



# Harder Than You Think – Immigrant Labor Market Integration in Agricultural Sector<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The recent forced migration to Europe has created more challenges for the labor market integration. However, the Swedish government encourages unemployed immigrants to seek employment in the farming, gardening, and forestry industries. Thus, this article focuses on the matching process in the Swedish agricultural sector by using an exploratory, qualitative, in-depth interview with representatives involved in the matching process. Immigrants experience challenges of Swedish language proficiency, lacking a driving license and adapting to new cultures in the workplace, while employers attribute challenges of effective hiring process and the absence of evidence of immigrants' work experience. Furthermore, the employment service offices struggle with scant knowledge of agricultural employment that needs to be combined with limited contact with employers and the bureaucratic delays caused by requirements of qualifications validation. The paper concludes with a Labour Market Matching Model, which focuses on critical aspects before, during, and after the matching process.

## KEYWORDS

*Immigrant / agricultural sector / labor market integration / employment service offices (ESOs) / labor market matching (LMM) / employment*

## I Introduction

A serious problem in the Nordic countries, including Sweden, is the large employment gap between native-born citizens and foreign-born immigrants (e.g., Calmfors & Sánchez-Gassen 2019). The difficulties associated with the labor market integration of immigrants (Aldén & Hammarstedt 2014), according to many observers, pose a threat to national and local socioeconomic cohesion. These difficulties in the Nordic countries have been found after the human displacement crisis from mass immigration has developed in the several EU Member States since 2015 (Bredgaard & Thomsen 2018; Nordic Council of Ministers 2017).

In recent years, the increase in the number of people seeking asylum and safety in Sweden has created many new challenges. Foremost among these challenges is the need to shorten immigrants' paths to employment and self-sufficiency. Although Sweden has

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a well-developed policy and structure for receiving and settling immigrants, the native-born citizen and foreign-born immigrant employment gap is one of the largest in the OECD (Henrekson et al. 2019; Luik et al. 2018; OECD 2015). Although Sweden has the most optimal labor market integration policies among EU countries (MIPEX 2020), it has great difficulty accommodating the relatively high immigration into its labor market (Bevelander 2011). The Swedish Public Employment Agency, various municipalities and industries, and other public and private groups have coordinated efforts to promote immigrants' entry into the labor market (Dolling et al. 2017). One lesson from these efforts is the recognition that, in addition to the public sector's key role in facilitating immigrant workplace integration, the private sector can provide valuable support with training, coaching, upskilling, and mentoring programs. The OECD (2017) concludes that it is essential to engage the business community in integrating immigrants into the labor market.

An area of particular interest in the discussion on the native-born citizen and foreign-born immigrant employment gap is the rural labor market for immigrants. Many rural areas in the European Union (EU) suffer from socioeconomic marginalization. Issues with labor availability and generational renewal are widespread in the EU agrarian workforce. In this context, immigrant agricultural workers who can contribute to the production of food and the management of natural resources have become key sustainability assets for the EU agriculture/conservation movement generally and for EU rural communities especially (Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020). The farm labor shortage is particularly acute in rural communities where farm generational renewal is declining (Nori 2017). Many employers in the agricultural sector, therefore, turn to immigrant workers, as they struggle to source labor regardless of conditions in the wider economy (Findlay & McCollum 2013).

Many challenges for immigrants' labor market integration come from the supply-side, the demand-side, and the matching process. The supply-side challenges refer to barriers such as immigrants' inadequate language skills, lack of work experience, and low work motivation because of the low economic incentives (Bredgaard 2017; Bredgaard & Thomsen 2018). The demand-side challenges refer to barriers such as discriminatory employment practices and inadequate incentive employment policies. The labor market matching process challenges refer to the information asymmetries that pose obstacles to the matching of immigrant jobseekers with employers. Mismatching could be more prevalent among immigrants for many reasons such as heterogeneity between jobseekers and jobs, sociocultural distance (Auer et al. 2018), lacking information about employers' requirements, language proficiency as well as industry's demand for highly educated and skilled employees (Dean 2018; Lundberg & Rehnfors 2019).

More information about immigrant jobseekers' work qualifications and employers' work requirements is needed to achieve sustainable employment matches (Dean 2018). Employers often view immigrants' claims of work and education qualifications somewhat skeptically (Damelang & Abraham 2016; Kurki et al. 2018). Thus, to bridge the employment gap between native-born citizens and foreign-born immigrants, we need to examine the situation from several perspectives (Calmfors & Sánchez-Gassen 2019): immigrants from the supply side, employers from the demand side, and the labor market matching process from both sides. What are the challenges during the matching process based on these different perspectives and to what extent can the process be designed to incorporate an integrated approach?

In this paper, we use an exploratory study to clarify the nature of the problem by collecting data from different sources (Stebbins 2001). We focus on labor market integration and the labor market matching process in the Swedish agricultural sector from the perspectives of key actors: employers, immigrant jobseekers, and public and private employment service offices. These diverse perspectives provide a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities in immigrant labor market integration. Based on these data, we construct a generic Labour Market Matching Model that can be used in the agricultural and other sectors to better match immigrants who want to work with employers who need workers.

In the following sections of this paper, we focus on immigrant employment in the agricultural sector (with an emphasis on the Swedish agricultural sector) and the labor market integration challenges for immigrants. Our literature review, while not comprehensive, is representative of recent research in the area. The findings from this research provide background for our empirical study and the LMM Model that we present in this paper.

## 2 Literature review

The literature on agricultural economics has not focused closely on the link between local agricultural systems and immigrant workers (De Rosa et al. 2019). In addition, the employers' perspective in the agricultural labor market received much academic attention (Findlay & McCollum 2013). However, some studies focused on foreign seasonal workers who are subject to exploitation by farmers, low wages, and poor labor conditions (Alho & Helander 2016; Rye & Andrzejewska 2010). Yet, some researchers conclude that immigrant agricultural workers can help revitalize rural job markets, economies, and communities (Siudek & Zawojka 2016). For example, international migration contributes to the production of parallel, overlapping spaces of engagement in rural communities inhabited by different cultural groups (Woods 2016). Moreover, rural SMEs play a significant role in immigrant workforce integration as well as in local community integration (Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020). It is claimed that immigrant employment opportunities are greater in the agricultural sector than in other industrial sectors (FAO 2018) and that rural life facilitates immigrants' integration into close-knit societies where there is more opportunity to interact with the native population (Hugo & Morén-Alegret 2008; Vogiazides & Mondani 2019; Waters & Jiménez 2005). Other claims are that rural societies are more welcoming to immigrants than urban societies (Crawley et al. 2019) and that rural companies' values influence the recruitment of immigrant jobseekers (Lämsä et al. 2019).

However, as Siudek and Zawojka (2016) point out, the socioeconomic integration of immigrant agricultural workers can be problematic and the attitudes toward immigrants and immigration can be rather negative in rural areas (Crawley et al. 2019). Some challenges for immigrants in rural areas – specifically, immigrants employed in agriculture work – differ in some respects from the challenges for immigrants in urban areas or non-agricultural industries. Seasonal employment, hazardous work conditions, substandard living conditions, human rights issues, and integration and stabilization difficulties pose special challenges for immigrants in the agricultural sector (Alho & Helander 2016; Nori 2017; Rye & Andrzejewska 2010).



Researchers with an interest in governmental policy describe actions taken in some developed countries to improve living and working conditions for immigrant agricultural workers. These actions are intended to advance the social integration of these workers, protect their human rights, and provide them with fairer compensation (e.g., Aleksynska & Tritah 2013). According to the FAO (2018), policy coherence, among other things, between immigration and agriculture and rural development is essential to the development of safe, orderly, and continued migration.

The number of people employed as agricultural workers in Sweden is steadily decreasing. Only about 2% of the country's economically active population is engaged in farming and more than 74% of the Swedish farmers are older than 50 years. Furthermore, because many Swedish farms are very small – as measured by labor requirements (Swedish Board of Agriculture Statistics 2018) – they lack the financial resources needed to survive economic downturns. In addition, the mismatch between jobseekers and available jobs is acute in the Swedish agricultural sector. For example, the Swedish Church, which employs numerous garden workers, is very worried about the lack of trained workers even though it has the resources to employ them.

## 2.1 The Labor Market Integration of Immigrants

Much of the research on the integration of immigrants in their host countries argues that labor market integration is one of the national governments' most important policies. The argument is that labor market integration provides important social and economic contributions that benefit not only the immigrants but also their host countries. For example, in addition to providing immigrants with financial independence, such workforce integration may help minimize the social exclusion often found in immigrant communities and groups. Although the integration of immigrants into the labor market cannot resolve all society's social and economic problems, it can slow, even reduce, decrease in national and local productivity and growth (Aiyar et al. 2016). This is especially true when countries or communities experience critical labor shortages. For example, countries can counterbalance the negative effects of native population ageing with the positive effects of immigrant workforce contributions (Damas de Matos & Liebig 2014).

Immigrant jobseekers are less likely than native-born jobseekers to find jobs through informal recruitment methods (as used, for example, in Sweden) such as social networks and family connections (Alho 2020; Behtoui 2008; Dustmann et al. 2016). The success of formal programs, therefore, depends on the ability of employment services and companies to match employers' requirements to immigrants' qualifications. For example, the employment of immigrants is positively correlated with their work qualifications (Mergener & Maier 2018). Skilled immigrants with an attested level of vocation-specific training are more successful in finding work. This training should address how an immigrant behaves, acts, and speaks in the new work environment that expects 'an integrated immigrant' (Kurki et al. 2018).

Barnow (2014) defined an occupational labor shortage as a sustained market disequilibrium between jobseeker supply and employer demand. This disequilibrium, which is exacerbated by the mismatch between immigrants' qualifications and available jobs, is a salient feature in immigrants' employment outcomes in their host countries.

Moreover, this mismatch often translates into persistent wage disparities that add to the economic inequalities between immigrants and native-born citizens (Aleksynska & Tritah 2013; Dean 2018) and even increases the likelihood of overall reduced wages (Aiyar et al. 2016).

Some of the literature on immigrants in the labor market takes a future look at perspective. For example, according to Benton and Patuzzi (2018) theory on the effects of EU immigrant integration on ‘jobs in 2028’, in a rapidly changing job market – with its trends in digitalization and online job platforms – European labor markets will likely look quite different than they do today. With increases in industrial productivity and the creation of more jobs, immigrants may, however, discover new work opportunities. Regrettably, they may still face the same old work barriers (e.g., lack of work contacts and networks) (Åslund et al. 2017).

Active labor market measures such as job search assistance and training programs (Andersson & Nekby 2012; Kurki et al. 2018) are very important and necessary for reducing the native-born citizen and foreign-born immigrant employment gap. In addition, intensive coaching and counselling for recent immigrants in Sweden by public service caseworkers have ‘significant treatment effects on employment probabilities’ (Andersson & Nekby 2012).

Many EU Member States, including Sweden, place a high priority on labor market integration for immigrants. Two primary reasons explain why labor market integration for immigrants is prioritized in these countries’ social, political, and economic agendas. First, labor market integration is essential for immigrants if they are to improve their economic situation (Calmfors & Sánchez-Gassen 2019; Jakobsen et al. 2019). Second, most EU Member States are gravely concerned about their shrinking populations and their aging workforces. The working-age population (15–64) in the EU was projected to decline by 7.5 million (–2.2%) between 2013 and 2020 (European Commission 2016). Many policymakers and politicians argue this population and workforce crisis means additional workers are needed in occupations where retirements will create vacancies (OECD 2014). The worry is that national social security systems risk underfunding if fewer workers support them via social benefit contributions.

Since 2015, Sweden has been a favored European destination for immigrants (Eurostat 2019). The largest group of immigrants were forced immigrants who migrated involuntarily and most of them came from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (OECD 2019). This global displacement crisis created new urgency around the issues of migration costs and benefits – leading to too much discussion amongst the general public, politicians, policymaker, journalists, and researchers. The public, politicians, policymakers, journalists, and researchers all joined in the discussion. One of the main discussion topics was (and still is) how to integrate those immigrants into the workforce in ways that foster their inclusion as productive members of society (Ahad & Banulescu-Bogdan 2019).

## 2.2 Challenges Related to Labor Market Integration of Immigrants

In its ‘economic take on the refugee crisis’, the European Commission (2016) stated that work had begun to help refugees learn a new language, become financially independent, and adapt to their host countries’ cultures and institutions. Despite this assistance, which is ongoing, many immigrants continue to face daunting challenges.



Acquiring proficiency in the host country language and learning/proving employable skills are the most immediate challenges for many immigrants. Many host countries offer free language programs to immigrants (e.g., in Sweden, *Svenskundervisning för invandrare*: translation: ‘Swedish instruction for immigrants’) supplemented by general education systems. Schools and universities may offer instruction in various skills needed for certification in specialized occupations. Some skills are widely transferable across borders, while others are country or even firm-specific (Friberg & Midtbøen 2017). Training in non-formalized or soft skills (e.g., communication and social skills) are more difficult to teach (Ruhs & Anderson 2010). However, the most useful language and skills training often occur in the workplace. Access to such training requires the participation of employers and, typically, the support of governments. While such training is a more costly solution for employers than formal language and skills training, the opportunity to advance immigrants’ labor market integration by ‘on-the-job training’ is also greater. Several European countries (e.g., Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Sweden) offer such job-related training. Although evaluations of these programs are limited, the OECD (2014) supports them.

After acquiring language proficiency and skills competency, immigrants are much better prepared to seek employment. For example, in Germany, immigrants with good German language skills (as well as country-specific work experience) have the best chance to be hired (Mergener & Maier 2018). Another study from Finland assumes that sufficient Finnish was supposed to be an industrial safety matter and an integration indication into the society (Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020). In addition, researchers confirm the beneficial effect for immigrants of skills training (Sarvimäki & Hämäläinen 2016), vocational certification (Damelang & Abraham 2016), and work experience (Husted et al. 2001). For instance, work experience in Germany (one year or more) improved immigrants’ other job opportunities (Mergener & Maier 2018).

However, sometimes even immigrants who speak the host country’s language and who have employable skills, however, may struggle to find employment. Many immigrants are deeply discouraged when they find that employers do not seem to recognize or value their qualifications (Dolling et al. 2017). Immigrants’ gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, or race are more influential in employment decisions than their qualifications and what makes this situation even more problematic is that immigrants’ credentials and references are often impossible to verify (Midtbøen 2014). This is true even in the agricultural sector where many jobs do not require specialized skills, education, or experience.

Researchers who study immigrants’ employment challenges and opportunities in their host countries have called on politicians and policymakers to strengthen their immigrant settlement and adaptation programs (e.g., Aiyar et al. 2016; Kurki et al. 2018). They emphasize the need for training and education for low-skilled immigrants. Researchers justify the cost of such programs by the socioeconomic benefit reaped from the expected financial self-sufficiency of immigrants (Bevelander 2016; Kesler & Safi 2018).

### 2.3 Cultural Issues Related to Labor Market Integration of Immigrants

Opinions differ on the effects of the workforce diversity that results from employing immigrants. One powerful argument in favor of such workplace diversity is that



the creativity/innovation sparked by hiring immigrants gives employers a competitive advantage (Carson & Carson 2017; Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020). Immigrants offer a potential workforce, which could ensure the sustainable operation of many rural companies (Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020) and which could be considered a mean of business sustainability and competitive advantage for entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector. There is some evidence that farms have benefitted from immigrant labor in terms of increased revenues and reduced costs, as they could be a cheaper source of labor that can substitute for (unskilled) native workers, thus reducing the cost of labor for farmers, which means that there is a positive linkage between immigrants and farm performance (Malchow-Moller et al. 2013). Hiring immigrant employees increase the profits, as they are considered a competitive advantage to the businesses. Immigrant employees have their ethnic background, skills, and knowledge of certain social or cultural habits, which were lacking among native employees (Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020). The counterargument is that such workforce diversity causes misunderstandings and conflicts among staff, leading to absenteeism, poor morale, and substandard product quality. Both arguments may be true, at least in part. As Bassett-Jones (2005) writes, employers face a paradox: 'If they embrace diversity, they risk conflict, and if they avoid diversity, they risk the loss of competitiveness'. Therefore, employers who rely on immigrant labor are well-advised to study diversity management. An extensive body of literature exists on how best to manage diversity in the workplace. For example, Patrick and Kumar (2012) recommend that employers offer employee training in cross-cultural differences, foreign language instruction, and overseas assignments.

In addition to the expectation that immigrant workers will integrate productively into the labor market, host countries also expect that immigrant workers will integrate with their cultures (Alaraj et al. 2019). The hiring process is described 'as cultural matching', companies need to provide new hires with clear descriptions of their company culture with its values and practices (Rivera 2012). Employee recruitment of immigrants often involves an evaluation of job candidates' cultural match with recruiters and employers (Findlay & McCollum 2013). Employment recruitment is therefore not just an economic policy or a bureaucratic procedure; it also entails social aspects that should be considered when matching immigrant jobseekers with employers (Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020).

Some employers are inclined to favor people who are culturally similar to themselves in terms of leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles. In addition, personal habits and traits such as demeanor, accent, clothing, and physical appearance may influence employers' attitudes toward candidates for particular jobs (Warhurst & Nickson 2007). This cultural evaluation involves demographic, racial, or ethnic stereotyping (Gorman 2005). Some employers justify this attitude with the explanation that culturally aligned employees are better investments (Ganapavarapu & Sireesha 2015). In general, the employers find that labor from eastern Europa shares more social, cultural, and religious values with them than immigrants from the Middle East or Africa (forced immigrants). For example, in Norway, immigrants from non-industrialized societies have religious and cultural backgrounds that can create difficulties in social and professional relationships (Friberg & Midtbøen 2017).

The cultural issues related to immigrants in the labor market are still more complex owing to these stereotypical images that some employers have of certain immigrant

groups. Such stereotypical thinking has advantages and disadvantages for immigrant jobseekers. On the one hand, certain immigrant groups are stereotyped, for example, as hard-working and highly motivated people. In this perspective, ethnicity is seen as a skill (Friberg & Midtbøen 2017). On the other hand, other immigrant groups are stereotyped, for example, as ‘troublemakers’ or ‘economic migrants’. This characterization means that immigrants’ employable skills and aptitudes are undervalued. Evidence of this discriminatory practice in labor markets has been found in Sweden (Agerström et al. 2012), Norway (Friberg & Midtbøen 2017), the Netherlands (Andriessen et al. 2012), Germany (Kaas & Manger 2012), and in England (Wood et al. 2009).

Previous research has addressed the issue of mixed cultures in the workplace when domestic companies employ immigrants. In a survey of Swiss hiring practices, Auer et al. (2018) found that employers’ evaluations of immigrants follow sociocultural distance perceptions and that immigrants with non-native backgrounds are at a disadvantage in high-skilled occupations. In low-skilled occupations, immigrants’ backgrounds are less problematic. Findlay and McCollum (2013), in their research on immigrant labor in the rural agricultural sector in the UK, found that employers place a greater premium on attitude and work ethic than on skills and qualifications. For this reason, many employers hire immigrants on a trial basis before offering permanent employment. For example, immigrants in the French and UK labor markets found that immigrants are more likely than native-born citizens to have temporary work contracts (Kesler & Safi 2018). In a study of Norwegian hiring practices, Birkelund et al. (2017) found that job applicants with foreign names (e.g., Pakistani/Muslim) were at an additional disadvantage in the labor market. This kind of name discrimination has also been found among second-generation immigrants who knew Norwegian and had acquired work experience in Norway. Another case study of migrants’ labor integration in Sweden shows that hiring migrants could be harmful to workplace performance and to the everyday work, as they cause a disruption of the sense of normality (Risberg & Romani 2022). However, there is a significant heterogeneity in attitudes toward refugee hiring in Swedish firms (Lundborg & Skedinger 2016).

### 3 Method and data

We adopt an exploratory, qualitative, in-depth interview with three actors in the immigrants’ matching process in the labor market (employers, immigrant jobseekers, and representatives) from ESOs. Our goal was to understand this matching process and to identify how we might create a LMM Model useful to actors trying to match immigrant jobseekers with employers.

We conducted 100 interviews in the Spring/Summer of 2018. All interviews took place in Sweden. The respondents were as follows: 83 employers in the agricultural sector (farm owner-managers and agricultural company managers); 11 immigrant jobseekers; four representatives from ESOs (two representatives from public ESOs and two representatives from private ESOs); one company adviser; and one company receiving coordinator. See Tables 1, 2, and 3 for information on the employers, the interviews, and the immigrants, respectively. We sought this diversity in respondents because we intended to acquire the perspectives of the representative actors engaged in the LMM process.



**Table 1** Employers' interview data

Type of farm or company	Number of interviews	Number of employees in each	Date of interview	Interview site	Interview time in minutes
Crop production	25	1–10			
Diversified farms	14	1–20			
Dairy farms	10	1–23			
Pig farm	8	1–8			
Cereals farm	6	1–10			
Meat production farm	6	1–3	Spring 2018	Workplace	15–60
Forestry	3	1–4			
Plant school	3	1–22			
Agriculture company	3	16–500			
Other	5	1–10			
Total	83	1–500			

**Table 2** Representatives' and immigrants' interview data

	Role	Date of inter- view	Total recorded interview time 'minutes'	Interview site
1	Employment service representative	20/03/18	23	Public employment service
2	Employment service representative	21/03/18	23	Private employment service
3	Employment service representative	21/03/18	10	Private employment service
4	Employment service representative	14/03/18	73	Public employment service
5	Immigrant	06/04/18	14	Workplace
6	Immigrant	19/04/18	23	Workplace
7	Immigrant	19/04/18	15	Workplace
8	Immigrant	24/04/18	24	Workplace
9	Immigrant	24/04/18	12	Workplace
10	Immigrant	28/04/18	20	Telephone call
11	Immigrant	04/05/18	20	Telephone call
12	Immigrant	19/04/18	15	Workplace
13	Immigrant	05/06/18	13	Workplace
14	Immigrant	09/07/18	11	Agriculture company
15	Immigrant	09/07/18	18	Agriculture company
16	Company adviser	09/05/18	30	Agriculture company
17	Company receiving coordinator	12/04/18	40	Laholm Municipality
Total	11 Immigrants + 6 others	–	384	–



**Table 3** Immigrant interview profiles

	<b>Gender m/w</b>	<b>No. of years lived in Sweden</b>	<b>Nation- ality</b>	<b>Educational/ Background/ Experience</b>	<b>Offers or support from Employment Service Office</b>	<b>Interest in the agricul- tural sector?</b>
1	m	3	Syrian	Agriculture as family work	employment	No
2	m	4	Afghan	Agricultural engineer	none	yes
3	m	4	Eritrean	Pharmacist + Agricultural background	internship	yes
4	m	2	Eritrean	Agricultural background	internship	yes
5	m	3	Syrian	Agricultural engineer	internship	yes
6	w	3	Syrian	3 years in agricultural school	internship	yes
7	m	3	Syrian	Agricultural background	employment	yes
8	w	3	Syrian	Agricultural engineer	employment	yes
9	w	2	Syrian	6 years' experience in an agriculture company.	internship and employment	yes
10	m	4	Syrian	Agricultural background; family job	employment	yes
11	m	2	Syrian	not available	employment	no

We encountered some difficulty in reaching respondents for our study. It was somewhat difficult to set up interviews with immigrant jobseekers because they are considered a hard-to-reach population (Fête et al. 2019) and because of the restrictions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – an EU law governing data protection and privacy, including personal data.<sup>1</sup> Although the employees at the Swedish public ESO could not give us detailed data on the immigrants in their registry, they could provide the names of immigrants who had expressed interest in agricultural work or who had experience in agricultural work. We sent interview request letters to these immigrant jobseekers. We also contacted immigrants who attended language courses and language cafes. Eventually, we were able to interview 11 immigrant jobseekers who had participated in the LMM process (some of whom had been in the LMM process for the agricultural sector).

For our interviews with representatives from the public and private ESOs, we selected employees who had work experience with immigrant jobseekers and the LMM process. For our employer interviews, we selected employers that were members of rural economic and agricultural societies and that were engaged in a variety of agricultural activities. From our outreach to some 200 employers, 83 employers agreed to participate in our study.

We conducted the interviews in Swedish, Arabic, or English, depending on the respondents' language preference. The interviews lasted between 15 and 80 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded, documented, and later transcribed. The interviewers took notes in each interview. Most interviews were conducted in face-to-face settings; a few interviews were conducted by telephone. We used a semi-structured interview guide

that allowed for the adaptation of each respondent. Note: We asked all 100 respondents about their experience with the LMM process.

- Immigrant jobseekers were asked about their personal and educational backgrounds and their work experience and skills. We asked them to describe their motivations and their challenges in looking for agricultural work in Sweden. We asked if they had received support from ESOs or elsewhere, and, if not, what kind of support would be helpful to them.
- Employers were asked about their activities, interests, and experience with employing immigrants. We focused on their experiences with the LMM process.
- ESO representatives and the two company representatives were asked to describe their experience with the LMM process (with a focus on the green industries such as land conservation, forestry, gardening, and agriculture).

The analysis of the collected data includes several steps. First, data from each respondent were analyzed within each respondent group (immigrant jobseekers, employers, and ESO/company representatives) in order to identify potential differences and similarities. Second, the data collection was categorized according to the different stages of the matching process to address potential differences and underlying patterns of challenges and possibilities. We used a software program (NVivo 11) to categorize our interview data, which consisted of our notes and the interview transcriptions for each of these steps. Finally, we conducted content analysis (Bengtsson 2016; Krippendorff 2004; Patton 2002) to identify themes within and between the respondent groups and to classify their actions at three stages of the LMM process (e.g., pre-matching, matching, and post-matching). Differences and similarities of the collected data were compared in each of the respondent groups, focusing on underlying patterns in the collected data. The findings are presented and described in the following section.

## 4 Results and discussion

In this section, we present and discuss the results of our research based on our interview data and our literature review. We also present our LMM Model that we created following this analysis.

### 4.1 Immigrant jobseekers

The immigrant jobseekers interviewed for this research are quite varied in terms of their education and work experience. Five of the 11 immigrants are highly educated (e.g., in fields such as agriculture engineering). However, the quality and extent of immigrants' formal education vary depending on their home countries' education systems (see Damas de Matos & Liebig 2014). Another five immigrants have direct agricultural experience from work on family farms. Only one immigrant lacks an agricultural background or agricultural experience. It is difficult to verify immigrants' claims of experience and education and thus to make comparisons to Swedish education standards or



Swedish agricultural experience. This lack of verifiability poses problems in matching immigrant jobseekers with employers.

Immigrant jobseekers are highly dependent on intermediaries (e.g., public and private ESOs) in their search for employment. They think that a good relationship with municipalities, trade associations, and industry associations can also be useful for finding employment. They agree, however, that without referrals from native-born citizens, the opportunities to establish such relationships are remote. As a substitute, the immigrants turn to their informal social networks (friends and families) for information and advice about job opportunities. Four immigrants said that the lack of a social network is their greatest employment obstacle.

Nine immigrant jobseekers think that the two greatest challenges in the search for employment in Sweden are overcoming the language barrier and fulfilling the driving license requirements. It takes a considerable amount of time and effort to learn Swedish, especially if the learner speaks the Arabic language. If the immigrant who applies for a job does not speak Swedish, his recruitment chance decreases significantly. Language skills and country-specific work experience substantially improve immigrants' chances of being hired. Moreover, preparing for and taking the Swedish driving exam is also a lengthy process. Driving licenses from immigrants' home countries (e.g., Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq) are invalid in Sweden.

Five immigrant jobseekers point to the integration challenges posed by the cultural gap between themselves and native-born citizens. Cultural differences, which have multiple causes, are probably as likely to appear in the workplace as in everyday life. The immigrants point to problematic cultural differences that make acceptance by Swedish society a constant challenge. They also note that Swedish society generally considers some immigrant work (e.g., picking berries and milking cows) low-skill and low-paid dead-end jobs.

The immigrant jobseekers say that more employment search support is required. They would like the national and local governments to offer more professional courses, internships, and special language courses. They agree that labor fairs, internship programs, and orientation and training programs can be useful.

## 4.2 Employers in the agricultural sector

The farmer-managers and the agricultural company managers often know little about the immigrants who seek work in their sector. They are unfamiliar with the immigrants' backgrounds, experiences, education, and skills. They worry about the immigrants' inadequate Swedish language proficiency, their lack of occupational/educational certificates, and the absence of evidence of work experience. In general, they think that native-born workers are a safer investment than foreign-born workers. Companies are reluctant to hire immigrants if they expect that they will have to make large initial investments in them. Job orientation and safety training are needed in addition to language support, driving license support, and cultural adaptation support. For example, an agricultural company manager said that two people are needed to support each newly hired immigrant: a mentor (for personnel issues) and a co-worker (for everyday work tasks and routines). A farmer-manager stated:

It takes a long time to teach them [the immigrants] all the tasks ... especially tasks they have not previously performed, or which require safety measures.

The employers explain that the seasonal nature of agricultural work requires a highly flexible workforce that can begin work immediately without extensive supervision. Moreover, much of the agricultural work is physically demanding and potentially dangerous. Not all immigrants can work in such conditions. Moreover, immigrant jobseekers seek permanent work, and seasonal work is a form of temporary work linked to a specific period of the year.

Cultural differences and communication issues are also concerning to the employers. For some of the employers interviewed, cultural concerns are more worrisome than productivity concerns. They worry that cultural clashes in the workplace are inevitable when immigrants are employed. An agricultural company manager stated:

Sometimes two mentors are provided for the immigrants: a Swedish mentor and a foreign-born mentor. To avoid competition between the two mentors, we have found that it is best to use only the Swedish mentor. That seems to be the best way to make the work environment comfortable and productive if cultural issues are a problem.

Employers are aware of the potential for mistakes when they hire immigrant jobseekers. Employers take a risk if they hire an employee who lacks proof of work qualifications or if they have doubts about an employee's willingness to adapt to a different culture. The employers support the concept of cultural matching – the selection of new hires who match the company culture. Yet, they recognize that immigrants bring their customs, norms, and lifestyles to workplaces in which the culture is quite different. They mentioned that they prefer to hire seasonal labor from eastern Europe who share similar culture and religious values with them.

However, some employers in our study shared positive experiences with immigrant workers and they showed that the best way to learn and practice the Swedish language is at the workplace. A garden company manager stated:

I do not care if they [immigrants] can speak Swedish or not because the best language training is always at the workplace. The Internship curricula intended for the practical work, should emphasize language training on site

### 4.3 Public employment service offices

Public Employment Service Offices (ESOs) in Sweden are governmental entities that work with immigrant jobseekers between the ages of 20 and 65 years who have been granted permanent Swedish residence and who want to enter the Swedish labor market. ESOs offer these jobseekers a 2-year support system (wage subsidies and other financial resources) during which they participate in various activities such as education classes or internships. ESOs are charged with recruiting immigrants into the labor market and with mapping immigrants' competencies. The matching of immigrant jobseekers with employers' job vacancies requires that the ESOs work closely with employers who seek workers.

The ESOs' representatives described the many and various challenges of their work. While an urgent need exists for trained workers (especially machine operators) who



have experience and competence in gardening, plant cultivation, and forestry, immigrant jobseekers rarely have the requisite qualifications for such work. Typically, they cannot operate workplace vehicles because they do not have the time and money needed to acquire a Swedish driving license. Furthermore, without a driving license and a car, immigrant workers have difficulty commuting to rural workplaces where public transportation is often irregular or nonexistent. The ESOs' representatives also report that the process of assessing immigrants' skills, education, and experience and of ascertaining employers' work requirements take a long time. Many employers lack the patience for such delays. An ESO representative stated:

It is not easy to work with the agricultural sector for many reasons. We do not have many contacts with farmers and agricultural companies. Also, we lack a specific system for evaluating agricultural skills.

Recently, some ESOs began dialogues with the agricultural sector intended to better understand the sector's employee needs. An ESO representative stated:

The most important part of recruitment is seeing how people talk to each other and what their attitudes, interactions, values, and norms are. We can describe this as culture, which is the decisive factor in determining if an individual is suitable for a job. We also look for work enthusiasm in candidates.

This representative added that a cultural match (between a job candidate and an employer) is a priority. As described above, the tendency toward 'cultural matching' is a real phenomenon in employment recruitment. LMM is more than a process of matching jobseekers' work competencies with employers' work requirements; it is also a process of matching the cultures of recruiters, jobseekers, and employers.

#### 4.4 Private employment services

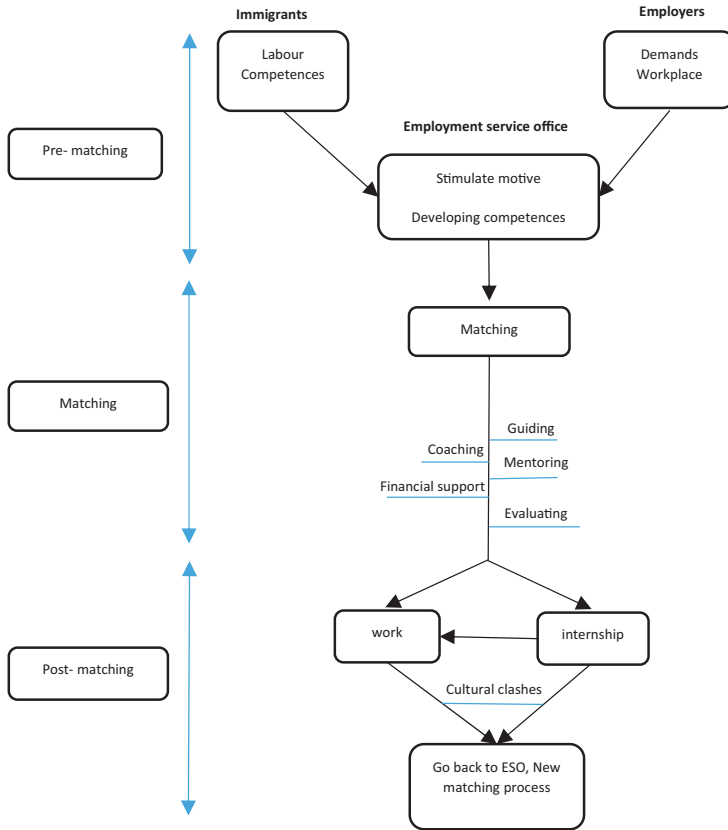
Private employment services (often referred to as agencies) have the same goal as public ESOs: matching the best job candidate with the most suitable employer. The agencies' representatives claim that their offices are more flexible and efficient than public ESOs. They also claim their non-governmental status meaning that they can establish closer, more trusting relationships with the immigrants. Thus, they can acquire more data about immigrants' education and background. However, the agencies' representatives admit that they have the same difficulty that the public ESOs have, namely, the lengthy delay in finding full-time jobs (versus internships or temporary placements) for immigrant jobseekers.

### 5 LMM model: Three stages in immigrants' job placement

We present our LMM Model in Figure 1 that is based on what we have learned from our interview data and our literature review. The LMM Model, which has three stages (pre-matching, matching, and post-matching), is designed for use by the ESOs.



**Figure 1** The LMM Model.



Source: own illustration

*Pre-matching*

1. In the pre-matching stage, the ESOs do the preparation work for the eventual matching: mapping, analyzing, validating, and evaluating immigrant jobseekers' work competencies and employers' work requirements. The ESOs' goal in this stage is to create a database for use in the second stage when jobseekers and employers are matched. Because the ESOs require current information on job vacancies, they need to establish good working relationships with the employers.
2. The ESOs then need to motivate employers to consider employing immigrants and to develop their competencies for employing a diverse workforce. To that end, working with employers, the ESOs develop training programs, establish internships, and plan information meetings, introduction seminars, and conferences. These activities strengthen the link between employers and the employment services that, in turn, strengthen the link between the employers and the jobseekers. The ESOs also support the employers with financial resources in addition to coaching and mentoring assistance.



*Matching*

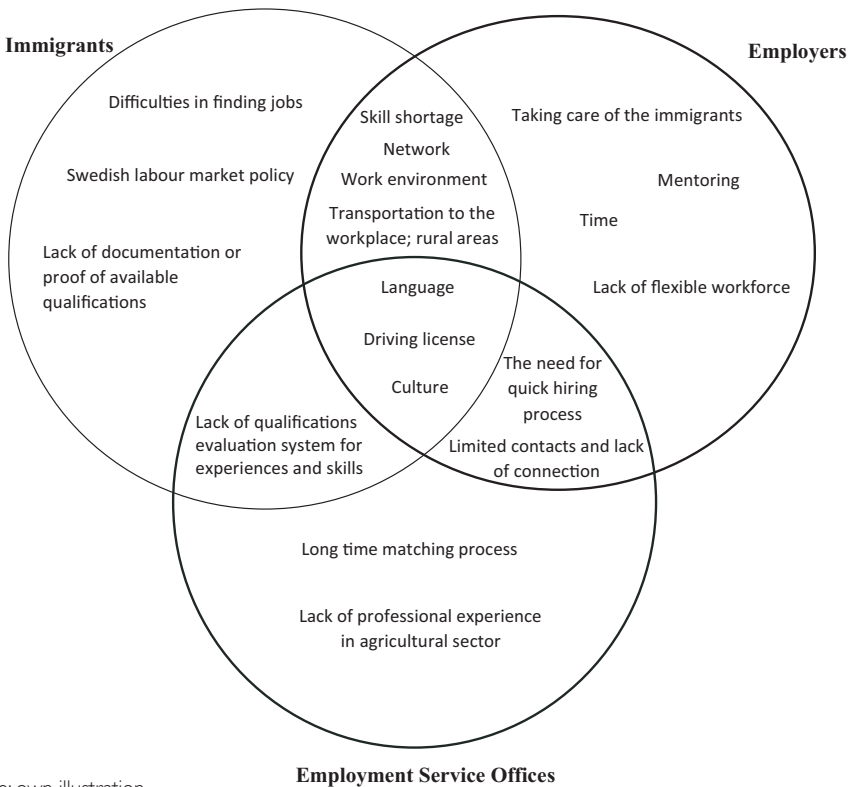
In the matching stage, the ESOs, using the database created in the first stage, begin the actual work of matching an immigrant jobseeker with an employer. Information meetings and introduction seminars are held in which the employer and the jobseeker discuss the jobseeker’s work competencies and the employer’s work requirements. These are informal, get-acquainted meetings arranged by the ESOs. The ESOs supervise the guidance measures (e.g., coaching, mentoring, and evaluating immigrant jobseekers) as well as the allocation of (possible) financial support.

*Post-matching*

In the post-matching stage, the ESOs address any problems and issues that the now-matched employer or jobseeker has (e.g., cultural clashes). A successful outcome of this stage is that the employer hires the job seeker as an employee or as an intern. If no job or internship results in a match, the ESOs begin again with a different employer match for the job seeker.

Figure 2 supports our LMM Model with its illustration of the challenges identified by the three respondent categories (immigrants, employers, and ESOs). The Venn diagram illustrates the common overlap of the challenges described by the actors.

**Figure 2** Challenges in the LMM process.



Source: own illustration



## 6 Conclusion and recommendations

With the recent increase in the flow of immigrants into the many EU Member States, including Sweden, national and local governments have struggled with immigrant integration. One of their greatest challenges is the labor market integration of forced immigrants. As researchers have noted, immigrants' gainful employment in their host countries offer perhaps the most successful path to their socioeconomic integration (e.g., Auer et al. 2018). A critical tool used in the labor market integration of immigrant jobseekers is the matching process in which immigrants' work competencies are matched with employers' work requirements.

Our research on the roles of the key actors in the LMM process increases our understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and problems experienced when matching immigrant jobseekers with employers in the Swedish agricultural sector. We conducted 100 interviews with the following respondents: 83 employers, 11 immigrant jobseekers, four employment services representatives, and two company representatives. Our focus was on the relationship between the employee supply and the employer demand in an industry sector that has high worker needs and a critical worker shortage.

This paper takes a two-pronged approach in its description and analysis of the challenges, opportunities, and problems associated with immigrant jobseekers' integration into the Swedish workforce. In the first approach, the paper reports on immigrant integration in labor markets in various EU and non-EU nations. In the second approach, the paper reports on an exploratory study of the labor market integration of immigrants in the Swedish agricultural sector. The findings from the first approach are used to amplify and confirm the findings from the second approach.

We chose the Swedish agricultural sector as the focus of our research for two reasons. First, the sector has a severe labor shortage; second, with the high rate of immigrant unemployment in Sweden, the national government has evidenced interest in supporting immigrant employment in the farming, gardening, and forestry industries. To supplement our exploratory study of labor market integration of immigrants in the Swedish agricultural sector, we created a LMM Model (Figure 1) that illustrates the three steps in the process of matching immigrant jobseekers with employers. We list the various challenges that the key actors encounter in the LMM process (Figure 2).

Most actors in our study identify the same primary challenges to the LMM process, focusing language, driving license, and culture difference in workplace. Immigrants who seek jobs in the agricultural sector in Sweden need to understand the Swedish language to follow instructions. They also need a Swedish driving license for commuting to rural areas and for operating farm vehicles on public roads. Moreover, the LMM process involves issues related to immigrants' cultural adaptability to workplace settings that are quite new to them. Immigrants have their customs, norms, and lifestyles that likely differ significantly from those of their Swedish employers and co-workers. Tolerance, patience, and adaptability are required by all actors if cultural clashes are to be avoided.

The interviews with the employers and the representatives from the ESOs revealed the relationship gap between them. The ESOs do not have close connections to the employers in the Swedish agricultural sector. They also lack in-depth knowledge of the nature and requirements of work in the agricultural sector. Both deficiencies pose a challenge to the matching of jobseekers and employers. A third problem is that the ESOs must follow certain bureaucratic procedures in the LMM process. Sometimes the



bureaucracy is just too cumbersome. At other times, it takes too long to verify immigrant jobseekers' qualifications. The qualifications of immigrant jobseekers from war-torn countries usually cannot be verified. Meanwhile, employers, who have crops to sow or harvest, cannot tolerate these hiring delays. They look elsewhere for temporary workers.

In summary, the labor market integration of immigrants into the Swedish agricultural sector requires that the key actors engage more actively in the LMM process. We recommend that additional language and skills courses, internships, and apprenticeships be offered to immigrant jobseekers. We also recommend that policymakers promote labor market and training policies that support improved information systems and that extend the network of employment agencies that match jobseekers with jobs. We also encourage policymakers to give more attention to immigrant settlement and employment in rural communities where agriculture is a vital part of the economy.

Finally, this study is not without limitations and provide opportunities for more research. The current study focusses on matching process, based on existing skill gaps between jobseekers and employers, but it could also be of interest to include and link to existing competence development programs when skill shortage is identified in the matching process.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> See previous research that describes immigrants as hard-to-reach populations owing to such restrictions (Fête et al. 2019).