



Article

Strengthening Support for Immigrant Workers: Insights from an Active Labour Market Programme

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Abstract

Labour market integration of immigrants remains a key policy priority, yet practical implementation continues to face challenges. This study aimed to co-design and re-design solutions to strengthen support within an Active Labour Market Programme (ALMP) to promote immigrants' sustainable working lives. Using a co-creative qualitative design, data were gathered through workshops with caseworkers, job coaches, immigrant participants, and workplace supervisors in a Swedish municipality. The findings identified four central aspects for improvement—providing timely and accurate information, aligning efforts toward shared goals, targeting individualised support, and integrating language learning at the workplace—emphasising the need for coherent and collaborative programme structures to facilitate a sustainable working life for immigrants.

Keywords: active labour market programme; immigrants; unemployed; co-production research; labour market

1. Introduction

In Western countries, immigrants constitute a substantial share of the labour force, yet remain overrepresented in vulnerable labour market positions characterised by lower wages, precarious employment, and higher unemployment (Eurofound 2019; Frattini and Cugini 2025; Helgesson et al. 2021; Helgesson et al. 2022; Sterud et al. 2018). Sweden reflects this broader trend, with approximately 20% of the population being foreign-born in 2025 (Statistics Sweden 2025). The foreign-born population has a higher proportion of individuals in working-age groups than the native-born population, largely because many immigrants arrive in Sweden between the ages of 25 and 34 (Statistics Sweden 2025). Arabic is also the largest minority language and the most widely taught heritage language in the school system (Bohnacker et al. 2025). Despite decades of policy efforts to promote labour market participation, unemployment among immigrants remains disproportionately high—18.4% compared to 4.4% among native-born individuals in 2021 (Arai and Vilhelmsson 2004; Statistics Sweden 2023).

This disparity is often attributed to limited language proficiency, lack of formal qualifications, and restricted access to professional networks (Benerdal 2021; Cheng et al. 2025). Language knowledge is also crucial for understanding social norms and achieving integration (İms et al. 2021). To address these barriers, language education and training initiatives such as Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) have been implemented (Fejes 2019).



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Since 2019, the Swedish Public Employment Service (SPES) has coordinated labour market initiatives, focusing on job matching and labour market preparation through various Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) (Diedrich and Hellgren 2018). Examples include extra services, establishment jobs, and introduction services. While the SPES holds formal responsibility, individuals deemed too distant from regular employment are often referred to municipal ALMPs within social work organisations. However, both national and municipal programmes have been criticised for prioritising short-term employment over sustainable integration (Arai and Vilhelmsson 2004; Starke and Hollertz 2023).

Still, regardless of the actor being responsible for the initiatives, these initiatives have faced criticism for focusing more on getting subsidised employment instead of supporting long-term labour market integration. Starke and Hollertz (2023) concluded that labour market programmes implemented by municipalities primarily aim to achieve financial independence for the unemployed. Drawing on international research, a systematic literature review by Filges et al. (2016) suggested that participation in active labour market programmes (ALMPs) has only a modest effect on securing employment. Benerdal (2021) conducted a policy document analysis and interviews with labour market actors and stakeholders involved in ALMPs, and reported that many programmes fail to provide the qualifications required for stable jobs, instead offering temporary placements that may perpetuate unemployment. Other studies emphasise that long-term educational components are crucial for sustainable participation (Hernes et al. 2022). Similarly, Hellman et al. (2024) reported that ALMPs did not always lead to new employment opportunities. The interviewees viewed this as counterproductive, as it often led to decreased motivation and feelings of hopelessness among immigrants. Hence, it was suggested that, in the context of subsidised employment, the goals and the employer's responsibilities for providing support should be clearly defined (Hellman et al. 2024).

Programme design has thus been identified as critical. Starke and Hollertz (2023) compared municipal and NGO-led programmes, showing that municipalities prioritised paid work and financial independence, whereas NGOs focused on well-being and skill development. Internationally, longer, workplace-based integration programmes have shown better outcomes, provided they include elements that enhance cultural and social capital (Ortlieb et al. 2025). Scholars argue that programme design must move beyond narrow integration policy frameworks and consider the broader implementation context (Bucken-Knapp et al. 2019; Starke and Hollertz 2023).

Despite extensive policy attention, limited research has explored how ALMPs are experienced by those directly involved. The existing studies have largely focused on employment outcomes, neglecting the lived experiences of immigrants and the practitioners who support them. Yet, participants' perceptions of programme design, quality of support, and developmental opportunities may be as decisive for long-term integration as for formal structures (Hellman et al. 2024; Ortlieb et al. 2025). Moreover, systematic reviews highlight that effectiveness depends not only on intervention type but also on implementation quality (Filges et al. 2016).

Despite the growing body of research, few projects have studied how ALMPs can be systematically developed or refined to fit the needs of end users and the expectations of the labour market through participatory and co-creative approaches. The existing studies primarily address programme outcomes or policy design, while the processes through which interventions are shaped together with immigrants and practitioners remain underexplored. Thus, there is limited knowledge on how ALMPs can be redesigned to better meet participants' needs and support sustainable labour market integration.

By adopting a co-design methodology within the MRC framework for developing complex interventions, this study offers a novel contribution to the ALMP and integration

literature. It provides empirically grounded insights into how programme components can be collaboratively identified and refined, and it expands the methodological repertoire of ALMP research by applying an intervention development approach rarely used in this field. The aim of this study is therefore to identify, co-design, and re-design practical solutions and actions to strengthen the support provided in ALMPs, thereby facilitating a sustainable working life for immigrants.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is part of a larger project in which the existing ALMP will be discussed and refined to enable further support to those participating. The larger project is guided by the MRC guideline for evaluating complex interventions (Skivington et al. 2024), including the following four phases: development or identification of the intervention, feasibility, evaluation, and implementation. This study focuses on further developing, revising and optimising the intervention ahead of empirical testing.

To highlight support needed and identify practical solutions to meet these needs, a co-creative design was chosen for this study. This co-creative project involves researchers, practitioners, and end users. End users in this study consists of immigrants with limited Swedish language proficiency participating in an ALMP, and practitioners who are municipal workers that support these individuals throughout their participation in the programme. These partners have collaborated based on the following key principles of co-creation: (1) power sharing; (2) inclusion of all perspectives, competencies, and skills of all actors/partners involved; (3) respect for and valuing of the knowledge held by all those involved in co-creation; (4) reciprocity; and (5) building and maintaining relationships (Hickey et al. 2018).

The study was conducted in collaboration with a Swedish municipality. Researchers and representatives from the municipality's labour market administration formed a co-creation team with the task of ensuring that all stakeholder groups (immigrants and various representatives from the municipality) participated and received relevant information throughout the project. The team jointly planned the design of the project, engaged multiple stakeholders representing end users, participated in workshops, and collaboratively analysed and discussed data within the project.

2.1. Context

The ALMP examined in this study is a long-term integration programme lasting one year situated in a workplace setting, funded and provided by a Swedish municipality. It is designed with the primary goal of helping job seekers in need of extra support to gain the skills and experience needed in order to increase their chances of finding sustainable employment in the regular labour market. The purpose of the ALMP includes, among other things, enabling participants to maintain and strengthen their professional skills; gain work experience within the Swedish labour market; obtain new references; and increase self-awareness and understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and individual needs. The participants enrolled in the programme are assigned a personal caseworker to guide them and are then placed in a workplace setting where they receive support from a workplace supervisor. They also receive help from other municipal workers, such as job coaches, to improve other job-seeking skills needed to increase their chances of regular employment opportunities after the programme. Furthermore, if needed, participants are encouraged to combine their work with Swedish language courses which are also provided by the municipality (SFI).

Placements commonly last for 12 months, but in exceptional cases, they may be prolonged for an additional period. Participants are placed in two types of workplaces.

The first are municipal workplaces with a primary focus on job training, which employ supervisors specifically tasked with supporting the individuals, such as second-hand department stores or bicycle repair shops. The others are municipal workplaces, such as preschools or elderly care centres, in which the main assignment is unrelated to job training. These workplaces do not usually have employed supervisors; instead, being a supervisor is a secondary assignment for one of their employees. After meeting with participants, caseworkers assign them to various workplaces they deem suitable after taking their wishes and skills under consideration. Typically, those in need of greater support are placed in the workplaces with specifically trained supervisors, and those deemed to have higher chances of gaining employment after the programme are placed in municipal workplaces with another main assignment besides job training.

Throughout the duration of the ALMP, caseworkers hold three follow-up meetings with each participant to review their status and progress with work tasks, well-being, and any further development needs. Workplace supervisors are often invited to attend these meetings. The format of each meeting depends on the caseworker's evaluation of the participant's needs and the availability of other relevant actors.

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling (Palinkas et al. 2015; Suri 2011) was used to target individuals involved in and contributing to the ALMP for immigrants. The informants consisted of (1) caseworkers who are primarily responsible for delivering the specific ALMP; (2) job coaches who provide services such as CV writing, interview training, information about the labour market, and support with job searching; (3) workplace supervisors who offer daily support in the workplace during the ALMP; and (4) immigrants who are participating in the specific ALMP.

Inclusion criteria for caseworkers, job coaches and supervisors required that they were employed by the municipality and worked either directly with or in connection to the specific ALMP. ALMP participants were selected according to three criteria: they were born abroad, actively engaged in an ALMP and could communicate in Swedish without the need for an interpreter. Eligible individuals were contacted either by the co-creation team or by caseworkers, who informed them about the study, including that participation was voluntary and would not affect their ALMP participation. Written informed consent was obtained by the research group. The ALMP participants participating in the workshops had slightly higher Swedish language proficiency than the average ALMP participant. This selection was done in order to ensure a rich dataset, since it enabled more constructive discussions and nuanced information about the topic at hand. Caseworkers, job coaches and supervisors were purposively asked about participation in order to obtain variation regarding work experience, gender and age.

The sample comprised a total of 29 informants, with the following representation: 7 caseworkers, 6 job coaches, 9 ALMP participants, and 7 workplace supervisors (see Table 1). The ALMP participants had been involved in the programme for a period ranging from 5 to 12 months, in workplaces including sanitation, preschools, cafés, and the recycling of electronic devices. The majority spoke Arabic as their first language, the largest minority language in Sweden.

Table 1. Interviewees' demographic information.

| Group of Interviewees | Age (Range) | Gender (Women/Men) | Work Experience in Current Position (Range, Mean) |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------------------|---|
| LMS/job coaches | 30–65 | 7/6 | 0.5–7 years (M = 2.3 years) |
| ALMP participants | 37–61 | 5/4 | 5–12 months (M = 8.75 months) |
| Workplace supervisors | 33–61 | 4/3 | 1–29 years (M = 10.25 years) |

2.3. Data Collection

Seven workshops were conducted, and some of the informants participated in two workshops each due to their availability and interest. Specifically, five workplace supervisors, three ALMP participants, one caseworker, and one job coach attended two workshops. The workshops were held separately for each stakeholder group to promote power sharing and enable occasions where all participants could openly share their thoughts and reflections. Two workshops were conducted with caseworkers and job coaches, two with workplace supervisors, and three with ALMP participants. The first two workshops with ALMP participants had low attendance, so a third workshop was deemed necessary.

The workshops were conducted in two series, where the first three (one with each stakeholder group) focused on the initial period of the ALMP (months 1–4), and the subsequent three focused on the continuation of ALMP (months 5–12) (see Table 2). The seventh workshop covered the whole ALMP period, as it was a complementary session. All workshops lasted approximately 120 min and were facilitated by the co-creation team. One person was the moderator, and 1–2 individuals served as observers. Representatives from both the university and the municipality participated in each workshop. The representative from the university was a neutral person to all participants and moderated the workshops. The representatives from the municipality participated as observers. These individuals worked at the municipality but not directly with the ALMP participants in order to minimise the risk of influencing the participants' answers and reflections.

Table 2. Interviewees in different workshops.

| Workshop | Focus at the Workshop | Informants |
|---------------------|------------------------|---|
| WS1 | Initial period of ALMP | Four caseworkers and four job coaches |
| WS2 | Initial period of ALMP | Four ALMP participants |
| WS3 | Initial period of ALMP | Seven workplace supervisors |
| WS4 | Later period of ALMP | Three ALMP participants |
| WS5 | Later period of ALMP | Six workplace supervisors |
| WS6 | Later period of ALMP | Three caseworkers and three job coaches |
| WS7 (complementary) | Whole ALMP period | Five ALMP participants |

The workshop sessions started with a presentation on the project and an overview of the current format and support provided during the ALMP. This was followed by small-group discussions focusing on facilitators and barriers in the ALMP, as well as ways in which the support might be reconstructed to strengthen the programme in order to promote sustainable labour market participation. To facilitate discussion and stimulate the group to generate new ideas, participants used post-it notes, large sheets of paper, and coloured pencils. The workshops ended up with a summary shared in the larger group.

All discussions were audio-recorded digitally and later transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, all post-it notes and written materials produced from the workshops were gathered and used in the subsequent analysis.

2.4. Analysis

The analysis followed a thematic approach, inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). The research material consisted of audio-recorded workshop discussions, which were transcribed and summarised after each workshop (to ensure familiarisation with the data). Moreover, photographs of post-it notes and handwritten tables created by informants during small-group discussions were included in the analysis. The process started with the

recorded discussions, as these described the content and arrangement of the post-it notes and tables. Subsequently, the photographs of the post-it notes and handwritten tables were coded thematically to ensure no new codes emerged. Finally, the arrangement of the post-it notes was explored. This investigation revealed thematic proximity among codes under the same topic, but it did not identify any hierarchical relationships between the themes.

Initial codes were created for each workshop, with frequently occurring codes serving as the basis for creating themes. For instance, the initial codes references, expected learning outcomes, and not regular employment described different views of the ALMP's aim, and hence, were grouped under the ALMP aim theme. Similarly, the initial code, norms and culture, describing different perceptions of workplace norms and the Swedish labour market, was perceived as potentially influencing the understanding of the ALMP's aim and was thus included within the ALMP aim theme. This theme was discussed under the sub-heading Lack of a shared understanding of the ALMP aim.

The themes were reviewed with reference to the coded extracts and their connection to the different actors interviewed, to determine whether certain themes were more prevalent among specific actors. For instance, the theme collaboration between caseworkers, job coaches, and supervisors was absent from the ALMP participants' workshops, although it was heavily prevalent in the workplace supervisors' workshops. This approach ensured that the concerns of the different actors were accurately represented. The next step was the finalisation and naming of themes. Thereafter, the themes deemed relevant to this article were selected and illustrated with representative quotations to enhance transparency.

The co-creation team collaborated throughout the whole analysis procedure. The first and last author conducted the initial coding using Nvivo 14 software, which were then presented and discussed within the co-creation team. Revisions were made and considered in the next step of the thematic analysis, which also were discussed and refined by the co-creation team. Before writing up the final results, the preliminary findings were presented and discussed with municipal actors.

2.5. Ethics

The project received ethical review approval. All interviewees were informed in writing about the project, its aims, and the method of data collection in advance. They also received information about the handling of their personal details, as well as about participation being voluntary and their right to withdraw at any time. For ALMP participants, all information was provided in simplified Swedish. All interviewees signed a consent form before the recording of the discussions.

To ensure pseudonymity, interviewees are identified by their role in the ALMP process and assigned a number; for example, case worker 1. To protect confidentiality, the authors carefully selected the quotations presented. Finally, all research material and personal information are saved in a secure location, according to General Data Protection Regulation rules.

3. Results

The findings highlight several areas in which participants perceive improvements which could strengthen support within ALMPs. These improvements are presented in four themes. (1) Participants emphasised the need for clear, accessible, and staged information, delivered in multiple formats, and where necessary, in their native languages, to ensure realistic expectations and understanding of the programme. (2) Enhancing coordination and establishing a shared understanding among caseworkers, job coaches, and workplace supervisors were seen as crucial for aligning efforts and providing coherent support. (3) Individualised support, including tailored plans, systematic follow-ups, and the active involvement of all key actors, was identified as essential for addressing diverse needs

and facilitating progress. (4) Integrating language learning into the workplace through mixed-language interactions, adapted communication, and close supervisory guidance was considered vital for enabling both skill development and social integration. These themes are further described in the following text.

3.1. Providing Timely and Accurate Information

All interviewees highlighted that ALMP participants may hold different perspectives and perceptions of the Swedish labour market compared to caseworkers, job coaches, and workplace supervisors. Differences in expectations of employees or job seekers were discussed as key factors influencing the understanding of the aims, goals, and processes of the ALMP. For example, some ALMP participants noted that, in Sweden, there is a strong emphasis on the importance and necessity of education, which may be less prominent in their home countries. This illustrates how participants' perceptions of employment may differ from the prevailing views in Sweden, as expressed by caseworkers, job coaches, and workplace supervisors, leading to varying expectations of the ALMP initiative. Caseworkers and job coaches highlighted that these differing perceptions may hinder participants from fully realising their own potential and that of the ALMP itself.

These differing expectations could also result in a misalignment between the intended aim of the ALMP and the participants' own expectations. This became evident, as some ALMP participants expressed emotional frustration. They described fluctuating between positive emotions, such as happiness at securing a "job" (referring to the ALMP contract), and negative emotions, such as disappointment when the contract was not extended or did not lead to a permanent position. These emotional shifts resulted in a sense of frustration and exhaustion, further compounded by the uncertainty and perceived injustice often associated with unemployment. These feelings arose even though caseworkers expressed that they made considerable efforts to inform participants about the framework of the ALMP, emphasising that it does not guarantee a permanent position. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of providing this information continuously, rather than only at the beginning of the ALMP. They noted that the volume of information in the initial phase could be overwhelming, and thus difficult for the ALMP participants to fully comprehend. Caseworkers discussed it as follows:

- *"It's important to know both what is expected during the employment, all these practical details that you talk about, but also that it's not one of those jobs that will last forever. They should still be looking for other jobs and preparing themselves for that as well."*
- *"I think it gets very confusing. Because this thing about, I mean, hope is the last thing to die"*.
- *"When you hear supervisors and colleagues say things like, 'he's doing a good job'. 'You're doing a good job'. 'We like you', and 'appreciated in the workplace', it creates a hope that maybe I can stay. I think that's what it is. That you still... And then you choose to interpret it that way"*.
- *"Yes, exactly. And then perhaps it needs to be very clear that this is not a place, that even if you work super well, this is still a temporary employment. So that they really understand it for real". (Caseworkers)*

To foster a shared understanding among the different actors, several recommendations were proposed. These included clearer communication with ALMP participants and closer collaboration among the actors involved. One suggested way to improve communication with ALMP participants was to provide information in different formats (e.g., oral; written; using pictures or films) and in the participants' native languages. This information should be distributed at different stages during the ALMP to ensure its relevance to participants'

current stage in the process. For example, topics such as reporting sick leave could be explored during the first months of the ALMP, while guidance on applying for jobs might be introduced at a later stage.

3.2. Aligning Efforts Towards Common Goals

It also became evident that the expectations and views on the aim of the ALMP were somewhat unclear, even among those working directly with these programmes, leading to diverse interpretations of what the ALMP was intended to achieve. The lack of a shared understanding was identified as challenging, particularly concerning collaboration between different ALMP actors, for example, caseworkers and workplace supervisors. This made it difficult to work towards a common goal, as summarised by one workplace supervisor.

“There is no common thread. Here you have participants, and then you have all the different professional categories that work with participants. And everyone works a bit differently”. (Workplace supervisor)

Some participants highlighted that the aim of the ALMP is to provide training in job-related tasks, as well as possibilities to practise and develop Swedish language skills. Others viewed the aim as being about understanding and becoming familiar with workplace norms, expected behaviours, and the general culture and structure of the Swedish labour market and society. The ALMP was also seen as a way to support participants in acquiring valuable references for future job applications. As discussed,

“It is important (for participants) to learn things on their own because that’s the difference between a regular job and ALMP. But they flow into each other a bit. The purpose (of the ALMP) is to get work training, to understand what employment in Sweden means”.

(Job coach)

Others expressed that they did not think about the aim of the ALMP to a great extent. However, they expressed great confusion about its purpose and its contribution to society as a tax-funded initiative. Concerns were raised about it being offered to individuals who might not yet be ready to enter the labour market, which made it difficult for some to understand its stated aims. The participants emphasised the need to clarify the ALMP’s aim and to establish a shared understanding among caseworkers, workplace supervisors, and ALMP participants to ensure everyone is working towards the same objective.

By fostering closer collaboration among key actors, including caseworkers, job coaches, and workplace supervisors, it is possible to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and communicated. The participants discussed that this approach could help minimise confusion and better align efforts towards common goals. Regular meetings and a shared document outlining the objectives and respective roles within the ALMP were perceived as crucial. Additionally, creating a network comprising caseworkers, job coaches, and workplace supervisors could facilitate problem-solving and promote a shared understanding, ultimately enhancing the overall support system for immigrants.

3.3. Targeting Individualised Support

During the workshops, it was highlighted that ALMP participants come from diverse backgrounds, including varying experiences, educational levels, and life conditions (e.g., family responsibilities or health conditions), all of which influence their development and ability to enter the labour market. All interviewees agreed that to effectively address this diversity, individualised support targeting each ALMP participant’s specific situation is needed. This approach was evident in meetings between caseworkers and participants, where activities were chosen based on individual needs. However, delivering such individualised support proved challenging due to its limited degree of systematisation and

the lack of a shared understanding regarding the primary focus of the ALMP. Specifically, caseworkers and workplace supervisors highlighted the superficial nature of follow-ups on participants' individual goals and activities, as well as the infrequency of meetings involving all three parties, caseworkers, workplace supervisors, and participants, together. As one workplace supervisor observed:

"I'm thinking we'll go back again to the aim. That you start from the (ALMP) aim and plan for the individual. Where are we on this journey? And what do we need to work on more? Because when I think about the follow-up meetings that I have been involved in during the ALMP, they mostly feel random. Like I said, the caseworker asks pre-determined questions. 'How is this going?' Then they ask me, 'how is this one going?' I say, 'yes, it's going well'". (Workplace supervisor)

Proposed actions to enhance individualised support included strengthening the triad of ALMP participants, workplace supervisors, and caseworkers to facilitate systematic follow-up, thereby creating a coherent "red thread" throughout the ALMP for each individual participant.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the initial meeting where the triad would participate and together complete a tailored plan for each participant, where the goal for their participation in the ALMP is clearly defined, should be formalised. This plan would then be reviewed at every subsequent meeting involving the three actors, facilitating regular monitoring of the participant's progress. The three actors would discuss how well the goals have been achieved or identify what more is needed in this direction. The importance of including the triad was emphasised due to their various contributions. For example, workplace supervisors can contribute by evaluating the needs of the ALMP participants with reference to what additional activities they should undertake.

"We can really make a wish list like that—where we see the person's needs. What would this person need? And present it at a follow-up meeting". (Workplace supervisor)

In summary, the provision of individualised support was closely connected to stronger collaboration between the actors and the establishment of a coherent "red thread" that all three parties could refer to. This would enable better coordination of their actions and decisions.

3.4. Integrating Language Training at the Workplace

It was discussed that ALMP participants' limited proficiency in Swedish often hindered their ability to learn at work, perform specific work tasks, understand the purpose of the ALMP, present themselves and their skills, and more broadly, participate in social situations within the workplace. Learning Swedish is crucial for entering the Swedish labour market. Although the ALMP often offers the possibility to attend language courses during working hours, participants were somewhat hesitant towards this. They found this physically and mentally demanding.

"The teacher told us that when you finish four hours of school, you should study at home for four hours also. But I couldn't study at home because I have several children there too. But there are some things you can do at home. There was so much; I was tired. Then I thought, maybe I should stop studying". (ALMP participant)

On the other hand, learning Swedish in the workplace was perceived as both helpful and valuable by the ALMP participants. This view was also highlighted by caseworkers, who stated that simply trying to express oneself in Swedish is as an important step in language acquisition.

“I would almost like to see everyone practising and just getting the courage to start speaking Swedish. You know, I’ve been struggling with this for years. The mouth just needs to start talking. Because that’s the first challenge”. (Caseworker)

Several solutions were proposed to strengthen language training in the workplace. For example, it was suggested that ALMP participants could be deliberately placed in mixed-language groups to encourage the use of Swedish, rather than relying on their mother tongue.

“And I also think we need to consider how we place people (in workplaces). Because sometimes, putting people who speak the same language. . . There is no development. They just sit and speak the same, or their mother tongue, together. And they feel very comfortable with it. So, they don’t use Swedish. If I sit with someone who speaks Swedish, it will force me to speak Swedish to communicate with them”. (Caseworker)

Furthermore, at an individual level, it was suggested that one-to-one interactions between workplace supervisors and ALMP participants could be strengthened by adapting the language to the participant’s level. Workplace supervisors could ensure the participant’s understanding through repetition, explanations, and the use of examples. Setting clear language improvement goals could be individually formulated for each ALMP participant.

4. Discussion

This study aims to identify, co-design, and re-design practical solutions and actions to strengthen the support provided in ALMPs, in order to facilitate a sustainable working life for immigrants. While the findings are grounded in practices and organisational structures of a single municipal ALMP, several of the identified challenges also reflect patterns documented more broadly in the ALMP and integration literature. The findings present four central aspects that were perceived as important features in an ALMP, as well as solutions on how to improve the support in order to facilitate long-term participation in working life. These aspects relate to the provision of timely and accurate information, the alignment of efforts towards common goals, the delivery of individualised support, and the integration of language training in the workplace. These will be discussed in the following sections.

Aligning efforts towards a common goal was perceived as challenging due to the diverse perceptions of the ALMP aim. It became evident that the four groups of actors involved held different, albeit overlapping, perspectives. Among the professionals, the understanding of the ALMP’s aim appeared to shift, from viewing it as a platform for participants to learn about Swedish society, norms, and culture, to seeing it as an initiative that focused on the individual participant and their efforts to attain employment through the ALMP. These findings are particularly noteworthy, as previous international research has highlighted both the educational aspects and the value of work experience in ALMPs (Ortlieb et al. 2025), which indicate that both views of the programme’s aim are relevant for ALMPs beyond this setting.

Nonetheless, all actors involved would benefit from establishing a common understanding in order to have a shared focus. The participants in this study discussed the importance of having a “red thread” throughout the ALMP, starting with a shared aim and an individual goal for each participant, and connecting the different resources and development opportunities together in order to achieve this goal by the end of the programme. This aligns with international research suggesting that ALMPs that include tailored and individualised integration plans tend to produce more positive employment outcomes for immigrants compared to programmes that offer uniform support to all participants (European Parliament 2024). Similar findings have also been reported in research on pro-

moting long-term work participation among other vulnerable groups (Bejerholm et al. 2015; Raeside and McQueen 2021; Sveinsdottir et al. 2020), suggesting that these mechanisms reflect broader structural features of ALMPs rather than characteristics specific to this single setting. A practical solution proposed to strengthen this support in the local setting of the particular municipality under study, was the establishment of a structured process that should be documented and steered by a development plan for each participant, based on their individual needs. Such a plan could serve as a reference document for all actors involved throughout the ALMP. The idea of setting a specific, meaningful goal for each individual and tracking its development is rooted in adult learning theories, which stress the importance of an individual's awareness of their own learning, assigning importance to their actions, and reflecting on them to create new knowledge. Given this, the need for continuity throughout the ALMP becomes even more critical, as European research has suggested that a "one-size-fits-all" design would considerably limit the initiative's potential. Findings that are applicable in international as well as local contexts.

It is also very important to consider ALMP participants' perceptions of the initiative. In this study, participants tended to perceive the ALMP quite pragmatically. By expecting to get a job upon its completion, they emphasised the end rather than the means to it. This perception may influence the emotional intensity and frustration caused by extended unemployment, as reported elsewhere (Hellman et al. 2024; Wikström and Ahnlund 2018). Besides the presence of negative feelings, the present study highlights the intensity of these emotions, which often follows the initial positive emotion of getting a "job" (an ALMP position) or receiving positive feedback for one's performance at work. Such experiences can create expectations of an eventual job offer, which does not correspond to how the ALMP is actually designed. When these expectations are not met, feelings of disappointment and frustration may be a common reaction, as highlighted by Brendler-Lindqvist et al. (2026), who found that such emotions were particularly evident among immigrants when subsidised positions did not lead to permanent employment. These unrealistic expectations may be based on individual dispositions or from misleading/unclear information provided by caseworkers or supervisors. The constant emotional shifts experienced by ALMP participants can intensify these expectations. This emotional shift can lead to frustration, anger, and a view of the Swedish system as unjust. In other words, the emotional frustration created by the ALMP may cause some participants to adopt a negative stance towards both the programme and society, not because they do not receive help, but because they struggle to reconcile conflicting emotions. Moreover, the ALMP, as provided in the municipality under study, does not lead to formal qualifications or officially documented competencies, as demanded for many jobs in the Swedish labour market, a finding that aligns with previous international research (Benerdal 2021; Filges et al. 2016). Instead, the ALMP provides participants with references for future jobs, in the form of contacts. However, the underlying issue of lacking formal education or non-validated previous work experience often remains for immigrants, even after completing the programme. Hence, ALMP participants may continue to be unemployed after their participation in an ALMP (Filges et al. 2016). To address the limited transferability of education and skills acquired in origin countries, research on labour market integration in EU countries highlights programmes that support investment in human capital in order to facilitate entry into and progression within the labour market (European Parliament 2024). This further emphasises the need for a broad focus, including learning about societal norms and culture, as well as opportunities for practical work experience.

This line of reasoning aligns with the findings regarding the potential to tailor individualised support during ALMPs, based on each individual's preferences and needs, which is in line with previous research (Ortlieb et al. 2025). ALMP participants were

often presented as lacking Swedish language skills, education, and experience, and also not understanding the Swedish labour market context. Focusing on language use in the workplace was identified as a key aspect in promoting integration and long-term work participation in the present study, consistent with previous international research on immigrants (European Parliament 2024; Ims et al. 2021) and refugees (Kiviholma and Karhunen 2022). To effectively tailor individual support, it is necessary to ensure consistency and continuity within the programme, which has also been seen in relation to other groups struggling to enter the labour market (Raeside and McQueen 2021; Sveinsdottir et al. 2020). However, both consistency and continuity seem to be challenged by limited collaboration among the different actors involved in the ALMP. Continuity is further hindered by the lack of rigorous follow-up on the participants' progress, as also noted in a previous study (Hellman et al. 2024). Specifically, fragmented communication and limited collaboration between the different professional groups involved in the ALMP process have led to work demarcation. The findings of the present study identified several possible solutions for improving these features, such as fostering closer collaboration among the involved actors and establishing a structured working process by using an individualised development plan during the ALMP. These are important features that warrant further attention, both in practice and in future research.

Methodological Considerations

This study has several methodological strengths that enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The use of a co-creative design ensured the involvement of researchers, practitioners, and end users throughout the process, allowing for the identification of solutions grounded in the lived realities of those most directly affected. Such participatory approaches have been recognised as particularly valuable for capturing diverse perspectives and fostering the relevance of research outcomes (Greenhalgh et al. 2016; Hickey et al. 2018). Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups enabled triangulation of perspectives, providing a more nuanced understanding of both challenges and potential improvements. The study also benefited from data triangulation, drawing on audio-recorded discussions, written materials, and visual artefacts, which strengthened the analytical process (Patton 2015). Still, the small sample size needs to be considered. However, consistent with the updated MRC framework, which emphasises iterative intervention development and refinement prior to feasibility testing and full evaluation, small and purposive samples are considered appropriate in this formative stage (Skivington et al. 2024).

At the same time, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the purposive sampling strategy, while appropriate for capturing rich and detailed accounts (Suri 2011), meant that only ALMP participants with somewhat higher Swedish language proficiency were included. This may have excluded some of the most vulnerable voices, while language barriers may still have limited the depth of expression among those who participated. However, it is a novel attempt to include vulnerable groups in research in areas that often target research on policy levels and stakeholder views only (Hellman et al. 2024; Ortlieb et al. 2025). Immigrant populations are highly diverse and using broad categorical labels risks oversimplifying this diversity and potentially reinforcing stereotypes or unintended stigmatisation (Krasnik 2015). Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the aim of this study is not representativeness, but to generate in-depth, contextually informed insights that help identify key uncertainties and guide necessary adaptations to the intervention. Still, the possibility of social desirability bias cannot be entirely excluded but the data suggest that participants did not limit themselves to affirmative or supportive statements. Both municipal stakeholders and ALMP participants articulated a broad range of perspectives, including several critical, nuanced, and at times

strongly negative reflections on their experiences. Such openness indicates that at least some participants felt able to express dissatisfaction despite the collaborative setting. It is also plausible that individuals elected to participate precisely because the workshops offered a structured opportunity to articulate concerns and influence aspects of the programme that they perceived as problematic. The MRC framework explicitly highlights the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders and capturing experiential knowledge to inform refinement activities before progressing to later evaluative phases (Skivington et al. 2024). Thus, the study sample aligns well with the developmental purpose of this phase and with the broader staged approach articulated in the MRC guidance.

It also has to be acknowledged that the study was conducted in collaboration with a single municipality, which may restrict the transferability of findings to other contexts with different organisational structures or labour market policies (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Still, it has to be acknowledged that the support given by municipalities is quite similar and the findings from this study might therefore be representative for other municipalities as well.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, two key recommendations for the further development of supportive measures in an ALMP can be highlighted. First, it is of high importance that the active labour market programme presents a coherent “red thread” throughout the whole programme. After mapping the ALMP participant’s needs, individual goals could be set, connecting these goals to relevant resources/activities, and regularly following up on the whole process. Second, close collaboration between the main actors (caseworkers/job coaches, participants, and workplace supervisors) is essential. Regular follow-ups and improved communication could enhance continuity and consistency, thereby helping to address the (emotional) frustration expressed by immigrant participants.

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