

Article

Enhancing Communication, Goal Setting and Accountability in Active Labour Market Programmes: Experiences from a Pilot Study

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Abstract

With activation driving labour market policy, job-seekers are often offered subsidised employment on the condition that they fulfill certain obligations, such as job searching and participating in training. Nevertheless, such initiatives often receive criticism for their ineffectiveness, and little is known about how these policies can achieve their desired results in practice. This study explores how active labour market programme participants, case-workers and workplace supervisors perceive the feasibility, acceptability, and value of a structured development plan within an active labour market programme (ALMP). The development plan was piloted for one month in a Swedish municipality and was followed by focus group or individual interviews. The findings indicate that the development plan was perceived as strengthening structured communication among the actors, increasing awareness and reflection on development progress through the use of concrete goals; enabling the combination of long- and short-term goals, and finally, clarifying the responsibilities of various actors involved in the ALMP process. In conclusion, this study contributes to knowledge on how individualised support can be provided in a feasible and structured way, and identifies mechanisms that may support future implementation and evaluation of individualised support within ALMPs.

Keywords: immigrants; goal setting; active labour market policy; intervention; person-centred

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the principles of person-centered practice have gained interest within the discipline of social work, acknowledging the importance of respect for individuality, self-determination, empowerment, as well as autonomy of social service users (Hansen and Natland 2017). Nevertheless, rising unemployment rates since the 1990s have led to stricter rules and increased demands on recipients of unemployment support and benefits, making unemployment a considerably tougher experience (Immervoll and Knotz 2018). These changes are often reflected in Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMP) or activation policies (Bonvin 2008; Immervoll and Knotz 2018),

which target individuals who are dependent on benefits, aiming to increase their active participation in the workforce. Activation policies are often implemented through benefits and support provided to individuals on the condition that they fulfil certain obligations, for example, job searching and participating in training (Kelly et al. 2022; Pohl and Walther 2007).

The increase in migration among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries has made unemployed migrants a new target group for activation policies (Breidahl 2017; Renema and Lubbers 2019). With the target groups for activation becoming more diverse, the individualisation of activation measures through person-centered practice has been introduced into social work (Lewis and Sanderson 2011; Solvang 2017). While there are a series of activation initiatives aiming to facilitate labour market integration, criticism is not absent. This criticism primarily concerns the effectiveness of these initiatives in practice. International research, such as Filges et al.'s (2018) systematic literature review, suggests that participation in labour market employment has only a minor influence on finding work. Moreover, other studies have highlighted that the focus of labour market employment often prioritises individuals' financial independence (Starke and Hollertz 2023) instead of their professional development and long-term labour market integration. Temporary job contracts (e.g., subsidised employment) may also have unintended consequences. From the perspective of employed individuals, these contracts can suddenly end without any obvious reason, which may negatively influence job-seekers' motivation for job seeking and their self-esteem (Brendler-Lindqvist et al. 2026; Hellman et al. 2025), as contract termination is not necessarily related to the job-seekers' performance.

Investigating activation for labour market integration in Norway, Khoronzhevych and Fadyl (2022) observed practices that led to a lack of trust between the employment specialist and the jobseeker. Consequently, they concluded that, in practice, activation initiatives are scarcely person-centered. In addition, they stressed the various difficulties participants face outside of employment, emphasising the need for support tailored to individual needs and conditions. Additional research has stressed the importance of individualised support when entering working life. According to employers, the generic societal orientation that seems to be helpful for first-generation immigrants should be individually tailored and sustained over time, as integration is not a linear process (Hansen and Gubrium 2022; Hellman et al. 2025). More specifically, Hellman et al. (2025) emphasised the importance of increased collaboration among different stakeholders involved in workplace integration, as well as the need to monitor subsidised employment opportunities.

Previous research has highlighted several shortcomings in labour market integration, emphasising the need for meaningful, individualised support, e.g., (Khoronzhevych and Fadyl 2022; Niyadurupola and Esposito 2021). Such shortcomings are confirmed by the project this study is part of. The current study is part of a co-creation research project, where researchers and social work practitioners have closely collaborated to co-create supportive measures for migrants participating in an active labour market program (ALMP). The goals are to facilitate their entry into the labour market and help them maintain sustainable employment. A previous study within the project identified several challenges in the ALMP, including a lack of shared understanding of its aims, the need for individualised support for participants, and limited communication capacity due to participants' Swedish language skills. It was concluded that the ALMP process could benefit from a more systematic follow-up of participants' progress, along with better communication and closer collaboration among the involved actors (Antera et al. 2026).

To address these challenges, and in line with the respective literature on active labour market programs (ALMP), this study focuses on an intervention designed to improve the provision of individualised support for immigrant ALMP participants, namely a development plan. The aim is to explore how ALMP participants, caseworkers and workplace su-

pervisors perceive the feasibility, acceptability, and value of a structured development plan within an active labour market programme.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is part of a larger project with the overall aim of co-creating and evaluating supportive measures for immigrants participating in labour market employment, in order to facilitate their entry into the labour market and to maintain sustainable employment. The project is co-created and conducted by a co-creation team consisting of three researchers and five practitioners representing various key stakeholders within the municipal organisation.

The overall project is inspired by the framework for developing and evaluating complex interventions (Skivington et al. 2024). This framework state complex intervention research as undergoing four phases: development or identification of the intervention, feasibility, evaluation, and implementation.

The first phase of the project focused on identifying and co-designing solutions to strengthen the support provided during an ALMP in order to facilitate immigrants towards a sustainable working life (Antera et al. 2026). This knowledge informed the development of an intervention, which was based on research and valuable input from key stakeholders (Skivington et al. 2024).

The second phase of the project, which is the focus of this study, explores the feasibility and acceptability of the intervention aimed at structuring the support provided to ALMP participants. The intervention was developed by the co-creation team based on evidence collected during the first phase (Antera et al. 2026), combined with insights from previous literature and program theory. The program theory in this study has considered previous literature and theories, identifying core components of importance to reach desirable outcomes (e.g., participant progression, motivation, and development).

With regard to feasibility, the refinement of the development plan was informed by the engagement of potential end users. The plan was discussed with caseworkers (outside the co-creation team), one of the intended user groups, whose involvement in this phase was considered meaningful and relevant. The aim was to refine elements of the development plan to maximise its potential for positive impact and enhance the prospects of achieving meaningful change.

2.1. Context—The Active Labour Market Programme

The ALMP in this study is a municipality-funded workplace-based labour market integration programme for unemployed residents requiring additional support before entering the regular labour market. It usually last for 12 months and the overall aim of the programme is to strengthen employability by providing work experience in Swedish workplace settings, opportunities to develop and maintain vocational skills, as well as to gain workplace references and an increased awareness of individual strengths, challenges and needs. Although not mandatory, participants are encouraged to combine work with Swedish language education (SFI) if needed, and they also receive support from municipal staff to improve job-seeking skills.

Initially, each participant is assigned a personal caseworker responsible for guidance, workplace matching, and follow-up. Participants are then placed in workplaces where they receive day-to-day support from a workplace supervisor. Placements are made in either work training-oriented municipal settings, such as second-hand stores or bicycle repair shops, where supervisors are explicitly employed to support participants, or in ordinary municipal workplaces such as preschools or elderly care centres, where supervision is provided as an additional task by an existing employee. Caseworkers match participants to workplaces based on their wishes, previous experience and support needs.

During the programme, caseworkers conduct scheduled follow-up meetings with participants to review work tasks, progress and further development needs. Workplace supervisors are also invited to attend these meetings. Together, the participant, caseworker and workplace supervisor form a support structure in which the participant engages in workplace-based training, the supervisor provides day-to-day guidance, and the caseworker coordinates the overall process and follow-up.

Eligibility criteria for inclusion in the programme is determined by the municipality, typically based on unemployment status as well as the need for labour market support and workplace-based training before being ready to enter regular employment. Participants are expected to attend the work placement according to the agreed upon schedule, take part in follow-up meetings with their caseworker and engage in other job-seeking activities, such as CV-writing, aimed at strengthening employability.

2.2. Program Theory: Self-Regulation and SMART Goals

The self-regulation process (Grant 2016, 2011) and the SMART goals framework (Doran 1981) provided the theoretical foundation for the development plan.

Self-regulation as a concept encompasses different forms of functioning, ranging from physiological processes to intentional thought processes. Self-regulation theories are based on the assumption that individuals can change their behavior, thoughts, and even emotions to adapt to the contexts in which they interact (Gestsdottir and Lerner 2008). The self-regulation concept, hence, describes the process in which an individual sets a goal, develops an action plan, initiates action, monitors and evaluates performance by comparing it to a specific standard and, based on this evaluation, alters their course of action to improve performance and achieve the set goals (Carver and Scheier 1998). This process can be supported and facilitated by another individual, often a coach.

The work process around the development plan is inspired by the self-regulation process. Involving the end user, the ALMP participant, in selecting and reviewing personal goals, is intended to increase self-awareness, self-reflection, and ownership of both the process and the end result. In this process, caseworkers and workplace supervisors take on the role of coaches, facilitating transition between stages. Coaching, in this case, requires conversations that always focus on goals, whether explicitly or implicitly (Grant 2011; Peterson 2010).

The SMART goal-setting framework (Doran 1981) provides guidance on how to approach and set goals. The framework describes goal characteristics that can increase the possibility of their accomplishment. This framework implies that goals should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic/Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART). Goals should thus be specific in nature and include a clear description of what is to be pursued. This includes also details about who is expected to act, what needs to be done, where, and how. Furthermore, it must be measurable to track progress effectively and attainable to strike a balance between being challenging and, at the same time, aligning with the individual's competencies and resources. It is also important to identify goals that are realistic and relevant in order to create achievable (Hawkins et al. 2020; Werle Lee 2010) and meaningful goals that meet the individual's needs. Finally, goals must be time-bound (Hawkins et al. 2020). These five characteristics are interconnected, and all are needed to set SMART goals (Stonehouse 2018). In that sense, the SMART goal framework was expected to support participants in translating broader aspirations into concrete, manageable actions that could be monitored and discussed during follow-up meetings (Aghera et al. 2017).

Taken together, self-regulation theory and the SMART goal-setting framework informed both the structure of the development plan and the intended work process around it. The underlying assumption was that clearly formulated and personally meaningful goals, combined with regular follow-up and clarification of responsibilities, would sup-

port participants' self-regulatory processes. By making goals visible, monitoring progress, and creating opportunities for reflection and dialogue, the development plan was expected to clarify roles and responsibilities among all three actors and to increase participants' awareness of their own development, strengthen their ownership of the process, and facilitate active participation in the ALMP. The intervention was therefore designed not only as a planning tool but also as a support for ongoing self-regulation through goal-setting, action, monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment.

2.3. Intervention

The development plan was designed to support participants in setting goals, monitoring progress, reflecting on achievements and identifying next steps, thereby operationalising the self-regulation process within the ALMP context. It was intended as a structured communication and goal-setting tool to support coordination and follow-up within the existing ALMP, and did not replace the ordinary labour market support or language training provided within the programme. The development plan is created and reviewed collaboratively by caseworkers, ALMP participants, and workplace supervisors through discussion, follow-up on work activities, and reflection. The development plan comprises three core components: (1) setting goals, (2) continuous work with activities, and (3) follow-up.

2.3.1. Setting Goals

The first component of the intervention focuses on setting SMART goals. This is done during an initial meeting where caseworkers, workplace supervisors, and ALMP participants collaboratively fill in a development plan for the ALMP participant after a discussion among the three actors. Based on the ALMP participant's needs and previous experience, the development plan should outline specific goals, objectives related to those goals, and activities that support the realisation of the objectives. It could include, for instance, learning or practicing specific workplace tasks, developing and maintaining routines, strengthening communication at the workplace, or tasks related to preparing for future studies or employment. Table 1 presents an example of a completed development plan illustrating how long-term goals, short-term objectives, planned activities, and follow-up procedures were documented and discussed throughout the intervention.

Table 1. Format of the development plan with an example.

Goals	Objective	Planned Activities	Date of Completion	Comments
To develop the Swedish language	To communicate simple information about a work task	Clarify work task to the workplace supervisor	21 November 2025	The participant has expanded their vocabulary with concepts and words related to work tasks. The vocabulary includes processes, tools and different positions in the workplace.
	To summarise working experience	Write one paragraph summarising the working experience from the new job		The participant summarises their previous work experience in simple Swedish and give examples of work tasks.
To strengthen collaboration	To work independently	Individual work tasks in electronics recycling	21 November 2025	The participant can work alone and can complete all tasks in a timely manner.

SMART goal characteristics were incorporated into the development plan, and caseworkers were instructed to create goals based on this framework. The introduction of activities in the plan served the same idea, i.e., to concretise the actions required to reach each objective. Short-term goals and related activities were formulated with the intention

that they would be achieved or meaningfully reviewed at the participant's next scheduled follow-up meeting with the caseworker. Thus, while obligatory deadlines for individual activities were not imposed, the development plan incorporated a temporal structure through time-bound follow-up meetings, allowing progress towards goals to be monitored, discussed, and, when necessary, revised. A column was included to indicate a completion date, in order to guide when new goals were needed.

The attainability and relevance of goals were safeguarded through discussions among the three actors while creating and reviewing the development plan. Following Grant's (2016, 2011) self-regulation process, caseworkers and workplace supervisors were instructed to help ALMP participants identify their needs and aspirations and support them in selecting actions to pursue their goals. Additionally, caseworkers and workplace supervisors ensured that these actions were not only relevant to the participants' needs but also feasible within the limits of the ALMP.

2.3.2. Continuous Work with Activities

After the first meeting, when the development plan is created, ALMP participants return to their regular work and other development activities. During this phase, the development plan is used for guiding the everyday activities and serves as a reminder of the broader goal in relation to everyday tasks. Moreover, the plan is used for reflection on activities, whether through self-reflection or as a result of (informal) discussions between the workplace supervisor and the ALMP participant.

2.3.3. Follow-Up

During the ALMP process, at least three meetings with the caseworker are conducted, where the development plan can be used to track goals, objectives, and activities. While participation by the workplace supervisor is optional in the follow-ups, it is highly recommended. The evaluation of goals is conducted through discussions among the three actors, focusing on what was achieved and how, what was not achieved and why, and the next steps to be taken. As shown in Table 1, the completion date refers to the date of the follow-up meeting when the objective was confirmed as reached. Additionally, the Comment section allows the three actors to provide relevant feedback for future use. Thus, the development plan is used as a living document during follow-up meetings. Goals, activities and responsibilities are regularly reviewed and, when necessary, revised jointly by the participant, caseworker and workplace supervisor. In this project, the development plan was tested in a limited form, with one follow-up loop lasting one month.

2.4. Informants

A strategic sampling method was used to target informants who had pilot-tested the development plan. The informants for this study included ALMP participants, caseworkers, and workplace supervisors.

Caseworkers were asked for participation in the study if they had tested the development plan with at least one ALMP participant. Caseworkers are responsible for overseeing the ALMP process for each participant and for evaluating their needs. They also refer them to different development activities during the ALMP. They meet regularly with the ALMP participants to discuss the participants' progress.

ALMP participants were selected based on three criteria: they were born outside of Sweden; they were actively participating in an ALMP, and they were willing to use the development plan in their ALMP. Caseworkers informed the participants about the project, and selection was based on interest and availability.

Workplace supervisors were invited to participate if they were connected to an ALMP participant who pilot-tested the development plan. All supervisors participating in this study had allocated time to act as supervisors.

The sample comprises a total of 23 individuals (see Table 2). Approximately half of the informants (49%) were women, and the mean age was 46 years (range 29–59). Table 2 shows a breakdown of participation by each actor group.

Table 2. Role, gender, and age of the informants.

Informants	Number of Informants	Gender	Age
Case workers	8	5 women—3 men	37–54
Workplace supervisors	4	4 men	29–57
ALMP participants	11	6 women—5 men	31–59

ALMP participants had been enrolled in the ALMP for between 2 and 11 months (mean $\approx$ 6.5 months), and most were from Arabic-speaking countries. They represented a heterogeneous group in terms of educational and occupational backgrounds, ranging from limited formal schooling to higher level education and professional training obtained in their origin countries. Several participants had engaged in Swedish language education (SFI) and other complementary training upon their arrival. Swedish language proficiency varied, with some participants requiring support from an interpreter. Previous work experience also varied and included both skilled and manual occupations, such as teaching, administration, manufacturing, cleaning, construction, or working as a driver. For several participants, experience in the Swedish labour market was limited, although some had completed internships or short-term positions. Within the programme, ALMP participants were engaged in a variety of work placements. Tasks included roles such as preschool childcare workers, cleaners, kitchen staff, and basic service or production tasks (e.g., clothing care and flower arrangement).

2.5. Data Collection

Four focus groups and five individual interviews were conducted after the informants had pilot-tested the development plan for approximately one month. A total of four focus groups were organised: two for caseworkers, one for workplace supervisors, and one for ALMP participants (six participants in total). In addition, five individual interviews were conducted with ALMP participants: four in Arabic with the use of interpreters, and one in English. All interviews were face-to-face and conducted in the municipality's facilities, where the participants felt comfortable. Each session was moderated by one lead moderator and one assistant moderator, both researchers from the university. The individual interviews were included due to the need for an interpreter during the interviews, as it was not considered feasible to include interpreters in the focus groups.

All interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide. The content of the interview guides was also informed by the programme theory and aimed to capture participants' and professionals' experiences of the self-regulatory processes embedded in the intervention, such as setting goals, identifying activities, monitoring progress, and reflecting on development over time. In total, three variations of the guide were developed through discussions among the authors. The interview guides followed the same overall structure and were divided into three sections: the initial meeting and goal-setting process; how the development plan was used to guide the work between meetings; and the follow-up meeting, including perceived outcomes of using the development plan. Each section included questions about positive and negative experiences, how the development plan influenced the ALMP process, possible improvements, and how it could be used as

a tool within the wider ALMP. In this way, the interviews were designed to cover all stages of the intervention process and to explore the feasibility of using the development plan for potential implementation on a larger scale. Questions included: How did the process of selecting aims, goals and activities work?; How was the development plan used at the workplace?; How did you experience following up the plan at the second meeting?; and How do you think using the development plan throughout the entire ALMP process could support participants and influence the way support is provided?

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with the support of a transcription software. All transcripts were compared with the audio files by the first author. The interviews that involved interpreters were also transcribed using a transcription software and automatically translated into Swedish. The researcher then checked the interpreters' translation, ensuring they matched the participants' phrasing. Hence, the interpreters' phrasing was kept in the transcription text for analysis.

2.6. Data Analysis

The research material comprised transcriptions of focus group and individual interviews, as well as the development plans created during the project. All material was analysed thematically, following the thematic analysis steps described by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, the researcher familiarised herself with the material through multiple readings of the transcripts and by listening to the recordings. Second, initial codes were created to address the three main questions posed during the interviews. For example, in response to the question of how the development plan was perceived, the codes "the plan as a basis for discussion" and "the plan as a ground for reflection" were created. Codes were unified under different themes based on their relevance. More specifically, the codes "setting concrete goals" and "becoming aware of the progress" were closely related, as evidenced by their presence in the research material and the reasoning provided by the informants. In other words, informants indicated that the concrete format of the goals made it easier to not only track their progress but also to pursue their objectives. Hence, these two codes were unified under the theme "Setting concrete goals: raising awareness of progress and initiating reflection" to highlight their interconnection.

The themes were later reviewed with reference to the coded extracts and their relationship to the different actors interviewed. This approach ensured that the views and concerns of all actors were represented in the findings. Thereafter, the themes were finalised and named. Themes of relevance for this article were selected based on the research questions and were supported with quotations for transparency.

Finally, the development plans created during the project were analysed with reference to their content, showing what aims, objectives, and activities the three actors selected. The codes derived from this analysis confirmed the findings from the rest of the research material, particularly regarding the selection of goals, objectives, and activities. Throughout the analysis process, there was a continuous discussion among members of the research team regarding coding decisions, theme development, and interpretation of the findings. These discussions contributed to the refinement and naming of themes and helped ensure that the analysis adequately reflected the perspectives of the different actors involved.

2.7. Ethics

The project received approval from the ethical review board (Dnr 2022-01757-01). All informants were informed in writing about the project. Moreover, they received information about the handling of their personal details and the voluntary nature of their par-

ticipation. Information for ALMP participants was also provided in simplified Swedish. All informants signed a consent form before their participation.

3. Results

After piloting the development plan, caseworkers, workplace supervisors, and ALMP participants expressed their views on its feasibility, acceptability and value in the ALMP process. These views are presented in this section.

3.1. Creating a Basis for Communication

The development plan served as the basis for communication among the three actors, they expressed that its creation required them to meet and engage in in-depth discussions about goals, objectives, and the respective activities needed to achieve them. Caseworkers and workplace supervisors referred to the potential of the development plan to become a “living” document, representing the constant communication between them and reflecting the participant’s progress. Moreover, caseworkers stated that they used the structure of the development plan to initiate a dialogue among the involved actors, helping to guide the content of the first meeting. This use was prolonged after the first meeting, guiding the ongoing communication among caseworkers, workplace supervisors, and participants. All three actors mentioned several ways of communicating (e.g., face-to-face or online meetings, telephone calls, and informal discussions in the workplace), used to track the participant’s progress and ensure the fulfilment of the plan during the pilot phase. Overall, the development plan was seen as a tool that systematised the already existing communication routines, as described below.

“I formulated goals and sub-goals together with the participant and then sent them by email to the supervisor and said if you have time to review it, like, we should together discuss what activities the person might need. [...] She wants to take responsibility for practical tasks in daily routines as a preschool child worker. She [the supervisor] writes that this plan might be good, this activity might be suitable. Together with the supervisor. Then I called the participant and said that today I have talked with your supervisor about this activity, you need to follow up on this activity.” (Caseworker)

Using the development plan structure to guide discussion with ALMP participants, caseworkers described how they initiated conversations about participants’ desired futures. They asked questions regarding their previous experiences and future plans. They worked with the ALMP participants to explore which jobs, educational opportunities, or competencies they would like to pursue, with the aim of selecting and formulating goals that would support these aspirations. Additionally, the caseworkers tried to connect ALMP resources and possibilities with the participants’ aspirations. The role of the caseworkers, in that case, was to guide the participants.

3.2. Setting Concrete Goals: Raising Awareness of Progress and Initiating Reflection

The development plan was described as offering a more concrete ground for discussion, follow-up and reflection, as it outlined specific objectives and activities that were supposed to be fulfilled. In this way, the communication was also systematised and concretised. According to the ALMP participants, writing down concrete objectives and specific activities made them more aware of what they needed to do. Monitoring their progress became easier, and they felt some positive pressure to be more active. They perceived that this was because they became more aware of how they could reach their goals and what was expected of them. Furthermore, seeing their progress and realising that they have achieved their goals made participants content.

“And this goal that’s written on the paper, it also helps us. (It helps with) knowing what to do now and what can be done in the future. That I think is the most important for us. Like, I had the same thing with the paper too. Every day when I go to work, I look at the paper and I think about the things that I still need to do. I do that (task), either in the afternoon or in the morning.” (ALMP participant)

All actors described the second meeting as an opportunity to go through the selected objectives and clarify which ones had been completed and how. In this sense, the development plan served as a reflection document, raising questions about how an objective was (not) achieved and why, leading to deeper reflection on the participant’s learning and the conditions that influenced it.

The objectives formulated in the plans varied, but participants had goals related to improving work-related Swedish. Other objectives focused on searching for work, gaining work-specific experiences, preparing for further education or improving practical skills relevant for future employment. These examples illustrate how the developmental plans translated participants’ broader aspirations of finding work or further education, into specific activities that could be discussed and followed up over time together with the caseworker and workplace supervisor. See Table 3 for a systematic overview of areas of development, including examples of long-term goals, short-term goals and activities.

Table 3. Overview of areas of development, long-term goals, short-term goals and activities.

Area of Development	Long-Term Goals	Short-Term Goals and Activities
Improving Swedish language and communication	Developing Swedish language skills for work and everyday workplace participation	Practicing Swedish with colleagues and supervisors; learning specific work-related words; describing work tasks in Swedish; attending SFI; using language-learning apps; watching Swedish TV shows
Job search and employment entry	Moving closer to paid employment and searching for work	Updating CV and personal letter; meeting with a job coach; attending job fairs; applying for jobs regularly; practicing self-presentation to employers; spontaneously visiting workplaces with CV
Occupational skills and work experience	Gaining experience in a specific occupational area	Learning kitchen tasks; preparing and packing food; taking part in delivery routines; planning and leading activities in childcare work
Education and qualification pathways	Preparing for further education or a specific professional area	Identifying eligibility requirements for university; contacting study guidance; planning complementary courses; attending SFI
Practical prerequisites for employment	Gaining a driving license and learning to ride a bike	Saving money for a driver’s license; studying driving theory and traffic rules; planning for driving school courses; acquiring a bike and helmet

3.3. Setting the Individual ALMP Process in a Broader Context

ALMP participants acknowledged the value of setting both long-term and short-term goals, meaning that they could act in the present while planning for the future. The development plan was tested for one month, with caseworkers focusing more on setting short-term goals. Nevertheless, participants promoted long-term goals as well. Short-term goals referred to those achievable within the duration of the ALMP. Caseworkers suggested these short-term goals based on the framework provided by the specific municipality (e.g., the potential meeting with a career counsellor and the participants’ responsibility to look for jobs). Finally, another goal of importance for immigrant ALMP participants was to develop their Swedish language skills. This goal originated both from caseworkers and ALMP participants, with all actors acknowledging the importance of speaking Swedish in finding a job.

Long-term goals were more generic life goals, such as getting a permanent employment contract with decent working conditions or obtaining a more generic skill or qualification, for example, a driving license or a university degree. The selection of long-term goals largely reflected needs outside of employment. ALMP participants, for instance, chose goals like saving money for future education or managing their stress levels. These goals indicate the necessity for a wholesome approach to the participant's well-being, which goes beyond merely becoming employable.

The role of caseworkers in achieving a balance between long- and short-term goals was crucial. Both caseworkers and participants stated that caseworkers supported participants in setting realistic, concrete, and measurable goals, as outlined in the development plan. They also helped participants prioritise their goals, starting with something easier and moving to something more difficult (when needed). With reference to the connection between short- and long-term goals, it seems that the possibility of following goals with increased difficulty was appreciated by the ALMP participants.

ALMP participant 6: "But the first goal is really easy. Like, I work for the municipality. It's a really easy job. I don't think I'm going to find another task that will be harder. Therefore, like I say, when it starts to become easy (to do the task), then it's okay. That's an example of how the first goal ends and the second goal begins. The second goal is harder than the first one. So, it's good if..."

Researcher: "It helps you that the objectives start easy and then they get harder. You take it step by step..."

ALMP participant 4: "Yes, step by step..."

ALMP participant 2: "It helps you to reach, to reach your goal. My goal was very difficult; how I can reach my goal with this plan? It helps you to... you have a passion sometimes, but it's difficult when you don't know, when you don't have any information. But if you have a passion that you talk about to your caseworkers, they help you. They tell you, 'You have to do this, this and this to reach your goal.' You can see in the end, like, this is where I am going."

Moreover, caseworkers informed participants about their possibilities and limitations, as they had a better understanding of the potential within the Swedish context. Moving from easier to harder goals/objectives/activities, as well as becoming aware of the possibilities and limitations in the Swedish context, were key factors in determining the attainability of the set goals. These factors were both challenging and aligned with the individual's competence and resources. Hence, the ALMP participants could see how the smaller steps taken during the ALMP process could serve their broader, more complex life goals, making ALMP an experience of value and relevance to their lives. With reference to the development plan, the potential to accommodate both long- and short-term goals simultaneously is viewed as a strength, allowing for a higher degree of individualisation. Establishing a continuation in what the participant experienced before, the progress made during the ALMP, and what lies ahead after the program can make the ALMP more relevant to the participants' lives.

3.4. Clarifying Responsibility of Action

Finally, all actors discussed the responsibility of action and how it is reflected in the development plan. Caseworkers assumed full responsibility for guiding the discussion around the development plan and ensuring its implementation. Their main intention with the creation of the development plan was to put more responsibility on the ALMP participants, in order for them to take action and build confidence and self-development. Caseworkers thought that the plan naturally distributed responsibility among the three actors. For instance, participants were responsible for completing the activities, while workplace

supervisors were responsible for recommending and following up on the completion of workplace tasks.

Caseworkers believed that the development plan helped participants assume more responsibility for their progress. This increased sense of responsibility was also mentioned by the participants themselves, who shared how they felt more motivated to pursue tasks after the plan was created or reviewed.

“She (the caseworker) asked me to write down new words. Actually, I even showed her the book. So, if it was not the case, I would consider taking Swedish language classes. But now I know that someone... There’s someone who is holding me accountable. I need to show (something). I can’t just be there. You understand what I mean? That’s human nature. You relax when people are helping you, but you’re not helping yourself. But with something like this, you’re compelled to help yourself, as well. Because you’re like, ‘I have to show something, so I need to do something.’ But when you know there’s nothing like that (someone checking), you kind of get a little bit relaxed.” (ALMP participant)

Regarding the division of responsibility between caseworkers and workplace supervisors, each case was handled differently, with some explicitly splitting roles, while others allowed for more blurred limits. Workplace supervisors seemed to have a smaller, more indirect role in the selection of goals and objectives, as their contribution focused mainly on suggesting activities to help achieve the goals. Furthermore, workplace supervisors were seen as responsible for monitoring the progress of the participants in the ALMP, as they were the ones directly working with the participants in the workplace. They were perceived as responsible for ensuring that participants took an active stance with their development plan activities. In practice, they were expected to remind participants of their tasks and goals, as well as observe and confirm their progress. Both groups agreed that these roles should be further clarified even in the development plan by adding a column indicating who is supposed to report the outcome of each activity and to whom, with caseworkers maintaining overall responsibility for overseeing the plan.

4. Discussion

This study explored how ALMP participants, caseworkers and workplace supervisors perceived the feasibility, acceptability, and value of a structured development plan within an active labour market programme. The findings are discussed in relation to the programme theory underpinning the intervention, particularly the assumptions that structured goal-setting, monitoring, and reflection would support participants’ engagement in the ALMP process. In brief, the development plan was perceived as a basis for more systematic communication among the different actors. It assisted in setting concrete goals, increasing awareness of progress, and promoting reflection on learning. Additionally, it helped situate the ALMP process within a broader timeframe in the participant’s life and supported the identification of responsibility for action among the different actors involved.

The goal-oriented approach, including concrete and specific goals, was positively received by all involved actors, especially the ALMP participants. Participants perceived that the clarity regarding responsibilities encouraged them to engage more actively in the ALMP process. The importance of goal setting in the context of activation has also been underlined by previous research (Niyadurupola and Esposito 2021). In the same line of thought, and specifically with reference to women at risk of unemployment, Huss and Magos (2014) stressed the synergetic relationship between self-actualisation, goals, values, tools, and employment.

Communication was shown to be a core element in the ALMP process. Participants and professionals described communication as clearer and more concrete when using the development plan. Moreover, the concrete nature of the goals made them easier to com-

municate and understand, fostering greater awareness of goals, responsibilities and progress. This is consistent with the self-regulation process underpinning the intervention, where making goals explicit and monitoring progress are expected to support participants' active engagement in the ALMP process.

The development plan focused on the ALMP participant and their individual needs, offering a person-centered approach that previous research has identified as important in social work (Lewis and Sanderson 2011). Participants described that being actively involved in identifying their needs and formulating their own goals made the support more relevant to their individual situation. This is consistent with the programme theory underpinning the intervention, where participants are expected to take an active role in setting personally meaningful goals while caseworkers and workplace supervisors support the self-regulation process through coaching, follow-up, and reflection (Grant 2011, 2016). Previous research has similarly highlighted the importance of collaborative and person-centred approaches in supporting labour market participation (Hultqvist and Hollertz 2023; Khoronzhevych and Fady 2022).

Nevertheless, the role of the caseworkers was also presented as valuable. Caseworkers contributed with context knowledge, either by offering information or ensuring that key elements for employment, for example, a CV, were in place. They supported participants in translating their aspirations into concrete and achievable goals, while also connecting those goals to the resources available within the ALMP. Knowing how to set goals and determining whether they should be more or less abstract has been discussed in coaching literature as a skill that distinguishes novice coaches from experienced ones (Grant 2011; Peterson 2010). This highlights the kind of professional competence required by caseworkers in their coaching role.

Combining long- and short-term goals was one of the advantages attributed to the development plan. This element was experienced as strengthening continuity by connecting previous life experiences, as well as future plans and aspirations of each ALMP participant. By approaching the participant as an individual with a past, present, and future, the combination of long- and short-term goals contributes to making the ALMP activity more relevant to the person's life. This is consistent with the programme theory underpinning the intervention, where long-term goals provide direction while short-term goals support self-regulation through concrete actions, regular follow-up, and reflection (Grant 2011, 2016). This is particularly important for adults who seek meaningful and relevant learning and need to recognise the value of their actions (Garrison 1997). By combining both long- and short-term goals, the development plan might promote a lifelong learning perspective, highlighting that one should continue to develop throughout life. Weldon and Yun (2000) also suggest that combining long- and short-term goals in coaching can lead to better long-term performance.

Furthermore, combining long- and short-term goals helped ALMP participants navigate the Swedish context. For instance, to achieve the long-term goal of becoming a pre-school teacher, one would not only need to learn Swedish but also complete the required upper secondary education for adults in Sweden. Going through the goal setting in this example would require participants to familiarise themselves with the structures of the Swedish education system, as well as potential work rights issues. Taken together, the findings suggest that the structured development plan was perceived as both feasible and acceptable to participants, caseworkers and workplace supervisors, while also supporting the intended self-regulatory processes underpinning the intervention.

Methodological Considerations

It can be noted that the existence of a co-creation team overseeing the project allowed for constant reflection and refinement of decisions throughout the project. Furthermore,

all team representatives actively contributed to the design and refinement of the intervention through two data collection processes. Hence, the intervention was based on their input, while also being informed by program theory. The high level of involvement from the end users, ALMP participants, caseworkers, and workplace supervisors in the project, led to an intervention that was positively perceived and considered feasible by the involved actors. Even though the findings were predominantly positive, alternative explanations should also be considered. As the study was conducted as a pilot intervention, participants and professionals may have been particularly motivated to engage with the new approach. Furthermore, social desirability may have influenced responses, as participants were aware that the development plan was being evaluated. The intervention was also implemented for only one month, which may have limited the emergence of implementation challenges and did not allow for an assessment of long-term developmental processes, behavioural change, employability, or labour market integration. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting initial experiences of feasibility and acceptability rather than long-term outcomes.

The ALMP participants represented individuals with diverse educational, occupational, and migration-related backgrounds. Participants were recruited based on predefined inclusion criteria, and the predominance of Arabic-speaking participants reflected the composition of the ALMP population in the participating municipality. As the present study focused on the feasibility and acceptability of the intervention, it was not designed to explore differences between participant subgroups. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the feasibility and acceptability of the development plan within this context rather than differences between participant groups. Future research should investigate how participant characteristics may influence experiences of and engagement with the intervention. Furthermore, the development plan was pilot-tested in a limited number of cases (ALMP participant—caseworkers—workplace supervisor), although it did represent all three involved actors. In this second phase in the updated MRC framework, the feasibility testing is in place, and thus a small sample still provides valuable knowledge regarding the intervention, before conducting a large-scale effect evaluation (Skivington et al. 2024).

Another limitation concerns the combination of focus groups and individual interviews, as well as the use of interpreters. These decisions were made due to the low Swedish language capacity of some ALMP participants, ensuring an in-depth discussion of their experience with the development plan. The presence of an interpreter may have affected the communication between the researcher and the informant. Nonetheless, since there were no controversies between what the interviewed ALMP participants shared and the ideas raised by caseworkers or workplace supervisors, the influence of the interpreters can be considered minimal. A potential strength of the use of interpreters was the possibility to include participants with limited language skills. This choice enabled the study to gather valuable knowledge from the most vulnerable participants who are most often involved in the ALMP.

Lastly, although the pilot sample primarily consisted of Arabic-speaking participants, the development plan itself was not designed for one specific cultural or linguistic group. The approach may therefore be adaptable to migrants from other backgrounds, although this should be further explored in future studies with more diverse participant groups.

5. Conclusions

This study discussed an active labour market program intervention in a Swedish municipality that was designed to improve the provision of individualised support for migrant participants, namely through an individualised development plan. By engaging the involved actors, caseworkers, ALMP participants, and workplace supervisors in both the

design and pilot-testing phase of the development plan, the study concluded that the intervention is perceived positively. It was perceived as enhancing communication among the actors, facilitating participant engagement through setting concrete goals and structured follow-up, and clarifying the responsibilities of each actor. Additionally, this study contributes new insights into how individualised support can be provided in a more structured way, moving the focus of research from policy discussions to practical application. At the same time, the findings suggest that the intervention may offer a practical structure for supporting person-centred practices within active labour market programmes.

To support future implementation practices, the findings suggest that participants need to actively engage in formulating goals and continuously work to achieve these between follow-up meetings. Workplace supervisors need to support the planned activities in everyday work, and caseworkers have to take overall responsibility for coordinating the process and monitoring progress. Clarifying roles and responsibilities within the development plan may further strengthen communication and accountability between the actors.

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