

# Constructing the employable immigrant: The uses of validation practices in Sweden

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## abstract

This paper examines the Validation/Integration (V/I) project, a labour market initiative aimed at developing methods of validating the prior learning of recent immigrants to Sweden as part of their settlement support aimed at promoting their 'employability'. This study places the V/I project within its social and economic context and uses a constructivist perspective on organizing in order to problematize how ideas regarding employability are translated into practice within the project. The study proposes that the V/I project, notwithstanding its laudable intentions, by focusing on the bureaucratic requirements of employers and public organizations, promotes specific forms of employability and may thus formalize and reinforce the ethnic division of Sweden's labour market.

## Introduction

Employability, often defined as an individual's potential to become employed, has gained renewed attention in political debate over the last two decades (Berntson, Sverke and Marklund, 2006; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Forrier and Sels, 2003; Finn, 2000; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Gore, 2005; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). It has emerged as a signifier that has replaced previous vocabularies for describing the workforce. In the existing literature, employability is often conceived of as a stock of individual resources that constantly need to be attended to and renewed and are strongly connected to ideas concerning education and training, lifelong learning, and work practice (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Berglund and Fejes, 2009). Also, the concept of employability is constantly being broadened to include more and more qualities, resulting in increased demands

on the individual when it comes to his/her personal development and learning, simultaneous to these demands often being less clearly stated (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004).

One area where the concept of employability has been seen as particularly beneficial is the context of the social inclusion of marginalized groups such as immigrants (Dahlstedt, 2009). As contemporary society is characterized by the growing mass displacement and migration of people – from so-called third world countries to so-called developed countries – increasing efforts are being made by many countries to manage this migration by means of measuring and evaluating the skills and knowledge of migrants upon arrival in order to promote their employability and support their entry into the labour market (see, for example, Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Diedrich and Styhre, 2008; Diedrich, 2013). Such efforts are often summarized under the heading ‘the validation of prior learning’<sup>1</sup>, i.e. a set of methods and procedures which include, among other things, questionnaires, personal interviews, and practical assessments all aimed at identifying, assessing and documenting skills, knowledge, and experience with the help of vocational experts or other educational specialists.

While there has been much support for the validation procedure, and many projects have been conducted in order to develop and implement its methods and tools (Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Andersson and Osman, 2008; Diedrich, Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2011; Diedrich, 2013), the results so far have largely been disappointing. Recent immigrants have failed to become employed to any greater degree than before. Even proponents of the system have found it difficult to link up any long-term positive results, including in relation to employability, with the procedure<sup>2</sup>.

There is, therefore, a need to further understand how employability is translated into practice as a part of organizing. Thus, drawing on the sociology of translation in organization studies (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Czarniawska, 2004), this paper reports an in-depth case study of a labour market project organized by the County Labour Board of Western Sweden and aimed at validating the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants to Sweden in order to promote their employability. It seeks to explore the question of how the idea of employability is translated into practice as a part of such organizing. More

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1 In other countries, this is also referred to as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), or the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), or Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

2 Presentation by the Director General of the Swedish National Commission for Validation (Valideringsdelegationen) on “The Swedish Model of Validation” in Stockholm, Sweden, in October 2007.

specifically, the study addresses how the employable immigrant is constructed and enacted in the context of the settlement of recent immigrants in Sweden. Similar to Garsten and Jacobsson (2004), we identify both the norms of employability and the techniques employed in the construction of an employable individual. Furthermore, by employing a translation perspective, attention is paid not so much to a given essence of employability, but on how it is constructed through organizing processes.

### Organizing employability

Labour market reforms (Glyn, Howell and Schmitt, 2006; Peck and Theodore, 2000; Gregg and Wadsworth, 1995), employment and employment relations, including temporary work (Smith and Neuwirth, 2009; MacPhail and Bowles, 2008), agency work (Hoque and Kirpatrick, 2008), and what has more broadly been referred to as contingent employment (Bergström and Storrie, 2003; Purcell and Purcell, 1998) have all garnered significant attention from social scientists and management scholars. More specifically, employability, has gained renewed attention in political debate over the last decade (Berntson, Sverke and Marklund, 2006; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Forrier and Sels, 2003). Replacing previous vocabularies for describing the workforce that spoke about the shortage of employment opportunities, and described people as being either employed or unemployed, the recent vocabulary speaks about degrees of *employability*, with individuals increasingly being portrayed as employable or not employable (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), or being in need of employability skills.

The shift away from an employment perspective, whereby society and the employers are held responsible for the job supply, towards an increased 'responsibilization' of the individual is part of the shift towards a neoliberal ideology (see, for example, Jarvis, 2007; Miller and Rose, 2008), in which individuals are expected to assume responsibility for their own lives and economic situation (see, for example, Adamson, Doherty and Viney, 1998; McKinlay, 2002; Roper, Ganesh and Inkson, 2010). Subsequently, in Sweden and many other countries, labour market authorities have been quick to embrace ideas concerning continuous education and training, lifelong learning, and the idea that individuals must constantly 'upgrade' their skills and knowledge (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Dahlstedt, 2009), including 'soft skills' such as decision-making, communicating, and having a positive attitude towards working life. In this new regime, an individual is expected to be capable of evaluating his/her own situation, to be prepared for all eventualities, and to embrace change (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). Policy rhetoric refers to these

kinds of individuals as ‘lifelong learners’ who run their lives as an enterprise and continually invest in education and learning in order to have the most updated skills and knowledge in relation to the changing needs of the labour market (Jarvis, 1999; Berglund and Fejes, 2009; Fejes and Nicoll, 2008). Such policy rhetoric implies that individual freedom and agency is unlimited.

Rather than empirically investigating the complexities of how employability is constructed in practice, researchers have often adopted a managerialist, essentialist perspective, treating employability as an array of traits and/or attributes, e.g. formal and informal skills and knowledge, and looking for the best methods and procedures for supporting and/or measuring people’s employability (see, for example, Harvey, 2010).

Critical researchers have used discourse analysis to examine how discourses on employability are mobilized on a transnational level, such as the EU and the OECD, in order to influence national labour market policy (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), or how they put people in various contexts in terms of being responsible for their own employability (Fejes and Berglund, 2010). Others have examined the relationship between the discourses on employability and lifelong learning and the difficulties of translating these concepts into practice within organizations (Fejes, 2010). Such discourses provide direction for day-to-day practice; they also prescribe and encourage certain types of behaviour, sometimes supported by various types of practices, e.g. practices of organizing, assessment, and reward. Garsten and Jacobsson (2004) argue that the discourse on employability has established the ‘employable individual’ as a normative category and that this category of employability, like other administrative categories, may function to legitimize measures directed – or not directed – at actors who fall under the category, as well as their position in the labour market. However, such generalized discourses are always *translated* into local contexts where existing practices, traditions, and institutionalized ways of seeing and acting transform and reformulate ideas in specific ways (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005).

#### *Translating the concept of employability into practice*

The translation model has been made sense of in organization theory in terms of the ‘travel of ideas’ (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005), a broad four-step process through which (1) an idea is separated from its original context and translated into an object such as a text, a model or some other representation, (2) the idea *qua* object travels in time and space until, (3) it is translated further within some other time/space on the basis of the local context and practices, and finally, (4) the new activities and practices are repeated and become institutionalized and eventually taken for granted.

While ideas, once they have been transformed into objects (e.g. a policy document outlining the new lifelong learning strategy of the municipality), can more easily circulate in and between organizations, from one time/space to another (see Latour, 1986; 1987; 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005), they do not become entirely 'objective' and unambiguous. Instead the translation is characterized and governed by different interpretations of the idea *qua* object. Furthermore, when actors seek to translate an idea, they may encounter other actors who have competing interests and who seek to interrupt this process. This means that they need to negotiate interests and actions with others. Subsequently, there are continuous struggles to stabilize a given translation, against various efforts to destabilize it. In this sense, local practice talks back at discourse (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). In other words, what employability becomes is determined by the local context.

While the prevalent literature on employability tends to only focus, with some exceptions, on what exists in an essential manner – employability as a set of specific and measurable attributes which a person needs to possess, and which can be created using the correct tools and techniques – the translation approach focuses on both what exists and what is created; the relationship between humans and ideas, ideas and objects, and humans and objects (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005). These relationships are characterized by various contingencies and attempts to control these, and are mediated by actors in search of meaning as a part of their work of enacting employability. In this paper, we argue that paying attention to all of these is required in order to understand what is usually referred to as employability.

## The study's setting and method

### *Swedish Immigration policy and practice*

The structure of immigration into Sweden has changed in a fundamental way over the past four decades. During the 1970s, the share of skill-based labour immigration from other Nordic countries, and directly linked with industrial demand and labour shortages, dropped to around 5% of overall immigration, while the number of refugees from other parts of the world, without any documented skills and knowledge, increased significantly (Lundh and Olsson, 1999). A number of official and academic reports have echoed the widespread belief that non-native residents of Sweden<sup>3</sup>, especially those coming from

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3 In 2007, 1,592,326 foreign citizens were registered in Sweden of a total population of 9 million. The majority is of Finnish descent, with other large groups consisting of

countries outside Europe, have a weak position on the Swedish labour market and are unable to find employment matching their skills and competence<sup>4</sup>. In Sweden, as in many other European countries, this weak position is attributed both to 'structural' and everyday discrimination and to structural changes on the labour market, where low-skilled jobs have largely disappeared and been replaced by moderate to high-skilled service jobs (De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002; Swedish Integration Board, 2006; Rauhut and Blomberg, 2003; Swedish Government Official Reports, 2003: 75; 2004: 21; 2006: 59). Other reasons that have been voiced concern perceptions among the host population regarding cultural distance from what is considered to be the Swedish norm, as well as the time immigrants have spent in Sweden (De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002). In response, and in line with an activation focus, Swedish policymakers have focused their attention on supporting immigrants into employment shortly after their arrival in the country through industry-specific, or otherwise specialized, Swedish language courses, career counselling, job-seeker courses, and activities aimed at assessing skills and knowledge, generally referred to in Sweden as validation.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

One of the authors undertook an ethnography-inspired study over a two-year period from 2006 to 2008. The study included interviews, observations, and document analysis. Forty-one interviews were conducted with immigrants (6) and representatives of various municipal, state, and private organizations (35) who are involved in the assessment of the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants to Sweden. These included the Swedish Migration Board, the Public Employment Service (PES), the Refugee Units, the Social Security Services, the Municipal Adult Education Administration, the municipal administration of one of Western Sweden's largest cities, and various providers of educational services.

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individuals (or their family members) born in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran, Poland, Denmark, Norway, and Germany.

- 4 The better the educational background of immigrants, the higher their rate of employment will be. The highest employment rates are to be found among immigrants from Germany and Finland, and the lowest among Somalis, who are deemed poorly educated (Statistics Sweden, 2009: 44). What is interesting is the fact that the employment rate is relatively low amongst immigrants from Iraq and Iran although members of this group usually have a background in higher education (Statistics Sweden 2009: 44). One important factor, which is often mentioned when it comes to employment, is the time that immigrants have spent in Sweden. Between 1997 and 2007, immigrants who had been in Sweden for shorter periods of time also had lower employment rates. (Statistics Sweden, 2009: 64; Segendorf and Teljosuo, 2011).

The interviews were open-ended (Silverman, 1993; Kvale, 1996). They were recorded on minidisc and then transcribed in full.

The fieldwork focused primarily on observations of assessment activities. Over a period of ten weeks, one of the authors observed a group of ten recent immigrants as they took part in the 'qualification portfolio' activity. This was a daily, four-hour course aimed at documenting their past personal and vocational experiences and, using various job-seeking activities, making them more 'job ready' for the Swedish labour market. The group consisted of four women and six men aged between 20 and 50. They had come to Sweden from Iran, Thailand, Russia, Somalia, Syria, and Djibouti. Most had fled from war and persecution in their home countries while a few of them had come to Sweden for personal reasons.

In addition, meetings were observed that involved management representatives and caseworkers facilitating the collaboration between the various organizations participating in the project. They painted a vivid picture of how the project participants talked about and made sense of their work with these recent immigrants. Throughout, field notes were taken, which included both comments made by the participants during the meetings and the researcher's comments regarding the setting and organizing of the meetings. These field notes later formed the basis of the field stories written about the meetings.

During the conversations and interviews, the interviewees described events that had taken place prior to the researcher's arrival on the scene, as well as the experiences of co-workers not being observed by the researcher. Different types of documents, e.g. government reports and statistics, agreements, memoranda, and documents from web pages, e-mails, and letters, enabled the identification and analysis of a number of these events.

The analysis focused on organizing practice. The analytical premises were that: (1) practice is difficult to understand simply by examining its products or outcomes; (2) practice involves joint efforts over time and is processual; and (3) meaning is continuously negotiated and mediated in a context. The analysis was influenced by a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Using an iterative process, the first interview was compared with the second, then the first and second interviews with the third, and so forth. In parallel with this, the notes from the observed meetings were compared to the interviews. It then became possible to identify categories and sub-categories in the material. The reading of the material was based on the pre-understanding of the researchers, who originate from a particular cultural setting, and it is inevitable that they will use classifications, which are in accordance with this understanding.

Subsequently, the material was categorized according to the constructions of the idea of validating prior foreign skills and knowledge, the ambitions of the project and its materializations in practice, and the construction of employability (as related to the efficiency of the administrative procedures and to the heterogeneous and ambiguous experiences of the immigrants). A final category concerned the results of the project. We are aware that this is not an exhaustive list of categories; however, given the limited scope of this paper, we will focus here on the above categories only.

## Validation practices and the employable immigrant

### *The idea of validating prior learning in Sweden*

In Sweden, the notion of validating prior learning appeared in connection with the *Adult Education Initiative (Kunskapslyftet)*, an elaborate education programme run by the Ministry for Education from 1997 to 2002 (see, for example, Swedish Govt. Reports 2001:78). Its intention was to 'improve every citizen's participation in social progress, employability and opportunities for further education (Government Bill, 1995/1996, p. 222). Validation had existed in Sweden prior to this (see Andersson and Fejes, 2010), but now it was being packaged in a more explicit way; it was positioned as a vital part of a process whereby the prior experience of every citizen is recognized, and followed by flexible and individual formal training (Andersson, 2008, p. 133). According to the Swedish government, validation is:

[a] process that involves the structured assessment, valuation, documentation, and recognition of the knowledge and competence that an individual possesses, independently of how this knowledge and competence was acquired. (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 19, authors' own translation)

Validation is carried out against the formal criteria of upper secondary school or university courses in only a limited number of occupations (e.g. the healthcare sector). In most areas, the focus is on validating skills and knowledge on the basis of industry requirements, with the procedure not leading to the issuing of formal grades. Over the past few years, the government has increasingly been highlighting the value of validating 'the competence of people of a foreign background to facilitate their integration with society and their entry into the labour market' (Swedish Integration Board, 2006). Mirroring Sweden's tradition of pursuing an active labour market policy, and collaboration between municipality, state, and other actors in labour market projects, a range of regional and national projects have thus recently been conducted in order to establish methods and processes of validating prior overseas learning (see, for

instance, Andersson and Osman, 2008; Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Diedrich, 2013, for more examples).

*The Validation/Integration Project - validation translated into a tool for integration*

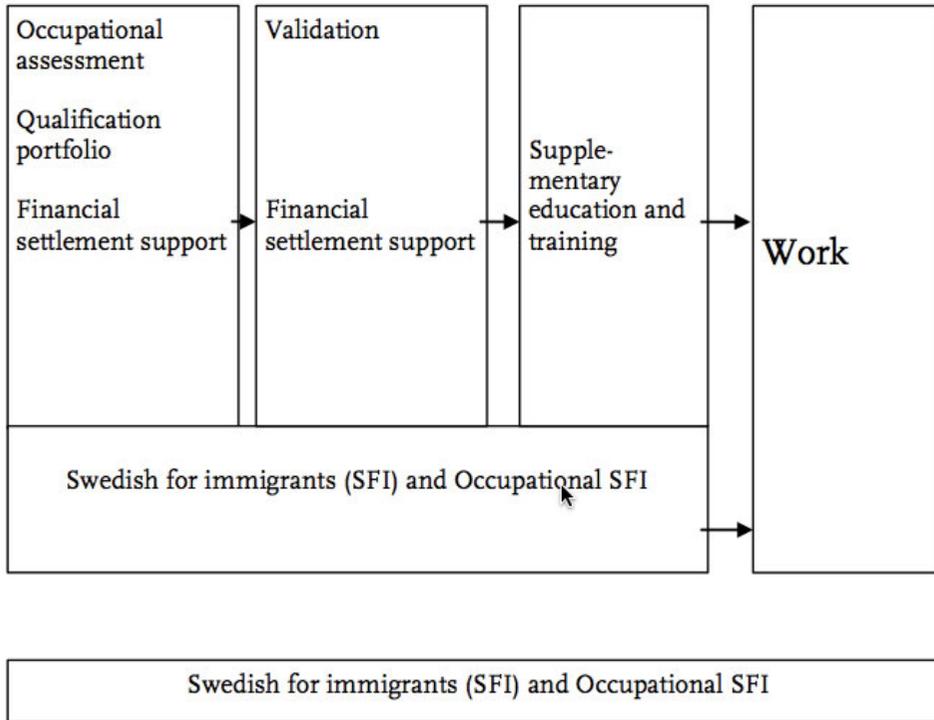
The Validation/Integration project (V/I project) was launched in 2006 by the (now defunct) County Labour Board (*Länsarbetsnämnden*) in one of Sweden's largest counties. It was aimed at improving collaboration between municipal and state actors providing recent refugees and other immigrants with settlement support and establishing and maintaining a procedure for assessing the prior learning of immigrants in order to better facilitate their integration into both the labour market and society. To do so, the County Labour Board sought to 'adapt' the existing validation methods for professionals with work experience from Sweden to the target group of 'recent immigrants with non-Nordic backgrounds' who participate in the settlement support process and possess 'skills and competence that cannot not be verified in any other way' (Internal project report, 2008-04-30). This target group was constructed as particularly being in need of assistance in order to enter the labour market. As part of the project, the prior overseas learning of 500 recent, non-Nordic immigrants was to be validated, with the aim of getting at least 70 per cent of them into jobs, or into training and education programmes, as well as other activities eventually leading to employment. The project did not focus on vocational training or educational activities and no resources were allocated for this purpose. It focused on developing the assessment procedure, the results of which could be used as a basis for further supplementary training. The project thus had a quantitative goal that had to be achieved within a specific timeframe.

The target group for the project was recent non-Nordic immigrants, who, during the settlement support activities, moved from one organization to the next, along the line 'from arrival to employment'. Each time they came into contact with a new organization, the caseworkers asked them about their personal and professional backgrounds, an activity referred to as 'mapping the immigrant'. Based on this 'map', the caseworker then decided how to support the person in finding employment. An important part of this mapping consisted of placing a person in an occupational category on the basis of the Swedish National Labour Board's Occupational Classification System (referred to using the acronym AMSYK in Swedish). Senior municipal administrators had criticized this mapping on the basis that caseworkers lacked the technical knowledge required to produce a 'good and correct' map of the person. Because the caseworkers' mapping was deficient, it was said, immigrants ended up in the 'wrong' occupational categories and, as a result, did not end up in jobs or in the correct

validation or training activities. One vocational training expert performing validations explained:

They [the immigrants] have been to the Migration Board and the Public Employment Service before and have been listed as carpenters. And they've remained like that for 8-10 years. And then they came to us and we saw that they weren't carpenters. And it isn't that strange that they don't get jobs. [Vocational expert MKo81201:1]

The training expert regards the PES caseworkers' assessments to be insufficient because they do not 'correctly' identify the immigrants' skills and knowledge. He also describes the V/I project as a solution to the problem: via the project's activities, the immigrants are to be efficiently sorted into the 'correct' categories; via validation, caseworkers and employers will finally know what their clients and potential employees know and are capable of accomplishing, i.e. their skills and knowledge. Two validation activities were proposed as part of the project: the 'occupational assessment' (*Yrkesbedömning*) and the 'qualification portfolio' (*Meritportfölj*) described above. The procedure involved working in the following way: A PES caseworker met the client and documented his/her experience, skills, and knowledge. If the caseworker judged the immigrant to possess overseas occupational skills and knowledge, then he/she would register that person for an occupational assessment, i.e. a brief conversation and practical assessment by a vocational expert in order to determine whether or not the person indeed had an 'occupational identity' within the occupation in question. If the caseworker deemed the person to be lacking qualified occupational skills and knowledge, then he/she would register the immigrant with the educational services provider for a qualification portfolio course, i.e. a ten week programme intended to support the person in terms of reflecting on and documenting his/her professional and personal skills and competence in order to see if that person possessed any skills and knowledge that could be connected to some or other occupation. Figure 1 below summarizes key elements of the validation procedure that has been described.



**Figure 1:** *The validation procedure of the V/I Project* (Source: Presentation material of the project representatives, Autumn 2006)

The results of these activities determined whether or not the person would be eligible for a ‘full’ validation, i.e. an assessment of skills and knowledge against the formal requirements of the labour market or the upper secondary schooling system. After a full validation, the immigrant would either be issued with a certificate or a diploma within his/her occupation. In cases where the assessment established that there was a ‘knowledge gap’ – i.e. a gap between the knowledge identified via validation and the knowledge and skills required in order to work in a certain occupation in Sweden – then he/she would be registered for a supplementary training/education programme aimed at closing this gap. This was, at least in theory, how the process should work and how it was presented to caseworkers and other public officials at the start of the project.

In sum, the employability of recent immigrants was directly linked to the inability of caseworkers to correctly identify their skills and knowledge. This was seen as the result of a fault in the administrative, bureaucratic procedure of settlement support. The recent immigrant was expected to become employable once his/her skills and knowledge had ‘correctly’ been identified and, if applicable, once gaps in skill and knowledge bases had been removed through educational interventions. Employability was, thus, operationalized as an

administrative outcome. If the administrative process works well, the individual becomes employable; if not, his/her employability is not advanced.

*The validation procedure as a tool for rehabilitation*

Caseworkers and heads of department were enrolled in the project on the basis of their work within the settlement process. Participation in the project was voluntary. As the caseworkers represented different organizations, and worked in different parts of the county, they did not have habitual meeting spaces. The project called for regular (monthly or bi-monthly) meetings in four regions within the county. At each of these meetings, one of the two project leaders informed the caseworkers about recent developments. The caseworkers also exchanged experiences of their day-to-day work with immigrants and of their work with validation.

Below, we present a conversation that took place at an early stage of the V/I Project at the offices of Educorp, a large private-sector educational services provider commissioned by the project leadership to develop validation methods to be used within the project. The meeting brought together the project leader and representatives from the refugee units, the PES, the ValCenter – a public-sector educational services provider – and two coaches from Educorp. Educorp had recently developed a procedure called the ‘Qualification Portfolio’ and wanted to check if it could be used as a validation tool. On their website, the company presented the qualification portfolio as follows:

The goal of the qualification portfolio is to make explicit, reflect on, and document learning, grounded in a consciousness of the importance of lifelong learning. The process thus strengthens your confidence and provides insight regarding your responsibilities for your own learning and development. A complete qualification portfolio includes an individual’s combined knowledge and competence within the formal, informal, and non-formal learning he/she has acquired up until today. It includes an occupational identification and competencies possible to validate. Every participant creates his/her own personal portfolio. [Educorp website, accessed 061015; authors’ own translation]

Thus, adhering to the general discourse on employability in Sweden and other European countries, the qualification portfolio was presented as a tool for promoting the responsabilization of the individual with regard to his/her own learning and personal development.

The Educorp coaches had asked the refugee counsellors working with the resettlement of refugees to choose two cases that could serve as examples of the future target group. The question was what *type* of person should be sent on a qualification portfolio course? The refugee counsellors began by presenting their

activities and their cases. They had brought along the case files of their clients, the ‘social map’ they produce during the initial meeting with the person. This part of the meeting went as follows:

*Refugee Counsellor 1:* Our task is to plan the settlement period for the refugees. They stay with us for a maximum of two years and there are many practical issues that need to be taken care of. That’s why we have the ‘social map’. It’s a two-page standardized document. We fill in the information concerning our clients’ financial and personal situation, including health issues, accommodation, insurance, and travel expenses. We also describe the short and long-term goals of the person to be achieved before the end of the settlement period. When we meet the client again, the social map is the basis for our discussion: Have the goals been achieved or not? Has the client’s personal situation changed in any way? If yes, how do we need to change our plans for this person?

*Refugee Counsellor 2:* ... and, based on what the social map tells us, we make different demands of the person.

*Refugee Counsellor 1:* Yes, and if a person doesn’t achieve the goals, we need to check why. At most, we get the chance to follow up on the social map every six months. It’s also important to realize that those who come to us are often in really bad shape, both physically and mentally. It’s quite a problematic group we’re talking about.

*Project Leader:* And this is exactly where I think this whole business of focusing on the skills and knowledge that they [the immigrants] bring with them from their home countries can have a rehabilitating effect, allowing them to get on with their lives.

[Observation of meeting at Educorp, October 12, 2006:4]

Here, the project leader echoed the widespread opinion in the public debate that validation can solve a number of broad problems related to social inclusion. However, the problem was constructed as one concerning ‘rehabilitation’, and not as an administrative problem. By focusing on their knowledge and skills, immigrants could be rehabilitated; they could return to being *normal* from a state of abnormality. Immigrants were seen in a homogenizing fashion as deviations from the Swedish norm. The notion of making skilled people employable by transforming the administrative procedures by introducing validation is translated here into the activities of rehabilitating, or making people who are thus considered ‘abnormal’ normal.

The meeting served as a platform for connecting the actions of the educational services providers with the actions of the caseworkers involved in settling refugees and other immigrants. As part of this work, the category ‘recent immigrants’ was constructed as the target group of the project. However, these immigrants were not present in person at the meeting. The assumed identity of

the envisaged objects of the validation process was negotiated, and mediated by the social plans representing the immigrants. In this setting, the immigrant was constructed as a deficient person in need of ‘rehabilitation’.

*The validation procedure as a diagnostic tool*

Ahmad, a middle-aged man from Iraq, is scheduled to undergo an occupational assessment at 9 am. We are just outside the city, at one of the larger vocational training facilities in Western Sweden. Ahmad has attended Swedish language courses and speaks the language well. The vocational expert tells me that Ahmad had been classified as a carpenter by his PES caseworker and that he currently works as a cook in a restaurant; a job Ahmad does not care for. During the assessment the following dialogue takes place:

- [...].
- Trainer: In my papers, it says you’re a carpenter? When I think about carpenters in Iraq, I think about furniture...
- Ahmad: It's like in Sweden, the same...you work with windows, doors....
- Trainer: But, do they build wooden houses in Iraq?
- Ahmad: Hmm...it's almost the same as in Sweden...

[Field notes from an occupational assessment at a training college, November 17, 2008].

Two things are evident here: First, while Ahmad has been classified as a carpenter by his caseworker, he has nevertheless been registered for validation during which he is questioned in ways that carpenters who have been trained and who work in Sweden would not be. Secondly, when Ahmad is asked whether people build wooden houses in Iraq, his prior experience is further called into question. As wooden houses are common throughout Sweden, and ever since the publication of Astrid Lindgren’s children’s books – not least the adventures of Pippi Longstocking - and their subsequent filming became a trademark of the country, a question mark is set against Ahmad’s experience as a carpenter by relating it to something considered essentially Swedish (for more on essentialization, see Zanoni, 2011). Sara Ahmed (2012: 177) refers to this type of questioning attitude as ‘making the stranger’, something which she compares to the questions usually asked of strangers when inquiring about where they are from. Ahmed found such questions to be more like saying: ‘you are not from around here’, thus questioning their experiences in the local context.

Thus, while initial intentions enacted validation as a way of assessing skills and knowledge in a ‘better’ way in order to remove defects from administrative procedures and, in doing so, promote immigrants’ employability, it becomes

translated into a diagnostic practice that questions the prior experience of recent immigrants. Later on during the assessment, the following dialogue ensued:

- T.: What were your duties at work?  
 A.: Everything.  
 T.: Casting a foundation?  
 A.: Casting a foundation? [...]. No, others do that. [In Sweden casting a foundation is the work of concreters, not carpenters.]  
 T.: If I understand you correctly, you've worked a lot with formwork [the construction of the temporary wooden moulds used when casting a concrete wall]  
 A.: [pauses, does not seem to follow]  
 T.: If you cast a wall (concrete in a mould), where is the risk of the wall collapsing greatest?  
 A.: At the bottom...  
 T.: Correct.  
 [The trainer proceeds to ask questions about the work of casting concrete foundations and walls.]  
 T.: It states 'carpenter' in your papers, but would you be interested in working as a 'concreter'?  
 A.: I don't understand.

[Field notes from an occupational assessment at a training college, November 17, 2008]

It is evident that the assessment of Ahmad is being guided by the trainer's understanding of the situation on the labour market where, according to the trainer, there is an overabundance of carpenters and an undersupply of concreters. While Swedish immigration policy is not linked to the idea of catering for the needs of the Swedish labour market through skill-based immigration, in practice, we see how the vocational expert instrumentalizes the validation procedure by putting it at the service of the Swedish labour market; more specifically, the construction industry, which has identified skills shortages concerning concreters. During the process, the expert acknowledges that Ahmad possesses skills and knowledge, but decides what these skills are, i.e. he decides that Ahmad is a concreter, not a carpenter. While this example of an occupational assessment could be interpreted as supporting the construction of Ahmad as employable, this construction is based on the trainer's (limited) understanding of what it means to be a carpenter in Iraq, as well as his (more accurate) understanding of the Swedish labour market. In line with this instrumentalization of the validation procedure, Ahmad's chances of staying in the category of carpenter diminish, regardless of his own will, expectations, and actions. Thus, the trainer does not facilitate Ahmad's responsabilization; on the contrary, the trainer actively engages in the decision-making.

*Validation and afterwards – what happens to the gaps?*

The project representatives hailed the outcome of the V/I project as a success. As stated in the project plan, over 500 assessment activities were performed. Seventy per cent of the participants ended up in work, studies, or other activities such as internships, possibly leading to work or further studies. However, most of the activities performed were qualification portfolios, described in one educational service provider's information material as the basis for a *future* competence assessment (see Table 1).

<b>Occupational assessment (Total number)</b>	<b>247</b>
Construction	132
Health Care	35
Restaurant	14
Automotive Engineering	64
Transportation (Truck drivers)	22
Welding	24
<b>Qualification portfolio</b>	<b>315</b>

**Table 1:** Number of 'validation activities' performed as part of the project.

In the past, qualification portfolio classes had been made sense of as a means of improving the job-seeking skills of people who had professional experience of working in Sweden and who had been made redundant, or were simply looking for a change of career. The qualification portfolio's core idea was to give participants the opportunity to reflect on their own past experiences, first under the guidance of a coach, and then in a *real* work setting, so that they could then document their skills and competence with the help of a supervisor at the workplace:

Well, and when these guys had been here on the course for a short while and I could see that they were network technicians, programmers... that they could work with hardware and change memory cards etc., I went to the companies and told them about validation and about what the company could expect [when temporarily taking on a qualification portfolio participant], and they thought that was great. They could get a 4-8 week validation... and most of them wanted 8 weeks... and then they had a person who was competent within the field. The only requirement we had was that this person would be given a supervisor at the

company, a person who would be responsible for him and follow him while he was at the company. [Coach]

This documentation could then be used to draft job-seeking documents, e.g. the Europass CV or a job application letter. In the V/I project, the method was adapted 'as far as possible' to the target group, i.e. 'newly-arrived non-Nordic immigrants'. As the project progressed, Swedish language skills were increasingly cited as the most dominant explanation as to why recent immigrants could not be properly assessed, and thus subsequently failed to gain employment. The focus of the qualification portfolio sessions thus shifted away from job-seeking activities towards self-reflection on competence and qualifications. The participants were encouraged to do so under the guidance of the coach, and then share with one another their previous work and other experiences – the documentation of these skills and knowledge was increasingly being deemed difficult, however. But, the 'qualification portfolio' was not only adapted to the target group, it was also adapted to the project's clearly-defined conditions, with regard to the financing available and its duration. Under these preconditions, qualification portfolios at a workplace under the guidance of expert supervisors were seen as unviable, entailing consequences for the legitimacy of the portfolio as it was enacted in the V/I project. One educational expert explains:

Well, the qualification portfolio isn't controlling because it's based on the individual's input. It would be more controlling if... I know the idea was previously about also giving those who went through a qualification portfolio the opportunity to show their skills at a real workplace. And that would've made it more controlling because we could really have seen whether these people really function in that specific occupation. But it hasn't worked that way. One could say that the qualification portfolio is the activity least related to any clearly defined levels of requirement. Most other activities are coupled to some form of trade and industry requirements, very often in the form of different certificates, or sometimes to upper secondary education. [Educational expert]

Consequently, while the qualification portfolio activities were intended to motivate participants and give them a sense of pride in their accomplishments, their value as a means of integrating immigrants onto the labour market and into society remained questionable. Even qualification portfolio enthusiasts acknowledged that employers were not inclined to hire a person based on the written documentation produced after these sessions. They stressed, however, that the real value of the qualification portfolio lay in the processes that it triggered 'inside the person's mind'.

Even more importantly, right from the very beginning, the project did not make any provisions for supplementary education and training to be given to

immigrants based on the results of their validations: As one education specialist explained:

For example, last Friday, I followed up the transport sector... people who had been validated against the requirements for truck drivers. And there was this one guy who the employers liked very much... I mean, he was a very competent professional, but needed some additional training – one or two weeks – in order to get some more qualifications, in order to be more employable. And, I can understand the employers for wanting that because there's a bunch of certificates that you need in order to drive trucks with hazardous loads, or a forklift, or whatever. But, I can only recommend this [further training]. I can't tell the PES that it has to pay for this training. I don't have the power to do that. I can simply recommend that this person needs this training in order to be more employable. But, then it's up to the PES to make its own decisions... if they have the money to pay for this training.... [Educational specialist]

Here, the educational specialist does not connect employability solely with the validation activity, but more specifically with validation *and* supplementary education and training activities based on the results of assessments. She is alluding to the notion that immigrants do not become employable merely by having their skills and knowledge assessed and documented. Given the situation on the Swedish labour market, and the requirements of employers, they need to be given the opportunity to make choices and participate in activities in order to close identified knowledge and skills gaps (as validation of the prior foreign learning of recent immigrants has generally resulted in the establishment of such skills gaps – be it with regard to language or other skills).

The PES' activities, on the other hand, are governed by other rules and regulations, which are not always conducive to the outcome of validation projects, as we can see in this case. The educational specialist alludes, here, to the fact that, while the project sought to establish methods of validating prior foreign learning, it was not intended to focus on what would happen to immigrants once they had been validated; no resources had been allocated to supplementary training and education in order to close knowledge and skills gaps established through validation, and no resources, in terms of time, had been allocated to the caseworkers of the various organizations to deal with the results of the validation activity. Thus, it was left to the PES to decide how to use the results, and what to do with its clients, on the basis of the outcome of validation.

In sum, the increasing focus on the qualification portfolio method (as opposed to occupational assessment) as a meaningful tool regarding the performance of the recent immigrant as employable, as well as the lack of focus on supplementary training, should be called into question given the strong focus of the Swedish labour market on formal documentation (certificates, grades, diplomas, work life experience being formally accounted for, etc.). Information on the immigrant

collected through the qualification portfolio is questionable as language difficulties do not fit well with self-documentation of skills and competence. Furthermore, while the produced documentation is sent to the participants' caseworkers at the PES, to be used by it when making future decisions about how to support immigrant employment, there is little follow-up regarding how this information will be used in the future to advance immigrant employability.

The results of the project were similar to results from validation work in other parts of Sweden: achievements vis-à-vis advancing employability and/or better integrating recent immigrants into Swedish society have been somewhat disappointing to date. Immigrants have not usually ended up in permanent employment any quicker, or on a larger scale, and the role of validation in integrating immigrants into Swedish society has proven difficult to assess. Nevertheless, the work of establishing and maintaining a validation procedure continues unabated.

## Discussion

Previous research into employability has shown the positioning both of employers and of state and municipal organizations as *enablers*, ensuring that employees make choices and participate in activities which contribute to their construction as employable (see, for instance, Fejes and Berglund, 2010). Our study shows that the concept of employability is translated, in practice, on the basis of the interests and administrative and bureaucratic needs of the participating public and private organizations and agencies.

The work of validation followed the broad four-step process outlined by Czarniawska and Sevón (2005). Subsequently, we were able to see how the idea of employability was separated from its original context, as a means of making the Swedish education system more inclusive, and translated into a tool for integration. The idea *qua* object then travelled in time and space until being further translated into the V/I project in Western Sweden and into a concrete validation procedure, based on the local context, practices, and interests. Finally, the new validation activities and practices were repeated locally as immigrants were assessed. However, these activities and practices have not yet become institutionalized and, up until the present time (2013), there is no well-established and taken-for-granted validation procedure for assessing and documenting the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants, on a regular basis, in Sweden.

In the absence of an institutionalized validation procedure, our study shows how the concept of employability is performed as part of the continuing translation processes, and how it is both informed by and constrains the activities of the project. While employability is seen, at the outset of the project, as being connected with inefficiencies in the administrative and bureaucratic procedure of settlement support, it becomes linked to the problematic nature of recent immigrants' prior foreign experiences once it has been translated into concrete assessment activities: the initial translation alludes to the notion that recent immigrants *are* not employable because of the inefficient workings of the administrative system of settlement support; the subsequent further translation of this idea, and its re-embedding in local contexts, sees defects in the prior (foreign) experiences of immigrants.

The study thus highlights important problems as regards arguing for the extended responsibility of the individual for his/her own employability. First, since the meaning of employability is translated and re-translated as part of everyday organizing and is, as such, always context-dependent, a person cannot surely know that the qualities deemed necessary in order to be employable, at one point in time and in one place, will still be required in order to be considered employable at another point in time and in another place.

Second, while the literature traditionally describes the role of employers and state organizations as neutral *enablers* of employability, this study has shown that, rather than simply enabling the decision-making of employees or job seekers concerning their employability, such organizations are implicated in the construction of the employable immigrant.

While there are studies examining the norms and means governing the creation of 'the employable individual' in various contexts (see, for example, Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), this study provides an in-depth case study of how the term *employability* is constructed as a part of the settlement of recent immigrants. In the present regime, too much emphasis is placed, arguably, on the value of documentation when it comes to meeting the bureaucratic and administrative routines both of employers and of state and municipal actors, and too little on the heterogeneous experiences of immigrants – on their requirements and expectations.

The literature on employability has generally underlined the responsibility of the individual for his/her own employability – everyone should ensure that he/she is attractive and employable on the labour market. Contrary to such a position, which renders a social problem amenable to individual solutions and practices, this study shows that, instead of empowering recent immigrants to be

responsible for their own employability, state and municipal organizations, in line with the shift in Sweden's labour market policy towards 'activating' individuals, has become responsible for (re)presenting recent immigrants as employable on Sweden's labour market, i.e. (re)presenting them as knowledgeable, skilled and competent.

## Conclusions and implications

Validation practices that push performance metrics as the key indicator of success invite educational service providers and municipal and state organizations to pay for and/or support activities that produce the quickest results in terms of favourable metrics, and not the most favourable outcome for either the individual or for the labour market and its employers. One consequence of this may be the accentuation of the trend concerning the establishment of 'ethnic niches' on the Swedish labour market, i.e. occupations and/or work activities predominantly performed by immigrants (De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002).

The study also contributes to the literature on careers during the contemporary era by emphasizing the career prospects of subaltern groups, rather than those of the middle-classes which are examined on a regular basis (see, for example, Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2012; McCabe, 2009), suggesting that recent immigrants are subjected to bureaucratic validation practices that only marginally allow them to enter the Swedish labour market. Their failure to fit into the predefined skill categories and work life experiences lowers their possibilities of having their skills and experiences properly validated. In other words, the immense social and economic challenges involved in global migration, and the introduction of immigrants into highly regulated national labour markets, are not simply a matter of linking up employers with the labour market's new subjects, but equally a question of how to assess and validate skills and knowledge falling outside of predefined bureaucratic policies and procedures.

Moreover, the V/I project, and much of the work of validation done in Sweden, today represents, contrary to the original intentions of its proponents, a return to employability as a policy concept aimed at focusing on socially, physically, and mentally vulnerable groups simultaneous with a more explicit focus in society on the individual and his/her qualities, credentials, and personal responsibilities regarding knowledge/skills (competence) and values/attitudes (social skills and adaptability) (see, for example, Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Fejes and Berglund, 2010). Constructing the employable immigrant is, thus, a set of

organizational activities determined by a variety of political, economic, and financial objectives and at times difficult to combine and bring into harmony.

Finally, the study contributes to the literature on validation. Contrary to expectations that validation will solve all the problems of social injustice by putting a greater emphasis on the lifelong learning of all citizens (Bjørnavold, 2000; Butterworth, 1992; Peters, 2000; Tudor, 1991), our analysis suggests that validation practices have unintended consequences in that they reinforce the immigrant's weak position on the labour market when he/she undergoes extensive continuous assessments or is classified in unfavourable categories. The study thus confirms previous research suggesting that validation, notwithstanding its positive intentions, often exposes, in practice, individuals to alternative forms of discrimination or exclusion (see, for example, Fejes and Nicoll, 2008; Harris, 1999).

For policymakers and scholars who consider validation practices to counteract social inequality, the study may be disappointing. However, validation practices are neither inherently discriminating nor inherently good. The enactment of validation practices is an everyday, human accomplishment which is constantly being re-negotiated and subjected to modification (see also Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997).

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