown that first-generation immigrants have higher rates of unemployment or underemployment, and being allocated to more physically demanding and lower-paid occupations than the non-immigrant population (Brendler-Lindqvist et al., 2022; Helgesson et al., 2021; Helgesson et al., 2023; Sterud et al., 2018). A qualitative study from Norway identified that job-seeking immigrant women did not feel that their competences were valued (Roysum, 2020). Being overqualified and employed in precarious work might negatively affect one's mental health and integration (Vahabi & Wong, 2017).

Previous studies have investigated the process from being new in the country to being established in the labour market. It has been noted that various activation initiatives and measures are designed as a linear process, however, they might rather be experienced as an iterative process characterised by interruptions, changes and steps backwards in the process by those being involved (Hansen & Gubrium, 2022). Studies highlight integration, where education, access to networks and language are important factors (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018; Klaesson et al., 2022). However, other studies have found inconsistent results from interventions targeting these factors (Hernes et al., 2022). Other factors of importance are motivation and respect for workplace policies (Johnsen et al., 2022). Furthermore, qualitative studies have found that achieving language competency and bridging cultural diversities at the workplace enabled feelings of inclusion (Hamrin, 2019; Major et al., 2014), as well as increased self-efficacy (Kuschel et al., 2023). Having an empathetic supervisor and informal mentor at the workplace assisted integration (Rajendra et al., 2017). From an employer perspective, financial support is important for enabling workplace integration; however, the inclusion practices are also greatly affected by the supervisors' attitudes and perceptions of social responsibility (Johnsen et al., 2022). Nonetheless, a qualitative study highlighted that many employers do not hire first-generation immigrants, regardless of subsidies (Behrenz & Månsson, 2023). Thus, work participation is an important feature in integration, which is influenced by several aspects and stakeholders. Reciprocal efforts need to be made to facilitate participation in working life and society (Klaesson et al., 2022; van Riemsdijk et al., 2016). However, previous studies indicate that stakeholders sometimes do not take enough actions in this process for various reasons such as, for example, lack of knowledge (Behrenz & Månsson, 2023; van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022), and thus do not promote a sustainable working life among first-generation immigrants.

In summary, there are several initiatives in place in order to facilitate labour market integration among first-generation immigrants. Initiatives focusing on collaboration, matching and getting into the labour market. Still, initiatives that are presented as effective solutions can have unintended consequences and make it more difficult for newly arrived immigrants to establish working life in the longer term. It is brought up that in order to create successful integration initiatives, relevant stakeholders need to be involved in the work so that their interests are considered and highlighted over time. To learn something about integration, and about how to organise integration efforts in a better way, one must first understand how various stakeholders interact and coordinate their actions in practice. Furthermore, more knowledge is needed about the employer's role and responsibility in the integration of first-generation immigrants (Diedrich et al., 2020). The aim of this study is to explore various stakeholders' perceptions of facilitators and barriers for a sustainable working life among first-generation immigrants and to understand their reasoning regarding how a sustainable working life might be achieved from their perspectives.

Method

This is an exploratory qualitative study based on focus group interviews with stakeholders who meet first-generation immigrants in their daily work. Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, D-nr 2022-01757-01.

Participants

Purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011) was used to target individuals who, are involved in and contribute to, work participation for first-generation immigrants. Participants represented stakeholders with different roles in relation to immigrants work participation, including participants working with preparatory activities and projects as well as with employment on the regular labour market. Furthermore, participants were recruited from communities and cities of different sizes and geographical locations in order to get experiences from persons working in regions with various prerequisites. Eligible persons ($n \approx 50$ persons) from the identified stakeholders were approached by e-mail, which included written information about the study. Several declined to participate due to time constraints. A few persons did not show up at the time for the interview and are considered as dropouts. At the time of the interview, the participants signed a written consent form.

The sample comprises a total of 30 persons. About half of the participants (47%) were employers representing with a high share of immigrants in the workforce, such as health and elderly care, cleaning, warehouse, logistics, hotel and restaurant. Participants also represented recruitment firms, civic organisations, trade unions, authorities and public organisations. Almost one-third of the participants were located and worked in smaller communities. The mean age was 47 years (range 26–62), see Table 1. During the interviews, experiences from particular cases were shared and formed the base for the discussion of facilitating and hindering aspects. Moreover, the participants reasoned about possible solutions to enable a sustainable work participation.

Data collection

Seven focus groups were conducted during the autumn of 2022. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 2 h and was conducted face-to-face, except one which was conducted digitally due to logistic reasons. The focus groups were mixed, with persons representing various stakeholders. This mix enabled a discussion based on various perspectives and identification of shared experiences and thoughts of possible solutions (Kitzinger, 1995). Interviews were performed by one moderator and one assistant moderator (TH, MBL and SA). During the interviews, the moderators asked follow-up questions and ensured that all participants had the possibility to share their opinions. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Table 2). All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis with an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In accordance with the procedure presented by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006), six steps were taken. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thereafter, the material was read several times. The transcripts were also imported to NVivo 12 for further analysis. Secondly, initial

Table 1. Participant's characteristics.

		<i>N</i> = 30
Gender	Women	15
	Men	15
Stakeholder	Union representative	5
	Employer representative	14
	Municipal representative	4
	Civic organisation representative	4
	Authority representative	2
	Political representative	1

Table 2. Semi-structured interview guide.

Semi-structured interview guide
<i>Entering working life</i>
What are your thoughts and experiences regarding how a successful entry into working life for first-generation immigrants can be promoted?
What aspects do you think are important in promoting a successful entry into working life?
What difficulties/obstacles do you see today in promoting first-generation immigrants entering working life?
How can different stakeholders work together to increase the opportunities for first-generation immigrants entering working life?
<i>Remaining in working life</i>
What are your thoughts and experiences of working to promote a long-term and sustainable working life for first-generation immigrants?
What do you see in your work as common reasons for first-generation immigrants being without a job (voluntarily or involuntarily)?
What aspects do you think are important to consider in working life to promote first-generation immigrants remaining in working life?
Are there any other aspects outside the work itself that need to be taken into account in order to promote a sustainable working life for first-generation immigrants?
How can different stakeholders work together to increase the opportunities for first-generation immigrants being permanently established in working life?

codes, close to the transcripts, were generated for each interview separately. In the third step, initial codes in each interview were sorted based on the context and meanings. Thereafter, the clusters of codes from each interview were merged and compared by scrutinising common patterns of the individual codes. Codes were then combined into more general themes. In the fourth step, the themes and codes were reviewed, going back and forth between the codes, themes and transcripts. In the fifth step, the themes and sub-themes were discussed thoroughly among the authors to ensure credibility. Steps four and five constitute an iterative process, in which the first author went back to the transcripts and initial codes after feedback from the other authors. After a consensus had been reached, the themes and sub-themes were named. In the final step of the analysis, the report was finalised, and the text describing the content of the themes and the sub-themes was produced.

Findings

Creating a sustainable working life for first-generation immigrants is a matter for several stakeholders

The main theme identified that this is a matter that concerns several stakeholders. By increasing collaboration between different stakeholders and providing support to both individuals and workplaces, a sustainable work participation can be facilitated. In [Figure 1](#), themes are described, as well as sub-themes describing facilitating and hindering aspects.

Motivation to enter working life

Being intrinsically motivated to work was understood as a key factor for entering and remaining in working life. The participants perceived that first-generation immigrants being curious and having an inner driving force had better opportunities to enter working life. The participants highlighted that these persons often find their way forward on their own and make active efforts to create networks that are needed for entering working life. The participants described that these persons are characterised by having a long-term goal and that they consciously make use of the opportunities available.

Some people are really curious and want to know about the new society, and the new culture and the new language. Now, we have the internet, social media, and many possibilities to find out what Swedishness is, for example, how it works in the new society. (Focus group no 6, municipal representative)

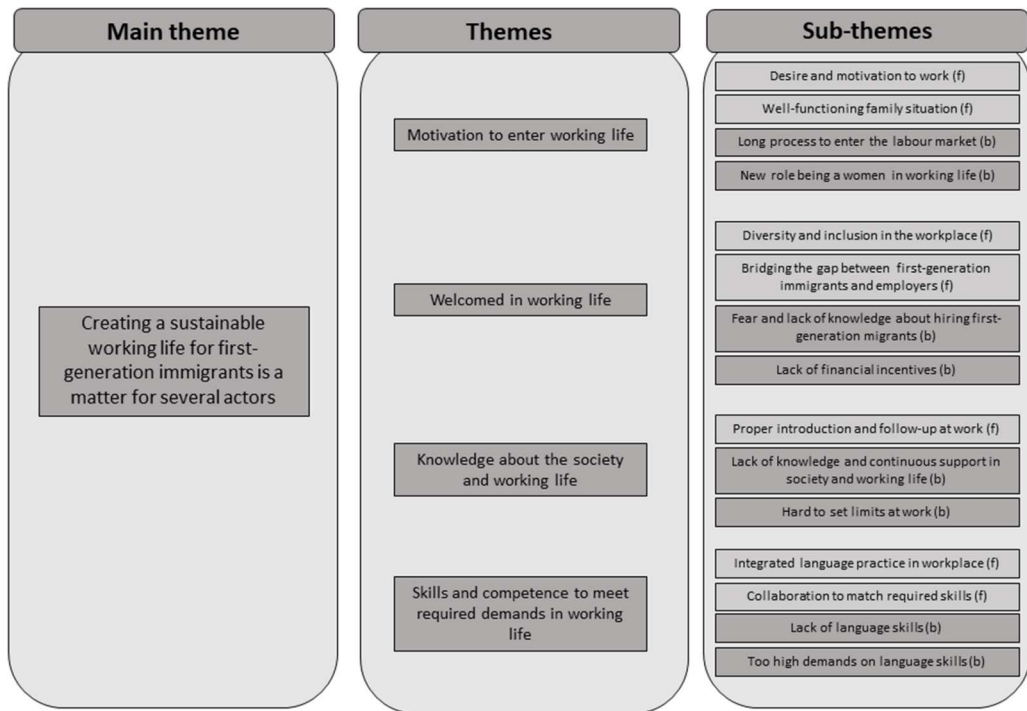


Figure 1. Overview of the findings. This figure illustrates the main theme, themes and sub-themes. The letters in brackets explain whether the sub-theme is considered to be a facilitator (f) or a barrier (b).

The participants perceived that one aspect that may influence motivation is about cultural norms and values regarding work participation, such as for example notions regarding retirement age or gender roles. These issues are naturally evident and need to be met. Participants perceived that to meet these issues stakeholders working with first-generation immigrants may be aware of these perceptions and engage with them in a constructive and respectful way.

It's about how I function, it's about my expectations of myself, my family's expectations of me, to understand how it works. Well, it's equality, child rearing. There are a lot of parts that you have to work with, to have a chance to understand how this puzzle ... Because this puzzle is huge, and in Sweden there are a lot of parts that have to be put together. I have to understand the point of going to work. (Focus group no 6, civic organisation representative)

The participants perceived that motivation could decrease over time as first-generation immigrants may encounter many obstacles in the long-term process of entering and sustainably participate in working life. For example, situations where persons applied for numerous jobs without getting a single positive response. In those cases, the participants described the importance of first-generation immigrants receiving clear support and guidance on which jobs are realistic and reasonable for them to apply for. The participants also perceived that if first-generation immigrants were engaged in subsidised employment that did not lead to anything concrete, it could rather be counterproductive for the first-generation immigrant and result in the person becoming more vulnerable, losing motivation and experiencing hopelessness.

There has to be a meaning, and then the employer has to think one step further, and not just yes, now I've got free labour for two or three months, and then I kick them out. It is not good; then you are not part of the solution in society. (Focus group no 4, political representative)

Thus, the participants agreed that when subsidised employment are utilised, the aim needs to be clarified, as well as the obligations of the employer in terms of providing support during the employment.

Welcomed in working life

The participants perceived that being and feeling welcomed in working life promotes first-generation immigrants in entering and sustainably participate in working life. A facilitating aspect is workplaces being inclusive and open-minded to various cultures, i.e. having mutual respect among all employees regardless of origin. However, especially the union and municipal representatives experienced that there are challenges in achieving such openness due to fear and a lack of knowledge among employers. Another challenge brought up by employers themselves as well as other stakeholders, is that the employers' first priority is the profitability of their businesses and thus, need to hire employees who produce fully from day one. The employers also described that they do not always have the financial prerequisites to provide sufficient support to people who initially need it, nor the knowledge of what kind of support might be adequate and relevant. In these cases, collaboration between several stakeholders is highlighted as a possible solution for reducing the distance between first-generation immigrants and businesses, and some practical examples were given on how other stakeholders can play a mediating and supporting role.

To promote workplaces to be open to cultural diversity and inclusion, the participants perceived several aspects that need to be considered. They expressed that there needs to be an openness to diversities and a curiosity to learn from each other. However, they, both employers and other stakeholders, also emphasised the employers' lack of knowledge and fear of dealing with cultural issues. The participants pointed out that this fear manifests itself in different situations in working life. They experienced that first-generation immigrants are still disadvantaged in recruitment processes, often due to the fact that employers feel safer hiring people who are more similar to themselves and with whom they can identify.

R2: And it is a challenge, because again in the recruitment industry, it is extremely rare that someone with a foreign name comes to the final interview. Or, even come to the first interview. And that says quite a lot.

I1: And what I hear you saying here is that language is an important part; it lies with the individual him or herself. But then, there is a lot that lies with the recipient, with the employers.

R2: And that is ignorance. (Focus group no 3, employer representative)

However, not all participants agreed with this opinion, and some employers and authority representatives did not see this being a barrier anymore. Those that experienced this barrier, suggested that the employer needs to have more knowledge about the issues. Openness is needed to create a good dialogue around cultural issues, and employers need support in these efforts. A positive example raised was a course on creating inclusive workplaces by training conversation leaders, for example, in how to welcome and introduce new employees. Participants, being employers and human resource managers, also talked about the physical design of the workplace, where a coffee room might be designed and furnished to promote integration.

Knowledge about the society and working life

Having a basic knowledge of societal systems, as well as rights and duties in working life, was highlighted as an important aspect and something that needs to be better supported. The participants agreed that first-generation immigrants often show much gratitude for having a job and thus become very loyal to their employer. Sometimes to such an extent that they push themselves above their limit, for example, by accepting all the extra shifts they are requested to work, never saying no to additional work tasks, or signalling when there is too much physical or mental strain.

I also thought of a vulnerability// That many foreign-born men might feel that there is a greater workload. It is expected of them that, for example, you must put in overtime, extra shifts // And then maybe the feeling of loyalty. Here is an employer who has given me the chance, or this was the only job I could get. For different reasons. And that you then feel that you have to perform at 120% to be as good as (Swedish-born). (Focus group no 2, union representative)

Moreover, the employers perceived that first-generation immigrants may be suspicious regarding benefits, such as wellness hours, wellness allowances and health checks. This, in turn, causes first-generation immigrants to sometimes not accept these benefits, which could have facilitated health and recovery. The participants also highlighted the need to be aware of what obligations exist in working life, such as arriving at work on time or notifying when you will be absent, which may be a challenge for individuals without previous work experience from their country of origin or from Sweden. The participants agreed that individual support might be crucial for the person to succeed in keeping their job. The participants, municipal and civic organisations representatives in particular, highlighted that this long-term support is lacking today, as it often ends when a person gets a job. They discussed that upon entry into working life, a new phase in the integration process begins and that extended support is crucial in this phase.

R2: But I'm thinking, do you coach them then, continuously, even after they have gained access to a profession?

R1: Absolutely, that's really where the real work begins. It's like you said before, how do you keep them in the workplace? And that's it// Having them and keeping them in the job, it is a constant work. Just motivational talk. It might ... Towards the employers too. (Focus group no 5, municipal representatives)

The participants agreed that the generic societal orientation given to first-generation immigrants needs to be individually tailored and remain over time as integration is not a linear process. Based on this reasoning, the participants saw benefits in integrating societal orientation with a workplace practice. For example, by appointing mentors/supervisors who not only support their colleagues in the work itself but also in how things work overall.

Skills and competence to meet required demands in working life

To ensure sustainable work participation, the participants stressed the importance of the current employment as an opportunity to strengthen capacities and experiences. Several employer representatives described the gaining of work experiences as a benefit with subsidised employments for those being employed, which was also brought up by other participants. Still, many participants perceived that even though these employments gave work experience they rarely prepared individuals sufficiently for further job-seeking activities. Several participants suggested that it would be beneficial to allocate time in the regular working hours for job-seeking activities and to receive support in this. One participant described an example of how to use a subsidised employment to prepare the person for forthcoming working life.

And then you went out, learned, job training, you worked. But it was still an ending. But there was one very important detail. It was that the employer made it possible for the person to still have the chance to look for other jobs for two or three hours a week while working. So that when you quit, it wasn't just 'Goodbye', back to the social security fund or back to Swedish Public Employment Service or something. But you've actually been looking for a job all this year, as you've had a job. (Focus group no 5, municipal representative)

The participants agreed that being skilled in the Swedish language is often a key to manage a job, and a significant barrier when not having the language. The participants stated that the language requirements are sometimes too high for certain work to be carried out, which may prevent first-generation immigrants from entering working life. At the same time, they see language skills as being crucial in the performance of even simple tasks, as well as for the social work environment. Some participants described measures such as adopting English as the official language or working with image support as ways to enhance inclusion. Others stressed the risk that, in a long-term perspective, such adaptations can contribute to a lock-in effect in the specific workplace and inhibit integration into society. The participants agreed on the importance of having a clear language policy at the workplace regarding which language to speak in the daily work or in the coffee room to promote social inclusion. Some employers described this as being taken for granted while other participants perceived that this may be a sensitive topic, thus avoiding approaching it.

But I think there can be a certain fear of saying that, to a co-worker, or a group of co-workers even, that we have to work with your language. You need to learn better Swedish. I'm not entirely sure it would be received as, as mere goodwill either. I can see and understand that it is needed. And the company can do that too. But I think it can be a bit difficult for an employer to have that dialogue. (Focus group no 1, union representative)

Furthermore, the participants described the potential benefits of integrating language training into everyday work. The participants experienced that such an arrangement often increased first-generation immigrants' motivation to learn the language as they gained a deeper understanding of why it is important to know the language. A disadvantage, however, is the increased burden that is placed on the regular staff.

It wears on regular staff when constantly being mentors and teachers. It's like double duty; you not only have to make sure to take care of your residents and guests, but you also have to make sure to work with them (trainees) that you have with you all the time. It's like a double job, so it is quite tiresome. (Focus group no 7, employer representative)

Other types of competencies are also sometimes lacking in first-generation immigrants. The participants highlighted the potential in increased collaboration between business and adult education initiatives in order to respond to these situations. This might also be beneficial for trades and industries, as several industries today face a major lack of resources and find it difficult to recruit employees.

Discussion

This study explored various stakeholders' perceptions of facilitators and barriers for a sustainable working life among first-generation immigrants and their reasoning regarding how a sustainable working life might be promoted. Work participation of first-generation immigrants has gained increased focus in policy and research. However, initiatives focusing on labour market participation do not reach its full potential, and it takes too long a time for first-generation immigrants to reach a sustainable participation in the labour market (Åslund et al., 2017). Policies have been evaluated (Emilsson, 2015; Hernes et al., 2022; Jakobsen et al., 2019) and activities related to labour market integration mapped out (Diedrich & Hellgren, 2018). There are several activities focusing on matching, building competence and creating networks and it is concluded that collaboration between various stakeholders is needed to a higher extent than what is in place today (Diedrich et al., 2020; Diedrich & Hellgren, 2018). The aim of this study is not, however, to evaluate specific initiatives or activities, or to make recommendations for policy as this would be beyond the scope of the research. However, the findings in this study bring valuable knowledge to the field regarding the role of the workplace and will be an important contribution to those working with policies and activities. The main theme in this study showed that collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders are needed. These findings are in line with previous research (Åslund et al., 2017; Diedrich & Hellgren, 2018). Our findings indicate that the workplace is considered to be an important arena for promoting sustainable work participation, but also that increased collaboration between different stakeholders providing support to both individuals and workplaces are needed. This is supported by previous research identifying the need to have a holistic approach to labour market integration, focusing on both work-related issues as well as other individual aspects (Khoronzhevych & Fady, 2022).

Having a job promotes experiences of social inclusion (Jahoda, 1981; Major et al., 2014; Paul & Batinic, 2010), sense of belonging (Wood et al., 2019), well-being (Phillimore & Goodson, 2006) and structure as well as collective purpose (Jahoda, 1981; Paul & Batinic, 2010). This was acknowledged in the present study, still some barriers for a sustainable work participation were also identified. First-generation immigrants might sometimes feel dependent on their employers, which may affect the job situation with too much over time and unreasonable demands. Similar results have been found in previous research focusing on immigration in general (van Tonder & Soontiens, 2014) and in relation to temporary foreign workers (Vahabi & Wong, 2017). Findings from the present study as well as previous research indicate that these aspects might negatively affect mental health and well-being (Vahabi & Wong, 2017; van Tonder & Soontiens, 2014; Wood et al., 2019), and thus need to be highlighted in the debate on workplace participation.

Being motivated to enter working life was perceived as an important promoting aspect in the present study as well as in previous research (Johnsen et al., 2022). However, our findings also indicated how various types of employment could decrease motivation and thus hamper a sustainable working life and well-being. It was evident that having a temporary job (i.e. subsidised employment) that, from the first-generation immigrants' perspective, suddenly ended without any obvious reason could negatively affect self-esteem and motivation to further job seeking. Previous research has also found that these types of employment are sometimes experienced as stressful or meaningless (Wikström & Ahnlund, 2018), even though these initiatives are found to have positive effects on a policy level (Card et al., 2017). This is particularly important to consider, as the focus of the 'work strategy' in Sweden has shifted from a previous focus on support and social responsibility towards an emphasis on activation and individual responsibility (Wikström & Ahnlund, 2018). This is also evident in Norway and research have shown that activation strategies reduce a holistic approach and thus might exclude important aspects that are needed in order to promote a sustainable working life (Khoronzhhevych & Fady, 2022). If initiatives decrease empowerment the first-generation immigrants will face even greater challenges in entering and remaining in working life. Thus, developing employment and initiatives that strengthen empowerment is highly important (Gower et al., 2022).

Consequently, the forms and arrangement of employment may influence the outcome of work entry and the sustainability of work participation. However, our findings also identified aspects at the workplace that influence the same. A Swedish systematic review concludes that workplaces need to raise awareness of and combat workplace discrimination (Akay & Ahmadi, 2022). However, ours and previous findings indicate a lack of knowledge regarding how to handle cultural diversities in the workplace (Behrenz & Månsson, 2023; van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022), which, in turn, might lead to feelings of social exclusion and discrimination (Major et al., 2014; Rajendra et al., 2017). Our study identified a need for a toolbox or support to promote an open culture and sustainable working life. Furthermore, it is necessary that employers are willing to hire first-generation immigrants and take an active role in forming a labour market with diversity and inclusion. Some employers see benefits in this, while others are more sceptical. These findings are congruent with previous research (Behrenz & Månsson, 2023; Johnsen et al., 2022). Our findings suggest a need to monitor subsidised employment opportunities and place greater responsibilities on the employers, but also to provide them with sufficient support.

Not surprisingly, language barriers were also highlighted. The requirement regarding language proficiency naturally varies between different areas of work as well as the language skills of immigrant workers. In Sweden, a Swedish course is offered as part of the introduction programme; however, several evaluations have concluded that this education does not meet quality requirements and fails to prepare first-generation immigrants sufficiently for the labour market. A better integration between theory and practice in the courses has been stressed and was also highlighted in this study. However, how language training can be carried out at the workplace needs to be further studied and the goal might rather be to increase self-efficacy through language competence than language competence in itself (Kuschel et al., 2023). The participants' joint experience was that job integration is often evaluated by the outcome of having a first job. However, previous research indicates that this outcome does not reflect sustainable employment or work participation (Åslund et al., 2017; Bratsberg et al., 2017; Starke & Hollertz, 2023). Our findings point to the need for further support when having a first job as well as the need for collaboration between stakeholders. It could also be about peer mentoring or integrated language training at the workplace, which has already been highlighted previously (Rajendra et al., 2017; van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022).

Methodological considerations

The number of 30 participants in the study limits the generalizability of the study, and it is not the intention to state that these results are applicable in all cases. Still, a strength of this study was the

diverse composition of the focus groups, constituting a variety of stakeholders involved in the integration initiatives and efforts in Sweden (Kitzinger, 1995). This diverse group enabled sharing of experiences and innovative discussions regarding collaboration and innovative solutions. A potential limitation might be the exclusion of first-generation immigrants from the study sample, and it is important to understand that the results presented in this study stem from the perceptions of other stakeholders working with these issues rather than first-generation immigrants themselves. However, we do argue that the choice to not include these participants was beneficial due to a possible power imbalance that might arise (Ramirez Galleguillos & Coskun, 2020). Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance to include end users in research focusing on possible solutions targeting their life situations and concerns; hence, a co-creative study design might be applicable (Voorberg et al., 2015). The research group is currently conducting a separate interview study with first-generation immigrants, focusing on their experiences of challenges and opportunities for sustainable participation in the Swedish labour market. Still, this research adds to the knowledge base on how to improve and enable work participation as the participants in this study cover a huge field and various perspectives concerning the issue.

First-generation immigrants are a heterogeneous group, which must be considered when studying their labour market situation and challenges. In this study, the focus was directed towards the processes in place which impact the labour market participation, rather than on the individuals as representatives of particular groups. There might be a potential risk of misinterpretation of the interview material in qualitative studies, so-called confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). To ensure the credibility of the findings, the analysis process went back and forth between the identified codes and the transcribed interviews (Krefting, 1991). Furthermore, the data were collected and analysed by an interprofessional research team with relevant methodological and theoretical experience (Morse, 2015).

Conclusion

This study presents facilitators and barriers for a sustainable working life among first-generation immigrants and how a sustainable working life might be facilitated. Facilitating aspects included promoting individuals to be motivated and having a well-functioning family situation, workplaces providing a proper introduction, having integrated language practice, and striving for diversity and inclusion. Barriers identified were employers having limited knowledge of how to handle cultural variations and first-generation immigrants having limited knowledge about Swedish working life as well as language skills. Our findings indicate that the workplace is considered to be an important arena for promoting a sustainable work participation for first-generation immigrants. The present study, therefore, points to a need to: (1) develop supportive solutions at workplaces, (2) formalise long-term support to first-generation immigrants and (3) strengthen the collaboration among the involved stakeholders. It is important to further develop and evaluate these aspects. Hence, they are critical issues to focus on in future research and practice.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for the study (registration number 2022-01757-01) has been granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Amongst other things, it was emphasised that study participation is voluntary and that the participants could withdraw from the study at all stages of the research and without giving a reason. Informed, written consent for study participation and for the interviews to be audio recorded was obtained from all participants during each interview session.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available because the data cannot be completely anonymized and can therefore not be shared openly; although names, places and the like have been removed from the transcripts, the participants speak of situations and sensitive experiences within specific contexts and with a level of detail that would pose a risk for the participants to be recognised. The participants have also not given their consent for the interview transcripts to be freely shared.

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